



## Starvation and satiation: Dualities of hunger in Amitav Ghosh's Jungle Nama

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### Abstract

This paper examines how hunger is used as a powerful metaphor to explore the intricate relationship between desire, survival, and the human condition in Amitav Ghosh's verse novel, *Jungle Nama*. A textual and theoretical analysis is conducted to examine the manifold representations of hunger and their metaphorical implications within the backdrop of Sundarbans folklore. Using ecocriticism as a framework, this paper further aims to explore the dualities of hunger of how Ghosh has treated the physical and metaphorical hunger to ruminate on the roots of societal, cultural, and environmental issues. It reveals how skillfully Ghosh has employed the metaphor of hunger to weave his narrative that highlights the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals and societies, urging his readers to contemplate on their own relationships with the natural world.

**Keywords:** Amitav ghosh, ecocriticism, sundarban, metaphor, hunger, folklore

### Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* (2021) emerges at a critical moment when environmental collapse, climate anxiety, and global ecological inequities dominate contemporary discourse. Written in the rhythmic poyar meter of Bengali oral tradition and accompanied by striking illustrations by Salman Toor, the narrative retells the Sundarbans' ancient tale of Bon Bibi, the guardian spirit who governs the boundaries between human desire and forest survival. Within this retelling, Ghosh foregrounds hunger both literal and metaphorical as a powerful thematic axis that structures the story's moral universe. Hunger governs the motivations of characters, shapes the ecosystem's relational ethics, and becomes a lens through which Ghosh critiques modern modes of extraction, greed, and ecological violence.

The duality of starvation and satiation lies at the heart of this folktale. For humans entering the Sundarbans, hunger signifies the need for sustenance, employment, and survival in an unforgiving ecological terrain. For characters like Dhona, however, hunger transmutes into unchecked greed, an insatiable appetite for wealth and domination. Conversely, Dukhey's hunger represents vulnerability, dependence, and the precariousness of poor forest workers whose lives are constantly negotiated through risk. For the forest itself, hunger manifests as the predatory nature of Dokkhin Rai, whose appetite symbolizes the imminent violence awaiting those who break moral or ecological laws. In this layered representation, Ghosh draws attention to hunger as the dynamic force shaping the moral negotiations between humans and nonhumans.

By situating this reading within ecocriticism, the theoretical framework that studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment, this paper argues that *Jungle Nama* transforms hunger into a complex ecocritical metaphor. It becomes a discourse on justice, sustainability, traditional ecological knowledge, and human greed disrupting natural balance. The folktale's emphasis on ethical limits and ecological restraint also becomes a counter-narrative to capitalist logic, which thrives on perpetual satiation at the cost of ecological starvation.

The paper proceeds by discussing the theoretical basis of ecocriticism, reviewing existing scholarship on *Jungle*

*Nama* and Ghosh's larger ecological oeuvre, and offering a detailed analysis of hunger as a dual narrative force that shapes justice, morality, and ecological equilibrium. It concludes by arguing that *Jungle Nama* is not simply a retelling but a timely ecological fable for the Anthropocene, reminding readers that the forest survives only when human hunger learns to restrain itself.

Ecocriticism, broadly defined, is the study of the relationship between literature and the natural environment. As Cheryll Glotfelty articulates, it is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" and is grounded in the belief that human culture is deeply interconnected with the ecological world (Glotfelty xx). Ecocriticism interrogates how literary texts represent nature, environmental justice, anthropocentrism, and the ethics of human interactions with the nonhuman world.

Lawrence Buell further expands ecocriticism by identifying environmental texts as those where "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell 7). Ecocritical reading thus becomes crucial for a text like *Jungle Nama*, where nature is not an inert backdrop but a living, decision-making, moral force. The Sundarbans are not simply setting; they are active participants in the narrative, shaping human destiny and moral responsibility.

*Jungle Nama* aligns with what eco-critics call eco-ethics, the moral codes that guide human-environment relations. Bon Bibi's laws, for instance, articulate a form of indigenous ecological justice, rooted in balance and restraint. The forest's rules are not arbitrary but designed to maintain ecological harmony. Hunger, in this framework, becomes an ecocritical metaphor: it is a force that can either sustain life or destroy it depending on how it is negotiated. Bon Bibi's role as protector mirrors ecofeminist notions of nurturing, care, and relational ethics that contrast with the masculine greed embodied by Dhona. In this sense, the narrative positions feminine divinity as the keeper of ecological balance, challenging patriarchal-capitalist models of exploitation.

Ultimately, ecocriticism provides a powerful interpretive lens for reading *Jungle Nama* as a text about environmental justice, moral responsibility, and the consequences of unrestrained desire. Hunger, refracted through ecocritical perspectives, becomes a symbolic site of tension between human need and ecological limits.

Though *Jungle Nama* is a relatively recent work, scholarship on Ghosh's ecological concerns has been extensive. Critics often position him as a leading literary voice of the Anthropocene. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh critiques modern literature's failure to address climate crisis and calls for narrative forms that can confront large-scale ecological realities. Critics note that Ghosh's eco-conscious narratives attempt to restore agency to landscapes. Thus, *Jungle Nama*, with its folkloric roots, becomes a deliberate aesthetic intervention to foreground traditional ecological wisdom.

Scholars studying the Sundarbans frequently emphasize the region's ecological precarity. Annu Jalais points out that the Sundarbans embody a shared space where humans and tigers negotiate their survival through mutually understood boundaries (Jalais 14). This aligns seamlessly with the laws established by Bon Bibi in the narrative. Ghosh's Sundarbans fiction reflects the entanglement of colonial histories, climate risks, and ecological vulnerability. Hunger, particularly in marginalized communities, often becomes an entry point to exploitative labor and dangerous encounters with the forest.

Recent reviews of *Jungle Nama* emphasize its ecological and moral symbolism. Hunger in the text operates as a catalyst for greed as well as a marker of social inequality, making it a central motif in understanding Dhona's betrayal and Dukhey's suffering. Critics also focus on the aesthetic symbiosis of verse and visuals. The illustrated verse narrative allows Ghosh to retrieve the mnemonic quality of oral tradition to teach ecological ethics to contemporary readers. Hunger and its associated dualities is understood as a structuring force within the text. Current scholarship, however, has not yet fully articulated the binary of starvation and satiation as an ecocritical lens. This paper fills that gap by examining how hunger becomes a narrative instrument that reflects environmental justice, class exploitation, and moral responsibility.

### **Hunger as Human Survival and Vulnerability**

Dukhey's hunger is the simplest yet most profound representation of human vulnerability. He enters the forest not out of ambition but necessity: "We've fallen on hard times, I earn very little...with that we get by, on little daal and rice" (Ghosh 16). His hunger is a social hunger, born of poverty, marginalization, and lack of opportunity. Through Dukhey, Ghosh exposes the structural inequalities that push the rural poor into dangerous ecological zones where their survival becomes intertwined with risk.

Dukhey's starvation is not merely physical but symbolic of exploitation: he is a child laborer compelled to rely on wealthier traders like Dhona. His dependence mirrors the precarious conditions of thousands of forest workers in the Sundarbans who risk their lives for minimal sustenance. Hunger here becomes a tool of power; those who control resources also control the vulnerable.

Ghosh humanizes Dukhey's fear and desperation, making him a figure of ecological innocence. When he prays to Bon Bibi, pleading, "Save me, Ma Bon Bibi, before I'm torn apart / an unearthly tiger wants to rip out my heart" (Ghosh

53), the metaphor shifts from bodily hunger to the predatory hunger of the forest. Thus, Dukhey becomes the embodiment of material, emotional, and ecological starvation.

### **Dhona's Hunger of Greed**

In striking contrast, Dhona's hunger represents insatiable greed, a satiation that only intensifies further appetite. Dhona is introduced as a successful trader, already possessing wealth, yet driven by an overwhelming desire for more: "There's much to be had there, I'll take all I can see / honey, wax and timber, and all of it for free" (Ghosh 10). His hunger is capitalist hunger—one that defines progress in terms of accumulation. Dhona's betrayal of Dukhey reveals the ethical collapse that occurs when satiation turns into insatiability.

He violates Bon Bibi's laws by entering forbidden territory, driven not by survival but profit: "Those who enter the forest should go out of need / or they'll court danger; tigers know the smell of greed" (Ghosh 10). Ecologically, Dhona embodies anthropocentrism, a belief that nature exists to be exploited. His hunger destabilizes ecological balance, illustrating ecocritical arguments that greed is the root of environmental degradation. Dhona's actions parallel contemporary deforestation, poaching, and resource extraction, making him symbolic of humanity's destructive appetites in the Anthropocene.

### **The Forest's Own Hunger and Predatory Justice**

Dokkhin Rai, the tiger demon, embodies the forest's own hunger—a natural force that punishes those who transgress ecological boundaries. His appetite is terrifying yet justifiable within the ecological order of the Sundarbans: he hunts not out of greed but necessity. When Dhona offers Dukhey as bait, Dokkhin Rai accepts, illustrating the reciprocity and danger humans face when exploiting forest ecosystems.

Ghosh describes him vividly: "I'd almost forgotten that sharp human odour / the taste of their blood and the tang of their liver" (Ghosh 29). This hunger represents the raw, untamed force of nature. It is impartial, unlike human greed. When directed toward Dukhey, it dramatizes the consequences of sin—Dhona's greed leads to Dukhey's near-death experience.

Dokkhin Rai's hunger also symbolizes the ecological threat faced by humans who upset balance. He is nature's retribution, not a villain. His defeat by Bon Bibi does not end his hunger; instead, it enforces a moral code that restricts when and where he may feed. Thus, hunger becomes a regulated ecological necessity rather than chaotic violence.

### **Bon Bibi's Ecological Ethics**

Bon Bibi represents restraint, balance, and ecological justice. Her hunger is not literal; it is the hunger for moral order, harmony, and protection for the vulnerable. She embodies what ecocritics call ecological stewardship. When she intervenes to save Dukhey, she restores balance disrupted by Dhona's greed. Her laws articulate a moral ecology: humans may take from the forest what they need, nothing more. She declares: "All you need to do, is be content with what you've got / to be always craving more, is a demon's lot" (Ghosh 70). This verse crystallizes the message of *Jungle Nama*: satiation must be modest,

balanced, and ethically aligned with ecological sustainability.

Bon Bibi's justice reconciles opposing hungers. She does not eliminate Dokkhin Rai; she regulates him. She does not ban humans from the forest; she guides them. Her judgment reveals that hunger, when moderated, sustains life; but when unleashed, it destroys ecosystems.

### **Hunger as Metaphor for Ecological Balance**

Across the narrative, Ghosh uses hunger as a metaphor for ecological equilibrium. Human starvation reflects socio-economic inequity; human greed reflects ecological destruction. The forest's hunger reflects natural predation; divine hunger reflects moral equilibrium. These hungers must coexist without overwhelming one another. Bon Bibi's intervention illustrates how traditional ecological knowledge regulates these hungers to maintain sustainable coexistence. Ghosh's retelling warns that modern societies have abandoned such moral-scientific systems of restraint. Consequently, the world faces ecological devastation, rising seas, disappearing species, and starving communities, much like Dhona's world would collapse without Bon Bibi's laws.

### **Conclusion**

Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* is a profound ecological allegory that uses hunger as a narrative and symbolic framework to interrogate moral, environmental, and social dualities. Through the contrasting experiences of Dukhey, Dhona, Dokkhin Rai, and Bon Bibi, Ghosh constructs hunger as a multifaceted force shaping human-environment interaction. Starvation is linked to vulnerability and exploitation; satiation is tied to greed and ecological imbalance. The forest's own hunger reveals the impartial, cyclical laws of nature, while Bon Bibi embodies moral hunger, an ethical appetite for balance and justice.

By interpreting the dualities of hunger through ecocritical frameworks, this paper has shown that *Jungle Nama* offers a timely message for the Anthropocene. It critiques anthropocentric excess, reclaims indigenous ecological ethics, and dramatizes the catastrophic consequences of violating ecological boundaries. Hunger in *Jungle Nama* is not merely a biological need but a moral reckoning: a reminder that sustainable survival depends on learning to moderate desire, respect natural limits, and coexist within the fragile, interdependent web of the Sundarbans.

In a world where climate crisis threatens both starvation and ecological collapse, Ghosh's retelling becomes a powerful reminder that the forest survives only when human hunger learns to restrain itself. As an ecological fable for our times, *Jungle Nama* suggests that the path to sustainability lies not in conquering nature but in rediscovering the age-old ethics of balance, humility, and ecological respect.

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