



**Man-Nature Relationship in  
Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry  
Tide***

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This study examines Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) in the context of ecocriticism. The study also examines how Ghosh has represented Sundarbans in a unique, ecological system and the landscape in a specific eco-political context. Besides, an attempt has been made to demonstrate how Ghosh has used his various skills and strategies in enacting the ecological dimension in relation to a complex social milieu and the problems of powers this relationship implies. From deracination to cosmopolitanism, from alienation to belongingness, Ghosh's understanding of the politics of ecology ranges across various spaces from different angles.

The central focus of the study is to show how Sundarbans has been represented in the colonial narratives in contradistinction to Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* that is written from an explicitly postcolonial perspective. In this sense, the historical dimension is also brought to the foreground exposing the complex relation between ideology, power and nature. The study gives the details about how nature has been perceived, valued and portrayed in Indian-English and British literatures by various writers.

**Keywords:** nature, *The Hungry Tide*, Sundarban, animals, ecocriticism, marginalization

### I. Amitav Ghosh and Nature

Since time immemorial, human beings have a symbiotic relationship with nature. Therefore, it is obvious to have nature as a pertinent theme in both oral and written traditions. Nature has been a major element of love, veneration and adoration playing a vital role in art and life. However, nature, the savior of the planet Earth, lost its virginity and wilderness due to the unregulated and unlawful encroachment of human beings to its pristine realm. Humans manipulated the plants and animals to their use and existence. Directly and indirectly, they have been accountable for causing damage and destruction to the nature (Callicott 58).

The novel as a unique literary genre tackles various issues, but nature has been a central theme in the Indian fiction. Writers like Amitav Ghosh (1956- ) go beyond ecological concerns and interpretations in most of their novels. He depicts in the wider context the themes of exploitation of the environment and people as well (Bose 67). Ghosh is a well-known Indian postcolonial novelist whose works address the colonial and post-colonial experiences of India, Burma and Bangladesh (Tiwari 79). Like other postcolonial writers, Ghosh's orientation goes more for the local than the global. This is evident and obvious from his selection of such a topic for his novel, *The Hungry Tide*, the characters and the representation of their lives and environment (Ibid 79). Winner of the Crossword Brook Award for Fiction, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is a contemporary tale of adventure, nature, refugees, identity and history.

Ecological concerns have been the major subject of Ghosh. Man-nature relationship is vividly portrayed in most of his literary works. Naturally, therefore, any threat perception to its flora and fauna, to its biological and physical nature, has become the critical concern in the works of Ghosh (Hawley 86). Such environmental crisis that challenges the Mother Earth, makes Man-Nature relationship too fragile, and endangers has acquired existential dimension in his works. He writes vividly and elaborately about man's relationship with nature and the factors which are responsible to disrupt and create existential problem (Ibid 86).

Ghosh has written many novels to his credit. Nevertheless, in this ecological novel, *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh has grappled with ecological questions. Many reviewers namely W. R. Greer, Ron Charles, Sandip Roy, Alfred Hickling and Jeremy Worman have pointed out facets like the historical details of the Sundarbans, the story and craftsmanship of Ghosh while interpreting this novel (Bose 89). None of these critics has given a space for a discussion on the ecological aspects, which is persistent in this novel.

Ghosh's serious concern of ecology is obviously expressed in a beautiful manner throughout the narrative structure of *The Hungry Tide* (Dhawan 51). In Ghosh's words:

When the tides create a new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right, they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impossibly dense. (Ghosh 7-8)

Ghosh's minute description of nature in *The Hungry Tide* is regarded as the epitome of an ecocritical writer who attempts to give a loud voice to the entity nature. One can actually feel the river flowing, the mangroves being submerged in the high tide, the crocodile moving stealthily in the water, the tiger watching everyone from a distance (Dhawan 76).

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* moves around two major plots. The first plot tackles the predicament of a group

of refugees (Kusum, Horen and Moyna) from Bangladesh who found themselves in an encounter with the Indian state in 1979. The other major plot is the complex relationship between humans and animals. The major characters struggle to survive in a threatening and hostile ecosystem (Bhatt 95). The Sunderbans becomes a blighted environment where life is hostile and unsafe. Ghosh describes this environment of Sunderban accurately where "beauty is nothing but the start of terror we can hardly bear, and we adore it because of the serene scorn it could kill us with. Every angel's terrifying" (Ghosh 69).

*The Hungry Tide* brought to the light the incredible beauty and presence of Sunderban, an archipelago of islands little known in India and probably an area of darkness. For an ordinary tourist it offers nothing. One needs the real eye to see its hidden beauty. Apparently, wild-looking green patches of Sunderban surrounded with water possess history having multiple layers. "It is like an onion; one can just keep peeling layers upon layers but can never come to the core; there is always more" (Ghosh 95).

The narrative starts with clear encounter between Kanai and Piya on their way to Sunderbans. They enter in the lives of the people staying in Lusibari, one of the islands of the Sunderbans. More especially Fokir, a local fisherman and Nilima, the organizer of Bodban Trust Bon Bibi, the God mother of the local people explore the apparently ordered but complicated history of the island and its people. They witness the poverty and suffering of the people living in the periphery and eking out their existence with all difficulties from the hungry tide; infested with hungry creatures from the dead accounts of Nirmal, the deceased teacher and once a revolutionary, Kanai, the translator from the city, unveils the ruthless atrocities of the government machinery, the so-called savior for the poor and unprivileged (Bhatt 99). Moreover, *The Hungry Tide* ends in Piya's arrival in Lusibari with all goodwill gesture and fund to improve the condition of the inhabitants (Tiwari 74).

### II. The Blighted Environment in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

The term ecocriticism refers to critical perspectives that pays close attention to the relationship between literature and the natural world. Ecology is the study of how living things live where they do (Armbruster 28). This means finding out as to how a plant or animal survives and reproduces in a certain surrounding, *environment* or climate. By 'environment', it is meant not only the soil and climate but also other living things of the same species and of other species, plants and animals (Callicott 98).

Environment originates from the combination of two French words *environ* and *environer*, meaning 'around', 'round about', 'to surround' or 'to encompass' (Ibid 98). These in tum are derived from Old French *virer* and *vuiron*, meaning 'to circle', 'to tum about', 'around', 'the country around', or 'circuit' (Ibid 98). From this etymology, one concludes that environment means the things or events that surround something else. Moreover, environment is the most vital part of ecology. Most living things are slave to environment but contrary happens in case of the human beings because they make the environment slave to their needs and necessities (Cohen 39).

By this definition, the natural environment is the environment that precedes human presence or human disturbance or management. However, the tragic fact is that man molds nature to serve his purposes, which are momentary in comparison to the eternity of the former. Such a definition contains two errors. First, it suggests that the natural world is static and fixed and that humans have distributed and changed it in some way. Our current understanding of nature as dynamic and changing is quite different, and our definition needs to reflect this (Callicott 99).

Second, the definition implies that there was a time before humans when the forest was virgin or the wilderness was pristine. Then humans appeared and changed nature into something else. This outdated model usually places indigenous people within nature and then focuses on the change induced by westerners. Although ecologists accept the idea that natural communities of plants and animals were present before human evolution, such communities demonstrate the widespread impacts of indigenous humans; once humans become part of the landscape. Humans manipulated plants and animals by feeding on them, they manipulated fire and the constitution of the forests and they appear to have caused the extinction of fragile and large animals. Human impact is not a recent event, although today it is much widespread and has more serious repercussions than even before (Callicott 99). Ron Charles in his review on *The Hungry Tide* mentions that it "is a great swirl of political, social and environmental issues, presented through a story that's full of romance, suspense and poetry" (Charles 55). To his opinion, "Ghosh's treatment has made this beautiful, treacherous and dynamic place as a provocative symbol of the modern world" (Ibid 55). Dramatically the novel moves as a series of a complicate unassociated stories, legends, fables and histories. Charles feels that "Ghosh has presented such problems with all remarkable sincerity and self-

consciousness more like a teacher than a novelist has" (Ibid 55). Sandip Roy, a noted reviewer, declares Ghosh's sparkling prose *The Hungry Tide* 'more as an epic than a struggle of man versus beast'. Roy vehemently states that "Piya's environmentalism seeks good solutions either for the predicament of the Fokirs of the world, or the poorest of the poor, and the dispossessed" (Charles 57). When Piya declares the terror of the devastation of a tiger, Kanai ponders, "Isn't that a horror too -- that we can feel the suffering of an animal but not of human beings?" (Ibid 57) Roy mentions, "whether he is writing about the teak forests of Burma or the deserts of Egypt, as a storyteller, Ghosh is masterful. But when he is in his own Bengali milieu, as with his previous novel, *The Shadow Lines*, he is just effortless, inhabiting the landscape, both physical and emotional, with vividness and particularity as if he were watching this clash of class and culture through Piya's dolphin-watching binoculars" (Roy 84). It is Roy's conviction that "*The Hungry Tide* may not have the grand historical sweep of Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* or the imaginative splicing of history and science in his *The Calcutta Chromosome*, but in some ways, it is a more straightforward novel of fish and tigers, of a perfect storm and murky backwaters" (Ibid 84).

Alfred Hickling enjoys Ghosh's adventurous river trip in search of India's modern identity, *The Hungry Tide*. He feels that "Ghosh's book is about more than the pursuit of a disappointing dolphin. It is a Conradian expedition and a Forsterish collision between Western assumptions and Indian reality" (Hickling 28).

Jeremy Worman states that "Ghosh interweaves a complex pattern of narratives, embracing such themes as myth, politics, colonialism, other forms of life, family history, and the drama of individual survival as it battles with extreme forces of nature- including dangerous rivers and forests, man-eating tigers and hurricanes" (Worman 49).

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a novel of place and the oppressed, marginalized, voiceless people of the remote islands. Morichjhapi is one of these islands in the Sundarbans, which is regarded as a big shelter of those illegal settlers witnessed a series of violent actions. In the late seventies, thousands of Sundarbans have been killed in a tragic incident that is known as 'the Morichjhapi incident'. The key figure of the novel, Kusum, passed away in this chaotic incident. Moreover, the memory of Morichjhapi incident was an obvious condemnation of the unjust and brutality committed against the refugees and the settlers. The unjust distribution of resources between the islanders and the Royal Bengal tigers of the Sundarbans to reserve the forest shows this catastrophic event. Ghosh viewed the government's primacy on environment and its use of force in Morichjhapi clearly especially when he described the catastrophic death of thousands of refugees. This was viewed by the Sundarbans islanders as "a treason not only of refugees and of the poor and marginalized in general, but also, of the Bengali *nimnobar* personality" (Tiwari 89). The would-be inhabitants of the island were promised this land and the way they were betrayed, as the dwellers of Morichjhapi stated in detailed description. The details included the concept that refugees and islanders enjoyed solidarity and the limitless spirit of *bonhomie* "whose similar experiences of marginalization brought them together to bond over a common cause which was to fight for a niche for themselves" and that was "an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without" (Ghosh 258). Kusum's fury and outrage are enough to prove this point: "the worst part is to sit here and listen to the policemen making announcements that our existence is worth less than dirt or dust" (Ghosh 259). Ghosh describes the scenario of those refugees and islanders, when Kusum informs Nirmal Bose: "Saar, this island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, and it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world. Every day, sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, 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 had 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 cleaning land and by planting the soil." (Ghosh 261-262) Ghosh is not only concerned with environment but also related issues such as the impacts of scientific development (IT) vis-a-vis the plight of the marginalized. As he points out: "If you care for the environment, does that mean you don't care about the plight of human beings, especially impoverished people?" He has ventured his narrative journey to Sundarban, which is the setting of this particular enchanting novel. His concern for environment is seen as he rightly says: "Climate

change is a matter of particular urgency when you are from a certain part of the world. In the event of global warming, the parts that would be most affected, really, are the rivers and deltas: the delta of the Nile, of the Ganges, of the Brahmaputra” (Ghosh 266). Expressing concern over the ecological decay in the Sundarbans Ghosh clarifies that in the interview, “You hardly see any birds at all. I remember there was a time when you could see great flights of birds, but that entire mass of bird life has just completely vanished. In years past, when you went to the mudflats, they would be covered with crabs. Now, the crabs have just vanished. Similarly, the Sundarbans was named after a kind of tree called the sundari tree. These trees have become incredibly rare; you hardly ever see them these days” (Ghosh 265). It can be mentioned here that Ghosh is different from other nature writers namely, Jim Corbett, Kenneth Anderson, Salim Ali, Kailash Sankhala and M. Krishnan. Corbett has a keen eye and he describes trees, birds, hills etc. while Anderson’s description of animal behavior excellent, the drama of woodland life interests him much. Salim Ali’s work as a scientist and conservationist distinguishes him from other nature writers. He reveals how male birds all weave nests that their mates inspect before choosing one. Success in love depends on skill at nest building. Moreover, Ghosh explicates the deceptive and hidden strategy of the State machinery to perpetuate its hegemony over the dispossessed. However, in this novel margin occupies the center. Here margin is not pushed to the background but becomes a vital part to be focused, discussed and debated. The peripheral life occupies the rich domain of this novel. He has globalized the local.

### Animal Lives

Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is a novel, which addresses notable topics such as environmentalism, imperialism, racism, and humanity. The government of West Bengal, which committed the Morichjhanpi massacre incident of 1978-79, forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island. It formed a background for few section of the text of the novel. Humanism and animalism were depicted by the novelist, as the two of which come into a state of clash and chaos (Bose 76).

Another obstacle to advancing postcolonial ecocriticism is about knowing where to place animals in the contested intersections of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. Like the field of postcolonial ecocriticism, postcolonial animal or species studies is a growing area of analysis. It has been argued that animals often served as a vehicle for exploring issues of race and racism in colonial literature. Postcolonial writers are interested in what animal stories tell us about the discursive creation of the human subject, “rather than allegories, animal stories are part of the discursive construction of such issues as family, race and nation” (Nyman 3). The interest is particularly in the ways in which stories about animals were used to create or support colonial justifications for Western imperialism based on concepts of social Darwinism (Huggan and Tiffin 103). Huggan and Tiffin take animals seriously in their postcolonial work. They see postcolonialism as “well positioned to offer insight” into the lives of animals, given that “[p]ostcolonialism’s major theoretical concerns: otherness, racism and miscegenations, language, translation, the trope of cannibalism, voice and the problems of speaking of and for others to name just a few offer immediate entry points for a re-theorising of the place of animals in relation to human societies” (Huggan and Tiffin 135). Concerning the issue of marginalization, Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* has a clear aim, and that is to make explicit links between androcentric, patriarchal treatment of other-than-human animals, particularly focusing on the complex co-existence of humans and animals and the unromantic scenery of nature. After the colonial rule for nearly two hundred years the marginalization drive persists. Ghosh has textualized an incident happened in Morichjhapi, one of the islands of Sundarbans. In the pretext of providing safety to tigers, government drives out the people inhabiting in that island. They are the unprivileged people from West Bengal and the refugees from Bangladesh. In the name of progress, animal rights and animal protection, the unlawful activities are legitimized. Officialdom, bureaucratic terror and police atrocity function radically to shake the roots of democracy. Inhabitants of Morichjhapi are being forced and manhandled to evict the place. Ghosh has shown their struggle and resistance. Subaltern, countries most disposed and disinherited people; long to belong but they belong nowhere and even to margin (Bose 78).

However, under the carpet of protection, rare animals are killed and sold; leather trade goes on and trees are chopped down and sold in a hefty amount to the traders coming from the cities. Tribes are not liable to the nakedness of the forest; it is the timber merchants from the cities destroy the forests in collusion with the Forest Department. The people of Morichjhapi, an island in Sunderban, represent the exploited class of the society. Ghosh fictionalizes the sufferings of the dispossessed class in his groundbreaking novel *The Hungry Tide* (Tiwari 97). Protection of animals is plea to ruin the wild life. Behind the screen, countless inhuman practices take place as a result the protected species become the sufferers. Therefore, Ghosh in this novel

informs the reader that in the name of development and preservation of wildlife, all the narrow and nasty deeds are made but the poor people always become sufferers (Tiwari 95). He deeply regrets on the death of the poor people as he laments "So this is just an index of the fact that the impoverished people dying are extremely poor and do not have a voice. They cannot make themselves heard and understood, and that is why we pay no attention to their plight" (Ghosh 269). However, Ghosh is concerned with the lives of dolphin, prawn, whales, dugongs and other such sea animals including the voice of the voiceless. As he remarks in the interview, "The indigenous people have been completely victimized. They are not responsible for the denudation of the forest; more often than not, it is the timber merchants from the cities who do that in collusion with the Forest Department" (Ghosh 75). He deeply expresses government's indifferent attitude towards the betterment of the poor and downtrodden, the weaker sections of the society and the marginalized. While weaving the story he gives a beautiful portrayal of the life of Sundarbans in general and the lives who depend on the Sundarbans in particular. With the help of his narrative technique, Ghosh tries to project the 'plight of the disposed', and how they toil to make their both ends meet (Hawley 121).

### Conclusion

Like many subaltern authors, Ghosh endeavors to recuperate the silenced and the marginalized voices of those not represented in the historical record. Many critics have looked at Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide* from different perspectives. Prominent among them are W. R. Greer, Sandeep Roy, Ron Charles, and Alfred Hickling. These critics have examined the text in a way, which allows them to bring new interpretations and shed lights not only on the social and political aspects but also on the ecological ones. Therefore, in this conclusion, their scholarly opinions have been documented to reflect a critical and beyond-the ordinary look on this novel. In addition to this, an endeavor has been made to include Ghosh's personal opinions and perspectives on this particular novel. In the Sundarbans, Ghosh argues, human lives are valued somewhat lower than those of tigers are. He also argues that poverty, famine, starvation, violence and colonization people living in the margins experience is one of the consequences of the unstable ecosystem. The pseudo or faulty decision and goodwill of the government is nothing but a slow deceptive agenda or strategy to perpetually disintegrate and dispossess the people staying in the margin. This deliberate distancing of the people from the nature and other creatures is nothing but an ecological imbalance that has been largely emphasized in this paper.

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