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An Ecocritical Probe into Amitav Ghosh's Non-Fictions

Abstract: Ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary approach to observe the relationship between literature and environment, comes into being as a critical idiom at an official sitting of the Western Literature Association (WLA), an association working for diverse literature founded in 1965, in the late 1970s; and later the concept was carried out as a literary concept from the USA to other countries. William Rueckert, in his 1978 essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism*, first coined the word 'eco-criticism' focusing the use of environmental concepts to the study of literature. This paper intends to analyse Amitav Ghosh's (India) non-fictions such as—*Overlapping Faults*, *No Aid Needed* and *The Town by the Sea* published in India's daily *The Hindu* from January 11 to 13, 2005 after his visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, *Folly in the Sunderbans* (2004), *Confluence and Crossroads: Europe and the Fate of the Earth* (2012) from eco-critical point of view. The definitive detection, however, is that the eco-structures of Amitav Ghosh's narratives, be it of fictions or of non-fictions, render multi-borne meanings surpassing nature's anthropocentric ethics. What he seems to desire to excavate through environmental imagination is perhaps a human space more specific and more turbulent even more drastic than physical environment.)

Key words: Ecocriticism, Cultural interconnectedness, postcolonial modernity, ecology.

It is not an overstatement that India's literary diaspora generation, in coincidence with resident Indian authors, as bearer of nuanced engagements, among others, in partition and the subcontinent's perennial political storms, continues to flourish day by day overriding western legacy of fiction and non-fiction writing. The variety of subjects and stylistic engagements in the contemporary Indian non-fictions in English ensue the experience that this well-heeled generation is extraordinarily capable of giving birth to various non-fictional constructs to raise eyebrows of the literary aspirants. The time in the post-Salman Rushdie generation in Indian literary consciousness is the same time of upheavals of the previous trends on almost all fronts and there is still possibility of new explorations. In conjunction with fictional constructs India's Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry and Amitav Ghosh have been too outstandingly dealing with the current ecological issues in their non-fictions on various occasions. Amitav Ghosh, after Rushdie, holds a gesture of optimism in face of partition dilemma and annoyances to attract his readers with multi-flavoured and erudite explorations into humanity and socio-spherical as well as bio-regional exasperations. The unique anthropological collage and literary artifice he puts through his oeuvre have been loaded with his another stratum of imagination: the environmental imagination. In other words, within an amalgam of history and culture construct, he expresses his deep concern towards the environment where man interacts with its natural as well as man-made forces. Superbly exposed to environmental issues and ethics, cultural interconnectedness and to postcolonial modernity, his non-fictional pieces *Overlapping Faults*, *No Aid Needed*, *The Town by the Sea*, *Folly in the Sunderbans* exuberantly tell the tale of human predicament in physical environment. As to why these attempts stride out flashing the literary scene is actually its unrivalled fusion of history and nature.

Before instituting an eco-critical exploration into Amitav Ghosh's non-fictions we must have a hurried look at the trends of eco-criticism and construction of nature in literature worldwide and in India.

It has been a big crisis since olden times as we the rational beings are, day after day, shaping our conditions into an excruciating whole by our repeated wrong doings in various forms to the environment. The life systems, because of our constant irresponsible and unenthusiastic attitude to nature, have been alarmingly at stake now. Hence, along with all environmentalists over the globe, the Deep ecologists also start a movement during the 20th century for an environmental consciousness. Norwegian eco-philosopher A. Naess, seeking a mass participation in the drive for human's fellow feeling towards nature, highlights this 'consciousness' so that the global people can learn how to behave towards nature and make this space of the human and the non-human a place of unremitting happiness (Naess, A., 2008: 99-104).

This very idea of nature and our accountability towards it also thud at an early work by British critic Raymond Williams in the 70s where the author, throwing critical and conscientious luminosity on 16th century English literary perceptions, explicates the conflict between rural and urban conditions regarding nature representations (Williams, Raymond, 1973: 289). These are not the only attempts in this field as an instance of ecological awareness in the early 70s is detected in Joseph W. Meeker, an American Professor of Comparative literature and an ex-ranger of US National Park Service in Alaska, who blames western cultural tradition that is responsible for environmental catastrophe. His environmental morals embedded in holistic approach to nature, reflect realization of our limitations in nature; and by "comedy" he assertively indicates our liberation (Meeker, Joseph, 1997: 21).

At formidable conjugations with various such feelings encompassing the idea of environmental awareness, a new movement as 'eco-criticism' first in the US academic

discourses begins to work with a grand purpose. Ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary approach to observe the relationship between literature and environment, comes into being as a critical idiom at an official sitting of the Western Literature Association (WLA), an association working for diverse literature founded in 1965, in the late 1970s; and later the concept is carried out as a literary concept from the USA to other countries. William Rueckert, in his 1978 essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, first coined the word ‘ecocriticism’ focusing the use of environmental concepts to the study of literature. He encapsulates the eco-centric idiom in the essay as:

“The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community. This is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude towards nature. The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities—the human, the natural—can coexist, cooperate and flourish in the bio- sphere” (Glotfelty, Cherryl & Fromm, Harold, ed. 1996: 107).

Interestingly enough, the 80s witnesses a serious approach as a practical campaign in the regional literatures under the aegis of WLA. Finally the two books *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cherryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* by Laurence Buell, published in 1996, harbingers the concept in a more tangible way. Categorizing ecocriticism as a study of relationship between ‘environment’ and ‘literature’, Glotfelty’s book bears, in its introductory part, the ground-breaking definition as:

“. . . the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and

economic class to its reading of texts, eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.” (Ibid, 1996: xviii)

Ecocriticism, thus in the analysis of global scholars, pays its conscientious focus on (i) movement, attitude, state of affairs, assimilation, confrontation and psyche of man living under physical environment (ii) creation of awareness towards culture and green earth giving a new impetus to environmental issues. The very recent opinions on ecocriticism direct the thinkers to see the idiom in a ‘transversal’ way. Patric D Murthy responsively leaves this view ‘in order to work continuously at accommodating a vast array of often seemingly disparate perspectives, disciplines, and contextual information, as well as the ever changing thematic, plot, setting and contextual elements of the aesthetic works under consideration and the responses of changing audiences through time and across cultures.” (Murthy, Patric D, 2015: xx) This attitude towards a gradually over-powering idiom into ecological domain opens up a new horizon. Rapid changes in both physical environments and cultures, of late, provide mankind with a frenzied perplexity and at this critical juncture a call for academic, ethical and scientific awareness towards such critical interpretations is need of the hour.

The canonical investigations under ecocriticism or Green Cultural Studies gradually draw attention of the world countries. At the early part, this study is confined to North American scholarship in the 80s and Britain in the 90s. The American practitioners, exploring wilderness in Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau in the initial part, spread its principles and thrust areas forming professional association-Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992 in Reno, Nevada. (Glotfelty & Fromm, Op.cit: xviii) The ASLE journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)* makes the concept internationalized assembling more and more thinkers and allowing more and more criticisms and counter-criticisms in this discipline. In England, Ecocriticism is applied, at the beginning

of the 90s, mainly on the Romantic arena. Jonathan Bate cuts the ecocritical road in this decade gazing at the Romantic writers and the ecological hazards as he introduces in his book:

“As political and moral visions change, so literary criticism will change too. I began writing this introduction on a fairly typical day early in 1990 when the three leading stories on the evening television news were: the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union voted to abolish article six of the constitution, thus bringing to an end the formal guarantee of the Party’s sole right to power; and the announcement of a move towards a unified German currency; and the appearance of a scientific report supporting the hypothesis that there are links between freak weather conditions and global warming... As with Wordsworth’s ‘Second spring’ a transformation in the volatile political order is dramatized by means of comparison with a familiar process in the cyclical order of external nature” (Bate, Jonathan, 1991: Introduction).

In China, that bears the history of strongest imperial powers in ancient times, the trend is caught in academic scholarship as a new approach to literary criticism and as environmental consciousness although literary theorists and scholars were fascinated by postmodernism and other 20 th century critical disciplines. The scholars who pursue ecocriticism as organizing principle for unearthing working themes of environmental and natural phenomenon come to realize that the Daoist and Confucian doctrines (relating to Chinese religion and duty-consciousness) have already affinity with the new ecocritical concepts. The well-known ecocritical circle that includes Scott Slovic, Wei Qingqi, Song Lili, Junjie Lou creates an atmosphere of environmental awakening through their critical deliberations. Lou’s novels *The Journey to the West*, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* embody explicitly a strong gaze in nature. Another ecocritic Li cheng, in his critical essays, highlights

the difference between American ecocriticism and Chinese ecocriticism due to delay in translations. Ecocritic Lu Shuyuan's thought provoking books—*Shengtai Piping de Kongjian* (Space for Ecocriticism), 2006 and *Tao Yuanming de Youling* (The Specter of Tao Yuanming), 2012 show the new roads to nature alertness. Zeng fanren is an ecocritic who arranges seminars on ecocriticism to the Chinese aspirants. (Ning Wang *Global in the Local: Ecocriticism in China*) Although eco-theoretical probe in nature and environmental consciousness originate in American thinking there are, of course, argumentative exchanges among global scholars and critics regarding American ecocriticism and European ecocriticism. Especially in Germany and France the much-talked –about eco-philosophy could not find proper positions and discussions because of several ideological reasons. Carmen L. Flys's panel discussion for the *European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, Ecozon clarifies this point of recent trend of ecocriticism globally. One of the panellists Alex Goodbody, Research Director of the Department of European Studies and Modern Languages, University of Bath, adds with a conviction that the US ecocritical idiom entrenched in national identity "is less strong in Germany (because of the Nazis 'ideology of Blood and Soil) and France (because of the French tradition of Enlightenment technophiles)." In European context, that translation studies remain an "excellent entryway into different national traditions" was panellist José Manuel Marrero Henríquez's chief concern. But the panellist Serenella Iovino, Professor of Ethics, Department of Education, University of Torino, discovers European ecocritical discipline as much broader and the root reason behind this, he maintains, is "multiplicity of cultural traditions and identities." (Carmen L. Flys, 2010: 1.1)

Indian literary perception as hauler of ecological design with man-nature interface, all forms of catastrophe and its cultural as well as ethical forces, could, in fact, claim the highest scope as the country is engulfed in multiplicity of physical environment which arrays from Himalayan belt in the north to southern plateaus and from the Bay of Bengal in the East to the

deserts of the western part. This vast physical dimension bears both scenic beauty and man-made devastations. And for the authors it is also a concern as population explosion mercilessly brings disaster to the environment day by day. However, the canonical idiom of ecocriticism that has already taken path of some progress in the western scholarship gradually attracts Indian literary thinkers. The reason behind usual blotting of the tenets of ecocriticism in the Indian ideas is same with the western context since the second part of the 20th century witnesses serious natural hazards for rapid advancements in science and technology. What Rayson k. Alex opines about incorporation of the concept in the Indian context is important to note. Alex, re-envisioning the already known first wave of ecocriticism that encompasses “humanist, anthropocentric, bio-centric, and eco-centric ideologies” and the second wave that sees “a shift of thrust from the rural to the urban and from nature to environment prompting the discipline to be socio-centric”, refers to Buell’s *Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends*, where Buell offers “analyses of the European, British, US-American, Japanese, Chinese, and Indian schools of ecocriticism to invite ecocritics; attention to the ecocritical scope in so-called third world countries.” In this context Alex suggests to see Indian ecocriticism history (Rayson K. Alex, 2014:16). The enthusiasm ecocritic Rayson trickles out in Indian context stressing on socio-centric and bio-regional milieu has really some reasons to accept. If land is viewed as a metaphor, and multiplicity of man’s living condition is checked as cultural construct in accordance with the facets of ecocriticism then India deserves to welcome the critical canon. It is a country of multi-racial mingling that has historic experiences of western authoritarianism and hence it is need of the hour for the Indian writers to concentrate on multi-dimensional themes at the heart of natural phenomenon.

While tracing back to the initial trend of ecocriticism in Indian scholarship we offer credit to Dr Nirmal Selvamony (of Central University of Tamil Nadu, India) who for the first time introduces Tamil Poetics, a course to see translated Tamil texts on ecocritical perspective,

in 1980 at Madras Christian College. His three serial petite publications (jointly with Nirmaldasan) namely *tinai* adds a scholarly shift to the conceptual sphere. Later, the Madras Christian College English Department organizes the 3rd World Conference and the 11th All India English Teachers Annual Conference in 2004. That is considered as the first event in India addressing environmental issues in literature. Scott Slovic, editor of the journal ISLE, (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment) initiates the idea of launching an Indian ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment). Hence, the period 1980-2004 remains as dawn of Indian ecocriticism. Although Rayson K. Alex prefers Indian attention to ecocriticism in vast dimensions, we, even inviting and endorsing his enthusiasm, admit that the trend in most of the Indian states is still at up-and-coming phase. It would certainly depend on research aspirants how they undertake to bear the importance. However, the successful overture of ecological awareness into fictional texts is largely because Ghosh always bears a sensibility towards environment and this has been possible for his global tours at the places where he physically experiences human torment in interface with devastating ecosystems. Possessing a journalistic as well as anthropological competence in the layers of his psyche Ghosh does impulsively see human culture all around and this richest attitude leads him to depict colonial and postcolonial socio-political oddities at all levels. It is, therefore, the same representation or eco-historical actualities concurrently begin to glue in his non-fictional texts too. Among Ghosh's three-article series—*Overlapping Faults*, *No Aid Needed* and *The Town by the Sea* published in India's daily *The Hindu* from January 11 to 13, 2005 after his visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a tsunami torn land (December 26, 2004), *Overlapping Faults* section tells about geographical locations, islands' capital city Port Blair and "political and geological fault lines" of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This Union Territory ruled by New Delhi stays "beyond the edge of the Indian tectonic plate" where the settlers are mostly "from Bengal, Orissa, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh." With a

peep into social arena Ghosh writes about the settlers: "...tens of thousands of settlers were able to make their way out of poverty, into the ranks of the country's expanding middleclass." The disaster, he informs, took not the physical being alone but it took proofs of identities. While visiting the Nirmala School camp in Port Blair, the author draws the pathetic condition of the refugees (about 1600) "and in that time no one had asked them where they wanted to go or when..." Ghosh also shows another picture of the refugees' perplexity as to where would they go and the Father Johnson's anxiety as to how he would manage the students of the educational institution where the refugees are taking shelter. Here Ghosh exposes the negligence of the central authorities. Ghosh brings another picture—the refugees are jostling to have pen and paper to write their names for identity: "No sooner had this request been made than another uproar broke out: those who'd been given possession of pens and paper now became the centre of the siege. Crowing together, people began to push and jostle, clamouring to have their names written down. Identity is now no more than a matter of assertion and nothing seemed to matter more than to create a trait of paper. On this depended the eventual reclamation of a life." About tsunami, the author writes---"it shook so hard that it was impossible to standstill and they were forced to throw themselves on the ground. (...) Looking seawards he (Obed Tara, a army personnel and victim) saw a wall of water advancing towards his house. Gathering his relatives, he began to run." Ghosh tells the story of Obed as more pathetic as Obed says, "The sea took my uniform, my ration card, my service card, my tribal papers; it took everything." He mentions Syvester Soloman, ex-serviceman in Navy, Paramjeet Kaur, a Sikh woman. Kaur came to this island after Independence in 1969 and then the place was jungle and she says, "We cleared it with our own hands and we laid out orchards of areca and coconut." "Cyclones, frequent in this region, are also associated with surges of water that rise to the heights of 10 or 15 metres and their effect would have similar." In the No aid needed section Ghosh narrates the condition of relief camps where supply is not satisfactory. He writes: "I met

with organizers of several relief camps and they were unanimous in stating that they had received no aid whatsoever from the government, apart from some water.” He talks about negligence of the Armed Forces and Bureaucratic insensibility. These essays or field reports keep intact several motives of the author: his inquisitive psyche towards eco-tragedy, study on post colonial hierarchy, hegemony and modernity, an exploration into ethnographic pattern of remote, death-defying islands, Indian colonial and postcolonial oppression, the issue of migration, study on middle class’s struggle for survival. In the section *The Town by the Sea*, Ghosh, as he informs us about his ride with the airfield Director on “yellow construction truck”, narrates about “dense tropical jungle, dotted, at intervals, with groves of slender areca-palms and huts mounted on stilts.” This section, perhaps, is the most heart-rending, pathetic episode Ghosh ever reports about an island in devastation. This report-cum-text truthfully depicts an eco-tragedy the victims suffer and gradually endure. The ecocritics, while incorporating “an earth-centered approach” to a text methodically see how far ecological hazards make root into human heart and how far it is represented in literature. The incident, centring round a yellow paint box (owned by the airfield Director’s daughter Vineeta) which was lying abandoned in the island and which was intentionally ignored to pick up by the Director but he is holding magnified glasses only, proves that people of any rank living in the island assume the cyclonic havoc as natural item of destruction, even memory. It leaves clouds of woes to everybody’s hearts. Ghosh writes at the closing lines in agonized apprehension: “Could it be that he (the Director) was seeking refuge in the one aspect of his existence that could not be erased by an act of nature. (...) Whatever the reason, his mind had fixed upon a set of objects that derived their meaning from the part of his life that was lived in thought and contemplation.” Frontwarding a stride into a deeper stratum of ecocritical idiom Estok argues that ecocriticism is never cramped to “the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical,

ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds” (Estok, Simon C., 2011: 16-17). The three-series article contributed by Ghosh in appropriate moments just after the tsunami in Andaman and Nicobar islands picks up along with the picture of ecological changes a picture of ideological changes that take place in the hearts of the island inhabitants. It is also history of terrible human interface with nature. In his much-discussed and important essay, *Folly in the Sunderbans* (2004) Ghosh has expressed serious concern about a grandiose project proposed by a business group-SaharaIndia Pariwar. In its charter of strategy submitted to the Government of West Bengal seeking green signal, the business group intends to create an enormous new tourism complex in the Sunderbans of the Bay of Bengal. The plan includes-accommodations like 5-star floating hotels, high-speed boathouses, land-based huts, luxury cottages, eco-villages etc. Landing jetties, spa, casino, shopping and meditation centres, mini golf course, aqua sports are alsosome of the plans. However, Ghosh has very honestly expounded various ecological consequences like a scientist as to why certain things cannot be executed and at what instant the whole of the project lacks environmentalists’ reflection. He says, “This is not an environment that is appropriate for snorkelling or scuba diving. (...) Even swimming is extremely hazardous in the Suderbans.”“The Bay of Bengal is one of the most active cyclonic regions in the world: two of the most devastating hurricanes in human history have been visited upon the coast of Bengal in 1737 and 1970. (...)Considering the pattern of cyclonic activity in the region no reputable firm is likely to provide insurance for this project. (...) It is clear then that even within its own terms, this project is misconceived.”

In his essay *Confluence and Crossroads: Europe and the Fate of the Earth* Ghosh talks about the very word ‘confluence’ as symbol of ‘seam’ and ‘separation.’ He writes: “Aterrain in which the mohana is the dominant feature is inevitably a landscape of ambiguity where there are no clear lines between river and sea, earth and water, island and mainland.”He talks about

the condition of Europe and its irony that although it has demarcation there is still confusion about its eastern boundary. He says, “The Mediterranean was the confluence that joined Europe to other continents.” Using the two concepts—confluence and crossroad she comes to the issues of migration of Europe and the other countries. The great reality

Ghosh exposes through this essay is that “Let us consider the example of the hundreds of thousands—possible millions—of Europeans who are now working on other continents: for example, in Dubai, Japan, Singapore, Brazil, Mozambique, South Africa, China, India, Thailand and so on. Let us ask: to what degree do these Europeans integrate into their host societies? The reality is that many, if not most of them, make every effort to maintain a strict distance between themselves and the countries they live in.”

While talking about waterways and confluence Ghosh hints about “a crisis (Europe and the whole world are facing) of multiple dimensions, in which economic breakdown, political paralysis, environmental degradation, and a broad cultural and imaginative failure are building up to a ‘catastrophic convergence.’” About environmental problem he says, “The resources of this planet, which we all inhabit, are dwindling very fast, while its atmosphere and climate are changing in ways that may bring an end to civilization as we know it. (...) Industrialization and what is called ‘development’—have contributed significantly to changes in the world’s climate. (...) We have seen them in freakish floods, unaccustomed heat waves, bizarre storms, and most of all in the drought that has blighted much of the world this year. (...) But here are a few examples of what is happening: glaciers are shrinking, around the world; permafrost is thawing, greatly accelerating the release of methane into the atmosphere; the oceans are warming and their waters are becoming more acidic; animals and plants are migrating, as are human beings.” However Ghosh relies on the processes taken by Europe, “Along with Japan, it was Europe that took the lead in the negotiations for Kyoto; Europe has also tried in good faith to find a way towards an equitable solution to the problem of climate change. (...) We can only hope

that Europe will now take the lead once again, in showing us how best to turn back.” (“Confluence and Crossroads: Europe and the Fate of the Earth) From above analysis, the definitive detection is that the eco-structure of Amitav Ghosh’s narratives be it of fictions or of non-fictions, render multi-borne meanings surpassing nature’s anthropocentric ethics. What he seems to desire to excavate through environmental imagination is perhaps a human space more specific and more turbulent even more drastic than physical environment.

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