MYTH AND MEMORY IN THE MANGROVES: REIMAGINING HISTORY THROUGH ORAL NARRATIVES IN *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) transforms the Sundarbans into a living archive where myth, memory, and oral storytelling converge to challenge the dominance of colonial historiography. Through the interwoven tales of Bon Bibi, the reflective memoirs of Nirmal, and the intuitive knowledge of Fokir, Ghosh redefines history as a fluid and participatory process rooted in local ecology and collective remembrance. The novel foregrounds how oral narratives function not merely as folklore but as repositories of historical truth and ecological wisdom. By situating myth within the material and historical reality of the tide country, Ghosh resists the erasures produced by colonial and capitalist modernity. This paper examines how myth and memory operate as narrative strategies in The Hungry Tide to recover subaltern histories, preserve indigenous ecological ethics, and reimagine human–nonhuman relationships within a postcolonial framework.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, The Hungry Tide, myth, memory, oral narratives, postcolonial ecocriticism, Bon Bibi, cultural history.

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh is distinguished for his descriptions of environmental concerns and historical narratives in his writings. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* stands out in modern postcolonial literature because it weaves together ethnographic insight, mythological elements, and a sophisticated awareness of ecological issues. Set in the

Sundarbans—a vast mangrove delta stretching between India and Bangladesh—the novel is not merely a story of human endurance but a meditation on the fragile relationship between culture, memory, and nature. Ghosh's text engages with the question of who tells history and whose stories are forgotten in the process of modernization. The Sundarbans, with their shifting tides and precarious geography, become a metaphor for the instability of historical and cultural memory.

Cultural memory theory is used to analyse these people's oral traditions and their attempts at cultural preservation. The theory investigates how societies transmit information and values in order to remember, forget, and preserve their cultural memories. They do this by transcending the past, present, and future within particular sociocultural contexts. Language, traditions, literature, and even the location all contribute to the creation, preservation, and spread of memories.

In Ghosh's narrative, history does not flow in a straight line but oscillates like the tide—between myth and fact, between written record and oral recollection. The novel opens with Kanai reading a passage that frames the geography of the Sundarbans through mythic imagination: "There is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle" (Ghosh 6). The river's mythic descent is thus transformed into an allegory of history itself—fragmented, entangled, and alive.

As Vinita Chaturvedi notes, Ghosh "turns the geography of the Sundarbans into a narrative form that resists singular historical interpretation" (Chaturvedi 247). By doing so, he asserts that history, like ecology, is a palimpsest of stories—each layer revealing what official archives conceal.

Myth as Cultural Memory: The Legend of Bon Bibi

At the heart of *The Hungry Tide* lies the legend of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess who mediates between the human and nonhuman worlds. The tale of Bon Bibi, recorded in the *Bon Bibi Johuranama*, functions as an oral scripture for the people of the tide country. In the myth, Bon Bibi defends the poor woodcutters and honey gatherers against the demon-king Dokkhin Rai, a symbol of greed and unrestrained human ambition. The story is a moral and ecological allegory that defines how the islanders understand their relationship with the forest.

In this narrative, the demon-king Dokkhin Rai—symbolizing greed and

unrestrained human ambition—is aligned with Western rationality and colonialism. Just as Bon Bibi protects impoverished woodcutters and honey collectors in the mythic tradition, the novel portrays her as a guardian who now shields people from the forces of Western rationality and colonial domination. The Bon Bibi narrative stands as a counterpoint to Western rationalism and colonial conservationist ideologies. While the colonial gaze perceived the Sundarbans as a site of danger and chaos requiring control, the Bon Bibi myth envisions it as a sacred space of reciprocity and balance.

Scholars such as Suparna Banerjee have argued that Ghosh "uses myth not to romanticize the premodern but to reveal how local narratives offer ethical frameworks for survival in precarious ecologies" (Banerjee 70). In this sense, Bon Bibi represents a form of cultural memory transmitted orally through generations. Her story becomes both a moral compass and an act of resistance against historical amnesia.

By preserving the tale of Bon Bibi alongside contemporary experiences of ecological displacement, Ghosh transforms myth into a vehicle for historical consciousness. The goddess's legend resists the erasure of indigenous voices, reminding readers that myth is not falsehood but an alternative form of truth—one rooted in lived experience and collective memory.

Memory and the Subaltern Voice: Nirmal's Recollection

If myth functions as the collective memory of a community, Nirmal's notebook in *The Hungry Tide* exemplifies the role of individual memory as an act of moral witnessing that unsettles official historiography. Rather than merely recalling past events, Nirmal's posthumous writings expose the epistemological tension between personal testimony and state-authored history, inviting a critique of how political power shapes the very terms through which events are remembered or erased. His reflections on the 1979 Morichjhapi massacre—an event systematically sanitized in governmental narratives—demonstrate how the modern state mobilizes bureaucratic rationality to justify violence against marginal populations.

Ghosh strategically positions Nirmal's fractured notes, later retrieved by Kanai, as a counter-archive. They resist the teleology of official documentation and instead foreground memory as inherently discontinuous, affective, and ethically charged. The uncertainty of Nirmal's voice does not diminish its value; rather, it underscores the theoretical argument that

subaltern histories often survive only in unstable, fragmentary forms. In this sense, Nirmal's testimony becomes what trauma theorists term a "non-linear memory trace," a form of recollection that challenges dominant frameworks of historical legitimacy.

Crucially, Ghosh reframes memory as ecological. Just as the tides shape, erode, and reform the Sundarbans, memory circulates through the landscape, becoming part of the region's multispecies consciousness. Nirmal's notebook thus bridges the personal and the political, demonstrating that to remember Morichjhapi is not simply to recover a suppressed history but to recognize how human and ecological worlds jointly bear the sediments of violence. Through this lens, memory operates not as a static record but as a dynamic, site-specific force that contests the erasures of the state and articulates an alternative ethical relation to place and community.

Pramod K. Nayar emphasizes that Ghosh's representation of Nirmal's memory "reconfigures postcolonial historiography by relocating historical truth in the unstable terrain of personal and oral narrative" (Nayar 15). Nirmal's recollections function as counter-history, a form of remembering that reclaims silenced voices. The trauma of Morichjhapi, though effaced from textbooks, survives through storytelling— a testament to the resilience of subaltern memory.

Oral Narratives as Counter-History

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh constructs oral narratives not as quaint cultural residues but as counter-epistemologies that directly challenge the Universalist claims of Western scientific rationality. The encounters between Piya, Kanai, and Fokir function as a dialogic field in which knowledge traditions collide, intersect, and ultimately destabilize hierarchical models of knowing. Piya, the American-trained cetologist, initially embodies what postcolonial theorists identify as technocratic modernity—a form of epistemic authority grounded in measurement, observation, and classificatory systems. Fokir, by contrast, represents an embodied ecology rooted in memory, myth, and inherited oral traditions. His knowledge is neither textual nor institutional; instead, it is sedimented through generations of tide-country inhabitants whose survival depends upon intimate attunement to the rhythms of the river.

Ghosh marks the epistemic divergence between the two most clearly through Piya's repeated astonishment at

Fokir's fluency in the landscape. When she asks how he came to know "this place… this island, Garjontola," Fokir responds through Kanai's translation: "I cannot remember a time when I didn't know about this place… Back when I was very little… I had heard about Garjontola from my mother. She would sing to me and tell me tales about this island." (Ghosh 270)

His ecological literacy is thus rooted not in data but in story, a mode that modern science often relegates to the realm of superstition but which the novel positions as a legitimate—and sometimes superior—form of environmental cognition. Ghosh further complicates epistemic binaries by showing that Fokir's oral inheritance contains sophisticated ecological insight. His mother's stories describe the dolphins as "Bon Bibi's messengers… they came here during the bhata… and during the jowar they scattered to the ends of the forest." (Ghosh 271)

While narrated in mythic terms, this description encodes precise knowledge of cetacean tidal behaviour— knowledge that Piya herself verifies through scientific observation. The convergence of myth and biology problematizes colonial epistemologies that oppose "rational" science to "irrational" indigenous belief.

The collaborative dynamic on the river dramatizes what Homi Bhabha calls a "third space of enunciation," where neither knowledge system remains intact but instead undergoes mutual transformation. Piya's GPS mapping depends entirely on Fokir's navigational expertise, as she later acknowledges that "all the routes that Fokir showed me are stored here… That one map represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge." (Ghosh 345)

Through these cross-cultural and cross-epistemic exchanges, Ghosh critiques the colonial logic that privileges written, institutional knowledge over oral, pragmatic forms. The river becomes the novel's metaphor for knowledge itself— fluid, mobile, and resistant to containment. In this tidal space, epistemic authority is decentered, allowing oral traditions to operate not as supplements to science but as alternative theoretical frameworks that expose the limits of positivist modernity.

As Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee observes, "Ghosh's fiction destabilizes the epistemic authority of science by positioning indigenous knowledge as equally legitimate and deeply ecological" (Mukherjee 102). Through Fokir, Ghosh valorizes oral tradition as a mode of survival that transcends literacy.

The dynamic between Piya and Fokir also reveals how translation and

misunderstanding can generate new meanings. Despite linguistic barriers, their mutual respect forms a bridge between scientific discourse and local memory. The narrative thereby enacts what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin call "postcolonial ecocriticism"—a negotiation between global environmentalism and local ecological realities (Huggan and Tiffin 87).

Kanai, the translator, occupies an ambiguous position. His urban sophistication and command of language contrast with Fokir's silence, yet he remains alienated from the land. Ghosh uses Kanai's gradual transformation to suggest that true understanding requires humility and listening. In the tide country, knowledge cannot be owned; it must be shared through storytelling.

Reimagining History through Ecological Memory

Ghosh's reconfiguration of history in *The Hungry Tide* rests on the principle of ecological memory—the idea that landscapes remember. The tides, rivers, and mangroves bear traces of both natural and human histories. The novel's setting itself acts as a mnemonic device: "These islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the anchol that follows her, half wetted by the sea" (Ghosh 7). This poetic imagery situates the Sundarbans within a continuum of national and cultural identity, linking geography to memory.

Elizabeth DeLoughrey interprets Ghosh's oceanic imagination as part of "a submarine history of the Anthropocene, where the sea becomes both archive and witness to human displacement" (DeLoughrey 404). The ebb and flow of the tide echo the rhythm of remembrance and forgetting. In this sense, Ghosh's narrative structure mirrors the ecology it describes: non-linear, cyclical, and porous.

By juxtaposing the myth of Bon Bibi with the memory of Morichjhapi, Ghosh reveals the continuity between mythic past and historical present. Both narratives speak to the same moral dilemma—human greed, ecological exploitation, and the quest for survival. The Sundarbans thus emerge as a space where the boundaries between myth and history, nature and culture, collapse into mutual interdependence.

Furthermore, the novel's use of multilingualism and code-switching underscores the multiplicity of historical voices. The intermingling of Bengali, English, and local dialects mirrors the hybrid nature of postcolonial identity. As Rajesh Rai notes, "Ghosh employs oral tradition not merely as cultural ornament but as a narrative method that

democratizes history" (Rai 168). By reclaiming the oral, Ghosh decenters the authority of the written word—the very tool through which empire once exercised control.

The Tide as a Metaphor for Memory

The recurring motif of the tide symbolizes the flux of memory and the instability of human settlement. Just as the sea reclaims land, history reclaims forgotten stories. The natural rhythm of submersion and emergence mirrors the process of remembering and forgetting that structures both personal and collective histories.

For Ghosh, the tide is not destructive but regenerative—it erases to make space for renewal. In Rilkean fashion, the novel suggests that falling can be joyous: "When we behold the lowering tide, we, who have always thought of joy as rising, feel the emotion that almost amazes us when a happy thing falls" (Ghosh 8). The falling tide becomes a metaphor for historical humility, an acknowledgment that all human constructs—nations, narratives, archives—are temporary.

Through this imagery, Ghosh invites readers to conceive of history not as a monument but as a tidal movement—fluid, interdependent, and constantly reshaping itself. Memory, like the tide, is both an act of loss and an act of creation.

CONCLUSION

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh demonstrates the complex interweaving of myth, memory, and ecological knowledge. Through the reconfiguration of history through oral traditions, Ghosh restores the suppressed stories of marginalised groups and honours their hidden pasts. The story of Bon Bibi represents the moral and ecological balance that sustains life in the Sundarbans, while Nirmal's notebook stands as a testament to political unrest and human tenacity. Together, these narrative threads demonstrate how storytelling is a vital tool for survival and resistance.

In an era well-defined by ecological catastrophe and cultural amnesia, *The Hungry Tide* repeats us that myth and memory are not relics of the past but living forces shaping the future. The novel's associating of the mythic and the material challenges the binaries of modernity, urging readers to recognize the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds. Eventually, Ghosh's narrative asserts that the true archive of history lies not in state records but in the voiced traditions, ecological rhythms, and collective memories of the people who live with the tides.

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