

Trends and Tendencies of Eco-criticism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

MD. MASUD RANA AND AMINA RASHID

Abstract. This study examines the trends and tendencies of eco-criticism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. Eco-criticism studies the representation of nature in literature and the relationship between literature and the environment. *The Hungry Tide* is a novel of ecological consciousness, which shows power struggle between humans and nature and tries to show off one's triumph of existence over another. The anthropocentric attitude towards nature is a serious environmental threat whereas the environmental conversation overlooks human rights. These two issues are critically presented in the novel. The archipelago of sundarbans turns into a refuge for the homeless refugees, who colonize and distort the eco-system of sundarbans, kill fauna, uproot the flora, and adulterate the natural biodiversity for their own protection and existence. On the contrary, environment as a powerful nonhuman character tries to rule the lives of human and animal in sundarbans. Ghosh therefore, emphasizes on eco-friendly attitude between humans and nature and the eco-critical study of the novel suggests the co-existence of both parties and hence humans should be more considerate to save the environment.

Keywords : Eco-criticism; Sundarbans; flora and fauna; archipelago; Morichjhanpi; refugee.

Eco-criticism is a critical literary approach for studying the portrayal of nature in literature and relationship between literature and environment. "Eco-criticism or environmental criticism in analogy to the more general term literary criticism—comprises an eclectic, pluriform, and cross-disciplinary initiative that aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature and other creative media in a spirit of environmental concern not limited to any one method or commitment" (Buell et.al., 417).

Eco-criticism, first used in William Ruekert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978, is the study of literature and environment from an academic point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and possible solutions for the correction of the present ecological distortion. As literature affects every aspect of human life and universe, there is a lot of scope to examine one's writing from an eco-critical perspective. This area of study demands our concentration because of its threefold aspects of significance.

Indeed its first aspect is the radical manifestation of eco-critical approach in Indian ecological and socio-cultural context related to global context. Because India is a country with variety of ecosystems, which ranges from Himalayas in the

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north to plateaus of south and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the east to dry Thar of the west. So, with time, these ecosystems have been badly affected due to increasing population and greed of human beings. Amitav Ghosh consciously and sympathetically has presented these issues in his writings especially in *The Hungry Tide*.

Secondly, the settings of his writings show a panoramic description of material environment and human interaction with it. In this perspective, his writings also show the interaction between man and nature that clearly brings out the rage of nature and frailty of humans.

The third aspect is to explore his works from eco-critical point of view to establish his inherent realization about environmental catastrophe and man-nature boundary and to investigate his text as the essential ecological values, what, in particular, is intended by the word nature, and whether the examination of “place” should be a distinctive category, much like class, gender or race.

Amitav Ghosh is the present dazzling figure of Indian English literature of the late twentieth and early twenty first century. His writings represent India, more broadly, Indian subcontinent, and a major socio-cultural domain of the world. An intensive study of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* reveals a different look towards the relation between man and nature. Amitav Ghosh has tried to show in *The Hungry Tide* how ecology of Sundarbans affects the human relation.

Aims and Objectives

1. To know the status of human relationship in ecological context.
2. What is the outlook of men of different classes and status towards nature?
3. How nature does receive human existences in different circumstances ?
4. How does his writings deal with present ecological change and to what extent?

Methodology

The Hungry Tide is taken as primary source and the text is analyzed from eco-critical point of view. Secondary data includes Ghosh’s interviews, research works by researchers and offline and online research articles etc.

Literature Review

Association for the Study of Literature and Nature (ASLE), India’s first book, *Nature and Human Nature: Literature, Ecology, Meaning*, edited by Murali Sivaramakrishnan, had attempted to raise a platform for ecocriticism and theory in the Indian context. Because many Indian writers such as Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Kamala Marakandaya, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh and so on have celebrated nature, life force and the wilderness in their writings as manifested in India. Among them,

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Amitav Gosh is relatively a recent writer but his works are not less discussed with the aims and objectives of this research programme. Some works have already been done which in other way carry the eco-critical endeavour. Anurag does the relevant work on "Man vs Nature: Eco-critical Approach in *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh". In his article he shows:

- the interface between humans and physical environment.
- the text's symbolic implications.
- imaginative text and environment and
- portrayal of historical episode (Morichjhapi incident, 1979) and politics, a co-operative view of place. Anurag says :

The Hungry Tide constructs nature by using interweaving legends, experience, myths and history to expose human interaction with the non-human world. Ghosh's conscious engagement with the natural world draws our attention to impending calamity of the global environment. The eco-critical investigation figures out that the novel *The Hungry Tide* penetrates a picture of man's complex interaction with nature (2).

Mr. B Kogilavani in his article "From Reverence to Destruction: An Eco-critical Approach in *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Gosh.", shows how bio network of Sundarbans witnesses the shift from a threatening ecosystem to threatened ecosystem. (51) Amitav Ghosh himself said in an interview, "two things have happened of late in the world of writing - One is that increasingly the world of literature/writing is becoming absorbed into this culture of diversion and entertainment, and I think some of these festivals are a part of that. Essentially, it is a part of the whole process of global distraction, which presents itself as a sort of contribution to writing." (Interview)

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The Hungry Tide is a story of precarious lives of a secluded village Morichjhanpi, an archipelago in Sundarbans, a natural mangrove forest and ecoregion with extraordinary flora and fauna in India and Bangladesh. The lives in the archipelago are in constant threat of wild animals especially tigers, tidal floods rise and surge over the land, unrest and eviction. *The Hungry Tide* has beautifully described the images of the flora and fauna of Sundarbans, the biggest delta in the world. Ghosh ornamentally describes:

Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that here, interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, and lies an immense archipelago of islands. The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged

fringe of her sari, the 'achol' that follows her, half wetted by the sea. They number in thousands, the islands . . . When the tide creates new island, overnight Mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right, they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles . . . Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes, and crocodiles. There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in yet to the world at large this archipelago is known as Sundarbans, which means the beautiful forest (Ghosh, 67).

The novel is about the conflicts between the culture and species living in Morichjhanpi. It is an exotic island, which describes the miserable lives of inhabitants who live in fear of fierce tides, wild animals, and the struggle to make their living. The novel provides "a mainstream environmentalist and conservationist lens on the bio-diverse environment of Sundarbans. Ghosh offers an intellectual inquiry that peers into the life of species – animals, humans, and tides, who are in conflict with each other to conquer the space for living (Afzal, 37).

Ghosh shows environment as a powerful nonhuman character alongside other human characters in the novel. He describes the hungry tide and its impact on the surrounding, which reshape the land by uprooting anything seems to be permanent in the archipelago and the role of flora and fauna. He says :

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundreds kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to reemerge hours late (Ghosh, 7).

The socio-political turmoil has also a huge impact on the environment. Nirmol's journal and Piya's expedition highlight the importance of the environment of the novel. Sundarbans is the biggest delta on the earth, a wildlife sanctuary and is declared as the protected forest under Forest Act 1865. At the same time, Sundarbans as an archipelago, becomes a place of shelter for small refuge where they find their identity and liberty. After the independence and separation of India and Pakistan in 1947, due to the failure to settle down in West Bengal and East Pakistan now Bangladesh, lower class, and uncast refugees took their refuge in the islands of Sundarbans. However, the government of West Bengal evacuated some of these rootless people and killed many of them because of their identity crisis as they were neither Indian nor Bangladeshi.

The life of the refugees on the islands are ruled and manipulated by the atmosphere of Sundarbans. Though the life of the islanders is uncertain with environmental challenges and hostility, they try to cope up with natural challenges of Sundarbans and hope for a new life. Therefore, the conflict between humans and nature starts and both try to conquer one another for their own survival and existence eventually lead to death and destructions.

Sundarbans as an eco-zone has its own natural law, rule the lives of humans and animals living in the biodiversity, which eventually symbolizes its own role as a non-human character. The novel depicts the hostile relationship between inhabitants and the nature, subaltern experience and hypocrisy of the government and environmental conservationists. The eco-system of Sundarbans, therefore is being distorted and shifted. The role of dangerous species such as tigers, crocodile, and the role of water as tide, flood over humans and animals in archipelago provide the most eco-critical theme in the novel.

In the novel Ghosh has used two fold narrative to disclose the miserable lives on the island and their relationship with Sundarbans – Piya, Kanai and Fakir narrate the one story and the other one is told by Nirmol's letter. According to Sandhya, and Bhuvaneswari,

these two parallel narratives give an account about the issues and problems of biosphere conservation and its related social causes faced by the people who are economically and socially down. The novel highlights the factual incident of Morichjhapi massacre where the human encroachment leads to ecological disturbance. The specialty of Sundarbans as a victim and victimizer gives the serious connection among the three main characters (Sandhya, 43683-43684).

Piya, as an environmentalist, protests the killing of tiger whereas Kanai as an anthropologist tries to defend her. The conversation between Piya and Kanai reveals the concern of environment and resists the anthropocentric views about humans over animals :

"Piya, you have to understand—that animal's been preying on this village for years. It's killed two people and any number of cow and goats—"

"This is an animal, Kanai," Piya said, "you can't take revenge on an animal."

All around them now people were howling, their faces lit by the dancing flames: "Maar! Maar!" Kanai caught hold of her elbow and tried to lead

her away. "It's too late now, Piya. We should both go." Go?" said Piya. "I am not going anywhere. I am going to put a stop to this." "Piya," said Kanai. "You're dealing with a mob here. They could turn on us too. We're outsiders." "So you're just going to stand by and let it happen?" "There is nothing we can do, Piya." Kanai was shouting now. "Be reasonable. Let's go (Ghosh, 242)."

Fakir as a local who thinks Sundarbans a home and belongs to the land, wants to kill the tiger to save himself and his community. Fakir says to Piya, "You should not be upset Piya: How can I not be upset? That's the most horrifying thing I've ever seen-tiger set on fire (295)." Kanai also tries Piya to understand her social position compared with Kanai's origin. Kanai says to Piya, "He's a fisherman, you're a scientist. What you see as fauna, he sees as food". (268)

The people in the islands tries to show their existence and identity by their aggressive attitude and triumph over Sundarbans, which is a serious environmental concern and a threat to the ecosystem of Sundarbans. Sree says,

Human settlement in the place meant for plants and animals, reclamation of coastal areas for the construction of buildings, and destruction of mangroves which are habitat for seabirds, amphibians and the aquatic animals are traced out as the root cause for the ecological and environmental problems and the source for hungry tides and earthquakes (Sree, 298).

Sandhya and Bhuvaneshwari opine through the character of Piya, "Ghosh condemns the atrocities meted out to the royal tigers and voices out the need to preserve the natural habitat". (Sandhya, 43685)

The novel shows that it is not only the environmentalist's responsibility to safeguard the environment but also the responsibility of the whole society. Ghosh also shows the inseparable relationship between humans, animals and the environment and points out the dependency to one another. Hence, the humans, the most knowledgeable have to be sensible and understand the language of the natural world for the sake of their own survival. According to Anand, "The novel is sensitive towards environmental crisis as well as the human crisis, foregrounded these crises as mutually inclusive of the poor and the natural world". (166)

In the novel Sundarbans is considered as hub of ecological pioneers; humans, tiger, and crocodiles, three heroic species are in war with each other and ready to take all the life-threatening challenges and even to die to show their existence. The novel reflects on the attitude of humans to nature and nature's appropriate

feedback towards mankind with a lesson of what humans should do to nature. Due to the destruction of Sundarbans and its flora and fauna by humans, a preservation process started but unfortunately it neglected and excluded the locals and indigenous lives.

According to conservationist approach, these locals and indigenous people are overlooked and ignored whereas the environment is given more importance. To protect the forest, these refugees were evacuated, killed and raped forgetting that these are marginalized people who like other flora and fauna need to be taken care by the same authority who are taking care of the forest. A dolphin's or tiger's life cannot be more important than humans do or human cannot kill fauna according to their own justification. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh highlights how human lives are valued less than those of their tiger inhabitants in the Sunderbans (Vincent, 759).

The double standards of the corrupt politicians towards the rootless refugees and Sundarbans is one of the root causes for environmental threat in the region. The ruling politicians declare the zone as conserved, but for their own profit "they exploit the region, prompt the nylon nets, which is very harmful for the eco-system". (Mishra, 47) Ghosh says, "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".(134) Ghosh beautifully comments on this issue, "it is the paradox of global environmentalism': namely, that those who worry the most about the destruction of nature are usually those who are making the problem worse". (194)

Therefore, Ghosh intends to say that the relationship and dependency between humans and nature are universal; one cannot be overlooked for another. The novel depicts the relationship between human activity and environment and emphasizes the universal coexistence to save the world, to save humans and all other living creatures.

Conclusion

The Hungry Tide is a novel of conflict between humans and nature; it has keenly portrayed the environmental problems in the eco-zone of Sundarbans. The novel has mainly addressed about two crisis: the environmental crisis and human crisis. The rootless refugees who have been dehumanized, finding on other alternative, colonize Sundarbans, the beautiful forest, encroach the archipelago, which seriously threaten the environment of Sundarbans. Ghosh has depicted the ecological problems, the hostile relation between humans and nature in the novel. According to Mishra, "*The Hungry Tide* is an ecologically conscious novel, which has beautifully created an image of ecological vision and consciousness for its readers". (45) Ghosh puts a new academic lance before the readers to justify man and nature and their relation in present eco-socio-cultural context in *The Hungry*

Tide. The humans including rulers, politicians, environmentalists, society irrespective of classes should be more rational and ethical towards environment and therefore their approach towards nature should be eco-centric rather than anthropocentric.

Md. Masud Rana

Faculty, English Language Institute
Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia

Amina Rashid

Faculty, English Language Institute
Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia

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