



MAN VS NATURE: UNDERSTANDING ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL "THE HUNGRY TIDE"

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Abstract: Literature is commonly characterised as the medium which serves to reflect life and all its aspects. The world of literature crowds with works concerning the beauty, excellence and intensity of nature since the time of Shakespeare. Lately it describes the connection between the human world and the physical environment. The concern for ecology and the threat that overt exploitation and continuous misuse of nature and natural resources poses on humanity has only recently grabbed the attention of the writers, giving emergence to a new literary movement, namely Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism encourages comprehending the complications of man-nature relation as presented in literature. The raising environmental issues and its affect give rise to a significant danger to the people and its environment. The present paper purports to establish the ecological perception regarding the Sundarbans, introduced by the eminent writer, Amitav Ghosh in his sixth novel, *The Hungry Tide*, chiefly as it presents a matter-of-fact delineation of nature, its privileges and wonders as well as adversities. The concern for our co-survival with environment is given expression in this novel where almost all characters foster their own diverging perspectives concerning their natural surroundings. The storyline of the novel is organised with nature's turns, dividing the book logically into two segments: The Ebb and The Flood. Knitted complicatedly into a plot that uses Nature as its basis for advancement. The novel entwines the cross-purpose romantic interests of its characters: Kanai, Piya, Fokir and Moyna; with the territory's fickle political atmosphere, environmental manifestations, history and myth. Amidst this incessantly shifting domain of Sundarbans, the inhabitants dwell under the dual hazard of anthropophagus tigers and demolishing storms, where everything is precarious and dicey.

Index Terms - Ecocriticism, ecology, environmental, Sundarbans, bio-diversity, nature, region, literature, mankind.

Amitav Ghosh, the author of smash hits like *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), is a prominent novelist, a non-fiction writer and an essayist. Being the beneficiary of esteemed awards like Sahitya Akademi Award, Ananda Puraskar and Padma Shri, for his magnificent compositions, his ranking in the literary domain is praiseworthy. The author's skill in both fiction and non-fiction literature is commendable and noteworthy. He is also recipient of Dan David Prize because of his inventive multifaceted research across conventional limits and prototypes. He has produced numerous novels beginning from his debut novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) to a spellbinding, globe-trotting trilogy, namely *Ibis trilogy*, which interrogate the history of humanity with discursive discourses. His nonfictional compositions are equally stimulating and demanding, providing cultural and philosophical interpretation of various themes like Egyptian culture, fundamentalism, revolution and many other.

At the beginning of his literary career Ghosh was in a brown study with the themes of Diaspora, postcolonialism, partition, communal violence, marginalities, identity crisis etc. A.A Mondal stated,

Ghosh mediates upon a core set of issues but each time he does so from a new perspective: the troubled legacy of colonial knowledge and discourse on formerly colonized societies . . . the formation and reformation of identities in colonial and postcolonial societies . . . an engagement with cultural multiplicity, and an insistent critique of Eurocentrism. (2)

A lot of Ghosh's works intervenes on the vexing and arbitrary nature of natural borders. Analysis and criticism from Indian researchers and scholastics focused mainly on the books like *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace* that dealt with the subjects of partition and colonialism respectively. The representation of gender likewise has become the subject of much critical debate. For instance, in *The Shadow Lines* the reversal of male characters is made passive at the expense of female characters. But in the entirety of his works there is relatively little discussion about the portrayal of nature with exception of this select novel, *The Hungry Tide*, which is surely obsessed with this more complicated theme of representation of nature and the relation between mankind and the natural environment. It is a novel which theorises key idea in Island studies. It likewise gives a phenomenal setting for literary exploration of ethnography and myths as well as postcolonial study. It connotes wilderness region of the Tide Country where tradition, divergent cultures and dialects work together for centuries. This is a type of confrontation of European colonial history. However, one of the main attractions of this novel is that nature here has been addressed as a significant character that is powerful enough to affect the existences of other characters in the novel. In the words of W R Greer:

In the Sundarbans where the tide changes the environment daily, nothing is certain and everything is a shade of gray. It's a place where tigers kill hundreds of people a year... In an environment where life is fragile, the essence of any person is broken down to its core. Amitav Ghosh lets the tide country break down the barriers of both society and its characters.

This novel offers compelling evidence that the analysis of literature should not be subordinate or peripheral activity for environmental study, especially at this critical juncture when the planet is on the verge of ecological catastrophe. This paper argues that literature has much to contribute to the theoretical work of environmental studies; it is an endeavor to analyze Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* and explore how far ecocritical point of view lights up this select novel.

The scholarly and basic enthusiasm for environment and green managerial is an ongoing advancement with a critical approach known as ecocriticism. It scrutinises artistic writings and literary text regarding different environmental issues alongside, the various manners by which literature deals with the subject of nature. The principal concern of ecocriticism in literature is to discover feasible solutions for ongoing environmental quandary. We are confronting the worldwide catastrophe today primarily on the ground that we are concerned more about the working of the moral framework, fairly agonising, over the functioning of the eco framework. Man is constantly left in stagger by cataclysmic events like dearth, drought, flood, quake and so forth which plunder the ecological pyramid and have left us near the precarious edge of desolation and destruction. However, man has cognised that he is a cosmological byproduct, and whatever happens inward or outside of an organism, is the inescapable consequence of nature. Ascertaining this universal truth, numerous scholars, artists and authors made a conspicuous spot for environment in their works, where nature is composed of both positive and negative perspectives. Amitav Ghosh, the Indian-born extraordinary writer, delineates the physical aspect of nature, which sometimes remain calm, sometimes furious; sometimes bright, benevolent and creative and at other times dark and destructive. His works, some in the background, others in the foreground, masterfully portray nature and ecological issues. The striking characteristic of environmental composing is that nature is not just a backdrop or setting for human activity, but a genuine factor in the plot, at some occasions even it is the protagonist. Cheryll Glotfelty in his book "The Ecocriticism Reader" established "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" [2]. Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as "a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" [20]. In general, ecocriticism gives an earth-centred approach to literary studies.

Earlier writers like Coleridge, Keats, Shelly has established their astonishment towards nature in romantic writings and pastorals. In present century numerous scholars have risen to exhibit the centrality of environmental issues and their significant association with literature. Nature has been depicted both in its favourable and unfavourable circumstances - as a benevolent mother figure which favours all earthly beings with her natural resources, essential for their survival and furthermore as a ruinous power which can perish thousands of lives at once. For Wordsworth nature is our guide, companion, teacher, and compassionate mother figure; for Coleridge nature is 'mysterious beauty'; for Keats nature is beloved. Whereas Amitav Ghosh portrays the physical aspects of nature with both optimistic and pessimistic note. Also, he presents the

transpire in nature and their consequences upon us. He has successfully established his identity as an environmentally conscious writer, who has continually attempting to drag the attention and consideration of his readers and the literary world towards environmental issues. In the words of Vineet Mehta, “Ghosh establishes himself as an ecocritical writer by questioning imperialism, globalisation, western model of science and scientific progress and calling for a symbiosis between man and nature.” (164)

Ghosh’s unique style of fabricating an arresting story with the touch of a bit of pedagogy gives his compositions their obvious intrigue. In spite of being a Ph.D in anthropology, his fondness for history can clearly be seen in his writings. The author’s sagacity, creative mind and a thorough research of nature, science and anthropology create a sturdy base for the development of the novel, *The Hungry Tide*, which got him the Hutch Crossword Prize in addition to other awards and laurels. The name “*The Hungry Tide*”, aptly puns on the word ‘hunger’ (which likewise represents poverty) which remains a significant component that propels the action and much passion across the eastern coast of India, and furthermore it also controls the decisions that individuals make, both in real life and in this novel. It is a prophetic novel of astounding intuition, winsomeness and mankind. The distinctiveness of Nature shapes rudimentary proposition for the novel to develop and profoundly influences the life of all characters and their shared relations. Nature is located in the earth’s utmost engrossing locale – the Sundarbans, opulent with variegated environment and biosphere, flora, fauna and quaint aquatic life along with its astonishing topographical highlights frames the hotbed for the storyline to develop and structure the lives of the characters in the novel. The Indian peninsula and eminently its eastern coast are privileged with extraordinary characteristic arrangements.

Between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands... Some of these islands are vast and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others have just washed into being... Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. The tides reach more than two hundred miles inland, and every day thousands of acres of mangrove forest disappear only to re-emerge hours later... For hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed and the hopeless dreamers of the world have braved the man eaters and the crocodiles who rule there, to eke a precarious existence from the unyielding mud. The settlers of the Sundarbans believe that anyone who dares venture into the vast watery labyrinth without a pure heart, will never return. (6-8)

Ghosh in this novel problematises the tension between human groups and their connection with the natural world, and the additional chaotic reality of nature which is the outcome of man’s constant encroachment of the ecosystem. The novel unfolds through the perspectives of two upwardly versatile, educated urbanites who take on a journey to the Sundarbans, the tide country or ‘bhatir desh’ as Ghosh calls it in an exceptional and aesthetic exercise of the term, practised during the rule of Mughal dynasty. Kanai Dutt, the Bengali-born, middle-aged linguist, having command over five European languages, who runs a translation bureau in Delhi, comes to the island of Lusibari to visit his auntie Nilima and get acquainted with the package containing his dead uncle Nirmal’s letters describing his last days which revolved around Kusum and her son Fokir – the victims of Morichjhapi massacre that took place in the year 1979 and where Kusum was killed. And the second one is Piyali Roy (Piya), an expatriate, young cetologist from United States who comes to Sundarbans to study a threatened breed of fresh water Dolphin, the *Orcaella brevirostris*. These two main characters of the novel, Kanai and Piya are thrown together by chance; they are designated toward a same destination have a purpose to be accomplished, which is the main theme of the plot. Kanai accompanies Piya in a train journey but the novel is not really about their excursion or developing acquaintance with each other but, much more centrally and in a far more extended way, it’s about the history of the place they have come to. Piya’s struggle to find and locate rare species of dolphins whose populace used to be bountiful in the past, is one of the many instances of mankind’s negative impact on nature. Shallowing of rivers, decline in fish population, fatal typhoons, as referenced in the story, depict mankind’s negligence and carelessness toward nature. Ghosh’s referring of these happenings of cataclysmic events, decline in the species of dolphins for oil and diesel fuel to be used in motorbikes and boats bears a resemblance to Kit Wright’s “Song of the Whale” which depicts how whales are being decimated for the sake of production of lipstick and shoe polish,

Great whale, crying for your life,
Crying for your kind, I knew
How we would use
your dying:
Lipstick for our painted faces
Polish for our shoes. [4-9]

Ghosh intertwines together two narratives: the Morichjhapi episode is an embodiment of exploitation of men by men for their own profit and self-interests, which doesn't stand on the moral ground and it was against the hypothesis of ecological vision too, as William Rueckert in his seminal essay *Literature an Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* suggests, "The idea that nature should also be protected by human laws, that trees (dolphins and whales, hawks and whooping cranes) should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights is one of the most marvellous and characteristic parts of ecological vision" [108]. Here in the Morichjhapi incident human laws for the welfare of human beings were brushed aside. Again, the place of man in nature has been vividly described with the detailed narration of the indispensable role of each aspect of nature such as the beauty of the Sundarbans as well as the region's violence, danger and indifference to human life where environment determines the fate of man. The characters perpetually endeavour to clarify and act as a link between the past and the present. Here change is the only constant. Piya and Kanai who were scheduled to be the author's urban voices in this bucolic setting, got themselves stunned and speechless in the midst of dire circumstances – life-death situations. It was the simple rustic acuity and natural astuteness of the local inhabitants that substantiated to be more fit than that of the entire world's knowledge accumulated through conventional schooling and formal education. Moyna, Fokir and the other inhabitants of that region overshadowed the protagonists of the novel with their intelligibility, straightforwardness and uncanny knack to vanquish every threat. There are ample illustrations of man's harmony with nature as well as his constant struggle against it. On a romantic note, this novel could likewise be tagged as a saga of man's tumultuous and bittersweet relationship with nature. In terms of aesthetics, a sense of sympathy, equality and humaneness are themes which rule the schismatic turns of fate. The narrative is appealing yet simple; grip is loose yet enduring, just like the environment of the region, which appears to be innocuous and gentle from distance, but loaded up with life-threatening dangers prowling everywhere.

Ghosh has done an extensive research work and has presented the evolutionary system of creation in an exceedingly distinctive way. He has been in a brown study with the existence of animistic creation and its environmental equilibrium in the region of Sundarbans. He imparts so much knowledge and information concerning gigantic dolphins and about flora and fauna of the region. Additionally, he unveils Sundarbans not solely as the confluence of rivers and the seas but also as a place of incredible meeting point of various cultures, that seems non-viable at other places. It is also a weird story of two lovers - Fokir and Piya. Piya asks Fokir to accompany her as a guide in her expedition to the canals of the area. They spent days and nights within the Brobdingnagian stretches of the river on the tree where both of them could not exchange words with each other as Fokir doesn't understand English and Piya doesn't know Bengali. However, they manage to communicate through nonverbal language. The novel also portrays the relation between Piya and nature. Water has special significance in Hindu mythology as well as in this novel. Water symbolises the Holy Spirit and is mainly associated with purification, fertility, life, immortality, creation and the feminine. Water plays a vital role in the lives of the people of Sundarbans. The water not only shelters the aquatic animals and nurtures the mangrove forests but also protects the region from far-reaching deforestation and even frequent natural disasters like tropical storms and fatal typhoons. Water is the maker as well as the destroyer. The bond is made when Piya almost drowns when she is abroad in a boat and finally rescued by Fokir. It winds up turning into a romantic companionship but ends with his life taken away while he tried to save Piya from the deadly strikes of the typhoon.

Ghosh here beautifully blends history and ethnography. Ethnography in which Ghosh depicts a series of cultural traits of the tide country's micro-community. It talks about the Scottish visionary Sir Daniel Hamilton who first transformed Sundarbans and founded a utopian community at the beginning of twentieth century and gifted its new inhabitants, mostly refugees, a place to call their own and brought to their hearts a new ray of hope of a future they all are ready to carve. It also talks about the legend of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai. Exalted ideologies offer an unsteady anchor to the ignoramus nitwits who think Bon Bibi, the goddess of forest will save them from every possible danger in any condition. This conviction is pitched against the belief in the demon Dokkhin Rai, signifying the evil, which sneaks in the unpopulated land. Ghosh here probably attempting to make singular spaces for nature and mankind with regions for each stamped invisibly through the reigns of two deities, as no human would dare to step in Dokkhin Rai's domain. But the novel is at its best when it narrates the untameable, wild and ferocious characteristics of nature that never surrenders to the human will.

The novel is filled with realistic depiction of tigers and their human prey, snakes, crocodiles, storms and fatal typhoons. Life is precarious with these fearful surroundings and minimal contact with the outside world. Here the struggle of man is against nature and natural forces – they live in mutual dependency with the natural world, fishing it and when required protecting themselves against it. It is contrasting but, in a way more earnest relation with the natural that Piya has to accept while she is compelled to perceive that Fokir is

not a projection of her ideal expertise and preserving nature. When Fokir supports the act of inflaming and killing of the trapped tiger that has attacked the villagers, she is taken aback and disheartened as she has assumed that he would share her beliefs. At the point when Fokir gives his perspective on this particular occasion, that when a tiger enters into a human settlement it hints at its self-destructive urge, she doesn't want to hear it and immediately covers her ears. However, very soon she understands that her dismissal of the villagers' perspective of the tiger puts her in the similar camp as the foresters, when she sees the same corrupt guard whom she has encountered on her trip to Lusibari on his approach to beat and menace and coerce bribes from the villagers for its self-preservative action.

The killing of the tiger prompts the most unequivocal discussion of the issue of conservation and its human impacts in the novel. According to Kanai, as he contends, these conflicts perhaps result from "people like you (Piya) who made a push to protect the wildlife here without regard for the human costs" [301]. Piya makes a neat riposte by stating "if we do not respect what was intended by nature, by earth, by the planet that keeps us alive" if we "(cross) that imaginary line that prevent us from deciding that no other species matter except ourselves... once we decide we can kill off other species, it'll be people next – people who're poor and unnoticed". Piya encapsulates this dispute at the core of post-humanist position by assuming that some people (like poor people, black slaves, refugees, jews classed as subhuman) are not really human and their oppression, enslavement and even killing could be justified as Kanai suggested previously. The protection of other species is the safeguard of all life including our own.

Piya and Fokir symbolise the union between the privileged and the unprivileged where Piya represents the privileged world and Fokir stands for the impoverished. As the novel draws to its close, the story comes to a point where Piya decides to settle in Lusibari for certain years to proceed with her exploration and research. She manages to bring some assistance from an association for the destitute people of Lusibari to improve the quality of their living. This culmination of the novel sets some ground for optimism that if people like Piya from developed countries step forward, the lives of these inhabitants of Sundarbans who live in utter poverty and hardship can be ameliorated - the union between the privileged and unprivileged will bring a prosperous future for the world's poor.

The novel, *The Hungry Tide* plays with a couple of ideas; Ghosh has attempted to portray a circumstance where in the name of conservation often some radical environmentalists fail to remember the real factors to the practical world; and another side of this scenario is that all through the world political exercises are being executed under the mask of preservation of nature. This novel is a critique of the Western model of conservation adopted by Indian Government for the preservation of some particular species and wildlife. It is contended that,

Ghosh is an ideal representative to comment on environmental issues in India . . . a critique of the neglect of local issues in national environmentalist projects provides a pathway that does not make ecological concerns abstract, but rather facilitates a humanist version of culture-specific, location-based environmentalism. (Sen 367)

In the narrative, it is described that earlier the Marxist party of West Bengal took stand in the favour of the refugees of Bangladesh and tempted these outcast vagrants to move toward Morichjhapi and settle there. But later when the party came into power, the settlement was declared illegal and a massacre occurred in the name of conservation of the island. As Annu Jalais said in her article "Dwelling on Morichjhapi",

It was often expressed that the government was happy as long as the tigers thrived and that in contrast, whether the islanders lived or died, as with the refugees, made no difference, because they were just 'tiger food'. It was also said that earlier both animals and humans lived in harmony and the animals did not harm the human beings. But after the incident of Morichjhapi, the tigers became 'man-eaters'. (1761)

Conservation should be a priority undoubtedly but, it should not stand against enervated people. Moreover, it should stand for the weak and poor without discriminating between the human and non-human world. The intense distress and suffering of these refugees can be felt in the expression of Kusum:

... the worst part was not the hunger or thirst. It was to sit here helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. This island has to be saved for trees, it has to be saved for its animals, ... it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid by people all round the world... who are these people who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? ... the whole world has become a place for animals, and our fault, our crime was that we are just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have... by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. [262]

All environmental studies endorse the perception that for a sustainable development ecological equilibrium is crucial. Everything, living or non-living existing on this planet has a major or minor role in keeping up the harmony. The novel has an instance where it tells the readers the importance of crabs for the nurturing of the mangrove forests. In the words of the author, “they kept the mangrove alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris. Didn’t they represent some fantastically large proportion of the system’s biomass?” [142]. Crab is not only the food for the inhabitants of the Sundarbans but it also nourishes the world’s largest mangrove forest. Throughout the novel the author endeavours to familiarise his readers with the astounding bio-diversity of the Sundarbans. There is a hope that mankind should recognise the worth of non-human world and the interdependency between the two.

In this contemporary progressive world, nothing has vandalised the eco-framework and biome as terribly as technology and industrialisation has done. Undoubtedly, development of technology and industrialisation have been helping mankind in a great way to satisfy human needs and improve living standards but risks are that the price this earth is paying for this advancement will cost lives on the earth. No one can claim that primitive lifestyle will cause any harm to the ecosystem as those ways of living were always in harmony with nature. *The Hungry Tide* depicts how the contemplation and ambition of civilised people have changed about the bygone ways of living in harmony with nature. A message that in this planet neither non-humans are here to dominate mankind, nor man should attempt to control and ruin the non-human world, is recapitulated all through the novel – they are interdependent. Sometimes human world uses, exploits and even kills the non-humans for his voracious covetousness; on other occasions, non-human harm the human. Yet the fact that they are compliment to each other cannot be denied. Towards the end of the novel, Ghosh finally gives his strident note on the plight of vulnerable human existence in the hands of despotic nature. Man who thinks himself as the mightiest among all other organisms becomes weak, impotent and defenceless when nature turns up with its authority and supremacy. Animals understand that to survive in this planet they have to live in harmony with nature, they are more eco-sensitive. But man has a domineering approach to nature which inevitably is bound to spell disaster.

To sum up, this study is a cautionary warning to humanity that overt exploitation and abuse of nature over a period of time will prompt an upheaval of nature. The novel, *The Hungry Tide*, is a fantastic netting of human emotions reflected continuously through the elements in nature. In an environmentally troubled world, this novel endeavours to make its readers mindful of the man-nature relation and man-man relation’s impact on man-nature relation. This is a nuanced portrayal of the human predicament which is often helpless and at the mercy of prevalent powers. Ghosh here highlights two kind of forces: power of nature and power of governmental forces. When these two meet the weak and poor class people are bound to be crushed. For a sustainable development man must cast aside his anthropocentric disposition and approach to step forward and advocate the weak and the deprived, regardless of whether they have a place with the human world or with the non-humans. Man cannot deny the fact that he alone cannot deal with this planet, he is the part of nature and have to live in communion with it and since human beings hold the highest rank in the social scale of intelligence, it is his responsibility to shun vicious encounters between mankind and other organisms of this world without causing much harm to any of them. The need of the hour is to stop catastrophic climate change and preserve biodiversity on Earth to fabricate a future that will find some kind of harmony between mankind and his surroundings, to maintain an equilibrium with the whole ecosystem, expelling his human-dominating ego. Mankind should endeavour to rebuild human relations at every level and this movement can be successful if it includes molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence and aspiration together with visible aspects.

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