



## Myth and Memory: Folklore in *The Hungry Tide*

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### Abstract

There is something stubbornly unresolved at the centre of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and that unresolvedness is, arguably, the novel's most honest quality. The Sundarbans – the tidal mangrove delta where the novel is set, shared uneasily between India and Bangladesh – is a landscape that does not accommodate clean conclusions. It swallows boats, rearranges its own channels, and has been killing people with a regularity that neither state intervention nor scientific monitoring has managed to reduce to any satisfying degree. Into this landscape Ghosh introduces two outsiders whose respective methods of knowing – cetological research and urban literary interpretation – are both tested and found, not exactly wrong, but incomplete. What fills the gap is folklore: the legend of Bon Bibi, the oral histories of the Morichjhapi dead, the embodied knowledge of a fisherman named Fokir who reads the delta's surface the way trained scholars read texts. This paper examines how Ghosh deploys these folkloric elements not as decoration but as epistemological argument – a sustained claim that the stories communities tell about their landscapes encode a kind of truth that no survey, however scrupulous, can fully recover or replace. Drawing on ecocritical theory, particularly the frameworks developed by Glotfelty and Fromm, Garrard, and Nixon, the paper traces four functions of folklore in the novel: as ecological memory, as ground of cultural identity, as challenge to the authority of the educated outsider, and as ethical grammar for coexistence between human and nonhuman life. The paper concludes that in centring these oral traditions, Ghosh performs a form of literary restitution for knowledge systems that colonial administration, postcolonial conservation

policy, and the general condescension of metropolitan modernity have worked, at different moments, to erase.

**Keywords:** *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh, folklore, Bon Bibi, Sundarbans, ecocriticism, oral tradition, postcolonial ecology, cultural memory, slow violence

## Introduction

Consider the scene, early in *The Hungry Tide*, where Piya Roy – a marine biologist trained in American universities, armed with binoculars and a field notebook – first encounters Fokir. She cannot speak Bengali. He cannot speak English. She has a methodology and a research question; he has a boat and a knowledge of the channels that no methodology has yet found a way to capture. The novel, from this early point, is asking something uncomfortable: what exactly does Piya's training give her that Fokir's inheritance does not? And, more sharply, what does his inheritance give him that her training cannot replicate?

These are not rhetorical questions in Ghosh's hands. He takes them seriously enough to build a novel around them. And his answer – developed slowly, through narrative juxtaposition rather than authorial declaration – has everything to do with folklore. Not folklore in the patronising sense of "interesting local belief," but folklore as what it actually is in functional terms: a repository of ecological knowledge accumulated across generations, compressed into transmissible narrative, and preserved through the act of communal practice. Jack Zipes, writing about the fairy tale tradition, argues that oral stories are never merely entertaining – they encode social experience and transmit it across the fractures of history in forms that institutional archives cannot always accommodate (Zipes 4). The Sundarbans' folklore, as Ghosh presents it, works in exactly this way.

The argument this paper develops runs against the grain of what is sometimes called the

"two cultures" reading of the novel – the idea that Ghosh is simply staging a confrontation between science and tradition, between Piya's empiricism and Fokir's intuition, and inviting us to find a comfortable synthesis somewhere in the middle. That reading is too tidy. What Ghosh is actually doing is more troubling: he is showing that the loss of Fokir's kind of knowledge is not a cultural curiosity but an ecological event, and that the institutions responsible for that loss – the conservation regime, the displacement policies, the developmental state – are not merely insensitive but actively destructive of the very ecosystems they claim to protect.

The paper proceeds through five analytical sections. The first examines the Bon Bibi legend in close detail, attending to what its specific narrative structure reveals about the ethics of human-nature relations in the Sundarbans. The second looks at Fokir as an embodiment of oral ecological knowledge, and at what his death at the novel's end means for the archival tradition he represents. The third turns to the Morichjhapi events and the way Ghosh uses them to expose the epistemological violence embedded in postcolonial conservation policy. The fourth examines the limits of translation as dramatised through Kanai Dutt. And the fifth takes up the question of religious syncretism and what the cross-communal character of the Bon Bibi cult tells us about the relationship between the sacred and the ecological in this particular landscape.

## Findings and Analysis

### 1. Bon Bibi: What the Legend Actually Says

It is worth pausing on what the Bon Bibi legend, as Ghosh renders it, actually contains –

because the detail matters, and because the detail is usually summarised too quickly. The legend is not, as some readings imply, simply a story about a benevolent forest goddess who protects the faithful from tigers. That summary flattens something much more specific and ethically interesting.

The story that Ghosh embeds in the novel concerns a merchant named Dhona who leads an expedition into the deep forest in search of wealth. He makes a secret pact with Dokkhin Rai, the demon of the wilderness: in exchange for the riches of the forest, he will surrender the boy Dukhey to the demon's hunger. Dukhey, abandoned and terrified, calls on Bon Bibi. She comes. She does not negotiate with Dokkhin Rai from a position of unchallenged supremacy; she contests him, and the terms on which the contest resolves are significant. Dokkhin Rai is not destroyed. He is contained within a boundary – the boundary that separates legitimate human need from illegitimate human greed. Dhona's transgression was not that he entered the forest; it was that he entered it with a calculus of extraction that treated another human life as an acceptable cost of doing business.

The ethical structure here is precise. Bon Bibi's protection is conditional: it extends to those who come to the forest with genuine need and proper reverence, and it is withdrawn from those who treat the forest as a resource to be maximised. This is not, in other words, a myth about the separation of humans from nature. It is a myth about the terms on which they coexist – terms that require restraint, reciprocity, and an acknowledgement that the forest has claims upon the human, not only the reverse. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, in their foundational work on ecocriticism, argue that literary texts carry ethical weight in the way they represent the nonhuman world, and that criticism must attend to the values embedded in those representations (Glotfelty and Fromm xix). The Bon Bibi legend, as Ghosh presents it, is a text in exactly this sense, and its embedded value is clear: the forest is not yours to exhaust.

What strikes the most significant, reading the legend in the context of the novel's broader argument, is the way it handles the figure of Dokkhin Rai. The demon is not vanquished. He is always there, on the other side of the boundary, waiting for the moment when the compact is broken. This is a remarkably honest account of what living in the Sundarbans actually involves: the danger does not go away; it is managed, through practice and devotion and constant attention, just sufficiently to allow human life to continue. There is no final safety, no moment when the covenant can be relaxed. The fisherman who prays before entering the channel is not performing a ritual whose function he has forgotten. He is renewing, each time, the terms of an arrangement that is never more than provisionally stable.

Fokir's practice of the legend – his prayers, his careful reading of signs, his knowledge of which stretches of forest are too deep to enter without risk – is this arrangement in its living form. He is not a representative of superstition. He is the current embodiment of a sophisticated, field-tested protocol for surviving in one of the world's most dangerous ecosystems. Greg Garrard's point about the politics embedded in representations of nature (Garrard 21) applies here in reverse: the dismissal of Fokir's knowledge as "mere" folklore is itself a political act, one that serves the interests of those who prefer to manage the Sundarbans without reference to the communities who have lived there longest.

## 2. Fokir's Archive: Oral Knowledge and Its Fragility

Ghosh makes a structural decision in this novel that deserves more critical attention than it usually receives. The character who knows the Sundarbans most intimately – who can find the dolphins without instruments, who reads the tide in the colour of the water, who knows before any weather report is issued that the storm is coming and precisely how bad it

will be – is a man who cannot read or write. Fokir's illiteracy is not a detail. It is the argument.

The argument is this: the most ecologically precise knowledge in the novel is stored not in any document, database, or institutional memory, but in a single human body and the oral tradition that shaped it. Fokir knows where the Irrawaddy dolphins surface near Garjontola because generations of fishermen before him, in this same boat on this same channel, noticed the same thing and passed the observation on – not in writing, but in story, in gesture, in the accumulated practice of going out on the water in a particular way at particular times. This is what scholars of indigenous land knowledge now call traditional ecological knowledge, or TEK: not guesswork, not intuition in any mystical sense, but systematic empirical observation transmitted through non-literate channels across timescales that no funded research programme can match.

Piya recognises this, to her credit. Her growing dependence on Fokir's navigation is not sentimentality – it is the rational response of a scientist who has encountered a knowledge system more calibrated to this specific environment than anything her training has given her. But recognition is not the same as preservation. When Fokir dies in the cyclone, Piya mourns him as a person. The novel mourns him also as an archive. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence – the gradual, undramatic destruction of communities and their knowledge systems through displacement, poverty, and institutional neglect – is directly relevant here (Nixon 2-3). Fokir's death is one moment in a long attrition that has been thinning the oral traditions of the Sundarbans' fishing communities for generations. No explosion marks this process. No news cycle covers it. The archive simply grows smaller, year by year, as the people who carry it are dispersed, impoverished, or killed.

There is also the question of Tutul, Fokir's son – a child who appears briefly in the novel and whose future the text leaves deliberately open. Will he inherit his father's knowledge? The pressures that bear on him – schooling, urbanisation, the contempt that educated India often directs at fishing communities – press in other directions. Ghosh does not tell us what will happen. He simply makes sure we notice that the question exists, and that its answer is not guaranteed.

### 3. Morichjhapi: The Violence That Erases the Archive

The Morichjhapi episode enters the novel through Nirmal's diary – which is to say, it enters the present through a document that has survived, barely, by accident. Nirmal's diary is read by Kanai, who translates it, incompletely, for Piya. This chain of transmission – oral event to private document to belated reading to partial translation – is itself a commentary on the fragility of subaltern memory, on the distances that separate the experience of dispossession from any audience equipped to respond to it.

What happened at Morichjhapi is, in outline, this: in 1978 and 1979, thousands of Dalit refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, who had been resettled by the Indian government in the dry forests of Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh, found those conditions impossible and made their way, largely on foot and by boat, to Morichjhapi, an uninhabited island in the Sundarbans. They settled there. They built homes, dug wells, and began cultivating the land. The West Bengal government – the Left Front, theoretically committed to the landless poor – declared the settlement illegal on the grounds that Morichjhapi lay within a wildlife sanctuary. The eviction, carried out over several months, involved a blockade that cut off food and medicine, the destruction of shelters, and violence that the state has never fully accounted for. People died. How many remains disputed.

The ecological justification for the eviction – protecting the wildlife reserve – is precisely the kind of conservation logic that Garrard identifies as politically loaded (Garrard 21). It assumes that the presence of human communities is, by definition, a threat to ecological integrity. It does not ask what kind of relationship those communities have historically maintained with the landscape. It does not inquire whether the knowledge those communities possess might itself be a form of ecological resource. It treats the refugees as encroachers and the forest as a space that exists independently of the human practices that have, for centuries, shaped it.

But the Morichjhapi refugees were not strangers to the Sundarbans. Many came from communities with generational ties to the delta region, displaced first by Partition and then by the bureaucratic indifference of resettlement policy. They brought with them the Bon Bibi tradition, the oral histories of the delta's tides and channels, the practical knowledge of mangrove cultivation and fish migration that had sustained their ancestors. All of this was treated, by the conservation regime and the state apparatus that enforced it, as irrelevant. The eviction was not only an act of physical displacement. It was an act of epistemological violence – the erasure, under cover of ecological protection, of a body of knowledge that the erasing institution did not recognise as knowledge at all.

Nixon's framework of slow violence helps name what is otherwise difficult to see: the damage inflicted on a community's epistemic resources by displacement is real damage, with real consequences, but it accumulates invisibly over time rather than announcing itself in any single catastrophic event (Nixon 16-17). The Morichjhapi eviction was not slow in its execution – it was swift and brutal. But its consequences for the oral traditions and practical ecological knowledge of the displaced communities have been slow: gradual, unrecorded, and ongoing.

#### 4. Kanai and the Failure of the Translator

Kanai Dutt is, in one sense, exactly the figure the novel needs: a professional translator, comfortable in multiple languages and cultural registers, positioned between the educated outsiders and the fishing community that is the novel's real subject. He is also, in a way that takes some time to become fully apparent, the novel's shrewdest study in the limits of linguistic competence as a model for cultural understanding.

Kanai can translate Fokir's words into English. What he cannot do – and what the novel keeps showing us he cannot do – is translate Fokir's knowledge. The distinction matters. Fokir's ecological understanding of the Sundarbans is not primarily encoded in language. It is encoded in the body – in the specific musculature of rowing a particular stroke at a particular bend, in the knowledge of how a certain ripple pattern near the mangrove roots indicates a change in the tidal current, in the instinctive spatial memory of which parts of the forest are navigable and which are not. None of this is translatable because none of it is, in any straightforward sense, verbal.

Kanai's mistake – and it is a mistake the novel gently but persistently illuminates – is to assume that his facility with language gives him access to meaning that would otherwise be inaccessible. It does not. The folklore of the Sundarbans is not a text waiting to be decoded by a sufficiently skilled interpreter. It is a practice, embedded in daily life, in ritual, and in the physical act of inhabiting a specific landscape over a long period. Glotfelty and Fromm's argument that ecological literary criticism must acknowledge forms of knowledge that exceed institutional frameworks (Glotfelty and Fromm xxii) is directly relevant to Kanai's predicament: his institutional framework – professional translation, metropolitan education – is precisely what fails him in the face of embodied ecological knowledge.

Piya, ironically, does better – not because she is more perceptive than Kanai in any general sense, but because her relationship with Fokir is structured from the beginning by an honest acknowledgement of what she does not understand. She watches him. She follows his lead. She does not try to put his knowledge into a framework she already possesses. This is not quite collaboration, and it is certainly not equality – the power differential between an American-educated scientist and a Bengali fisherman is not erased by mutual respect. But it is, at least, an epistemically honest arrangement: one in which the limits of her knowledge are acknowledged and his is treated as genuinely informative.

### 5. The Syncretic Deity and the Ecology of the Sacred

One aspect of the Bon Bibi legend that tends to receive less critical attention than it deserves is its religious character – specifically, the fact that Bon Bibi is worshipped by both Hindu and Muslim communities in the Sundarbans, and that her mythology draws on Islamic narrative traditions (her origin in Arabia, her father's name Ibrahim) while her function within the landscape aligns her with regional Hindu goddess traditions.

This syncretism is not accidental, and it is not simply a pleasant example of interfaith harmony. It is, rather, the religious form taken by an ecological argument. The Sundarbans does not organise its dangers according to communal boundaries. A tiger does not distinguish between a Hindu honey-gatherer and a Muslim fisherman. A tidal surge treats all boats with equal indifference. If the deity who mediates between human communities and the forest's violence is to be credible – credible in the sense of being actually efficacious, actually useful for the people who invoke her – she cannot belong exclusively to either community. The syncretism of the Bon Bibi cult is the Sundarbans itself insisting, through the medium of religious narrative, that the landscape's

claims on its human inhabitants are not divisible along the lines of faith.

This has pointed implications for the novel's treatment of the secular postcolonial state. The Indian state's conservation regime, which authorised the Morichjhapi eviction, operates within a framework that treats the natural world as a domain of scientific management and legal regulation – a framework from which religious or folkloric claims are, in principle, excluded. The Bon Bibi compact has no standing in the legal instruments that govern the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve. The covenant that has sustained human life in this delta for centuries cannot be entered as evidence in an eviction proceeding.

Ghosh is not arguing that the secular state should be replaced by a religious one, or that conservation policy should be determined by reference to goddess mythology. His novel is far too aware of the ways in which religious identity can be weaponised against the vulnerable for any such simplistic position. What he is arguing – and here the argument has a very specific contemporary resonance – is that any conservation framework that cannot recognise the ecological validity of the Bon Bibi compact is working with an impoverished model of what sustainable coexistence actually requires. The sacred and the ecological are not, in the Sundarbans, separable categories. They are the same compact, expressed in different registers. A conservation policy that acknowledges only one of them is, at best, half an answer.

### Discussion

What does it mean to read *The Hungry Tide* as a novel about folklore? It means, first, refusing the temptation to treat folklore as the novel's "local colour" – the atmospheric backdrop against which the real drama, presumably the dolphin research or the love story or the Morichjhapi history, is played out. The folklore is not the backdrop. It is the argument. And the argument is, in essence, that

the stories a community tells about its landscape are a form of knowledge – not a primitive precursor to real knowledge, but knowledge in its own right, with its own methods of verification, its own forms of transmission, and its own account of what matters.

This claim has theoretical support from several directions. Nixon's slow violence framework, applied to the erosion of oral traditions, identifies the loss of folkloric knowledge as a form of environmental damage that is as real in its consequences as deforestation or pollution, even if it is far less visible (Nixon 2-3). Garrard's ecocritical framework insists that we read representations of nature for the political assumptions they embed, which means attending to whose knowledge of nature is privileged and whose is dismissed (Garrard 5-6). And Glotfelty and Fromm's foundational ecocritical principle – that culture and nature are not separable, and that literary criticism must therefore take the nonhuman world as a serious object of analysis – provides the broader frame within which Ghosh's folkloric argument becomes legible (Glotfelty and Fromm xix).

There is also a formal dimension to this argument that deserves attention. *The Hungry Tide* is structured around two narrative strands: Piya's present-tense research story, and Nirmal's past-tense diary, which Kanai reads and which the reader, over Kanai's shoulder, reads with him. These two strands do not resolve into a single linear narrative. They remain, to the end, formally distinct – two different ways of knowing the Sundarbans, held in tension without synthesis. This formal refusal of synthesis is itself an argument: it enacts, at the level of narrative structure, the novel's thematic insistence that the Sundarbans cannot be adequately known from any single perspective. The scientific account is real. The historical account is real. The folkloric account is real. None of them, alone, is sufficient.

It is worth noting, too, what Ghosh does not do – because the restraints a novelist exercises are as revealing as the choices he makes. He does not give Fokir a redemptive moment of explicit cultural affirmation, no scene in which the Western-educated characters formally acknowledge the superiority of traditional knowledge. He does not have Piya give up her science in favour of the Bon Bibi legend. And he does not suggest that folklore, left to itself, can solve the Sundarbans' problems: the cyclone kills Fokir regardless of his prayers; the tigers kill the fishermen regardless of their devotion. The legend of Bon Bibi does not make the delta safe. It makes it liveable – or it has, for centuries, made it liveable – and that is both more modest and more profound than safety.

The implications of this for contemporary conservation practice are uncomfortable but necessary. The global conversation about biodiversity, ecosystem services, and indigenous land rights has moved, in the past two decades, toward a grudging recognition that communities with long-term connections to particular landscapes often possess ecological knowledge that formal science has not yet catalogued. The Sundarbans is a case study in what happens when that recognition comes too late – when the displacement has already occurred, when the archive has already been thinned, when the Fokirs are already gone. Ghosh's novel does not offer a policy prescription. But it makes the cost of the failure legible in human terms, which is precisely what fiction is for.

### Conclusion

The last image the reader has of Fokir is of him dead, his arms still wrapped around Piya, having used his body in the cyclone's surge to shield her from the force of the water. It is an image of extraordinary sacrifice, but it is also – and this is Ghosh's most quietly devastating move – an image of knowledge protecting ignorance at the cost of its own

extinction. Piya survives. The dolphins will be counted. The research will be published. Fokir, who knew more about the channels of the Sundarbans than any document will ever record, is gone. And the oral archive he carried, the accumulated ecological intelligence of generations, goes with him into the water.

This is not a comfortable ending, and it is not meant to be. *The Hungry Tide* is a novel that refuses comfort with some consistency. It refuses to resolve the tension between scientific and traditional knowledge by awarding victory to either side. It refuses to make the Morichjhapi events into a clean parable of state evil versus community innocence. And it refuses to suggest that the Bon Bibi legend, however ecologically sophisticated, is a sufficient answer to the pressures that the twenty-first century is bringing to bear on the Sundarbans and the people who live there. What it insists on, instead, is that folklore matters – that the stories communities tell about their landscapes encode genuine knowledge, genuine ethics, and a genuine account of what coexistence between the human and the nonhuman might actually require.

The case Ghosh makes is, in the end, both literary and political. Literarily, he demonstrates that folklore can carry the structural weight of a serious novel – that myth and oral tradition are not merely decorative but can constitute a narrative's moral and epistemological core. Politically, he argues that the dismissal of folkloric knowledge – by colonial administrators, postcolonial conservation officers, and the general apparatus of developmental modernity – is not a neutral act of rational administration. It is a form of violence, slow in its accumulation and catastrophic in its consequence, against the communities whose knowledge was never invited into the archive. To make that violence visible is one of the things that fiction does best. *The Hungry Tide* does it with precision, and without flinching.

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