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## **An Ecology and Eco-Criticism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide***

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“If you want to taste the real meaning of life for hundreds and thousands of years, then enjoy afforestation”. **Rig-Veda**

### **Abstract**

In recent times, literary writers have been drawn to the hitherto ignored strong interactive relationship between humans and nature. This relationship throws light upon the study of ecology and eco-critical reading. Now, literary writers focus upon the major environmental issues in their writing to highlight the problems of ecosystem. Amitav Ghosh is one of them. His novel *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans meaning “Beautiful forest” which comprises of more than ten thousand square kilometers, the tide country- narrates the history of the forced evaluation of refugees from the island of Morichjhapi. Environmentalism and Destabilisation are some of the predominant themes in the novel. In this novel the physical environment is a representation of an active force that connects the plant, animal and human life together and one is affected by the other directly or it indirectly. The goal of my paper is to attempt an ecological analysis and the eco-critical reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.

**Keywords-** Afforestation, Ecology, Eco-criticism, Ecocritical, Refugees

Amitav Ghosh is one of the greatest novelists of Indian English Literature of modern times. He was born on 11 July, 1956 in Kolkata and grew up in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. He completed his schooling from the Doon School in Dehradun. After schooling, he completed his further education from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, and Delhi School of Economics. Ghosh won the In lacs foundation Scholarship for D.Phil. in social anthropology at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford. Firstly he worked in Indian Express newspaper in Delhi. Thereafter, he worked as a faculty in college and university. Indian government has awarded him awarded him Padam Shri in 2007. His contribution in Indian English Literature is remarkable. His works may be categorized into two part Fiction and Non-fiction. Like, in fiction, *The shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, *The Ibis trilogy* and *Gun Island* are popular work. In Non- fiction, *In an antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia* and *at large in Burma*, *Countdown*, *The Imam and India* and *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.

The novel, *The Hungry Tide* has divided in two plots: firstly, it investigates the dilemma of displaced people – a group of refugees from Bangladesh, and in other side it is related to the question as to how humans share a complex and dangerous ecosystem with animals:

In between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands. Some of these islands are vast and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others have just washed into being. These are the Sundarbans - the beautiful lands. Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. The tides reach more than two hundred miles inland, and every day thousands of acres of mangrove forests disappear only to re-emerge hours later. For hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed and the hopeless dreamers of the world have braved the man eaters and the crocodiles who rule there, to eke a precarious existence from the unyielding mud. (*Harper Collins* 2004)

Man and Nature are the two parts of one coin. Since the evolution of man, there is a close emotional and physical bonding between them. It has been proven by our Rishis and Religious scriptures as well as modern science that the life force of man is dependent on natural forces and the flora and fauna. As agriculture has been considered as the backbone of man since ancient times and this creates strong affection between man and Nature that can be revealed as *Ecology*- ‘a scientific study of the relationship between living organism and their environment’. *Ecology* is the term first coined by a German Biologist Ernest Hackel in 1866. The term *ecology* is derived from *Greek* words ‘Oikos’ which means house and logos refers to the study of. So ecology is the study of organisms at home. Majorly ecology is concerned with biological relations and process of organisms, air, waters and soil etc.

Eco-criticism and green studies both terms are used to denote a critical approach which began in the USA in 1980s and it began in UK in 1990s. In USA eco-criticism founded by Cheryll Glotfelty with the co-editor Harold Fromm, a key collection of helpful and definitive essays, *The Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Cheryll Glotfelty defined eco-criticism: “eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” Eco-criticism as a concept first of all arose in the meeting of the WLA (the Western Literature Association, a body whose field of interest in the literature of the American West) in late 1970s. Eco-criticism in America exists in the works of three major writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-62). These all three writers were known as transcendentalists.

Eco-criticism is a branch of literary scholarship that tries to find tangible connections between the environment and literature. The environmental problem is one of the most prominent issues of current generation. It can be distinguished in two phases, first is rubs on

nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction. The second is Eco-criticism or the Revisionist Eco-criticism is inclined towards an environmental justice to the issues of social criticism, urban. The main aim of eco-criticism is to show how the works of writers concerned to environment, and supportive in solving and pressing ecological concern.

*The Hungry Tide* (2004) is one of the greatest books related to the ecological and eco-critical book written by Ghosh, It's a contemporary story of disjunctions, dislocations and destabilization. It has been well known about ecological novel. It is remarkable novel with the mixture of anthropology, environmentalism, migration, travel, ethnography, and landscape wrapped under the veil of English fiction. It has limited range of characters make it more appealing to reader.

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily-some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. (*THT* p.7)

At the beginning of the novel Ghosh reveals the power of Nature through these lines. In this novel, Ghosh tries to portray the picture of conflict between man and nature. Sometimes Man gets victory over nature and sometimes nature dominate its presence upon man. Man deals with nature as a Helot. Man has been thinking since long time that Nature exists to fulfil their desire so they exploit Nature at broad level. As people of Morichjhapi are doing in the novel. They are destroying Natural resources to, fill their stomach and build house for living. Overuse of environment resulted of climate change and depletion of Natural resource in Morichjhapi.

It is considered that if we exploit Natural resources there will be no natural resource for our future generation and depletion of nature brings hazardous for man. Nature also takes revenge with men in the form of Typhoon, Cyclone, Hurricane, Earthquake, Landslide etc. As in the novel we witness a great cyclone which results in the death of Fokir. Nature has started to take its right in severe manner. Human beings shall have to reshape their bondage with Nature by admitting that Nature and Human beings are two part of one coin and one is not superior to other.

The setting of *The Hungry Tide* is in the heart of Nature. Novel knowingly deals with ecological issues of the Sunderbans, the mangrove forests between the plains and the sea of Bengal. Biodiversity of Sundarbans is slowly imbalanced due to modern activity of human being to make alive themselves and their family. As in novel Moyna explains the Nilima's view about the new nylon nets which is use to catch tiger in sunderban. "These new nylon nets, which they use to catch chingrimeen- the spawn of tiger prawns. The nets are so fine

that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well. Mahima wanted to get the nets banned, but it was impossible” (*THT* p.134).

These lines exactly depict the drawback of the advancement of technology which is, to some extent useful for men, but dangerous for Biodiversity. The wealthy and balanced natural resources of Sunderbans of West Bengal (India), are deeply being influenced by uneducated poor man of the Island. They consider Natural resources are only for them and they can use it at any cost. So, Government has to take serious action to flee them from the island to save nature’s wealth and to maintain proper cycle of biodiversity of Sundarbans. As Nilima said-

Some refugees have occupied one of the islands in the forest. There was a confrontation with the authorities that resulted in a lot of violence. The government wanted to force the refugees to return their resettlement camp in Central India. They are put in the truck and buses and taken away... ( *THT*. p. 26)

Ghosh tries to reveal the discipline of Nature in this particular novel. Somewhere he is mocking upon human that human being is considered as the most intellectual being of earth and he does not follow any rules until he feels the need of rules for their proper nourishment. But Nature does its job unconditionally. As:

Piya remembered a study that had shown there were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe. This proliferation of aquatic life was thought to be the result of the unusually varied composition of the water itself. The waters of 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 variation of salinity and turbidity. (*THT* p. 125)

In general, we consider that natural calamities like, Hurricane, Cyclone, Earthquake, al-nil-lo etc, are natural process of our ecosystem but this is not true. These incidents are the wrath of Nature or we can say that oppose of Nature over man who tries to remove the existence of Nature for their benefit without knowing the result.

In spite of love story Ghosh includes ecological issues, Language problem and sophisticated relationships among Piyali, Fokir and Kanai. He intelligently solves this perplex relationships by the climatic ending in the novel with a cyclone which kills Foir, while saving the life of Piya. As, M. Abhijit Dhakuria Comments, “Amitav Ghosh is a master of the genre ‘fictionalized thesis’.” This comment rightly suits to Amitav Ghosh for his remarkable Contribution. He is the minute observer of Nature and tries to show how human being’s share a complicated and hazardous ecosystem with living things like dolphins and tigers.

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Climate change is the notable thing in the novel. Due to climatic disorder in the environment of Sunderbans that rare species of Dolphins and other fishes are languishing. At the same time the population of tigers is dwindling day by day. Ecosystem of Morichjapi Island is at alarming level. Due to misbalance in ecology of the Sunderbans lead to dangerous conditions. Submersion of Islands is real ecosystem are the prominent part of the environment. A minute misbalanced in ecosystem leads to dangerous in ecological chain. As Piya reveals:

Some kind of crabs actually laundered the mud they lived in, scrubbing it grain by grain. Their feet and their sides were line with hairs that formed microscopic brushes and spoons. They are used these to scrape off the diatoms and other dibble matter attached to each grain of sand. They were a sanitation department and a janitorial team rolled into one: they kept the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their debris. Didn't they represent some fantastically large proportion of the system's biomass? Didn't they outweigh even the trees and the leaves? Hadn't someone said that intertidal forests should be named after crabs rather than mangroves since it was they –certainly not the crocodile or the tiger or the dolphin –who were the keystone species of the entire ecosystem? (*THT* p.142)

Nature is the boon for human beings which god has been given as gift since the birth of man. Ghosh portrays the picture of Nature as mother. Without Natural resources human being can't be nurtured in proper manner. He has to take help of Nature for comfortable life. As in the novel, Kusum expresses when her father returned from a long and successful fishing trip, there was money in the house and food. In this way Nature full fill the basic needs of human. Anyone can survive with the help of Nature. But the needs of human turned into greed. Therefore, they have to face the wrath of Animals as well as Nature. Kusum's father wanted to eat delicious food. So, Kusum's mother cooks rice, dal and vegetables. But, firewood ran out when it came time to cook some fish. His father became angry when he heard about ran out of firewood. So, he stormed out of the house and went to bring some firewood. Here, Amitav Ghosh depicts that man doesn't want to compromise and this leads to damage for their life. As kusum's father finished his life, when he went to bring only some firewood.

Ghosh tries to show the power of Humans and Animals. Sometimes Human came in power and sometimes men overwhelmed upon animals but there are the loss of both. Human being is considered as the most intellectual being of the earth, they should be considered about the balance of ecosystem and thinks about animal that they too have emotion and feeling and they will behave according to their nature. But problem is that Human being known everything but he ignores. As Kusum's father went to bring firewood in angry mood and failed to recognize the situation which resulted in his death. Ghosh writes:

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The animal was in the trees that lined the shore, and from the direction of its advance she knew it had watched the boat as it came across the river. At kusum's first scream her mother and many others from the hamlet ran up to embankment. But her father, for whom the shout of warning had been intended, didn't hear for the wind was blowing in the wrong direction.

Within moments dozens of people had joined her on the embankment and all saw what she had seen: The animal was stalking her father." (*THT* p.108)

Ghosh's, ideas, that animal too has emotion but due to selfishness of human being they feel trouble and sometime they attack us due to fear or to protect themselves and eat them as their food. Nobody wants to get cross other persons in his territory. Therefore Animals also want to live free at their place. Due to overpopulation human being knowingly destroys the forest and constructs their mansion. These all activities effect the emotions of animals because forest and caves are safe place for them and they can easily get everything what a needs for their survival. Animal feels helpless and some they get angry when he saw their enemy in the form of human being and try to take revenge from them because they think that they came to kill him or destroy their area. That's why Animals use their power to save their life and sometimes to make human as their food. As Ghosh's reveals the emotion and predication of animals in this novel; "The animal to was upwind of its prey and they could see its coal flashing as it closed in; because of the distinctiveness of its own odour, it was skilled in dealing with the wind and it knew that the people on the other bank were powerless against these gusts" (*THT* p.108).

Ghosh depicts the cycle of nature in the novel. He introduces the incident of 1970 in which there was a great cyclone and at the present time Fokir, Piya and other people of island facing the same cyclone which brought destruction and turmoil in Sunderbans at immense level. Somewhere Ghosh wants to warn the people that if we don't bring change in our life style, Nature will take its revenge in this manner. Ghosh wants to get aware to the people about the natural calamities of environment in future which will be the result of human's own karma. As Ghosh reveals the cycle of nature in the novel:

It was in 1737. The Emperor Aurangzeb had died some thirty years before and the country was in turmoil. Calcutta was a new place then- the English had seized their opportunity and made it the main port of the east.'

'Go on, Saar.

it happened in October- that's always when the worst of them strike, October and November. Before the storm had even made landfall the tide country was hit by a huge wave, a wall of water twelve metres in height. Can you imagine how high that is, my friend? It would have drowned everything on your island and on ours too. Even we on this roof would have been under water.' . . . 'And this, may friend and

comrade, is a true a story, recorded in documents stored in the British Museum, the very place where Marx wrote Das Capita.’

But, Saar, it couldn’t happen again, Saar, could it? . . . ‘My friend, not only could it happens again- it will happen again. A storm will come, the waters will rise, and the badh will succumb, in part or in whole. It is only a matter of time.’ (THT p.204-205)

Ghosh very intelligently intermingle the Indian myth with ecological problems of Sunderbans. People of Lusibari consider about ‘Bon bibi’- ‘the goddess of the forest,’ who rules over all the animals of the Sunderbans. People of Lusibari use to stage perform of the Glory of Bon bibi. People believe that tigers, crocodiles and other animals do her bidding. It is considered by the people that Bon bibi is very merciful and she tries to save the life of people in hazardous natural calamities. When, Dokkhin Rai was being stalked by a tiger. He called out “O mother of mercy, Bon Bibi, save me, come to my side!”(THT p.105) Bon Bibi came while crossing the waters and save his life as mother. Thus, Born Bibi show the law of the forest that greedy would be punished and poor were always rewarded by her. But sometimes Ghosh rejected this myths as Kusum spoke to Kanai “I called her too, but she never came, Bon Bibi. The day my father died. I saw it all, it happened in front of me, and I called her again and again . . .” (THT p.107) Ghosh very interestingly mingle Bon Bibi myth in this novel and raise question in the mind of reader for research and also try to depicts innocent nature of the rustic people who begins to believe at any fact without doubting or questioning.

Piyali Roy comes to do survey of the marine mammals of the Sundarbans. She is interested in Gangetic Dolphins and Irrawaddy Dolphins. Piya tries to depict the description of dolphins- their discovery, history, and problems faced by them. Piya lived in Lusibari for few days but due to hazardous incident in the life and area of Lusibari she left for a month, but returned to work for Badabon trust. She decided to move the trust in the direction of conservation of the Gangatic Dolphins, in consultation with the local fisherman of Lusibari: she is also helped by financing a house for Moyna and College education for Tatal. She asks Nilima for the rent of Upper floor of her house to set guest house. She wanted to work on project at the name of Fokir and at last she said, Nilima, “For me, home is where the Orcaella are, so there’s no reason why this couldn’t be it.” (THT p.400) And Kanai starts to write what he remembered from reading Nirmal’s journal. Ghosh tries to end the novel with happy setting from the hazardous Nature calamites face by the people of Lusibari:

The novel abounds in information about natural history, the authenticity of which need not be questioned from a writer with a reputation for meticulous research and one who is an anthropologist by training. However, it is the movement towards a vision at the end, which is more interesting and enlightening. What Piya realizes should be realized by all the eco-critics. After the storm and Fokir's death, Piya goes away only to return with funds and a proposal for a research project. Piya wants to

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work in consolation with the local fishermen so that the burden of conservation would not fall on those who could least afford it. She wants the project to run under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust. It is a small gesture but significant nevertheless. She refuses to exclude the man at the grassroots from her work as a conservationist. She is aware that without Fokir's particular knowledge of his environment, she would have remained ignorant of the river dolphins in the tide country and so would the rest of the world. (Thakur 70-71)

*The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans meaning "beautiful forest" which comprises of more ten thousand square kilometers. Climate change in the Sundarbans affected both human being and Animals. Flora is also in danger. Due to increase in the population mangroves of Sunderbans begin to wrinkle. Sudden, rising of water level increase the possibility flood and Tsunamis. People of the islands are uneducated and lack of awareness which leads to imbalanced biodiversity in Sunderbans- tide country.

The novel recounts the event of the Morichjhapi incident that took place in 1979 and it depicts the exploitation faced by the refugees from Bangladesh. The Government of India has taken steps to preserve its natural resources which include the endangered species like the Royal Bengal Tiger and the Gangetics Dolphins called as Oracella.

The preservation of the region has given rise to confrontation with the local people. In 1978 a large number of people came and settled here. There were refugees from Bangladesh who were exploited Muslim communists and upper class Hindus. Since this place was a reserved forest the government authorities declared eviction of the settlers. For almost a year, there was strong conflict between the authorities and the people. The ultimate conflict took place in the year 1979 and it remains a mystery whether Nirmal was a part of it. The incidents of Morichjhapi are revealed through the papers left by Nirmal for Kanai.

Environmentalism and Destabilization are some of the predominant themes in the novel. The geographical location of the Sundarbans serves as a significant metaphor in the novel. The physical environment is a representation of an active force that connects the plant, animal and human life together and one is affected by the other directly or indirectly. The topographic features habitats of the people, professions of this tide country are responsible for the formation of their communities. In the novel, we see a co-existence among various kinds of people face the same consequence while encountering with the environment which comprise of dense forests, rivers, snakes and crocodiles, fishes, tigers and also the natural disasters like the cyclone and terrible storms.

The environment is not only important to form the narratives structure but also its highlights the mystery and fates of an individual's existence even in the midst of a dangerous but at the same time a beauty of nature. The people living in close proximity with Nature have their own myths and legends about Mother Nature. Here in this novel we have the Bon



Bibi myth that is necessary in the formation of an identity for the people of this tide country who believe so much in the myths, customs and rituals of the Sunderbans jungle and its influence upon their lives. The concept of the Jungle is a distinct paradigm which shows the differences between the civilized and the uncivilized people.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh has depicted nature's resistance towards its regimentation and strict categorization. We clearly see that Nature has its own workings that are beyond human control. In the Sunderbans the boundaries collapse and rivers merge with each other. Amitav Ghosh's novel explores the theme of destabilization mainly caused by globalization. It is based on a true historical incident; the event of Morichjhapi and also concern the issues of the environment, its protection and conservation of the Sunderbans. Ghosh shows the conflict between the refugees and the government authorities and also focuses on the suffering of the settlers in a hostile environment where they have no other place to go.

Through the novel, Ghosh hints at the fact that globalization far-reaching impact upon the people who are considered backward and uncivilized. Through the globalization, even these sections of people have benefitted a lot and the transfer of knowledge and effect of communication will pave the way for further education and advancement in technologies and ideas. However, Ghosh shows the negative aspects of globalization as well. This is seen in the inhuman and different attitude shown by the urban people towards the settlers of the Morichjhapi.

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