

‘NATURE RED IN TOOTH AND CLAW:’ AN EVALUATION OF SY MONTGOMERY’S REPRESENTATION OF THE WILDERNESS OF THE SUNDARBANS

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Abstract

*Sundarbans, a place that witnesses a perfect amalgamation of beauty and horror, because of its relative inaccessibility as compared to the other forested areas in India, has always been a mystery, an uncharted territory, arousing curiosity but denying opportunity to explore the deltaic landscape. In her book, *Spell of the Tiger: The Man-Eaters of Sundarbans*, Sy Montgomery has endeavoured to unravel the mysteries of the place that has eluded definitions. The title is taken from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s line in canto LVI In Memoriam A. H. H (Tennyson 15) . The paper intends to analyze, from an ecocritical perspective, the author’s representation of nature in her book, and how she has portrayed human existence in a tiger-infested land, how do the people of the Sundarbans cope with the menace of man-eating tigers, and how their beliefs, lore, and legends are shaped via their interaction with the denizens of the forests as well as natural calamities, and how the author herself gets trapped in the web of uncertainties surrounding the landscape.*

Key words: Nature, Tigers, Jungle, Man-eater, Sunderbans.

‘Sundarbans,’ the largest halophytic mangrove forest in the world, evokes the picture of an unfathomable domain, the tide country which is still relatively untouched by the prevailing corruption of modern civilization, a place which physically manifest an incorporeal force that looms large over the inhabitants surviving there, a region where tiger still rules, an exotic locale that has given rise to many discourses concerning environment. The Sundarbans never ceases to surprise the onlooker, and at the same time, make him reach out to the darkest recesses of his heart, through challenging his instincts at every step. The place appears to be a remnant of the pre-historic times when the relations and definitions were simpler, determined by the basic needs. Nature has not only showered her bounties over the mangrove forests of the region, but also, as a divine entity, introduced the Ravager in the form of Blakeian ‘Tyger’ that would lurk “In the forest of the night” (*Tyger*, 2) to destroy whatever is detrimental to the innocence and incorruptibility of the junglescapes. Indeed, it is a common

belief among the people of the Sundarbans that anybody pure of heart, and he who pays homage to the gods who preside over the place, will never be harmed by a tiger which is the protector of the forests. Is it not curious that media, especially the channels dedicated to the research of wildlife all over the world show little interest in filming the place which has intrigued many generations of readers, as well as scholars? They go back again and again to the Savannas, or South American rain forests, or North American landscapes, because of their accessibility. Sundarbans rejects representation. Otherwise why, despite being the most talked about geographical wonders in the academic circles, the Sundarbans only has a handful of researchers investigating it? The remoteness of the place has both intrigued and discouraged the wildlife enthusiasts to explore its vast reserve and diverse flora and fauna. It still remains the most marginalized territory in the canon of wildlife writings on a global scale. In India, tigers in Corbett National Park, Bandhavgarh, and Ranthambhore are relatively well documented. However, it should not be forgotten that in habitat, predatory habits, and intelligence, tigers from Sundarbans present an altogether different picture. Their characteristics make them unique. The tiger's effect on the local inhabitants, its fear, does not depend on its physical presence in the locality, but the absence is equally capable of sustaining the atmosphere of terror and uncertainty. Sy Montgomery, in *Spell of the Tiger: The Man-eaters of Sundarbans* has tried to assimilate the collective memory of the local inhabitants within herself, and shedding the inhibitions of an occidental woman she has tried to associate with the mass culture of the region. Her book is documentation of the realities of the Sundarbans from an outsider's perspective. She has spoken extensively on the flora and fauna of the region and its volatile climatic conditions. Her acceptance of the ways of the jungle goes on to prove that she has endeavored to understand the bio-diversity of the Sundarbans and present it faithfully in her writings.

To a layman's eyes, the Sundarbans would provide enormous opportunities for the satisfaction of the senses. The prospect of watch a magnificent beast in the core of the jungle would also provide thrill to someone venturing out into the forests for the first time. Sy Montgomery writes that the place, despite the horror it holds, despite being an embodiment of the hostile nature, is never devoid of appeal. Usually a very little percentage of the tourist succeeds in witnessing a tiger in the wilderness. Yet, the apparently bucolic surrounding provides a respite from the din and bustle of the city life. But at the same time she warns her readers that this is only one aspect of the deltaic region, the place harbours many mysteries, dark, deep, and often beyond the comprehension of ordinary senses: "But this is only one face of Sundarbans. Like the many-headed deities of the Hindu pantheon, it embodies terror as well as peace., but from a safe deck of a big tourist boat, the terrible face of Sundarbans is as visible as the dark side of the moon" (Montgomery 2).

The Sundarbans, in Sy Montgomery's book, *Spell of the Tiger*, defies explanation. The strangeness of the landscape effectively imposes the feeling of incompleteness of the human knowledge. In other parts of the world, nature is defined in more simplistic terms, as the

human civilization has effectively silenced nature. If you venture into a zoo, or an amusement park anywhere in the world, you will find nature has been carefully constructed, trimmed, pruned, caged, and tamed behind the bars and glass walls. Artificial habitats are created for the inmates in order to compensate the loss of the natural ones. This seems easy, and frankly, boosts our pride in the technological progress this civilization has made. Indeed, we can think of this great achievement, this “Ecological imperialism,” (Crosby, 2004) while musing on the lines in *Hamlet*: “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals” (2.2 77-78)!

However, in the Sundarbans, nature indeed works in mysterious ways. Sy Montgomery writes: “Nature does not obey the rules: fish climb trees; the animals drink salt water; the roots of trees grow up toward the sky instead of down to the earth; the tide may run in opposite directions simultaneously in the same creek” (Montgomery 3). In their hunting narratives, writers like Jim Corbett and Kenneth Anderson have documented the processes via which a normal tiger becomes a man-eater: loss of habitat, incapacity to hunt normal prey due to some injury, eating the corpses to name a few. The tigers in the Sundarbans actively seek out the human prey. They do not follow the usual hunting practices, such as hunting in the night. They hunt in broad daylight, as if nature has assigned them to be the executioners of men who venture into the forests to collect honey or wood. Sy Montgomery finds such behaviour to be extremely territorial, not in the usual way tigers everywhere else do. For her, it is not simply an act meant to establish prowess, or to survive and rear cubs, but retribution—retribution directed against mankind for soiling the sacred grounds.

It is significant to note that in the narratives of Jim Corbett, Kenneth Anderson, and Hugh Allen, the figure of the ‘sahib’ would always induce courage in the natives who would equate power with the whiteness of the skin. Jim Corbett was referred to as the ‘White Sadhu’ or white saint, with almost mystical powers that would rid them of the menace of a man-eating tiger. The white men, the representatives of the colonial power in India, would often consider the jungles to be their playgrounds, and the denizens of the forests to be subject to their mercy. In his essay, *Nature and Silence*, collected in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Christopher Manes writes: “For human societies of all kinds, moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communication with one another” (*The Ecocriticism Reader*, 16). Manes, while acknowledging Foucault’s notions on the similar subject, notes that since humans have the power of articulate speech, they are likely to ignore a nature that does not speak back or protest vocally against its exploitation (*The Ecocriticism Reader*, 16). The human civilization has become so preoccupied with technological progress, trying to provide rational arguments for every phenomenon that it has killed the senses that communicate with nature. This anthropocentric attitude has its roots embedded in the teachings of Renaissance and Humanism which have placed man at the centre of the universe, as well as in those of the Bible and exegesis which have guaranteed

man's lordship over every other entity beside him. However, the forests in the Sundarbans speak back, rather, overwhelms the human speech and human definitions. The confidence of an educated westerner gets a jolt when she steps into the depths of the forests: "So seldom do we Westerners think of our own flesh as meat. So seldom do we consider ourselves another being's food. So seldom do we dare think that a clawed predator could stalk us, kill us with its face, chew our meat from our bones" (Montgomery 71).

The idea of tiger is deadlier than its actual presence. The inhabitants of the region have accepted it as a part of life. The fatalism is also shared by the officers of the Indian Forest Services. For instance, in an interview with the author, Kalyan Chakrabarti, a former field director of Sundarban's Tiger Reserve, who says that whoever ventures into the forests are completely at the mercy of the tiger. He says, "If a tiger really wants to kill you, it can take you. There is nothing you can do. Not even a gun will help you" (Montgomery 9). In the heart of the Sundarbans, strange things happen that are not always connected with the tiger. Sy Montgomery writes about one of her interviews with another forest officer, Murali, who was born and brought up at a village in the Sundarbans, and studied at a university, narrates how once he witnessed during one of his patrols that a fierce wind shook the trees on the right bank, while the left bank was entirely calm. When asked to explain what might have happened, he says, "Spirits of the dead often raise up sudden whirlwinds; however, it doesn't harm anyone" (Montgomery 51).

In order to survive in the hostile natural conditions in the Sundarbans, the people living there put their collective faith in the deities who can protect them from the jaws of a tiger. Yet, the death toll in the Sundarbans is constantly on the rise. In fact, Sy Montgomery comes across, during her travel through the region, the famous 'vidhaba pallis,' villages where only the widows stay—women whose husbands have been killed by tigers. Most of them do not get compensation from the government since the victims ventured further than the buffer zones, into the core areas, restricted to the general population. According to the figures released by the government, the author states, thirty to forty people comprise the death toll in the Sundarbans (Montgomery 9). Many unreported deaths take place in the core areas, and they are not recorded. In such dire conditions, it becomes essential that some measures should be taken in order to minimize such casualties. Bonani Kakkar, a wildlife conservationist who has worked for the World Wildlife Fund, United Nation's Environmental Program, and the World Bank, in an interview with the author, mentions several measures taken by the forest authorities to ensure that the death toll is brought down. These measures include erecting electrically charged clay dummies in several areas of the forest; as well as wearing masks on the back of the head as it is generally believed that tigers attack from behind. These plans, especially the latter worked for some time before the tigers could work out the trick, and adapted themselves to the new situation (Montgomery 39). Hence, it can well be inferred that in the Sundarbans, culture can neither tame nor control nature.

The author observes that the people of Sundarbans, despite suffering from the frequent onslaughts of nature in the form of man-eating tigers, feel that tiger is essential for the maintenance of biodiversity (Montgomery 20). They resort to the local ‘gunins’ or witch doctors to protect them while in the forest. They offer elaborate ‘puja’ to their gods, and they have a number of deities presiding over every natural ailment. Thus we have Bonbibi, Shah Jungli, Dakshin Ray, Gulalbibi, Fulbibi, and Ghazi Saheb. Plays are staged which tell the story of Bonbibi’s greatness, how she and her club-wielding warrior brother Shah Jungli protect the innocent from the wrath of Dakshin Ray, the tiger god. The author, despite being a Christian finds herself inexorably drawn towards the faith of the local people. In order to achieve success in locating tigers in the wilderness, she offers ‘puja’ to the jungle gods, being assisted by Girindra, the local guide. She feels that the place questions her faith in her own religion, after being overcome by the reigning fatalism in the Sunderbans. She exclaims: “We wanted, of course, to show our respect for Girindra and his beliefs. We wanted to see how the forest gods are worshipped. But also, although Dianne is agnostic and I am Christian, we both hoped, secretly, in the back of our minds, that Girindra’s gods could coax a miracle from the forest” (Montgomery 73). The author also realizes that such ceremonies do have psychological impacts on the local people. She accepts that Girindra has suddenly become bolder, right after the ceremony, which is evident in his readiness to take the author and her friend to Bagna, a tiger-infested area, where earlier he was unwilling to go. Also, there is the goddess Manasha, who is also worshipped in other parts of West Bengal as well. The goddess looks after the poisonous snakes and protects people from snakebites. Sy Montgomery writes that those who die of snakebites in the Sundarbans, are not cremated. Their bodies are tied to rafts and sent downstream—offerings to goddess Manasha, who may restore life in them. The tiger is considered to be Dakshin Ray’s agents of destruction. According to the popular lore, Sunderbans has always been a site of contention between Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray, fighting for the soul of man. Bonbibi is the benevolent goddess, whereas Dakshin Ray’s legend has a parallel with the Grim Reaper in Christian mythology. The myth of a forest goddess may also find an equivalent in the beliefs of the Bambara tribes in Mali, which worships Chi Wara, (Goucher, LeGuin, and Walton 3) the god of agriculture who mediates between humans and nature, and have taught them agricultural practices. Just as Dakshin Ray takes the form of a tiger, Chi Wara appears in the form of an antelope. Similarly, in Roman mythology, we have Ceres, goddess of growing plants and motherly relationships, as well as Diana, goddess of hunt, animals, wilderness and moon. Since these gods nurture and protect the denizens of the forests through the bounties of nature, they are feared by the mankind for their power to withdraw the favor bestowed on them. Even in Hinduism, there is Vaishno Devi who rides a tiger, and is worshipped by the hill and jungle-folks of northern India. But these deities are held in so much awe that they can hardly be approached in human terms, but in the Sundarbans, the relationship is more intimate between Bonbibi and the locals, as is evident

from Girindra's dreams, through which he claims that Bonbibi communicates with him, speaking affectionately as a mother does with her son (Montgomery 79).

Like the witch-doctors in the jungles of Kenya, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and the shamans in the native American cultures, Sy Montgomery comes across a number of shamans, 'Gunins' as they are mostly known as. They are believed to wield power over the beasts of the jungle, and perform elaborate rituals to appease the tiger god: "Bakher Gazi is a fakir, a Muslim shaman. His powers are believed to be so effective that they can clear an entire section of forest of danger, allowing the fishermen, woodcutters, or honey collectors in his company to work there safely. He is in great demand in Sundarbans. His powers work equally well for Hindus and Muslims, he claims" (Montgomery 113). The source of his powers comes from nature. He has a magic wood called ascan embedded in his leg. The piece of wood comes from sundari tree. A much larger piece of wood called asabari also comes from sundari tree and is used to protect bigger parties of woodcutters (Montgomery 113). He claims to have learnt shamanism from his father. He believes that sundari tree is sacred, and with the right enchantments, it becomes a shield from the tigers. The author meets another shaman, from the Hindu community, Ksab Kayal, who sprinkles holy water collected from the mud-banks, on the first tree on the river bank they come across, and request it to stand as a guardian while the workmen do their job. Everybody places his hand on the tree, and the shaman utters the command of Bonbibi, known as "Bonbibi hukku," (Montgomery 115) and the tree thus becomes enchanted with and bound by the holy spell to watch over the working men. A gunin, named Phoni Guyan, in an interview with the author states that the gunin can only try to appease (Montgomery 190). Also, sometimes these gunins fail to prevent an attack because of their own carelessness, like not chanting the right incantations, not following rituals correctly and so on (Montgomery 190). Adhir Krishna Mridha, a powerful gunin could not even protect his son who was taken by a tiger right in front of him. He explains that despite having chanted all the right spells, the tiger attacked his son, as the young man having urinated on the bank, desecrated the holy ground and invited the wrath of the gods, resulting in the terrible tragedy. In Sundarbans, it is always required to have purity of the heart, or the tiger will hunt him down. This is not simply a local belief. In fact the same opinion is shared by Kalyan Chakrabarti, a former field director in the region says, "A careful, watchful, respectful person is never killed by the tiger in Sundarbans" (Montgomery 43).

Sy Montgomery's *Spell of the Tiger: The Man-Eaters of Sundarbans* documents a land where nature does not simply act as a background for human action, or an ideological screen. Here nature stands as a living, breathing, and communicating entity, and demands a separate environmental ethics to address it. The place is an embodiment of the failures of the human endeavour to be the master of his natural environment. The author, during her journey, gets sucked into the cultural adherence and allegiance of the to the nature, embodied in the idol of Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray, like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, or Adela in *A Passage to India*.

The journey to the Sundarbans becomes a search for the self. In the 'Postscript' she writes that she still awaits a letter from Girindra, the guide who introduced her to the spirit of the Sundarbans, and make her share in the sense of place of the people living there precariously, yet are unwilling to relocate since the place is deeply ingrained in their consciousness. They cannot escape, and do not want to either. Living in the lap of nature, they have discovered essential truths about their place in the scheme of things, the reason for their existence. This reality is succinctly and most accurately summed up by the author: "Thanks to the tiger, the people of Sundarbans still understand what the rest of us pretend to ignore: that all who share the sacred breath of life—chital and boar, frog and fish, idiot and genius—are made of meat. And all bodies made of meat bow before the divine, humbled by the spell of the tiger" (Montgomery 22).

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