

AN ECO-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF 'HUNGER' IN "THE HUNGRY TIDE"

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Abstract - The notion of "Ecocriticism" has been an emerging trend as evinced in literature, developing an outlook, somewhat transgenic in sense. The term after being first used in William Rueckart's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism(1978)", has given rise to multifarious approaches of studying the man- nature relationship, both in terms of conformity and conflict. Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide", set against the backdrop of Sunderbans, a delta formed by the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers in the Bay of Bengal, vividly portrays the eco- critical view in terms of the survival needs which chiefly governs the confrontation between mankind and nature. The novel pivots round the concern of needs and requirements and their fulfilment to be meted out by the settlers of the land and its ambience as well. The aim of this paper is to explore the extension of the word 'hunger' as enforced and its eco- critical justification by the author in his novel - reflected in the interpersonal networking of the characters, intricacies of situation resulting from socio-political unrest, aquatic and terrestrial incongruity – all are interconnected in a larger domain of ecological cycle.

Key words: Ecocriticism, transgenic, interdependence, ecological, balance, upsurge, entrepreneurial, environmentalism, conflict, precariousness, symmetry, bountiful, inexorable, abode.

The profuseness of Amitav Ghosh's vision regarding the constancy of interdependence between man and nature is aptly captured in his sixth novel, "The Hungry Tide". Beginning with a panoramic description of the tidal wetlands, resulting in the development of a sensibly interwoven relationship among the characters, the novel constantly calls for our attention to the facets of 'hunger' moulded in ecological, and psychological perspective as well. Nature always reflects the quality of transience which is best understood in naming the two parts of the novel as *The Ebb: Bhata* (1st part) and *The Flood: Jowar* (2nd part). During the high tide, when acres of land gets submerged under the water, only to emerge back after hours with the level of water lowering down by then, nature seems to function as a universal force, firmly controlling the harmony between the terrestrial and aquatic interaction in the form of appearance and disappearance of its elements at intervals. But this harmony is disrupted when floods occur and wash away the settlements on land, leaving behind the hopelessness and helpless cries of the survivors, finding them standing on the plain of utter devastation. Thus water, which holds a mythological significance in Hindu culture, believed to be controlled by Lord Shiva who holds the river in his deadlocks, anticipating a threatening deluge, turns out to be destructive and monstrous while engulfing miles of land and showing no mercy to its victims. Apparently, water seems to be responsible for this kind of disasters, but in turn if we delve into its root cause, we will find the continuous man- made exploitation of the nature disturbs the ecological balance which becomes the reason for nature to outburst its rage in a gigantic way.

The novel centres round the characters of Kanai Dutt, a Bengali- born and Delhi- settled businessman who sets on a train journey heading towards Canning, to get hold of his uncle's journal at the pleading of his aunt Nilima, who is famous as "Mashima" over there. On his way, he comes across Piyali Roy, a marine biologist, or what we might call, a cetologist who is also travelling to Sunderbans in search of a rare species of river dolphins which is the subject of her research. On reaching there, she faces a nuisance from the forest guards who tried to forge money out of her by misleading. It is then; Fokir turns up as a saviour, rescuing Piya against the backdrop of water which appears to have performed the role of a protector by sheltering them into its bosom. Time and again, nature has emerged as the unbeatable force to which humans are no better than weaklings, thriving continuously to adapt themselves with the

ecological and biological factors of their surroundings. The deluge, the regular upsurge of the water level, settlers being susceptible to the lurking dangers amidst the dense mangrove forests, the dreadful riots and turbulence of the refugee settlement in places like Morichjhampi and Emilybari and the revelation of Fokir as a contradiction to Piya's ideological thoughts in the incident of tiger killing – all contrive in this novel a very familiar tug-of-war; that exists between man and nature since the prehistoric age.

Ghosh has vividly sketched in his work the necessity of balance which can be maintained through conformity to terms of environmental force by people. Apparently, the archipelagos comprising both fictitious and real islands represent the scenic beauty in respect of its fertile lands and thick mangrove forests, but a picture of *third – world environmentalism* can be witnessed through the description of the dispossessed refugees who were struggling to have a piece of land for survival after the mass migration of East Bengali Hindus to West Bengal during partition in 1947. This brings in the question of “intra – human justice” where poverty and struggle compel people to seek their basic means of sustenance at the cost of environmental health. On the other side, the Marxist formulation of considering nature as a ‘commodity’, is delineated through the attempts of the government and policemen who ruthlessly tortured the migrants to evacuate those places as they were to be kept reserved as ‘protected area’. However, this reservation policy was more entrepreneurial in purpose than up keeping the holistic intention to preserve the ecological balance of the islands. Both Nirmal and Nilima attempted to serve the mankind with proper education and hospitality, but it was Nirmal who could anticipate the destruction to befall if stability of interdependence between man and nature is disturbed. We are all set in a living matrix only to be controlled with the law of reciprocity. This is explicit in the novel through the everyday struggle of the settlers; the absence of borderlines between freshwater and salt water, river and sea, all indicating the precariousness of life in the marshy islands of Sunderbans.

The restoration of ecology comes into conflict with the question of survival when nature, no longer, reflects the feminine tenderness to its human dwellers. The mangrove forests becoming the abode of fierce tigers and other venomous creatures, and the water being the habitation of cunning crocodiles, constantly poses such threats to which man appears to be utterly helpless and meek, unable to resist the impending peril falling upon them only to lessen the strength of the population by each day. However, this crude reality remains unrecognised by the environmentalists who always intend to justify nature and its mechanism in every sense. Similar was the picture with Piya who was not ready to accept the death penalty of the tiger given by the villagers, in which, Fokir played a major role. Much to her disappointment, when Fokir tries to explain Piya that invasion of a tiger to a human settlement cannot be entertained at the cost of the lives of villagers, and so, the tiger is destined to be killed, Piya covers her ears to prevent herself from listening about it anymore. She finds Fokir as a contrary to her vision and ideology which makes her depressed. Later, she realises her sharing of the same position as that of the forest guards, on rejecting the perspectives of the villagers regarding this act, as the deed brings into the question of safety that fell into danger because of the attack.

The tiger killing incident becomes a major issue owing to the understanding of the extent of conservation of nature needed in relation to the undisturbed settlement of mankind on earth. The novel “The Hungry Tide” attempts to unfurl the various domains of interconnectivity between man and nature, extent of their interdependence aimed at restoring the balance between the two realms each time, after being confronted to commit and satisfy their own terms. Readjustment and rethinking is to be established to determine and allocate the pattern of distribution of settlement on earth to support the uninterrupted functioning and sustenance of nature only to achieve symmetry in the existence of life forms.

Conclusion

Nature always appears to be our supreme parental figure. Even Wordsworth in “*Tintern Abbey*” has echoed this line, “For I have learned to look on nature, not as in the hour of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes the still, sad music of humanity”, reflecting nature as the abode of solace whenever human race is heavily wounded. The therapeutic quality of nature comes in forefront whenever humans have been in its need for satisfying their requisites of living. If nature is bountiful, then the hankering of man towards a modern and advanced life is also inexorable. This approach calls for a

readjustment of thinking which will then gradually eliminate the existing disparity between man and nature. Amitav Ghosh is widely known for his ingenuity in handling the temporal and spatial machineries applied in the advancement of plot in his works. His novel "The Hungry Tide" discerns the conquest of mankind to befit their survival amidst the dense and thick mangrove forests of Sunderbans, its mudflats, the socio-political threats regarding the settlement issues, and water, besides being the dominant force controlling the lives of the settlers, always emerging as a demigod engulfing acres of land with tides. Amidst all these factors, the central aim of this discussion has always tried to project the necessity of harnessing a sense of equanimity at all levels of ecosystem to contribute to the uninterrupted functioning of the ecological cycle, of which the poise between man and nature is an obvious condition.

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