

From Reverence to Destruction:- An Eco-critical approach to Amitav Ghosh's '*The Hungry Tide*'

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Introduction:-

The Hungry Tide is a 2005 novel by Indian author Amitav Ghosh. 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. The *Hungry Tide* unfolds through the eyes of two upwardly mobile, educated individuals who undertake a journey to the tide country. "The *Hungry Tide* ...is a fascinating, intense, tight book perhaps the best Amitav Ghosh has written...It has everything that makes for a masterful book." 'The *Hungry Tide* is rich in worldly lore... the setting suggests vivid possibilities.' 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.

Amitav Ghosh may have become the first Indian writer to strongly engage with ecological issues in Indian English fiction with the publication of his novel *The Hungry Tide* in 2004. This might come as no surprise, since Ghosh worked as a journalist and has written extensively on various topical issues including terrorism, religious fundamentalism, displacement, and the many postcolonial realities of the Third World. *The Hungry Tide* (2004)—is permeated by an underlying consciousness of the subaltern and a narrativization of the subaltern experience. *The Hungry Tide* takes a step further to voice the subaltern experience, in that the novel's publication had the force of a political pamphlet which made the world take stock of efforts to corporatize parts of the Sundarbans National Park. The novel raises national and global awareness about the history of violence inscribed on the Sundarbans, throwing into relief the continuing exploitation of the place. The paratexts¹ of the novel, including the "Author's Note," interviews, and articles from the time of publication, also serve to buttress Ghosh's political ends in writing the novel. As Lawrence Buell argues, ecocritics explore literary texts as "refractions of physical environments and human interactions with those environments, notwithstanding the artifactual properties of textual representation and their mediation by ideological and other socio-historical factors". In this vein, Ghosh's novel reveals the interactions between the state, the poor, the fauna and flora, and the physical environment, and in doing so this work highlights both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that were inherent in the conservation efforts in the Sundarbans. More precisely, it is the discursive construction of the Sundarbans' waterscape in Ghosh's novel that helps achieve this purpose.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Shri Lanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria, and is the author of,

- ❖ *The Circle of Reason,*
- ❖ *The Shadow Line,*
- ❖ *In an Antique Land,*
- ❖ *Dancing in Cambodia,*
- ❖ *The Culcutta Chromosome,*
- ❖ *The Glass Palace,*
- ❖ *Sea of Poppies,*
- ❖ *River of Smoke,*
- ❖ *Flood of Fire*
- ❖ *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable.*

Ghosh's work has been translated into more than twenty languages and he has served on the jury of the Locarno Film Festival, Switzerland and the Venice Film Festival. His essays has been published in the *New Yorker*, the *New Republic* and the *New York Times*. In January 2007 he was awarded the Padma Shri , one of India's highest civilian honours.

➤ **What is Eco-criticism:-**

Eco-criticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyses texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of Nature. Eco-criticism is an intentionally broad approach that is known by a number of other designations, including “green (cultural) studies”, “eco-poetics” and “environmental literary criticism” and is often informed by other fields such as “ecology”, “sustainable design”, “bio-politics”, “environmental history”, “environmentalism and social ecology”, among others.

The word “eco-criticism” first appeared in William Rueckert's essay “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism*” in 1978. However, it was only in the 1990s that eco-criticism emerged as a separate discipline although it is a fact that the relationship between man and his physical environment had always been interesting to literary critics. Eco-criticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. The term Eco-criticism has a broad domain and has been expressed through many literary genres. Some of the most widely known eco-critics, are Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Howarth, William Rueckert, Suellen Campbell, Michael P. Branch and Glen A. Love.

According to Wikipedia, “Eco-criticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyse the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation”.

Cheryle Glotfelty working definition in the Eco-criticism reader is that “Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.”

More recently, in an article that extends eco-criticism to Shakespearean studies, Estok argues that eco-criticism is more than,

“simply the study of nature or natural things in literature; rather it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function- thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical or otherwise- of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents that contribute to material practise in material words.”

This echoes the functional approach of the cultural ecology branch of eco-criticism, which analyzes the analogies between ecosystem and imaginative texts and posits that such texts potentially have an ecological function in the cultural system.

➤ **The Eco-critical approach in *The Hungry Tide*:-**

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity. Ghosh sets his novel in the Sundarbans, the tide country where the contours of land constantly change with the ebb and flow of water. But Ghosh presses this point further: He uses water as the agent that rewrites the social matrix of the Sundarbans in the novel. Water is both motif and agent, shaping not only the story but also the geography and history of the land. The unusual agency of water is highlighted here—its potential to act, as well as to move from object/other position to that of the subject and, in doing so, reverse the object/subject status of the characters. It is also significant that Ghosh uses water as the agent to resolve the chief conflict fictionalized in the novel. Water, as both a symbolic and a literal phenomenon in the novel, serves heuristically to expose the ecosocial and ecopolitical issues that the novel addresses as it dramatizes the competing claims of human and non-human species for existence.

Ghosh’s novel reveals the interactions between the state, the poor, the fauna and flora, and the physical environment, and in doing so this work highlights both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that were inherent in the conservation efforts in the Sundarbans. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity. The friction between land and the sea in the Sundarbans creates a constant friction between the plant and animal life. Man’s constant encroachment of the ecosystems of the Sunderbans only justify the tensions between the various elements of

nature. *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sunderbans, an island in the Bay of Bengal which is not just beautiful but also fascinating. For settlers, the Sunderbans offer an extremely unpredictable and insecure life. Here in the novel *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh's says "the Sunderban" which means "the beautiful forest".

"There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove- the sundari tree, *Heritiera minor*. In the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide- bhati. And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as bhatir desh- the tide country- except that bhati is not just the "tide" but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the bhata." (Ghosh 8)

"No one – in the beginning. Remember, at that time there was nothing but forest here. There were no people, no embankments, no fields. Just kadaar bada, mud and mangrove. At high tide most of the land vanished under water. And everywhere you looked there were predators- tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards." (Ghosh 49)

Unrest and eviction are constant threats and attacks by tigers are most common. Tidal floods destroy the stability of life on the island without any warning. This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwived by the moon, is to know why the name "tide country" is not just right but necessary. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* constantly discusses the conflict between man and nature in the context of the Sundarbans in India and Bangladesh. The novel reflects the conflicts between the residents and the aquatic and wild life of the Sunderbans. Amitav Ghosh has warned mankind against the overt exploitation of nature. The Tide Country is a harsh landscape, full of peril and death in many forms.

"At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of 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."(Ghosh 7).

Rajender Kaur in his essay on *The Hungry Tide* titled, "*Home Is Where the Oracella Are*" says, "Ghosh's selection of the Sundarbans for his setting was aptly chosen." *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 and cyclone. “In our legends it is said that the Goddess Ganga’s descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by trying it into his ash-smeared locks.” (Ghosh 6)

To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain. Ghosh gives the beautiful description of the tide country in the novel *The Hungry Tide*,

“...interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands. An archipelago, stretching for almost three hundred kilometres, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh.” (Ghosh 6)

He introduces the reader about the islands of tide country and says,

“The islands are the trailing threads of India’s fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari,.....They number in the thousands, these islands; some are immense and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago. These islands are the rivers restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it , but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift.” (Ghosh 7)

In the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a mohona- an oddly seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement.

“There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily...” (Ghosh 7)

India is a country with variety of ecosystem 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 populations 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.

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 writer refer 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. By contrast, the post colonial Sunderbans witnessed increasing human activity, declining biodiversity and recognition and marketing of the uniqueness of the Sunderbans. At present the bionetwork of the Sunderbans witness the

shift from a threatening ecosystem to a threatened ecosystem. The tides reach more than two hundred miles inland and everyday thousands of acres of mangrove forest disappear only to re-emerge hours later. For hundred 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 stalk 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.”

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 Fokir. ‘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 Fokir as the epitome of an ecological pioneer.

The publication of *The Hungry Tide* play 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 novel’s 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. Rilke’s catkins hanging from the hazel and the spring rain upon the dark earth, when we behold the lowering tide,

“We, who have always thought of joy

As rising. . . feel the emotion

That almost amazes us

When a happy thing falls.” (Ghosh 8)

If man enriches Nature, Nature too enriches man. If man nourishes Nature, Nature too nourishes man. This relationship between man and Nature continues to be unbroken and seamless as long as Nature and man both remain preserved, protected and flourishing. But when this relationship gets disturbed, Nature becomes annoyed and man becomes endangered. This is precisely the reason behind the Nature's fury frequently seen now-a-days. Nature which used to shower prosperity as goddess Mahalaxmi and bestowed knowledge as goddess Mahasaraswati has now become Mahakali and showering destruction today.

Added to these three characters is the uniqueness of the Sundarbans, the waterscape that alternates between being subject and object, victim and victimizer. Water in the Sundarbans, more than being a passive recipient of both social and physical changes, exercises its potential to transform the physical space and in turn alter the social order. For both Piya and Kanai the expedition and the storm at the end of the novel that remaps the landscape facilitate a renewed and more specific understanding of the Sundarbans, the place and the people. W. R. Greer suggests that choosing the Sundarbans as his setting allows Ghosh "to create a setting where everyone is on an even footing . . . the hostile environment erases all social strata because everyone is an equal in the struggle to survive in the hostile environment."

Situated in the face of the threatening topography of the Sundarbans, social differences between both the urban and rural sets of characters are gradually elided, resulting in an increasing tension between their cultural and social identities. The novel in this sense is suffused with multiple social transitions, between the First World and the Third World, local and global, rural and urban, traditional and modern, and among linguistic, religious, and class barriers, all played out in the context of the waterscape. Only in the face of a hostile environment are the social barriers broken down and overcome, and nature serves as the agent to level all social and cultural hierarchies.

The friction between land and sea in the Sundarbans creates unique ecosystems for plant and animal life, and given the increasing human encroachment on the habitat coupled with lopsided conservative initiatives, tensions between these various elements seem inevitable. The man-eating habit of the Sundarbans tigers has also been attributed to the material properties of the water. Sy Montgomery refers to the German biologist Hubert Hendrichs's unfinished study of tigers in the Bangladeshi part of the Sundarbans in 1971 which correlated the most frequent attack sites with areas having the saltiest water. Humans, animals, and water form three axial points of Amitav Ghosh's novel, both literally and figuratively. The cyclicity of the tides, coming in and going out, counts as "hungry" in precisely this sense, connecting the immanence of the tide and the tiger. The beasts' hunger in the Sundarbans is dramatized through two instances, the tiger killing Kusum's father and the tiger killed by the villagers when it enters the cowshed.

On the one hand, Kanai reasons that the uncertain numbers and unpublicized death toll of humans killed by tigers is because "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 300-01). The tiger killing verges on the carnivalesque, with the angry villagers plunging their staves into the pen, setting

fire to it, and “screaming in a maddened bloodlust, Maar Maar!” (Ghosh 295). So if it is the tigers’ hunger that keeps encroachers at bay and protects the forests, it is hunger that drives men into illegally entering the forests. In fictionalizing the tiger kill, Ghosh draws attention to this pitiful condition of both the human beings and the beasts. And when human beings kill a tiger, the consequences are equally dire. As Kanai suggests, there would be arrests, fines, beatings, and enquiries about the foreigner, Piya. The latter, perhaps to ensure that the news of the tiger’s death does not reach the outside world, testifying to the ineffectiveness of the state’s conservation drives which may hinder further global funding for tiger conservation. The dwindling number of dolphins that Piya studies, their strange behaviour owing to their distinctive habitat on the blurred borders between fresh water and salt water, also point to the uniqueness of the bionetwork of the Sundarbans and the need for conservation. Nirmal’s diary entries recounting Morichjhapi and the plight of Fokir’s mother Kusum serve as a constant backdrop to the contemporary reality of the Sundarbans. The fight for survival against both other people and the beasts is powerfully conveyed through Kusum, the victim of Morichjhapi after the water and food supplies are cut off to the island to coerce the refugees to flee. Through her voice, Ghosh problematizes the complex discourse of conservation, evoking the impulse of hunger in both the humans and beats:

“... the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world. Everyday sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human being could think this is a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived—by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil.” (Ghosh 261-62)

Apart from the tearing down social divisions, the storm at the end of the novel also aligns human beings and animals on par as victims. Seeking refuge from the storm, Piya comes across the tiger, further accentuating the potential of water as the agent that can bring humans and animals together. This encounter breaks the order of the Sundarbans food chain where the man-eating tigers are in many ways above the humans. The novel’s denouement with the storm ends on an optimistic note, with Piya deciding to set up a conservation initiative with the participation of the local community. However, the increasingly apparent proclivity of global environmental agencies to appropriate “community participation” as a means to advance their own agendas and create new subjects of underprivileged people who were earlier invisible entities, as Michael Goldman argues, makes the resolution an uneasy one. Water as the agency that brings closure to the novel, with the death of Fokir, also engenders a revised understanding of the Sundarbans.

➤ Conclusion:-

To nature, in short-

The immanence of animality and the human capacity for consciousness and cognizance are woven together through the metaphor of hunger in the novel. Differences of all kinds, between people, between species, and between nature and all that is deemed non-natural, are overhauled in the novel at various occasions through the material presence of water. The characters and the land change from victims to victimizers and vice versa sweeping away all cultural constructs of differences. Water becomes the agency that facilitates all transitions, be they from land to sea or urban to rural, eradicating class, caste gender and linguistic barriers. The all-pervasive physical presence of water in a setting such as the Sundarbans makes it impossible for the narrative to extricate itself from the presence and play of water. As Nirmal writes,

“look at the badh. See how frail it is, how fragile. Look at the waters that flow past it and how limitless they are, how patient, how quietly they bid their time. Just to look at it is to know why the waters must prevail, later if not sooner” (Ghosh 205).

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