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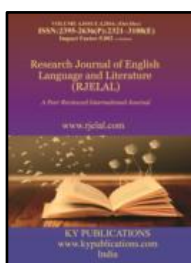
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## ECOCRITICISM: UNDERSTANDING THE MOTIF OF HUNGER AND STARVATION IN INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

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### ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is the study of literature from an ecology or environmental perspective. It is the study of explicitly environmental texts from any critical perspective or the application of various environmental lenses to any kind of texts. Ecocriticism is the study of presentation of nature in literary works and of the relationship between ecocriticism and the environment. As a separate movement or a school of literary criticism started developing in the 1990s. There is a close relationship between ecocriticism and literature. It is an interdisciplinary study of Ecology and Literary Criticism which is unusual combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. By analogy ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how man's relationship with his physical environment is reflected in literature. This paper discusses the term ecocriticism and the role of ecocriticism in literature. It cites examples of how the theme of ecocriticism can be interpreted through the reading of two Indian novels, namely, *Nectar in a sieve* by Kamala Markandaya and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecology, Literature, Indian novels.

### INTRODUCTION

William Ruckert may have been the first person to use the term eco-criticism. Ruckert published an essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in (1978) which he focused on "the application of Ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature". First, ecocriticism is a response to the need for humanistic understanding of our relationship with the natural world in an age of environment destruction. Secondly, environmental crises are result of humanity's disconnection from the natural world, brought about not only by increasing technology but also by particularization. Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary. In order to connectedness of all things- including in the life of the mind and life of

the earth. One must reconnect the disciplines that have become sundered through over specialization.

Eco-critical approaches, thus, can be theoretical, pedagogical, rhetorical and on including the combinations of the above. Ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' referred in literary theory as 'society' to include the entire ecosphere. Ecocriticism is a branch of Literary criticism in which has being discussed worldwide as an interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment. It covers the study of subjects like science, literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology etc and attempts to study the attitudes of mankind towards nature. Some popular names for this relatively new genre are eco-poetics, green culture and environmental literary criticism.

**Ecocriticism in Indian English Fiction**

Ecocriticism is not only the application of Ecology and Ecological principles but also the study of literature and theoretical discourse. There has been a close relationship nature and literature. This relationship has been reflected through writers and poets throughout different cultures across the world. A variety of novels, poems and other expressions of literature been depicted on the backdrop of issues concerning nature. Today, environment issues have become a matter of concern for many departments and disciplines of knowledge and development. In many literary works in English, nature has been a prime issue. Colonialism has been a significant factor in the social and cultural environments of the world have completely changed the representations of mans attitude towards nature in literary expressions. Environmental studies in literary texts through nature imagery, gender construct, feminism, man-woman relationship, tourism, culture etc have wider meanings than what is portrayed through their literal expressions.

**The Motif of Hunger and Starvation**

Literary depiction of hunger and starvation had been a powerful motif in the writing of many writers across the world. Because the act of eating such an essential place in the day-to-day life of the human as well as in the struggle for survival, the motif of hunger becomes a powerful force that drives the action and the plot of many works of art. In Indian English literature in the field of fiction, novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya expressed their resentment against the economic and social evils wrought by imperialism. Also they had expressed their concern for the poor, the hungry and the destitute in their novels. Anand in *Untouchable* (1933) and *Cool i*(1936), R.K. Narayan in *The Guide* (1958), Bhattacharya in *So Many Hungers* (1947) and *A Handful of Rice* (1966) and *He who Rides a Tiger* (1956).

Kamala Markanda in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and *A Handful of Rice* (1966) have resised their powerful voice against the problem of hunger and starvation. Paul Varghese rightly remarks that "Food is the primary requisite of human dignity;

hunger debases and dehumanizes man. That why hunger is the theme of a large number of Indo-Anglian novels" (Rai- 6). Though the motif of hunger used by the novelists is not a new one, Amitav Ghosh has used it in a different manner in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2013). This paper is an attempt to illustrate how Kamala Markandaya and Amitav Ghosh are used the motif of hunger and starvation in their novels.

The Motif of Hunger and Starvation in Kamala Markanday's *Nectar in a Sieve*

*Nectar in a sieve* is the story of peasant woman, Rukmani, whose life is totally shattered various factors of her life. Markandaya shows how the hostility of nature and rapid industrialization led her and her family to hunger and starvation. Though this environment, Markandaya depicts the life of toil and uncertainty lived by the tenant-famers. When their harvest fails owing to natural calamities, the farmers face not only starvation but also miserable poverty that forces them to sell their small possessions in order to pay the rent. Rukmani and her husband Nathan are forcibly dispossessed of their land as a result of rapid industrialization.

Markandaya's *Nectar in a sieve* (1954) describes the female protagonist Rukmani's attempt to retrieve and review elements of her family's rural life or strong sense of rootedness in their land. Both she and her husband toil on the land and have a special sense of belonging to it. However their sole dependency on this piece of land for survival is also a cause of their poverty. The relationship between land and Rukmani becomes an important instinct into understanding Rukmani's sense of belonging to her rural environment. The very beginning of the novel focuses the relationship between Rukmani, the land and her rural environment. This is how Rukmani recalls her early married days "while the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have good store grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for?" (Markandaya-8).

Markandaya does not blame human beings alone for the pitiable conditions of poor peasants. Nature to a large extent is also responsible for

leading them to hunger. The tragedy of rural life in India is that the people of villagers are entirely dependent on nature with her innate uncertainties and freaks of weather. This hanging fear of uncertainties is quite evident in these words of Rukmani "fear, fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger; fear of the blackness of death" (Markandaya-81).

Very soon Rukmani and Nathan have to work as stone –breakers to earn their bread for unbalance conditions of nature and environment. Very soon modern technology with takes man away from nature and ultimately destroys their relationship with nature enters the life of Rukmani's family. Rukmani's fear come true when her son, kunthi dies of starvation and ultimately Nathan also dies of overwork, exhaustion and starvation. Nature attacks them first in the form of heavy rains resulting in foods. First they have no rice to eat. They have to live on roots and leaves, the fruits of the prickly pear and plantains. The second ravage of nature in the form of drought.

A remarkable quality that distinguishing Kamala Markandaya from other Indian-English is that she makes her readers realize the true meaning of 'Hunger and Starvation'. True, once cannot judge the impact of hunger and starvation without passing through the terrible ordeal of being hungry. Markandaya lived in South- Indian villages and shared the sufferings of villagers as independent observer. This peculiar experience enables her to portray authentically the real picture of hunger.

For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, walking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and there is a gnawing and pain as if your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you by a moment's respite even while you know, fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull, and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you. (89-90)

The tannery symbolizes of modernity. It transforms both, the environment and the economic conditions of the village. It also brings about the drastic change in the relationship between the conditions of the villagers. While Kunthi is glad about the tannery, Rukmani sees it as a threat to the village life. The tannery became the main factor for the loss of her three sons. The tannery helped Arjun, Thambi and Raja to deal with the dire poverty that they were struggling with. While it created employment for them it also took them away from their family members, thus, degrading the importance of their family life. Markandaya successfully establishes that poverty, hunger and starvation can lead to disintegration of family followed by innumerable sufferings.

Tannery swallows the land of the farmers by purchasing it at a high cost. They are evicted from their land and from their mud huts. Uprooted in this way, they migrated to the city, the family disintegrates, and this disintegration of a single family is a symbol of the disintegration of the Indian agricultural way of life under the impact of western technology. Dr. Krishna Rao points out:

Thus, in the *Nectar in a Sieve*, a novel of rural India, she dramatizes tragedy if the disruption of Hindu joint family of a farmer owing to heavy industrialisation, a typically modern aspect of national economics. The family as an occupational unit in the social life of the country is a traditional idea that is either increasingly discarded or, at any rate, so much modified that is inoperative in the new social setup. Industrialisation, with its main emphasis on urban on urban development and the mechanisation of the means of production and distribution necessarily results in the social dislocation of the family. Hunger, starvation, destitution, desertion, eviction, industrialisation and death-all combine to make '*Nectar in a Sieve*' a tragedy of rural India. (KN-74)

The Motif of Hunger and Starvation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005), is one of the first Indian novel to strongly raise

ecological issues in Indian. Ghosh's novel reveals the interactions between the state, the poor, the fauna and flora, and the physical environment, and in doing so this work highlights both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that were inherent in the conservation efforts in the Sundarbans. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity.

*The Hungry Tide* is an extraordinary achievement of Ghosh. He attempts to explore the obscure, even ignored area of research in his fiction. For him, history and science are linked to human conditions. This is a great novel of political, economical, social, environmental and scientific issues that had been presented through a story, full of romance, suspense and poetry. This novel includes scientific treaties, travelogue, folklore and homelessness.

*The Hungry Tide* is the first novel of Ghosh that is entirely situated in Bengal and for this reason and it is very significant for Ghosh. Who himself accept that Calcutta can be found in most of his novel. This is the novel that represents the Bengali tradition of river novel. The landscape of Sunderbans determines much in the character's life. The precarious part of the world is always hit by tides and cyclones wash away the island everyday human life is very cheap in the archipelago. He remembers t y this storm became so famous that in 1970, cyclone thirty thousand people were killed. That is one of the reasons why *The Hungry Tide* is divided into two parts. The first part is 'the ebb: bhata' and the second part 'the flood: Jwar'. Between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost cost of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands. Some are vast and some no larger than sandbars. Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. Here at the beginning of the last century a visionary Scotsman founded a Utopian settlement where peoples of all races, classes, and religions could live together.

The motif of hunger Ghosh has used both in literal sense and suggestive sense. The animal's

hunger and nature's hunger is mentioned in the novel at various places. When Nirmal and Neelima first came from Calcutta to get settled in Lucibari- one of the island of Sundarbans- in 1950, they were astounded by the poverty-stricken condition of the tide country. The soil bore poor crops; the floods and storms rendered the land infertile. Most of the families subsided on a single day meal. The settlers of Lucibari were drawn to visionary Sir Daniel Hamilton. The settlers were mainly formers but hunger drove them to hunting, fishing and honey collecting. The result was disastrous- many died of drowning; many were killed by tiger, snake and crocodiles.

The hunger of love is seriously present in the novel towards between two different groups in triangle way. Love is an irresistible force that had consumed both Fokir and Piya, even though they were kept apart by language, class, literacy and by the social institution of marriage. At the same time, they are aware that their love and admiration for each other as a taboo by the society. In the silence of their heart they cherished their love and admiration for each other. Kanai became jealous towards the kind of relationship between Piya and Fokir. Kanai whose always "liked to think that he had true connoisseur's ability to both praise and appraise women" (3). Considers himself to be the natural choice of Piya. An account of illusory notion about himself, he makes attempts to relationship with Piya; but fails. He is envious of Fokir, who is able to establish the emotional contact with Piya despite the communication barrier between the two.

Fokir's warmth and child like naive simplicity bind him spontaneously to the women. That is why Piya falls in love with him. Moyna, his wife, grows, anxious, when she finds the proximity of Piya and Fokir. Moyna knows well that Fokir's innocence is sure to create emotional ripples in Piya. She is afraid that she might lose Fokir and Piya. Both kanai and Moyna became jealous due to their possessive nature and their and love towards Piya and Fokir respectively. The love triangle of Piya- Kanai- Fokir is similar to that of Nirmal- Kusum - Horen. Just like Kanai who with all his learning could not enter the heart of Piya, Nirmal could not enter

Kusum's heart. Kusum chose the illiterate Horen over the educated Nirmal. Nirmal on the other hand finds himself to be torn between his wife Nilima and Kusum; *I felt myself torn between my wife and the woman who had become the muse I'd never had; between the quit persistence of everyday exchange and the heady excitement –between prose and poetry* (216). The emotional entanglements between the characters show that the hunger of love is present in every human heart.

The tide's hunger had eaten up the potentially rich love of Piya and Fokir. The news of Fokir's death spread all around quickly .A great number of people came to attend his cremation. When the mourners gathered, Piya was always with Moyna. Tutle appeared beside her. Kanai left Lucibari a week after the cyclone. Moyna had cut off her hair in keeping with the custom. Piya also preferred to wear saree. Piya made a house for Moyna and provide college education to Tutle. She had several offers for funding from environmental groups and she had finally to stay at Lucibari and open her office on the upper floor on the guest house. Moyna would manage part time, of course, when she was not on duty in hospital. The novel ends with displacement and search of home with love.

#### **Conclusion**

To conclude I would like to state that ecocriticism aims at analyzing any text that foregrounds nature and environment. It is a broad genre that is known by many names: green cultural studies, eco-poetics, and environmental literary criticism. For some individual thinkers, ecocriticism can be socially activist or even spiritual. Although ecocriticism can touch virtually any discipline, when it translates into action, it generally comes back to its home ground- the human relationship with the earth. Ecocriticism, then, can be, but need not be, politically active, as it advocates for an understanding of the world that works to heal the environmental wounds like hunger, starvation, flood and drought that humans have inflicted upon it. Markandaya brings out that it is hunger and starvation which leads ultimately to degradation of family followed by innumerable sufferings. In the same way Ghosh's portrayal of hunger and

starvation of the poor people of the tide country and his metaphorical use of hunger in terms of love constitute the hunger motif a predominant feature of *The Hungry Tide*. These two novels focus the main theme of hunger and starvation at large of environmental situation at present.

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