



Research Paper

Ecological Vision Regarding the Sundarbans: Towards an Ecocritical Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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ABSTRACT: Amitav Ghosh has successfully established his identity as an ecologically conscious author. This paper intends an ecocritical analysis of Ghosh's well known novel *The Hungry Tide*. It is an endeavour to discuss the ecological vision suggested by Ghosh regarding the Sundarbans. In the paper, the focus is also on those elements of the novel which spreads ecological consciousness among its readers.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Ecological consciousness, Ecological vision, the Sundarbans.

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Amitav Ghosh is reputed as an author who has constantly been endeavouring to drag the attention of his readers and the literary world towards ecological problems. His works, some in the foreground, others in the background, consummately depict nature and environmental issues. Man-nature relation plays a crucial role in his novels. The present paper aims to ascertain the ecological vision, in connection with the Sundarbans, presented by this distinguished author in his sixth novel *The Hungry Tide*.

The Hungry Tide delineates man-nature relationship, though man-man relationship and the effects of the man-man relationship on the non-human world also play a significant role in the development of the plot. The novel elicits a kind of ecological consciousness and furnishes an ecological vision as well. The life of the poor people of the Sundarbans, issues related to them and their daily struggle for survival, everything has been effectively depicted in the novel. Furthermore, the novel also addresses the ecological changes taking place in the Sundarbans. Life of these inhabitants has never been easy. Every day the dwellers have to fight against nature for their own survival. Their life is dependent on the sea which gives life to the Sundarbans and takes life away from it as well. The place of man in nature and the man's place in man's world both are consummately described in the novel. The story of the novel draws the attention of its readers towards the historical incident of massacre in Morichjhapi. No doubt the incident was politically motivated, but the novel prompts the readers to ponder over the question whether the incident was morally justifiable. About the concept of ecological vision, in his seminal essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, William Rueckert writes, "The idea that nature should also be protected by human laws, that trees (dolphins and whales, hawks and whooping cranes) should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights is one of the most marvellous and characteristic parts of the ecological vision" (Rueckert 108). When Rueckert points out, 'nature should also be protected by human laws' it seems he believes and he knows that human beings have already been given protection by human laws. However, the Morichjhapi incident is an exemplification of exploitation of men by men for their self-interests. The incident does not stand on moral grounds and it was against the theory of ecological vision as well. It would not be wrong to suggest that in the Morichjhapi massacre incident human laws to protect human beings were not taken into account. The then government said that the settlement by the refugees was illegal and they were undermining the ecosystem of the island. But were they really causing harm to the ecosystem of the place? Were they not innocent people trapped in the hands of the politicians? Nazia Hasan writes,

"They are the unfortunate 'no lands' children who found no home when the nation of India was partitioned in 1947 and 1971 subsequently. They chose Mother Nature over all governments of the three sparkling new nations after drinking seers of their relatives' blood" (Hasan 185).

The idea of conservation of the eco-system has in fact two grounds. One is practical, i.e., for the survival of human beings ecological equilibrium is a prerequisite. The other one is ethical, which contends that like humans, the non-human world has also the right to survive, and man has no authority to exploit everything including other human beings for his growth and development. In the novel Kusum questions, "Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us? Do they know what is being done

in their names?" (Ghosh 262). Ghosh has tried to depict a situation where in the name of conservation so many times radical environmentalists forget the realities to the practical world, and the other side of the picture is this that throughout the world political activities are being executed in the disguise of conservation of nature. In the storyline, it is described that earlier the communist party of West Bengal took stand in the favour of the Bangladeshi refugees, but when the party came into power, it evacuated the Morichjhapi island, the place where these refugees were settling down. It was the communist party which at first tempted these homeless people to move towards Morichjhapi and settle there. But later the settlement was declared illegal, and a massacre took place for the sake of conservation of the island. No doubt conservation is imperative, but conservation should not stand against the weak; moreover, it should stand for the weak, without differentiating between the human and the non-human worlds. It should be done in a humanitarian manner for a sustainable development of life on the earth.

Through this ecologically conscious novel, Ghosh has presented a true picture of the real world where humanity has been perpetually losing its basic tenets. Since time immemorial, man has given every effort to make him stand apart from other animals, and has established the base for humanity. But today's anthropocentric civilisation is unable to carry all of those humanitarian beliefs forward. Man's anthropocentric attitude has been motivating him to bring into play every other entity to fulfil his own purposes. *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* states that the root of the environmental crisis "lies in the human-centric model of the history originating with Greeks" (Childs 65). There was a time when the idea of anthropocentrism was flourishing among the humans but today up to a great extent anthropocentrism has controlled the thought-process of the present civilisation. Man has become more of an animal, and weathering this crisis, for those who are still following the ways of civilised human beings, is a big challenge. As Kusum says, "As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place of animals, and 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 262).

In an era when man bears the backlashes of his human-centred exploits and the problem of environmental-crisis has taken the centre stage. *The Hungry Tide* brings consciousness about the non-human world on the foreground. At various places in the novel, the novelist has portrayed scenes delineating the ecological changes that had taken place in the Sundarbans. Nirmal recollected that years back when he with his wife Nilima had arrived, the environment of Lusibari was different and ecologically better. He could no more sight those birds which used to cover the sky at sunset. In the beginning, he thought that their exile was temporary but they never returned. Nirmal wrote in his note-book; "I remembered how when I first came to Lusibari, the sky would be darkened by birds at sunset. Many years had passed since I'd seen such flights of birds. When I first noticed their absence, I thought they would soon come back but they had not" (Ghosh 215). At many points in the novel Ghosh sounds like a deep ecologist. "Deep ecologists argue that environmental philosophy must recognize the values that inhere objectively in nature independently of human wants, needs or desires" (Keller 206). The novel raises a pertinent question; would there be some laws to question the extinction of those birds? With such dismissal of a part of life from the life on earth as a whole does not show any derangement in a shorter run, but of course sooner or later it will exhibit its noxious effect. These small dismissals may cause future ecological crisis; "The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take, to submerge the tide country? Not much – a minuscule change in the level of the sea would be enough" (Ghosh 215).

All ecological studies espouse that for a sustainable development ecological balance is essential. Everything, living or non-living, existing on this earth has a major or minor role in maintaining equilibrium. The novel has an instance where it informs its readers, how important crabs are for the existence of the mangrove forests. The author writes, "they kept the mangrove alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris. Didn't they represent some fantastically large proportion of the system's biomass?" (Ghosh 142). Crab is the food for not only for the people of the Sundarbans but it also proffers life to the world's largest mangrove forest. At every point Ghosh has made effort to familiarise his readers with the incredible bio-diversity of the Sundarbans. There is a vision that man should understand the value of non-human world and the inter-dependency between the two.

In the modern world, nothing has damaged the eco-system as badly as 'industrialization' and 'development of technology'. Undoubtedly, industrialization and technology have been helping human to develop to an advanced stage, but chances are that the price that this earth is paying for this development will cost the life on the earth. None can prove that primitive ways of living can cause damage to the ecosystem; those ways were always in harmony with nature. *The Hungry Tide* describes how the thoughts of the educated mass and people sitting at important places have changed about the olden ways of living in unity with nature. While the refugees were settling in Morichjhapi and were choosing ancient ways of living Ghosh points out in Kusum's words, "No human being could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived- by fishing, by clearing lands and by planting the soil" (Ghosh 262). However, educated

Kanai and Fokir's wife felt that Fokir's ways of living were not correct. They found him impractical and irresponsible. Fokir's understanding of nature was valued by only Piyali. Ghosh successfully and symbolically hits the present day Indian education system that is aimed to produce professionals but at the same time it is taking the generation away from the basic understanding of nature and man-nature relationship.

The Hungry Tide also highlights the idea that for monetary gains corrupt politicians themselves allow their men to breach the law. On the one hand, these politicians declare an area as conserved, and penalize poor people who try to intrude upon these forbidden areas for their livelihood. On the other hand, the same politicians for monetary gains close their eyes when their own men exploit those conserved regions, not only this, but they also promote the production of products which are in fact very harmful for the eco-system because ban on such products may hamper their income. Moyna told Kanai that the new nylon nets which were used by the fishermen to catch the spawn of the tiger prawns, were so fine that the eggs of other fish also got caught in that net. Nevertheless, those net could not be banned, "because there's a lot of money in prawns and the traders had paid off the politicians. What do they care – or the politicians for that matter? It's people like us who're going to suffer and it's up to us to think ahead" (Ghosh 134).

Among the major characters of the novel, Piyali Roy (Piya) represents the privileged world and Fokir stands for the unprivileged. To its culmination, the story comes to a point where Piyali chooses to settle in Lusibari for some more years to continue with her research, she manages to bring some help from an organisation for the poor people of Lusibari to improve the quality of their life. This ending of the novel sets some hope that if people like Piya from the developed world come forward, the life of these Sundarbans dwellers that live in utter destitution can be improved. "Ghosh wants to suggest that if the people of both privileged and impoverished backgrounds are united, then there will be prosperous future for the world's poor. The relationship between Piyali and Fokir symbolizes the union between two" (Alexander 176).

A message that on this planet earth neither the non-humans are here to dominate the human world nor human should try control the non-human world is reiterated throughout the novel. The relationship between the human and the non-human worlds is inter-dependent. Sometimes man uses them, kills them, and exploits them for his insatiable avarice. On other occasions, non-humans harm man. But it is also true that they are complement to each other. Amitav Ghosh has pictured a world where he has successfully shown the difficulties faced by the people living in the Sundarbans and the environmental crisis faced by the unique biosphere as well. The novel makes the readers conscious about the life and geographical conditions of the Sundarbans.

Furthermore, *The Hungry Tide* toys with a couple of ideas. One of the contrasting radical environmentalists and the other of the practical human world; when Kanai tried to convince Piya that it was necessary to kill the tiger which had already killed two people and some cattle, Piya was not able to identify herself with this fact. She believes if the tiger had killed people and cattle that did not justify man to behave like the tiger too. She says, "This is an animal Kanai" (Ghosh 294), "You can't take revenge on an animal" (Ghosh 294). Readers are left to think and decide whether the killing of the tiger was valid or not. However, Rueckert's concept of ecological vision was absent in the act of killing the tiger. The chapter entitled 'Interrogations' throws light on man's twofold attitude. "But Kanai," Piya retorted, "everywhere in the world dozens of people are killed every day – on roads, in cars, in traffic. Why is this any worse?" "Because we are complicit in this Piya; that's why" (Ghosh 301). For humans there are laws to punish them only after a trial, but for the tiger there was none. Anthropocentrism stands as an obstacle against the actualisation of ecological vision.

In the background, the endangered dolphins Orcaella also plays a crucial part in the story. This endangered species of dolphins is the subject of study which Piya undertakes. In fact, Piya came to the Sundarbans only in the search of these dolphins. The novel highlights the woeful plight of this mammal for the conservationists to step up their efforts. A glimpse of the anthropocentric world's cruelty towards them is evident in this dialogue between Piya and Kanai,

"The Mekong Orcaella had shared Cambodia's misfortunes: in the 1970s they had suffered the ravages of indiscriminate American carpet bombing. Later they too had been massacred by Khmer Rouge cadres who had hit upon the idea of using dolphin oil to supplement their dwindling supplies of petroleum" (Ghosh 305). "Do you mean to tell me," Kanai said, "that they were melted down and used as diesel fuel?" "yes, in effect" (Ghosh 306).

Interestingly, as the novel draws to its close, it discerns Ghosh's strident note of helpless human existence against the powerful nature. Man who thinks of himself as the mightiest among all creatures becomes helpless and weak when nature turns up with its authority. The storm described in the novel is a symbol of nature's superiority over man. Nature checks, controls and maintains equilibrium on the planet earth, though its manner may cause great destruction for the anthropocentric man. Animals know that to survive they should live in communion with nature, but man has an overbearing attitude to nature which surely is doomed to spell disaster.

To sum up, the present study has brought a few facts into light. Firstly, it emerges that Amitav Ghosh has consciously endeavoured to pass on a message that an ecological vision is imperatively required to bulwark

the endangered ecosystem of the Sundarbans. Seemingly, the people leading a miserable existence in the Sundarbans and the non-human world of this world's largest mangrove forest are not taken earnestly by the governments and have constantly been a victim of shallow politics. It appears that the novel, in an ecologically disturbed world, strives to make its readers aware of the man-nature relationship and man-man relationship's effects on man-nature relationship. Since man reigns supreme in the hierarchy of intelligence, hence, it is his obligation to eschew violent encounters between man and animals without causing much damage to both the sides. The Morichjhapi incident, the life in Lusibari, the encounter with the tiger, the concern about the endangered dolphins, the mighty tsunami-like storm, the geographical conditions of the Sundarbans, and the importance of crabs, all these together seem to symbolise that life on earth or on a part of the earth like the Sundarbans comprise human and non-human worlds both, and for a sustainable development man must abandon his anthropocentric attitude and come forward to stand and advocate for the deprived and the weak, whether they belong to the human world or to the non-human world. Man cannot disregard that he alone cannot manage this planet earth, and therefore, he is a part of nature and must live in unity with nature. Nevertheless, man must come forward to support the weaker section of his own species instead of exploiting them as if their fragile existence does not prick their conscience.

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