



The Genius Loci in Bengal: An Eco-Critical Reading of the Uncanny in Selected Stories from Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Taranath Tantrik* and Other Stories

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ABSTRACT

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay (1894-1950) is one of the foundational figures of modern Bengali literature and is widely celebrated for his profound ecological consciousness, which is expressed in one of his pastoral masterpieces, *Aranyak*. His supernatural tales have been appreciated for their atmospheric horror, but also unexamined through the theoretical lens of eco-criticism. This paper will argue that Bandyopadhyay's supernatural fiction is not merely a collection of supernatural stories but an exploration of the pantheistic uncanny worldview as it derives from the natural world itself. Applying an eco-critical framework, this paper suggests that the landscapes in these narrative functions are not merely a passive environment but an active agent of the supernatural. Through a close reading of the key stories from the collection *Taranath Tantrik & Other Tales* (2022), specifically "Arrack," "Maya," and "The House of His Foremothers," we will analyse the obscuring boundary between the traditional ghost and the *genius loci*—the spirit of a place. It will be argued that, for Bandyopadhyay, the land itself possesses memory, agency, and moral force that can manifest as haunting phenomena, thus offering a unique contribution to the eco-Gothic subgenre and providing a powerful critique of the anthropocentric worldview.

The ghost story, as a genre, has traditionally explored human psychology, societal anxieties, and the return of the repressed. However, in the works of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, the supernatural takes



on a particularly ecological dimension. His well-documented affection for the natural world, and a recurring theme throughout his works, reflect his tales of the uncanny, transforming them into narratives in which the environment is not a mere stage but a central character. While his novel *Aranyak* is the most obvious statement of his ecological philosophy, this paper argues that his supernatural fiction is an equally compelling and refined expression of the same convictions.

This paper challenges the conventional reading of Bandyopadhyay's supernatural tales as simple folklore or horror. Instead, it proposes an eco-critical reading that relocates the source of the uncanny from the spectral realm of the dead to the sensitive realm of the living earth. The central thesis is that Bandyopadhyay's hauntings are often worked as a manifestation of the *genius loci*, or the spirit of a place. This concept allows for an understanding of the landscape as an active agent with its own history, memory, and moral authority. By analysing stories such as "Arrack," "Maya," and "The House of His Foremothers," this paper will demonstrate how the boundaries between the human and the non-human, the natural and the supernatural, are deliberately collapsed, giving rise to a unique form of eco-horror that is both deeply rooted in Bengali folklore and relevant to contemporary ecological concerns.

Eco-criticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). It moves beyond a purely anthropocentric focus to examine how nature is represented in texts and to explore the complex interconnections between human culture and the non-human world. A key principle of eco-criticism is the rejection of the idea of nature as a passive resource or a mere backdrop for human drama. Instead, it seeks to recognize the environment's agency and inherent value.

Genius loci is the central concept for this paper's analysis, a Latin term for the "spirit of a place." Originally referring to a guardian deity in Roman religion, the term has evolved in architectural and literary theory to describe the distinctive atmosphere or prevalent spirit that defines a particular location (Norberg-Schulz 5). In a literary context, the *genius loci* can be understood as the personification of a landscape, where the place itself is imbued with consciousness, memory, and intention. This concept provides a powerful tool for an eco-critical reading, as it allows us to see the environment not as a setting, but as a character that actively shapes the narrative.

In Bandyopadhyay's work, the *genius loci* is not just a literary device but a reflection of a pantheistic worldview that sees divinity and consciousness in all aspects of nature. His fiction consistently portrays a world where the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual are permeable. By applying the lens of



genius loci, we can move beyond interpreting his supernatural entities as mere ghosts and see them as a product of the land itself, with expressions of its history, its trauma, and its power.

Several of Bandyopadhyay's stories depict landscapes that are actively hostile or misleading, in which the *genius loci* act as an antagonist by punishing human transgression or absorbing individuals into its own reality.

In "**Arrack**," the supernatural is explicitly tied to a specific location: a "large saltwater lake in the middle of the desert" surrounded by hills (Bandyopadhyay 120). The unearthly "swan-women" are not wandering spirits but are essentially part of this place. The protagonist's grandfather, driven by desire and intoxicated by arrack, attempts to capture one of these beings. His transgression is an act of attempting to possess and control a part of the wild and uncontrollable spirit of the place. He becomes "suffocatingly wrapped in an all-encompassing desire to possess. He would have to have one of them, or he would never be able to breathe properly again" (Bandyopadhyay 125). The consequence is not death but a complete loss of self-madness. The land, through its spirits, defends itself against human conceit. The *genius loci* here is a greedy guardian, and the horror stems from the violation of its sacred domain, a violation that ends with the grandfather dying "absolutely insane" (Bandyopadhyay 126).

The story "**Maya**" presents a more subtle but equally terrifying form of environmental intervention. The protagonist is a cook who finds refuge in an isolated house where "the effect was that of being closely surrounded by untouched forest. No other person or house was visible" (Bandyopadhyay 76). The supernatural presence is diffuse and unseen, and the house itself feels responsive. As the cook approaches it one evening, he feels "The house looked curiously alive in the deepening dusk, as if it was sitting there in anticipation of something. Was it waiting to swallow a scrap of mortality, like me?" (Bandyopadhyay 80). The goal of this *genius loci* is not to harm but to entrap. The protagonist is slowly calmed into a state of "blissful insanity," severed from the outside world but perfectly content (Bandyopadhyay 77). A villager warns him that previous caretakers would "stop leaving the house altogether... and then eventually die in the house" (Bandyopadhyay 86). The horror of "Maya" is the horror of absorption. The *genius loci* is a lonely entity that desires companionship, and it achieves this by dissolving the protagonist's individuality. By the end, the protagonist confirms his fate: "It has been two years since that conversation. I live in the house... I do not remember when I last left the house. Why should I go anywhere? Everything I need is right here" (Bandyopadhyay 87).



While some landscapes in Bandyopadhyay's fiction are hostile, others are infused with a deep sense of memory and nostalgia, where the *genius loci* act as a benevolent or restorative force, seeking connection rather than destruction.

"The House of His Foremothers" is the most affecting example of this. The protagonist, Radhamohan, returns to his decaying ancestral home, a "big house... on the banks of the Madhumati" surrounded by a "mango orchard so overgrown with lush green that it looks like an ancient forest" (Bandyopadhyay 127). The house is haunted by the gentle spirit of his young aunt, Lokkhi. She is not a vengeful ghost but an embodiment of the house's memory. Her presence is filled with a deep sense of longing for the house to be inhabited again. She tells Radhamohan, "This huge house has been lying empty for so long. No one even lights a lamp in the evenings... I want all of you to come here. I want the conches to be blown at dusk, and the lamps to be lit" (Bandyopadhyay 130-131). The haunting is a call for reconnection. Radhamohan, who initially "did not feel alone. It was as if the silent presence of his ancestors who continued to inhabit the house could see him," ultimately chooses to embrace the *genius loci* and become a defender of the land's memory, finding a sense of belonging from his urban existence that could not provide (Bandyopadhyay 130).

A similar theme appears in **"A Small Statue."** The archaeologist Sukumar Sen discovers a statue that carries the spiritual inscription of its creator, the thousand-year-old monk Dipankar. The spirit is tied to an object created *from* a place. Dipankar's motivation is to share knowledge, and he tells Sukumar, "The statue you dug out of the ground has pulled me back to this world, after a very long time... I was so attached to her that she held the power to bring me back to this world, as she has done now" (Bandyopadhyay 144-145). The supernatural event bridges the gap between past and present, offering a depth of understanding that empirical science alone cannot provide. The *genius loci*, in this case, is concentrated within an artifact, demonstrating that the spirit of a place and its history can be contained and transmitted through the objects it produces.

Bandyopadhyay's work can be situated within the broader genre of the Gothic, but with a distinct ecological inflection that marks it as a form of "eco-Gothic." While Western Gothic literature often uses nature as a sublime yet external backdrop to heighten human terror, Bandyopadhyay's pantheistic understanding positions nature as the very source of the uncanny. The distinction is crucial: in the Western tradition, the castle is haunted; in Bandyopadhyay's world, the land itself does the haunting. This is rooted in a cultural imagination, as Devalina Mookerjee notes in her introduction, the word for ghost,



bhut, is the same as the word for the past. "So not only are ghosts and the past perceived as close to one another in the Bengali cultural imagination," she writes, "they are virtually identical" (Mookerjee 9).

This eco-centric perspective is a subtle form of resistance against the anthropocentric and rationalist understanding of colonial modernity. The early 20th century in Bengal was a period of intense social change, marked by the rise of Western education and a scientific outlook that sought to disillusion the world (Sarkar 12). Bandyopadhyay's stories consistently locate the supernatural within the rural, pre-modern landscape and, indirectly, expound an indigenous and animist epistemology. The ghost, as the spirit of the land, becomes a force that resists categorization, rationalization, or exploitation by modern man. The logic teacher in "An Open Door," who is destroyed by a primal elemental he cannot explain, is the ultimate cautionary tale about the vanity of pure rationalism. The supernatural in these tales thus functions as a moral and ecological corrective by punishing greed and disrespect for the natural world.

Conclusion

To read Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's supernatural tales as mere ghost stories is to misunderstand their profound ecological depth. By applying the theoretical lens of eco-criticism and the concept of *genius loci*, we can see these narratives from a fresh perspective, as sophisticated works of eco-fiction that explore the sensitive and representational power of the natural world. From the malevolent swan-women of "Arrack" to the gentle, nostalgic spirit of Lokkhi in "The House of His Foremothers," his supernatural entities are a consequence of the land itself, as expressed in its memory, morality, and resistance to human domination.

In the current Anthropocene, where the consequences of our disrespect for the environment are becoming increasingly apparent, Bandyopadhyay's work has never been more relevant. His tales are a powerful reminder of the deep, mystical, and often terrifying connection between humanity and the physical world we inhabit. They are a call for ecological humility, urging us to recognize that the land is not a passive resource to be owned and exploited, but a living entity with its own stories to tell and its own power to employ. The ghosts of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay are, ultimately, the ghosts of the land itself, and they haunt us with the timeless and urgent truth that we are inseparably part of the very world that we seek to control.

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Bio-notes

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