

An Eco- Critical approach towards Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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ABSTRACT

The Hungry Tide is a 2005 novel by Indian author Amitav Ghosh. *The Hungry Tide* takes place primarily in the Sundarbans, a massive mangrove forest that is split between West Bengal in India and Bangladesh. Containing tigers, crocodiles, and various other predators, it serves as a dramatic backdrop for Ghosh's story of the environment, faith, class structure, and the complex history of India in terms of colonialism and sectarian conflict. Like all of Ghosh's novels, *The Hungry Tide* contains a wide array of characters and settings that intersect throughout the novel. There are not many novels in Indian fiction that deals with the theme of ecocriticism though; nature has been used as a backdrop against which the story develops. It is because a serious concern with ecology seems to be lacking in the works of earlier writers. Of late, writers prefer to create awareness of the consequences of human actions which damages the planets basic life support system. Amitav Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide' deals with the study of nature writing. The book is about one of the most dynamic ecological systems of the world. This novel clearly brings out the wrath of nature and fragility of humans at the mercy of nature.

KEYWORDS: Eco-criticism, Ecology, Nature, Environment, Sunderban and Region.

Nature and literature goes hand in hand. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However, the concern for ecology and the hazard that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only recently caught the attention of the writers. This sense of concern has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Eco-criticism. The word eco-criticism first appeared in William Ruekert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Yet it remained inactive in critical vocabulary. Literary criticism examines the relations between writers, texts and the world. The world is synonymous with society. Ecocriticism expands the idea of the world to include the entire ecosphere. Ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary criticism.

India is a country with variety of ecosystems which ranges from Himalayas in the north to plateaus of south and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the east to dry Thar of the west. With

time, however, these ecosystems have been adversely affected due to increasing population and avarice of mankind. Literature could not remain unaffected from this depletion and my paper focuses on how concern for nature changes in Indian literature from reverence to destruction.

The Hungry Tide unfolds through the eyes of two upwardly mobile, educated individuals who undertake a journey to the tide country. Kanai Dutt, the Bengali born, Delhi-settled businessman arrives in Lusibari to visit his aunt Nilima and claim the package left for him by his uncle, Nirmal. The package, he discovers is an account of his uncle's last days, which revolved around Kusum and her son Fokir, who are portrayed as the victims of eviction from the island of Morichjhapi. Ghosh weaves together two temporal narratives: one unfolding through Nirmal's journals recounting the Morichjhapi episode that happened 28 years earlier and the second through Piya's expedition, to study the threatened Gangetic River dolphins. The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights the problems and issues of wilderness conservation and its related social costs in areas populated by the socially and economically disprivileged both in the past and the present. Water is of special significance in Hindu mythology. Water is chiefly associated with fertility, immortality, place, creation and the feminine. Running water is deemed sacred in Indian mythology. According to the Rig Veda, the river is a continuation of the divine waters that flow from heaven to earth. Mythology has it that when the Ganges descended from the heavens, so mighty were its currents that it threatened to drown the earth itself. Shiva anticipating the deluge captured the river in his dreadlocks. It is only when the river nears the sea that it untangles into a thousand strands forming a vast archipelago of the Sunderbans. The water that shelters tigers, crocodiles and snakes and nurtures the mangrove tree also protects the area from large-scale deforestation and even frequent natural calamities like storms and typhoons.

By contrast, the post-colonial Sunderbans witnessed increasing human activity, declining bio-diversity and recognition and marketing of the uniqueness of the Sunderbans. At present the bio network of the Sundarbans witnesses the shift from a threatening ecosystem to a threatened ecosystem. 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 in this land were refugees from Bangladesh like Kusum, Fokir and Moyna and people of rare interest who wish to serve humanity like Nirmal, Nilima and Piya, the cetologist. For settlers here, life is extremely precarious. Attacks by deadly tigers are common. Unrest and eviction are constant threats. Without warning, at any time, tidal floods rise and surge over the land, leaving devastation in their wake. The island has suffered much hardships,

poverty, famine, catastrophes and failed dreams. Death is a stark reality. In spite of these dangers people like Kusum feel at home in these islands and even while on exile in Bihar ' she had dreamed of returning to this place, of seeing once more these rich fields of mud, these trembling tides (The Hungry Tide, 21).

Fokir in the novel is a forest guide who accompanies hunters and woodcutters on their expedition to the forest. The hunters and woodcutters are so superstitious that they will not venture into the forest unaccompanied by a fakir. 'Fakir' is the anglicized form of 'Fokir', the forest guide. Fokir guides Piya and Kanai through the waterways. He loses his life in the process of steering the outsiders safely through the forests. He fits the archetype of the hapless and illiterate native, exposed to man-eating tigers, sharks, crocodiles and snakes inhabiting the tide country and also to bribe taking officials of the state who are constant threat to his survival. Ghosh empowers him in his familiarity with the tide country, and its creatures and the legacy of centuries old oral traditions he inherits. Despite the technological advancements and educational background the outsiders depend on a fakir to navigate the waters. Ghosh portrays fakir as the epitome of an ecological pioneer.

Another reason for concern is the expanding tourism industry in India. Sahara India Parivar's mega tourism project proposes to take over large areas of the Sundarbans to construct floatels, restaurants, shops, business centres, cinemas, and theatres which would disturb the fragile ecosystem and further threaten the already endangered biodiversity of the region. Ghosh vehemently oppose this gigantic hotel project in the name of conservation. The publication of 'The Hungry Tide' plays a crucial role in garnering worldwide support against the Sahara Project, which led the Central Ministry of Environment and Forests to terminate the project. The novels publication is in this sense political to the extent that the fictional narrative gave Ghosh the liberty to talk about the violence meted out to the natives, the flora and fauna of the Sunderbans. Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide' reveals how ecological concerns and conservation efforts served as a mere disguises to camouflage the pursuit of political ends.

This kind of harmonious relationship between nature and society opens up another question – man's space in the geomorphologic pattern of a region and its connection with the culture of that community, their creation of myths and legends such as the Bonbibi myth, or the place of Nature in the culture of a community. This relates the very fundamental question of the co-evolution of a community culture and the nature in which the community exists. In *The Hungry Tide*, *jangal* is the basic correlator. The settlers in the Sunderbans made their own place of living by hacking at the forests with their *daas* (Ghosh 52), the place which would be called '*jangala*' in the earlier sense. This '*Jangala*' suggests a balance between society and nature

encompassing the intrinsic value of the 'total environment'. The people living in '*jangal*' and treated as '*janglees*' believe in distinct values, develop a distinct paradigm almost opposite to that of the so-called civilized people who with their colonial hangover are made to believe on the derogatory meaning of 'jungle' extinguishing the ancient cultural tradition of India. The Sunderbans is of no exception. But how their cultural values have been developed out of such a concept of *jangal* and how it creates a distinct paradigm for them is too mysterious a question to answer. Whatever be the reason, the people of the tide country have been facing a cultural displacement alongwith their diasporic experience.

The characters like Piyali, Kanai, Nirmal, Nilima, Fokir, Kusum, Horen and others have gone through such kind of identity crisis because of displacement and diasporas along with 'cultural appropriation' based on other values. Since the coming of the first settlers in the 1920s, the natives have been facing the cultural appropriation either by the western people like Piya or by the so-called 'enlightened' Indians like Nirmal and Nilima. But they never detach them from their own beliefs, myths, and rituals and customs through which they sustain their local ethnic culture that incorporates a homogeneous population irrespective of their religious boundaries and become cohesive in cultural traits. Rather it is unique in case of the Sunderbans that the tide people have been able to assimilate the foreign cultures and a counter-cultural appropriation takes place in which nobody is left unaffected.

It is in the colonial conspiracy that they attempted to tag the encountering culture as rudely 'savage' or humbly 'mystic' considering their own culture as paradigmatic or "authentic". But Ghosh's novel emerged as a protest suggesting that a folk culture need not be either savage or mystical in order to create an 'authentic' identity for them. It is itself 'authentic' and its own cultural identity survives in confrontation with the colonial cultural appropriations. The so-called 'enlightened' cultural people like Nirmal with a dream of a Utopian society in the western parameter or Piya with the eye of a cetologist-researcher turn out to be affected by a counter-cultural appropriation and both of them end up as gropers in the archepalago of mystic hearts of the tide people. *Jangal* is the epicenter in the cultural map of the tide country. This concept of *jangal* is almost similar to the idea of jungle as conceived by Zimmermann:

The jungle, like the human body, provides a favored context for a conceptualization of the relations between the outside and the inside, between wildness and culture, and at an even deeper level, for dialectic between the pure and the impure. (Zimmermann 218)

The Sunderban *Jangal* itself and its associated myths, customs and rituals have a formative influence, in the formation of a distinct community identity for the tide countrymen. The uniqueness of this *jangal* has been picturesquely explored by the deft hand of Amitav Ghosh. It is a mangrove forest and is 'a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or

jungles' (*The Hungry Tide*, 7). The topographical name, 'Sunderban' may have been derived from the name of a common species of mangrove – the Sundari tree, *Heriteria minor*. This dense forest is a safe shelter for tigers, snakes and crocodiles. It is often impenetrable because of its tough and leathery mangrove leaves and gnarled branches. "At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy and expel them" (*The Hungry Tide*, 8). It is the eternal denial of human interference by Nature in its activity. Nature's playful happiness is evident in this immense archipelago of islands in the region of the *mohona* in the Sunderbans, where five or six rivers interflux and "the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumour of land, echoing back from the horizon ... The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later". (*The Hungry Tide*, 7). It is Nature's own right to shape or reshape, break or build the islands and the peninsulas at its own will. Human endeavour to deforest or install *badh* for their own habitation is of Nature's aversion and it often causes Nature's fury against human beings. Man's formation of their society, social communities, community folkways, myths and legends depend much on such eternal conflict. Edgell Rickword in his 'The Cultural Meaning of May Day' appears with such an opinion:

"The struggle forged by men at work, by men and women joined in harmony in the struggle against Nature ... was the basic theme of all the mythologies of human life". (Rickward 130-131)

Thus, *The Hungry Tide* is a survey on an endangered eco system—the *Sunderbans* in the Bay of Bengal. He constantly explores and responds to the issues of migration and collapse in cultures and human relationships in the historical past. He juxtaposes history sometimes using primary sources like note books, diaries etc. as found in *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh has imprisoned the essence of the precarious existence of the *Sunderban*'s inhabited islands with remarkable imaginative accuracy. The ecosystem used as setting in the novel gives a co-operative view of place. It is a location where local and outsider meet together, share and feel that the ecological degradation is the global concern.

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