

FEMININE ECOLOGY AND THE ETHICS OF BALANCE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S JUNGLE NAMA

T. SOBIKA

Full-time Ph.D. Scholar in English
H. H. The Rajah's College (Autonomous),
Pudukkottai – 622 001
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University,
Tiruchirappalli.

DR. S. GANESAN

Associate Professor and Research Supervisor
Department of English
H. H. The Rajah's College (Autonomous),
Pudukkottai – 622 001
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli.

ABSTRACT

Women and nature have often been imagined together in Indian culture. Rivers are given female names, the earth is seen as mother, and nature is commonly addressed as “Mother Nature.” This cultural association also reveals a deeper ethical relationship between women and the natural world. Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*, a verse adaptation of the Bon Bibi legend of the Sundarbans, presents this relationship through myth, folklore, ecology, and moral instruction. The narrative centres on Bon Bibi, Dokkhin Rai, Dhona, Mona, and Dukhey, and shows how greed disturbs the balance between human beings and the forest. Bon Bibi, the Lady of the Jungle, protects the poor and restores ecological order by insisting that every being must stay within its limits. Dukhey's mother also represents feminine wisdom, as she understands the danger of greed and warns her son against the destructive desires of men. This paper studies *Jungle Nama* from an ecofeminist perspective. It examines how Ghosh connects women, nature, care, restraint, and ecological balance. It argues that Bon Bibi and Dukhey's mother stand against greed, exploitation, and anthropocentric thinking. Through them, Ghosh presents a world where survival depends on respect, limits, and harmony among all living beings.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, Bon Bibi, Dokkhin Rai, women, nature, *Jungle Nama*, Amitav Ghosh.

Received: 02-June-2026

Accepted: 02-July-2026

Published: 14- July-2026

1. INTRODUCTION

Women and nature are often seen as givers. Both nurture life. Both sustain those around them. Yet both have also been exploited by structures of power. Nature has been used for human profit, while women have been placed within systems of domination and service. This shared history of exploitation has created an important connection between feminism and environmentalism. In many cultures, women have been associated with fertility, care, nourishment, and protection. In India, rivers such as Ganga, Yamuna, Narmada, and Kaveri carry feminine associations. The earth is revered as mother. Forests, rivers, and fertility goddesses are part of folk memory and religious imagination. Such images do not merely romanticize women and nature. They also reveal how deeply human culture has depended on feminine and ecological forces. During the growth of civilization, human beings began to use land and nature for their own needs. Forests were cleared for settlement. Animals were hunted. Rivers were controlled. Land was converted into private property and agricultural space. Gradually, humans began to believe that nature existed mainly to serve them. This attitude created an anthropocentric view of the world, where human desire stood above the needs of other living beings. At the same time, women were dominated within patriarchal society. They were expected to serve men, look after families, and remain within the limits set by social tradition. Just as nature was treated as a resource, women too were treated as available for use, care, labour, and sacrifice. This parallel between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature gave rise to ecofeminist thought. Ecofeminism studies the relationship between the oppression of women and the destruction of nature. It argues that the same structures of domination that exploit women also exploit the environment. It questions capitalism, patriarchy, militarism, and anthropocentrism. Ecofeminism also values care, interdependence, sustainability, and respect for all forms of life. Ynestra King, one of the important voices of ecofeminism, describes ecofeminism as the “third wave of the women’s movement.” She also states, “We are a woman-identified movement and we believe we have a special work to do in these imperiled times.” This idea is useful in reading *Jungle Nama*, because the narrative presents a feminine power that protects the forest and restores balance. Amitav Ghosh’s *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban* is a verse adaptation of the Bon Bibi myth. Though the story belongs to folklore, it speaks strongly to the ecological crisis of the present. It shows how greed disturbs the natural order and how restraint is necessary for survival. Through the figures of Bon Bibi and Dukhey’s mother, Ghosh presents feminine wisdom as a force that understands the limits of desire and the need for balance.

This paper examines the interconnection of women and nature in *Jungle Nama*. It studies the roles of Bon Bibi and Dukhey’s mother and contrasts them with the greed of Dhona and Dokkhin Rai. It also argues that Ghosh’s retelling of the Bon Bibi legend offers an ecofeminist vision of coexistence.

2. ECOFEMINISM, WOMEN, AND NATURE

Ecofeminism grows from the understanding that women and nature have both suffered under domination. Patriarchal society has often controlled women’s bodies, labour, mobility, and choices. At the same time, capitalist and anthropocentric systems have controlled land, forests, rivers, animals, and natural resources. Ecofeminism brings these two forms of exploitation together and studies how they are connected. Women have played important roles in environmental protection. One of the most significant examples in India is the Chipko Movement of the 1970s. Women in the Himalayan region led this non-violent movement to protect trees from being cut by forest officials. They hugged the trees and placed their bodies between the forest and the axe. This act became a powerful symbol of ecological resistance. The Chipko Movement shows that women’s connection with nature is practical as well as emotional. For many rural women, forests are sources of fuel, food, medicine, water security, and livelihood. When forests are destroyed, women’s daily lives are directly affected. Their environmental awareness often comes from lived experience rather than abstract theory. Indian myths and folk traditions also show women as protectors of nature. Goddess Manasa is worshipped for protection from snakebites and is also connected with fertility. River goddesses such as Yamuna and Ganga carry sacred and ecological significance. Nature itself is often called Mother Nature. These images suggest that feminine power is connected with protection, nourishment, fertility, and balance. Vandana Shiva, in *Staying Alive*, views nature as an

embodiment of feminine energy. Her ideas help us understand how traditional cultures often see women and nature as connected forces of life. This connection can also be seen in *Jungle Nama*, where Bon Bibi becomes the guardian of the forest and the protector of the poor. The Sundarbans in Ghosh's text is not a passive background. It is a living ecological world filled with animals, tides, mangroves, fear, hunger, and mystery. Human beings enter this world for survival, but they also enter it with greed. Bon Bibi's role is to maintain the balance between human need and the rights of the forest.

3. BON BIBI AND THE ETHICS OF BALANCE

Jungle Nama is based on the Bon Bibi legend widely known in the Sundarbans. Earlier versions of this story appear in the Bon Bibi *Johuranama*, meaning "The Narrative of Bon Bibi's Glory," attributed to Abdur Rahim Shahib and Munshi Mohammad in the nineteenth century. Ghosh's interest lies especially in the story of Dhona, Mona, Dukhey, Bon Bibi, and Dokkhin Rai. He observes, "Those are long sections in the story which are interesting, but not as interesting to me as the story of Dhona, Mona, and Dukhey" (Ghosh, 2021). In Ghosh's retelling, Bon Bibi is the Lady of the Jungle. She is a divine feminine figure who protects those who enter the forest with humility and need. Dokkhin Rai, the tiger demon, represents danger, hunger, and greed. He feeds on human weakness and punishes those who cross moral and ecological limits. The story begins with Dokkhin Rai's power over the forest. He fears no one and feeds upon humans. To stop his violence, Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli arrive in the Sundarbans. They fight Dokkhin Rai and humble him. Yet Bon Bibi does not destroy him. Instead, she gives him a territory and sets limits. This act is important. Bon Bibi does not create balance by eliminating danger. She creates balance by assigning place and boundary.

Ghosh writes:

Thus did Bon Bibi create a dispensation,

that brought peace to the beings of the Sundarban;

Every creature had a place, every want was met,

all needs were balanced, like the lines of a couplet (6)

These lines express the moral heart of the text. Every creature has a place. Every need is recognized. Balance is compared to the lines of a couplet, suggesting harmony, proportion, and poetic order. Bon Bibi's justice is ecological. It respects the needs of all beings. Ghosh's statement that the Bon Bibi folklore teaches "how essential a sustainable relationship is to the natural world" is central to this reading. Bon Bibi represents a form of power that is different from domination. She does not rule by greed or violence. She rules by balance, mercy, and limit. This makes Bon Bibi an ecofeminist figure. She protects the vulnerable, checks excessive desire, and upholds the rights of the forest. She stands against the belief that nature exists only for human profit. Her world is based on reciprocity rather than possession.

4. DHONA, GREED, AND ANTHROPOCENTRIC DESIRE

The peace established by Bon Bibi is disturbed by greed. Dhona and Mona are brothers living in the Sundarbans. Dhona is rich, but he desires more. Mona is content with what he has. This contrast between the two brothers is significant. Mona represents sufficiency, while Dhona represents excess. Dhona plans a journey into the mangrove forest to collect timber, wax, honey, and other resources. He wants to use seven ships for this purpose. His desire is not based on need. It is based on accumulation. He sees the forest as a storehouse of wealth. Mona advises him to be content and not be driven by greed. He refuses to join the journey, though he helps arrange the vessels. Dhona, however, cannot give up his desire. When he realizes that he needs another person for the journey, he chooses his poor cousin Dukhey. This decision reveals his moral weakness. He uses Dukhey's poverty for his own gain. Dhona promises Dukhey a better future and assures him that he will arrange his marriage after their return. He also gives money

to Dukhey's mother, hoping to convince her. His promises sound generous, but they are false. He does not act out of care. He acts out of self-interest. Dhona's behaviour represents anthropocentric and capitalist thinking. He believes that the forest can be entered, emptied, and converted into wealth. He also believes that the poor can be used as tools for his ambition. His greed joins the exploitation of nature with the exploitation of a vulnerable human being. Dokkhin Rai recognizes this greed. When Dhona and his men enter his territory, he knows that their intention is not innocent. They have not come with need and reverence. They have come to take. Dokkhin Rai therefore becomes the dark mirror of Dhona's desire. The demon feeds on the greed that already exists in human beings.

5. DUKHEY'S MOTHER AND FEMININE WISDOM

Dukhey's mother plays a small but very important role in the narrative. She is poor and uneducated, but she possesses moral clarity. She understands the danger of Dhona's offer. She knows that his promises cannot be trusted. Her wisdom comes from experience, care, and an understanding of human nature.

She warns Dukhey:

"He'll make big promises, tempt you with money; you know little of the world, and of men's villainy" (20). These lines reveal her awareness of exploitation. She knows that the poor are easily tempted because they have fewer choices. She also knows that powerful men can use promises to trap the vulnerable. Her warning is not merely about Dhona. It is about a world where greed hides behind kindness. Dukhey's mother also understands the danger of the forest. She warns her son about Dokkhin Rai, the tiger demon who feeds on greed. At the same time, she gives him hope. She tells him to remember Ma Bon Bibi, the Lady of the Jungle, if he faces danger. This advice later saves Dukhey. Her role reflects the ecofeminist idea that women often understand survival in relation to care, restraint, and community. She does not ask her son to become rich. She asks him to be careful. She values life over wealth. She knows that contentment is safer than greed. Chris Cuomo, an environmental ethics scholar, explains that women often empathize with nature because both women and nature have belonged to oppressed positions. She observes that while male energy in the last two centuries has often moved toward capitalism and industry, women's energy has more often gone into building relationships, social health, and care. Dukhey's mother fits this idea. She does not measure life by wealth. She measures it by safety, dignity, and balance. Dukhey's mother therefore becomes an earthly counterpart to Bon Bibi. Bon Bibi protects the forest at the divine level. Dukhey's mother protects her son through practical wisdom. Both figures oppose greed and teach restraint.

6. DOKKHIN RAI, TEMPTATION, AND THE COST OF EXCESS

Dokkhin Rai is the tiger demon of the Sundarbans. He represents danger, appetite, and temptation. Yet he is also part of the natural order created by Bon Bibi. His existence is not erased. He is given a place. The problem begins when boundaries are crossed. When Dhona and his men enter Dokkhin Rai's territory, the demon understands their greed. He tricks them by making the forest appear empty of resources. Dhona becomes confused and frightened. Dokkhin Rai then demands an offering in exchange for the forest's wealth. The offering he wants is human blood. He asks for Dukhey. At first, Dhona hesitates. He feels some pity for Dukhey. But greed soon overtakes him. He agrees to sacrifice the poor boy in order to gain access to wealth. This moment is one of the strongest moral points in the narrative. Dhona's greed makes him willing to give up another human life. Dukhey becomes the victim of both human greed and demonic appetite. He is poor, young, and helpless. When he realizes his fate, he remembers his mother's words and calls upon Bon Bibi. His cry is expressed in the poetic form of *dwipodi-poyar*, which connects the story to Bengali oral and folk tradition. His prayer reaches Bon Bibi. Bon Bibi sends Shah Jongoli to bring Dokkhin Rai before her. Dokkhin Rai asks for forgiveness. Bon Bibi grants mercy but warns him against crossing limits. She says, "You must stay within your bounds and never transgress; with what you have you must make do, don't seek excess" (56). This warning is the ethical centre of *Jungle Nama*. It applies to Dokkhin Rai, but it also applies to humans like Dhona. Every being

must remain within bounds. Every being must avoid excess. The forest can sustain life only when desire is controlled.

Bon Bibi's mercy is celebrated later:

"Bon Bibi's mercy has granted me a reprieve.

Truly is her mercy beyond all measure;

She's sent me great riches, an immediate treasure" (69)

Her mercy does not mean weakness. It means restoration of balance. She saves Dukhey, restrains Dokkhin Rai, and exposes Dhona's greed. Her justice is protective and ecological.

7. WOMEN, NATURE, AND THE MORAL STRUCTURE OF THE FOREST

The connection between women and nature in *Jungle Nama* is seen through Bon Bibi and Dukhey's mother. Both figures value balance over accumulation. Both protect life. Both understand the dangers of greed. Both stand against the destructive desires represented by Dhona and Dokkhin Rai. Bon Bibi is directly linked with the forest. She is the Lady of the Jungle. Her authority comes from her ability to maintain ecological order. She does not allow human beings to take whatever they want from nature. She also does not allow the tiger demon to destroy without limit. She protects the rights of all beings. Dukhey's mother, though human and poor, shares this moral wisdom. She understands that wealth gained through greed may bring danger. She teaches her son to trust Bon Bibi and to remain aware of human villainy. Her knowledge comes from care, suffering, and closeness to the conditions of survival. The male figures in the text are more closely linked with desire and control. Dhona wants wealth. Dokkhin Rai wants blood and power. Dukhey, though innocent, is initially tempted by the possibility of money and a better life. These male figures are connected with movement into the forest for gain. The female figures are connected with warning, protection, and restraint. This contrast does not mean that all men are destructive and all women are pure. Rather, Ghosh uses the mythic structure to show two different attitudes toward nature. One attitude sees nature as wealth to be extracted. The other sees nature as a living order that must be respected. In *Jungle Nama*, the second attitude is carried mainly by feminine figures. Ecofeminism helps us understand this contrast. It shows that domination of nature and domination of the vulnerable often arise from the same desire for control. Dhona's exploitation of Dukhey and his desire to empty the forest belong to the same moral failure. Bon Bibi's protection of Dukhey and her defence of ecological balance belong to the same moral order.

8. THE SUNDARBANS AS A SPACE OF ECOLOGICAL INTERDEPENDENCE

The Sundarbans in *Jungle Nama* is a place where human beings, animals, spirits, tides, mangroves, and dangers live together. It is not a landscape that humans can fully control. It is unpredictable, fertile, frightening, and sacred. People enter it for honey, wax, timber, fish, and livelihood, but they do so with risk. Amrita Sen observes that the Sundarbans is a context where a deity is worshipped not merely as custom, but out of need. People worship Bon Bibi to gain confidence and courage before entering the forest. This observation is important because it shows that Bon Bibi is part of the everyday ecology of the Sundarbans. She is not distant from life. She belongs to the practical survival of people. The worship of Bon Bibi expresses human dependence on the forest. It also admits that the forest has its own power. People cannot enter it with arrogance. They need humility, prayer, and awareness. The forest gives livelihood, but it also demands respect. Ghosh's retelling preserves this ecological wisdom. *Jungle Nama* teaches that the natural world cannot be reduced to resources. The forest is a living system where every being has a place. The balance of this system is disturbed when greed enters. Dhona's journey shows how quickly desire can become violence. The Sundarbans also

becomes a space where Hindu and Muslim traditions meet. Bon Bibi is worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims in the region. This shared devotion gives the narrative a cultural and ecological inclusiveness. The forest brings communities together through shared danger and shared reverence.

9. ECOFEMINIST MEANING OF JUNGLE NAMA

The ecofeminist meaning of Jungle Nama lies in its critique of greed and its celebration of care. Dhona's desire for wealth leads to betrayal. Dokkhin Rai's hunger leads to violence. Bon Bibi's intervention restores balance. Dukhey's mother's wisdom prepares the child for survival. The narrative therefore places feminine care against destructive excess. Ecofeminism stands against capitalism and misogyny because both depend on domination. Capitalism often treats nature as a source of profit. Patriarchy often treats women as subordinate beings. In Jungle Nama, these forms of domination appear through the urge to possess and control. Dhona wants to possess the forest's wealth. Dokkhin Rai wants to possess human blood. Both must be checked. Bon Bibi offers another model of power. Her power is not based on possession. It is based on boundary, mercy, and justice. She does not allow greed to rule the forest. She insists that each being must remain within its proper place. This is an ecological principle as well as a moral one. Dukhey's mother also carries ecofeminist meaning. She knows that greed can destroy the poor. She knows that false promises can trap the innocent. She trusts the protective feminine force of Bon Bibi. Through her, Ghosh shows that women's wisdom often grows from vulnerability and care. The title Jungle Nama itself suggests a story of the forest. But the forest's story is also a story of women, the poor, animals, greed, and balance. The text asks readers to rethink the relationship between human beings and nature. It shows that survival depends on knowing limits.

10. CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh's Jungle Nama presents the deep interconnection between women and nature through the Bon Bibi legend of the Sundarbans. The text shows that nature is not a passive resource meant only for human use. It is a living order where every being has a place. When this order is disturbed by greed, violence follows. Bon Bibi stands at the centre of this ecological vision. As the Lady of the Jungle, she protects the poor, restrains the powerful, and restores balance. Her warning to Dokkhin Rai that he must stay within his bounds and avoid excess becomes the moral lesson of the text. It applies to animals, spirits, and humans alike. Dukhey's mother also represents feminine ecological wisdom. She understands the danger of greed and warns her son against the false promises of men. Her care, caution, and trust in Bon Bibi show how women are often connected with protection, survival, and moral clarity. Dhona and Dokkhin Rai represent the destructive force of greed. Dhona sees the forest as wealth to be collected. Dokkhin Rai feeds on desire and weakness. Through them, Ghosh shows how anthropocentric thinking damages both nature and human beings. Dukhey becomes the innocent victim of this greed, but Bon Bibi's intervention saves him and restores justice. From the Greek goddess Gaea to Mother Nature, from Indian river goddesses to Bon Bibi of the Sundarbans, feminine figures have often been linked with the nurturing and protection of the natural world. Jungle Nama continues this tradition while giving it ecological urgency. The text reminds readers that the future depends on balance, restraint, and respect for all living beings. In this sense, Ghosh's retelling of the Bon Bibi myth becomes an ecofeminist call for harmony between human life and nature.

REFERENCES

1. Chimalgi, Kavya. "Nature Worship in India." *The Last Wilderness*, May 2014.
2. Cuomo, Chris. "Women and Nature Share a Powerful Moral Connection." Interview by Srijana Mitra Das. *The Times of India*, 8 Feb. 2020.
3. Ghosh, Amitav, and Salman Toor. *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban*. Fourth Estate, 2021.

4. "Meet Bonbibbi: The Forest Goddess Worshipped by Hindus and Muslims Alike." Youth Ki Awaaz, 4 Feb. 2020.
5. Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Fernwood Publications and Zed Books, 1993.
6. Sen, Amrita. "Traditional Livelihoods and Survival Crisis: The Politics of Biodiversity Conservation in Sundarban, West Bengal." 2017.
7. Shiva, Vandana. "Everything I Need to Know I Learned in the Forest." YES! Magazine, 3 May 2019.
8. Siganporia, Shahnaz. "Amitav Ghosh on the Folktales and Mythologies of the Sundarbans." Vogue India, 12 Feb. 2021.
9. Sturgeon, Noël. *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action*. Routledge, 1997.
10. Thomas, Leah. "How Patriarchy Has Contributed to the Climate Crisis." Teen Vogue, 7 Mar. 2022.
11. "Jungle Nama: Folk Traditions and Collaborative Reading." Firstpost, 13 Feb. 2021.