

An Eco-Critical Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's novel "The Hungry Tide"

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Abstract:

Nature and literature have always close relationships as is evidenced in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in all cultures. Literature does not float above life and it has role to play. Many poets and novelists have become environment and eco-conscious. They used nature as landscape and as beautiful and lively atmosphere such as R.K Narayan, Jayanthi Mahapatra etc. But writers like Amitav Ghosh, Bhattacharya, and Kiran Desai have dealt the subject matter with environmental concern. They focus their attention on value of eco-balance and environmental concern. They advocated balanced co-relation between nature and mankind.

Key words: Eco-criticism, Hungry Tide, Environment, Mangrove forest, Sunderbans.

Introduction

Nature was not given due consideration by literary critics, so ecologically oriented literature leads for a better understanding of nature in its wider significance. Eco-criticism, a literary theory is crucial in the current scenario, as reading a literary work in eco-critical aspect is one of the functions of eco-criticism. It not only magnifies the works that appreciates nature but also explores linguistics and literary exemplification of environment. Eco-criticism is literary approach for studying basically two things that is representation of

nature in literature and relationship between literature and environment.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the few Indian writers in English in Post-colonial era, constructs nature in his fictional works by using intervening legends, experience, myth and history in his works. The setting shows a pen picture of physical environment and human interaction. The term eco-criticism coined William Ruckert in his critical writing "Literature and Ecology" an experiment in eco-criticism in 1978. Eco-criticism is a field that bridges the gap between science and literature.

Amitav Ghosh is an Indian writer and winner of 54th Jnanpith award, best known for his works in English fiction. The fictional works of this Indian English writer can be viewed through eco critical perspective.

The Hungry Tide is the sixth novel by Indian born author Amitav Ghosh and won the 2004 Hutch Cross word book award for fiction. The story take place aftermath of terrible 2004 Tsunami in Indian Ocean that devastated entire area.

Objectives

1. To study how individual in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects.
2. To probe the survival of ecologically balanced area like Sunderbuns.

3. To analyse the novel in eco-critical perspective.

The novel takes place primarily in Sunderbans, a massive mangrove forest that is split between West Bengal in India and Bangladesh. There are tigers, crocodiles and various other predators as a back drop for Ghosh's story of environment, faith, class structure and complex history of India in terms of colonialism and sectarian conflict. There are not many novels in Indian fiction that deals with the themes eco-criticism though, nature has been used as back drop against the story develops. This novel *The Hungry Tide* deals with the study of nature writing and it is about one of the most dynamic ecological systems of the world. It is set in Sunderbans a rather alienated cluster of islands in the Ganges delta which often falls prey to tiger attacks and constant floods.

This story starts with the travel of Kanai Dutt, a wealthy businessman and translator, who comes to visit his Aunt in the Sundarbans, and intends to inquire about a journal written by his deceased uncle that had just recently discovered again. Soon while taking the train towards the Sundarbans, Kanai meets Piya Roy, an Indian—American scientist who came to the Sundarbans to research rare Irrawady Dolphins.

Soon the focus shifts to Piya after the two part company. After Piya reaches the Sunderbans she encounters the local government, who gives her a tough time while she seeks permission to conduct research on the dolphins. Piya soon continues her research with her local team of observers while searching, Piya meets a local fisherman named Fokir when he rescued her after falling out of the boat she then decides to continue her research with Fokir in his boat due to the original crew having an excessive focus on her money and expensive equipment. Eventually, Piya

returns with Fokir to Lusibari, when Kanai and his uncle reside. Piya discovered that Fokir and Kanai families are friends.

After Piya describes her research to Kanai family, they agree to lend her boats and crew to help. As they are on the expedition, Fokir and Piya decide to split off to explore the rivers in a smaller boat.

While they are separate from the main boat, a storm role in, Kanai and rest of the crew are forced to leave after waiting for their arrival. Fokir and Piya while stuck in the storm are forced to seek protection in the forest of mangroves. And while stranded, Fokir tries to protect Piya, but he is killed by debris flying in the wind. Piya however, survives and makes it back to town to notify the family of Fokir's death. Traumatized, Piya leaves but returns a month later to raise money for the family of Fokir.

This novel was acclaimed for the authors' description of Sunderbans and his ability to draw one into the characters.

The setting of the novel is in the very heart of nature, puts ecological perspective at the fore front. It would not be an exaggeration if nature is the chief protagonist of this work. *The Hungry Tide* is quite eloquent about the ecological concerns of Sunderbans, Mangrove forest between sea and plains of Bengal, which is slowly denuded of its biodiversity.

The ecological balance in this part of India, with the poor, is seriously being threatened. As the scientist Mr Pinddington warned against establishment of town canning, he said if forest itself is engendered that is certainly to diminish the possibility of Calcutta being protected anymore against the devastating oceanic storms of Bay of Bengal. This concern for ecological balance is visible throughout the novel.

Ghosh presents nature not only as setting of picturesque beauty alone. It also appears as hungry of human blood. The tide and its surges stand for all the devastating aspects of nature. We may spot following expression about Mangrove forest from the Bengal script that Kanai reads in the novel.

“A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. 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” (THT, .7-8).

The above quoted passage describes unreceptive approach of the nature towards man. In this section “Canning”, Kanai remains dumb struck on seeing the plight of the passenger in the boat due to the vast expense of the bellowing mud:

“...on stepping off the plank, there was a long- drawn out moment when each passenger sank slowly into the mud, like a spoon disappearing into a very thick daal. Only when they were in up to their hips did their descent end and their forward movement begin. With their legs hidden from sight all that was visible of their struggles was the twisting of their upper bodies” (THT, p.24-25).

Ghosh has presented in this section entitled “S” Daniel a discussion between Nirmal and Kanai about “S’ Daniel’s efforts in bringing people to the tidal region, which was weighted down with number less hazards and risks to their lives. It is a matter of pity that tidal surroundings bring not only

that sudden danger to the inhabitants but constant fear of psychosis:

“Think of what it was like, think of tigers, crocodiles and snakes that lived in creaks and nalas that covered islands. This was feast for them. They killed hundreds of people.”

These are islands where inhabitants live in fear of drowning tides and man eating animals. Kanai words to Piya go in this way.

“This is after all no remote and lonely frontier- this is India’s door mat, threshold of teaming sub-continent. Everyone who has ever taken the eastern root into Gangetic heart land has had to pass through it--- Aracnese, the Japanese, the Dutch, the Malays, and the English”.

The novelist meticulously offers nexus the man—nature complex interactions like manifest threats posed by human settlement to the unique diversity of aquatic terrestrial life in mangrove swamps and constant depletion of aquatic species by fishing, trawling, human settlers to fall victim to constant erosion of dykes and embankments, the sitting up of channels, the flooding by storm waters. The climatic ending, in which a cyclone threatens the inhabitants of Sunderbans, underscores Nirmal’s observation that “nothing escapes the maw of tides”.

This is an enticing tale where Ghosh orchestrates the marvels –tigers, river dolphins, crocodiles, lunar rainbows and tides which go against settlers. The work is an eradicable mask bearing a conflict between wilderness and human civilization.

Nature comes out as hostile and antagonistic to human beings right at the outset where Ghosh acquaints us with the word Mangrove. For inhabitants of Island the nature is bountiful mother and hostile force. The storm and tigers are the forms in which nature expresses its hostility to

human beings. The gentler aspects of nature are represented by the river Dolphin which Kusam names her son as “Gods messengers.” Even the slightest changes in the river water are threats like cyclone can be predicted with a change in Dolphin’s behavior and appearance in and out of water.

This novel is a survey on and endangered eco-system—the Sunderbans in Bay of Bengal. The Sunderbans in Bay of Bengal are some Islands which people share with animals. The condition of their living is much inferior to animals. The predicament of the inhabitants suffers due to unwanted unexpected tidal surges and tidal attacks show a serious ecological calamity on earth. Ghosh says that environmental decline in Sunderbans in life time has been very shocking. The bird life, fish and crabs certain type of trees and plants have become extremely rare and their absence is clearly felt. Piya struggles to find the Irrawaddy dolphins, whose populations used to be numerous in the past is the one of the examples of humans’ negative impact on nature. The decline of fish population and shallowing of rivers, terrible cyclones, which are mentioned in the story, prove that we would better take climate change seriously before it is too late.

It is a story centre on two visitors to Sunderban community. It is a story of adventure set in one of the most fascinating regions on earth. Human settlement in the place meant for plants and animals reclamation of coastal areas for construction of buildings and destruction of mangroves which are habitat for sea birds and amphibians and aquatic animals are traced out as root cause of the ecological and environmental problems and source for Hungry tides and earth quakes.

This novel describes the wild and untamable and fierce qualities of nature. The novel is vivid description of tigers and their human prey, crocodiles, snakes, large forests of

mangroves, storms and fatal typhoons. It is set in the remote part of North-eastern Islands known as Sunderbans which consists of thousands of small Islands formed by Inter-flow of two rivers.

Ghosh describes people of Sunderbans, their history struggle with natural world. The struggle of people is against nature, the tides, the storm, the tiger and fearful surroundings. The novel seeks link human stories with broader story of ecological and environmental forces that have acted on the region. The delta of Sunderbans has been presented as destroyer and preserver of life. Ghosh selection of Sunderbans has a setting at Hungry Tide is apt to represent the contrast inherent in life as well as in emotions. The contrasts are not only portrayed through characters and incidents but also geographical description of the place.

This novel disseminates scientific information, minute details of process and phenomenon in a very aesthetic manner. We are instructed in geography, climatology, marine biology. We are taken through the use GPS, behavior of river dolphins along with research history are very pains takingly described. Even physiological and behavioral details of dolphins are described minutely. Even crabs are researched upon great detail.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh has taken literary mission with two important commitments that fictionalization of historical facts and figures expression of concern over physical environment. His conscious engagement with natural world draws our attention to impending calamity of the Global environment. The novelist indicates deteriorating condition of both place and people living in sunderbans by making use of several symbols, though indirectly such as waves, tidal surges and title etc. It is a place where local and outsider meet

together share and feel that the ecological degradation is global concern.

Thus, it is an ideal example of contemporary author grappling with literature's potential to address ecological issues. In short the well being of our environment, our planet Earth is in our hands and we ought to re-negotiate, re-design our relationship with it. As Piya and Kanai make deliberate division to conserve people to and environment in Sunderbans with commitment by relocating themselves to the place. Ghosh's text is source of creating awareness, ecological consciousness and sensitizing the readers to the unique mangrove forest.

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