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Poetics of Resistance: An ecocritical reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract: In the contemporary literary scene, most of the ecological issues are being actively engaged with. This can be seen to have led environmental activism through literature, as such writings resist and challenge the mainstream narratives of state. This paper looks at Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* from an eco-critical framework. The novel employs various literary techniques and genres in the form of literary pastiche, which in turn give a nuanced understanding to the ecopoetics of this novel. The paper explores how the text achieves that and becomes a historiographic metafiction of the Marichjhapi massacre. In the process, the text is also located at the juncture of postcolonialism and postmodernism.

Keywords: ecology, ecopoetics, historiographic metafiction, Green Postcolonialism, Marichjhapi massacre, postmodernism

Eco-narratives have come to be a distinct genre in literature that engage with ecology, and in the process question the conventionally held notions of “modernity” and “development”. Even prior to the emergence of this category of genre, nature and allusions to it have always been a part of the literary imagination, sometimes as the focal point and sometimes as a backdrop. To this end, Dana Philips in “Ecocriticism, Literary Theory and the Truth of Ecology” states that “nature is complex, nature is thoroughly implicated in culture and culture is thoroughly implicated in nature.” Writers across centuries and spaces have employed nature as a backdrop that may correspond to the unfolding of incidents in the plotline. However, this usage may not essentially point to an ecocritical perspective. It is only with the rise in environmental degradation and the ensuing environmental activism towards the end of the last century that ecology and its conservation became a worldwide concern. The result of this was the inclusion of environment in all domains, ranging from policy making to academic. In literature, it is manifest as eco-criticism.

The Ecocriticism Reader (1996) defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the environment.” According to Pramod K Nayar, Ecocriticism is a “critical mode that looks at the nature and representations of Nature and landscape in cultural texts, applying particular attention towards ‘nature’ and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it” (Nair 330). With its essential links to activism, Ecocriticism therefore formulates a political engagement with the texts, thereby exploring the underlying politics. Infact, it

is seen as an interdisciplinary approach as aptly suggested by the journals like *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE).

The recent theoretical advances in Ecocriticism are linked with the various discursive strands that this theory has come to accommodate within itself- Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Marxist Environmentalism, and Eco- socialism. It is important to note that these bifurcations are resultant of the relationship that the 'developed' and the 'under-developed' or the 'non-developed' spaces share with Nature as well as Gender.

Deep Ecology is seen as perhaps the most influential philosophy in bringing about environmental activism worldwide. Characterized by a spiritual tendency, it emphasizes on an emotional relationship with and response to nature instead of a mere rational-intellectual one (Nair 332). This is what has been a guiding principle for organizations like Earth First! Deep Ecology entails a radical shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric worldview and projects the need for society to acknowledge that we cannot thrive if man exists in large numbers.

This view has been further challenged by the third world eco-critics such as Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier. According to them, there is a strong link between poverty and ecological degradation, especially in African and Asian countries. While in the developed countries where there are large tracts of unused land, Deep Ecology makes sense, however, in the third world nations where there is poverty and dearth of land, Deep Ecology makes little sense. For these eco-critics therefore, Deep Ecology is an elitist idea which cannot be applied all across globe. An offshoot of this criticism is 'Liberation Ecologism' which is based on a postcolonial take on ecology. It criticizes the trade policies and agreements of the First world nations that adversely affect the Third world nations. The examples of IMF- World Bank development policies, the waste dumping of First world nations in the Third world Nations are few such examples of the Euro-American politics. Ramachandra Guha points towards the acknowledgement that the language of development and modernity followed in the First World cannot be replicated in the Third World. Liberation Ecologism thus emphasizes on the need for Ecocriticism to take social justice into consideration. The ensuing strand is the idea of 'the environmentalism of the poor' as proposed by Guha and Martinez-Alier (1998).

These strands and a host of others show that Ecocriticism has opened up a broad spectrum of perspectives "which can help to reaffirm the relevance and responsibility of the humanities and the literary studies" (Zapf 136). It is a fertile ground that is constantly evolving in terms of its premises, and this can partly be attributed to the fact that "the environmental turn in literary studies has been more issue-driven than method of paradigm-driven" (Buell 12).

Most of Amitav Ghosh's novels can be identified as eco-critical narratives having Sunderbans of West Bengal as a central focus. This paper aims to undertake a study of *The Hungry Tide* as an eco-critical text, and in the process, answer questions such as, What are the various techniques used by the writer to examine the ecological issues? What purpose do such techniques serve ultimately? How has the language of "development" been examined? How does historiographic metafiction work in these texts?

The Hungry Tide is a 2004 novel by Amitav Ghosh and is set in the Sunderbans, lying in the easternmost coast of India. The narrative unfolds through the perspectives of different characters cum narrators such as Kanai, Piyali, Nirmal, Nilima, Kusum, Fokir, Moyna and Horen, with an unnamed fictional narrator functioning like a commentator who also interconnects the missing links in the novel.

Ghosh wrote this novel at a very critical juncture in 2004 in order to draw the attention of the world to the fragile state of the Sunderbans. The West Bengal state at this time was propagating the idea of Eco-tourism, leading the people to believe in a false idea of the tourism that was friendly to ecology. However, Amitav Ghosh through this text challenges this connotation and asks the reader to reconsider whether this tourism plan for the Indian mangroves should really be seen as ecotourism or environmental degradation.

Jean Francis Lyotard in “The Postmodern Condition” defines postmodernism as an “incredulity towards metanarratives”. The metanarrative that Ghosh undermines is that of the West Bengal government, that in 1978 declared Marichjhapi as a reserve forest and accused the refugees for violating the forest acts by destroying “the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance.” Ghosh, in the novel presents multiple stories that counter this narrative. Nirmal’s journal is one of the many examples of this. Postmodernism also acknowledges that all knowledges are fragmentary and incomplete. This is showcased in the novel with several instances, such as the journal getting lost, Fokir dying, with only the GPS remaining, and Kanai having to reproduce from his memory only partial memories. This also makes the text metafictional because while a reader may be looking to find a singular, real story, the text is self-reflexive by showing that there is not one, but many stories. Ghosh therefore makes a critical comment on the decolonized space where the colonial politics continues through the state. By showing the state’s hypocrisy, the text critiques the postcolonial society that has failed.

The ideas of postcolonial and Marxist eco-criticism are reaffirmed in the novel by showing that the western concept of ecological conservation cannot be blindly applied to the decolonized, third world spaces. In a space where the human and the nature have existed in a syncretic relationship, the conservation plans may prove to be intrusive and harmful. Furthermore, the people living in such spaces live off nature, having scanty resources to fend off in an ever-becoming capitalistic world. In such a scenario, the western ideas of conservation may come across as elitist and unaffordable. Through the people of Sunderbans, the text also recovers some binaries. Within the colonial space, there is a binary of the colonizer and the colonized. The same binary is transposed when in the space having the urban and the poor. The urban space is seen as the repository of knowledge, which in this text is represented by Kanai, a knower of many languages. The rural is seen as ignorant and powerless. However, in Garjontola, or the tide country, Kanai is reduced to a powerless colonized. The subaltern who is powerless in Marichjhapi is powerful in this space.

In terms of narrative, there is an interesting connection between the narration and the space. Sunderbans are characterized by the mangrove forests and in result, a very mutative topography which is unpredictable with its low tides and high tides. These tides keep reconfiguring the island, where land cannot be discerned from water. This corresponds to the plural stories that the narrative presents. Even as the narrative changes, the characters also change in the course of time. In the first part of the novel, the events are relatively calm and the action is slow, the characters are yet to know each other, thereby representing the tidal ebb in the Sunderbans. As against this, the events in the second part wash over and the conflict becomes more evident. These observations point to the Postmodern elements in the novel. Sunderbans, itself can be in fact seen as postmodern as anything that claims centrality in this space is washed away, and the landmass and water constantly challenge who becomes the center. It can be argued that the space in the novel itself contributes to the postmodern element in the novel. The employment of literary pastiche in using multiple registers and genres in the story are again postmodernist. The folkloristic narration of the tale of Bon Bibi in itself brings in different textures of speech, and this hybridization once again defies centrality.

In conclusion, Ghosh can be seen to have employed a range of techniques under postmodernism; such as pastiche and historiographic fiction; which go on to build the ecopoetics in this novel. The text shows that the language of development that the state uses is deceiving and misleading. If it has any purpose, it is only to collude with power structures and turning a blind eye to the relationship that people may share with the land. By incorporating multiple stories, the text becomes an eye opener for the readers to be more skeptical to the state politics when it comes to their so called projects of development.

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