

# Rhizomatic aesthetics of the mangroves: Alternative cultural imaginings and literary perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

Mangrove wetlands, the botanically cherished ecosystem owing to its diversity and protective benefits, hold immense cultural and aesthetic prospects. It is a dynamic site where the boundaries of sea and land, human and non-human and fresh water and saline water are constantly obliterated. This paper puts into perspective the rhizomatic cultural modalities and literary perspectives associated with the mangrove wetlands, evince multiplying, ever-shifting and entangling properties. French critics Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari imbue the botanical concept of rhizome with cultural purports that open up non-hierarchical and liberating pathways. The principles of rhizome expounded by Deleuze and Guattari suggest alternative modes of thinking and living. Contrary to the traditional arborescent/tree schema, the rhizomatic model shuns barriers and embraces horizontal expansion. The mangrove ecology, characterised by the constant flux, becomes a lively illustration of the complex and variegated human and non-human interactions that resist rigid classifications and firm fixities. The mangrove biome is a universe on its own with the rhizomatic potential of endless transformation. In literature, the mangrove thickets have been the locale for many ethnographic narratives that have raised pertinent concerns of nature, culture, history, identity and home. Such mangrove narratives as Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* or Maryse Conde's *Crossing the Mangrove* signal movements beyond homogenising and essentialising tendencies. The rhizomatic paradigms of the mangrove ecosystem and life uphold connection and adaptability, counteracting the stasis in personal and cultural life.

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Unique ecosystems whose melody and rhythm are constantly regenerated by the visiting tides, mangrove forests are formed by germination of the salt-tolerant mangrove trees in the coastal wetlands of tropical areas. They are habitats to many flora and fauna and have biological, climatic and economic benefits to offer. They play a vital role in protecting the coastline, preventing flood and soil erosion, obstructing storms, mitigating climate change impacts, and absorbing carbon. They are under the threat of elimination due to rampant urbanisation, oil spillage and industrial waste discharge. Clarion calls have been raised from various quarters for the adequate protection and efficient management of the mangrove environment spread across the world.

Mangrove forests teem with a rich variety of plant and animal species since it includes “diversified habitats like mangrove-dominant forests, litter-laden forest floors, mudflats, coral reefs and contiguous water courses such as river estuaries, bays, inter-tidal waters, channels and backwaters” (Sundararaju, 2019). Diverse food webs are supported by the ecosystem, which consists of the leaf-consuming organisms and the microbes that feed on the rotten remnants of the tree. Home to diverse bats, birds, insects, crabs and molluscs, mangrove wetlands are also breeding grounds for fish. Mangrove trees survive in conditions usually deemed hostile to most vegetation owing to their adaptations, like a filtration system to expel the salt and a complex root system that supports the mangrove trees in the shifting residues of land and water. As Singh and Odaki (2004) point out,

... mangrove forests have attracted much scientific attention and curiosity due to strange morphological, anatomical adaptations, special physiology (high osmotic potential of cell sap, reaction to salinity, desalination, viviparity etc.), seed and seed dispersal and survival, species succession in time and zonation in space (vertical and horizontal), paleo history of the shores and biological assemblages. (p.1)

A highly bio-diverse mangrove ecosystem has exciting cultural and literary prospects as well. This paper puts into perspective the rhizomatic cultural modalities and literary perspectives associated with the mangrove wetlands, evince multiplying, ever-shifting and entangling attributes. The Deleuzo-Guattarian cultural model of rhizomatic is deployed to grapple with the imports of non-hierarchical, horizontal connection and perpetual transformation suggested in the two mangrove narratives, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* or Maryse Conde's *Crossing the Mangrove*.

Rhizome, in botany, is a subterranean stem that produces roots below and sends up shoots from its nodes. French critics Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari imbue the botanical concept of rhizome with cultural purports that open up non-hierarchical and liberating pathways. The analysis of knowledge and culture systems based on rhizome has been variously called as “Rhizomatics”, “Schizoanalysis”, “Stratoanalysis” “Pragmatics” and “Micropolitics” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2005, p.22). Though the mangrove plants do not have rhizomes, but pneumatophores (aerial roots derived from the subterranean

roots that enable plants to breathe in the sodden soil), in the strict botanical sense, the mangrove ecosystem can be taken as the ecological counterpart of the rhizomatic cultural model proposed by Deleuze and Guattari.

Deleuze and Guattari set out to reject the arborescent/tree model that has so long suppressed liberty and creativity. This is a tree-like model where certain ideas or ideologies, are dominant enough to be the benchmarks to assess and even denigrate fresh thoughts. Rigidly hierarchical, self-contained and immobile systems like these can stifle the dynamic flow of ideas and thoughts. Contrarily, Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2005) came up with the rhizomatic model, which “ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (p.6). The rhizome is devoid of any fixed shape, and it has a horizontal way of proliferation:

A rhizome has no beginning or end: it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be”, but the fabric of rhizome is the conjunction, “and ...and...and” This conjunction carries enough the force to shake and uproot the verb “to be”. Where are you going? Where are you coming from? Where are you heading for? These are all totally useless questions. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2005, p.25)

The rhizomatic model is open-ended and is inclined towards connection. The arborescent structure invariably attempts to trace the source or root of things and looks forward to the culmination.

Deleuze and Guattari identify six principles of the rhizome - connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography and decalomania. The first principle of connection is a call for enhancing relations and associations. As Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2005) put it, “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (p.7). The principle of heterogeneity exhorts embracing diversity rather than uniformity or conformity. “Principle of multiplicity”, the third principle of rhizome, holds that the “multiple is effectively treated as the substantive, “multiplicity,” that it ceases to have any relation to the One” (p.8). It is a proliferating multiplicity wanting unity or centrality. The “principle of asignifying rupture” means that “a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (p.9). Implying immense prospects, this principle endows the rhizome with the ability for endless rejuvenation. The principle of cartography means that rhizome cannot be reduced “to any structural or generative model ... It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation”(Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2005, p.12). The principle of decalomania suggests that the movements of the rhizome cannot be traced; it does not have any pre-given shape; but is constantly modified along the way. Mangroves’ intertwining and changing nature offer us a green model of the Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizome.

Mangroves have appeared in poetic and prose imaginings from varied cultures and times. Richly evocative, the lively environment of the mangroves has offered a setting for many moving tales like Maryse Conde’s *Crossing the Mangrove* (1989), Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Linda Marie’s *Beyond the Mangroves* (2014), Stephen Morrill’s *Life in the Mangroves* (2016) and *Death among the Mangroves* (2016), John L Campbell’s *The Mangroves* (2012) and the recent *Magic Mangroves* (2021) by Axel Sainz. Environmental activist and author from Kerala, Kallen Pokkudan’s (alias Kandal Pokkudan) autobiographical work *My Life among the Mangroves* (Kandalkkadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham) merges the sketch of his personal life with the account of the mangrove varieties and peculiarities. The present paper takes up two works from divergent cultures, Indian and the Caribbean, placed in the mangrove locale, Maryse Conde’s *Crossing the Mangrove* (1989), Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) putting into perspective the rhizomatic modalities of characters, places, events, themes and perspectives.

Jnanpith legatee Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) archives the concerns of home and homelessness, borders and crossovers, settlement and displacement, ecology and humanity, and cultures and classes. These issues are unravelled against the geographical backdrop of the archipelago of Sunderbans, a mangrove-filled area between India and Bangladesh, through the interlocking stories of Piya, an Indian American marine biologist, Fokir, the illiterate native who becomes her guide, Kanai, a Delhi professional who acts as her interpreter, the refugees of the Island, and Nilima and Nirmal who work for the upliftment of the people of Lusibari. As Ratnam (2017) points out, the mangrove biome is a “zone of different kinds of interaction, a zone of contact between different cultural, national, ethnic, linguistic and religious communities” (p.23).

The novel opens with the meeting of forty two year old Kanai Datta and Piyali Roy, both of whom are heading from Calcutta to Canning in the Sundarban, on a railway platform. Kanai, who oversees an office of translators and interpreters in New Delhi, wants to meet his aunt Nilima, who told him that his uncle Nirmal had left a cover with writings specifically for Kanai. A graduate student in cetology at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California, Piya has undertaken this trip to survey the unique marine mammals of the Sundarban. Soon after arriving in Canning, Piya comes across a poor fisherman, named Fokir, who saves Piya from drowning in the salty and vegetation-filled water and takes her to the dolphin region. Even though Fokir doesn’t know English, they manage to communicate. Piya achieves advancement in her mapping project, identifying the habitat and studying the behaviour of Irrawaddy dolphins. Once, when she goes into the deep river water of tide country, storm breaks out followed by heavy rain and powerful and devouring tides and Fokir dies in the incident. As ideas given by Fokir could be the sources for decades of ‘research’, with the sponsorship of Nilima and the involvement of local fishermen, Piya starts an institution in the memory of Fokir- the unlettered downtrodden fisherman.

The description of the fluctuating nature of the mangrove wetlands is tellingly placed at the beginning of the novel itself:

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as two hundred miles inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily – some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. (Ghosh, 2005, p.7)

In tune with the ever-fluctuating setting, the people who inhabit the island have to recreate their histories and identities. One of the focal points in the novel is the Morichjhapi massacre of 1979, when the authorities brutally evicted the Bengali settlers in the island. They were actually refugees from East Pakistan (present Bangladesh). Just like the tides that work to regenerate the space there, historical and political forces operate to change their lives and predicaments.

The rich biodiversity of the mangrove area is reminded by Piya, who intends to “do a survey of the marine mammals of the Sunderbans” (Ghosh, 2005, p.11). The characters Piya, the researcher, Kanai, the translator and interpreter and Fokir, the fisherman are from widely disparate backgrounds, but like mangroves which are ostensibly unconnected but their lives are intertwined and they crisscross one another’s path. They form a rhizomatic arrangement with heterogeneous connections.

An interesting assemblage presented in the novel is Bon Bibi, a deity who sways over the tide country. She is invoked by those who enter the forests and collect resources as they believe she will protect them against the attack of tigers. Both the Hindu and Muslim communities worship Bon Bibi, pointing to a significant heterogeneous connection:

Piya stood by and watched as Fokir and Tutul performed a little ceremony. First, they fetched some leaves and flowers and placed them in front of the images. Then, standing before the shrine, Fokir began to recite some kind of chant, with his head bowed and his hands joined in an attitude of prayer. After she had listened for a few minutes, Piya recognized a refrain that was repeated again and again - it contained a word that sounded like “Allah.” She had not thought to speculate about Fokir’s religion, but it occurred to her now that he might be Muslim. But no sooner had she thought this than it struck her that a Muslim was hardly likely to pray to an image like this one. What Fokir was performing looked very much like her mother’s Hindu pujas - and yet the words seemed to suggest otherwise. (Ghosh, 2005, p.152)

The mangrove ecosystem is not just a setting for the novel, but is a uniquely animate space which partakes in and supplements the geographical, political, cultural and religious issues raised by the text. The theoretical and practical nuances of heterogeneity and connection sparkle through the characters and events in the mangrove-filled Sunderbans.

*Crossing the Mangrove* (1989) by Guadeloupe-born French writer Maryse Conde, is set in the coastal village of Riviere au Sel, near the mangrove wetlands. It spurs pertinent thoughts about gender, race, relationships, past and present. At the outset, Francis Sancher, is found dead. The novel proceeds in the form of ruminations about the impact of Sancher on the lives of the villagers.

Sancher is an explorer and a writer who wants to pen down a work with the same title as the novel. His demise sets the narrative in action, suggesting the possibility of transcending death, which is often regarded as the fixed and inevitable end. The novel itself becomes a mangrove with its apparently independent but strangely interconnected characters and its movement in a horizontal pattern without the dominance of any particular character. The novel has multiple entry and exit points because each chapter portrays an independent picture. Sancher is the object of contemplation, and each character’s perspective, sometimes contradicting one another, forms the narrative content. Thus, we have a non-hierarchical heterogeneous assemblage which is characteristic of a rhizome of the Deleuzo-Guattarian model.

Through the dialogues and monologues of the rustics who assemble at his wake, it is revealed that Sancher is connected to everyone and everything - man, woman, flora and fauna. He has impregnated Mira, the charming daughter of Loulou Lameaulnes, the plantation owner. He had a relation with Dinah, the second wife of Loulou. He has also impregnated Vilma, the gloomy daughter of Sylvestre Ramsaran, an Indian. He is connected to elderly people like Mama Sonson, the elderly clairvoyant and Cyrille, the story teller and to younger people like Joby and Aristide, Loulou’s sons. He is connected to the rich Loulou and poor Desinor. As Mitsch (1997) puts it, “[l]ike the mangrove of the novel’s title, Francis Sancher’s activities spread out in many directions, intersecting, crossing, setting roots in the lives of many others ... he became entangled in the lives of others and created an intricate web of relationships ... “ (p.54). Sancher is rhizomatic in establishing multiple heterogeneous connections, bringing together widely different elements like a mangrove system. He starts and ends relationships every now and then, thus exemplifying capacity for renewal or the rhizomatic principle of asignifying rupture. His movements can only be mapped, they cannot be traced.

Each character in *Crossing the Mangrove* is enmeshed in his or her own mangrove, which strangely becomes a site of both dynamism and stagnation. Vilma believes that it is impossible to cross the mangrove: “You don’t cross a mangrove. You’d spike yourself on the roots of the mangrove trees. You’d be sucked down and suffocated by it” (Conde,

1989/1995, p.158). On the contrary, Mira manages to cross the mire of betrayal and disappointment and proclaims: My real life begins with his death ...” (p.193). She spreads a positive light and ventures being rhizomatic: “From now on my life will be nothing but a quest. I shall retrace my steps along the paths of this world” (Conde, 1989/1995, p.193). She does not regard rupture as the end; instead she is convinced of the ability to start anew at any point of time and space. She also has an inkling that her child’s life also won’t be settled and stable. As a mangrove, she suggests resistance to fixed identity or role: “Mira’s evolving role as she negotiates Conde’s symbolic mangrove ... serves as a reminder that Conde’s response to assignation of “sites” of identity is inevitably one of contestation” (Gaensbauer, 2004, p.398).

With multiple people entering and exiting at random points, even the family that has often been described as a tree becomes a complicated mangrove system. The tree like figure of the family fails to provide comfort for Dodose, Rosa, Dinah, Aristide and Emile. Some of them fail in extramarital relationships as well, indicating that being rhizomatic demands constant modification. Aristide and Emile plan to leave the place. None of them can root their life in the conventional sense: “But the root does not hold life to it and it alone; life is not dependent upon a single source” (Drabinski, 2012, p. 291). They have to move beyond and connect, if they should survive.

Racial mixing also brings to light the rhizomatic plane of existence occupied by the characters. The Caribbean is a conglomerate of cultures, races, histories and languages. Moise, the postman is Chinese African, Mira is half white and half Negro, Ramsarans are from the East Indies, and Dinah is Dutch-Indonesian. Lucien is born in the Caribbean, but is a French-educated and Cuba-loving revolutionary. As for Sancher, he has African, European, North American and Caribbean connections.

Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2005) criticise the traditional tree owing to its vertical, hierarchical and immobile inclinations: “We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much” (p.4 -5). The cultural, social and conceptual model of the rhizome is more flexible, connected and ungraded, and hence is conducive to variegating and enriching life. So are the glimpses of life in *The Hungry Tide* and *Crossing the Mangrove*, unravelled in the backdrop of lush green mangroves, characterised by heterogeneous relations, commencements past rupture and mapping. Just as the dynamic site of the mangroves where the boundaries of sea and land, human and non-human and fresh water and saline water are constantly obliterated, these two mangrove narratives open up a world where borders are fragile and grounds are unstable. The rhizomatic paradigms of the mangrove ecosystem and life there uphold connection, heterogeneity and adaptability, counteracting the stasis in personal and cultural life.

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