

Ecological Consciousness in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

The reflection of ecological concerns in literature has made its landmark entry with the writings of Raja Rao, R.K Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandya, Ruskin Bond Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh. One of the important aspects of these writers is that they write predominantly the relationship between man and nature. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with beauty of the nature but also with power of the nature. Amitav Ghosh is one of the most eminent and accomplished writers of this genre with a strong eco-consciousness. He occupies a significant place in the world of ecocriticism. His works deal with the major themes of migration, displacement, subaltern experiences as well as the global concerns of environment related to flora and fauna. In the present paper, two novels of Ghosh *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *River of Smoke* (2011) are considered for analyzing his consciousness towards ecology.

Key Words: Environment, Ecological Balance, Human Interaction, Disasters.

Human beings are closely associated with the nature. They constantly depend on it and interact with it. Apart from depending on nature for his survival, man has also made many transformations to nature to meet his needs. As a result nature also changed its face through interactions with man. This contradictory process between man and nature frequently ended in tragedy and ultimately nature became hostile to man. The man-nature interaction, the issue of the ecological imbalance is a global problem. Literature well known for representing the contemporary issues has also focused this theme. However, the consciousness for ecology and the crisis of environment has only recently ignited the writers. The Indian writers who are interested in nature and depicted the relationship between man and nature in their writings are Raja Rao, R.K Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandya, Ruskin Bond Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh to name a few.

Raja Rao deserves a permanent place in Indian Literary tradition with his acclaimed work *Kanthapura*. This novel is known for his true depiction of relationship between man and nature

where a real picture of the South Indian village culture and environment is presented. He shows how rivers and mountains play an important role in people's lives. R. K Narayan uses a place or landscape as a main theme and character in his writings. In 'The Dark Room' the river and the ruined temple leave a benign influence on Savitri. The flowing Sarayu, the ruined temple and the stone slabs influence Raju in 'The Guide', and contribute to his sainthood. It is the spirit of Malgudi that helps him to face the ordeal of fast in the right earnest. It is the retreat across the river that almost transforms Jagan. Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'So Many Hungers' is acclaimed for the projection of true reality and the effects of Bengal famine occurred in 1943. The famine caused the death of millions of people. The novel deals with the miserable and helpless situations in which people are entangled.

Nectar in Sieve, a popular novel of Kamala Markandya demonstrates the relationship between nature and man. Considering nature as both destroyer and preserver, she describes the influence of natural forces over mankind. She writes about nature in comparison with a wild animal which behaves according to the mood of man. Ruskin Bond is another writer who takes ecology as an important theme. Many of his short stories portray the effects of ecological imbalance and the pathetic condition of living beings on the earth. He brings forth the relationship between man and nature. "An Island of Trees", "The Tree Lover" and "The Cherry Tree" are the few examples of short stories in which the benefits of nature to mankind are explored. The other writer who established herself as a major voice in Indian Literature with her prominent work, *Cry, the Peacock* is Anita Desai. In this novel she compares the characters with nature to bring out inner state of mind. Desai's *Where Shall We Go this Summer* deals with eco criticism as a dominant theme which makes the readers aware of ecology and safeguarding the environment.

Kiran Desai's Booker Prize novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is a best example for eco critical reading. In this novel, Desai imparts human attributes to nature and land scape to show her concern towards environment. She graphically describes the natural beauty of Mount Kanchenjunga. Not only describing the peaceful and serene atmosphere of the hill station she also presents the issues like Gorkhaland agitation and terrorists activities which bring environmental crisis. Amitav Ghosh is widely acclaimed as one of India's prominent writers of postmodern age. His works are filled with invaluable, thoughtful, incisive ideas that offer scholarly insights. Ghosh is preoccupied with interesting themes set against historical backdrops such as cultural displacement, migration, exile, communal riots and ecological issues. His major novels *The Hungry Tide* and *Ibis Trilogy* series offer a glimpse into the aspect of ecology and environmental crisis.

The present paper analyses Ghosh's novels *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *River of Smoke* (2011) to highlight the issues of ecology and the effects of imbalance. It also shows the relationship between man and nature, nature in the form of plants, rivers, mountains and animals.

Ghosh's very first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) explores the theme of migration and a continuing tradition of cultural exchange for India. Through this novel Ghosh tries to show that western reason proves to be inadequate and he celebrates the triumph of human goodness. It is a search for a transforming vision-more than a simple quest for identity- as the protagonist moves from Lalpukur in India to al-Ghazira in Egypt to the little town of El-Qued in the north-

eastern edge of Algerian Sahara. One of the major concerns of the novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is search for self-knowledge and self-identity. The protagonist of this novel “is an individual, rooted and well-defined but as the novel progresses he seems to transcend himself and becomes identified with a depersonalized contemporary consciousness”(Sircar, 49). It also deals with the concerns of our period, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture and the legacies of partition in the subcontinent.

In An Antique Land (1992) is a novel in which Amitav Ghosh explores African-Asian connections preceding British colonialism and points out at the tragic turn of events in history of Asia and Middle East and particularly India. And *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) is an attempt to deconstruct and dismantle Western sense of superiority by Indian irrationality. Ghosh questions the colonial narrative of discovery and the myth of progress in his corpus by disputing the colonial “truth” of Ronald Ross’ account of ‘Plasmodium B.’ *The Glass Palace* (2000) is once again a book about the issues of civilization, families, their lives and their connection with each other, wars and their futility, the concept of boundaries, colonization, and hybridism. The massacre at Morichjhāpi of Bangladeshi refugees and their agonies, the harsh realities of the life of the Sunderbans islanders, the debate on eco-environmental and cultural issues through the intrusion of the West into the East find voice in *The Hungry Tide* (2004). The latest novels in the *Ibis* Trilogy- *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* trace the lives of the main characters who reconstruct their identities to cope with the colonial and socio-cultural situations. As a postmodern writer, Ghosh celebrates in his writings the fluid condition of entity along with other elements of postmodern fiction such as migration, plurality, multiculturalism, skepticism and the disappearance of boundaries.

The story of Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* unfolds in the backdrop of Sunderbans which is a bioregion. Sunderbans is a beautiful land situated amid the wind and the tides and largely covered by mangrove forest. The two main characters around whom the story revolves are Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy. Kanai is a translator and business man who comes to the Island of Lusibari to meet his aunt Nilima. Through his late uncle Nirmal’s notebook, Kanai happens to know about the conflict between human and non human life forces, resettlement tragedy of Morichjhapi in the name of conservation. The diary also reveals the story of Kusum and her son Fokir who are the victims of eviction from the island of Morichjhapi. Piyali is an American born cetologist who comes as a researcher to conduct studies on Irrawaddy dolphins which are exclusively found in the rivers of Tide country. She takes the help of Fokir to trace the region of dolphins.

The novel explores not only nature in its beauty but it also appears as hungry for human blood. The ebb and flow represents all the traumatic issues of nature. The following description about mangrove forest that Kanai reads is apt to the situation:

A mangrove forest is a universe into itself...Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassable dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moments 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 and expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.(7-8)

It unfolds the devastating effects of nature towards man. In the section “Canning”, Kanai becomes speechless and shocked on seeing the plight of the passengers in the mud. Champahati, the threshold of Sundarbans, was merely “a pond filled with foaming grey sludge” (9). The Malta river, which in 1970s was a “... vast waterway, one of the most formidable rivers he had ever seen”, had become “no wider than a narrow ditch” (24) at low tide. He felt upset and disturbed to the sight of the people travelling to Canning. They had to walk through the mud piled up to the level of their hips.

The life at Lusibari became hard and risky as the people had to suffer and survive with a single meal. Natural calamities like floods and storms cause major damage and land become infertile due to soil erosion. To the people of Lusibari, “. . . hunger and catastrophe were a way of life”(79). The place had undergone a dramatic change. The sky that was “darkened by birds at sunset” and the scarlet mud banks filled with “millions of swarming crabs” had faded away gradually. And Nirmal curiously interrogates, “Where had they gone ... those millions of swarming crabs, those birds?” and he anticipates the signs of destruction. “The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea” (215).

The novel also unveils the environmental issues related to the village of Morichjhapi through Nirmal’s diary. It contains some personal history of Nirmal’s life. Morichjhapi was selected as a place for tiger preservation project by the government. The place was occupied and inhabited by refugees from East Pakistan. They found vast land in Sunderbans and created their livelihood. Ghosh eloquently summarizes the events at Morichjhapi in 1979 through Nirmal’s account. As the place became tiger reserve, the refugees were forcefully evicted from the island. Nirmal in his diary writes about the efforts of the refugees to build in a new life:

Saltpans had been created, tube wells had been had been planted, water had been damned for the rearing of fish, a bakery had started up, boat builders had set up workshops, a pottery had been founded as well as an ironsmith’s shop; there were people making boats while others were fashioning nets and crab lines; little market places, where all kinds of goods were being sold, had sprung up. (192)

The novel poignantly shows the trauma of Morichjhapi settler and victim, Kusum in the following lines:

The worst part was... to sit here, helpless, with hunger gnawing at our bellies and listen to the police man say... ‘this island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals....it is a part of a reserved forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers...’ Who are these people, who loved animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? (262-263)

Ghosh through *The Hungry Tide* presents important ongoing controversies between governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, environmental activists, socialists, human and animal rights protection groups, tribal, tidal inhabitants and urban inhabitants, about the exigency for inculcating fair environmental policies that do not show favour to any one species while crushing another. The novel concludes with several positive measures suggested towards an eco-friendly relationship between human populations and their environment.

Another novel *River of Smoke* unfolds the ecological consciousness through two individuals who undertake a journey to Canton in a botanical ship the *Redruth*: Paulette and Penrose. Bengal born Paulette is the daughter of Pierre Lambert. He worked as a Botanist in Calcutta. After her father's death in Calcutta she decides to travel to Mauritius in search of her earlier family connections. She reaches to Port Louis on the *Ibis* along with other girmityas. There she takes shelter in the Pimple-mouse Botanical Gardens to be discovered by Fitcher Penrose. He is on an expedition eastwards in his own two-masted brig, the *Redruth*. Ghosh weaves these narratives together.

A deep ecological concern marks the narration of Honam episode. Honam is an island situated on the banks of Pearl River opposite to the city of Canton. In contrast to Canton which is crowded with houses, walls and narrow streets, "Honam is like a vast park, green and wooded: several small creeks and streams cut through it and their shores are dotted with monasteries, nurseries, orchids, pagodas and picturesque little villages" (279). This geographically diverse island becomes one of the principal settings in the novel. The country retreat of Punhyqua, the Cantonese local opium trader, is located on it. Punhyqua had deep connections with the merchants of Bombay.

As a special respect to the Parsis, he invites Bahram to the banquet held on Honam Island. Robin meets Punhyqua on the same island in his search for camellia. Robin describes the garden:

Punhyqua's estate is regarded as a fine example of the southern style of garden making... a place of the most *extravagant* fantasy: there were winding streams, spanned by hump-backed bridges; lakes with islands on which dainty little follies sat precariously perched; there were halls and pavilions of many sizes, some large enough to accommodate a hundred people and some in which no more than one person could sit. The trees were too fantastically varied, some tall and sturdy, soaring proud and erect; some tiny and stunted with their branches trained as if to illustrate the flow of the wind. At every turn there was a new perspective to baffle and delight the eye: it was as if the very ground had been shaped and contorted to create illusory vistas. (279-80)

Postmodern fiction plays a crucial role in transmitting ecological values. Ghosh's narrative details the invaluable exotic plants of China. From the earliest plant-hunter, James Cuninghame who belonged to the eighteenth century to the most recent, they aroused curiosity and interest. The significance of the Chinese flowers as early as the fifth century was recorded by Hsieh Ling-yun, the Duke of Kang-lo as follows:

*The petals on their green tinged stem shine like the purest gold.
 A purple eye looks up from the centre, setting the bloom aglow,
 It remedies the pain of ageing bones and quickens the memory
 and mind,
 It puts to flight the death that festers in the lungs.* (124)

The Duke of Kang-lo was regarded as one of the greatest Chinese naturalists. The above lines meant "that not only could this flower reverse the effects of ageing, it could also be used to battle one of the humanity's most dreaded enemies: that scourge of the lungs—consumption" (124). Recognising the lucrative value of the exotic natural resources in China, typical naturalists like Penrose exploit nature under the guise of botanical discovery and expedition. His cruelty is

illustrated when a small porpoise gets entangled in the *Redruth*'s fishing lines. Despite Paulette's urge to set it free, Penrose slaughters the creature to strip it of its fat. In contrast, for Paulette, ...the love of Nature had been a kind of religion, a form of spiritual striving... in trying to comprehend the inner vitality of each species, human beings could transcend the mundane world and its artificial divisions. If botany was the Scripture of this religion, then horticulture was its form of worship: tending a garden was...no mere matter of planting seeds and pruning branches—it was a spiritual discipline, a means of communicating with forms of life that were necessarily mute and could be understood only through a careful study of their modes of expression—the languages of efflorescence, growth and decay... apprehend[ing] the vital energies that constitute the Spirit of the Earth. (78-79)

The attitude of Paulette and Penrose towards nature appear contradictory. While the former symbolizes French liberalism and tranquility, the latter represents Victorian materialism and austerity. Robin's sensibility to nature is similar to Paulette's. He condemns Penrose's idea of running plant nursery on the ship. He reveals his views to Paulette. He says, he

was *fascinated* to learn of...discovery of a promising patch of land on Hong Kong, and of Mr Penrose's decision to transfer a part of his collection to that spot...it makes a perfect sense that...plants should be given a holiday from their life aboard the *Redruth*. After all, plants were not meant to grow on ships...and it does seem cruel to deprive them of their natural element when it lies so close at hand. (438)

River of Smoke invites an ecologically informed reading. Similar to Historiographic metafiction that mixes "the reflexively fictional with the verifiably historical" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 36), the ecological fiction is also concerned with both imaginative and natural worlds. This kind of narrative often underlines the relations between human imagination and the environment. Such an approach may also seem pertinent in helping humans find their connection to the earth. Acknowledging the environmental concern, Oppermann says the postmodern novel

...draws attention to the constitutive engagement of human discursive systems with the material world, and it also critically reflects upon the complicity between our discursive formulations and the global capitalist desire for overproduction, which has unmistakably caused an unprecedented environmental degradation. In other words, postmodernism radically challenges the conceptual language of literary and cultural discourses, subverting the essentialist conceptions of the human subject as possessing epistemological superiority to reduce nature's basic units into exploitable objects in order to manipulate the natural environments. (Oppermann 37)

Amitav Ghosh's two novels deal not only with the life style of the inhabitants of Morichjhapi and Honam but also its landscape. These novels demonstrate the non-human perspectives like trees, rivers, mountains and animals and their relevance in the total understanding of environment. Nature is rapidly being gulped up in the name of nurture, so it is the urgent need of the day to maintain ecological balance. The two internationally acclaimed

novels have highlighted this perspective. Ghosh's eco-centric approach will allow the people to think deeply about the crisis and to find out a remedy for it.

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