

# ECO-CRITICAL STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S THE HUNGRY TIDE

Dr. A. Anitha Sree

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Akshaya College of Engineering and Technology, Kinathukadavu.

*"The Universe along with its creatures belongs to the lord. No creature is superior to any other: Human beings should not be above nature. Let no one species encroach over the rights and privileges of other species"*

Isha-Upanishads (1500-60 B.C.)

**Abstract-**The literary and critical interest in environment and green politics is a recent development with a critical approach known as eco-criticism. In the present century many writers have emerged to demonstrate the centrality of environmental concerns and their profound connection with literature. One such writer is Amitav Ghosh. The relation between nature and society plays a prominent role in a country like India with ecosystems ranging from Himalayas in North to the Indian Ocean in South and from Sunderbans in the East to the dry Thar of the West. Moreover human culture is connected to the environment affecting it and also affected by it. The objective of this paper is an attempt to analyse the novel of Amitav Ghosh *The Hungry Tide* and explore how far an eco critical perspective illuminates this select novel.

**Key Words:** eco criticism, perspective, illuminate, ecological, humanity, resettlement, nature, environment, Sunderban, and region.

The *Hungry Tide* is a prophetic novel of remarkable insight, beauty and humanity. Human life is inconceivable without the existence of nature. Man is aware of his dependence on the bountiful flora and fauna. It is not just the artistic and aesthetic aspect of life which breathes the abundance of the beautiful earth. It is a precondition for survival itself. Like any other literary movement, ecological literary criticism is gaining momentum in the present day context of environmental concerns. The title of this paper indicates the reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* which is set in the world's largest mangrove ecosystem-the Sunderbans, which comprises both water and earth and the intersection of landscape, water, human beings and their culture. The tide which is always hungry comes in twice daily, resulting in a constant reshaping of the land and an uprooting of anything permanent. During partition in 1947, mass migration of East Bengali Hindus to West Bengal in India took place. It was especially the higher class Hindus who were persecuted by low class Muslim tenants. They fled and found refuge in the homes of their affluent friends and relatives of Calcutta. But low class Hindus 'squatted' on public and private land. The tides in Sunderbans reach nearly three hundred kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater. It re-emerges hours later. The island is reshaped almost daily by powerful currents. The theme of the novel ranges from history to the current events which he reinterprets and weaves together. Though the novel deals with the danger of Sunderbans with the lurking tiger in the jungle and harmless looking but deadly crocodiles in the water, the fisherman who eke out a living, the study of Dolphins by Piya, a cetologist, Kanai a translator, the core of the novel lies in the ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistan refugees who had run away from the Dandakaranya refugee camps to Morichjhampi as they felt that the latter region would provide them with familiar envisions and therefore a better life. This is a reality which is almost forgotten.

The story centres on two visitors to Sunderban Community. It is a story about adventure and unlikely love, identity and history, set in one of the most fascinating region on the earth. Amitav portrays the globalization embodied in Americanized Piya with her hi-tech GPS device, local identity symbolized by Fokir, and Kanai the Delhi resident. Part globalized modern entrepreneurs shifting in between a transcultural shift is seen when Kanai reads extracts from his Uncle's journals, the extracts are reproduced in English but the reader is asked to imagine Kanai reading them in Bengali. Some of the places mentioned in the novel are Lusibari, Garjontola. Canning, Gosaba Satjelia, Morichjhampi and Emilybari Lusibari and Garjontola are fictitious. Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhampi and Emilybari are real places inhabited by refugees from East Bengal and other dispossessed factions of society. (P.401) Lusibari becomes the main focus-a places in the process of development. Lusibari is a small island that supports a population of several thousand. Some of the people were descended from the first settlers, who had arrived in 1920s. Others had come successively, some after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and some after the Bangladesh war of 1971. Many had come even more recently, when other nearby islands were forcibly depopulated. The focus of their arrival was to make room for wildlife conservation projects.

Nature is a great reminder of the transient nature of the divisions between individuals of whatever social class. In the wake of rising natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunami this paper will highlight the following factors – the power of Nature and its borderless state, lives of people living in such unusual settings and it also underscores the fragility of man's brief time on earth. The study reminds one that human beings are weaklings in the hands of immortal nature and emphasizes forcefully the struggle of humans for survival in adverse conditions and the humility that is demanded in the face of nature and the place of man in it.

Human settlement in the place meant for plants and animals, reclamation of coastal areas for the construction of buildings, and destruction of mangroves which are habitat for seabirds, amphibians and the aquatic animals are traced out as the root cause for the ecological and environmental problems and the source for hungry tides and earthquakes. But the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess is of the view that humans are neither the rulers nor the centre of the universe, but are embedded in a vast living matrix and are subject to the laws of reciprocity (292). This is explicit in this novel focuses on man's indomitable struggle with nature. Life is precarious in the marshy land of Sunderban, an archipelago of islands, spread between the sea and plains of Bengal, there are no borderlines to separate fresh water from salt, river from sea and land from water. Survival is an everybody battle for the settlers of the Sunderbans who have learned to strike a balance with nature.

A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys; mangrove leaves are tough and the thick foliage hampers the visibility. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, 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. The waves here are treacherous. The tides reach several miles inland and everyday thousands of mangrove forests disappear to re-emerge hours later. No one dares to make a home there except the truly dispossessed and displaced who are unwanted and who have nowhere to go. They have settled there to eke out a living from the barren, unyielding salty tracts of land. The men are mostly fishermen who depend on the river and the sand for fish and crabs for sustenance. Each day of their lives is therefore unpredictable, making survival precarious on those islands, also referred to as the "tide country".

Ghosh blends ethnography and history. Ethnography in which Ghosh delineates a series of cultural features of the tide country's microcommunity. It speaks about the Utopia community founder in the Sunderbans at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the visionary Scot Daniel Hamilton. 'S' Daniel's schooling was in Scotland, a harsh cold and rocky place. His teachers taught him that life's most important lesson is "labour conquers everything". A time came when Daniel Hamilton with his countrymen had to leave his native land to seek his fortune and he chose India. He came to Calcutta and joined Mackinnon & McKenzie, a company with which he had a family connection. This company sold tickets for the P&O shipping line, which was then one of the largest in the world. Young Daniel worked hard and sold many first class, second class, third class, steerage

Ghosh has made tremendous research work and has presented the evolutionary system of creation in a unique way. He has been preoccupied with the presence of animistic creation and its ecological balance in that region. He imparts so much information about gigantic dolphin, and about flora and fauna of the locality. He also shows Sunderban is not only the confluence of rivers and the sea; the place is an amazing meeting point of different cultures, which seems impossible at any other place. It is also a strange love story of two lovers Piya and Fokir. They spent days and nights in the vast stretches of the river on the tree. Where both the lovers could not exchange words each other. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is set in the mangrove islands of Sunderbans, West Bengal. The *Hungry Tide* explores refugee resettlement in the forest reserves of Marichjhapi, Sunderban and the complex Man-Animal relationship in the archipelagos ecosystem. This novel focuses on the ongoing tension between humanity and the environment in the Sunderbans, the Tide country of West Bengal, India and Bangladesh. This paper will give a new insight to the readers about the untouched parts of this novel.

This sixth novel of Amitav Ghosh, considers the conflicts between the environment and its tenacious residents, and between those groups intent on preserving the Sunderbans unique aquatic life and tiger population; sometime at the expense of its residents. The novel's centre character is a scientist, the American Piyali Roy of India decent. So it is not surprising that technology appears with some frequency throughout *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh offers both warnings and cautions of how it can mix with nature. Amitav Ghosh has discovered yet another new territory, summoning a singular place from its history, language and the myth and bringing it to life. Yet the achievement of *The Hungry Tide* is in its exploration of a far darker and more unknowable jungle, the human heart.

This novel is at its best when it describes the wild, untameable and fierce qualities of nature, which do not bend to human will. This novel is full of vivid descriptions of tigers and their human prey, crocodiles, snakes, large forest of mangroves, storms and fatal typhoons. *The Hungry Tide* is set in a remote part of northeast India known as the Sunderbans which consists of thousands of small islands formed by the interflow of two rivers as they flow into the Bay of Bengal. Life is precarious with shifting islands, tigers and other predators, poor soil, and minimal contact with the outside world. Ghosh describes the people of the Sunderbans, their history, and their struggles with natural world. It is an amazing story of the land and the people of Sunderban. The struggle of the people is against nature, the tide, the storm, the tiger, and the fearful surroundings. The novel seeks to link the human stories with the broader story of the ecological and environmental forces that have acted on the region. Acknowledging the animals allows Nirmal to begin to listen to the voices of others, and find his humanity not in its exclusivity and permanence but in its continuity with the transience and transformative processes of the natural world. Their relationship with that world is not defined by abstracted concepts such as conservation. The natural world is one with which they live in mutual dependency, fishing it and when necessary defending themselves against it. It is different but in a way more profound relationship with the natural that Piya has to accept when she is forced to realise that Fokir is not a projection of her ideal understanding and preserving nature. When Fokir joins in the killing of the trapped tiger that has attacked the villagers she is shocked and disappointed since she has assumed that he would share her beliefs. When Fokir offers her his view of the event, that when a tiger comes into a human settlement it wants to die, she refuses to hear it and literally covers her ears. But in short order she realises that her rejection of the villagers viewpoint of the tiger places her in the same camp as the foresters, when she sees the same corrupt guard that she had encountered on her trip to Lusibari on his way to beat and bully and extort bribes from the village for its self-preservative action. The tiger killing leads to the most explicit discussion of the issue of conservation and its human effects in the novel. Piya's counter that 'if we do not respect what was intended not by you or me but by nature, by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive' if we 'cross that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves.

*The Hungry Tide* considers not only the issue of environmental conservation and how it might be achieved but the issue of how we might begin to understand the diversity of the human not only as a readjustment between different kinds of human societies and values, the rich, the poor, the developed, the undeveloped, the articulate and the silenced. But also as a readjustment of the idea of how the human is defined in itself and how this needs to reflect the broader categories of life across species and even across the idea of the whole interrelated pattern of living forces that constitute the planet.

### Conclusion

Nature which is spread all over is sympathetic to man. It not only gives solace to man but is also its teacher, guide, guardian and anchor. Why should then man destroy it? Green which stands for freshness and humility is soon vanishing amid all other material colours. Only when man lives in the midst of nature can he be a human. With nature slowly losing itself, man too is soon becoming an animal. *The Hungry Tide* provides multiple optics on the Sunderbans ecosystem of mangrove forested islands and mudflats, representing the constant transformations it undergoes, because of daily tidal flows with sections of island being temporary submerged and with seawater. Ghosh's greatest gift as a writer may well be his sense of place. A landscape, a city, a village on the edge of a desert; it is these images that we summon from his novels when we are distanced from them in memory. The region is supposed to derive its name from the sunderi tree, as the mangrove is locally called in his book. Ghosh has presented the overall natural and environmental approach to his vision clear in his novel *The Hungry Tide*. The efforts have been made to prove that the novel of Amitav Ghosh is analysed on the eco critical study and would sure give a new and a unique way of reading to the readers in the context of ecological study and approach.

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