



From Ecocritical to Geocritical: Place and Spatiality in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Kochi-682021.

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Abstract

The two contemporary theoretical approaches of literature, Ecocriticism and Geocriticism complement each other as both the approaches rely on the interconnectedness of human consciousness and its enviroing milieu. Westphal formulates his theory of geocriticism in pragmatic terms, emphasizing the interface between fictional representations of real-world places and the places themselves. Westphal's primary interest is in the literary representation of *place* while Ecocritics, the largely assumed advocates for the surroundings, display an indomitable spirit in matters of environmentalism and have been in the forefront in bringing together ecological and literary concerns by safeguarding and preserving the lived environments.

These new approaches proposing novel ways of investigating literature, ecology, and geography observe the uses and abuses of space as meaningful and perceive their productive association in critical and social theory. In an attempt to understand the changing meaning of space and place in the present epoch, Westphal endorses that the fictional representations of place can have a powerful performative function in altering our perception and outlook of a place which we thought was familiar and predictable. Literary representations provide precious evidence to the various ways in which places have been perceived at different moments and it is through our bodily feelings and reactions to the environment that we enter into communication with the objective world. Such literary texts therefore present the individual in the context of place and defined by place.

Key words: Ecocriticism, Geocriticism, ecology, space and place

The two contemporary theoretical approaches to literature, that emerged in the early 1990s, Ecocriticism and Geocriticism complement each other as both the approaches rely on the interconnectedness between human consciousness and its enviroing milieu. These disciplines most prominently and consistently engage with the question of human spatiality, by exploring connections between ecology, geography, and fictional representations. Westphal, an early proponent of geocriticism formulates his theory in pragmatic terms, emphasizing the interface between fictional representations of real-world places and the places themselves. Westphal, through his theory of geocriticism argues for a geocentric approach to literature which has much in common with the ecological concerns of Ecocriticism. Together Ecocriticism and Geocriticism supplement, stimulate, encourage and instigate each other as they share mutual interest on issues like place, space, nature, landscape and environment, which accelerate the convergence between the two.

Though Westphal focuses on the literary representations of place and contribute to the ecocritical study of literature, he neglects the questions of environmental activism and man's being in nature. Ecocritics, on the other hand, has a strong activist bent, motivated by acute awareness of the impact that human cultures have on the environment and display an indomitable spirit in matters of environmentalism. But both the movements have been in the forefront in bringing together ecological and literary concerns by safeguarding and preserving the lived spaces and environment. Eminent Ecocritics like Lawrence Buell and Michael Cohen have recognized the overlapping of these two theories as productive ways in examining and exploring literature.

These new approaches proposing novel ways of investigating literature, ecology and geography, observe the uses and abuses of space as meaningful and perceive their productive association with critical and social theory. In an attempt to understand the changing meaning of space and place in the present epoch of ecological catastrophe, Westphal endorses that the fictional representations of place can have a powerful performative function in altering our perception and outlook of a place which we thought was familiar and predictable. Our understanding of place certainly has a great impact on the environment and ecology. Literary representations provide precious evidence to the various ways in which places have been perceived at different moments and it is through our bodily feelings and reactions to the environment that we enter into communication with the objective world. Such literary texts therefore present the individual in the context of place and defined by place.

It is quite interesting to look at Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* in the light of this Geocentric and Ecocritical perspective as the novel calls for a deliberate attention to an exceptional place like Sundarbans. He weaves in the novel the story of a local community that dwells in the distinctive and exceptional natural zone of the place called Sundarbans, a place not inhabited by many people. In the beginning people were a bit apprehensive to reside in this untamed area, a place where floods continually inundate the land, with no

embankments and no fields except the *bada* tide, marshy land and the dense mangroves. To an outsider, the jungles of the tide country was an illusion where time stands still, or on a closer observation it becomes evident that the wheel of time was spinning too fast to be understood. Transformation is the rule of the tide country where life is lived in transformation. Islands are made and unmade within no time and rivers change their course beyond prediction where mangroves could recolonize discarded islands in a few years' time. Ghosh sensibly depicts the extreme hostility of the terrain by familiarizing the world of mangroves:

Mangrove leaves, are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. 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 or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (*The Hungry Tide* 7-8)

Ghosh as an anthro-ecologist exploits his scientific knowledge to construct a wonderful series of narratives of natural artistry and illustrates how the *Sundari* trees encapsulate its own history. The people believed that the region got its name because of the *Sundari* tree whose spread protects the entire region from the fury of cyclonic destructions and at the same time providing stability to the whole region by preventing erosion due to tidal action. The mangrove forest is a universe unto itself hostile and resourceful at the same time. But as per the records of Mughal emperors, the region got its name not from a tree but from a tide, the ebb- tide in particular, the *bhata*. This explanation becomes more reasonable in a tide country where the land gets submerged at high tide and the falling waters give birth to a whole forest. Ghosh in his descriptions make this place a space, where the place turns out to be a space in the verbal encapsulation of the novel. The narrative transforms the place into space of human interpretation and negotiation.

The inhabitants of the Sundarbans often encounter the life-threatening dangers, posed by nature in the form of storms, waves, cyclones and earthquakes. They lead a life of precariousness in front of earthquakes and there was none among them who had not stood before a tiger or haven't looked into the maws of the tide. In their struggle to persist and to eke out a precarious existence they lived among the predators all around - tigers, crocodiles, estuarine sharks and poisonous snakes, along with intense storms and natural calamities. "No day seem to pass without the news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile" (79). Ghosh's concern for the ecosystem gets revealed through Nirmal when he questions, "Whose is this land, nature's or man's?" In the Sundarbans both are at threat, the human beings with their settlements stand as a constant threat in the mangrove forest, and the forest with its tigers, snakes and crocodiles, the *bata* tide and cyclones are a constant threat to human beings.

Yet the non-hierarchical nature of life on this island encouraged people to settle here despite the dangers that lurk in the form of the tide, swirling storms and treacherous animals. These people hack at the forest when water falls, wait out the flood on stilt-mounted platforms and sleep in hammocks. Raja Ambethkar observes, "It

is a liquid landscape where surging cyclones can wipe out thousands of lives with the flick of one giant wave, where animals and humans, myth and reality and imperceptivity merge into each other in a ritual struggle for survival” (*The Criterion* 2). As Nirmal detects in his diary, “...these islands had seen so much suffering, so much hardship and poverty, so many catastrophes, so many failed dreams that perhaps humankind would not be ill served by its loss?” (*THT* 216). Ghosh vividly presents the scenes that reveal the beauty, brilliance and grandeur of natural phenomena and *The Hungry Tide* is no doubt the story of ordinary people bound together in a mysterious place, apprehensively existing at the ebb and flow of natural forces that can devour them all. “One can actually feel the river flowing. The mangroves getting submerged in the high tide, the crocodile moving stealthily in the water, the tiger watching everyone from a distance” (Pramod 167).

Sundarbans as a place gains spatial significance as the rich Scotsman, Sir Daniel Hamilton bought ten thousand acres of the tide country from the British *sarkar* and founded a Utopian settlement where people of all races, classes and religions could live together and work together without any petty social distinctions and differences. Nilima’s trust and Nirmal’s high school were built over the site of a commune established by the British idealist. This idyllic settlement self-sufficient with electricity, telephone lines, central bank of Gosaba, and a currency of its own attracted many as “...men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening” (*THT* 53). With the support of Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Thakur and many other Bijuwa nationalists, Hamilton planned a new kind of country, a perfect model for India where land was provided free of cost and the migrants could make a decent living. The idea appealed to too many that they started pouring in from Orissa, Eastern Bengal and Santhal Parganas in boats and dinghies. “In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh delineates a series of cultural features of the tide country’s micro-society, its human ecosystem, folk culture, rural cosmopolitanism, and folk literature, inter-cultural and cross-cultural relations and indigenous utopian community founded in the Sundarbans at the beginning of the twentieth century” (Avinash Badgujar 143).

Setting *The Hungry Tide* in the Sundarbans allows Amitav Ghosh to create a place where everyone is on an even footing. The fictional representation of a place has a powerful performative function, creating a change in our perceptions of a place which we think we know. Westphal, the pioneer of geocriticism emphasizes the fact that “literary representations provide precious evidence of the various ways in which places have been perceived at different moments in their history, making it possible to get a sense of the transversal path cut by the place through history” (Eric Prieto 25). Nature stands in the background and serves as a more or less picturesque backdrop to the main drama of human activity. Ghosh’s depiction of nature appears to be comprehensive and factual as he makes no attempt to romanticize nature or shower unrealistic reverence, but presents with openness all the disastrous aspects which are unavoidable in a tide country. The novel projects a deep awe of nature at the same time focuses on the destructive hold on humanity. The history of conflict between the humans and nature can be traced back as early as to the birth of the first humans in earth. The necessity to

procure food, shelter and comfort inevitably led the humans to be involved in a never-ending acrimonious battle with nature.

Sundarbans is not just a land where tigers are preserved, but is also noted for its proliferation of creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms from gargantuan crocodiles to microscopic fishes. Studies reveal that there were more species of fish in this area than could be found in the whole of Europe as a result of the remarkably diverse composition of water:

The waters of river and sea did not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta; rather, they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of fresh water running along the floors of some channels, creating variations of salinity and turbidity. These microenvironments were like balloons suspended in the water, and they had their own patterns of flow....Each balloon was a floating biodome, filled with endemic fauna and flora, and as they made their way through the waters, strings of predators followed trailing in their wake. (THT 125)

Piya, the cetologist who comes to Sundarbans to research on Orcaella dolphins is mesmerized by this symbiosis that existed between human beings and these dolphins. Fokir, who represents the common fisher folk and had an intuitive knowledge of the locality rely on the dolphins as they are responsive to the secrets of the tides. With every big *shush* he comes to know of the dolphins living there and believed that dolphins could effortlessly lead them to the area where fish could be found. “Now, much like rabbits uprooting a harvest of carrots, the dolphins were picking the fish from the riverbed” (167). The Dolphins cooperated with the fisher folk in the cast-net fishing and Piya gets a firsthand indication of it when she comes across two fishermen from the locality that lived in a small village north of Mandalay. While Piya romanticizes the connection that local people have with their environment they explain to her that in fact the dolphins were herding a school of fish towards the boat. Immediately the other fisherman swirled the net around his head and made a cast. “Small silver fish leapt in the air, while the two patrolling dolphins swam faster and faster in tightening circles. The other dolphins in the pool joined in and began to make darting charges, thrashing the surface with their flukes in order to drive the fast scattering fish back towards the net”(168). The fishermen were wriggling and writhing while pulling out the net, “it was as though a piñata had burst, releasing a great mass of tinsel. The dolphins in the meanwhile were celebrating a catch of their own” (168), feasting on the underwater harvest.

The life of early inhabitants in the Sundarbans reveal that though they adopted a hunting- gathering culture they lived in total harmony with their surroundings fully aware of this bondage and unity with his fellow humans and with other creatures of the universe. Fokir experiences complete union with the river, which respects no boundaries or culture, washing ashore myriad possibilities only to dissolve them in its abysmal depth. Pramod K Das evaluates, “Piya feels an affinity for Fokir and his life which matches the rhythms of his environment” (163). River is a passion for Fokir Mondol, who identifies each and every moment of its life with his own, the placid moments and also the deeply ferocious ones that lie within. Lusibari, his home is a place where he broods and

sulks, acts quite uncomfortable, as a fish out of water. There are thousands of such ecosystems in India where natives maintain a profound interdependence and interconnectedness of deep ecology maintaining a perfect harmony, the “web of life.”

As the primary object of geocentric criticism is places, it necessitates a reversal of the traditional approach to the literary study of place and the construction of places. It demands an exploration of many different kinds of texts and representations of place from different perspectives and disciplines to develop a polyphonic or dialogical understanding of the place in question. Thus the comparative method at the heart of the geocritical approach enables us to deterritorialize the stereotypical views of place and the illusion of permanence suggested in received wisdom and hegemonic discourses. Ghosh following this geocentric attitude presents Sundarbans in all its complexity and polyphonic character. Nature in all its complexity, both as a destroyer and as a preserver is present in Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh attempts to sensitize humanity about the need to understand nature and its intricacies in order to construct our relationship with nature/place. Fiction here is not simply a distraction from the real, but a performative operation, which has the ability to bring about change in the world by breaking down borders and exploring spaces between established sites. It is this new understanding about our place/nature that we can save humanity from the impending anthropogenic catastrophe. Ghosh here following Westphal shares the conviction that literature not only represents the world around us, but participates actively in the production of that world. As Westphal writes:

Since, in terms of representation, fiction is able to influence reality, it is conceivable that literature and other mimetic arts, on the basis of approaches they make possible, could have applications well outside of the fields to which they had traditionally been assigned. Would literary studies be “applicable” to areas outside of the library, or even outside the territories of fiction? In other words, could the study of literature help to decipher the world? I think so. (169)

Fiction discovers the multiple possibilities within the real apart from providing mere aesthetic pleasure. Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is therefore both about place and space. It is ecological and geocritical in that it “actualizes new virtualities that had remained unformulated” about Sundarbans, its ecology and its rhythm of life.

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