



## TOWARDS AN EPOCHAL SHIFT IN ECOLOGICAL DISCOURSES: A READING OF *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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### Abstract

The present paper is a re-evaluation of the prominent text, "*The Hungry Tide*" which reveals that it is essential to critique and register the shaping of environment by capitalist modernity. In this text, Ghosh draws attention on the annihilating impact of conservationist policies that aim to preserve the environment without considering any other aspects. This becomes evident especially in the context of Sundarbans Island where people are compelled to migrate and vacate the land under the pretense of ecological conservation. By depicting the geographical terrain of the Sundarbans Island which embodies complexity and diversity, Ghosh reveals nature's resistance to be comprehensible. Ghosh exposes the unreliability of logicity and science when challenged with the potent forces of Nature. In this context, Ghosh focuses on the transformations experienced by the characters in the novel in their negotiation of the environment. Thus, the paper focuses on those characters who eventually reassess their Western ideologies of environmentalism and re-examine their own assumption of a region being knowable. This further hints at a universal transformation and enables the reader to contemplate on the folly of human beings to define class, boundaries and borders and put into fixed compartmentalization. In doing so, the paper aims at showing the intriguing complexities of man-nature relationship and revises the utopian impulse of prioritizing any human or non-human inhabitant over the other which can prove to be detrimental.

Keywords: Ecology, Conservation, Knowledge, Resistance, Conflict, Border

### INTRODUCTION

*The Hungry Tide* is a hybrid literary text where Amitav Ghosh focuses on the historical account of the Morichjhapi massacre and also urges the readers to preserve the eco-system by exploring the problems of conserving biodiversity. In this text,

Amitav Ghosh addresses the ecological conditions which affect the smooth functioning of life in Sundarbans. Ghosh draws attention on the deteriorating influence of environmental protectionist policies which leaves the local people evacuate their island. Ghosh also subverts the very notion that the islands can be easily mapped out and

defined. Through the diverse perspectives of the characters in the novel, it becomes possible to have an understanding of their notions and relationship with the environment.

The setting of Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide* is Sundarbans. The Sundarbans serves both as a setting and a living character. The landscape contains an omnipotent presence as both destructive and life-enabling environment, thereby making it hard to map out. The landscape represents the general Indian environment which is unconsciously viewed by most characters in the novel as the "other" and therefore, an interesting subject. Greer also comments about the elusive nature of the island and asserts that in the Sundarbans where the tide changes the environment daily, nothing is certain and everything is a shade of gray. We get a glimpse about the diversity, volatility and the elusive nature of the island. This representation clashes with the notion that islands are easily knowable places.

#### DISCUSSION

Sundarbans is generally known to be the home of a wide range of animals and plants, particularly the Bengal tiger. The government's steps to protect the Bengal tiger resulted in the disputes with local people. This Conservation project was chiefly responsible for the tragedy of Morichjhapi. The incident of Morichjhapi is significant as it provides the historical backdrop of the text as well as it serves as the evidence of the devastating impact of environmental protectionist policies that sidelines human lives and the local cultural knowledge in the name of preservation. Divya Anand considers the Morichjhapi massacre as the main theme of the novel as it exposes the shams of the global conservationist policies by "disregarding the material reality of a landscape, are detrimental to the socially and economically backward classes like the indigenous peoples, forest dwellers, tribals and nomads."(157)

In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin draws attention on the precarious modes of existence that are produced by the environmental violence with the onset of colonialism and

capitalism. In this novel, the precarity is symbolized by the unpredictable landscape of the Sundarbans. The island is not suitable for human settlement as it is subjected to catastrophic floods, famines and other natural calamities. Sir Hamilton, a rich Scotsman, without understanding the complexity and mystery of the treacherous island envisions a utopian human settlement wherein people of all races would live in harmony and without any discrimination. His seemingly benign utopian vision encouraged people of other parts of the country to migrate to the tide country in search of a 'free society'. However, nature's resistance is pronounced and we are constantly reminded, "At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and 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."(3). His utopian vision fails as he ignores the local history and the forces of nature. We come to know more about the region's unique geography from Nirmal's journal when he states:

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. (3)

Through these lines, Ghosh interrogates the absolute claims of knowledge production and urges the readers to subvert their pre-conceived notions about the island being knowable places. Through the representation of Sundarbans, Ghosh enlightens the reader that it is difficult to authoritatively claim the ecological issues of a place without considering the human and cultural issues which are a part of the natural ecosystem. In the novel, the island of Sundarbans become a profitable destination for ecotourism under the disguise of ecological conservation. In this context, Rosaleen Duffy

mentions that the concept of ecotourism relies on the neo-liberalization of nature through the transformation of natural resources into privately owned and globally 'marketable goods.'(320) .

David Harvey (2006) opines that the global capitalist modernity involves the displacement of poor and historically marginalized people that have compelled them to migrate from their homeland leading to the devastation of villages and rural culture as a whole. Ghosh sheds light on the destructive effects of capitalism and the neoliberal modes of accumulation by dispossession. Capitalist ideology unleashes unrestricted competition even at the expense of repressing the local populace. Thus, Ghosh recounts the traumatic memory of Morichjhapi in the text and voices against the atrocities in the name of development and ecological conservation. Ghosh challenges the environmental politics that subjugates local narratives and human histories. The narrative focuses on the characters like Kusum, one of the Dalit refugees from Bangladesh who had chosen to settle on the Indian side of the Sundarbans and eventually she falls prey to such vague environmentalist policies and dies as she is compelled to evacuate from her homeland. Ghosh exposes the harsh reality of the State's "ecological conservation" whose only motive is monetary and political. We come to know this through the remarks made by Kusum. Kusum laments:

The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless and listen to the policemen making their announcements...This island 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. (216)

Her remark problematizes the benevolent interests of these conservationist policies when she claims this was how "humans have always lived- by fishing, by clearing land and by planting ;p.the soil."(262). Kusum's death impacts a host of characters throughout the novel. Kanai's uncle, Nirmal's account of the Morichjhapi incident exposes the conflicting agendas of environmentalism. Nilima explained Kanai that the

refugees were people without any power and privilege. The refugees were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down. (Ghosh, 118).

Huggan and Tiffin cites Lawrence Buell's belief that "environmental crises and Western thought are intrinsically interwoven": "Western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's environmental problems" (Buell 1995: 2, quoted in Huggan and Tiffin 2007: 5). By revealing the diverse perspectives of the chief characters in the text like Piya, Kanai and Fokir, Ghosh interrogates the Western notions of understanding the environment. Vandana Shiva opines that these Western models of development reinforces oppression of local people, culture and does more harm than benefit to the third world countries. A thorough reading of the text reveals how characters like Piya, Kanai and Nirmal come to revise their Western ideologies of environmentalism. Piya, an American scientist visits the Sundarbans to undertake research on the dolphins. In the beginning, Piya comes to the island with the presumably benevolent notions of conservation. Initially, she is proud of her scientific and technological knowledge that eventually proves to be subversive and reductive. She is accompanied and guided by Fokir, a local knowledgeable fisherman. Kanai, a wealthy translator comes to Sundarbans to visit his aunt to translate her husband's work after his death and later serves as an interpreter to Piya. Kanai's uncle, Nirmal's annal helps to render the unimaginable scale of time that dominates the humans and nonhuman residents of the Sundarbans. Like Hamilton, Nirmal also dreamt of a utopian society. His revolutionary zeal made him ignore the local culture and history and the mysterious nature of the landscape. The fictional island of Lusibari becomes a source of inspiration for Nirmal's utopian impulse. Hamilton's idea of utopian society wherein apparently all the people of India would live freely irrespective of the cultural differences ironically appeals Nirmal. This vision does not get materialized as Hamilton dies and there was not enough resources to fulfil the dream into reality. Yet, Nirmal finds hope in the utopian vision as we find him telling Kanai that "it was just that the

tide country wasn't ready yet. Someday who knows? It may yet come to be." Nirmal's notion of looking at the environment is anthropocentric which initially makes him ignore the significance of the local culture. Nirmal's expectation clashes with Hamilton's seemingly utopian vision when he visits Morichjhapi. His expectations do not match with what he witnesses. The refugees disagree to give up their freedom and do not adhere to the western environmentalist agenda that forcibly evicts them in the name of ecological conservation. . It is then that Nirmal comes to reassess his utopian vision. He begins to identify himself with the refugees and in anguish, he begins to question his position as a privileged outsider. Similarly, Kanai undergoes transformation after reading his uncle's account of Morichjhapi. Kanai's transformation can be noticed in an instance when he translates the local Bon Bibi legend for Piya. In another incident where the tiger attacks the villagers, leading to the killing of the tiger by an angry mob, Kanai interrogates the conservationist policies as well as refines his own fixed notion about preserving the tiger at the cost of human lives. Kanai remarks:

That tiger had killed two people, Piya," Kanai said. And that was just in one village. It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? Isn't that a horror too—that we can feel the suffering of an animal but not of human beings? (248).

Piya vehemently condemns this act of killing the tiger by villagers. Her notion of environmentalism emerges from the Western philosophical concept of "deep ecology." This concept leads to the biocentric-anthropocentric dichotomy. This dichotomous worldview focuses on the preservation of the non-human, biocentric world and preserving their rights which seems to be wiped away by the humans. The anthro-biocentric dichotomy, when imposed on the Sundarbans, appears to be hazardous as it completely sidelines the plight of the people who are left at the mercy of the fiercest of animals – the Royal Bengal Tiger. Ramachandra Guha opposes Piya's biocentric notion of the environment and comments:

This is an ecologically updated version of the White Man's Burden, where the biologist (rather than the civil servant or military official) knows that it is in the natives' true interest to abandon their homes and hearths and leave the fields and forest clear for the new rulers of their domain...the biologists, park managers and wildlifers—to determine collectively how the territory is to be managed. (How Much Should 16)

Kanai reveals the loopholes of these conservationist policies and voices the predicament of the local populace. Kanai compels Piya to re-think about the hidden agendas of conservationist policies as well as her limited vision of prioritizing the non-human beings over the humans and romanticizing the environment. Eventually, we find that Piya embraces a more comprehensive model of environmentalism which encompasses the concerns of the humans as well as the non-human world.

Fokir seems to have understood the functioning of the island better than Piya. We come to know that it is actually Fokir's indigenous knowledge about the depths of the world and the Sundarbans in particular, which eventually saves Piya's life. Piya's relationship with Fokir is significant as it focuses on the ways both of them interact with the environment. Furthermore, it sheds light on the reductiveness of man-made boundaries, class, East/West divide and Western forms of knowledge production . Even though both Piya and Fokir cannot speak due to linguistic barrier, yet, we come to know that they share a meaningful bond. Piya develops a deep attachment for the local fisherman despite the lack of verbal communication. Fokir teaches her to respect the concerns of the island as well as the local people and its culture. Piya relies on him for his vast experiential knowledge about the natural world . At the end of the text, Fokir's knowledge and experience in dealing with the forces of nature saves Piya's life. After the death of Fokir, Piya returns to Lusibari and makes up her mind to name her project after Fokir to preserve his legacy. Also, it is Fokir's data and knowledge that would provide the foundation for Piya's 'scientific' research. This is an instance where Ghosh challenges and subverts Western knowledge as superior to the non-West.

Through the characters like Piya and Kanai, Ghosh problematizes the collective endeavours of understanding the environment and the culture of the indigenous people. Piya realizes that the conservation efforts are effective when it has the intention to serve the locals and so, she plans to share her funding with the Babadon Trust. By depicting the character of Fokir and the myths throughout the novel, Ghosh challenges the dominant modes of knowledge production and presents an indigenous 'subaltern' knowledge which finally helps in transforming the 'global cosmopolitan' characters.

### CONCLUSION

Thus, in Ghosh's novel, we find that the non-human world, the nature and also the native culture possesses an agency which, if we re-consider, would preserve the natural balance of the universe and ensure a better environment. This ecological diversity is significant for global sustenance. In conclusion, it can be reinstated that Ghosh employs ecology as discourse to address the futility of human superiority and also offer crucial insights in grappling with the natural environment.

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**Declaration:** This article is original and has not been submitted elsewhere.