

**Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: A Study of Tortuous Man-Nature Relationship**

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**Abstract**

*Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide is one of the popular novels which strongly raises environmental issues in literature. The novel is a story about the people of the Sunderbans, their everyday struggle and how they have survived the continual onslaughts of natural disasters. This paper seeks to co-relate the human stories with the extended story of the ecological and environmental forces that have acted on the region. The study points out that the novel penetrates a picture of man's complex interaction with nature. In The Hungry Tide, Ghosh highlights the tensions and conflicts 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 abrasion between land and the sea in the Sunderbans creates a constant friction between the plant and animal life. Man's constant encroachment of the ecosystems of the Sunderbans only justify the anxiety between the various elements of nature. For settlers, the Sunderbans offer an extremely unpredictable and insecure life. Unrest and ejection are constant threats and aggression of tigers are most common. Tidal floods abolish the stability of life on the island without any warning. 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. This paper is an attempt to explore man-nature tortuous relationship through the depiction of wrath of nature and fragility of humans.*

**Key Words:** nature, literature, relationship, exploitation, conflict

From the time immemorial, co-existence of man and nature is interdependent. On the one hand, nature provides the necessary support to man and other living beings, on the other hand living beings help nature to grow and develop. In any natural system the well being of a species is dependent on the growth and harmony of the whole eco-system. Species other than man has poor understanding of personal and natural growth and development, so it is fundamental ethical responsibility of man to respect and protect nature, its resources and life supporting systems. Nature should not be taken for granted. Whenever man has exploited the natural resources unethically, it has responded furiously in the form of ferocious floods,

earthquakes, landslide, tsunami and other natural calamities etc. Man might have reached to any level of growth and advancement but the importance of ecological balance for the survival of living beings is same as it was in primitive times. Besides scientists, environmentalists, ecologists and nature lovers, the artists, poets, philosophers, thinkers and writers also have great concern and deep rooted interest for maintenance of the ecological balance and nurturing care for environment. Concern of literary community may be well felt in the literature. When we undertake a literary journey through the literature of any community or language, we see, poets and writers have tried their best to care, protect and preserve the environment.

To express the concern for environment a new term “Eco-criticism” was coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism.” Eco-criticism as an academic discipline began in earnest in the 1990’s, although its roots go back to the late 1970’s.

Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the pioneers in the field, has defined eco-criticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”, and Lawrence Buell says that this study must be “conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.”

Nature and literature have always maintained a close relationship. The literary critic tries to study how this close relationship between nature and society has been textualized by the writers in their works. In this context two terms have become very important today – ecology and ecocriticism. India is a country with variety of ecosystems which ranges from Himalayas in the north to plateaus of south and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the east to dry that of the West. With time, however, these ecosystems have been adversely affected due to increasing population and avarice of mankind. Literature could not remain untouched from this depletion.

The two components of nature, organisms and their environment are not only much complex and dynamic but also interdependent, mutually reactive and interrelated. In this relationship they are so much interdependent on each other that any disturbance in one disturbs the other. History has proved this every now and then that with every change in the civilisation the relationship of animals and human beings have also changed and the effect on civilisation of the changes in environment has been so acute that sometimes it has wiped the whole civilisation from the face of the earth. Therefore, concern for ecology is one of the most talked issues today.

The Hungry Tide is purely of both natural and human environment. The Tide country i.e. *Sunderbans* to which the whole of the story is devoted is not only a far-flung land of intimidating physical environment but also a place of dealings among an assortment of communities—ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural etc. These are islands where inhabitants live in fear of drowning tides and man-eating animals. Kanai's words to Piya go in this way:

*"This is, after all no remote and lonely frontier—this is India's doormat, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent. Everyone who has ever taken the eastern route into the Gangetic heartland has had to pass through it—the Arakanese, the Khmer, the Japanese, the Dutch, the Malays, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the English."* (Ghosh. p. 50)

Ghosh thoroughly offers the stricture: the man-nature complex interactions. Like manifest threats posed by human settlement to the unique diversity of aquatic and terrestrial life in the mangrove swamps and the constant depletion of aquatic species by fishing and trawling, the human settlers too fall victim to constant erosion of dykes and embankments, the silting up of channels, the flooding by storm waters.

The author's nuanced descriptions of the moods and microenvironments of the island serve a lush backdrop for an intricate narrative that moves fluidly between past and present. The climatic ending, in which a cyclone threatens the inhabitants of the *Sunderbans*, underscores Nirmal's observation that *"nothing escapes the maw of the tides."* (Ghosh, p. 225)

In the novel, Ghosh minutely orchestrates the marvels—tigers, river dolphins, crocodiles, lunar rainbows and the tides—which go against the settlers. It is an ineradicable mark bearing a conflict between wilderness and human civilization. It may also be considered, for all time to come for its artistic accuracy, as a drama of love and endurance and a wonder about man's place in physical environment—the environment or the landscape which appears itself as a dynamic character in the novel.

Ghosh's text meticulously demonstrates, without releasing his conclusion, injury of the western philosophy of environmentalism on local ethical understanding. Introducing a rediscovered diary as primary source, the novelist refers to the historic tragedy in 1970 of refugee settlers on the island of Morichjhapi in the *Sunderbans* and skillfully brings in a post-colonial political conflict between demands of wildlife conservation and needs of the *Sunderban* inhabitants. The author clearly shows that the inhabitants of the tide country are part of the local ecology having instilled with its malevolent and benevolent calls every day. They are well-acquainted with smell and pulse of its soil since long back. But the model the westerners pursue to conserve wildlife i.e. tiger in the land in accordance with their political activism brings dissatisfaction and untold miseries to the settlers. They wonder if it is a

protection for wildlife conservation and beautification or ironically a systemization to put the local people daily into the mouth of death. The tear-jerking words despondently coming out through Kusum's lips record the undying cry in history:

.... "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.' Every day, 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?...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." ( Ghosh p. 262—263)

Anshuman A. Mondal has rightly observed that *The Hungry Tide* outlines western environmentalists' motif to separate humanity from nature '*perhaps as a result of binary western thinking that posits an opposition between culture and nature*'. (A Mondal:176—77)

The inter communications between the country, the poor, the physical environment and the flora and fauna of the area are very well presented in the novel. It also highlights the clashes between the humans for conservation. The most important concern towards nature as well as human beings in this world has been ignored by the politicians or the government. John C. Hawley rightly says about the novel, *The Hungry Tide* "it shares Ghosh's concern for the individual against a broader historical – or even, in this case, geographical – backdrop" (Ghosh p.132).

Change in the climatic conditions of any country or any part of a country is affected due to human interference. The effects like that of ozone depletion, global warming, are some of the major reasons which affect the whole nature comprising animals, plants as well as human beings. In the novel, when Kanai comes to Lusibari after several years, on the invitation of Nilima, his aunt, he sees that the river has totally changed its course. The water level goes down and the people have to face a lot of difficulty to go from one place to another. Now, the things have changed, the situation of today is completely different from 1970's. It is all due to the establishment of Port Canning on the Matla River. So, because of human interference, the nature gets affected as in Sunderbans it is going worse day by day. Ecological damage is very well visible and this dwindling of fishes and other species is going to be disastrous. Moyna tells Kanai, "Mashima says that in fifteen years the fish will all be gone" (Ghosh p.134).

The inter-connectedness between nature and man can be seen in the entire novel as Ghosh depicts a dual face of nature in his novel. First as a kind and benevolent nature and the other as a disastrous one. At the end of the novel, there are instances that man sometimes is shown to be at the mercy of nature. There is no hard and fast rule that human being or nature only one will win out of the two, but sometimes nature dominates human beings and vice versa. But the storms in the tide country are the proof that man cannot always impose his domination over nature. At last, we see Piya, sitting alone and helpless on a branch of a tree. She has lost all her equipments as well as the data which she has collected in her ongoing research about the dolphins in the tide country because of the disastrous storm. The scene of storm is depicted in the novel;

*Powerful as it already was, the gale had been picking up strength all along ... It sounded no longer like the wind but some other element ... The air was now filled with leaves, twigs, branches, dust and water. This dense concentration of flying objects further reduced the visibility...It was difficult to imagine that the wind could grow any stronger or more violent. (Ghosh p. 379)*

So, here it seems that nature refuses to accept the dominion of the human beings. Moreover, it looks like nature has been portrayed as a character in the novel rather than being a non- living object only. It seems that Ghosh depicts nature both as a preserver as well as destroyer. The novel very aptly describes humans' responsibility towards nature and a balanced relationship between man and nature. Hawley comments about the ending of the novel, "The last point is certainly true: the cyclone is powerfully described and reminds readers very forcefully of the humility that is demanded in the face of nature, and our place in it" (Hawley, p.134).

The problem arises when man's relation with nature gets imbalanced because man does not consider himself as a part of nature. Getting out of the domain of nature, he begins to control it, which becomes a problem for man himself and consequently, the ecological balance gets disturbed.

Fokir, son of Kusum, is one of the most important characters of the novel. He is the hero of the novel, depicted as a marginalised man who faces the harsh realities of life. He is an illiterate man, who is unaware about studies as against his wife, Moyna. He is a native fisherman who knows each and every corner of the Sunderbans. His ignorance as well as illiteracy turns to knowledge when he helps Piya in her research without displaying his knowledge. It is he who goes with her at the place where the dolphins were present. Through the character of Fokir, Ghosh tries to voice the unheard plea of the subaltern and

the marginalised. Fokir is a powerless creature who becomes a puppet in the hands of powerful ones that is, Nature as well as the government. Nature plays a very dominant role in the lives of people and the islanders as well as refugees were dependent on the environment for their essentials. Fokir always goes for fishing crabs in order to get food from the river. He takes his son named Tutul with him. Tutul is also interested in going to expedition with his father. But his mother, Moyna did not like this at all. She wanted him to study and go to school but he is happy in enjoying nature.

Ghosh, in the novel presents nature not as a setting of picturesque beauty alone it also appears as hungry of human blood. The tide and its surges stand for all the devastating aspects of nature. We may spot the following expression about mangrove forest from the Bengali script that Kanai reads in the novel:

*“A mangrove forest is a universe into 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.” (Ghosh, p. 7—8)*

The above quoted passage unfolds the tremendously unreceptive approach of nature towards man. In the section “Canning”, Kanai remains dumb-struck on seeing the plight of the passengers in the boat due to the *vast expanse of the bellowing mud*:

*“On stepping off the plank, there was a long drawn out moment when its passenger sank slowly into the mud, like a spoon disappearing into a very thick daal; only when they were in up to their hips did their descend end and their forward movement begins. With their legs hidden from sight, all that was visible of their struggles was the twisting of their upper bodies.” (Ghosh. p. 24—25)*

Morichjhapi massacre is the background of the novel which takes place because the government has evicted out the refugees. Even government killed tribal people when they resisted against them. The government wants to save the tigers and for this the human lives are put on stake. Nilima is a social activist, who has established the Badabon trust to help the needy and helpless refugees. It depicts the plight of powerless refugees against the powerful class of society. Ghosh portrays the struggles and sufferings of tribal people through the character of Kusum. She is a poor marginalised woman but also a very bold one. She raises her voice against the governmental authorities. Fokir is the son of Kusum. He is an illiterate man who usually goes for fishing. It is his hobby and he possesses abundant knowledge about

the whereabouts of the dolphins. He is familiar with every corner of Lusibari as well as neighbouring Islands. His wife Moyna is well educated nurse who aims to be a doctor. At the end of the novel, when Kanai, Horen, Piya and Fokir are out on expedition, a disastrous storm is about to come. As a consequence, Kanai and Horen save their lives but Piya and Fokir are caught in the storm. Fokir saves Piya's life by putting his own life in danger. At the end Fokir dies but he saves Piyali's life. Piya decides not to go back but to pursue her research in Sunderbans. She wants to pay homage to Fokir. She names the project after Fokir. She has changed herself, she begins to wear plain sari and she is full of guilt. She takes Tutul and Moyna as her own responsibility. Nilima is a practical woman, she agrees to Piya's decision of pursuing her research in Sunderbans.

Ecocriticism is now a topic of study in different parts of India. In West Bengal Pannalal Dasgupta, a socialist thinker and the founder of Tagore Society attempted to make environmentalism a social movement. His meen-mangal festival and the concept of dharmogola demand collaborative efforts for conservation of Nature and elimination of economic exploitation from the society. The meen-mangal festival makes us aware that we must care the rivers and give something to the rivers in return for what they give us.

We can read the seminal books of Vandana Shiva (1952) in relation to ecocriticism. Her books such as *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (1997) and *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* (1999) exposes the ulterior motive of the American Patent laws and the rhizomatic ways of functioning of new capitalism to ensure the plunder of natural resources, the Pancha bhuta as described in the Indian scriptures. Vandana Shiva's writings add a postcolonial perspective to the theory of ecocriticism. In this regard we can remember activists like Medha Patekar and Arundhati Roy.

A study of Rabindranath from this new perspective is rewarding. To Rabindranath Nature is a living soul. His literature advocates a close relationship between Nature and human beings. The play *Muktodhara* foresees the environmental activism.

Postcolonial theory pioneers the causes of the marginalised. It demands adequate importance to be given to the 'other', the margin. Ecocriticism too upholds the causes of 'Nature-other'. Humanism speaks of homocentric values. It thinks that man is last word of this universe; all natural resources as water, food grain, soil, air and other creatures are meant for his consumption and gratification. And that's why human civilisation is now at stake. Ecocriticism looks for way out of this crisis. And hence ecocriticism is not a mere literary theory but a comprehensive philosophy of an alternative life.

In fact, the novel deals with the environment and its relation to human beings. It is a novel in which Ghosh portrays various issues related to conservation and ecology. Human beings are dependent upon nature as nature provides abundant useful resources to them. These resources are helpful to every creature on the planet whether they are humans or animals. But human beings have always tried to exploit the resources for their own benefit without caring for other living beings. Man exploits nature and he considers himself the sole heir of the universe and this attitude depicts his anthropocentric attitude. This particular idea has been dwelt upon by Ghosh in this novel. He tries to revisit history which has been forgotten by the present post colonial India.

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