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**Bioregionalism and Eco-consciousness in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide***

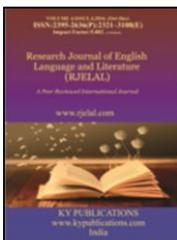
**Dr.MATHEW P JOSEPH<sup>1</sup>, RIYA SUSAN SCARIAH<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Research Supervisor, Bharatiar University, Coimbatore & Principal, Catholicate College,  
Pathanamthitta

Email: [drmathewpjoseph@yahoo.com](mailto:drmathewpjoseph@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar (Part Time, Category- B)Bharatiar University,Coimbatore

Email: [riyabcm@gmail.com](mailto:riyabcm@gmail.com)



**ABSTRACT**

Bioregionalism is an innovative way of thinking about place and planet from an ecological perspective. A bioregion is literally and etymologically a "life-place"-a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human communities. The bioregional study of Indian English writing will help to cultivate a long term view of place ;and shows how a deeper awareness of the natural and cultural history of a place might shape the future of a community.

The paper aims at analyzing some of the features of bioregionalism in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* and also observes how it helps in building up the ecological consciousness of the community. The novel focuses on the biotic life in Sunderbans,which is essentially a bioregion. Ghosh views the Sunderban bioregion not only as territory defined by natural makers but also a domain of consciousness. Sunderbans, with its dwindling population of endangered species of Royal Bengal Tiger and the Irawaddy Dolphin poses a serious environmental crisis. Thus *The Hungry Tide* is a strong appeal for preserving our unique bioregions and the restoration of watershed.

Key words: Bioregion, Bioregionalism, Eco-consciousness, Living-in-Place, Reinhabitation

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**INTRODUCTION**

The bioregional "movement" arose in the 1970's as a branch of contemporary environmentalism. The distinctive niche of bioregionalism has its focus on the local environment and its commitment to seeking place-based solutions to environmental problems. This has much relevance in Indian scenario as our culture is integrated with our nature. Bioregional thinking places primary value on direct experience in a place, at the same time ,it values the other mode of human experience which Gary Synder has called "hearsay"-

the inheritance of knowledge we draw from our spiritual traditions, myth ,philosophy and science. The knowledge about their natural system will bring a positive shift in the attitude of the people.

In the novel *The Hungry Tide*, the life of the people is revolved in a particular bioregion called Sunderbans. Sunderbans are the archipelago of islands that lie on the border between India and Bengal where the transformation is the rule of life, where rivers stray from week to week, where islands are "made and unmade"(224) *The Hungry Tide* examines the landscape, the flora and fauna and the

people who inhabit the Sunderbans. In his 'Author's Note' Ghosh points out that the two principal settings, Lusibari and Garjontola are fictitious. However, secondary locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichihapi and Emilybari are real. Ghosh clearly foregrounds the terrain where the action happens. What he emphasizes is its impermanence. The landscape is like a book: "a complication of pages that overlap without any two ever being the same"(224) Kanai, the translator, is able to see the difference in just one look.

#### Features of bioregionalism in the novel

A detailed analysis of the theory of Bioregionalism is drawn in *Home! A Bioregional Reader* in which famous bioregionalists like Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann talks at length about living-in-place. "Living- in -Place" is not a new phenomenon but rather an age old way of human adaptation which was successful of thousands of generations, until the rise of patriarchy and the present- day exploitative industrial civilization.

One of the main features of bioregionalism is the concept of life –place. Sunderbans is a bioregion and it means "beautiful forest" and is located in the northern part of Bay of Bengal.It stretches across coastal India and Bangladesh, from the Hooghly river in West Bengal to the shores of Meghna in Bangladesh. Measuring over ten thousand square kilometers, the Sunderban deltas the world's largest mangrove system.

Ghosh views the Sunderban bioregion not only as a territory defined by natural markers, but also as a domain of consciousness. Ghosh's biocentric vision is exemplified in the novel where he describes the landscape, the flora, the fauna and the people who inhabited the Sunderbans (qtd.in *Ecocriticism in Practice*,51).

Bioregional narratives can be used as tools to restore the imagination of place, namely, to understand and to orient the evolutionary dynamics connected to the life of place, involving an open and more inclusive reflection on identity, history and ecology. PeterBerg and Raymond Dasmann defined bioregion as both a "geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness...a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place" (Buell 36).

The natural habitat was reinhabited by a British idealist named Sir Daniel Hamilton. Hamilton was a Utopian visionary, and he had bought ten thousand acres of the Sunderbans and invited impoverished people to come and populate the place, free to them on one condition-there would be no caste system, and no tribal nationalisms. Despite the crocodiles, tigers, snakes and dangerous tides, the people started living a life in harmony with nature or they lived in integrity with the natural system.

A central element of bioregionalism is the importance given to the natural systems. A natural system is a community of independent life, a mutual biological integration on the order of ecosystem. The very gut of bioregionalism thought is the integrity of natural systems and the culture, with the function of culture being the mediation of the self and the ecosystem.

The integrity of natural system and the culture is another important feature of bioregionalism. A deeper awareness of the natural and the cultural history of a place might shape the future of the community. Sunderbans is a place, a kind of "Utopia; where one's familiar markers for identity-caste, religion etc-stand obliterated and Nature seems to create undo and recreate a borderless region.(247)

Bioregionalism is simply biological realism; in natural systems we find the physical truth of our being, the real obvious stuff like the need for oxygen as well as the more subtle need for moonlight, and perhaps other truths beyond that The people of the Sunderbans well accepted their natural system and they. A natural system is a community of independent life,a mutual biological integration on the order of an ecosystem. Natural systems can function as models of consciousness.

Bioregionalism is an all-inclusive way of life, embracing the whole range of human thought and endeavor. It advocates a full restructuring of systems within a given bioregion, orienting toward regeneration and sustainability of the whole life community. This inclusion of the nonhuman in the definition of community is vital. Indeed, one of the basic tenets of bioregionalism is the notion of "biocentrism," or "eco-centrism," where reality is

viewed from a life-centered or ecologically centered perspective, rather than from a human-centered focus (anthropocentrism). In the novel *The Hungry Tide*, we can see the co-existence of the human and the non human.

In the bioregional spirit view we are all one creation, and it may seem almost simple –minded to add that there is a connection-even a necessary unity-between the natural world and the human mind. Different people and groups have their own paths and practices and may describe this connection differently.-profound, amusing, inelectable, mysterious-but they all acknowledge the importance of the connection not fixed to a single religious form or practice. The story of Bon Bibi is imprinted on the minds of the people . “...Bon Bibi rules over the jungle, that the tigers, crocodiles and other animals do her bidding”(102). Central to their lives in the tide country is their belief about Bob Bibi, the goddess of the forest, who protects them. This ‘bioregional spirit’ is another notable feature of bioregionalism.

#### Eco-Consciousness and Bioregionalism

The famous eco philosopher Theodore Roszak in the preface to his famous book *The Voice of the Earth*, remarked “ecological unconsciousness” as the main cause for the deeper imbalance in nature. (13) If ecological unconsciousness is the root cause of all problems then what is ecological consciousness? “Literature is a lens which we’re able to sharpen our understanding of our world’s vital problems-and literary criticism the mechanism of articulating what we come to understand”, so says Scott Slovic in his seminal essay “Savoring, Saving and Ecocritical Responsibility”(8).

Glen Love claimed in 1991 that “the most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world”. (213)

Literature is considered “as a potential medium of consciousness change and an increased ecological sensibility which, however indirectly, can help to contribute a change of political and social practice” (Gersdorf and Mayer 51)

Piyali Roy is a cetologist, comes to the Sunderbans from America, with an aim to study the dwindling breed of Irrawady dolphin. The dolphins

she spots there exhibit familiar behavioral patterns. She later found out that the presence of an underwater ‘pool’ where the Orcaella gather, and she calls it the ‘Garjontola pool’. Piya had chosen her career to save an endangered species of dolphin called Orcaella or Irrawady dolphin. When she was under pressure to quit her work owing to security risk, Piya remains unfazed. “I can’t return Kanai...If I leave, Who knows how long it’ll be before another cetologist can come here?”(229) It is Piya’s ecological consciousness that led her to say that she is ready to sacrifice her life for the cause: “If I thought giving up my life might make the rivers safe again for the Irrawady dolphin, the answer is, yes, I would”.(302). It is no wonder that Piya comes back to Lusibari at the end of the novel with a plan of working on a project with funds from conservation and environmental groups. Thus, Piya hailing from Seattle, makes Lusibari her home. Nilima, the old inhabitant of the island is surprised to hear from Piya: “For me, home is where the Orcaella are: so there is no reason why this couldn’t be it”(400).

Fokir is another major character who lives in harmony with the nature. He knows the ebb and flow of every tide and Piya’s scientific knowledge is complemented by the native knowledge of Fokir, the local fisherman. Since Fokir has the river in his veins, he knows the routes frequented by the dolphins. He takes Piya into every little creek and gully where he had ever seen a dolphin. Piya once remarked: “I’ve never met anyone with such an incredible instinct: It is as if he can see right into the river’s heart...Fokir’s abilities as an observer are really extraordinary. To be with him was one of the most exciting experiences of my life” (268).

#### Conclusion

Bioregionalism calls for human society to be more closely related to nature (hence, bio), and to be more conscious of its locale, or region, or life-place (therefore, region). According to Peter Berg from Planet Drum foundation, bioregionalism is “more than just saving what’s left”, more than environmentalism rather it is the political means for directing society toward restoring and maintaining the natural systems that ultimately support all of life. Gary Synder in his seminal essay Bioregional Perspectives in *Home! A Bioregional Reader* states “

Bioregional awareness teaches us in specific ways. It is not enough to just “love nature” or to want to “be in harmony with Gaia”. Our relation to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience”.(17) One bioregion is distinguished from another by characteristics of flora, fauna, water, climate, rocks, soils, land forms, and the human settlements, cultures, and communities these characteristics have spawned.

Aberly’s belief that “bioregionalism offers the best hope we have for creating an independent web of self-reliant, sustainable cultures”(McGinnis 4).Bioregionalism speaks to the heart of the community. If we are to continue to live on earth, the definition of the community has to include all the living things in the ecosystem and the novel *The Hungry Tide* is an exemplary work which reminds us to live in integrity with the natural system. People are counted as an integral aspect of a place's life, as can be seen in the novel and they live sustainably and joyfully in place.”

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