

Man amidst Wilderness: Representation of Virulent Nature in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Human beings are notorious for their vicious exploitation of nature. As civilization progressed, the abuse and misuse gradually increased. Ecocritics and environmentalists have raised their concern about immediate abstinence of these mal treatments and invoked a harmonious concord several times. But it only remained as an intermittent plea that each time got enshrouded by ravenous greed of people. Man's intrusion in forests and foliages always proved catastrophic. They destroyed the harmony and looted natural assets, flora and fauna for personal gains. Literature always presented this debauchery acutely and succeeded in raising global concern many times. It has shown how the natural lifestyle gets hampered by the most intelligent species. It has shown how man can be devoid of humanity while preying upon wild animals. It has presented the ruthless nature of man in cutting down an entire forest in the name of industrialization. But very few literary pieces have shown the resentment of nature towards this race. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* has shown the opposite tenets of human nature interface. Here humans strive every moment. Whenever they violate nature's course, it doubles the toll. This article focuses on the human expedition over nature and their consequent struggle for existence.

Keywords- Nature, Exploitation, Struggle, Tide, Mangrove

Man grows wise with experience. Each previous action gives him some knowledge with the help of which he frames the future. But in case of man's dealings with nature, this theory does not work at all. His one way treatment of natural resources proves beneficial and presently endows him with immense improvement. The concrete gains conceal abstract ideas of disaster. Fast improvements with the excessive use of natural resources generally get applaud instead of reproaches. Environmentalists have warned against global warming, about ozone holes, deforestations, endangered species, about draughts, and famines, and many more. But hostility did not stop. Literature has shown human

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exploitation of nature and the consequent plight of the dwellers of primal wilderness. Animals, birds, woods, non living assets and even the tribal people who live in close proximity with nature are the worst sufferers in almost all novels and stories. But Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* presents a different hue. It praises the beauty of nature, presents the unadorned originality of wilderness, exposes the intrusion of humans into an otherwise stable eco system and portrays how an unuttered battle rages on between two unequal forces, regarding the establishment of colony and the immediate refusal to them. The novel brings out human struggles in a foreign forest land where nature is the ruler and human ruled, where but to live depends on the whims of wilderness.

The novel revolves around the expeditions of two major characters, Kanai and Piya. Kanai is a wealthy businessman who comes to visit his aunt Nilima. Nilima resides in Lusibari, one of the islands in Sundarban and runs a charity, hospital and provides all possible help and basic amenities to the dwellers of Sundarban. She is actually an NGO activist. Kanai's late uncle Nirmal who was a devout marxist in his lifetime left a parcel for Kanai at his death. Kanai finds a diary in it and this diary reveals a lot in the novel. On the other hand Piyali Roy, in short Piya arrives in Sundarban with a mission of research. She is a cetalogist and is very interested to explore a species named Orcella dolphins. Piya's adventure connects all and gradually reveals the risky life of the inhabitants in the hand of a malevolent nature. Nature in the Sundarban is furious, as if it is opposing the intrusion of humans there. But as the novel progresses we come to know that not only humans but the entire flora and fauna experience a different life here. This delta has created its own biosphere where nature itself is the ruler.

The area of Sundarban ranges from the southern part of Kolkata to the Bay of Bengal. In width it covers about 335 kilometers of area including a large portion of Bangladesh also. It is perhaps here that the nature denies any partition made by human territories as none can distinguish Indian or Bangladeshi parts here clearly. The border surrenders before nature's might. Annu Jalais has beautifully sketched it in his writing :

On the southern tip of West Bengal in eastern India, just south of Calcutta, the great river Ganges fans out into many tributaries over a vast delta before ending a journey that began in the distant Himalayan north with a plunge into the Bay of Bengal. The mouth of this delta is made up of about three hundred small islands, spread over an area of about ten thousand square kilometers and straddling India's border with Bangladesh. It is one of those areas of the world where the lie of the land mocks the absurdity of international treatise, because it is virtually impossible to enforce border laws on a territory that constantly shifts, submerges and resurfaces with the ebb and flow of the tide. (Qtd in Mukherjee, 108)

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It is a place which is far away from the clutches of human civilization. Though now it is somehow populated with a good number of human inhabitants, but they have to adjust with the whims of nature; for nature here is omnipotent, and mere flow of a community cannot change its vibrant course. The Gangetic delta has created such a biological niche where both river water and sea meets, creating habitation for multitudes of rare animals and trees. The rivulets merge and diverge in their paths, forming islets almost everywhere. Ghosh has very aptly depicted its unique features:

This proliferation of aquatic life was thought to be the result of the unusually varied composition of the water itself. The waters of the river and sea did not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta; rather, they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of fresh water running along the floors of some channels, creating variations of salinity and turbidity. These micro environments were like balloons suspended in the water, and they had their own patterns of flow ... Each balloon was a floating biodome, filled with endemic fauna and flora. (Ghosh, 125)

The novelist has delineated nature so exquisitely that it almost becomes a character in the plot. Piya's adventures towards dolphin land, Fokir's instinctive familiarity with the land and its creatures, uncle Nirmal's avout dealings with the terrain's issue, in every case, nature has its omnipresent role to play on. Lawrence Buell rightly said,

The salient features of environmental literature is that nature is not merely a setting or backdrop for human action, but an actual factor in the plot, that is, a character and sometimes even a protagonist. This is particularly obvious in nature and wilderness writing, which originate in the narrator's transformative encounters with a landscape and its inhabitants. (qtd in Tallmadge, 282)

Both aquatic and terrestrial life abounds in various types of creatures. Land mainly consists of mangrove forests with ferocious wild animals including famous royal bengal tiger, venomous snakes, deer, monkeys etc. Aquatic life is more enthralling. Fishes of both sweet and salt water thrive in excess. Crabs and dolphins, sharks and crocodiles form a unique biological niche. But under this apparently peaceful cohabitation, there remains a bitter story. And the story, in a deep penetration, reveals the warring forces, the unequal struggles and a pathetic human life under the threat of natural calamities, whimsical changes in weather and more dangerously under the spying eye of preying animals. The area itself is unstable like those of its inhabitants. It is "a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable." (Ghosh, 7). But if everything in this delta happens in accordance with the natural rule, then why do there come such struggles? It is quite normal in wild animals to prey and hunt each other. Then why are humans involved there or

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why is humans thrust into such conditions of wild territory, bound by their laws? The answer is different. Ghosh has softly touched that corner when humans intruded into the land of wilderness. Nilima says, "there was nothing but forest here. There were no people, no embankments, no fields. Just kada ar bada, mud and mangrove" (Ghosh, 51).

The novel takes us back to history. In 1903, when India was under British rule, Sir Daniel Hamilton, famous English visionary, bought 10000 acres of the tide country from British government. Gosaba, Satjelia, Lusibari and Rangabelia were under his land and hence came to be known as Hamiltonabad. After acquiring the area he gathered people from different places. Poor people from East Bengal, North Orissa, santhal paraganas came and built society. Hamilton wanted to build human settlement in that ferocious no entry zone. He began to give encouragement to those who toiled hard to clear out jungles and settle a habitable area there. Aunt Nilima says, "Sir Daniel began to give out rewards to anyone who killed a tiger or crocodile" (Ghosh, 52). But the problem starts here. To build a habitat, the dwellers began to cut down trees. The indiscriminate cutting down of forest area gave rise to complications. The dense jungle was the habitat of thousands of animals. Besides, mangroves used to keep balance in the climate. They were, in a word, protectors of the land from the recurrent tides and storms. But clearing out that protection means becoming more vulnerable to natural disasters. Again, to tackle the predators, they used the easiest resort of killing them whenever they are found. This merciless killing of wild treasures over years left a deep impact over nature. And this human entrance was unwelcomed in every respect. To dwell in wilderness itself is risky, and when that dwelling severs harmony, it becomes intolerable. Annu Jalais comments, "In the context of the tide country, every day, is a struggle for survival. Man killing the tiger and tiger killing man are scenes that happen every day on the terrain of Sundarbans" (Jalais, 1758).

The novelist has very clearly pointed out this unwelcomed status of humans beings there. They are, in every second, surrounded by dangers. To live there is to avoid death in every inch, "At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles" (Ghosh, 7-8).

There are many instances of perils throughout the novel. One such was Kusum's father's death. In a stormy weather, he became prey to a tiger. "The animal too was upwind of its prey... because of the distinctiveness of its own order, it was skilled in dealing with the wind and it knew that the people on the other bank were powerless against these gusts" (Ghosh, 108). But generally, tigers used to hunt stealthily. So much so that it created an atmosphere of haunted horror. "... the great cats

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of the tide country were like ghosts, never revealing their presence except through marks, sounds and smells" (Ghosh, 108).

Attacks of tiger are so common in that area that when a man gets lost in the jungle, none goes out to find him. It is accepted that he has been taken by tigers. Nilima says, "I know that in this day and age, in the twenty first century, it's difficult for you to imagine yourself being attacked by a tiger... It happens several times each week" (Ghosh, 240).

Not only tigers, crocodiles were also very dangerous. There is a scene of crocodile attack on Piya. She sees crocodiles making a snatching, twisting movement while their sharp teeth failed to grasp her into the mouth. Fokir saves her somehow. But the incident leaves her to a state of paranoia. Kanai considers the attack of crocodile more dangerous since they do not kill instantly, and the suffering becomes horrible. "A crocodile, it's said, will keep you alive until you drown; it won't kill you on land; it'll drag you into the water while you are still breathing. Nobody finds the remains of people who're killed by crocodiles" (Ghosh, 328).

If animal attack constitutes one side of fear, the other side consists of more terrible dangers; for it comes not from any natural agents, but from nature itself. The tides, storms, muds all makes life hazardous. There is an instance where Piya gets entrapped into dirty mud, and the novelist gives a deadly sinking description of it;

With her breath running out, she felt herself to be enveloped inside a cocoon of eerily glowing murk and could not tell whether she was looking up or down. In her head there was smell, or rather, a metallic savour she knew to be, not blood, but inhaled mud. It had entered her mouth, her nose, her throat, her eyes-- it had become a shroud crossing in on her, folding her in its cloudy wrappings. She threw her hands at it, scratching, lunging and pummeling, but its edges seemed always to recede, like the slippery walls of a placental sac. (Ghosh 54-55)

The cyclones and tides were horrible and when earthquake and storm happens together "the waters rose so high that they killed thousands of animals and carried them upriver and inland" (Ghosh, 204). There are many instances in the novel one of which is Kanai saving Piya in a storm at the cost of his own life. Wind is compared exquisitely with a clawed animal that would tear the boat apart. Fokir, along with Piya goes deeper into the island to escape the direct surge. They tie themselves with mangrove tree unless which they cannot survive. Ghosh gives a chilling description;

Powerful as it already was, the gale had been picking up strength all along. At a certain point its noise had reached a volume where its very quality had undergone a change. It sounded no longer like the wind but like some other element -- the usual blowing, sighing and rustling had turned into a deep, ear-splitting rumble, as if the earth itself had begun to move. The air

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was now filled with what seemed to be a fog of flying debris -- leaves, twigs, branches, dust and water. (Ghosh, 379)

These pen pictures of the delta give a deep impression of a hazardous life there. Death there plays with living beings and they could feel the presence of it everywhere. This gives a shocking effect and sometimes the bravest also collapses. Kanai once feels such paranoic situation; "He could not recall the word, not even the euphemisms Fokir had used: it was as if his mind, in its panic, had emptied itself of language. The sounds and signs that had served, in combination, as the sluices between his mind and his senses, had collapsed: his mind was swamped by a flood of pure sensations" (Ghosh, 329). Ghosh has shown another side of human life here and this exposes the same greed of human world. While seeking Orcella population Piya sees merciless killing of fishes and crabs and prawns. The rivulets there, are a big source of fishes and crabs which in turn, are very lucrative in terms of business. Humans have always shown interest when it comes to profit and it is no exception. Ghosh speculates, " ... because there is a lot of money in prawns and the traders had paid off the politicians. What do they care -- or 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).

The novel also has references where dolphins are hunted and their carcasses are used to extract fuels for vehicles. This use of dolphin fat for fuel is at once shameful and reprehensible. But the novel has shown glimpses of harmony also. If man can feel the nature in his heart, everything seems at peace. This knowledge of akinness comes not through hostility, but by true appreciation of nature. To know nature, one has to love nature first. Only then he can feel the harmony. And then life seems easier to him. Fokir is perhaps that instance. He guides Piya in her expedition, saves her several times, shows his keen affinity with that delta world. Though he dies at the end, but through him the novelist has shown, how life could be at harmony in that otherwise dangerous land. Fokir knows the language of nature and hence does not require any instruction from Piya. He outruns the bookish knowledges of the civilized world. Piya is surprised at his natural process of tracking an area which perhaps an advanced GPS system could do. Piya says about Fokir, "But that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously -- people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another's heads -- was far more than surprising" (Ghosh, 151).

Fokir does not need the advanced languages of civilized people, nor does he require any information about the whereabouts of the animals. He knows where Orcella are, knows how to avoid crocodiles and how to get rid of a virulent storm. All springs from his heart. He is the nature's man and his mother has rightly declared that "the river is in his veins" (Ghosh, 245).

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