



Conflicts Of Rights Between Humanscape And Landscape In Amitabh Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

Parishmita Taye

Student

English Department

Gauhati University, Guwahati, India

Abstract: Nature and Literature have always shared an intimate bond as is apparent in the works of all poets and authors down the eras. Currently, this inseparable association between the natural and social world is being accentuated and interpreted in all fields of knowledge and growth. At present, environmental degradation has arisen as a major global concern for humankind. Jnanpith award winner Amitabh Ghosh in his novel *The Hungry Tide* writes about nature, people and environmental problems along with the climate change in the tidal area of the Sundarbans. That's why I have selected *The Hungry Tide* as my case study to explore the bond between man and nature. In this paper, I propose to address this conflict of rights and find a way to settle the issue of preference, focusing on the very pertinent question raised by Fokir who is the outsider in the ecosystem of the tidal land, and how much more responsible the "native" fishermen are for destroying the natural ecosystem than the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and forms of government and self-government interference.

Index Terms - Nature, ecosystem, rights, conflicts, humanity, conservation.

The Hungry Tide by Amitabh Ghosh was published in 2004. It won the 2004 Hutch Crossword Book Award for Fiction and was among the final nominees for the 2006 Kiriya prize.

Like his earlier works, *The Hungry Tide* reflects the author's expertise as a sociologist with a Ph.D. from Oxford University, his broad general knowledge and his insight into the general knowledge and his insight into the colonial past. *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, the vast, intermittently submerged archipelago, primarily covered by mangrove forests, that forms the delta of the Ganges as it debouches into the Bay of Bengal. The narrative is a long river trip in search of the Irrawaddy, dolphin. However, it comes to be a combination of travel, anthropology, ethnography, migration, landscape, and environmentalism. Ghosh here intertwines the human cape and landscape.

Bhatir Desh (the tidal land) upholds the efficiency to shift the course of rivers and shape and reshape lands. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh highlights environmental concerns of the disharmony about the conservation of the natural world and civil liberties in the novel. Sundarbans, one-third of which is in India and two-thirds in Bangladesh, are the habitat to many endangered species like the Royal Bengal Tiger and Irrawaddy dolphins. Likewise, it is the dwelling for dilemmas between humans and non-humans for space. On one hand, there reside the deprived people of the tidal land, and on the other is the non-human world. The association between human settlers and the beast of prey is sublimely elucidated in the myth of Bon Bibi, the tiger goddess. And the role played by the government in safeguarding the environment is satirized in the episode of Piya's encounter with the forest guard.

The novel *The Hungry Tide* mainly revolves around three characters- Piya, Kanai, and Fokir. Piya is a young cetologist, who arrives from Seattle, United States, for her research on a freshwater dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*). Kanai is a middle-aged linguist who administers a translation bureau in Delhi. However, the novel emphasizes not on the character arc of the correlation among the characters belonging from wholly distinct surroundings and occurrences. It is, as Supriya Chowdhury inspects, "... about the many histories of the region they have come to." For instance, a historical event has been inscribed in Nimal's (Kanai's uncle) notebook which has a substantial role in the entire purpose of the novel. The occurrence is that of the deportation of the refugee settlers from Morichjhāpi Islands in the Sundarbans by the Left Front government of West Bengal in 1979. These refugees depart from the Dandakaranya camp in Madhya Pradesh in 1978 and moved toward the island of Morichjhāpi to inhabit there. They cleared and plow the land for agricultural practices. One of the refugees was Kusum, Kanai's childhood playmate, and Fokir's mother. Kusum is the reason why Nirmal gets harmonized with these refugees and eventually be witnessed the eviction of these settlers through a "brutal display of state power" (Chowdhury) in May 1979. Later on, Nirmal is discovered wandering in the port town of Canning, never healing from the agony of the event. This narrative of Morichjhāpi is a very crucial aspect of the novel.

The refugees dwelling in Morichjhāpi are the people who have arrived from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and had to suffer and leave behind everything including their motherland because of the partition of the country. The government of India acknowledged accepting the accountability for those coming from East Pakistan. Millions of people from East Pakistan and West Pakistan were bound to leave their homeland in order to save their lives due to communal uprising and settled in the Dandakaranya camp. Nilima portrays the situation to Kanai about Dandakaranya, a forest area located in central India, covering the states of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh: "The soil was rocky and the environment was nothing like they had ever known. They couldn't speak the languages of that area and the local people treated them as intruders, attacking them with bows, arrows, and other weapons." (Ghosh, 118). After spending numerous futile years there, they realized the necessity to consider else ways. And the abandoned tidal lands of the Sundarbans were the alternative that came to their mind. So they headed for it "by train or on foot", "in the hope of settling in the Sundarbans" (Ghosh, 118). A handbill of the Mana Udbastu Unnyanshil Samiti of the time says, "In May, representatives of the Manya Udbastu Unnyanshil Samiti went by launch from Hasnabad to Morichjhāpi in Gosaba police station. Opposite this 125 square miles sand bank rising out of the tide did not rise above five feet... It would be possible for 16,000 families from Mana to settle just on the island, and nearby at Dutta Pasur another 30,000." (qtd. In Pal, 309, translation mine)

Although, the Government of India, along with the Government of West Bengal was not ready to permit them to settle on the island of Morichjhāpi. Jyoti Basu, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal commented in the Assembly that the refugees in Morichjhāpi were taking part in unauthorized activities like deforestation and exploiting other forest resources. In such a manner, there were harshly destroying the environment and its assets. Furthermore, they were allocating the lands without any such accreditation from the government among themselves. Besides, they were not permitting any outsiders to enter the island, not even government officials. Hence, they were establishing a parallel executive system that the state government could not approve. The state government then operated to evict the settlers. Ghosh also gives an impression of state violence in the novel. Accordingly, as has been asserted by the state government it indicates that the primary motive for the forcible expulsion is to revive the ecological balance of the island of Morichjhāpi which was being disrupted by a large number of individuals by the illegal intrusion. Currently, this incident once again puts forward the concern of prioritization between humans and nature.

This discussion is, strikingly, addressed by Ghosh in part two of the chapter 'Interrogation'. Piya is utterly restless to witness the killing of a tiger by the villagers. She is more haunted by negligence, or rather support to some extent, of Horen and especially of Fokir. Kanai's argument here is very noteworthy: "That tiger had killed two people, Piya. And that was just in one village. It happens every week that people are killed by the tigers. How about the horror of that?" (Ghosh, 300)

Ghosh also illustrates the extent of atrociousness through Nilima. According to her account of events, on the Indian side of the Sundarbans, more than a hundred people are killed by tigers every year. And as is argued by Kanai, these data are neither current ones, nor the consequence of the encroachment upon their territory. Moreover, this has been ongoing for ages. According to the report by J. After, the English naturalist presents that between 1860 to 1866, almost 4,218 people were killed by tigers around two people each day. Kanai states, "if there were killings were never reported, never written about it in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too- that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?" (Ghosh, 300-301)

If we recall the underprivileged refugees, we would notice that they suffered primarily because of the partition of the country where they no longer belong to their homeland and were compelled to depart. Here, they have only been trying to reside in the river-based islands acquainted with them back home in Bangladesh. These people have shifted specifically to a waterless camp in Dandakaranya for this reason whereas Nirmala states, "the soil was rocky, and the environment was nothing as they had ever known." (Ghosh, 118) The question here arises to naturalists who are concerned about protecting the Royal Bengal tigers of Sundarbans is whether would the Royal Bengal Tigers of the Sundarbans be capable of surviving in the desert of Rajasthan or the Himalayas if they are transported there with an intent to conserve. Likewise, how do we presume humans to be able to flourish in an unconventional environment? Do these individuals not have the minimal right to survive within their familiar atmosphere?

Additionally, the communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims can be observed in every part of India. It's quite obvious that immigrants would like to settle to such a land where there would be no threats from communal riots and other communities. Folktales like Bon Bibi Johuranama demonstrate the spirit through the blending of the two cultures. In Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, these tales also have a crucial role. Kanai hands over an English translation of it to Piya as a gift. Ecologically, too, the myth of Bon Bibi plays a relevant role. It articulates the relationship between humans and predators. It is regarded that Gabriel endowed upon Bon Bibi and her twin Shah Jongoli the "divine mission" of traveling to "the country of the eighteen tides – athhero hair desh – to make it fit for human habitation" (Ghosh, 103). After her victory over Dokkhin Rai, the demon king, Bon Bibi divides the region into two parts. One part she allocates to the humans and the other to Dokkhin Rai or the predators. Ghosh writes: "Thus did Bon Bibi show the world the law of the forest, which was that the rich and the greedy would be punished while the poor and the righteous were awarded" (Ghosh, 105). This is an account of indication of the eco-consciousness of the people of the tidal land. These people only want to have the freedom to survive among these hostilities. They never even envision exploiting the forest resources and the animals including the predators that are a continuous threat to their lives.

Besides, in order revive the ecological balance the immigrants were forcibly displaced from Morichjhāpi. The government wanted to clear the mangroves and plant coconut and casurina trees in Morichjhāpi, whereas the mangrove forest has its own ecological value and their replacement by coconut and casurina trees would cause more harm to the flora and fauna of the region. Piya's encounter with the forest guard, at the outset, illustrates the readers that he is no nature-lover or environment-concerned person. Rather, some of his activities contrast with his words. Therefore, if the responsibility for the protection of the forest and its animals is in the hands of such persons, what kind of safety can we expect? Contrarily, we observe Fokir, who is fully acquainted of the ambiance of the tide country. He is much mindful of the habitats and the creatures in the tidal land moreover he is sympathetic towards these creatures, which lacks within the forest guard. Fokir, and other aware dwellers, rely on the land. They know the laws of nature and pursue them in such a manner that they would never feel the deficiency of the resources. Implying that due to their activities there should not be

the extinction of any species. Even though, the number of these fishes and crabs are reducing. Moyna, Fokir's wife, is aware of the imbalance of the ecosystem and substantial cause of insufficiency hence, apprehensive about the future of her son. Considering the advancement of technology and its misuse by few opportunist are mainly the reason for it's degradation. She explains to Kanai the reason behind Mashima's assumption of the extinction fish in the coming fifteen years or so: "These new nylon nets, which they use to catch chingir mean- the spawn of tiger prawns. The nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well" (Ghosh, 134). People like Mashima who are informative and aware try hard to ban these nets but to no avail. And the motive behind the failure is also very intriguing. Because there is a lot of money in prawns and the traders have paid off the politicians. And the worst victims of such irresponsible actions are the poor fishermen of the tidal countries: "It's people like us who are going to suffer" (Ghosh, 134). They have to discover either some other source of livelihood which is challenging to search in these parts of the land or to starve. Consequently, it is apparent that these people, can't be responsible for the destruction of the environment where they are itself the worst victims,

Later in the novel, we came across the death of the Irrawaddy dolphin, a rare and endangered species, by the encounter with the reckless motor launch of the government. We see the motor launch hired by Piya by the forest guard emits a tremendous amount of pollutants. We see the abundant use of generators on the islands of the tidal land causes huge pollution and the government and the environmentalists taking no radical steps to stop them. Aren't these things harming the natural growth of the flora and fauna of the mangroves, and hence the whole ecology extensively damages more than the damages caused by the livelihoods of these poor people?

In *The Hungry Tide*, we discover the people of the Sundarbans toiling vigorously for their existence against several natural forces. Besides the hazards posed by vicious animals like tigers and crocodiles, they have to withstand natural calamities like cyclones which are very frequent and fatal in these places. The number of life-risk they have to face every day is agreeably contemplated through one of the rites performed by married women of the region. They remove their shankha and pala (white and red bangles) and the sindoor (vermilion powder), i.e., all symbols of their marriage, whenever their husbands go fishing. Nilima, the representative of the outer world is utterly surprised to come across such a custom. Hence, in the tidal country life is so unpredictable that the women from their girlhood are mentally prepared for a very short married life and early widowhood. They never expect to stretch it beyond their twenties and thirty, if they are very fortunate. Ghosh writes:

It was as though they were trying to hold misfortune at bay by living through it over and over again. Or was it merely a way of preparing themselves for that which they knew to be inevitable? (80)

Here we noticed the shadow of environmental degradation or green post-colonialism. Each day we are degrading our environment by exploiting its resources. The thousands and hundreds of industries throughout the world contribute constant amounts of impurity to the air and the environment. As follows their harmful effects on nature are evident. Although we never envision abandoning and ceasing all the factories, motor vehicles and our luxurious lifestyle add threats to the environment rather we assume that these poor people would sacrifice their necessities to preserve our environment from them. Therefore expect these habitats to compromise their essentials and livelihood for the destruction done to the environment. Accordingly, these issue echoes the issue of the first world countries pressurizing the third world countries on environmental issues. It hinders those nations in their progress whereas the developed nations never had to endure this.

REFERENCES

- [1] Choudhury, Supriya. Review: *The Hungry Tide*. Amitabh Ghosh. N.d. Web. 11 April 2023. https://www.amitavghosh.com/thehungrytide_r.html
- [2] Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2004. Print.
- [3] Meyer, Petrie. "Selling Nature to Humanists and Humanity to Environmentalists: Existence and Co-existence in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*". Writing Showcase – Petrie Meyer on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. Nature Critical. 19 Nov 2012. Web. 14 April 2023. <https://naturecritical.wordpress.com/2012/11/19/postgraduate-work-showcase-petrie-meyer-on-amitav-ghosh-the-hungry-tide/>
- [4] Pal, Madhumoy, ed Marichjhapi: Chhinno Desh, Chhinno Itihaas. Kolkata: Gangchil, 2009. Print.