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The Sundarbans in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*:* A Bioregional Perspective

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Abstract

Bioregionalism encourages intimate knowledge born out of dwelling in place, community, and local culture. The bioregional approach regards the region as a "physical and cultural ecology of place where ecological and cultural systems interact to shape one another" (Bunting 1997, 3). Following this line of thought, this paper explores the theoretical perspective of bioregionalism, positing "place as a complex of nature and culture" (Ryan 2012, 81). The paper reads the two novels by Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), as two representative texts to demonstrate this theoretical perspective of bioregionalism. These two narratives primarily engage the readers with the interior landscape of Sundarbans as the literature of place. Interestingly, Ghosh's ecological orientation ranging from issues of nature, place, human settlement, local culture, species' lives, the dominant religion, and the folk deities, are all situated within the context of Sundarbans, creating an integrated land mosaic.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Bioregionalism, Sundarbans, Forest Deities, Land Reclamation.

Introduction

Studying a place from an ecocritical perspective offers an opportunity to understand how the interaction between humans and nature has shaped a particular bioregion. The impact of humans in a specific bioregion and the study of the environment, species life, and climate condition are important factors to form the foundation of the sustainable culture that is the ultimate goal of bioregionalism. Therefore, bioregionalism is the process of rediscovering human connections to land (Lindholdt 2015, 25-28). Bioregionalism presents human culture's partnership with the place or region. This perspective asserts that in a specific place, the natural and cultural (human) systems shape one another, as any multifaceted land, with its unique climate and geographical conditions, does not easily conform to the human system. Therefore, each place or bioregion presents a setting to examine the human-nature interaction and the cultural and ecological consequences of human occupation of the land.

This paper explores the theoretical perspective of bioregionalism, positing "place as a complex of nature and culture" (Ryan 2012, 81) and reconceptualizing the human-environmental-place interrelationships. This perspective provides a culture-nature convergence more comprehensively: a partnership of human culture with the place. Ryan further explains when bioregions are construed as

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composites of all the factors that go into making a place, both natural and cultural, such as the historic land use patterns, social practices, spirit etc., the region is subject to constant redefinition according to culture (85). In this paper, we use this theoretical perspective of bioregionalism to read the two novels by Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019). It attempts to study the confluence of specific ecological realities and human culture of the place: the trends of human settlement and reclamation of forest land that change the ecology of the bioregion and the human-nature-place coexistence that informs the dominant religious and cultural beliefs in the Sundarban bioregion. Ghosh, in these novels, presents "an array of human partnerships with the landscapes and place" (McGinnis 1998, 2) in his stories about the mangrove jungle, Sundarbans. His *place-based stories* of Sundarbans decimate the culture/nature and human /nature dualism. They present cultural dimensions that interweave bioregional values. The place is linked with human life, i.e., the "life-place" (Thayer 2003, 3). As McGinnis observes, humans are connected to the ebb and flow of living earth; the sensual fibers of an animate world tug and pull to connect culture with the land. As we listen to the landscape, we smell and taste *the flesh* of the land (McGinnis 1998, 1). Ghosh's *place-based stories* relate to the ebb and flow of the tides and *the flesh* of tide country:

> Human imagination and stories create bioregions […] Every bioregion is already filled with stories and modes of discourse […] of the values and practices […] that ordinary working people who live in that place embrace (Lynch et al. 2012, 14).

How does the Sundarban bioregion represent the culture-nature (human-nature) complex? The deep, dense forestland is in constant flux. Humans have encroached on, cleared, and cultivated it for decades. The struggle between man and nature is eternal in this land of eighteen tides (*Athhero bhatir desh*). It gives a unique configuration to the bioregion—sometimes the forest swallows up the human habitation, sometimes the sea. Again, the forest dwellers and settlers clear and reclaim the forest or the newly emerged islands. W. W. Hunter (1875) states: "So great is the evil fertility of the soil, that reclaimed land neglected for a single year will present to the next year's cultivator a forest of reeds (*nal*). He may cut it and burn it down, but it will spring up again almost as thick as ever" (as cited in Bhattacharyya 2020, 33). The bioregion's historical experiences are unique: Sundarban frontier was an important corridor of trade, migration, and invasion in the past; the acquisition of land and the several efforts to claim land/ forest and human settlement; clearance of forest land for agriculture and various peasant movements; the human-animal conflict and strife over reserve forest. Amitav Ghosh, in his novels, narrates these experiences. This bioregion is continuously shaped by humans and their culture, just like the sea shapes and reshapes the tide country. He relates stories about the merchants and their trades and the curse that follows the gun merchant; the benevolent patriarch, his vision to create a model farm on his island (Hamilton's Island/ Gosaba), the fictional Lusibari in Ghosh's novel; the river dolphins on the verge of extinction are messengers of the forest goddess; the snake goddess and her miracles; the fight among forest deities for the land in the legends; the tussle between the refugees and the government for the land (the refugees, the tiger reserve project, and the Morichjhãpi island). All these are interwoven with the bioregion, a region

with its own culture: "everything which existed was interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature" (Ghosh 2004, 282-283).

Bioregionalism and the Culture-Nature Complex: The Ecocritical Perspective

Ecocritics often perceive and construct a bioregion as the "ecological context for transforming cultural relationships to nature" (Ryan 2012, 80), therefore, creating a confluence between human community/culture and nature. Robert L. Thayer Jr. (2003) states that a bioregion is:

> literally and etymologically a "life-place"—a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms (e.g., particular mountain ranges, prairies, or coastal zones) and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region (3).

Bioregionalism urges an intimate and localized knowledge of dwelling concerning place, biotic and abiotic community, and culture. It engages the inhabitants with the land as an allegiance that entails a commitment to bioregion as personal habitat, interdependent human community, and sustainable physical environment in cognizance of the interdependences between one's particular ecosystem and the wider world (Buell 2005, 420). The term *bioregion* is originally used by the Canadian poet and biogeographer Allen Van Newkirk (1975). He defines bioregions are biologically significant areas of the Earth's surface discussed as distinct existing patterns of plant, animal, and habitat, distributions as related to complex cultural niche-habits, including deformations, attributed to one or more successive occupying populations of the culture-bearing mammal (Newkirk 1975, 108). In *Reinhabiting California* (1977), Peter Berg and Raymond Dashmann state that a bioregion "refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness to "a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place". Berg observes that people are an integral aspect of a place's life which is seen in the ecologically adaptive cultures of early inhabitants and the activities of present-day reinhabitants **(**62**).** Michael Vincent McGinnis (1998) echoes Berg as he states that bioregionalists stress the importance of reinhabiting one's place and earthly home in the modern context of segregation of nature-society. Bioregionalists believe that "we should *return* to the place 'there is,' the landscape itself, the place, we inhabit and the communal region we depend on". A particular bioregion represents the intersection of vernacular culture, place-based behaviour, and community (3). Therefore, bioregionalism urges us to live sustainably in unison with the natural world, limiting the modernist nature-society or the culture-nature segregation.

In *Dwellers in the Land* (2000), Kirkpatrick Sale states that bioregions have "particular attributes of flora, fauna, water, climate, soils, and landforms, and by the human settlements and cultures, those attributes have given rise to" (55). In "Humanity's Bioregional Places: Linking Space, Aesthetics, and the Ethics of Reinhabitation" (2012), John Charles Ryan quotes Wendell Berry, who states that bioregionalism is local life aware of itself. However, Ryan describes bioregionalism as "a local life aware of itself in its natural setting" since place evolves out of the interplay between humans and the

environment, with the environment as a point of reference (82-84). Therefore, Ryan characterises "place as a complex of nature and culture". When studying a bioregion, we explore its natural characteristics and the people and their culture who inhabit it (the biophysical and the cultural phenomenon). The bioregion presents a more comprehensive integration between human culture and the specific place. In essence, a bioregion is construed as a distinct local geographic area, in which human cultural relationship to the natural world develops and sustains to maintain the long-term functioning of the ecosystem they inhabit (or cohabit with biotic and abiotic communities). Doug Aberley (1998) expresses a similar idea as he explains the place-based bioregional culture. He states that bioregionalism evolved as a response to the challenge of reconnecting socially-just human culture to the region-scale ecosystems in which they are embedded (13). Therefore, bioregionalism attempts to overcome the nature/culture dichotomy by seeing the two as forming a symbiotic relationship with each other and that nature and culture co-evolve in a dialectical relationship, with each transforming the other. Bioregionalism aims to achieve a co-adaptive fit between local cultures and local environments (Evanoff 2017, 56-57). The study of a specific bioregion includes the natural characteristics of a place and its inhabitants. Evanoff further elaborates that bioregionalism champions learning and extending the lore of local cultures, including their customs, myths, and rituals (60). It presents a human (re)connection with the land in the constantly changing world.

Amitav Ghosh's novels foreground this (re)connection. The Sundarban has dramatically changed over the past few decades, influencing the relationship between humans and the place. For example, the land reclamation in Sundarbans (a period of more than a hundred years presented in his novels) connects humans with the land in a distinct way. The forest land becomes *the destroyer and the preserver*. This *Janus-faced* land gives rise to a specific culture as a tactic to respond to the survival threat of all species. This Sundarban is the production of a set of interactions between nature and culture over the years. Close readings of Ghosh's novels focus on the unique aspect that portrays an interface between nature and culture. They remind us that culture is not contrary to nature. A particular place is entwined with the local culture. The novels collect small stories from a *regional culture bucket* that characterizes the Sundarban. As Alexa Weik (2006) explores that *The Hungry Tide*, is a story about the Sundarbans themselves, the sort that helps us understand the fascinating and sensitive ecology of what in the novel is called "the tide country," as well as the crucial importance of this region's continued existence (120). The place-based stories of Sundarban present a panoramic view of the dominant cultures of the bioregion and provide an excellent scope of study through the lens of bioregionalism and the culture-nature complex.

Changing Features of Sundarban Bioregion

As J. C. Ryan (2012) elaborates, bioregions are construed as composites of natural and cultural factors that go into making a place like the historic land use patterns, social practices, spirit etc., the region is subject to constant redefinition based on cultural influences (85). We find that the changing courses of rivers and tidal waves continuously make and unmake the Sundarban[1] that influenced the land use pattern or the land reclamation in this bioregion. Added to these are the cyclones, floods, and storms that influence the land constitution of the world's largest delta. Anu Jalais observes in *Forest of Tigers:*

People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans (2010) that the human habitat of the bioregion is often referred to as *abad* (*abade*). The reclamation of these islands is perilous because of the threat of the salt-water rivers in turn reclaiming entire villages in a few minutes is constant. The regular occurrence of storms and cyclones usually accompanied by huge tidal waves called 'bores' causes much loss of life and damage to property (2). Pramod K. Nayar (2010) comments on the fictional depiction of the bioregion in Ghosh's works. He observes that the "landscape is between land and water, is both land and water. The form of the land, its topography, is never stable and is therefore beyond the map and reliable knowledge for those like Kanai." (92). Ghosh has realistically presented this land of eighteen tides (*Athhero bhatir desh*), where the islands "are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they're disappearing before our eyes" (Ghosh 2004, 15):

> *There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as two hundred miles inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to reemerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily— some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles.* (Ghosh 2004, 7).

This constantly changing bioregion has been dominated by humans for ages. Literary, historical, and archaeological evidence shows that Sundarban had a human settlement in or around 300 B.C. to A.D. 1200 (Ray 1949; Jalil 1986). Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar (2012) states that recent archaeological findings reveal that human civilization flourished and disappeared in this part of deltaic Bengal in the last two thousand years (70). Before the nineteenth century, Indian Sundarbans were sparsely settled, and the theory of depopulation in the Middle Ages is prominent. The theory claims several reasons, such as earthquakes leading to sudden land subsidence, attacks carried out by Portuguese and Burmese/Arakans pirates, etc., leading to depopulation (Ghosh et al. 2015, 154). Amitav Ghosh refers to the distant and glorious past of Sundarbans in *Gun Island*. He narrates the saga of the gun merchant depicted on the clay panels of the Shrine of Manasa; the Mughals as the gunpowder empire; the Shrine's Bishnupur style of architecture (the combination of Islamic and Hindu elements); Dhaka as Bengal's great port or the cryptic reference to Dhaka as "*nagar-e-jahan*" (Ghosh 2019, 29-30).

Kalyan Rudra, in his study *Rivers of Ganga-Bramhaputa-Meghna Delta: A Fluvial Account* of *Bengal* (2018) claims that the early civilization that flourished in this delta has declined, and the whole area was depopulated. However, subsequent encroachment of forest land occurred in stages (116). The Sundarbans have received little appreciation for their ecological value from the British administration. They designated it an area of evil fertility and pestilential exhalations from the rotten jungle that should be drained, dyked, and reclaimed for tillage (Bhattacharya 1990, 35). Therefore, land reclamation and settlement in the colonial period started in the 1770s, mainly to extract revenue. Migrants, tribes, and refugees settled in this bioregion from various parts of the subcontinent and Bangladesh[2]. Anu Jalais

(2010) observes that before these settlers came, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Sundarban rivers were inhabited by fishermen, woodcutters, paddy cultivators, salt-makers, and pirates who lived on boats: "And even before that, it is believed that this territory had been settled, destroyed, abandoned, and then resettled, for thousands of years" (3). The settlers in the delta converted the vast tract of the tidal forest into rice fields. They deforested the land, constructed embankments and used the remnants of tidal forest for fuelwoods, timber and thatching grass. The whole bioregion faced a massive transformation; the destruction of the Sundarban wetlands and hydrology, and the exploitation of the soil, forest and endemic wildlife.

If we consider *reinhabitation* as one of the key bioregional concepts, which "involves becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it," (Berg and Dasmann 399), we find that Ghosh has paid considerable attention to *reinhabitation* while describing the human land use patterns in his works. For example, in *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh portrays how the landless people stormed into this wild forest full of predators. The place was just "*kādā ār bādā,* mud and mangrove" (Ghosh 2004, 57). Yet, the migrants and tribes came for land from northern Orissa, eastern Bengal, and Santhal Parganas. In his notebook, Nirmal recounts that people were desperate and could sell themselves for a patch of land. Settling and reinhabiting in a wild forest area for free was better than migrating to distant places like Burma, Malaya, Fiji, or Trinidad. He also speaks about Sir Daniel Hamilton and the fictitious Lusibari. Ghosh states how Sir Daniel understood the worth of the tide country and the untamed forest land. Nirmal relates Sir Daniel's vision and the cosmopolitan society he tried to build in Lusibari. People willing to work and stay here had to live and work together, forgetting their caste and cultural differences. Lusibari has all the uniqueness of Sir Daniel's estate, Hamilton's Island or Gosaba. It was a model with various measures for the development and alleviation of poverty, such as co-operatives, rural banks, banknotes, institutional lending, and Dharmagola: "He wanted to build a place where no one would exploit anyone and people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences" (Ghosh 2004, 59). This reinforces the concept of *reinhabitation* as defined by Berg and Dasmann (1977) "evolving social behaviour that will enrich the life of that place, restore its life-supporting systems, and establish an ecologically and socially sustainable pattern of existence within it" (399).

Human habitation, settlement, and small pockets of cultivation brought massive changes in the ecology of the Sundarbans bioregion. The stages of forest reclamation and tillage have two distinct facets: the serious damage to the life and property of peasant settlers and the rapid decimation of the native species' lives and natural habitation. When the land reclamation was over, only a few patches of the pristine forest were left. Endemic nonhuman species were extinct within a few decades. The peasant settlers also faced severe hazards due to lacking necessities, hygiene, extreme environments, diseases, and predators. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh describes the plight of the settlers in Lusibari and their struggle with the forest. The settlers were mainly farmers and came to Lusibari with the promise of free farmland. They became forest-goers for hunting and fishing, which proved disastrous: "thousands risked death in order to collect meager quantities of honey, wax, firewood and the sour fruit of the kewra tree. No day

seemed to pass without news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile" (Ghosh 2004, 78). As the land was not fit for agricultural produce due to the salinity of water, river embankments were constructed to protect the agricultural fields, damaging the landscape's hydrology. Ghosh narrates how the *badh* (bund) or the embankment guarantees island life. Nirmal, in his diary, recounts the embankment on the Raimangal River. The *badh* was beaten down by the 1930s storm. He describes Lusibari as looking like some gigantic earthen ark, floating when there is low tide, and the *badh* is riding high on the water. Therefore, the *badhs* are no longer the guarantors of life. Nothing guarantees life in this tidal country; everything disappears once the tide is high. The tides swallow up the jungle, rivers, and everything else.

In *The Sundarbans: Folk Deities, Monsters, and Mortals* (2017), Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar observes that Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* captures evocatively some of the dimensions of the bioregion's historical experience, constituted by man, beast, and nature (3). She further comments that forest land acquisition for agriculture/settlement shifted the focus of the man-nature conflict in Sundarbans: "the struggle between man and man which overshadowed the conflict between man and the jungle" (142). In this novel, Ghosh delineates an important phase of Sundarban's ecological history, the Tiger Reserve project and the refugee settlers of Morichjhãpi. The journal of Nirmal recounts the massacre. The refugees from Bangladesh came and settled on the island of Morichjhãpi. Ghosh subtly hints at the problem of land acquisition and forest land clearance. Nilima tells Kanai that many refugees from Bangladesh settled in the Dandakaranya refugee camp and came to Morichjhãpi in 1978. The uninhabited island was deforested almost overnight, and this no man's land was converted into a bustling village with no help from the government. The agitation started when the Left Front government forced the refugees to vacate the area designated for the Tiger Reserve project. Ursula K. Heise (2016) has stated that the Tiger Reserve project and the refugee problem point out two biopolitical objectives on the part of the government: "… on one hand, the attempt to contain and police refugee populations and, on the other, the goal to maintain control of natural resources, including not just the Bengal tiger but also the plantations that had already been started on Morichjhãpi Island before refugees arrived." (189).

The cultural experience of the bioregion and its changing features blurs the thin line between the Sundarbans bioregion and the fictional bioregion portrayed in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*. Ghosh presents the many major events and periods of the bioregional history of the Sundarban Delta. The different layers of the richness of the story of the bioregion relate to the overall plot structure of the novels. His *place-based stories* seem to catalogue the human dimension of the bioregion: the place shaped human culture and the culture that adds human narratives of exploitation and power (the experience of the land through the evaluation of its use value for human needs/satisfaction). Ghosh encapsulates and critiques the history of land reclamation during the colonial period and the importance of the tide country as a resource base in his novels. Ananda Bhattacharyya (2020) comments that Ghosh has an anthropologist's fascination for local mythologies that subvert the official religious and national versions of history. He often investigates the 'local reality', and with it, critiques the official version of history in *The Hungry Tide*. In this novel, the local reality is that of the Sundarbans, a densely populated archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, which straddles West Bengal and Bangladesh. The tide country people have an epic narrative of origins that they have passed on orally from one generation to another (25).

The Forest, the Forest Dwellers, and the Folk Deities of Sundarban Bioregion

Dominique Waissbluth has explained in his article, "Bioregionalism, Community and Environmental Ethics: An Approach to Geographical Borderlines" (2016), that bioregionalism advocates a continuous understanding of the land, its resources and human beings dwelling in it. Therefore, a bioregion is defined by physical and environmental features and is determined by that region's cultural phenomena, for instance, local cultural inbreeding and the connection with the land developed by the dwellers (14). Ghosh's novels encapsulate these cultural phenomena of Sundarbans and the themes connected to the place as a complex of culture and nature: the eco-cultural and historical perspectives reflected in the mention of the contest between animals and humans (the forest dwellers, i.e., gatherers, honey collectors, and fishermen) and their dependency on the folk deities. Ghosh represents the cultural mingling of various ethnic groups (tribes, migrants, and refugees) and the flourishing of a new society with a heterogeneous and unique culture. The interdependency of the species living in the wasteland (*bada*) and the habitation (*abade*) are examples of the coexistence of humans and nature. The folk deities—Bonbibi, Dakshin Ray, Manasa, Kalu Ray, the fearsome animals they rule (their *vahanas*), and the dominant religious beliefs/elements are a form of protection in the endangered terrain and a response to the need for recognition of the popular folk cultures (Sengupta 2018, 86). Sundarban has a place-specific cultural uniqueness that exists in this region's culture of festivals or puja, where man and nature coexist in a very delicate setting. In her work "The Human and the Nonhuman: 'Socio-Environmental' Ecotones and Deep Contradictions in the Bengali Heartland" (2020), Annu Jalais mentions the "forest law" that binds the forest dwellers beyond any religious or cultural segregation:

> If those who worked in the forest as fishers believed that the forest had a common law for all humans and nonhumans who entered and lived in the Sundarban forest, they also believed that 'forest law' was superior to the laws dictating the segregations of caste, class, religion and gender between humans. This 'forest law' was believed to have been established by the forest 'super-power' Bonbibi sent by Allah to the forest to establish some sort of understanding between nonhumans and humans. An entity represented as a goddess by Hindus and as an earthen mound by Muslims, venerated with fruits and sweets and the reading of a booklet that exhorted humans and nonhumans to live together as 'brothers' as all were her children. And this was why, they explained, humans and nonhumans 'understood' each other (130).

Mcginnis in "A Rehearsal to Bioregionalism" (1998), has observed that culture's rituals (like ceremonial dances, offerings, etc.) reflect a healthy relationship with the place. These rituals are direct observations of the relationship between nature and culture and represent a culture's knowledge of the place (1). Sufia M. Uddin (2019) reflects similar ideas that the relationship to the place is central to the construction of beliefs and rituals. The practices inculcated by the ritualized relationship between humans and their immediate environment demonstrate a profound respect for the forest, even sanctifying it (292).

Ghosh's works delineate how the worship of forest deities and the religious practices of forest dwellers (culture's rituals) refer to their beliefs, rituals, and reverence for the forest (nature).

Dominique Waissbluth (2016) states that bioregionalism acknowledges the potential of the immediate place that people inhabit in socially inclusive, ecologically regenerative and spiritual ways. The inclusion of a spiritual aspect in a bioregion gives an understanding of bioregionalism as the concept that allows the incorporation of environmental concerns together with traditional wisdom and makes explicit the importance of the relationship between humans and land in a meaningful manner (18). The spiritual/religious practices of dwellers of the Sundarban Delta reflect the importance of the relationship between humans and the bioregion. For instance, the Bonbibi cult[3] and worship of Manasa present the unique admixture of Hindu and Islamic, which are "socially inclusive and spiritual ways". In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh describes the *puja* of Bonbibi, which is the outcome of the synthesis of Hindu and Islamic religious cultures: the offerings (*hajat or hajot*), the *panchali* of Bonbibi in a strange variety of Bengali language, deeply interpenetrated by Arabic and Persian, the performance of the glory of Bonbibi. An instance of religious harmony among Hindus and Muslims is portrayed in *Gun Island* in the description of the Shrine of Manasa. The custodian of the Shrine of the Hindu goddess is a Muslim boatman (*majhi*).

The present human settlement in Sundarbans is only four hundred years old. Homesteaders' settlement and acclimatization present a unique combination of human, nonhuman, and place relationships. During the human settlements, the bioregion witnessed drastic transformations, making the Sundarbans a place of the cultural mosaic. The settlers sustained an environment different from their homeland, and this new environment played a dominant part in reorienting their life and culture (Mishra 2010, 100). They transformed the forest land into villages and were completely forest-dependent for their living. Exposed to the forest, predators, and unpredictable weather conditions, the forest dwellers developed a relationship of their own with the forest land. The humans and the habitation (*abade*) and the wild animals and the wasteland (*bada*) gave birth to an interconnection that takes the form of worshipping the folk deities and the fearsome forest:

> Whatever the nature of its population—civilized or tribal, sparse, or thick, the Sundarbans with its unique physical features offered a tough proposition to human habitation throughout the ages…In fact, battling with the hostilities of nature was so overwhelming an aspect of the settlers' lives in the Sundarbans that it led to the evolution of deities in whom they could seek refuge psychologically, though the settlers did not view it as a psychological need. For them it was grounded in reality (Chatterjee Sarkar 2017, 23-24).

Ghosh presents how the cultural synthesis of various populations and the constant fear of jungle goers materialize a close tie. The dreaded niche of the place forced the jungle entrants to seek refuge in the blessings of the folk deities, which is another way to be in communion with nature and the land. The rituals of worshipping them are not limited to the *puja* but are part of a conscious relationship with the deities: to propitiate them and believe in their miracles: "You would think that in a place like this people would pay close attention to the true wonders of the reality around them. But no, they prefer the imaginary miracles of gods and saints." (Ghosh 2004, 103).

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh brings out this very clearly as he describes Kusum's father's experience of the miracles. Her father was stranded in a storm and came to Garjontola. In the dark silent forest, he experienced the miracles of Bonbibi: *'He dreamed, in his oblivion, of Bonbibi: "Fool!' she said. 'Don't be afraid; believe in me. This place you've come to, I value it as my own; if you're good at heart, here you'll never be alone."* (Ghosh 2004, 226). Similar miracles are recorded in *Gun Island.* The island is the shrine of goddess Manasa, who protects the people of the nearest hamlet. The villagers tell Nilima and Horen that the miracles of Manasa saved them from the devastating Bhola cyclone in 1970. Therefore, the very existence of the gods is *alive* through these miracles in these forest dwellers' lives.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Fakir tells Kanai that the big *Shush* or the dolphins are the goddess's messengers (repeating what Nirmal narrates in his diary). These animals are the eyes and ears of Bonbibi, and this sacred secret is passed down from generation to generation. Similarly, Dokkhin Rai and his control over the tigers are also a part of this conscious relationship with the place and the nonhumans. He is the tiger-demon god and the ruler of the land of eighteen tides: "The jungles of the country of eighteen tides were then the realm of Dokkhin Rai, a powerful demon-king who held sway over every being that lived there—every animal as well as every ghoul, ghost and malevolent spirit" (Ghosh 2004, 105). The conflict to rule the land between Dakshin Ray and Narayani (mother of Dakshin Ray) and Bonbibi and her brother Shah Jangali are narrated in Bengali *Punthi* Literature[4], namely, *Bonbibir Johuranama*, *Raimangal Kavya*, *Narayanimangal Kavya*, legends of *Bara Khan Gaji*, and text of the *Gazi, Kalu Champabati*. Chatterjee Sarkar (2017) studies the genre of *punthi* literature in Bengali verse, devoted to the gods and goddesses of Sundarbans. Battling with the hostilities of nature was an overwhelming aspect of the settlers' lives in this bioregion. This hostile situation led to the evolution of deities to whom they could appeal for refuge psychologically during difficult times. These *punthi*s thus offer interesting insights into the characters of past human settlements in the Sundarbans (6). The texts say that the land was divided among the gods. Raimani (or Narayani) surrendered and offered Bonbibi to rule the land, the *bada ban* (forest wasteland). But she declined and redistributed the land. She owned the area around Bhurkhunda, and Dakshin Ray got the area of Kendokhali. Conflict on distributing/ruling the land among the deities is an analogy to human settlers and the reclamation of the forest land. Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* has recounted the existence of land boundaries and the influence of Dakshin Ray in the eastern area of Sundarbans.

The Bengali genre literature *Mangal Kavya*[5] has one of the oldest texts dedicated to Manasa, the *Manasamangal Kavya*, which recounts the exploits of Chand Sadagar and Manasa. Ghosh's Gun merchant, Bonduki Sadagar, is shaped similarly to Chand Sadagar. The story of the Gun merchant recalls Chand Sadagar's conflict with Manasa and his final surrender to the goddess's will. Like Chand Sadagar, the Gun merchant has also angered Manasa. Plagued and pursued by natural disasters and her *vahana*s (the venomous creatures), the merchant takes refuge in Gun Island. The story of conflict, disobedience, and final surrender ultimately conveys the god dependency of the local dwellers of Sundarbans[6]. The worship of Manasa is common in these snake-infested areas. The goddess protects them and creates an affinity between humans, nonhumans, and the fearful forest. Ghosh describes this brilliantly in his novel:

> 'Goddess' conjures up an image of an all-powerful deity whose every command is obeyed by her subjects. But the Manasa Devi of the legend was by no means a 'goddess' in this sense; snakes were not so much her subjects as her constituents; to get them to do her bidding she had to plead, cajole, persuade. She was in effect a negotiator, a translator – or better still a *portavoce* – as the Italians say, 'a voice-carrier' between two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her mediation there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression (Ghosh 2019, 76).

These novels exemplified the human partnership with the place and animals that have shaped the bioregion's unique folklore, rituals, myth etc. Ghosh has presented a synthesis of various ideas: the supremacy of good over evil in the legend of folk deities, people for whom survival and sustenance are the utmost important factors, the religion of the forest emerges as a form of self-protection and the struggle for territorial existence where legends, folk deities, nonhuman animals are the carriers of a belief system and a way of living: "a culture emerging from the responses to the challenges of nature in various forms" (Chatterjee Sarkar 2017, 24).

Conclusion

Michael Vincent McGinnis (1998) has pointed out that bioregions encompass diverse cultural areas, homelands, biodiversity, spiritual and ideological canyons, reveal economic practices, territories of the mind, unique histories of place, and geographically discrete parts of the earth (4). Therefore, when we study a bioregion, we consider the geographical and cultural terrain: "the confluence between specific ecological realities and specific human adaptations" (Young Walter Webb quoted in Dan Flores 1998, 44). This confluence directly influences and dismantles the nature/culture binary. According to Berg (2003), bioregionalism can be defined as the distinct overall pattern of natural characteristics (including people) found in a specific place. Hence, bioregionalism focuses on the interactions between humans (culture) and a specific bioregion (nature), emphasizing the mutual interdependence of human culture with the ecosystems they cohabit with biotic and abiotic communities (culture-nature co-evaluation in a particular bioregion). To demonstrate this theoretical perspective of bioregionalism, positing "place as a complex of nature and culture" (Ryan 2012, 81), this study has examined the novels of Amitav Ghosh. The paper knits together two important facets of the Sundarbans bioregion: the human settlements and land use patterns (a period of more than a hundred years presented in his novels) that change the biodiversity, ecology, topography and climate of the bioregion and the human-nature-place coexistence/co-evaluation that informs the dominant religious and cultural beliefs. This Sundarban bioregion is the production of a set of interactions between nature and culture over the years.

Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster (2012) observe that bioregionalism is about creating place-based communities, or, cultures-in-place (12). Literature and other forms of art are vital expressions of cultural values embedded in a place or bioregion (cultures-in-place) and play a key part in developing a *sense of place*. Therefore, bioregional narratives (storytelling, ancient and new rituals, myth-making, theatre, dance, poetry and prose, which became the languages of bioregional expression (Aberley 1998, 24)

reflect the relationship of humans with their natural environment and the place they inhabit. Amitav Ghosh's *place-based stories* or bioregional narratives breathe a similar concern of positing literary pieces within the specific bioregional culture and celebrating/cultivating a *sense of place*: "the accumulation of local soil and local culture" (as cited in Garrard 2004, 154). Ghosh's novels project this rooted sense of the place: *here*, religious faith helps humans hold on to the wilderness surrounding human-animal lives. This *sense of place* is the real story of the Sundarban bioregion. Ghosh writes about Sundarbans, a living land thriving with life. It emerges and disappears in the sea. Humans, nonhumans, deities, forests, the sea, and rivers create a unique biocultural system in this region. Ghosh presents this biocultural system in seven hundred pages. He introduces this region to the readers in a different vein. He writes about the mixed population, the actual gods in their life, the beautiful yet hostile terrain, the animals, and the tides—rediscovering the human connection to the land.

السمات اللغوية للشخصيات الذكورية في أفلام الرسوم المتحركة التي أنتجتها ديزني

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الملخص

يشجع نظام المنطقة الأحيائيّة للحصول على المعرفة الوثيقة التي تولد بسبب الإقامة في المكان والمجتمع والثقافة المحليّة. ويعدّ النهج الإقليمي الحيوي المنطقة "بيئة ماديّة وثقافيّة للمكان الذي تتفاعل فيه النظم البيئيّة والثقافية لتشكيل بعضها ببعض" (Bunting 1997، 3)، اتباعاً لهذا الخط الفكري، وتستكشف هذه الورقة المنظور النظري لنظام المنطقة الأحيائيّة، مفترضة "المكان كمجمع للطبيعة والثقافة" (ريان 2012، 81)، وتدرس هذه الورقة روايتي أميتاف غوش، هانغري تايد (2004) و غون آيلاند(2019)، كنصين تمثيليين لإظهار هذا المنظور النظري لنظام المنطقة الأحيائيّة، وتشارك هاتان الروايتان القراء في المقام الأول في المشهد الداخلي لسونداربانس كأدب المكان. ومن المثير للاهتمام أن التوجه البيئي لغوش الذي يتراوح بين قضايا الطبيعة والمكان والمستوطنة البشريّة والثقافة المحليّة وحياة الأنواع والدين المهيمن والآلهة الشعبيّة، تقع جميعها في سياق سونداربانس، مما يخلق فسيفساء أرض متكاملة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد البيئي، نظام المنطقة الأحيائيّة، سونداربانس، آلهة الغابات، استصلاح الأراضي.

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