

Ratiocinating Through an Ecocritical Lens: Amitav Ghosh's *'The Hungry Tide'*

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Abstract

Ecocritical exploration is a recent phenomenon. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary area of study that is basically concerned with the relationship between literature and environment. It deals with human association, interaction and involvement in Nature as reflected in literature. The concern for continuous exploitation and waste of our environment has been a recent phenomenon that came under the purview of the writers of contemporary era and their sagacity to save environment through literature has given rise to ecocriticism. This paper examines the eco-critical issues in 'The Hungry Tide' written by Amitav Ghosh placing the perspective in the dynamic equation and rationale of man's relationship with nature in the contemporary form of life. Ghosh's novel exposes the heart wrenching condition and the sham of modesty implicit in the attempt to preserve the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans. This is done through the interactions between the state, the impoverished and the physical environment. This paper undertakes to locate the gap existing within human communities leading to intra-communal conflicts and it examines how this extra-discursive reality of human relationships and his constant interference in the ecosystems of the Sundarbans affects Nature, bringing change in Nature. It will also show that mass awareness and transformation in society is possible following legal procedures, implementation of laws and socio-economic initiatives, but literature can be taken as one of the most engaging medium to focus on the ecological question.

"Always to strip down Nature, its 'laws' and its 'limits,' so as to expose History there, and finally to posit Nature as itself historical". (Mythologies, 1957)

-Roland Barthes

Ecocritical exploration is a recent phenomenon. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary area of study that is basically concerned with the relationship between literature and environment. It deals with human association, interaction and involvement in Nature as is reflected in literature. The concern for continuous exploitation and waste of our environment has been a recent phenomenon that came under the purview of the writers of contemporary era and their sagacity to save environment through literature has given rise to ecocriticism.

The fruition and progress of ecocriticism in the West, as stated by Lawrence Buell, arrived in two different segments: "the first wave" followed by the "second wave" ("Ecocriticism" 138).

The first wave of ecocriticism drew heavily from the ideologies of anthropocentrism, bio-centrism, eco-centrism and humanism. A remarkable transition from the pastoral to the city life and from 'Nature' to the study of environment is noticeable in the second wave of ecocriticism. This encouraged the study of ecocriticism to be more socio-centric. The second wave of ecocriticism focused more on the bioregional theories, eco-political theories and theories based on postcolonialism. In 'Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends,' Buell draws the attention of the critics towards to the scope of ecocriticism in the so-called "third world" countries by analysing and comparing the philosophies, principle, beliefs and ideals of various schools of ecocriticism of the European countries, Britain, America, Japan, China and India too. Rayson Alex records the development of ecocriticism in India when:

Nirmal Selvamony introduced in 1980 a course entitled "Tamil Poetics" at Madras Christian College and this was the beginning of ecocriticism in India. Selvamony used translated Tamil texts as primary sources for the course and the course drew heavily from his extensive eight-year Ph.D. research entitled *Persona in Tolkappiyam*. . . . Selvamony renamed the course "Ecoliterature" in 1996, following which the Department of English at Madras Christian College organized the 3rd World Conference and the 11th All India English Teachers' Annual Conference in 2004, the first conference in India addressing environmental issues in literature. . . . This was the evolutionary phase of ecocriticism in India and I call this 1980-2004 phase of Indian ecocriticism the rockbed layer (the base layer). ("A Survey of the Phases of Indian Ecocriticism" 2)

This paper examines the eco-critical issues in 'The Hungry Tide' written by Amitav Ghosh placing the perspective in the dynamic equation and rationale of man's relationship with nature in the contemporary form of life. Ghosh's novel exposes the tragedy and the sham modesty of the state that is implicit in their conservation efforts of both the flora and fauna of Sundarban. This is done through the interactions between the state, the impoverished and the physical environment. This paper undertakes to locate the gap existing within human communities leading to intra-communal conflicts and it examines how this extra-discursive reality of human relationships and his constant interference in the ecosystems of the Sundarban affects Nature, bringing change in Nature.

The plot of the novel is set in the villages such as Garjontola, Lusibari and Morichjhapi in Sundarban. This place is also referred to as the 'Tide Country' in the text. In his novel 'The Hungry Tide', Amitav Ghosh exhibits the skirmishes between the dwellers and the biota of the Sundarbans. It shows the travails of terra firma and the pelagic part of the Sundarban generating a relentless confrontation between the flora and fauna there. In the adept hands of Amitav Ghosh, Sundarban principally appears to be a bioregion, mostly shielded by the mangrove forest. The unreal lines drawn between the countries (here the reference is to India and Bangladesh), and thereafter the directions of the wind and the high and the low ebb s take the fishermen to the estuaries that stand as an intemperate source of fresh and salt water.

At the exposition part of the novel, the readers are introduced with a businessman from Delhi, Kanai Dutt who works as a translator too. He visits Nilima, his aunt, at the Island of Lusibari in Sundarban. Nilima and her husband Nirmal came to the Sundarbans when Nirmal evolved as a revolutionary in Calcutta and he had premonitions that it might invite trouble for him if he stays back at his place. Nirmal's journal acts as a repository of information about Morichjhapi in Sunderban, the place known for the project of tiger preservation. It narrates Nirmal's life too.

Another major character Piyali Roy, an American cetologist (one who studies different species of Whales and dolphins), visits Sundarban to inspect the Irrawaddy dolphins which dwell in the fresh water of the rivers of the place.

Piyali takes help of a boatman, Fokir, who guides her to accomplish the task. Kanai too joins them. Piyali arrives at canning and hires from the government officials a guard and a dubious guide with whom she remains unconvinced. Fokir and Piya connect to each other by communicating non-verbally as they do not know each other's language. They travel to inspect the dolphins while Kanai comes back from the trip. Therefore, Ghosh is successful in relating the human relationship with the flora and fauna of the place.

In another instance, Ghosh has brilliantly naturalized the everyday custom of 'widowhood' in this novel. The women of Sundarban shed their marital-marks everyday usually when their husbands go out for fishing. Ghosh describes:

When the men folk went fishing it was the custom for their wives to change into she garments of widowhood. They would put away their marital reds and dress in white saris; they will take off their bangles and wash the vermilion from their heads. It was as though they were trying to hold misfortune at bay by living through it over and over again. (Hungry Tide 85-86).

Even Moyna and Kusum have survived in Sundarban this way.

Sundarban substantiates an extremely unpredictable and insecure life for settlers. Life is too uncertain there. Attacks by tigers, discontent, turbulence and dislodgment are continual fears that often haunt in everyday life. There is sudden onrush of tidal floods without any warning that demolish the arrangement of life in Sundarban. 'The Hungry Tide' repetitively cogitates on man's struggle amidst nature keeping Sundarban in the background. It reminds how man causes harm to Nature and about his extreme mistreatment towards it too. Sundarban being a rough terrain, bursting with perils and dangers often repay man with many forms of death. He writes: "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" (Hungry Tide 7).

Through this novel, Ghosh reciprocates that the world's impoverished can prosper if both the haves and the have-nots are united. The union between Fokir and Piya is suggestive and the cultural differences exist between them which is projected through the tiger killing incident in the novel. The villagers have grieved a lot over the sudden attack of tigers, but the government officials have levied restrictions on its poaching. Rather they have started the conservation of these tigers. To Piyali, poaching and slaughter of tiger by these residents appear brutish, vicious, ravaging, and inhumane, since she comprehends this matter from an outsider's point of view. Modernity has brought along with it the concept of industrialization. It has increased man's greed for poaching of tigers too which has its far reaching devastative impact on the physical environment. This impact of modernity and industrialization is also prominent in the contrast between Nature and the human crowd which is well expressed by Kamala Markandaya's in *Nectar in a Sieve*, when Rukmani says:

Not in the town, where all that was natural had long been sacrificed, but on its outskirts, one could still see the passing of the seasons. For in the town there were the crowds, and streets battened down upon the earth, and the filth that men had put upon it, and one walked with care for what might lie beneath one's feet or threaten from before or behind; and in this preoccupation forgot to look at the sun or the stars: and knew nothing of the passage of the time save in dry fry frenzy, by looking at a clock.

But for us who lived by the green, quiet fields, perilously close though these were to the town, nature still gave its muted message. Each passing day, each week, each month, left its sign, clear and unmistakable. (Nectar in a Sieve 117)

These words remind us two famous poems by Wordsworth, 'The World is Too Much With Us' and W. H. Davies, 'We have no time to stand and stare'.

'The Hungry Tide' ends when Fokir and Piya are trapped in the whirlwind of a cyclone, their fight for survival bring them closer to each other. This is the portrayal of the quintessential relation between human beings and between man and Nature in 'The Hungry Tide'. Piyali mistranslates the action of the people and environment around her. Ghosh therefore urges that there is a dire need to promote cross cultural relations in order to evince a positive change in social anthropology and this would be highly beneficial to our posterity.

'The Hungry Tide' is a saga of the journey of the settlers and their relationship with the physical environment in the 'Tide Country'. At the same time, it is a quest into the cores of the characters. This paper thus locates the agony of existence of the dwellers of Sundarban. It gives a call to the present generation to move forward to uplift the condition of the inhabitants of Sundarban and their ways of living in a fragile and imperiled ecosystem.

'The Hungry Tide' is a social novel that records social changes. This paper thus brings into being how the wind of modernity blew through the Nature bringing erosion of the beauty of Nature and how man has been alienated from his simple spiritual identity along with a definite loss of his innocence. Modern man has become complex in character. Therefore, this paper shows that mass awareness for preservation of Nature is the need of the hour. To bring back balance in the ecological system, transformation in attitude of the people of our society is required and is possible through many ways, and one among them is by following legal procedures, implementation of laws and socio-economic initiatives, etc. But literature can be taken as one of the most engaging and effective medium to focus on the ecological question because liability and responsibility of mankind towards the environment forms a crucial segment of the moral and ethical alignment of the texts.

Works Cited

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