



The Ecological Concerns and Displacement of the People of the Sundarbans Reflected through the Prism of Amitav Ghosh's Hungry Tide

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *Hungry Tide*, tries to find out the vulnerable condition of the economically weak and marginalized people and raises the pertinent observations about the conflict between the policies of the government and conventional use of land by the people. He is also equally equivocal about the issues of identity and social justice. Though *Hungry Tide* does not explicitly deal with climate change, it encapsulates the extreme vulnerability of the Sundarbans and the disputes that pose a serious problem when it comes to solve the issue that is environmental and political. Situated in the huge expanse the Sundarbans mangrove forest stretching out to Bangladesh and India. The *Hungry Tide* delineates the changes through the perceptions and observations of three protagonists. Ghosh does not want to identify the sense of aesthetics and sublimity as a distinct episode rather he tries to make a blending of ethics and politics that helps locate our elucidation with the natural world, leading us to work in tune with the people who have been side-lined. The *Hungry Tide* is a unique portrayal of Amitav Ghosh that forms an assortment of identity, ecology, migration, environmentalism and landscape. The article makes an attempt to explore the environmental consciousness of the local people, the crisis of identity and over-emphasis on the Tiger Project. Another important objective of the paper is to provide a canopy of the interplay of equilibrium between ecology and human

beings.

Introduction

The archipelago of Sundarbans is a piece of land situated between the Bay of Bengal sharing the periphery of India and Bangladesh. The Sundarbans is the ingenious habitat of a large variety of endangered species, flora and fauna, the Royal Bengal Tiger and the Irrawaddy dolphins. The novel is weaved through the characterization of a series of events and the tidal landscape with the background. The delineation of the characters of Piya, Fokir, Kanai, Moyna, Nirmal and Nilima are intertwined with each other and reflects the socio-cultural and environmental issues of the Sundarbans. Piya, Fokir and Kanai are concerned with the geographical and ecological issues of the Sundarbans. Nirmal and Kanai raise the issues of the refugees of the tidal country. As an activist Nilima focuses on the instantaneous complications of the colony of Lusibari. The Hungry Tide deals with the issues of the practical problems of encroaching mutual space and uncertainty of habitation of local people in the ecologically fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans. Though it is a tough job to address the ecological concerns, Ghosh tries to build a mutually understanding place where both animals and human beings can equally share the same territory of the Sundarbans. Marcia Langton states: Conservation, as a general descriptor of human activities that are intended to mitigate against environmental degradation and biodiversity loss, refers primarily to human decision-making about wise use of resources and maintenance of the natural and cultural values of land, water and biota, including the systems that support them. How humans make decisions is dependent on their cultural, social, political and economic contexts. Aboriginal decision-making styles, and related factors, are of relevance to the development and design of conservation policy and planning (Bowler et al. 68).

The Hungry Tide deals with a pertinent issue of the conflicts of space where there is a continuous tug-of-war for leeway between animals and human beings. Amartya Sen says: Consider our responsibilities toward the species that are threatened with destruction. We may attach importance to the preservation of these species not merely because the presence of these species in the world may sometimes enhance our own living standards. This is where Gautama Buddha's argument, presented in Sutta Nipata, becomes directly and immediately relevant. He argued that the mother has responsibility toward her child not merely because she had generated her, but also because she can do many things for the child that the child cannot itself do. In the environmental context it can be argued that since we are enormously more

powerful than other species, . . . [this can be a ground for our] taking fiduciary responsibility for other creatures on whose lives we can have a powerful influence (Sen 52).

The dominant theme of the novel is to highlight the binary of nature and civilization where the spatiotemporal relationships propels the interference of human beings in the vigour of nature. But ultimately the forces of nature and human beings gets blended with each other. This correlation supports the views of Bakhtin- “Nature cannot be separated from the earth” (Bakhtin). Ghosh’s *Hungry Tide* prescribes a comprehensive ecological program that is subtly susceptible to the collaborating interdependence of the human beings and biotic species that share the same territory of the Sundarbans. Ghosh tries to construe that exploitation of nature by developmental projects designed by human beings is a common phenomenon, but what is centrality to the template is that a symbiotic relationship is to be forged to design a suitable structure for contending with the changes affecting the local people brought about by the forces of global economy and heightened environmental pressure. William Wordsworth writes: “Little we see in Nature that is ours” (Wordsworth). The poet argues that the natural world always acts as a sort of reflector in which human beings have much to learn themselves- a reposeful counterforce to the disorderly urban life, and that buoys up introspection. The poet raises the issue, as human beings cut off from nature, they hardly find any expanse for self-examination.

In the reserved areas of the Sundarbans the Bengal tigers are accorded the world status. They have the freedom to move freely in the forest and maraud the human settlements quietly. The settlers of the Sundarbans have frequently barged in conflicts with the tigers and subsequently fallen prey to the ferocious predators. And this enraged the forest officials that resulted in extreme humiliation and harassment of the in-laws of the victim. The preservation of wildlife has significantly been prioritized and the life and property of this tide country is constantly being rendered endangered. The sufferings of the dwellers of this tide country pained the novelist and he expressed his agony in the character of Kusum: ‘The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. “This island has to be saved for trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world” (Ghosh 261).

Here in the name preservation tigers are eulogised as sublime by the perception of the cosmopolitan image where the attacks of villagers by tigers are implicitly ignored. Significantly, the poor villagers

whose life and livelihood are completely hinged upon the resources of the forest have tactfully sidelined while the tigers are romanticized to fulfil the desires of the global economic drivers in an iconic structure of colonial ideology. Though the novel does not directly deal with the issue of how in a mutually shared territory both humans and tigers can live peacefully, but the issue of the disappearance of dolphins has been highlighted that shows the population of dolphin starts declining owing to the activities of bycatch. But their disappearance is not any kind of simpler equation than that of the tigers. Huggan & Tiffin (185) examine that such conflicts had been discussed by means of both environmentalist and postcolonial critics who're "alert to the dilemmas involved in retaining endangered ecosystems and animals whilst the livelihoods of nearby (subaltern) peoples are concurrently placed at chance." By projecting and romanticizing the dominance of animals over the poor and subjugated people *The Hungry Tide* comes up with a compelling critique of the projects, namely the Project Tiger that priorities the preservation of wilderness and species by way of negating the existence of the marginalized people who equally share the territory of national parks and wildlife sanctum of the Sundarbans. Ramachandra Guha argues in his trenchant critique of wilderness preservation, "because India is a long-settled and densely populated country in which agrarian populations have a finely balanced relationship with nature, the setting aside of wilderness areas has resulted in a direct transfer of resources from the poor to the rich.... The designation of tiger reserves was made possible only by the physical displacement of existing villages and their inhabitants." Creating a new category of "ecological refugees" in the process (Guha 107). Thus, *The Hungry Tide* negates the conventional abstract ideals of sublime that may question our predetermined premise and spur us to develop an ecological outlook where there is no peripheral demarcation between human and nonhuman, rather it provides the perspective of mutuality rather than dominance. This harmonizing ecocentrism is an indispensable move for negating the anthropocentric ideology that considers the nonhuman as supplying human ends. Buell goes on to qualify that this is by no means to suggest that environment justice advocates do not care for the earth; however, they reject "an ethic of concern only for nature preservation" at the cost of people, especially poor and disempowered groups (Buell 297-281).

Ghosh's ecological concern is largely reflected in what Tsing Says, "What if we imagined a human nature that shifted historically together with varied webs of interspecies dependence?" Tsing (218) calls her webs of interdependence "unruly edges." She continues, "Human nature is an interspecies relationship." The ecological complication becomes problematic when we negate the symbiotic approach and adopt one-dimensional attitude. But the novel does not resolve the issue, rather it opens up

avenues for the readers to resolve the problematic issue of the biosphere that requires equal justice of how human and nonhuman live together mutually in a shared territory of the Sundarbans. Nature, Collingwood (214) remarked, has no “inside.” “In the case of nature, this distinction between the outside and the inside of an event does not arise. The events of nature are mere events, not the acts of agents whose thought the scientist endeavours to trace.” ‘Listen! she cried, holding a hand to her ear, pointing in the direction of the exhalations. He nodded, but without showing any surprise; it was though there were nothing unexpected about this encounter and he had known all along that they would be there. Could it be that this was the spot he had been aiming for the night before-with the idea of showing her the dolphins.....how could he have known that they would be there on that day, at that time? Groups of migrating Orcaella were anything but predictable in their movements. She decided to shrug off these questions for the time being. The job at hand was to record all the data that could be conjured out of this fog (Ghosh 113).

Fokir’s guidance acts for Piya are best be described as a real supervisor as he is the personification of the indigenous knowledge and experience of the tidal people. Fokir’s role, what Schmalz, calls are “incomparable” for Piya and she believes what Fokir does” (Schmalz). Fokir’s instinctive sense of realizing the movement of the dolphins demonstrated his deep connection with the ecology of the Sundarbans and also established the notion that the inhabitants not only utilize their comprehension of the Sundarbans for the purpose of using the resources in a serviceable way, but also their involvement lends credence to the idea that they are indelibly connected to the Sundarbans. It also negates our established notion of identifying of animal consciousness by way of applying the academically nurtured human intellect. The dramatic moment gives the idea of a collaborative potentiality in which the inhabitants share a common territory in the vicinity of their natural surroundings. Fokir’s apprehension in best described in what Alan Weisman says “We can’t survive in managed forests” (Weisman).

Fokir’s indigenous knowledge of the ecosystem of the Sundarbans found expression in a cosmopolitan research scholar Piya who could in a better way explain the knowledge combined with her academic pursuits followed by her global connections further got systematized to demand for change. The economically weak Fokir is not traditionally educated, but this subaltern with his local ecological knowledge was endeared by Piya and accompanied her sojourn in the Sundarbans challenged the established discourse of the power of colonial ideology and accentuated a more subtle engagement with nature and its people. But Fokir’s idyllic and nondescript character and his penchant for nature failed to adequately attend to the intricacies of emerging ecological problems and human equity in the

environment that globalization demands. In spite of her sound educational mooring equipped with high-tech GPS Piya hinges upon Fokir to navigate her journey on water. Ghosh's depiction of Fokir challenges the stereotypical civility and this idyllic villager comes out as the embodiment of an ecological avant-garde.

The way to understanding of nature has been conceptualized in the characters of Fokir. The depiction of the character of Fokir has raised the issue of Ghosh's narration of ecocentrism. Being a poor and local fisherman Fokir had to kill animals for eking out a livelihood. But his consciousness regarding conservation of nature and animals accentuates the spectrum that the local people are equally conscious of preserving the landscape of the Sundarbans. Ghosh tries to give the notion that ecological concerns can justifiably be solved by the joint venture of the local people and the so-called conservationists. On all levels of the story, in fact, the forces of the global interact powerfully with the local, be that in ecological, economic, or cultural terms. And, in the end, an engaged globalism and an engaged localism emerge as co-constitutive, and are posited together opposite the force of destructive national and regional politics (Weik 121). "I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them.? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? 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. No human being could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived- by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil" (Ghosh 262).

Kusum points to Project Tiger which was established in 1973 heightened the status of the landscape of the Sundarbans and acquired the designation of the largest natural habitat of the Royal Bengal tiger. Kusum's articulation resonates with the rhetoric that people like her are deemed as redundant who must be done away with, so much so as the so-called environmentalists want to get rid of these ecological redundant people. According to Pramanik, the increased exploitation of the forest is directly related to the decrease in the tiger population in the Sunderbans. "Tigers are the best conservators of the forest. They keep human beings away. If there are no tigers in the Sunderbans, the forest area would be left bare in months," he said. By way of delineating the plight of the ecologically fragile people, Ghosh reminds us of the people who live in the vicinity of the forest where conservation is ensured by means of brutal forces, ignoring the human value, turns out a workable choice. What is the driving force of the novel is its robust interpretation of complex situations where human beings are picturized as a

threatening entity and landscape and its associated animals are considered as heavenly abode? John C. Howley writes, “The Hungry Tide shares Ghosh’s concern for the individual against a broader historical—or even, in this case, geographical backdrop may be relevant in this context. The novel covers the very intellectual territory which scholars of ecological studies need to traverse if we are to think in genuinely interdisciplinary ways about the relationship between the representation of ecology in diverse textual field [literature, history, popular fiction, journalism, travel writing] and their historical and contemporary geo-political realities” (Hawley 131-132).

Amitav Ghosh depicted historically the gruesome episode of violent eviction and massacre of the refugees that acquired the epithet of the Morichjhapi massacre. The Morichjhapi massacre is a saga of treachery and concocted brutality sponsored by the nation state ousts the people what they consider their home. Kusum realizes that the refugees like her is less valueless in comparison to the Royal Bengal Tiger who has acquired the status of national animal of India. Ghosh’s characterization of Kusum is an attempt to remind the urban elites of their perception of conservation that negates the existence of the local people who equally share the common territory of the Sundarbans. Amitav Ghosh’s environmental concern stands in sharp contrast to the global environmental theory that primarily focuses on the endangered species and are less concerned with the marginal and oppressed human beings. Buell goes on to qualify that this is by no means to suggest that environmental justice advocates don’t care for the earth; however, they reject “an ethic of concern only for nature preservation” at the cost of people, especially poor and disempowered groups (Buell 279- 281). The novel not only deals with the issue of justice for the refugees like Kusum who have been displaced for the conservation and preservation of tigers, but also shows deep apprehension about the ecologically fragile landscape of the Sundarbans. Piya recounts the fury of cyclone that affects every creature living in this deltaic region her description of a flock of exhausted white birds and a tiger in following ways: A white cloud came floating down from the sky and settled on the remnants of the drowned forest. It was a flock of white birds and they were so exhausted as to oblivious of Piya and Fokir One of the birds was so close she was able to pick it up in her hands: it was trembling and she could feel the fluttering of its heart. Eventually the birds had been trying to stay within the storm’s eye.... she saw a tiger pulling itself out of the water and into a tree, on the far side of the island.... (Ghosh 389). In a pragmatic way Ghosh comes back to his ecological concerns in which human beings, animals and other species are equivalently vulnerable to the hazards of cyclone. At the end of the novel when an immense cyclone flares up and Fokir loses his life in the devastation it strikes. The Garjontola island completely got engulfed by the surge of tidal wave

and impacts all the living creatures under the ferocity of the storm. Ghosh accentuates those humans and other living creature forms a congenial part of the broader biosphere of the Sundarbans and the analogy in which they share the same fate.

At the end of the novel, we see the fate of Piya and Fokir are ensnared by the violent cyclone. It is a terrible situation and in their desperate fight for survival both Piya and Fokir came together. Piya realises that environment perceived by her underwent major shift and proceeds to develop an idea of equality where subaltern and elite culture mingles with each other. Ghosh strives to go in for an anthropological social change that demands the development of cross-cultural matrix. The Hungry Tide not only deals with the pain and agony of the displaced local people, but also an effort to build a cross-cultural prism where the barriers of cosmopolitanism and locality tends to be slackened. Ghosh delineation of subaltern space challenged the established theory of cosmopolitan hegemonic approach to conservation of nature and natural animals and clearly advocated that any one, be it cosmopolitan or others, must be ethical and sensitive to distinctiveness and local conditions.

Conclusion

The novel is a subtle texture of a congenial balance between human beings and nature. The coexistence theory comprising of man and nature is the cornerstone of the novel. It drives home the point that there is symbiotic relationship between man and nature. Amitav Ghosh makes an attempt to depict different characters to highlight the sincere ecological concern of the people who live in the vicinity of nature. The novel is a powerful creation of environmental consciousness that correlates the burning issues of environmental question by way of giving priority of human justice. It also makes a valid observation that environmentalism is not a distinct matter, rather it is equally concerned with the question of human settlement. Amitav Ghosh's creation of literature with the objective of environmental and social consciousness is pragmatic and gives out the sense of "a catalyst for social action and exploratory literary analysis into a full-fledged form of engaged cultural critique" (Huggan and Tiffin 1-23). The Hungry Tide captures the trials and tribulations of the displacement of the local people, pain, agony and hardship of the people of the tide country and highlights the integrated vigour of the landscape of the Sundarbans and finally the inconsiderate measures of the government that negates the endeavour of the people of the tide country who try to accommodate themselves in the territory of the Sundarbans. At the same the author makes it clear that without evaluating the issue of human settlements the environmental issues cannot be addressed.

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