

Ecocriticism and Representation of the Non(humans): Posthumanist Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Ramchandra Guha, the environmental historian accurately espouses the idea of 'marriage' of social welfare and sustainable existence in his book *Environmentalism*. Keeping in view Guha's proposition, this paper intends to analyse Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* from the dual perspective of Ecocriticism and Posthumanism. Ecocriticism talks about the threats posed to Mother Nature by anthropocentric activities. Again, Posthumanism concerns inclusion and independent existence of the Non-humans in this world. Their free existence is threatened by their superior binary opposite, humans. Both these schools of thought concern the crises of the Non-human elements and their right to cohabit with the humans.

The novel *The Hungry Tide* projects the ecological crises and vulnerability of the 'posthuman beings' in contemporary Indian territories. This paper shall try to explore Ghosh's depiction of the interdependence of the human and posthuman characters and how anthropogenic activities threaten human-nature relationship. The character of Piya is Mother Nature herself who tries to save the marine animals, Kanai represents the threats of extinction indigenous cultures are facing just as the voiceless non-humans face. This study would also attempt to propose measures that could be adopted to reconceptualise human-nonhuman cohabitation in a sustainable Eco-ethical world.

Keywords: Posthuman, Ecology, Nature, Anthropocentric, Sustainable.

Introduction

Ramchandra Guha, the environmental historian accurately espouses the idea of 'marriage' of social welfare and sustainable existence in his book *Environmentalism*. Climate changes and its aftermath (including) – flood, forest fires, global warming, tsunami etc. are some of the alarming disasters and feedback through which Mother Nature wants to beware us of the impending hazards anthropogenic activities are heading to. The capitalist urban culture and the anthropogenic developmental activities are major threats to the environment and its living and non-living elements. Ecocriticism talks about the threats posed to Mother Nature by anthropocentric activities. Again, Posthumanism concerns inclusion and independent existence of the Non-humans in this world. Their free existence is threatened by their superior binary

opposite, humans. Both these schools of thought concern the crises of the Non-human elements and their right to cohabit with the humans.

The emergence and significant progress in the field of Posthumanist theory in the last few decades and the simultaneous growth in ecological movements paved the way for considering Ecological and beyond human crises under a convergent reading. Ecological crises can't be addressed segregating the non-human beings from them. Not just the flora and fauna world, the urban capitalist culture exploited and ravaged the non-human beings, hence threatening their independent undisturbed existence on earth. Donna Harraway rightly points out Anthropocentric practices couldn't have been exercised without the existence and exploitation of the Non-humans beings.

Again, thinkers like Donna Harraway, Bruno Latour also claim that humans are no longer able to externalise Nature, rather they internalise nature. The Anthropocentric world is entirely dependent on their surrounding Ecological setup for material as well as capitalist profit. We can no longer separate ourselves from consequences of the modifications and alterations that we've inflicted upon the Non-humans world. Having said that Cherry Glotfelty rightly points "All Ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it." (192) She adds "As a stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land, as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human.(197)

But in the face of such apocalyptic end triggered by Anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh, through his fictitious world of Marichjhapi in *The Hungry Tide* depicts 'tales' from imagined rural communities who are striving hard to live a sustainable existence with Mother Nature and their binary opposite, the non-human beings. Therefore through this novel Amitav Ghosh stresses that the involvement of the regional rural communities in curbing Anthropocentric urban culture and their negative impact on nature and its creatures is a dire necessity. Ghosh himself hints towards his concern for nature and the animal world in an interview and I quote him "The tornado of 1978 certainly heightened my awareness of extreme weather events. But my engagement with the climate change dates back to 2000 when I started writing my novel *The Hungry Tide*, which is set in Sunderbans. Since that time it has become clear that this is the greatest challenge that humanity has ever faced."

Socio-political Backdrop and Historical background of Ghosh's Fictionalised Island

To trace Ghosh's idea of writing about coastal Indian Archipelagic ecosystem, the partition of Bengal and Bangladesh serves as a base and it must be focused primarily. As a consequence of the Partition, migration from the both the areas continued from 1950-1960s, giving surge to the refugee population near the coastal areas. The refugees started settling in the Sunderban region as the then government promised them rehabilitation. They started developing their sustainable and nature friendly living in Marichjhapi island, but ever since the government took initiatives of evicting these indigenous people, the Marichjhapi settlers protested and faced atrocities. With the 1979 Forest Protection Act they were deprived of food, shelter, water etc. They lost access to basic necessities for sustenance. People who opted to reside in the island despite tortures from the local administrative bodies were shot dead by police. The survivors of the mass eviction later

recounted the horrific treatment they received. All these events led Ghosh to Fictionalise the Marichjhapi massacre and hence draw our attention towards how the peripheral coastal ecosystems are dealt with by the urban policies.

Anthropocentric Exploitations and the Non-humans in *The Hungry Tide*

In this novel Amitav Ghosh depicts how the urban culture in the name of conservation treats the indigenous people as non-humans just like the plants and animals of this region. Piya, the female protagonist is a biologist, she specialises in marine mammals. Ghosh depicts a parallel concern for the ocean ecology and the posthuman beings who equally deserve cohabitation in the Anthropocentric world. By placing the Sunderban island as the backdrop to his novel, which is surrounded by small tributaries of Gangetic and Irrawady rivers – Ghosh depicts his concern for the ecological crises of the peripheral regions which are away from the mainstream areas and hence remain overlooked. All the characters in the novel are an embodiment of human-nature conflict. There are several incidents in the novel, Ghosh posits some of which as symbolic representation of the Eurocentric Ecological ideology and some as indigenous tribal communities' beliefs who have different image of nature in their psychical and practical set up.

Sir Daniel Hamilton, a successful builder of cooperative society in Lusibari, near Ganges ; and Piya the protagonist , educated in America – through these characters Amitav Ghosh delineates the ideological differences that exist between the Western world and the eastern indigenous inhabitants as concerned with nature and the posthuman lives. The Westerners always wanted to commercialise the non-human world as well as the flora fauna resources in order for their commercial benefits. But on the other hand characters like Kusum, Kanai project nature as a deity. The reference to Bon Bibi very clearly shows that Indian indigenous cultures worshipped nature and its elements since the Vedic period. Bon Bibi is idolised as a goddess who is the creator and sustainer of life and punished those whose intentions were maligned. This is evident in these line from *The Hungry Tide* “Bon Bibi rules over the jungle, that the tigers , crocodiles and other animals do her bidding.” (102) This further brings back Vandana Shiva's Ecofeminist theory where Shiva opines Nature is perceived to be Goddess or Prakriti in the Indian subcontinent.

The Anthropocentric activities which try to alter the non-human beings and ocean ecology itself can be located in one of the incidents in the novel when Piya and Fokir visit Garjontala where the seven dolphins can be spotted swimming. These dolphins never behave as their usual behaviour should be. For commercial purposes humans extract oil using dolphins. Humans hunted these innocent animals recklessly. “The injuries suggested that the dolphin has been hit by the propeller of a fast moving motorboat.”(346)Piya asserts that the migratory habits of these dolphins are lost and they are adjusting in the human dominated world to find a dwelling place for themselves. And hence their original identity and existence is compromised. They are dragged to the verge of extinction. The ecological alterations and disturbances in the natural flow of the marine life is well evident when Moyna utters these lines – “This island has to be saved for its trees... it has to be saved for its animals.” (261)

In the same way the indigenous people also face threats from Nirmal who's a strong preacher of Marxist ideas. Nirmal was beyond elated when he heard Marichjhapi was modernised in a

Marxist model thus denying the inhabitants their right to live in the island. The urban conservation policy is hypocritical as it ignores the underprivileged humans and they strive to protect the tigers only instead of the entire coastal Ecological structure comprising other animals and valuable plants. These government forest officials and power-mongers save only tigers instead of all species of animals because in the words of Divya Anand in her article “Words on Water : Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* - “Tigers are best conservators of forest. They keep humans away” – which implies that the urban government policies are trying to deprive the tribal people to sustain on nature , rather the Bhadrolok classes are the sole possessor of nature and its elements and they can exploit mother nature and her flora and fauna resources as and when required. Tigers kill multiple people hence keeping the tribes away from forest.

The character Kusum shows, how the rural people fight urban environment protection policies. Kusum, Fokir all these people are illiterate according to modern literacy parameters. But staying in the close proximity of nature and animals they possess much greater knowledge of the ecosystems of the Sunderban islands. Kusum is a true representation of the human – Non-humans harmony. She says “ No humans could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing , by clearing land and by planting the soil.” (262)

Non-humans and Their Resistance to Anthropocentrism

Having said these how the human superiors exploited Non-human world, Ghosh in his novel also poses a dual image of Nature. The animals and their habitats are dominated and modified often according to human needs. But at times instead of being an epitome of creation nature becomes a despotic destroyer. Nature and the non-humans resist the authority of their superior opposites and this is evident in certain incidents in the novel, where humans seem powerless to the non-human beings. The storm is an outrageous retaliation of mother nature. Piya , in the face of the storm loses all her instruments and research data on dolphins and she seems helpless and feeble ultimately taking refuge under a tree. The storm seemed “Powerful as it already was , the gale had been picking up strength all along.” (379) Another example where the animals fight human interference and attempt to save their self managed ecosystem can be traced in the incident where Piya almost loses her hand by a crocodile’s attack, thus demanding untampered existence, which is devoid of human interventions.

Just like the storm, the indigenous marginalised communities also seem to oppose the existential threats posed to them by modern upper class people. They are being denied their right to cohabit this earth with their superior dominant cultures who are the instrumentally empowered class by their hypocrisy. The civilized classes employ policies which seem to the serve to their interest , in broader aspects. The indigenous communities solely survived on nature from the beginning. But they are powerless and exploited and vanquished by the scientifically empowered society.

Conclusion

Having dealt with the problems of the Indian territorial Ecologies, Ghosh’s novel also discerns the need to reconceptualise human-nonhuman relationship. Piya being a western ecologist realises how the indigenous cultures play significant roles in saving nature and animals. Nirmal

shows the failure of the urban forest policies and he goes back to nature leaving back his modern privileged life. In the Anthropocentric world, definitely we face the consequences of ruining nature and its biotic and abiotic components. Posthumanism posits the necessity to plan and practice sustainable measures where the human-nonhuman dichotomy can dwell in peace. Posthumanist ecology renders us to think and assess the role of our non-human other and their agency in maintaining the natural equilibrium. The current Ecological circumstances prompt us to treat the Non-humans as more-than-humans.

Summing up Amitav Ghosh's novel delineates the conflict and clash of the ideologies of the urban ecology and Indian coastal Ecologies. Anthropocentric activities led to the loss of natural life in these islands. Ghosh as an ecologically concerned author criticises the Anthropocentric policies and places Sunderban islands as a living character who demands equal right to live on earth. The novel attempts to awaken human conscience and restructure the human-nature relationship.

The Anthropocentric social setup has to be restructured to nature-centric whereby the plants and animals cease to remain as marginal beings. In this regard Amitav Ghosh's words in an interview on climate and literature – "I think the problem lies part with the word 'Nature' itself. This is a word or concept that comes into being during the Enlightenment and all sorts of dualisms are written into it : it has come to signify opposite of humans. But this is an absurdity of course because humans are in every sense a part of continuum of living things" prompts the entire human society to rethink the human non-human relationship and that both are a part of a conjoined unit of environmental structure. Thus Ghosh points towards internalising Nature and Non-humans. It's not humans who dominate nature rather nature is the one which sustains human lives and hence remain a dominant force. Therefore the mutual living of the urban and rural people, while keeping both the Posthuman and indigenous cultures alive together can lead to Sustainable existence.

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