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Re-thinking Planetary Solidarity: Exploring Eco-Cosmopolitanism through Myth and Folklore in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner than Skin*.

[1]Dr. Nishtha Pandey
Assistant Professor, Department of English,
St. Joseph's College for Women, Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh
(https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9345-2406)
(nishthagkp@gmail.com)

[2]Dr. Sunita Murmu
Professor, Department of English,
Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh
(https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7961-9073)
(sunita.eng@ddugu.ac.in)

Abstract

The rapid strides of economic growth, fetishised industrial development, and insatiable pursuit of limitless 'progress' have plunged humanity into an unprecedented planetary crisis, threatening its very foundations of existence. Moreover, the global nature of ecological challenges has forced eco-critics to endorse and adopt a cosmopolitan outlook towards environmental degradation. In recent years, South Asian climate fiction authors have leveraged mythological narratives to address ecocide. This article explores the intersection of myth narrative, ecocriticism and cosmopolitanism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner Than Skin*. At first, the study moves beyond the traditional notion of place-based identity and engages with the recent scholarship on "eco-cosmopolitanism". It then demonstrates how, through the strategic employment of myths and legends, the texts challenge anthropocentric discourses, promote ecological sensitivity, and aid in the pursuit of multispecies solidarity. Finally, the study contends that local ecological systems are imbricated with global ones; therefore, thinking globally and acting locally are crucial to safeguarding the environment.

Keywords: Planetary crisis, Eco-cosmopolitanism, mythology and folklore, Sundarbans, glaciers.

The rapid strides in economic growth, fetishised industrial development, and the insatiable pursuit of limitless 'progress' have propelled humanity into an unprecedented planetary crisis, threatening the very foundations of its existence. This alarming crisis has led eco-critics and environmental humanists to prioritise planetary well-being. Moreover, the global

nature of ecological challenges has forced eco-critics to endorse and adopt a cosmopolitan outlook towards environmental degradation. This shift has given rise to eco-cosmopolitanism, a philosophical approach that integrates ecocriticism with cosmopolitan principles. First introduced by Ursula K. Heise in her book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), eco-cosmopolitanism poignantly highlights the inextricable link between human existence and the natural world. It acknowledges the complex web of symbiotic relationships in which humans are embedded and encourages ecological advocacy for the nonhuman world. By recognizing our shared ecological space, eco-cosmopolitanism promotes a sense of responsibility and reciprocity towards the environment. This ethos of eco-cosmopolitanism is central to South Asian mythology, legends, and folklore. Myths and legends challenge anthropocentric discourses, promote ecological sensitivity, and aid in the pursuit of multispecies solidarity. In recent years, contemporary climate fiction authors have increasingly drawn on mythological stories to tackle the complexities of climate change. Notably, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner Than Skin* explicitly address the issue of ecocide. In these narratives, characters not only navigate and make sense of the insurmountable ecological challenges that confront humanity but also recognize the detrimental effects of anthropogenic activity on ecology. Through the novelistic articulation of myths and eco-cosmopolitanism, Ghosh and Khan confer voice and agency to other-than-human species.

Amitav Ghosh, a renowned Indian novelist and essayist, is distinguished by his meticulous historical, anthropological, and geographical research, which deeply grounds his literary works. As a prolific contemporary writer, Ghosh excels at sensitively addressing historical, political, cultural, and ecological issues without compromising artistic grace. 'Climate' and 'ecology' cast a much bigger shadow on his literary oeuvre, spanning from *The Circle of Reason* (1986) to his latest work, *Jungle Nama* (2021). In an interview with T. Vijay Kumar, Ghosh once emphasised, "I don't want to write about just the individual in a particular place. I also want to write about what is there, the geology, the deep time that exists outside the individual, and the immediacy of time, and the times that make up every aspect of the circumstance." (Ghosh 103, interview by T. Vijay Kumar). Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* exemplifies this ecological concern through its intricate narrative set in the Sundarbans. The vast archipelago of islands - a sprawling mangrove forest where the Himalayan waters converge with the sea's incoming tides - serves as a rich backdrop for exploring the issues of environmental crisis. The wondrous and deadly world of the Sundarbans - a place teeming

with crocodiles, snakes, sharks and man-eating tigers - is where an Indian-American cetologist, Piyali Roy, comes to study the elusive Irrawaddy dolphin. Piya, a second-generation immigrant in the United States, has lived a peripatetic life, traversing various parts of the world. As a cosmopolitan, she struggles with a sense of placelessness. She has "no home, no money, and no prospects". Her "friends are thousands of miles away and [she] get[s] to see them maybe once a year, if [she is] lucky" (Ghosh, *Hungry* 302). Her primary connection is neither with a specific locality nor a particular group but rather with her profession and, more profoundly, with the dolphins. In the Sundarbans, she befriends Kanai Dutt and Fokir. Kanai, a Delhi-based interpreter, is the founder and chief executive of a small yet thriving translation agency that specialises in serving the expatriate communities of New Delhi, including foreign diplomats, aid workers, charitable organisations and multinational companies. In contrast, Fokir is a young local fisherman who not only saves Piya from a near-fatal accident in a muddy, crocodile-infested river but also provides her with shelter at the residence of Kanai's aunt, Nilima. As the narrative commences, the notebook of Kanai's uncle, Nirmal, provides an account of the Marichjhãpi island siege, wherein the Indian government forcibly displaced and killed Bangladeshi refugees under the guise of wildlife conservation. This tumultuous past is juxtaposed with the tales of Daniel Hamilton, a wealthy Scotsman who envisioned to "build a new society, a new kind of country. It would be a country run by cooperatives" (52). The narrative reaches its climax with a cyclone that threatens the lives of the residents of the Sundarbans. While Kanai and Piya narrowly escape the disaster, Fokir heroically sacrifices himself to save the former. Piya, later, channels her grief by establishing a conservation initiative to support local fishermen, as a lasting tribute to her saviour, Fokir.

In the novel, the setting transcends mere backdrop, as the Tide Country embodies a chronotope of a boundless world. The landscape's fluidity is underscored by the "rivers' channels [which] are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. […] There are no borders … to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea." (7). Each character hails from a distinct shore, marked by differences in language, culture, education, class, and nationality, yet they converge and interact with remarkable fluidity. Notably, Piya, although Bengali by origin, is paradoxically disconnected from her native language, yet manages to communicate with Fokir despite linguistic estrangement. Fokir, too actively contributes to Piya's research project by helping her identify the habitat of *Orcaella brevirostris*, a river dolphin species.

Although their interaction is mediated by Kanai, who serves as a translator, it is their shared interest in ecology that facilitates it. As the narrative progresses, Piya and Fokir's partnership deepens, but Kanai remains sceptical about their friendship prospects, even reprimanding Piya at one point, "You shouldn't deceive yourself, Piya…there wasn't anything in common between you then and there isn't now. Nothing. He's a fisherman and you're a scientist. What you see as fauna, he sees as food. …Piya, there's nothing in common between you at all. You're from different worlds, different planets." (268). Yet, it is the ecological consciousness that develops an intuitive connection between the two. While it is true that Fokir and Piya hail from distinct socio-cultural milieus, their shared commitment to environmental conservation unites them. The text supports this claim with strong evidence. In the novel, when a tiger enters a human habitat, Piya is left dumbstruck after watching the inhumane killing of the tiger at the hands of the villagers. What leaves her even more devastated is that Kanai appears unperturbed by it, whereas Fokir himself participates in the process. As a cetologist and wildlife conservationist, she finds the actions of the villagers brutal and barbaric. When she asks Kanai for help to save the tiger, he utters, "…Isn't that a horror too that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?" (301). Piya replies to him, stating,

> "…Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What'll be left then? Aren't we alone enough in the universe? And do you think it'll stop at that? Once we decide we can kill off other species, it'll be people next - just the kind of people you're thinking of, people who're poor and unnoticed." (301)

Piya "matures from being a blinkered conservation biologist focused only on studying the Oracella to a more progressive environmentalist" (Kaur 132). It is true that Piya came to Sundarban to fulfil her own agenda; however, in the course of her pursuits, her life ultimately shifted towards a path as advocated by Heise:

> "An environmentally inflected cosmopolitanism needs to combine sustained familiarity and fluency in more than one culture with a systemic understanding of global ecology that goes beyond environmentalist clichés regarding universal connectedness and the pastoral understanding of ecology that informed earlier kinds of modern environmentalist thinking. The merit of environmental justice activism along with [Ulrich] Beck's more sweeping vision of new forms of solidarity emerging out of global risk scenarios is their analysis of how such an eco-cosmopolitanism

might link experiences of local endangerment to a sense of planet that encompasses both human and nonhuman worlds." (Heise 159)

Like Piya, Fokir shares a profound connection with the Sundarbans, yet his engagement with the environment differs fundamentally. While Piya's approach to the archipelago is scientific, Fokir's connection to *bhatir desh*, is highly metaphysical. Fokir reveres dolphins as "Bon Bibi's messengers" and believes that they bring Bon Bibi "news of the rivers and khals" and helps fishermen like him to find fish (Ghosh, *Hungry* 307). According to the locals, *Bon Bibi*, which translates to 'lady of the forest', is the goddess who protects the people from Nature's fury. The myth posits that in the holy city of Medina, Ibrahim, a childless Sufi faqir, was miraculously blessed with twins, Shah Jongoli and Bon Bibi, through the intervention of Archangel Gabriel. When the twins came of age, they were tasked by an archangel for a divine mission: "to travel from Arabia to "the country of eighteen tides" - *athhero bhatir desh* - in order to make it fit for human habitation." (103). They journeyed to the jungle, dressed as Sufi mendicants, and encountered Dokkhin Rai, a powerful demon-king who ruled with hatred and a craving for human flesh. The twins' arrival was met with resistance, but they defeated Dokkhin Rai's hordes in a fierce battle. After her victory, Bon Bibi decided that "one half of the tide country would remain a wilderness; this part of the forest she left to Dokkhin Rai and his demon hordes. The rest she claimed for herself, and under her rule this once forested domain was soon made safe for human settlement." (103). However, greed soon took over one of the wetland dwellers, Dhona, who decided to make a fortune in the jungle. He took a poor, orphaned boy Dukhey, along with him on his expedition to the wild forest, and ended up trading Dukhey's life with the demon-king Dokkhin Rai for cart-loads of honey and wax. Abandoned by Dhona, the innocent boy called Bonbibi for rescue from the predator. Bon Bibi saved Dukhey, ousted the demon Dokkhin Rai, and nursed the boy back to health, demonstrating to the world the law of the forest: "...that the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous were rewarded." (105). This Bon Bibi's myth is ethnologically internalised by Fokir, who prays to her to appease the forest's spirit. He conducts a ceremony with his son Tutul before a leaf-thatched shrine whose altar features a majestic, large-eyed female figure in a sari, accompanied by a smaller male figure and a tiger. Recognizing that a greater force rules beyond human control in the tide country, Fokir, with his head bowed and hands joined, recites a solemn chant, evoking traditional Hindu pujas. Such belief systems, according to Jessica Schmonsky, can have a,

> "…considerable effect on environmental attitudes and can therefore play a major role in ecological conservation practices […] seemingly, one of the most popular forms of conservation through folklore is by taboos or trepidation. When humans regard plants and animals, stars and planets, rocks and soil as integral parts of their world, then they take certain actions to protect or manage them, either indirectly by tradition, ritual or taboo." (Schmonsky)

Interestingly, in the narrative, Bon Bibi's story not only "enables the Sundarbans islanders to envision nonhuman others as fellow beings" but also helps to envisage "a form of coexistence with them that is quite different from the idea of species preservation." (Kumar 27). Fokir's belief in Bon Bibi's myth, underscores the importance of living in harmony with nature and cultivating a deep reverence for the environment. In the novel, both Piya and Fokir endorse sensibilities akin to Heise's understanding of eco-cosmopolitanism, the "attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and non-human kinds" (Heise 61). None of the protagonists is born in the tide country, not even Fokir, who migrated from Bangladesh, yet each character displays expansion of one's own "topophilia" and exhibits biospheric connectedness (Tuan 113). It is their "ecologically oriented thinking," which "entails the emergence of new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place" (Heise 10).

Uzma Aslam Khan's works, akin to Amitav Ghosh's, exhibit a profound ecological sensitivity, prompting readers to contemplate the breathtaking beauty and magnificence of nature, and the symbiotic bond that inextricably links nature and human life. A lauded Pakistani writer, Khan poignantly documents the devastating consequences of so-called human development on nature. Her novel, *Thinner than Skin* (2012), is a powerful ecocentric fiction that speaks "to the state and fate of the earth and its nonhuman creatures" through its vivid setting and characters (Buell 127). According to Munazza Yaqoob, the text is among contemporary Pakistani fiction that "hold [...] a mirror to the appalling environmental conditions in Pakistan" wherein "the writers' environmental consciousness is manifested in their portrayal of growing industrialization and urbanization resulting in the degradation of natural surroundings and resources and the deleterious impact on human habitats and communities." (250). Set against the stunning backdrop of Pakistan's Kaghan Valley, the narrative masterfully engages with the complexities of climate change through a pivotal research expedition led by Farhana, Nadir, and Wes. Farhana, a 30-year-old determined scientist born to a Pakistani father and German mother, embarks on a journey to explore her

father's homeland with her boyfriend Nadir, a young Pakistani landscape photographer living in America. She has persuaded Nadir to accompany her on this journey in order to conduct a study of the region's glaciers with her American colleague Wes. Along the way, they meet Nadir's Pakistani friend Irfan, who accompanies them on their journey. In Kaghan Valley, the group encounters the Gujjar family, comprising Maryam, a middle-aged woman, her physically disabled husband Suleiman, their daughters Jumanah and Kiran, and son Younis. This encounter of the locals (the Gujjars) with the outsiders (the visiting photographer and scientists) sparks the narrative in motion. Farhana, in order to introduce Maryam's children to local tourist activities, organises a boat ride which ends in tragedy: a wave capsizes the boat, and Kiran drowns. Overwhelmed with grief, Maryam carefully packs Kiran's belongings into a box for safekeeping and demands justice for her daughter. As terrorist activities escalate in the valley, Ghafoor, Maryam's old lover, is tasked with transporting a dubious package for a group of men. Driven by revenge for Kiran's death, Ghafoor secretly places the suspicious box containing a bomb in Nadir's pack. However, in the chaos, boxes are mistakenly exchanged, and Nadir ends up with the first box containing Kiran's cherished belongings. When Nadir is stopped by military men in a convoy of trucks, he is interrogated and even beaten for suspicion of terrorism, and the mix-up is discovered. Ultimately, Kiran's death sets the stage for the novel's climax, where these distinct narrative threads converge. The novel deals with the issues of identity and belonging, international war and politics, democratic capitalism, and terrorism. However, its core focus lies in the ongoing ecological catastrophes that perpetually reshape the South Asian landscape. Through the interwoven narratives of Nadir and Maryam, Khan thoughtfully explores the increasingly pressing ecological challenges.

In the novel, Nadir, a struggling photographer, views nature through the lens of pervasive instrumentalization, seeing it primarily as a means to achieve his artistic goals. To him, mountains, glaciers, and grasslands are beautiful and meaningful only insofar as he can perceive them through his camera lens, thereby making him enslaved to image rather than reality. However, when he catches sight of the glaciers in the valley of Pakistan, he is forced to wonder, "Glaciers in the eastern Himalayas are receding. Some say the Alps will be ice-free by 2100. Greenland's glaciers are melting so fast that they could sink southern California and Bangladesh. But in parts of Pakistan, glaciers could be expanding […] Glacial growth and decline were equal indicators of global warming" (Khan 43). This newfound awareness of Nadir is further solidified when he shares the ancient tale of Malika Parbat's jinn with

Farhana. In the ancient tale, a jinn guarded Malika Parbat (Queen of the Mountains) and fell deeply in love with Badar Jamal, a fairy princess and water creature who inhabited the lake. However, their love was disrupted by Prince Saiful Maluk, a charming prince from a distant land, who captivated Badar Jamal's heart. The jinn's jealousy intensified, triggering a catastrophic event. His "scalding fury caused Malika Parbat's snow to melt with such force it breached the banks of the lake and nearly drowned the poor lovers." (46). The lovers escaped to a nearby cave, but the jinn's fury had already changed the course of their love story. In the novel, Nadir's realisation that global warming is the modern-day jinn suggests that he sees climate change as a formidable, almost supernatural force threatening the world. Just as the jinn's fury in the ancient tale wreaked havoc on the environment, global warming, at present, is causing irreparable harm to the planet. Furthermore, while trekking up the glacier, he observes, "[t]here were others trekking up the glacier with us, as well as a line of jeeps, all heading up to the lake, all leaving brown scud marks across the glittery white expanse." (44). The glaciers, once pristine, are now "packed with tourists and trekkers", and are desecrated by pollution (47). He laments, "[a] lot has changed since we were here last." (45). His concern underscores the devastating impact of uncontrolled tourism and unbridled capitalism in Pakistan, which ravages natural areas and poses severe environmental risks. Here, it is worth citing Dipesh Chakrabarty's work, which contextualises climate change within the broader narrative of globalisation. In his book, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), Chakrabarty contends that "[t]he globe and the planet – as categories standing for the two narratives of globali[s]ation and global warming – are connected. What links them are the phenomena of modern capitalism (using the term loosely) and technology, both global in reach" (4). Furthermore, Chakrabarty emphasises that "greenhouse gas emissions have increased almost exclusively through the pursuit of industrial and post-industrial forms of modernization and prosperity" (4). In the novel, Nadir's attentive gaze makes him realise the destructive impact of anthropocentric development on the natural world. This attentive gaze of Nadir, resonates with Van Dooren et al. concept of "arts of attentiveness" (17). The art of attentiveness is, "a two-part proposition: both a practice of getting to know another in their intimate particularity…and, at the same time, a practice of learning how one might better respond to another … In short, the arts of attentiveness remind us that knowing and living are deeply entangled and that paying attention can and should be the basis for crafting better possibilities for shared life." (Van Dooren et al. 17). The art of attentiveness is the foundation of multispecies solidarity which is the major concern of multispecies cosmopolitics. Donna

Haraway, building upon Isabelle Stengers' work, defines multispecies "cosmopolitics" as a "practice for going on, for remaining exposed to consequences, for entangling materially with as many of the messy players as possible." (Haraway 106). In the novel, Nadir becomes deeply entangled with the complexities of planetary existence and realises the multiscalar relationality between human and non-human beings. Later, while rowing on the lake, Nadir starts to feels that, "[t]hese valleys belonged to the farmers down in the plains, and the hoarders around" (Khan 68) and he and other tourists are just an intruder in the area disrupting the ecological harmony of the valley. This sentiment is echoed by Irfan, who is working on a project in the area, when he notes that the local tribes "want the tourists to leave" (70). Furthermore, Irfan, with his understanding of the nomadic lifestyle, questions the need for capitalist developments in the region. He wonders,

> *Do they need it?* If for thousands of years people had survived, with varying degrees of success, by building irrigation channels from glacial melt, despite their poverty and isolation, did they need a man from the city bringing them pipes and taps? It was a fine line, the one between helping and hurting. To do nothing could mean becoming a passive witness to a potential calamity. (71-2)

Mariyam, who has known Kaghan Valley intimately, corroborates this perspective, observing that the world she has lived in, has undergone dramatic changes over just a few generations. She notes that new development schemes and political interventions have severely crippled the "wandering lifestyle" of innocent mountain dwellers and wreaked havoc on their lives (183). Maryam is disheartened to see "alleys that once chimed with horse bells now clattering with cranes" (136). The decisions of the local government to replace the Kaghan goats and "desi" sheep with Australian cattle is unsettling to her. She shares her concerns with her daughter, lamenting that:

> …foreign sheep were not as strong as thin desi sheep. They could not survive the icy winds and sudden snowdrifts of Kaghan Valley. They were fussy eaters. And they were slow-moving, adjusting poorly to nomadic living and complaining too much…Another thing…their wool. So long it gets all tangled up in thorns as we look for better feed, just for them. (190).

Additionally, Maryam reminisces about the region's rich equine heritage, recalling that only a generation ago, there had been many other breeds of horses in the valley: "the Nukra, Bharssi, even the Yarkandi breed [...]. Now all those breeds were lost, forever" (207). She fears that within a few years, "the Kaliani breed too might be extinct" (207). Maryam laments

the attrition of horse breeds, a consequence of slow violence that has unfolded over years. Slow violence involves a subtle, long-term destruction that unfolds gradually and is often unseen. It disperses across time and space, eroding through incremental, accumulating effects that are typically overlooked as violence. Slow violence "is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales." (Nixon 2). It refers to attritional calamities caused by climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes (2). Furthermore, the novel repeatedly mentions Maryam's difficulties with "revenue-generating forest policy" and "grazing fee and tree-cutting fee," which have forced her and her community to change their traditional practices and lifeways (Khan 250). For "centuries," locals had obeyed the unwritten "law" of nature that one must wait until a tree has reached maturity in order to cut it down; however, under new laws, "Hardly anyone waited anymore" (248). This has resulted in large-scale deforestation and flooding: "the land was easily destroyed in the floods [...] because it had no trees [...] because the same inspector grew fat each time the forest was torn down" (212). Furthermore, Mariyam's observation in the narrative highlights the diverse ways in which ecological balance is disturbed in the region, underscoring the relevance of Ralph Metzner's poignant words: "we as a species are suffering from a kind of collective amnesia. We have forgotten something our ancestors once knew and practised – certain attitudes and kinds of perception, an ability to empathize and identify with nonhuman life, respect for the mysterious, and humility in relationship to the infinite complexities of the natural world" (61). In the novel, the collective amnesia is manifest in the region's degraded environment, which reveals man's profound disconnection from the nature world. In Khan's novel, eco-cosmopolitanism emerges as a framework for transcending national boundaries by grounding oneself in the planet's ecology, geography and localities, which are simultaneously local and global. By anchoring the local in the global, Khan's approach implicates the planet as a whole, promoting a nuanced understanding of interconnectedness. In the narrative too, 'semi-nomadic' Mariyam and 'transnational' Nadir, despite their differing national backgrounds, adopt a perspective that transcends bioregionalism. Both Mariyam and Nadir, consider the Kaghan Valley on a planetary scale. This progressive sense of place enables them to shift from anthropocentric views and embrace eco-cosmopolitanism.

Amitav Ghosh and Uzma Aslam Khan, in their groundbreaking work simultaneously address the global reach and local manifestation of the environmental crisis. Departing from

traditional climate fiction, which focuses on an apocalyptic future, Ghosh and Khan ground their narratives in the immediacy of the present. Through their strategic use of myth and folklore, Ghosh and Khan subvert dominant anthropocentric discourses, cultivate ecological sensitivity and promote multispecies solidarity. By integrating lore, Ghosh and Khan demonstrate that eco-mythological perspectives can transcend localised ecosystems and can resonate across the larger canvas of human existence. Furthermore, through the cast of characters such as Piya, Fokir, Mariyam, and Nadir, the authors illustrate that connections can transcend barriers of class, culture, language, and gender and be grounded in a shared sense of being and a relationship with the natural environment. These characters humanise the abstract concept of a 'citizen of the world', embedding it in the intricate web of ecosystems. Thus, we find that Amitav Ghosh and Uzma Aslam Khan reveal the intertwined fates of human and nonhuman worlds, pointing towards a more inclusive, eco-centric understanding of citizenship that recognizes our shared belonging to the Earth.

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