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A Nexus between Myths, Legends, Climate Change, and an Ecocritical Reading in Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island and The Hungry Tide

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Abstract- Climate Change has become an umbrella term in today's environmental everyday narratives. It is encompassing economics, sociology, geopolitics, national, and local politics and is intricately linked with poverty escalation, environmental degradation, and finally global security. In the 21st century, it is an alarming issue that aware the Anthropocene world that how with Globalization we are ignoring the cataclysmic rise of greenhouse gases that are affecting marine animals, and disturbing the ecological balance in the sea. Human beings also cannot escape from the clutches of the disorder of nature. Every day the level of the sea is rising which is in turn leading to the fear of submergence of lands, the continuous coming of different cyclones, and the rise of temperature is inviting diseases and death both to human beings and animal world. With the advancement of science and technology world might have got a cosy ambiance to live in but this is ignoring the safety and security of the human beings, non-living beings, and everyone around living in the universe. This has been a topic of urgency that compelled me to write this paper. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* inculcates the issue of climate change and the different problems nature is undergoing due to human beings. Moreover, both novels brilliantly interweave tales of myth and legends that make the storyline move from Sundarbans to Venice, from Bono Devi to Manasadevi which makes the reader constantly interrogating whether they are in the world of reality or the world of imagination. So, Ghosh's both novels emerge a text that explores the space of mythology, the unignorable issue of climate change, and also the question of maintaining a proper equilibrium and harmony between Mother Earth and the world of Anthropocene. All these issues compelled and motivated me to write this paper.

Keywords- Anthropocene, ecocriticism, zoo centrism, deep ecology, environmental justice, etc.

The interplay of Myth and Legend

Myths and legends are the part and parcel of our Ancient Indian History. Their conflux and coalescence of one over the other make Indian culture and its heritage-rich and appealing. Eminent Indian writers like Raja Rao, RK Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Sri Aurobindo, Toru Dutt, G V Desani, Anita Nair, Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and many other Indian English Writers oeuvre is full to the brim with stories running with themes of myths, legends, the question of women place in society, themes of diaspora, postmodernism and above all the center of commonality of all the writers is a unique contemporary

storytelling art that marvels the modern readers and transports them to an imaginative cosmos. Their writings are so pervasive that it tends to percolate from the world of imagination and fantasy to the temporary reality blurring the world of unreality or nonexistent. It stands as a challenge for a creative writer to yoke the world of untruth, unrealistic, unjustifiable to the world of truth, belief and justified. The line of distortion leads demons, rakshasas, queens, kings, and Gods, to fly into the cosmos of reality and provides the readers the flavor and color of "Truth". Like the international reputed author, Anita Desai prefers to concentrate on the issue of truth and reality and feels that

Writing is to be a process of discovering the truth – the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth..... [Mehrotra 227]

However, with the progress of time authors are further culminating not only myths, legends, and folklores into stories but tries to draw the lens of awareness through the theme of climate change and its catastrophic effects on human beings, animals, and the whole universe. It seems that ecocriticism makes the world conscious of the interrelationship of humans with plants and animals and literature and "ties their cultural analyses explicitly to a green moral and political agenda"[Garrard 3] Nowadays the everyday narratives of the Anthropocene world exquisite comprised of various terrifying tales of environmental crisis like natural resources are depleting in a fast rate, pollution is escalating, extinction of rare species melting of polar ice caps, torrential rain leading to floods, global warming, ozone layer depletion, and its hazardous effects on climate-all this turned out to be common tales in modern-day life. . Very recently the sudden cloudburst at Uttarakhand in 2013 caused devastating floods and landslides. The reason behind the disaster was due to anthropogenic causes like unscientific developmental activities that undertook roads construction by cutting down the mountains, opening new resorts and hotels, and more and more hydroelectric projects in the watersheds of the state paved the way for a "disaster waiting to happen". Super cyclone storm - *Amphan*, 16th May was another deadly tropical cyclone that caused widespread damage in West Bengal and also in Bangladesh has been basically due to the heating of ocean beds which are nowadays properly known as "ocean dead zone". After this havoc storm, another super cyclone named *Nisarga had* hit the state of Maharashtra. So, a chain of cyclones is constantly hitting the land and we would find that number of environmental degradational narratives has increased a lot and at the core of all this lies mostly the anthropogenic or man-made causes apart from natural reasons.

Amalgamations of Climate change and Ecocriticism

Amitav Ghosh an international and a bohemian author interweaves complex patterns of narratives embracing myth, legends, colonialism, politics, climate change, and ecology. Being an intricate book of so many, genres Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* and *The Gun Island* uses a Conradian expedition and Holme's intelligence to untangle certain mysterious, hidden, and uncanny issues and find out the truth that makes him a globetrotter from the marshy dark uncanny islands of Sundarbans to Venice. Both the novels bear an intriguing tale of myth, legends, history of the Bangladesh Liberation Movement of 1971, catastrophic nature of climate change, refugee crisis, extinction of rare species and balance of flora and fauna of Sundarbans -----all these are interweaved so auspiciously that it would transport any reader from the physical world to the world imagination would make the reader think that our Bengali legendary storyteller Chanderburi is revolving her charkha and narrating some nostalgic tale of love and pain, past and present, Illusion and phantasy, political radicalism, and utopianism. The convoluted islands of Sundarbans possess deep forests, and deadly tigers and the deadliest is the tide that rises and surges up and falls on the island leaving everything ruined and devastated. One day Kanai Dutta, a translator, and Delhi-based businessman is called urgently by Nilima, his aunt to solve the mystery of his missing uncle, and Kusum his childhood friend meets an American marine biologist, Piyali who too is heading towards Sundarbans to study an endangered dolphin. She calls the dolphin to be Rani. Both of them meet the uncanny tide that makes them understand the precarious lives of the settlers in Sundarbans. The novel *Gun Island* too is set in the backdrop of the magic realism genre where Dina Nath Dutta, a York-based based antiquarian book dealer goes to the marshy flood-prone zone of Sundarbans to unveil the myth that lurks regarding the Gun merchant and Manasa Devi, the goddesses of the snake. Her vengeful nature takes the merchant from Sundarbans to Venice and makes a palpable sense of loss in his life He becomes a victim the of the flood that had once hit the Sundarbans and is later sold as a slave and ultimately retires on the island of guns i.e. Venice which was once considered as the greatest producer of ammunition. In this narrative, Ghosh readily amalgamates myth, and folklore, with the alarming issues of climate change that run from the beginning

to the end of the story. Both the novels encompass the interrelationship between humans and nature and enlighten Timothy Morton 's *idea of ecological thought* a belief that "everything is connected". Even Arundhati Roy in "Come September" quoted

Today Corporate Globalization needs an international confederation of loyal, corrupt, preferably authoritarian governments in poorer countries to push through unpopular reforms and quell the mutinies. It needs a press that pretends to be free. not the free movement of people, not a respect for human rights, not international treaties on racial discrimination or chemical and nuclear weapons, greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, or god forbid justice

(Arundhati Roy," Come September" 2002)

Amitav Ghosh's novels also culminate in an ecocritical reading. The novelist throws light on maintaining a perfect ecological balance between the world of Anthropocene and Mother Earth. Ecocriticism has emerged as a rhizomatic movement that has considered all the environmental issues and the different stories of environmental degradation and destruction into one single form. The genre has opened up new environmental perspectives like Deep Ecology, Environmental ethics, Environmental Justice, etc. Ecocriticism is most popularly defined as "the study of the relation between literature and the physical environment". (Glotfelty xviii). Ecocriticism deals with the artistic feedback which claims to explore the correlation between writing and earth. It covers the investigation of writing, human studies, social science, brain research, and so on and endeavors to consider the state of mind of humankind in the environment. Ghosh claims in his nonfiction book *The Great Derangement: The Climate Change and the Unthinkable* that how art and fiction have ignored such catastrophic problems. This intended for me to write a paper that is very urgent and necessary. Though some cli-fi fiction like Jenson's *The Rapture*, Frank Schatzing's ecothriller *The Swarm*, or two Hollywood disaster cli-fi epics like *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Geostorm* have been produced and are added to the oeuvre of climate fiction still there is a lot to work on and strict actions are required to be enforced on it. Therefore, this paper intends to bring out an in-depth study of the interrelationship of myths, legends, climate change, and ecocritical reading of Ghosh's novels.

The world of Myth

The legends of Bono Bibi and Manasa Devi are the recurring myths in the novels. When the novel *The Hungry Tide* commences Kanai Dutta is found reading a Bengali manuscript written by his uncle and it begins like

In our legends, it is said that the goddess Ganga's descent from heaven would split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance, and immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point, the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe thousands, of tangled strands
(Ghosh 6)

The word myth has been derived from the Greek word *mythos* which means story or word. "Myths are symbolic tales of the distant past that concern cosmogony and cosmology, may be connected to a belief system or rituals and may serve to direct social action and values" [Mary Margo lick] In William Bascom's article "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives" where myths are defined "tales are believed as true usually sacred set in the distant past or other worlds or part of the world and with extra-human, inhuman or heroic characters". Such myths, often described as 'cosmogonic' or 'origin 'myths function to provide order or cosmology based on cosmic from the Greek "kosmos" meaning order [Leeming 1990, 3,13; Bascom 1965]. Indian ancient history is infused with tales of Hindu mythology like Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu, Saraswathi, Devi Durga, kali, Ram, Sita, Ganesh, Hanuman, Lakshmi, Manasa Devi, Kartik, etc. Myths being cosmogenic narratives present gods, protohumans that are linked to different foods, festivals, ceremony, and their setting is typically primordial and tries to convey different aspects of life. Our life is interrelated and interwoven in a cyclic regeneration and degeneration process that makes biological, spiritual, psychical, philosophical, and metaphysical go in hand in hand with myths.

When Aryans had settled on the banks of river Indus and laid the foundation of an agrarian society. They were mostly nomadic people and their domestication of animals, and agriculture formed an important event in the history of India. Indo Aryans were possessors of some powerful hymns, and chants that were later comprised in the Rigveda. The Vedic hymns possessed autochthonous myths in primordial form and that's why Prof Max Muller a German scholar of comparative languages holds the view that

Now where is the wide distance which separates the wide the ancient poems of India from the most ancient literature of Greece more clearly felt when we compare the growing myths of the Veda with the full-grown and decayed myths on which the poetry of Homer is founded the Veda is the real theogony of the Aryan races while that of Hesiod is a distorted caricature of the original image [Dowson 36]

The pivotal aspect of the myth is to blend truth with fantasy-like in The Song of the Road Apu and Durga dance with ten to twelve sages in Charkas and then on a moonlit night the sacred "Neel puja" begins. Neel puja and charka are related to Lord Shiva where people believe that on the last day of "Chaitra" or Bengali calendar evil power would be destroyed and sorrow and suffering would be eradicated from their life and they will lead a prosperous life in the new year. In Indian culture, the women are worshipped as goddesses and they are also the embodiment of power and purity. India is worshipped as Motherland and this concept of Motherland and revering female as the incarnation of power is of Indo Aryan origin. Females are the prototype of power and later this developed into "Sakti". The shrines of the female goddesses are found almost ubiquitous in every town and hamlet. The presence of myths is ample in Indian English fiction in Raja Rao's Kantha Pura there is Kenchamma who protects the villagers from demons. She is so powerful that once she killed all the demons and the hill has turned the red as she has sucked all the blood. The villagers worship her cries out "O Kenchamma Protect us Always like this through famine and disease, death, and despair. O most high and bounteous." [Kantha Pura 3]. Similarly, in *The Hungry Tide*, there is a description of the worshipping of the forest which is known as "Bono Bibi". At the very outset of the novel Horen a heavily build, muscular man with a tattered lungi comes in and informs Nilima he had gone to jungles "Jongol Korte Geslam" [Ghosh 27], and Bono Bibi granted him, honey, for sale. Hearing this bizarre Kanai enquired Nilima about Bono Bibi and Nilima whispered

the goddess of the forest...in these parts, people believe she rules over all the animals of the jungle. [Ghosh 28]

The presence of Bono Bibi is further conspicuous as Ghosh presents a detailed pen picture of the dense foliage at the beginning of the novel. The forest bears a perfect blend of an uncanny beauty which is itself a manifestation of a female Shakti

When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate and if the conditions are right they can so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly other woodlands or jungles. There is no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrains' hostility to their presence of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes, and crocodiles...to the world at large this archipelago is known as "the Sundar ban" which means the beautiful forest. [The Hungry Tide 8].

In the chapter "A Gift" from *The Hungry Tide* a story is narrated with the title "Bonobibir Karamoti or that Bon Bibi Johuranama ["The Miracles of BonBibi or the Narrative of her Glory"] as told by Abdur Rahim where Dukhey sins are redeemed. He is saved from demons and it is Bono Bibi who rescues him. Goddesses always tend to forgive the evil and she never closes their ears to the cry of her children. She is "Ma" [Ghosh 359] or the embodiment of motherhood, the soul of forgiveness, patience, endurance, optimism, and love, and always becomes the shield of protection for her children.

In *Gun Island* Manasa Devi, the Hindu goddess of snake, sister of Shesha and Vasuki, epitomizes the protective and possessive nature. She safeguards nature from the evil hands of mankind. We, human beings destroy our "Mother Earth" by capitalism and globalization. The merchant or Chand Saud agar upholds the symbol of capitalism and globalization. She is the true epitome of power and her confrontation is against patriarchy i.e. divine Lord Shiva or the capitalist leader Chand Saud agar. She has always stood for her own for her independence, dignity, and respect. Manasa Devi dwells over the kingdom of snakes. It is wrath that made the merchant flee from the islands of Sundar ban and take shelter at Venice [the land of guns]. However, it is observed that the image of a snake recurrent s throughout the novel. In the beginning, when Deen accompanied by Tipu who visits the temple on the marshy island of Sundarban

gets bitten by a cobra that demolishes Tipu's pride of subduing the kingdom of snakes. Manasa Devi was basically

In effect a negotiator, a translator, a voice carrier between species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her meditation, there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression [Ghosh 153].

Climate change and Ecocriticism

Both the novels foreshadow the alarming and deadly issue of climate change and give a clarion call for maintaining a proper interrelationship between man and nature. The novel presents problems like "bleaching of Irrawaddy dolphins, "fish kill off", siltation of Sundarbans, sinking of a city like Venice," ocean dead zones" (a new scientific term), exploitation of rare species like Tarantula, pollution of the seas, a decrease of oxygen in the oceans. And at last, due to all these degenerations of nature, it is the human beings who are the victims of their destruction and are forced to migrate to other countries which again in turn adds to corruption in the borders McKibben rightly says "We have changed the nature and thus we are changing the climate".

Amitav Ghosh has always felt the urgency of the ongoing destruction and degeneration of nature. He wrote in his book of derangement that "My ancestors were ecological refugees ..." (The Great Derangement 4). He has witnessed such catastrophic impact of nature from his childhood when in the 1850s, one day he with his family was forced to leave Bangladesh as the Padma river changed its course and there was a flood:

I heard this story on a nostalgic family trip, as we were journeying down the Padma river in a steamboat. I was a child then...coconut palms bending. envisioned woman and children racing through howling winds s the waters rose behind ... (Ghosh 5)

In this incident, the author draws an analogy to Gun Island when Nilima alludes to a book named "Cyclone Relief Accounts,1970". It seems that the novelist wanted to assure the readers to w modern-day people would too be witnessed different cyclones due to the rise in the temperature and that make people would become homeless and poverty-stricken.

Table 1: West Bengal is in the 3rd rank from the vulnerability of cyclones

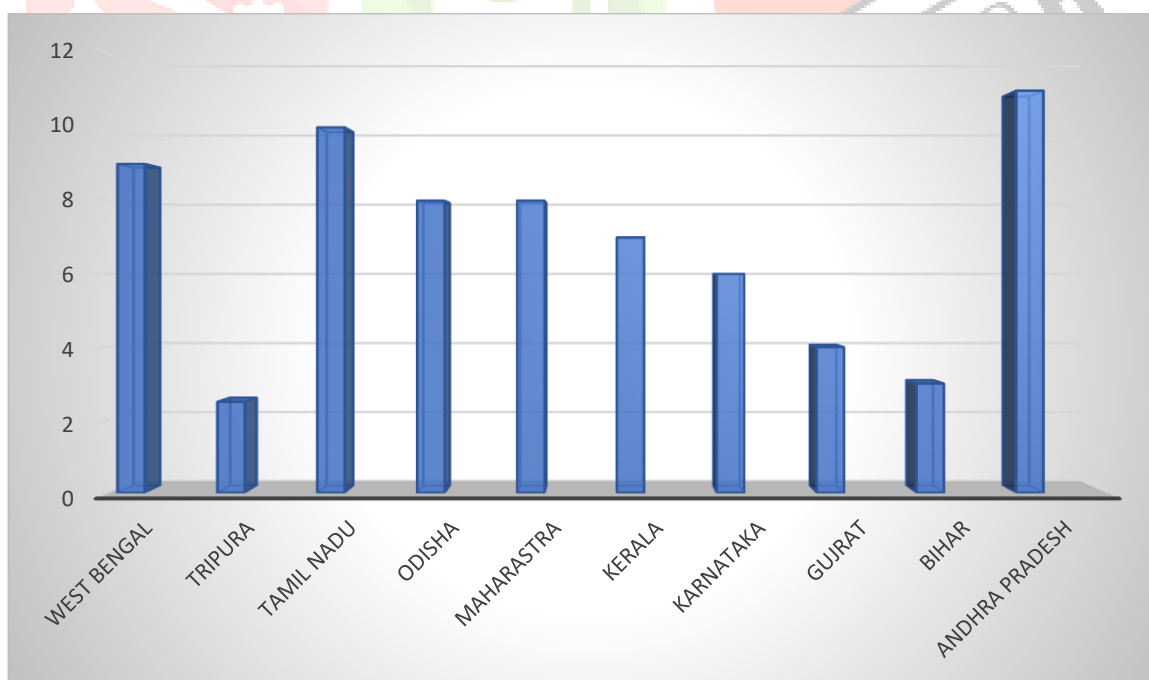


Fig1: [World Bank Disaster Risk Management team brings out that West Bengal is at the third rank based on the vulnerable people at risk from cyclones at the state level]

Source: Building Resilience for Sustainable Development of the Sundarbans; strategy report. The World Bank Report no-88061-In

From the world bank report, it has been found that from 1891 to 1994 there have been 90 cyclones out of which 35 were “severe”. The novelist draws the lens of the uncanny face of nature as he vividly describes

the consequences of the cyclone Ayla of 2009 that had hit the Sundarbans and the picture was so grim. The loss was traumatic as masses of people were evacuated, and everything was reduced to dust. Ghosh besides narrating such a mysterious story continuously invokes the sense of seriousness to be imbued within human beings. Further, there is the issue of global warming. Scientists are continually checking the SSTs or Sea–Surface Temperature that is leading to reducing the oxygen level in the oceans and large lakes. the heating of the bottom of the ocean beds is known as ocean dead zones. This is a new coined by the scientists. Indiscriminate dumping of chemicals from refineries has led to the massive killings of fish and dolphins. The composition of water is changing. Besides the level of the sea is rising and there are occasions of frequent flash floods.

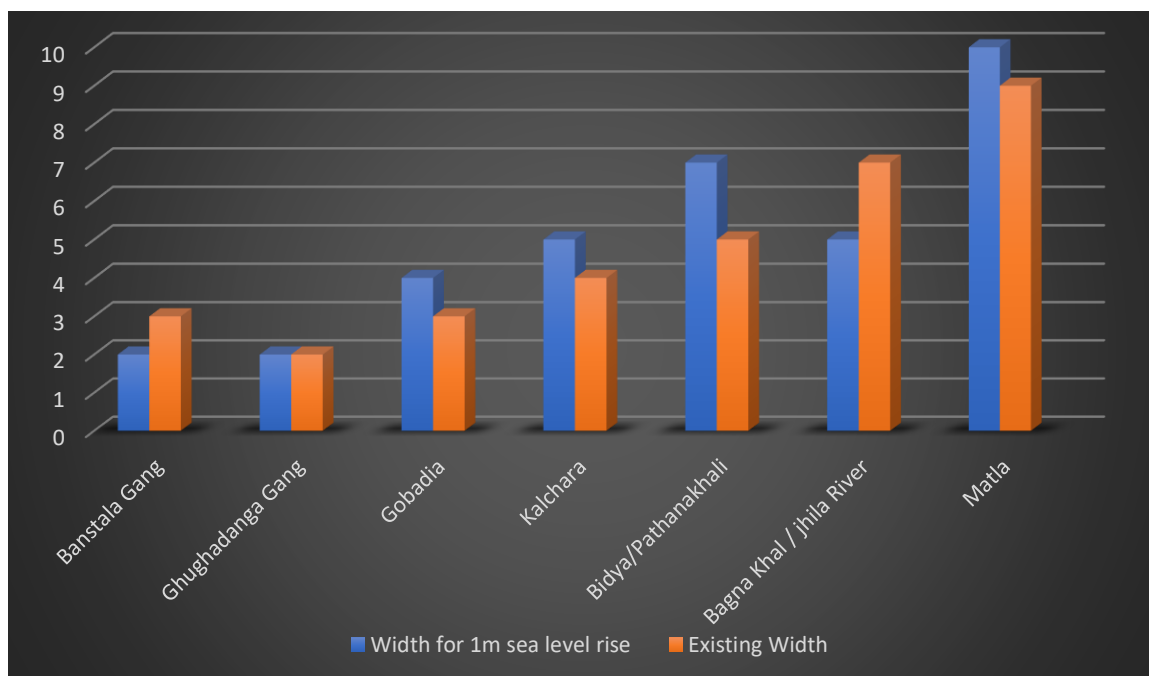


Fig2: Comparison between Existing Channel Widths and Predicted Width after 1m rise in sea level

Fig2: Source: Building Resilience for Sustainable Development of the Sundarbans; strategy report. The World Bank Report no-88061-In

The impact of climate change is not only limited to Sundarban but moves further to New York and finally to Venice. One such incident is described in Venice regarding the rising of deadly sea snakes on the sea beaches due to the warming of the ocean bed:

Did the dog get bit? by that snake? there is a yellow-bellied sea snake.....But we had a bunch of yellow –bellies washing up in the last few months (Ghosh 131)

Gun Island is also a reminder of the argument that deep ecologists have always maintained i.e. both human and non-human being life on earth have intrinsic value on earth. If we delve deep into the novel then we would find that Ghosh has presented such situations where human beings are not allowing the plant and animal kingdom to be in harmony and is continually disturbing the ecological balance. Deep ecologists have identified the anthropocentric dualism of humanity /nature as the ultimate source of anti-ecological beliefs and practices.

Role of Women and Nature

Karen J Warren states in her work *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture Nature* claims that Women and the environment have a closer walk together. As they have a close connection with nature, they have their pursuits too in accordance to their walk with nature. Piya the Bengali-American lady first observes

“the flow of freshwater diminished, saltwater has begun to intrude deeper upstream making certain stretches too saline for the dolphin”

(Ghosh 92)

Even it is Piya who finds out that man-made sounds from submarines and sonar equipment make the mass killings of fishes and dolphins and how they can navigate faster than humans in such hellish areas

Marine animals use echolocation to navigate. If something messed with that they could become disoriented and run aground.

(Ghosh 99)

Piya indeed becomes the savior of Nature and tries her best to restore the green Nature.

Conclusion

The Hungry Tide and Gun Island, both the novels awaken the sleepy readers with the alarming and vivid tales and blurs the line of reality with fantasy, the myth of Manasa Devi and Chand Saudagar with the prophecy of Bono Devi, the idyllic style of Moyna with that of sophisticated and educated Piya [the Marine Biologists], the dense foliage of Sundarbans with that of the land of guns – Venice, the hustle and bustle city life of Kanai with that of the rustic fisherman Fakir ----- all are amalgamated in an appropriate proportion. ” Humans have become geological agents, changing the most basic physical processes of the earth” (Chakravarty 1), and Arundhati Roy too in tune with Chakravarty and aware that advancement in science and technology is leading to” the severing of the link-the understanding- between human beings and the planet they live on”.(Roy 4) Ghosh also felt that the Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities but also to our common sense understanding and beyond than that to the contemporary culture in general. Thus, a climate crisis, is, therefore a crisis to culture and so measures should be taken to prevent it.

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