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Manuscript Title: Phytopoetics of Resistance: Botanical Agency and Decolonial Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*

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Abstract

This essay examines the representation of plants as active agents in decolonial ecological narratives through a comparative reading of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Robin Wall Kimmerer's nonfiction work *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013). Drawing on critical plant studies (Marder), indigenous epistemologies (Kimmerer), and postcolonial ecocriticism, it argues that both texts challenge anthropocentric "plant blindness" by foregrounding vegetal intelligence, communication, and reciprocal relationality as forms of resistance to colonial and capitalist exploitation of landscapes. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans mangrove ecosystem—particularly the dynamic agency of tidal forests and species like the *sundari* tree—emerges as a nonhuman protagonist that disrupts colonial cartography and extractive developmentalism. Ghosh's narrative entwines human histories of displacement with the mangrove's adaptive, rhizomatic growth, presenting plants as co-creators of place and memory.

Similarly, Kimmerer's Potawatomi-informed essays reframe plants such as sweetgrass as teachers and kin, whose braided growth models ethical reciprocity and challenges Western scientific objectification. By placing these texts in dialogue, the essay highlights how literary and indigenous modes of phytocriticism recentre plants as sentient partners in multispecies world-making. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates how contemporary literature and Indigenous knowledge systems converge to overcome anthropocentric biases, fostering non-extractive human-plant relationships essential for ecological justice in the Plantationocene.

Keywords: *Critical plant studies; Decolonial ecocriticism; Vegetal agency; Amitav Ghosh; Robin Wall Kimmerer; Indigenous epistemology*.

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Introduction

In 1998, botanists James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler identified a pervasive cultural phenomenon they termed "plant blindness": the human tendency to overlook or systematically undervalue plants, to see them as passive backdrop rather than living agents.[1] This perceptual failure, they argued, is not merely aesthetic but epistemological: it structures Western science, philosophy, and popular culture in ways that render vegetal life invisible precisely because it is ubiquitous. Contemporary literary and indigenous knowledge systems, however, have begun to contest this blindness with increasing urgency, foregrounding plants as communicative, sentient, and politically significant participants in the worlds they co-create. This essay examines two such interventions: Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide (*2004) and Robin Wall Kimmerer's nonfiction collection *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific*

[1] The phrase comes from botanist James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler, who coined "plant blindness" in 1999 to describe the perceptual and cognitive bias by which human observers overlook or undervalue plants in their visual field and in broader cultural imagination. See Wandersee and Schussler, "Toward a Theory of Plant Blindness," *Plant Science Bulletin* 47.1 (2001): 2–9.

Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants (2013). Through a comparative reading informed by critical plant studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, and indigenous epistemologies, I argue that both texts construct what I call a "phytopoetics of resistance": a mode of writing in which vegetal agency is not merely thematised but formally enacted, challenging anthropocentric and colonial frameworks for understanding landscape, knowledge, and ecological relation.

The term "phytopoetics" builds on Michael Marder's influential project of "plant-thinking," which seeks to attend to vegetal life on its own terms rather than through the distorting lens of animal or human metaphysics.[2] Where Marder works primarily in the tradition of Continental philosophy, Kimmerer grounds her engagement with plants in Potawatomi epistemology and the grammar of animacy embedded in indigenous language, while Ghosh's fiction achieves its vegetal consciousness through narrative form: through shifts in focalization, the texturing of ecological description, and the implication of the Sundarbans mangrove ecosystem as a structuring, non-neutral presence. Together, these texts suggest that overcoming plant blindness requires not simply better botanical attention but a fundamental reorientation of the categories through which Western modernity has organised its relationships to the living world.

The stakes of this reorientation are not merely philosophical. Both texts situate plant agency within histories of colonial extraction, indigenous dispossession, and capitalist monoculture. The Sundarbans, spanning the delta of the Ganges-Brahmaputra in India and Bangladesh, is a landscape shaped by centuries of British imperial forestry, agrarian settlement schemes, and postcolonial developmentalist pressure.[3] Sweetgrass, *Hierochloe odorata*, carries within its braided growth the memory of Potawatomi ceremonies, but also the scars of colonial prohibition, forced assimilation, and the suppression of indigenous land relations. In both cases, the plant is not merely a symbol of what has been lost but an active participant in what persists, and in what resists. Reading these texts together through the lens of decolonial ecocriticism reveals a shared project: the elaboration of human-plant relationships that are reciprocal, attentive, and grounded in obligations that colonial modernity has systematically foreclosed.

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[2] Marder's project extends Derrida's thinking on the trace and difference into vegetal life, arguing that plants present a mode of temporality and signification that deconstructs the binary of presence and absence foundational to Western metaphysics. See Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia UP, 2013), especially chapters 2 and 4.

[3] The Bengal famine of 1943, colonial indigo cultivation, and the displacement of communities in the Sundarbans following Partition are all legible as historical substrate in Ghosh's novel, though he renders them obliquely. For the environmental history of the Sundarbans, see Amites Mukhopadhyay, *Living with Disasters: Communities and Development in India* (Cambridge UP, 2016).

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Critical Plant Studies and the Grammar of Vegetal Agency

Critical plant studies emerged in the early twenty-first century at the intersection of philosophy, biology, and literary and cultural theory, drawing impetus from scientific findings about plant communication, memory, and problem-solving that challenged long-held assumptions about vegetal passivity. Research by Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, popularised in *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (2015), demonstrated that plants exhibit tropistic responses, chemical signalling, and forms of distributed cognition that, while radically different from animal neural processing, constitute genuine modes of sensing and responding to the world. Monica Gagliano's experiments on learning in the mimosa plant and Suzanne Simard's research on mycorrhizal communication networks in forests extended this picture, suggesting that plant behaviour is not mechanically deterministic but contextually responsive and, in some meaningful sense, intentional. These findings did not go unnoticed in the humanities.

Marder's "plant-thinking" proposes that vegetal life instantiates a form of being that is irreducibly non-identical: distributed, rhizomatic, temporally open, and constitutively entangled with its environment. Plants, he argues, do not merely occupy space but actively produce it; they do not merely exist in time but modulate it through seasonal rhythm, growth, and decay. Crucially for literary analysis, Marder suggests that attending to plant ontology requires a corresponding transformation of the languages and genres through which humans narrate their relationships to the living world. Anthropocentric narrative modes that centre discrete, bounded, self-identical subjects are structurally ill-fitted to represent vegetal life. What is required, Marder implies, are modes of writing that enact multiplicity, distributed agency, and temporal diffusion — precisely the formal qualities that Ghosh and Kimmerer, in their different ways, develop.

The concept of vegetal agency, however, is not without its critics and its complications. Prudence Gibson and Baylee Brits caution against a naive anthropomorphism that simply projects human-like interiority onto plants, arguing that this risks replicating the very hierarchies of cognitive value that plant studies seeks to dismantle. Donna Haraway's work on making kin and staying with the trouble offers a more productive orientation: rather than asking whether plants are "like us," she invites attention to the specific, asymmetrical, and non-innocent entanglements that characterise multispecies relations. This is the framework that most closely aligns with the phytopoetics of both Ghosh and Kimmerer. Neither author claims

that plants are conscious in a human sense; both insist that they are nevertheless partners in world-making whose claims on human attention carry ethical and political weight.

The postcolonial dimension of this argument is crucial. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" — the attritional, temporally dispersed violence of environmental degradation that falls disproportionately on the poor and the racialised — provides one framework for understanding why plant agency matters to decolonial ecocriticism. If plants are the first casualties of extractive capitalism — cleared, monocultured, patented — then attending to their agency is inseparable from attending to the human communities whose lives and knowledges are entangled with them. Deane Curtin and Vandana Shiva have each, in different registers, argued that colonial epistemology and agricultural capitalism are mutually reinforcing: the reduction of seeds and ecosystems to inert resources mirrors and enables the reduction of indigenous and peasant communities to surplus labour. Critical plant studies, read through this lens, becomes not merely a philosophical intervention but a political one.

The Sundarbans as Vegetal Protagonist: Ghosh's Mangrove Epistemology

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, the vast tidal mangrove delta that occupies the mouths of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers. The name itself derives from the *sundari* tree (*Heritiera fomes*), whose canopy once dominated the forest and whose diminishment by salinity intrusion and deforestation tracks the ecological degradation of the delta with painful precision. From the novel's opening pages, the Sundarbans resists easy narrativization. It is a landscape in perpetual flux, its islands appearing and disappearing with the tides, its channels shifting with each monsoon, and its boundaries impossible to fix with colonial cartographic precision.[4] This instability is not merely scenic; it is ontological. The mangrove forest constitutes a mode of being that confounds the categorical distinctions — between land and water, rooted and mobile, interior and exterior — upon which Western spatial thinking, including colonial mapping, depends.

The novel's dual protagonists — Piya Roy, an American cetologist of Bengali descent, and Kanai Dutt, a Delhi-based translator who has come to the Sundarbans to retrieve his late uncle's journal — both arrive as outsiders, equipped with the cognitive frameworks of Western science and metropolitan modernity respectively. Their education in the Sundarbans is, among

[4] Ghosh's subsequent nonfiction, particularly *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), makes explicit what *The Hungry Tide* enacts fictionally: the argument that Western realist narrative is structurally ill-equipped to represent ecological crisis because it centres human interiority over nonhuman agency.

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other things, an education in vegetal agency: a progressive disorganisation of their existing epistemological frameworks through immersion in an ecosystem whose logic exceeds those frameworks. It is the local fisherman Fokir, illiterate by metropolitan standards but fluent in the signs and rhythms of the tidal forest, who functions as the novel's guide to plant intelligence. His navigational knowledge is inseparable from his attentiveness to mangrove species, tidal patterns, and the microecological cues that the forest offers to those trained to read them.

The *sundari* tree functions in the novel as a kind of botanical memory palace. Ghosh renders it with an attention that goes beyond ecological description; the tree becomes a figure for the persistence of indigenous and subaltern knowledge in the face of colonial erasure. Nirmal's journal — the textual heart of the novel, the document that Kanai has come to retrieve and translate — is suffused with botanical consciousness. Nirmal writes of the mangrove ecosystem as a living archive: "the forest was not just a place; it was a language", a system of signs that recorded the histories of the communities that had learned to read it (Ghosh 174). This figuration of the plant world as language is not metaphorical decoration but a serious epistemological claim: that the Sundarbans constitutes a form of knowledge whose grammar is distributed across species, tidal rhythms, and human practices of attention.

The mangrove's specific morphology enacts what Deleuze and Guattari would call a rhizomatic ontology.[5] Unlike the arborescent tree of Western thought — upright, hierarchical, rooted in a single origin — the mangrove propagates through pneumatophores and prop roots that interweave, proliferate laterally, and create new land through their own growth. This form of propagation is simultaneously botanical and political: it models a mode of community and persistence that is horizontal, adaptive, and resistant to the kind of extraction that requires clear boundaries and singular points of control. Ghosh's narrative structure mirrors this mangrove logic. The novel's multiple narrative threads — Piya's cetological survey, Kanai's translation of Nirmal's journal, Fokir's tacit ecological knowledge, and the subaltern histories of the Marichjhapi massacre — do not resolve into a unified, hierarchically organised plot but remain in lateral tension, connected through the tidal ecosystem rather than through a single commanding perspective.

[5] Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome concept, introduced in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), explicitly takes its name from botanical root systems: "a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" (25). Ghosh's mangrove archipelago literalises this figure.

The Marichjhapi massacre — the violent expulsion of Bengali refugees from a Sundarbans island by the West Bengal government in 1979, carried out partly in the name of forest conservation — is the historical event around which the novel's ecological and political arguments converge.[6] *The Windermere Accord*, Ghosh's fictional version of the international conservation frameworks that legitimised the expulsion, represents a model of environmental protection that excludes human communities from the ecosystems they have shaped and that have shaped them. Ghosh's critique is precise: it is not conservation per se but conservation in the colonial mode — the mode that treats nature as pristine wilderness requiring protection from human contamination, rather than as a relational commons produced through long-term multispecies entanglement — that is the object of his critique. The mangrove ecosystem, in this reading, does not support the fantasy of pristine wilderness: it is a cultural landscape, shaped by centuries of human-plant-animal-tidal interaction. To protect it by expelling the communities whose knowledge and practice have been constitutive of it is to protect not the actual Sundarbans but a colonial fiction of what the Sundarbans should be.

Ghosh's representation of the *sundari* tree's decline is therefore overdetermined. The tree's diminishment by salinity intrusion tracks the degradation of the ecosystem as a whole, but it also figures the erasure of the subaltern knowledges — Fokir's navigational intelligence, the refugee communities' adaptive practices — that colonial and developmentalist conservation has expelled. The tree's botanical agency — its capacity to generate land, to filter salt, to provide habitat for the Irrawaddy dolphins that Piya has come to study — is inseparable from its role as a figure for the non-extractive, reciprocal relationships between human communities and their vegetal environments that colonial modernity has systematically foreclosed. In this sense, the *sundari* tree in *The Hungry Tide* functions not as a passive symbol but as an active narrative participant: its presence or absence shapes the novel's plot, its morphology informs the novel's form, and its fate articulates the novel's central political argument.

Sweetgrass as Teacher: Kimmerer's Grammar of Animacy

Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* approaches plant agency from a starting point that is in some ways antithetical to Ghosh's novelistic indirection: where Ghosh embeds his ecological argument in fiction, in character and plot and the formal resources of the novel,

[6] *The Windermere Accord* is Ghosh's fictional counterpart to real UNESCO heritage contestations, but it also invokes the broader discourse of "fortress conservation" critiqued by scholars such as Dan Brockington in *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania* (Indiana UP, 2002).

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Kimmerer writes directly, as a scientist and as a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, about what it means to understand plants as persons. Her central formal and philosophical device is the grammar of animacy embedded in the Potawatomi language, which does not distinguish between animate and inanimate on the basis of whether a being moves or thinks in human-recognisable ways, but on the basis of a deeper indigenous ontological commitment: that the living world is populated by beings with agency, intentionality, and relational claims.[7]

In English, a bay, a stone, and a sweetgrass plant are all grammatically "it": inert, passive, available for use. In Potawatomi, they are "ki": animate, agentive, deserving of the kinds of attention and respect that English grammar reserves for persons. Kimmerer's argument is that this grammatical difference is not merely linguistic but ontological and ethical: the language you speak shapes the kinds of relationships you can have with the beings you name. A grammar that renders plants as "it" makes them available as resources; a grammar that renders them as "ki" makes them available as teachers, relatives, and co-creators of the world. Kimmerer's writing performs this grammatical transformation, not by writing in Potawatomi — a language whose revitalisation she supports but which she herself is only partially fluent in — but by writing English prose that enacts animacy through the quality of its attention.

Sweetgrass or *Hierochloe odorata* itself is the book's organising figure, and Kimmerer's account of its ecology is a sustained lesson in reciprocal agency. Sweetgrass, she explains, does not flourish in the absence of human harvesting; its growth is stimulated by the careful, respectful picking that Potawatomi women have practised for generations. This is not a relationship of use but of mutual benefit: the plant needs the human attention, and the human community needs the plant's gifts — material (its use in basket weaving) and spiritual (its role in ceremony). The braiding of sweetgrass that gives the book its title is simultaneously a technical practice, an aesthetic act, a form of prayer, and a model of ecological ethics. To braid is to weave together strands that are distinct but mutually supporting; Kimmerer's book itself is structured as a braiding, interweaving scientific knowledge, indigenous teaching, personal memoir, and botanical description into a form that no single strand could achieve alone.

This formal braiding is a response to the institutional separations that Western modernity has imposed between ways of knowing. Kimmerer is trained as a botanist and holds a professorship in environmental biology; she also carries the teachings of the Potawatomi

[7] For a fuller account of Potawatomi language and its grammatical animacy, see Kimmerer's discussion in chapter two of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, as well as comparative work in Basil Johnston's *Ojibway Language Lexicon for Beginners* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1978).

tradition, transmitted through family and community. Her book stages, repeatedly and with remarkable precision, the moments at which Western scientific frameworks reach their limits — the points at which the demand to maintain objectivity, to treat the plant as a datum rather than a subject, produces a form of knowledge that is technically accurate but relationally impoverished. The scientific paper describes the sweetgrass's chemical composition and growth requirements; it cannot describe what it means to sit with the plant, to acknowledge its gifts, to understand oneself as indebted to it in ways that cannot be discharged by a citation in a journal article.

Kimmerer's account of the "Skywoman" origin narrative, which opens the book, establishes the cosmological framework within which plant agency becomes legible. In the Potawatomi telling, Skywoman falls from the upper world, bringing with her seeds and the knowledge of cultivation; the animals who receive her are the first students of vegetal generosity. This is a story not of human dominion over nature but of human dependence on, and reciprocal obligation to, the plant world. It stands in direct contrast to the Genesis narrative of Western Christianity, in which humans are granted dominion over creation and plants are given for human use. Kimmerer does not make this contrast polemically; she does not argue that the Potawatomi story is simply "true" and the Genesis story "false." What she argues, more precisely, is that stories shape relationships: that a culture whose foundational narrative places it in dominion over plants will relate to plants differently from a culture whose foundational narrative places it in obligation to them.

The implications for decolonial ecocriticism are significant. Kimmerer's argument is not merely that indigenous knowledge systems offer useful supplementary information about plant ecology — though they do. It is that they offer a fundamentally different framework for understanding what plants are and what kinds of claims they make on human communities. This framework is not available to Western science not because Western science is insufficiently empirical but because it is constitutively committed to a set of ontological assumptions — about objectivity, about the boundary between subjects and objects, about the irrelevance of gratitude and obligation to the production of knowledge — that preclude the kinds of attention that plant agency, on Kimmerer's account, requires. The decolonisation of plant studies, she implies, requires not merely the inclusion of indigenous data but the transformation of the epistemic framework through which data is gathered, interpreted, and put to use.

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Phytopoetics in Parallel: Form, Resistance, and Reciprocity

The most significant formal parallel between *The Hungry Tide* and *Braiding Sweetgrass* is their shared strategy of what I want to call "ecological defamiliarization": the use of narrative and rhetorical technique to make the reader perceive plants as active participants in the scenes they inhabit, rather than as backdrop. Ghosh achieves this largely through focalization: by aligning the reader's perception with characters who are in the process of learning to read the mangrove forest, he makes the forest's signals and rhythms a source of narrative tension and revelation. When Piya's boat moves through a narrow channel, and Fokir adjusts their course in response to some cue that Piya cannot read, the reader experiences the forest as a text to be deciphered — a text that the Western-trained scientist's instruments and methods cannot fully access. The forest is not silent; it is speaking in a language that colonial epistemology has not provided Piya with the tools to hear.

Kimmerer's defamiliarization is more directly rhetorical. Her prose is characterised by a mode of apostrophe — direct address to plants — that is unusual in scientific writing and challenging to academic prose more broadly. When she writes of thanking the plants she harvests, of acknowledging the gifts they offer before she takes them, she is not being naively animistic; she is performing a relational ethics that her indigenous tradition encodes and that her scientific training has systematically discouraged. The critical insight is that this apostrophe is not supplementary to her argument but constitutive of it: the act of addressing a plant as "ki," of acknowledging its agency in the very syntax of the sentence, enacts the ontological transformation she is advocating. The reader who follows Kimmerer's prose long enough finds themselves, almost without noticing, in a different relationship to the plant world — more attentive, more indebted, more aware of the web of reciprocal obligation that industrial modernity has rendered invisible.

Both texts also share a concern with the relationship between plant knowledge and subaltern communities: with the ways in which colonial and capitalist systems have not merely degraded ecosystems but have severed the human communities whose practices of attention and reciprocity were co-constitutive of those ecosystems. In Ghosh's novel, this is rendered through the figure of Fokir, whose navigational intelligence is embedded in a lifetime of embodied, attentive engagement with the tidal forest. Fokir does not merely know where things are; he knows how the forest moves, how it communicates, how its signals can be read by a body and a sensory apparatus trained to receive them. His death in the cyclone that ends the novel — a death that Piya survives, clinging to Fokir's body — is not merely personal tragedy

but epistemic catastrophe: the extinction of a form of knowledge that cannot be recovered through Piya's scientific instruments or Kanai's translations. The mangrove forest mourns Fokir in its own way: the novel's final passages render the tidal landscape as neither consoling nor indifferent but as an active participant in the scene of loss, its rhythms continuing with an agency that outlasts the human.

In Kimmerer's text, the equivalent figure is the Potawatomi community itself, whose relationship to sweetgrass — carried across generations of ceremony and basketry — was violently interrupted by colonial policies of forced assimilation. The prohibition on indigenous ceremonies, the appropriation of indigenous lands, and the imposition of English as the sole legitimate language of knowledge production all severed the relational fabric within which sweetgrass had meaning as more than a botanical specimen. Kimmerer's project of revitalising the Potawatomi language is therefore inseparable from her project of revitalising the human-plant relationships that the language encodes. The grammar of animacy is not merely a linguistic feature; it is a relational infrastructure, a set of cognitive and ethical tools for maintaining the kinds of attention that allow human communities to live well with, rather than merely upon, the plant world. Its suppression was not a cultural loss but an ecological one: without the practices of reciprocal harvesting and ceremonial acknowledgement that the language sustained, sweetgrass populations in many areas declined, their mutualistic relationship with Potawatomi communities broken by the same colonial violence that broke the communities themselves.

Towards Ecological Justice in the Plantationocene

The concept of the Plantationocene, developed by Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and their collaborators, names the epoch defined not by human geological impact in general but by the specific logic of plantation agriculture: the simplification of ecosystems into monocultures, the deployment of racialised and enslaved labour to manage them, and the global circulation of extracted plant materials through colonial trade routes.[8] The Plantationocene is a useful frame for reading both *The Hungry Tide* and *Braiding Sweetgrass* because it connects the degradation of botanical diversity to the systems of racial capitalism and colonial governance that both texts contest. The *sundari* tree's decline is a Plantationocene story: a once-dominant species

[8] The term Plantationocene was coined in collaborative conversation between Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and colleagues, and refers to the epoch defined by plantation logics of monoculture, forced labour, and species simplification. See Haraway et al., "Anthropologists Are Talking — About the Anthropocene," Ethnos 81.3 (2016): 535–64.

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diminished by the salinity intrusion caused by upstream water management decisions taken for the benefit of industrial agriculture, whose costs are borne by the communities least able to resist them. Sweetgrass's decline is equally a Plantationocene story: a plant sustained by indigenous relational practices, whose populations collapsed when those practices were suppressed by colonial governance and replaced by extractive models of land use.

Reading Ghosh and Kimmerer together within this frame reveals a shared argument about the conditions of ecological justice. Ecological justice, on the account that emerges from these texts, is not merely a matter of distributing the benefits and burdens of environmental degradation more equitably among human communities — though it is that. It requires a more fundamental transformation: the recognition of plants as active participants in multispecies communities whose claims on human attention and restraint carry moral weight independent of their utility to human ends. This recognition, both texts argue, is not available through Western scientific frameworks alone; it requires the kinds of attentive, reciprocal, and obligating relationships that Indigenous epistemologies model and that colonial modernity has systematically foreclosed.

Ghosh's contribution to this argument is formal as much as thematic. By embedding his ecological critique in a novel — a genre that Western modernity has associated with the cultivation of human interiority and sympathy — he tests and expands the genre's capacity for multispecies representation.[9] *The Hungry Tide* does not simply tell a story about the Sundarbans; it makes the Sundarbans a storytelling agent, a force that shapes the novel's plot, generates its conflicts, and determines the limits of its characters' knowledge. The mangrove forest's resistance to narrative resolution — its continued dynamism after the human story ends — is a formal enactment of the argument that ecological systems are not resources for human narrative but communities with their own temporal and spatial logics.

Kimmerer's contribution is epistemic. By demonstrating that Western scientific knowledge and Indigenous relational knowledge are not merely supplementary but structurally different responses to the question of what plants are and what they require of us, she makes the case that ecological justice cannot be achieved by better science alone. The transformation of human-plant relationships that both texts advocate requires a transformation of the frameworks through which plants are known: a move from the grammar of extraction to the

grammar of reciprocity, from the language of resources to the language of kin. This is a political as well as an epistemological project, because the grammar of extraction is not merely a mistake but an achievement — an ideological accomplishment of colonial modernity that serves specific interests and that is sustained by specific institutional structures, including those of the academy.

The phytopoetics of resistance that emerges from reading these texts together is therefore a practice of double *defamiliarisation*: it makes strange both the plant world (by rendering it as active, communicative, and morally significant) and the human world (by rendering human communities as constitutively dependent on, and obligated to, their vegetal partners). This double *defamiliarisation* has consequences for how we understand decolonial ecocriticism as a field. It suggests that the decolonisation of environmental humanities requires not merely the inclusion of Indigenous voices in existing conversations but the transformation of the epistemological frameworks that govern those conversations. It requires, in Kimmerer's terms, learning to speak a grammar of animacy; in Ghosh's terms, learning to navigate by the cues that the forest offers rather than by the maps that colonial cartography has imposed.

Conclusion

Both *The Hungry Tide* and *Braiding Sweetgrass* represent significant interventions in the project of overcoming plant blindness, and the comparative reading offered here suggests that their significance is amplified when they are placed in dialogue. Ghosh's novelistic mangrove epistemology and Kimmerer's Potawatomi grammar of animacy converge on a shared phytopoetics of resistance: a mode of writing that challenges colonial and anthropocentric frameworks not merely by arguing against them but by enacting alternative epistemological and relational possibilities. The *sundari* tree and the sweetgrass are not merely symbols or settings in these texts; they are protagonists in the fullest sense — beings whose agency, temporality, and relational claims shape the human stories that unfold around them.

The concept of the Plantationocene provides a political framework for understanding why this phytopoetics matters: because the systems that have made plants invisible — that have reduced them to resources, backgrounds, and raw materials — are the same systems that have dispossessed Indigenous communities, degraded ecosystems, and organised the global distribution of environmental benefit and harm along lines of race, class, and colonial history. The revaluation of vegetal agency that Ghosh and Kimmerer enact is therefore not a narrow

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aesthetic or philosophical project but a contribution to the larger work of imagining and building the multispecies relationships that ecological justice requires.

The formal lesson of both texts is that this work is necessarily incomplete: neither the novel nor the essay can fully represent the complexity and the ongoing agency of the vegetal world. What they can do — what they do — is cultivate in their readers a different quality of attention, a willingness to be taught by the forest and the sweetgrass meadow, to understand themselves as part of rather than apart from the living communities they inhabit. In an era of accelerating ecological crisis, this cultivation of attentive reciprocity may be among the most urgent tasks that literature and Indigenous knowledge systems can undertake together.

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