



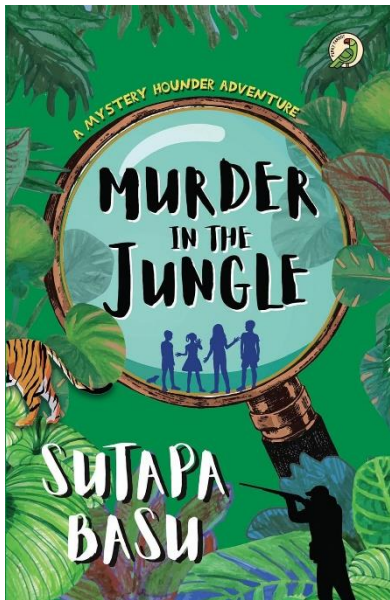
Ecology, Mystery, and Moral Responsibility: A Critical Reading of Sutapa Basu’s Novel

Subhajit Bhadra

William Golding’s observation that “*man produces evil as a bee produces honey*” offers a compelling lens through which Sutapa Basu’s novel may be read. The text presents a disturbing yet engaging exploration of human greed, environmental exploitation, and moral decay, articulated

through the conventions of detective fiction and eco-narrative. Blending mystery, adventure, and ecological consciousness, the novel situates crime not merely as an individual act but as a symptom of a deeper ethical rupture between humanity and nature.

Structurally, the novel aligns itself with the tradition of classic detective fiction, recalling the controlled suspense and gradual



revelation associated with Agatha Christie. However, Basu departs from the purely urban or domestic crime setting and relocates mystery to the jungle—a space that is both nurturing and vulnerable. From the opening pages, the forest is rendered with poetic intensity, creating an atmosphere of dread and anticipation. Animal behaviour, ominous silences, and symbolic imagery foreshadow violence, establishing nature itself as an active participant in the narrative. The murder that unfolds is not an isolated crime; it

represents a violation of ecological and moral order.

One of the novel's most significant achievements lies in its juxtaposition of the human and animal worlds. The jungle is described through lush imagery—soil, rivers, trees, and wildlife—revealing an unmistakable ecocritical sensibility. Characters demonstrate an awareness of environmental responsibility, most notably through Tara, who articulates concerns about pollution and human negligence. Such moments position the novel within contemporary eco-fiction, where nature is no longer a passive backdrop but a contested space shaped by ethical choices.

At the same time, the narrative retains the accessibility of an adventure story. The journey of four cousins from Bengaluru to Mysore introduces themes of companionship, curiosity, and youthful resilience. Their emotional bond provides narrative warmth, balancing the darker undertones of crime and exploitation. The presence of Rippa, a domestic animal and constant companion, reinforces the novel's emphasis on interspecies relationships and coexistence. Visual illustrations further enrich the narrative texture, suggesting the author's intention to appeal to both young and adult readers.

Adolescence occupies a central thematic position in the novel. The emotional volatility, moral sensitivity, and intuitive intelligence of the children contrast sharply with the compromised ethics of the adult world. This juxtaposition highlights a recurring motif: innocence versus corruption. The children's proximity to nature grants them an ethical clarity often absent in adult characters driven by power and profit. In this regard, the novel echoes the nature-centric sensibilities of Ruskin Bond and Buddhadev Guha, writers who foreground the moral wisdom embedded in close contact with the natural world.

The Kaberi River deserves special mention, as it functions almost as a character within the narrative. Its presence anchors the story geographically and symbolically, representing continuity, life, and witness. By grounding the fictional events in real landscapes, the novel enhances its realism while reinforcing the urgency of environmental preservation.

Tara's role as a writer introduces a subtle metafictional dimension. Her reflections on research, creative freedom, and writer's block mirror the novel's own balancing act between factual realism and imaginative storytelling. This self-reflexivity enriches the text without overwhelming its primary narrative thrust.

A notable contemporary element is the introduction of artificial intelligence as a thematic concern. The novel gestures toward the ethical implications of advanced technology and its potential misuse. While this inclusion adds topical relevance, the prolonged discussion of AI occasionally disrupts narrative cohesion, momentarily shifting focus away from the central mystery. Nevertheless, the ethical warning remains clear: technology, like power, must be governed by moral restraint.

The disappearance of a tiger marks the narrative's central crisis. This event exposes the brutal intersection of human greed and environmental destruction. Vinay, the Divisional Forest Officer, embodies institutional responsibility and ethical conflict. His role underscores the immense pressure placed on individuals tasked with protecting fragile ecosystems within corrupt or indifferent systems. The tiger, historically and culturally revered, emerges as a potent symbol—of strength, sovereignty, and endangered majesty.

The historical setting of Mysore, enriched by references to Tipu Sultan and Nawab Hyder Ali, lends cultural depth to the narrative. The tiger's symbolic resonance is amplified through these associations, linking past reverence to present exploitation. Nawab Sahib, in particular, occupies an ambiguous moral space. Devoted chapters explore his fascination with wildlife, history, and antiquities, blurring the boundaries between admiration and possession. His cryptic remark regarding the missing tiger initiates a shift in narrative tension, inviting suspicion and interpretive uncertainty.

As the plot unfolds, the children assume the role of amateur detectives. Their discovery of tranquilizer strips signals the presence of organized poachers, transforming the narrative into an eco-thriller. The forest becomes a site of covert operations, where criminal networks exploit administrative gaps and global demand. The novel exposes how

environmental crime operates transnationally, implicating local elites and international markets alike.

Ecological philosophy underpins much of the narrative. References to conservation debates and deep ecology raise unsettling questions about whether wildlife can truly survive within human-dominated spaces. A naturalist's assertion that tigers are no longer safe in the forest reflects a grim contemporary reality, challenging romanticized notions of wilderness.

The exposure of the poaching racket forms the novel's moral climax. Nawab Sahib, Mr. Nair, Ruby, Palay, and Mathews are revealed as participants in an international trafficking network. The murder of Kiku, punished for aiding forest guards, stands as the novel's most harrowing moment, underscoring the lethal stakes of ecological resistance. Here, crime fiction converges with environmental ethics, revealing how the exploitation of nature inevitably entails human suffering.

The conclusion restores a sense of moral balance. In a moment tinged with *déjà vu*, the Superintendent of Police acknowledges the contributions of the four children and Rippa, whose collective courage proves decisive. The ending affirms faith in ethical action, youthful agency, and communal responsibility.

In sum, Sutapa Basu's novel is a compelling fusion of mystery, ecological consciousness, and moral inquiry. Despite minor narrative excesses, particularly in its engagement with artificial intelligence, the prose remains lucid and engaging. The novel succeeds not only as an entertaining detective tale but also as a serious reflection on humanity's ethical relationship with the natural world. It leaves readers with an enduring awareness of nature's vulnerability—and of the consequences of forgetting that responsibility.

Title: Murder in the Jungle

Author: Sutapa Basu

Available: [Amazon](#)

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Subhajit is a gold medallist in M.A from Tezpur University. He is a freelance writer, poet, critic and translator. He has published a number of books including *The Masked Protagonist In Jewish American Fiction*, *The Man Who Stole The Crown*, *The Rising Sun*, a book of poems in Bengali and a translated work titled *Selected Stories of Arun Goswami*.

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