



UNEARTHING ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVELS

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Abstract

The concern for ecology and the threat that overt exploitation and continuous misuse of nature and natural resources poses on humanity has only recently grabbed the attention of the writers, giving emergence to a new literary movement, namely Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism encourages comprehending the complicacies of man-nature relation as presented in literature. The raising environmental issues and its affect give rise to a significant danger to the people and its environment. The present paper purports to establish the ecological perception regarding the Sundarbans, introduced by the eminent writer, Amitav Ghosh in his sixth novel, *The Hungry Tide*, chiefly as it presents a matter-of-fact delineation of nature, its privileges and wonders as well as adversities. The concern for our co-survival with environment is given expression in this novel where almost all characters foster their own diverging perspectives concerning their natural surroundings. The storyline of the novel is organized with nature's turns, dividing the book logically into two segments: The Ebb and The Flood. Knitted complicatedly into a plot that uses Nature as its basis for advancement.

Key Words: colonial, earthly, ecological, environment, knowledge, post-colonial, resources

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Introduction

Ghosh mediates upon a core set of issues but each time he does so from a new perspective: the troubled legacy of colonial knowledge and discourse on formerly colonized societies . . . the formation and reformation of identities in colonial and postcolonial societies . . . an engagement with cultural multiplicity, and an insistent critique of Eurocentrism. A lot of Ghosh's works intervenes on the vexing and arbitrary nature of natural borders. Analysis and criticism from Indian researchers and scholastics focused mainly on the books like *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace* that dealt with the subjects of partition and colonialism respectively. The representation of gender likewise has become the subject of much critical debate. For instance, in *The Shadow Lines* the reversal of male characters is made passive at the expense of female characters. But in the entirety of his works there is relatively little discussion about the portrayal of nature with exception of this select novel, *The Hungry Tide*, which is surely obsessed with this more complicated theme of representation of nature and the relation between mankind and the natural environment. It is a novel which theorises key idea in Island studies. It likewise gives a phenomenal setting for literary exploration of ethnography and myths as well as postcolonial study. It connotes wilderness region of the Tide Country where tradition, divergent cultures and dialects worktogether for centuries. This is a type of confrontation of European colonial history. However, one of the mainattractions of this novel is that nature here has been addressed as a significant character that is powerful enough to affect the existences of other characters in the novel.

In the words of W R Greer:

In the Sundarbans where the tide changes the environment daily, nothing is certain and everything is a shade of gray. It's a place where tigers kill hundreds of people a year... In an environment where life is fragile, the essence of any person is broken down to its core. Amitav Ghosh lets the tide country break down the barriers of both society and its characters.

This novel offers compelling evidence that the analysis of literature should not be subordinate or peripheral activity for environmental study, especially at this critical juncture when the planet is on the verge of ecological catastrophe. This paper argues that literature has much to contribute to the theoretical work of environmental studies; it is an endeavor to analyze Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* and explore how far ecocritical

point of view lights up this select novel.

The scholarly and basic enthusiasm for environment and green managerial is an ongoing advancement with a critical approach known as ecocriticism. It scrutinises artistic writings and literary text regarding different environmental issues alongside, the various manners by which literature deals with the subject of nature. The principal concern of ecocriticism in literature is to discover feasible solutions for ongoing environmental quandary. We are confronting the worldwide catastrophe today primarily on the ground that we are concerned more about the working of the moral framework, fairly agonising, over the functioning of the eco framework. Man is constantly left in stagger by cataclysmic events like dearth, drought, flood, quake and so forth which plunder the ecological pyramid and have left us near the precarious edge of desolation and destruction. However, man has cognised that he is a cosmological byproduct, and whatever happens inward or outside of an organism, is the inescapable consequence of nature.

Ascertaining this universal truth, numerous scholars, artists and authors made a conspicuous spot for environment in their works, where nature is composed of both positive and negative perspectives. Amitav Ghosh, the Indian-born extraordinary writer, delineates the physical aspect of nature, which sometimes remain calm, sometimes furious; sometimes bright, benevolent and creative and at other times dark and destructive. His works, some in the background, others in the foreground, masterfully portray nature and ecological issues. The striking characteristic of environmental composing is that nature is not just a backdrop or setting for human activity, but a genuine factor in the plot, at some occasions even it is the protagonist. Cheryll Glotfelty in his book "The Ecocriticism Reader" established "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment". Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as "a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis". In general, ecocriticism gives an earth-centred approach to literary studies.

Earlier writers like Coleridge, Keats, Shelly has established their astonishment towards nature in romantic writings and pastorals. In present century numerous scholars have risen to exhibit the centrality of environmental issues and their significant association with literature. Nature has

been depicted both in its favourable and unfavourable circumstances - as a benevolent mother figure which favours all earthly beings with her natural resources, essential for their survival and furthermore as a ruinous power which can perish thousands of lives at once. For Wordsworth nature is our guide, companion, teacher, and compassionate mother figure; for Coleridge nature is 'mysterious beauty'; for Keats nature is beloved. Whereas Amitav Ghosh portrays the physical aspects of nature with both optimistic and pessimistic note. Also, he presents the transpire in nature and their consequences upon us. He has successfully established his identity as an environmentally conscious writer, who has continually attempting to drag the attention and consideration of his readers and the literary world towards environmental issues. In the words of Vineet Mehta, "Ghosh establishes himself as an ecocritical writer by questioning imperialism, globalisation, western model of science and scientific progress and calling for a symbiosis between man and nature."

Ghosh's unique style of fabricating an arresting story with the touch of a bit of pedagogy gives his compositions their obvious intrigue. In spite of being a Ph.D in anthropology, his fondness for history can clearly be seen in his writings. The author's sagacity, creative mind and a thorough research of nature, science and anthropology create a spiffy base for the development of the novel, *The Hungry Tide*, which got him the Hutch Crossword Prize in addition to other awards and laurels. The name "*The Hungry Tide*", aptly puns on the word 'hunger' (which likewise represents poverty) which remains a significant component that propels the action and much passion across the eastern coast of India, and furthermore it also controls the decisions that individuals make, both in real life and in this novel. It is a prophetic novel of astounding intuition, winsomeness and mankind. The distinctiveness of Nature shapes rudimentary proposition for the novel to develop and profoundly influences the life of all characters and their shared relations. Nature is located in the earth's utmost engrossing locale - the Sundarbans, opulent with variegated environment and biosphere, flora, fauna and quaint aquatic life along with its astonishing topographical highlights frames the hotbed for the storyline to develop and structure the lives of the characters in the novel. The Indian peninsula and eminently its eastern coast are privileged with extraordinary characteristic arrangements.

Between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the

easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands... Some of these islands are vast and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others have just washed into being... Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. 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 of the Sundarbans believe that anyone who dares venture into the vast watery labyrinth without a pure heart will never return.

Ghosh's very first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) explores the theme of migration and a continuing tradition of cultural exchange for India. Through this novel Ghosh tries to show that western reason proves to be inadequate and he celebrates the triumph of human goodness. It is a search for a transforming vision-more than a simple quest for identity- as the protagonist moves from Lalpukur in India to al-Ghazira in Egypt to the little town of El-Qued in the north-eastern edge of Algerian Sahara. One of the major concerns of the novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is search for self-knowledge and self-identity. The protagonist of this novel "is an individual, rooted and well-defined but as the novel progresses he seems to transcend himself and becomes identified with a depersonalized contemporary consciousness" (Sircar, 49). It also deals with the concerns of our period, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture and the legacies of partition in the subcontinent.

The story of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* unfolds in the backdrop of Sunderbans which is a bioregion. Sunderbans is a beautiful land situated amid the wind and the tides and largely covered by mangrove forest. The two main characters around whom the story revolves are Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy. Kanai is a translator and business man who comes to the Island of Lusibari to meet his aunt Nilima. Through his late uncle Nirmal's notebook, Kanai happens to know about the conflict between human and non human life forces, resettlement tragedy of Morichjhapi in the name of conservation. The diary also reveals the story of Kusum and her son Fokir who are the victims of eviction from the island of Morichjhapi. Piyali is an American born cetologist who comes as a researcher to conduct studies on Irrawaddy

dolphins which are exclusively found in the rivers of Tide country. She takes the help of Fokir to trace the region of dolphins.

The novel explores not only nature in its beauty but it also appears as hungry for human blood. The ebb and flow represents all the traumatic issues of nature. The following description about mangrove forest that Kanai reads is apt to the situation:

A mangrove forest is a universe into

It unfolds the devastating effects of nature towards man. In the section "Canning", Kanai becomes speechless and shocked on seeing the plight of the passengers in the mud. Champahati, the threshold of Sundarbans, was merely "a pond filled with foaming grey sludge". The Malta river, which in 1970s was a "... vast waterway, one of the most formidable rivers he had ever seen", had become "no wider than a narrow ditch" at low tide. He felt upset and disturbed to the sight of the people travelling to Canning. They had to walk through the mud piled up to the level of their hips.

The life at Lusibari became hard and risky as the people had to suffer and survive with a single meal. Natural calamities like floods and storms cause major damage and land become infertile due to soil erosion. To the people of Lusibari, ". . . hunger and catastrophe were a way of life". The place had undergone a dramatic change. The sky that was "darkened by birds at sunset" and the scarlet mud banks filled with "millions of swarming crabs" had faded away gradually. And Nirmal curiously interrogates, "Where had they gone ... those millions of swarming crabs, those birds?" and he anticipates the signs of destruction. "The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea".

The novel also unveils the environmental issues related to the village of Morichjhapi through Nirmal's diary. It contains some personal history of Nirmal's life. Morichjhapi was selected as a place for tiger preservation project by the government. The place was occupied and inhabited by refugees from East Pakistan. They found vast land in Sunderbans and created their livelihood. Ghosh eloquently summarizes the

Another novel *River of Smoke* unfolds the ecological consciousness through two individuals who undertake a journey to Canton in a botanical ship the *Redruth*: Paulette and Penrose. Bengal born Paulette is the daughter of Pierre Lambert. He worked as a Botanist in Calcutta. After her

itself...Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassable dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moments 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. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.

events at Morichjhapi in 1979 through Nirmal's account. As the place became tiger reserve, the refugees were forcefully evicted from the island. Nirmal in his diary writes about the efforts of the refugees to build in a new life:

Salt pans had been created, tube wells had been had been planted, water had been damned for the rearing of fish, a bakery had started up, boat builders had set up workshops, a pottery had been founded as well as an ironsmith's shop; there were people making boats while others were fashioning nets and crab lines; little market places, where all kinds of goods were being sold, had sprung up. (192)

The novel poignantly shows the trauma of Morichjhapi settler and victim, Kusum in the following lines:

The worst part was... to sit here, helpless, with hunger gnawing at our bellies and listen to the police man say... „this island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals...it is a part of a reserved forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers...“ Who are these people, who loved animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? (262-263)

Ghosh through *The Hungry Tide* presents important ongoing controversies between governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, environmental activists, socialists, human and animal rights protection groups, tribal, tidal inhabitants and urban inhabitants, about the exigency for inculcating fair environmental policies that do not show favour to any one species while crushing another. The novel concludes with several positive measures suggested towards an eco-friendly relationship between human populations and their environment.

father's death in Calcutta she decides to travel to Mauritius in search of her earlier family connections. She reaches to Port Louis on the *Ibis* along with other girmityas. There she takes shelter in the Pimple-mouse Botanical Gardens to be discovered by Fitcher Penrose. He is on an expedition eastwards in his own two-masted brig,

the *Redruth*. Ghosh weaves these narratives together.

A deep ecological concern marks the narration of Honam episode. Honam is an island situated on the banks of Pearl River opposite to the city of Canton. In contrast to Canton which is crowded with houses, walls and narrow streets, "Honam is like a vast park, green and wooded: several small creeks and streams cut through it and their shores are dotted with monasteries, nurseries, orchids, pagodas and picturesque little villages" (279). This geographically diverse island becomes one of the principal settings in the novel. The country retreat of Punhyqua, the Cantonese local opium trader, is located on it. Punhyqua had deep connections with the merchants of Bombay.

Amitav Ghosh's two novels deal not only with the life style of the inhabitants of Morichjhapi and Honam but also its landscape. These novels demonstrate the non-human perspectives like trees, rivers, mountains and animals and their relevance in the total understanding of environment. Nature is rapidly being gulped up in the name of nurture, so it is the urgent need of the day to maintain ecological balance. The two internationally acclaimed novels have highlighted this perspective. Ghosh's eco-centric approach will allow the people to think deeply about the crisis and to find out a remedy for it.

Conclusion

The environment is not only important to form the narratives structure but also its highlights the mystery and fates of an individual's existence even in the midst of a dangerous but at the same time a beauty of nature. The people living in close proximity with Nature have their own myths and legends about Mother Nature. Here in this novel we have the Bon Bibi myth that is necessary in the formation of an identity for the people of this tide country who believe so much in the myths, customs and rituals of the Sunderbans jungle and its influence upon their lives. The concept of the Jungle is a distinct paradigm which shows the differences between the civilized and the uncivilized people.

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