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Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* as a study of the Impact of Climate Change upon
its unique Bio-Diversity and the Human Communities

Abstract: Climate Change and Global Warming are already beginning to transform life on Earth. They threaten to catastrophically damage our world. It is high time that we should be concerned about the damage it is and will be causing in the coming years. In the wake of the growing concern for the fast deepening Environmental Crisis this paper highlights how Environmental/Climate Fiction can effectively be a powerful mediating tool in understanding the dramatic and emotional contours of Climate Change. Termed as a “canonical text for environmental critics” by Greg Garrard, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a perfect example of this new genre of Climate Fiction or Cli-fi. The plot being embedded in Hindu Mythology explores the complex ecological issues of Climate Change that pose severe threats to the mere existence of the inhabitants of the Sunderbans, whether it is the human communities or the unique diversity of aquatic or terrestrial animals.

Keywords: Climate Change, Global Warming, Climate Fiction, Sunderbans, *The Hungry Tide*.

Introduction

Climate fiction or Cli-fi is a sub-genre of the apocalypse style narratives focusing on climate change and global warming. This new genre not only aims at conveying the subjective experiences but also attends to the abstract, global forces and depicts the complex spatio-temporal scales and multiple perspectives including the non-human. It is steadily giving rise to new ways of conceptualizing the issue of climate change. The term Cli-fi has been popularized by journalist and climate change activist Dann Bloom with a hope of creating a new genre as a wake-up call, a warning flare towards raising awareness about the most urgent issue of today's time- Climate Change. Though the term global warming entered public consciousness in the 1970s and the scientists have studied our planet's natural green house effect since 1820s, it is in 1896, a Swedish Chemist named Svante Arrhenius concluded that human activity (like coal burning) contributed to the warming of the planet. For years, authors such as Margaret Atwood, Paolo Bacigalupi, Michael Crichton, Ian McEwan, Amitav Ghosh, Barbara Kingsolver, Ursula Le Guin, Nathaniel Rich, Kim Stanley Robinson have contributed to this new genre that imagines the past, present and future effects of climate change.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* published in 2004 is an early example of climate fiction. It provides a fascinating and detailed story giving accounts of the various social and ecological factors relating to environmental issues especially climate change. Though it does not deal with climate change directly, notions related to the environmental crisis are subtly inter-woven throughout the novel. His recent work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* talks about the challenges he had to face in translating the bitterness of his perceptions related to climate change into the medium of imaginative life- into fiction. It is here after so many years that he talks about his realization about the accelerating impacts of global warming that have begun to threaten the very existence of low-lying areas like the Sunderbans:

I have come to recognize that the challenges that climate change poses for the contemporary writer, although specific in some respects, are also products of something broader and older; that they derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that come to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth.

(GD:9)

However, despite the fact that climate change casts a much smaller shadow in such an important eco-critical text, the readers cannot escape the uncanniness of the unpredictable which is no doubt experienced throughout the text through subtle local observations.

Ghosh's narrative rather than encompassing vast swathes of South and South-East Asia, focuses a magnifying lens on a micro-culture within the region namely, the Sunderbans or "tide-country"- the lower region of the Ganges delta, which extends over 250 kms from the Hoogli River in the West Bengal, India, to the banks of the Meghna River in Bangladesh. It is an immense archipelago of islands interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal. Amitav Ghosh gives us a long lyrical yet ironic description of the Sunderbans:

The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, a`chol that follows her, half wetted by the sea. 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. (HT 6-7)

The Sunderbans appear as a transient topography which emerges and submerges in a continuous interplay between land and sea. Islands appear and disappear in the span of a few hours with every turn of the tide, oscillating between a safe abode and a threatening presence

for its inhabitants. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* records this paradox by referring to the terrain's utter hostility to the presence of its inhabitants, 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. (HT 8)

Stories of people drowned in the tide or fallen prey to the wild beasts of the forests, of peculiar qualities of the wildlife, like the man-eating habitat of the Sunderbans tigers are all attributed to the uniqueness of the tide country. Throughout the novel we encounter an endangered ecosystem where men live and fight with the animals and the tides. Nature is not presented as possessing picturesque beauty but rather appears as hungry of human blood. Submersion of islands is not a fiction but reality. Commenting on this transient and fleeting nature of the tidal waves which dominate the region, Amites Mukhopadhyay in his book *Living with Disasters: Communities and Development in the Indian Sunderbans* says:

The forested land which disappears under water every six hours during high tide is the abode of wildlife, while the islands which have erected mud embankments around themselves to prevent their submergence are where people live. Yet the forests and the islands do not exist in isolation, as rivers keep connecting and disconnecting as they flow around them. (5)

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* centers on two visitors to the Sunderbans- Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy. It is their interaction with the community of the tide country and with each other at large that informs us of the hazards inherent in this apparently beautiful place. Kanai Dutt, a Delhi based businessman, has come here to pay a visit to his aunt Nilima, an NGO activist who runs a charity hospital, a guest house and educational services in the name of Badobon Trust in Lusibari. He has come to collect the parcel that has been left to him by his late uncle, Nirmal. The package he discovers is an account of his uncle's last days, which revolves around Kusum

and her son Fokir, who are portrayed as victims of the Morichjhapi massacre. Apart from this, it also serves as Ghosh's medium of revealing the story of the Sunderbans with its geography, origin, landscape, skyscape and the story of the human communities whose life is entwined with the ecology of the place they inhabit.

Piyali Roy, another outsider in this region is a cetologist on a mission to carry out a survey of the marine mammals, a very rare species of the river dolphins, *Orcaella brevirostris*, commonly known as the Irrawady dolphins who are found to inhabit the Bay of Bengal near the Sunderbans. Ghosh's motive behind bringing up the fact of research was to hint at the extinction of this rare species which at one time was supposed to be found in abundance here. It is because of the changes in the environment that the rare species of dolphins and other fishes are dwindling. In trying to record the movements of the endangered *Orcaella*, Piyala believes that by deciphering the ways in which these marine animals are adapting to the tidal ecology we might get clues to conservation of this endangered species. Not only the aquatic species but the population of the tigers is also thinning day by day. Recent studies have revealed that the ecosystem of the area is on the verge of extinction as there are drastic changes in the climate. Once this area was unpopulated and rivers and rivulets were in abundance in the area but now these are claimed by the civilization, causing great damage to the ecosystem. A recent study in 2015 suggests that only 170 tigers are left in the Sunderbans. Water buffaloes, swamp deer, marsh crocodiles and many more species are on the verge of extinction.

Moyna's reference to the impending extinction of fishes due to the use of 'new nylon nets' which are "so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well", Piyali's feeling of a "smell or rather metallic savor" in the waters hints at the crisis disturbing the aquatic life of the place. The destruction of the mangroves of the Sunderbans, the natural defense system of the area is causing great threat to the islands found there. As Nirmal says that the mangroves are Bengal's deface against the bay and they serve as a barrier against nature's fury, absorbing the

initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges. Small changes in the climate create a chain of changes resulting into great disasters. Climate change, no doubt, has severely affected the flora and fauna of the Sunderbans. The thick mangroves are destroyed because of the rising of the sea levels and colonization of the area. Occasionally tsunamis and cyclones cause severe destruction.

Nilima's mention of the change in the course of river on Kanai's arrival at Canning clearly proves what Nirmal wrote in the papers Kanai read on the train that the Sunderbans are a place where Nature has the power to shape the world to its liking, with little or no concern for the humans who may rely on certain waterways. Because the river is part of a delta, the ocean's tides impact it. These tides are influential in how the people in the Sunderbans live their lives, reinforcing the power the natural world has over people in this part of the world. Kanai feels amazed to see that at low tide, the half mile wide riverbed is mostly mud with a ditch running through the middle. He watches in disbelief as passengers jump off a boat in the middle and wade through the hip-deep mud to shore:

On stepping off the plank, there was a long drawn out moment when each passenger sank slowly into the mud, like a spoon disappearing into a bowl of very thick daal; only when there were in up to their hips did their descend end and their forward movement begin. (HT 24)

Nirmal's views about the Sunderbans were shaped by the cruelties of climate change that he had witnessed in Lusibari. Hunger and catastrophe reigned in Lusibari, the ground was salty even after decades of settlement and bore poor crops which forced the settlers to subsist on a single daily meal. Despite all the labor they had invested in the embankments, there were still periodic breeches because of floods and storms and each such inundation rendered the land infertile for several years at a time. Hunger drove these people to hunting and fishing leading into disastrous results.

Many died of drowning, and many more were picked off by crocodiles and estuarine sharks. (HT 79)

They were shocked to see how the residents in Lusibari lived in ‘deference’ to Nature in comparison to the residents in Calcutta where Nature is by default second to man-made structures and systems. Storms are so common in Lusibari that the fishermen’s wives preemptively prepare for widowhood when their husbands go out for fishing. This undermines the environmental exploits hidden behind the initial readings of Nature as resource and deity. Nirmal’s observations are undoubtedly alarming and not over whelming. It enhances the sense of natural world and do not distract the narrative by trying to capture a complex global issue. In order to address these unavoidable natural calamities these locals rely heavily on the story of the goddess Bon Bibi, whom they believe watches over the islands. Although the prevalence and the apparent power of the Bon Bibi legend offers the illusion that humans are able to gain the upperhand in the fight against nature, the lives of these local people affirms that they live at the mercy of the natural world. The remark Nirmal makes when Kanai inquires about Bon Bibi is quite ironical:

...in a place like this people would pay close attention to the true wonders of reality around them. But no, they prefer the imaginary miracles of gods and saints. (HT: 102)

Nirmal had taken great efforts to make sure that there were anti-cyclone measures adopted during the construction of the charitable hospital run by Nilima. A large ward was made and was specially equipped to withstand cyclones. It had windows with thick wooden shutters and the doors were reinforced with steel. He was horrified to learn that the people in the tide country were completely unaware of the country’s history of catastrophic cyclones. When cyclones roll through they destroy boats, kill livestock and people and submerge entire islands. This novel even offers the historical anecdote of Henry Piddington, the Englishman who coined the term “cyclone” as a cautionary tale to not underestimate the power of the storms- he correctly

predicted that a cyclone would lay the carefully planned port city of Canning flat within fifteen years of its construction. The cyclone shelters suggested by Nirmal is one way for humans to actually make some progress towards their fight against Nature.

Thus, though this novel does not mention climate change directly, yet it manages to closely reflect upon the issue through landscape and species observation forcing the readers to engage with the issue and think about it. The threat from climate change is real, urgent, serious and growing overnight. Ghosh provides his readers factual details surrounding climate change in the guise of narration by using various frames of reference to build an ecological aware account. He has clarified the very idea that imaginative narratives about nature is also essential along with the scientific facts for understanding and connecting with the issues like climate change. Antonia Mehnart in her *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* says:

The importance of literature for the discussions of climate change lies precisely in its potential to offer imaginaries for the unfamiliar realm of the future. It thereby not reframes scientific data in a way that provides insight into the intimate aspects of human struggles in altered environments, exposes potential conflicts and is able to create affect, but shapes the very idea of climate change. (8)

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