

Eco-Human Crises: A Debate on Amitav Ghosh's

The Hungry Tide

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Abstract

Through the ages Man has cherished nature with its myriad wonders all through his life. Today we live in a world that is contaminated, polluted and threatened. As result of man's anthropocentric attitude towards nature, he has to face a number of problems related to his immediate environment. So it is the necessity of the hour that forces creative writers and social critics to focus on environmental disasters that threaten the future of Earth. One such writer in India is Amitav Ghosh. This present paper proposes to study *The Hungry Tide*, which portrays life in the Tide country. This novel discusses environmental issues related to the ecoregion Sundarbans. This paper seeks to look into the failing relationship between man and nature that raises many survival issues both to human beings and nature. The novel

carries important discussions on the biodiversity of the Tide Country and the man-made crises on the micro culture of bhaatirdesh.

Keywords: Tide Country, Man, Nature, Sundarbans, Manmade Crises, Environment.

Introduction

Ecocriticism, as a literary approach is gaining momentum in the present day context. It is an unusual combination of interdisciplinary fields such as natural science, humanistic discipline, Ecology, Bio-politics, and Social Ecology. “Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof- by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story and image to reinforce, enliven and direct environmental concern- can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of eco degradation that afflict planet Earth today” (Buell et.al ,418).

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) portrays the ongoing debate on the eco-environment and the cultural intrusion of the West into East. In an interview in 2007 Ghosh agrees that in his novel *The Hungry Tide* stemmed from two concerns, namely the protection of the environment and the admiration of beauty. Rajender Kaur in his essay on *The Hungry Tide* entitled “Home is where the Oracella are” says, Ghosh’s selection of the Sundarbans for his setting was “aptly chosen” (127).

The novel is set in the heart of a natural locale Sundarbans- a beautiful, unique, and incredible biodiversity known for its largest mangrove forests in the world. It comprises water, land, human beings and animals forming an intertwined ecosystem. This delta plain is featured by complicated river channels, creeks, mud flats and small islands of salt-tolerant mangrove forest. This sensitive ecoregion derives its name from the Sundari mangroves (*Heritiera Fomes*) which defines the biotic community of the region. The Sundarbans is located at the islets of the Ganges Delta lie south of the Kolkata and east of West Bengal/Bangladesh frontier. The delta, spanning 335

kilometers in width, is the largest mangrove forest situated at the mouth of Ganges and spreads across the land areas of Bangladesh and West Bengal. It encompasses the delta region of rivers like Padmini, Meghna and Brahmaputra. This archipelago of islands is the abode of certain vulnerable species including the Royal Bengal Tiger, estuarine crocodile, the Gangetic dolphin and the Irrawaddy dolphins. The present Indian part was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1973. It was announced as a National Park on 4 May 1984 and declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987.

The novel can be seen as a survey on a threatened ecosystem, the Sundarbans. It is the landscape where native inhabitants and outsiders meet, share and feel and have interaction with the non-human world too. The novel portrays a lifelike picture of man's convoluted connection with nature. It also figures out the precarious existence of an eclectic population, with the ever changing ecosystem of the Sundarbans. Survival becomes an everyday battle for the voiceless in the region and their indomitable struggle for life strikes a balance with nature. Ghosh describes the Sundarbans thus:

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear under water only to re-emerge hours later . . . A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles . . . Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense . . . Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles (THT 7-8).

The text portrays several issues of the tide country, its origin, topography and also the challenges linked to the existence of human beings, with its biodiversity, where human and

animals try to find means of survival. Ghosh has also shown the tide country as a meeting point of diverse populations of different cultures. He also portrays the plight of the eviction of refugees in the forest reserves of Morichjhapi and the complex relationships between man and animal in the archipelago's ecosystem.

During the Partition of India in 1947, vast migration of East Bengali people as refugees came to West Bengal in India. So the expatriates took refuge in Calcutta. Soon they were sent to distant Dandakaranya refugee settlement. Due to the harsh conditions of the camps, these refugees flee to settle in Morichjhapi island in the Sundarbans with the dream of a better life. In 1979 the state government imposed an economic blockade and the police forcibly evicted the settlers. This led to the death of thousands of people into a great massacre. The government justified eviction in the name of protecting the mangroves.

The Hungry Tide explores the coastal ecosystem of Sundarbans for its rich biodiversity. In this novel Ghosh in the Author's Note has acknowledged that "the characters of this novel are fictitious as are its two principal settings, Lusibari and Garjontola. However, secondary locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhapi and Emilybari do indeed exist and were indeed founded" (THT 401). His main focus is the hostile landscape and the incessant violent conflicts between humans and nature. He has also pointed out the sufferings of the marginalized settlers against the conservation groups who intent to protect the fragile ecosystem at the cost of extreme agony of the poor refugees.

The main story focuses on the two educated sophisticated individuals Kanai Dutt, a middle-aged translator and Piyali Roy a marine biologist, who by chance accompanied together to the tide country. Bengal. Nirmal uncovers the Morichjhapi massacre in his diary and the local fisherman Fokir, who overhears every voice of nature in the Tide country. The central character Piyali Roy, who is of Indian origin, and also an American cetologist visits the Tide country to study the rarely seen Irrawaddy dolphins. Kani comes to Lusibari to meet

his aunt Nilima to unveil his late uncle Nirmal's diary. Both of them accidentally meet in a local train to Lusibari and Kani comes forward to help Piya in her research.

Fokir, the local fisherman, is the son of Kusum who had died in the Morichjhapi massacre. Rajender Kaur indicates that Fokir, "lives in an idealized harmony with the rhythms of the tide country" (135). Fokir belonging to a marginalized community resides in an environmentally threatened area. Fokir always interacts with the currents of water rather than the inland. It is he who takes Piya to find more dolphins. It is he who rescues Piya for the first time while drowning in water and in the end too he saves her by sacrificing his own life. Piya discloses "It had happened in the last hour of the storm, she said. He did not make it . . . he had been hit by something stump . . . He had said Moyna's name and Tutul before the breath faded on his lips" (THT 392). Fokir is the heart of the novel. Even after his death, Fokir's presence continues to resonate in the ebb and flow of the tides.

Piya dedicates herself completely and is also destined to sacrifice her life for the dolphins. "If I thought giving up my life might make the rivers safe again for the Irrawaddy dolphin, the answer is, yes, I would"(THT 301-02). To Piya, "home is where the Orcaella are" (THT 400). As a marine biologist, she is of the strong conviction "This island has to be saved for its trees it has to be saved for its animals, it is part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers ,which is paid for by people from all around the world (THT 261). Piya with her GPS finds the route of the dolphins and is awestruck at the complicated ecosystem of the Tide country:

The waters of river and sea do not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta; rather they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of fresh water running along . . . These micro-environments were like balloons suspended in the water . . . Each balloon was a floating bio dome filled with endemic

fauna and flora. (THT 125)

The above extract talks about the expansion of the diverse integrated environment responsible for the creation and the long term maintenance of ecological balance of various life forms of the Sundarbans. Fokir can always dive into the heart of the river. Witnessing the peculiar behavior of the Gangetic dolphins he is able to decipher an advancing storm. Aldo Leopold, a renowned environmentalist, proposed that, competition and cooperation exist but are cautiously balanced between man and animal. Every living being has a worthy role to play in the bionetwork.

Mother Earth is always beautiful. She blesses man with all her bounty and protects him all through the ages. *The Hungry Tide* also displays nature not just as a beautiful landscape but as a being, hungry for human blood. The novel takes us to the year of 1903, to the Daniel Hamilton's Settlement. The islands Gosaba, Satjelia, and Lusibari (10,000kms) of the Tide country are hosted only by animals and reptiles. Nilima recounts "Remember, at that time there was nothing but forest here. There were no people, no embankments, no fields. Just *kada ar bada* mud and mangrove"(THT 51). Sir Daniel Hamilton a Scottish businessman bought 10,000 acres of land in the tide country. As a visionary, to fulfill his 'co-operative dream he invited people from different places to establish an equitable society. So people started pouring inside the island and transform the wilderness into human settlement. Soon the predators started killing hundreds of people. Rewards in the form of lands are given to the people who killed any animal. As a result, the habitation becomes a human settlement in due course of time, and this leads to the constant conflict between man and animals and the decline of the animal population. Ghosh boldly states that excessive human intrusion on nature is the fundamental reason for environmental collapse and climate emergency. The novel *The Hungry Tide* is full of human and nature conflicts. After the famine of 1942 the whole tide region is struck by an environmental catastrophe. Ghosh describes the calamity

thus:

In Lusibari hunger and catastrophe were a way of life. They learnt that after decades of settlement the land had still not been wholly leached of its salt . . . Hunger drove them to hunting and fishing and the results were often disastrous. Many died of drowning No day seemed to pass without news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile. (THT 79)

In the hostile environment, nature fights violently against the inhumane actions of man. We can witness the ecological disturbance visibly throughout the novel as nature acts against humans and vice versa. The hungry tides and heavy storms are the outcome of the merciless intervention and human disruption, of the environment. The ecocide caused by the cyclones and tides seem to be cruel and beyond repair and redemption.

The Hungry Tide provides an elaborate picture of wild, rigid, and untamable aspects of the macrocosm that refuse to budge, human will. Life becomes a nightmare for the environmental refugees who are forced to flee from their own county to India. They have to inhabit the Tide Country amidst all the conflicts with the tigers, crocodiles and natural calamities. Amidst all perils in the darkness, the indigenous people believe and worship nature as a Goddess, as it gave them courage to encounter the predators and the officials. To make both ends meet, these people encounter limitless hardships throughout their life. In this whole process of natural disaster, human and non human lives are lost indiscriminately. Destruction in the shape of storms and earth quakes is the harsh reality of natural ecocide.

In the Tide country storm remains “powerful as it already was . . . It sounded no longer like the wind but like some other element – the usual blowing, sighing and rustling had turned into a deep, ear-splitting rumble, as if the earth itself had begun to move. The air

was now filled with what seemed to be a fog of flying debris-leaves, twigs, branches dust and water”(THT 378-79). These lines reveal the blood thirsty nature of the hungry tidal waves that sweep everything along with them. The extreme hostility of nature makes the entire ecosphere numb and hopeless.

Biocentric egalitarianism rejects man's superiority over nature to consider the intrinsic value of non human forms. It questions anthropocentric views highlighting the interconnection of man with all forms of nature, encouraging ecological integrity without human impairment. In the book *Hazardous Future: Disaster, Representation and the Assessment of Risk*, Shoko Suzuki states that the “significance of ecological concepts lies in the realization that nature, comprises of a single organ system, simply in other words various elements in an ecosystem are connected, creating a mesh of interrelatedness. Human beings exist in relation to ecology with other entities who coexist in a state of mutual influence” (112). The quote emphasizes on coexistence and interconnectedness of every element of nature promoting ecological balance and sustainability.

Piya as a cetologist remains awestruck at the help done by the dolphins to the fisherman by casting the net. She thinks, “Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and populations of wild animals?”(THT169). In the Tide country the role played by crabs are highly commendable. Ghosh in the narrative has referred crabs as key stone species, because they work for ecological balance and ecological restoration of the tide country. He calls them, as members of the sanitary department who keep the mangroves alive by cleaning their leaves and prevent the forest from choking. Crabs, help a lot in maintaining the health of the mangroves by removing the debris and litter. Joseph Meeker rightly says each species, “performs unique and specialized functions which play a part in the overall stability of the community” (54). It is the crabs that lead Piya to the pool where the *Orcaella* are found. Fokir comments “Didn't they represent some

fantastically large proportion of the system's biomass? Didn't they outweigh even the trees and the leaves? Hadn't someone said that intertidal forests should be named after crabs rather than mangroves" (THT142). From the above lines, Ghosh tries to make the humans realize the need for the conservation of these species in the ecosystem.

Piya narrates how the dolphins are massacred by Khmer Rouge Cadres to extract dolphin oil that serves as a supplement for the dwindling supply of petroleum. She says: "These dolphins were hunted . . . their fat would drip into buckets . . . they were melted down and used as diesel fuel" (THT 305-06). The navigation of River Mekong becomes a huge catastrophe for the entire dolphin population. In addition to this, Ghosh has also predicted that the prolonged usage of nylon nets will result in the extinction of juvenile fishes, thereby reducing natural breeding stock. The traders amass great wealth in marketing of tiger prawns. In course of time these man-made excessive interruptions, lead to the disturbances in the ecosystem, causing alteration in the sea level and in turn this will lead to the dooms day of humans in the biosphere.

All types of ecological imbalances and ecocides can be hampered only by establishing a harmonious relationship with nature. Every atom in space has its role defined in the ecosystem. Likewise, all the living beings are constantly connected with one another for their own survival. Today we are living isolated from nature and experiencing a life disconnected from nature. So to save the human community we have to stay connected with nature. This novel remains open ended for the readers to take active decisions to preserve nature for the future generation.

Conclusion

The novel *The Hungry Tide* creates ecological consciousness and an ecological vision to the readers by negotiating the idea that nature is diminishing due to human actions. Ghosh insists that man bends nature in accord to his wish and also commodifies all forms of nature

in a selfish manner. Sundarbans is one of the rarest and unique aquatic biodiversities in India and it has to be conserved for the future. The narrative tries for a solution, by creating a path towards ecological vision and an inclusive way of non human life for the betterment of the Earth. Theodore Roszak in his book *The Voice of the Earth* has pointed out the need to protect the earth and the ecological issues are due to the ecological unconscious of human mind. He calls people for immediate action to “Scale down. Slow down. Democratize. Decentralize” (311). Ecological stability is possible not by its uniformity but by its diversity. In the planet living is possible only by mutual interdependence (symbiosis) and interaction of man with all forms of life. Man must live in harmony with the environment. It is high time that human beings should be aware of the present day situations and challenges for their survival in the coming future.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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