The Deltaic Ebbs and Flows: An Eco-psychological Analysis of Amar Mitra's *Dhanapatir Char*

Suman Adak

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

West Bengal State University

West Bengal, India

sumonadok@gmail.com

Abstract

Amar Mitra's novel *Dhanapatir Char* (*Whatever Happened to Pedru's Island?*) is a novel where myth, mind, and the environment meet. Primarily drawing on the "ecological unconscious" and "biophilia" hypotheses of Theodore Roszak and E.O. Wilson, this study explores how the characters' psychological identities evolve in response to the volatile environment of the Bengal Delta. The novel presents a six-monthly world where the boundary between land and water calls for a psychological boundary. The call is a resistance against the urban-industrial psyche imposed by state intruders. The mythological figure of the tortoise chief represents a record of evolution and an interplay between personal and planetary well-being. Through a detailed analysis of the characters Batashi, Jamuna, Kunti, and Dhanapati Sardar, the study illustrates how the cultivation of 'fishy smells' and 'imaginal engagements' such as witchcraft, serves as a defence against the commodifying gaze of the government. This study explores the novel through the framework of eco-psychology. The analysis posits that the novel is a critique of human alienation from nature, advocating for an 'ecological ego' amidst a silent yet destructive Anthropocene.

Keywords: Biophilia, Ecocritical Psyche, Ecological Unconscious, Radical Ecopsychology, Magical Realism

Introduction

Lands do not have a fixed identity but are a "lease from water" (Ashraf). *Chars* are found in the Bengal Delta region. A *char* is where the sediments of the rivers, Ganges and Brahmaputra meet the Bay of Bengal. The islands known as *Char* appear and disappear according to the tides (Bhattacharyya 1). Amar Mitra received the prestigious O. Henry Prize and the Sahitya Akademi Award. In his novels, he addresses the themes of land, familial bonds, and displacement. Amar Mitra's *Dhanapatir Char* explores the unstable human condition. The novel centres on Pedru's Island. It is a piece of land that is believed to rest upon the back of a primordial tortoise avatar of Vishnu (Mitra 2). Fishermen stay there for six months of the year. The island is more than just a resource for them. According to Theodore Roszak, it is a psychological sanctuary that restores the sense of self, which earlier succumbed under the "urban-industrial culture" of the mainland (14-16). Ecopsychology asserts a deep connection between mental health and the health of the planet. Roszak argues that today's average mind suffers from a "collusive madness" born of its separation from nature (53). In Mitra's novel, this separation is personified by the "government", a force of police, bureaucrats, and traders who categorize, license, and commodify the "liquid land" of the delta (Bhattacharyya 2; Mitra 73). The inhabitants of the *char*, however, operate through an "ecological unconscious," a level of the mind that shelters a "compacted ecological intelligence" of the species (Roszak 15). There is a cycle of arrival and departure for the settlers, which mirrors a "biophilic" pull. Their resistance to the state represents a reclamation of their 'ecological ego'. Dhanapati Sardar, the protagonist, navigates a world where myth and reality converge with his seventeen-year-old wife, Kunti, and the fisherwomen Batashi and Jamuna. The "tortoise chief" beneath the island is both a geological fact and a psychological archetype (Unudurti). As the representatives of the 'government' the constable Mangal Midde, the trader Dasharath Singh, and the official Nabadwip Malakar attempt to 'tame' the island, they confront an unusual resistance. This

shows how the exploitation of both human beings and the earth are interconnected in the novel and how the characters' somatic experiences, such as the ‘fishy smell’ act as markers of ecological belonging (Fisher xv).

Literature Review

The discipline of ecopsychology emerged as a therapeutic science with the publication of Theodore Roszak’s *The Voice of the Earth* in 1992. Roszak’s primary contribution was the “ecological unconscious”. He described it as a core of the human mind that seeks connection to nature and other organisms (Roszak 13). He suggested that the “psychopathology of our everyday life” is a symptom of a “biospheric emergency registering at the most intimate level of life” (13, 308). Roszak seeks to bridge the “historical gulf between the psychological and the ecological,” moving toward a “synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being” (14, 321). Andy Fisher expanded on this with his theory of radical ecopsychology, which explores the psychological relationship between humans and the environment and the importance of ecological awareness and healing (Fisher 176). Fisher critiques mainstream psychology for its portrayal of human consciousness in a basic manner. He points toward the failure of canonical psychology to figure out the destructive impact of capitalism on the mind. He contends that the removal of people from the land to create landless workers led to a gap between the psyche and nature. Fisher opines for a psychology in the service of life taking the mental, social, and ecological dimensions as an integrated whole. His work emphasises that one must go through society to understand the interdependence of the mind and nature.

Susan Rowland’s *The Ecocritical Psyche* takes from Jungian analytical psychology to literary studies. Rowland argues that literature is a space where the “creative imagination” can reconnect humans with nature or “non-human reality” at the “edge of chaos” (Rowland). She talks of archetypes of “earth mother consciousness” and “green-world epiphanies” that reanimate the world of “brute matter” made by industrialism. Rowland approaches the

"imaginal realm" as a source of "tacit knowledge", a form of knowledge based on body and connection that can hardly be explained in abstract words. Theodore Roszak's Ecological Unconscious explains the mythological connection to the tortoise chief. Andy Fisher's *Radical Ecopsychology* provides the ground for a critique of the "Government" and commodification in the region (Fisher 171). Ecocritical psyche describes the novel's magical realism, such as Kunti's "witchcraft", a form of re-enchantment (Rowland). Glenn Albrecht's concept of "solastalgia" describes the distress of characters in this region, 're-ensouling' the island as a living entity (Albrecht 45; Fisher 218).

Mitra's *Dhanapatir Char* focuses on the symbiotic relationship between subaltern people, nonhuman and inhuman identities. Critics opined that Mitra's work is "replete with myths and metaphors" blending "folklore and hard-nosed realism" (Unudurti). The novel is within the context of the Anthropocene and highlights certain communities that are "brunt of climate precarity" (Sarkar and Maity 2). The *char* lands act as a "fractal landscape" that encloses a finite area (Unudurti). It has an infinite perimeter, mirroring the mind. Literary theorist Tapodhir Bhattacharjee in his review of the novel notes that the novel is "alluring and outlandish" yet carries a "deep socio-philosophical message" regarding the "abuse of power" (Unudurti). The novel's portrayal of "soaking ecologies" emphasises the continuity of land-water relations, a theme that aligns with ecopsychology's focus on the "web of life" (Bhattacharyya 4).

Research Rationale

The framework of ecopsychology is important to *Dhanapatir Char* as the seminal characters of the novel reject the "urban-industrial culture" in favour of a seasonal psyche. This psyche is rooted in the delta's movements. Scholarships typically concentrate on the aspect of 'subaltern studies', of how the state exploits fishermen. This critical layer does not capture the characters' internal transformation. For instance, the character Batashi is described as "skin and

bone" and "aimless" on the mainland, yet she "fills out" and becomes "rosier" within a month on the *char* (Mitra 4). This physiological change is not a matter of improved diet; it is a manifestation of biophilia, an innate affinity for life and nature (Wilson 1). The bureaucratic obsession with "license" and "categorization" represents what Roszak calls the "urban psyche's alienation from the age-old natural environment" (Roszak 13-14). One can interpret the tortoise myth not as superstition but as narrative eco-resilience. It allows the inhabitants to overcome environmental catastrophe through imagination and spirituality. This study seeks to explore the gap between the material exploitation of the *char* and, through that exploitation, the internal journey of its inhabitants.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary framework of ecopsychology that intersect with eco-psychology. The methodology is designed to explore the symbiotic relationship between the deltaic environment of the Bengal Delta and the psychological landscapes of the characters in Amar Mitra's *Dhanapatir Char*. The research primarily utilizes three pillars of ecopsychological theory to analyze the text: Theodore Roszak's Ecological Unconscious, Andy Fisher's Radical Ecopsychology and Susan Rowland's Ecocritical Psyche. This study adopts a textual and thematic analysis of the English translation of Mitra's novel.

The *Char* as a Site of Psychosomatic Identity

The island of Dhanapati is a "six-months-a-year world" that exists only when the "waters recede somewhat" in the month of Ashwin (Mitra 2), which falls between mid-September and mid-October. This phenomenon creates a "six-monthly identity" for its residents, who leave their "homes, wives and children back in Ghoradal" to form "island families" (3). These temporary associations strike psychological tensions. To the government it appears as prostitution. To the inhabitants, though, it is a "bond blessed by the elements" (Unudurti). The island is described as a "sensuous woman" who begins to "spread her charm

from the month of Ashwin" enamouring men and women alike (Mitra 3). The personification of nature and the mapping of the inhabitants reveal distinct roles. Dhanapati Sardar acts as the Guardian of the Archetype, believing himself to be a descendant of the pirate Pedru or the giant tortoise itself. Batashi represents the ecological ego, resisting commodification through her fishy smells. Jamuna serves as the source of narrative resilience. Kunti acts as the imaginal seeker, aspiring to become a witch (Mitra 4, 142). The government, however, represents the alienated psyche, embodying the destructive "urban-industrial culture" (Roszak 217; Mitra 73). The premise of the novel shows that the island rests on the back of a sleeping tortoise. It is an archetypal expression of the ecological unconscious. Roszak argues that the contents of this unconscious represent "the living record of cosmic evolution" (312). In the context of the delta, the tortoise chief serves as a bio-spiritual record of the gradual growth of the space over thousands of years. The settlers' belief that "the death of the island would mark the awakening of the tortoise" illustrates their awareness of an interplay between their existence and the "more-than-human" world (Mitra 3; Fisher 113). This is an active belief system. On the full moon night of Kartik, the inhabitants engage in the "puja of the tortoise chief," a unique ritual where they "lovingly lull him to sleep" (Mitra 4). By singing hymns like "Sleep, chief, sleep... we are keeping you warm" the inhabitants are reinforcing their mental anchor of survival. This ritual acts as a defence against "environmental alienation" as it allows the "recently created urban psyche" to reconnect with the "age-old natural environment" (Roszak 64, 69). The ritual creation of a clay tortoise with both "man's manhood" and a "woman's bosom" suggests a non-duality, where both genders are integrated into a biocentric whole (Mitra 4).

Biophilia and the Cultural Memory

"Biophilia" suggests that humans possess an innate emotional bond with other living systems (Wilson 1). In *Dhanapatir Char*, this bond is evident in the physical and psychological transformation of the fisherwomen. Batashi is one such example of the process. In the city, she

is “all skin and bone,” having suffered the “torrential rains of Shravan on the pavements” (Mitra 4). The state of “depletion of natural joy and spontaneity”, according to Fisher, occurs when people are separated from nature (6). However, upon reaching the island, the environment acts as a “resonant mirror” for her health (Ríos). Within a month, she begins “filling out” and looking “rosier” (Mitra 4). This “seasonal identity” is a contradiction to the “fixed geography” desired by the state (Bhattacharyya 6). The characters' sanity depends highly upon the cycle of the tides. When the southerly breeze arrives in the month of Chaitra during Spring, another psychological shift occurs again. The inhabitants must let go of “their make-believe worlds” and “forget the women who had loyally looked after their needs” (Unudurti). This forgetfulness is a defence mechanism against the ever-upcoming environmental trauma.

The novel utilizes snatches of songs and rhymes to set up an “incantatory spell” that strikes the characters' sympathies (Unudurti). Jamuna has kept on coming to the island for ten years and carries the story of the tortoise chief as her primary source of mental strength. For such marginal inhabitants, “collective reminiscence of a glorious past is a form of defence against the incursion of the state” (Unudurti). Susan Rowland calls it the “creative imagination” connecting humans with nature (99). The songs, such as “Golden Dhanapati, tortoise chief/ Here’s milk and rice to expand your fief,” serve as a spatial “lullaby” that maintains the stability of the island (Mitra 7). If the tortoise suddenly wakes up, this dreamy world ends instantly. The tides will consume the land and its temporary people. Therefore, the mental labor of the inhabitants is fully engaged to keep the land in “slumber”, which becomes a metaphor for maintaining ecological balance here (3). Ecopsychology seeks to awaken this very environmental reciprocity in functionally ‘sane’ adults who have lost the child's animistic quality of experience (Roszak 79-82).

The Technocratic Gaze of the Urban-Industrial Culture

The characters innately fear the government. Batashi "shivers in fear" when Jamuna mentions that "the government can sell village after village" (Mitra 59). Such a kind of terror is rooted in reality. Jamuna recounts how her brother was "maimed for life" by a police officer (Mitra 44). This represents the trauma that is a consequence of environmental destruction and the loss of nature, a biospheric emergency (Roszak 308). This is due to the state's ecocidal policies attacking both external nature and internal nature simultaneously (31, 45). The inhabitants feel that they have "no country", no belongingness, as they are marginalised by both the borders of India and Bangladesh. This, according to ecopsychology, is a form of "environmental alienation" (Mitra 31). Nabadwip Malakar's investigation acts as a metaphor for the state's intrusion into the subaltern psyche. Malakar insisted that nothing happened in the shanty; as something at least has to be recorded in a "report typed on the computer in English" (123). This definitely is a form of epistemic violence. He attempts to replace the inhabitants' "tacit knowledge" with the "abstract literacy" of the bureaucracy (Rowland).

Andy Fisher focuses on how capitalism has become a medium to exploit "both human beings and the earth" (Fisher 84). In *Dhanapatir Char*, Mangal Midde, Dasharath Singh, and Nabadwip Malakar embody this exploitative drive (Mitra 122). The island is not a sacred tortoise to them; it is rather a "wasteland" that should be "taxed" and "licensed" (135). This bureaucratic mindset illustrates the "problem with normal", the notion of nature as an 'objective' lifeless entity separate from human 'subjectivity' (Fisher 51). The government represents the "masculine" character traits that Roszak argues compel us to exploit nature as if "it were an alien and rightless realm" (Roszak 321). It becomes tangible when Nabadwip Malakar describes the women of the island as "unlicensed prostitutes" (Mitra 135). He compares their bodies to "vacant, state-owned land by the roadside" that is "waiting and available to be encroached upon" (130). This "property-thinking" differentiates land from

water to facilitate bureaucratic management (Bhattacharyya). This is a state apparatus that fuels colonial and postcolonial urbanisation.

Psychosomatic Resistance

One of the eco-psychological insights in the novel is the conflict over smell. Dasharath Singh, the trader, is obsessed with commodifying Batashi. He offers her soap, scented oil, and snow cream to wash out the "fishy smell" that he finds "revolting" (Mitra 18). He wants to "sanitize" her, to take away any visual evidence of her connection to the delta and to make her a "diamond" in the city (63). As a form of resistance, Jamuna advises Batashi to stay the same, smelling fishy (64). Jamuna's warning shows a subtle yet effective form of resistance: "Fill yourself with fishy smell... This is the only way to keep men off. Even sages and yogis cannot stand a foul-smelling woman" (80). By "deliberately cultivating the fishy smell," Batashi is mentally and physically asserting her identity as a "fisherwoman" rather than a "prostitute" (80). This act of olfactory ecocentrism illustrates the principle that "reclaiming physical integrity" is a suppression against the patriarchy and the technocracy (Roszak 94, 315). The fishy smell is a bodily marker of the "ecological self", a boundary that the urban-industrial psyche cannot cross. Batashi traps the constable and the trader in her shanty by using her "temporary home" as a somatic weapon (Mitra 107). The "makeshift door" and the "plastic sheet" become psychological boundaries of the ecological self (105). This resistance demonstrates that even the most "marginalized islanders" possess an agency rooted in their "situated knowledge" of the terrain (Majumdar). Their psychology is an "amphibian" one, comfortable in the "fluid geographies" that technocratic governance seeks to erase.

Susan Rowland emphasises that in literature, the experience of the "earth as alive" can occur (Rowland). Kunti, the seventeen-year-old wife of Dhanapati Sardar, represents the "enchanted sense of the world" that ecopsychology seeks to recover (Roszak 320). While the government sees her as a "deranged" girl, her psychological state is one of deep "imaginal

engagement" (Mitra 56). She claims to be a "witch trained at Kamrup-Kamakhya" having the ability to "ride on trees" and "blind the eyes" of her enemies (Mitra 141). This witchcraft is not madness. It is a psychological defence mechanism. By identifying as a witch, Kunti creates a "mythic substrate" that makes the society subscribe to her "otherness" (Rowland). She uses this identity to "tame the tiger", Malakar, by putting him to sleep with a lullaby while he attempts to sexually assault her (Mitra 188). Kunti claims that she will "wake Dhanapati up" and have "a hundred children". This reflects a psychological longing for 'planetary fecundity' in a world where the state forbids giving birth on the island, as the state will not acknowledge the identity of a child born of temporary unions. She embodies "pedomorphy", which is a child's quality of experience, which leads to a potential regeneration of the ecological unconscious (Rowland).

Solastalgia and Ecological Grief

Solastalgia is the distress resulting from environmental changes that affect one's home (Albrecht 6). The lives of the inhabitants are punctuated by "solastalgia". They suffer "environmental alienation" in the "mountains of garbage" of the city for six months, being "all skin and bone" (Mitra 4, 121). Their return to the island creates a psycho-emotional bonding with the world as a means of healing. However, the island is "inching towards the sea" and will one day "vanish, not leaving so much as a speck on the water" (2). This upcoming danger generates ecological grief. This grief is a natural reaction to the possible extinction of a habitat. Dhanapati Sardar's fatalism, which is in his belief that nothing is permanent in this world, is also a mental adaptation to this precarity (3). He exists in a state of unconscious identity, viewing himself and the tortoise as "one and the same" (134). This merging of self and environment is a hallmark of the "ecological ego" which matures into a sense of responsibility for the planet.

Conclusion

The conflict in Mitra's novel can be synthesized as a struggle between the metabolic "rift" and the "soaking ecologies" of the inhabitants (Marx 949; Bhattacharyya 4). The government here represents the rift as it considers the *char* as a site for "speculation" and "property-making" (Bhattacharyya 6). The inhabitants represent a continuum, where "the needs of the planet are the needs of the person" (Roszak 321). The novel suggests that the stability offered by the state is a delusion. Dhanapati Sardar knows that "the ancient chief of the tortoises will either move towards foreign shores or go down under" (Mitra 3). This awareness of transience is itself keeping the inhabitants sane. The government blames people for poor environmental conduct. However, the inhabitants undertake an examination that analyses the need to trigger those habits (Roszak 55). They understand that the sanity that keeps people together in society is not necessarily the same sanity that bonds people to the creatures as companions (18). Literature, in Mitra's hands, becomes a narration where the psyche of survival and environmental morals intersect. Kunti's "lullaby" to Malakar is the ultimate eco-psychological victory. She puts the "urban-industrial culture" to sleep, allowing the "ecological unconscious" to remain unviolated (Mitra 188). Her final realisation that she cannot come physically close to the opposite gender apart from her master, Dhanapati, is a dissolution of the difference between self and nature (187). The person and the planet have become, for one night, a single entity.

Amar Mitra's *Dhanapatir Char* is an exploration of the principle that "the earth hurts, and we hurt with it" (Roszak 308). Through the lens of the "ecological unconscious," the novel reveals that the "sanity" of the subaltern inhabitants is present in their biophilic reciprocity with the delta. The characters' resistance to the commodifying gaze of the government through the "fishy smells" and the "witchcraft" is a reclamation of the ecological ego against the "collusive madness" of an industrial society (Fisher 186). By portraying the *char* as a living entity, a

tortoise, Mitra challenges the “fixed geography” and “property-thinking” of a technocratic government (Bhattacharyya 6). The “six-monthly world” of the *char* offers a model of psychological “renewal” that the twelve-month world of the mainland cannot match (Fisher 14). The novel posits that the survival of the human spirit in the 21st century depends on the ability to “suspend disbelief” and “surrender to the inexorable power of stories” (Unudurti). The novel becomes a testament to the “deltaic space” (Bhattacharyya 4) and a psyche that finds its greatest strength in the fluid, the transient, and the biophilic.

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