

## Co-existence of Human, Nature and Animal: An Ecocritical Approach to Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

**Aarti Verma**

PhD Scholar

University of Lucknow

Department of English & MEL

**Abstract:** The recent global attention to environmental topics has increased interest of scholars in eco-concerned themes to analyze and interpret modern literature. In a broad sense, ecology is a study of the interaction between the environment and its organism while ecocriticism is the application of ecological themes to the study of literature. In literary sphere, approach of Ecocriticism focuses on environmental issues and criticizes human domination over animals and nature. This article is intended to analyze Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* through the lens of ecocriticism. It endeavors to explore the interconnectedness and co-existence of human, nature and animal in *The Hungry Tide*. This paper brings in forefront complex ecological issues like animal rights versus human rights, local people's eviction and resettlement, government policy of The Tiger Project, and human survival in the endangered area of the Sundarbans.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, The Sundarbans, Climate Change, Ecocide, Animal Rights

Tiger Project

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In recent times, the rapid degradation of environment—global warming, water and air pollution, ozone layer depletion, frequent occurrence of flood and drought, mountain eruption, earthquake, hurricane, and species extinction, etc.—has become a major problem. The recent increase in environmental problems and issues have particularly captured the attention of writers who started to focus on the inter-relatedness of human, nature and animal in their literary texts from an ecocritical stance.

Cheryll Glotfelty, in an anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: landmarks in Literary Ecology* defines, “Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (19). Ecocriticism is a recent phenomenon in the area of theory and criticism. Lawrence Buell states, “the term ‘Ecocriticism’ was coined in the late 1970s” (13). The term Ecocriticism has been first used by William Rueckert in 1978.

In literary sphere, approach of Ecocriticism focuses on environmental issues and criticizes human dominance over animals and nature. This paper analyzes complex ecological issues like animal rights versus human rights, local people's eviction and resettlement, government policy of The Tiger Project, and human survival in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*.

The novel is set in the ecological region of the Sundarbans which is also known as bhatir desh (tide country). It is shared between Bangladesh and India, two neighboring countries. Famous for its biodiversity, the Sundarbans is full of innumerable islands having mangrove-forests. Thousands in number, these islands are, "...the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the achol that follows her, half-wetted by the sea" (Ghosh 6). The ebb and flow of the Bay of Bengal create new islands while the old islands are destroyed in its havoc flow. The submersion of the old islands creates a frequent environmental threat to the people of Sundarbans.

Ghosh presents nature as an entity having its own power and agency which can appear or disappear like an illusion. The landscape itself becomes a dynamic character and the chief protagonist of its other characters in the novel. In the novel, the landscape significantly works in multiple directions. Roman Bartosch considers the landscape as an agent. He says, "The landscape not only represents a structural basis for the plot but is depicted as an environmental-textual agency in itself since its changing form significantly governs the form of the narrative" (98). . It actively plays a significantly role in the lives of Piya, Fokir and Kanai.

The fascinating setting shows all pervading and dominant presence of nature and puts the ecological perspective at the forefront. There is no physical boundary as well as the

boundary of race, class and religion among people of tide country. The natural Environment of the Sundarbans was untouched by human influence, before the arrival of the English Visionary, Daniel Hamilton. He planned to establish a utopian settlement where people are not allowed to “bring all their petty little divisions and differences”,(51) but unfortunately, this settlement ignored the animal ecosystem completely.

There starts a conflict of survival among peoples and the predators. For predators, these peoples are proved as a great feast and they started killing them. The novel deeply focuses on its characters Piya, Fokir, Nirmal and Kanai, revealing their views and drawing their actions towards nature and animals in the Sundarbans. The Indian Sundarbans has been reserved for ‘Project Tiger’, launched in 1973. The aim of Project Tiger is to save tigers from extinction.

Ghosh exposes how the poor inhabitants of the Sundarbans have to struggle against the calamitous environment to arrange their daily meal. Men have to risk their lives in the process of foraging for food. In the novel, Kusum’s father has been killed by a tiger during his visit to forest for collecting firewood. *The Hungry Tide* focuses on environmental issues facing countries all over the world. Modernization, migration, globalization, increasing population and their unending demands are the sole reasons of degradation in eco-system.

Ghosh portrays the discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity. In Sundarbans, attacks by tigers and tidal floods are so common that it destroys the stability of human life on the island. The novel reflects the conflict of the inhabitants, aquatic and wild life of the Sundarbans. The tide country is a harsh landscape, full of horror, peril and death in multiple forms. Kusum painfully states, “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it

belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world” (Ghosh 262). It exposes deficiencies in government’s planning to reserve tiger even at the cost of local people’s lives. Kusum is referring to the Project Tiger which was launched with funding from the World Wildlife Fund, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources to make national parks in India.

Ghosh pictures nature as its own creator. The river delta is a landscape in which the land, river, humans and animal all try to co-exist but often they fail in creating a harmonious bond among themselves. The life in such islands is quite uncertain. The currents of rivers are powerful enough, “to reshape the islands almost daily- some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before” (Ghosh 7).

One of the most prominent concerns of Ecocriticism is Ecocide -- a major concern of Ecocriticism that discusses the ecological destruction caused by the human world to nature. Glen A. Love exposes various modes of ecological disaster in Practical Ecocriticism:

The disquieting fact is that we have grown inured to the bad news of human and natural disasters... Actual instances of radiation poisoning, chemical or germ warfare, all rendered more threatening by the rise of terrorism... The overcutting of the world’s remaining great forests. An accelerating rate of extinction of plants and animals, estimated at 74 species per day and 27,000 each year. The critical loss of arable land and groundwater through desertification, contamination, and the spread of human settlement. (14-15).

It exposes human activities—terrorism, deforestation, over-population—which are responsible for the degradation in environment.

People living in Sundarban have to face ever-changing tough weather of the Bay of Bengal. Cyclones and tsunamis are the frequent occurrence there, putting the existence of human and animal world in danger. The climate change and its consequences are depicted vividly in the novel. The rare species of dolphins and the population of tigers are on the verge of extinction due to drastic changes in the climate.

Even a small change in ecosystem can create major problems to the human and animal world. Piya feels that each biome has a significant role in the large canvas of the bionetwork. Piya describes how small crabs play an important role in keeping mangrove trees alive. She says that small crabs “laundered the mud they lived in, scrubbing it grain by grain” (Ghosh 142). Recalling a study of the sundarbans, Piya speaks, “This proliferation of environments was responsible for creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms- from gargantuan crocodiles to microscopic fish” (Ghosh 125). However, this rich biodiversity of Sundarbans is in danger due to climate change and anthropogenic intervention in the form of globalization, colonization and economic development.

Piya comes to the Sundarbans to do a survey on Gangetic Dolphins and Irrawaddy Dolphins. In *The Hungry Tide*, we find a detail description of dolphins, their behaviors, problems, discovery and history. Once dolphins were in abundance but now they are dwindling. The novel exposes that the unique diversity of aquatic and terrestrial life in the mangrove swamps is put in danger by human settlement on the islands and their encroachment to nature.

Piya describes the causes of rapid declination of Orcaella, a special species of dolphin. People hunt dolphins and use their fat in making oil for running boats and motorcycles. Over-fishing, violent wars and water pollution are also responsible for the

alarming decline in dolphin populations. Pointing out these facts Piya says, “These dolphins were hunted with rifles and explosives and their carcasses were hung up in the sun so that their fat would drip into buckets. This oil was then used to run boats and motorcycles”(Ghosh 306). Such a pathetic description reveals the inhumanity in the human world. Now has come the time when we should rethink, reevaluate and redesignate our relationship with our physical environment by acknowledging the fact that we are part of our environment. We should seek our space in monistic identification with the ecosphere realizing the intrinsic value of nature.

The real cause of the environmental problems is over consumerism, over ambitious attitude of humans, luxurious lives of the upper and middle class people. The poor people living in small villages do not interfere much in the peace of nature. The climate change requires various steps to be taken like use of advanced technology, favorable changes in lifestyle, development of renewable energy and less dependency on fossil fuel.

Ghosh highlights his ecocentric concerns in the closure of his narrative which reveals that human, non-human and forest, alike, become victims of the dangers of cyclone and its devastation. Both tiger and bird try to come out of the danger of cyclone, much like the two vulnerable persons, Fokir and Piya. All of them seem helpless in front of the cyclone’s fury.

Ghosh presents not only hostile aspect of nature but also gentler aspect. The terrain of Sundarbans evokes feelings of love, care, affection, respect and sacrifice between Piya and Fokir. Here, this reference does not suggest that such a relation can only develop against the backdrop of nature; rather, it is to point out that nature also has a voice and plays an effective role in human’s life. Piya, a marine scientist, comes to Sundarbans where she meets a local fisherman Fokir who helps her a lot in her research by using his extraordinary knowledge of

river and dolphins. Verbal language does not become an obstacle in their relationship. Ghosh defines speech as “only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being” (Ghosh 159). The novel also highlights profound, positive and pristine moments of human interaction with the physical environment. In Nirmal’s view “everything which existed was interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature” (Ghosh 283).

The relationship between human and animal world is vividly described through the myth of Bon Bibi, the tiger goddess, who rules over the jungle. The inhabitants of Jungle feel an imaginary borderline between the realm of human beings, protected by Bon Bibi and the realm of the evil Dokkhin Rai. Ghosh explains that literature, myths, legends and folklore affect our response and connect us to nature. The legend of Bon Bibi shows an understanding of local people to their land and develops an ecological responsibility to co-exist with the wildlife.

The decline in environment and climate change is the catastrophic result of the over-exploitation of nature and excessive pursuit of modernity. As literature mirrors these issues, “the challenge for the contemporary artist is to rediscover sacredness in the world and to initiate a new cultural coding for the ecological age that will aid in the development of an age of ecological awareness/concern” (Fowler-Smith,web). In the view of Huggan and Tiffen, the novel advocates, “the sensible policy of no conservation without local consultation and participation.” (5) according to them, environmental conflict in *The Hungry Tide* occurs due to the “incursion of Europeans into other areas of the world from the fifteenth century onwards (which) catastrophically resulted in genocide or the dispossession and marginalization of indigenous peoples across the globe”, and this incursion is conceived as

“both prime cause and continuing consequence of environmental change incurred through the post- 1492 European diasporic intrusions.” (1).

Piya is the embodiment of environmentalism. Once she visits to an island where some villagers are “armed with sharpened bamboo poles” (Ghosh 292). They are gathered around a small hut in which a tiger has been trapped. They hit the tiger angrily by sharp bamboos in order to kill it. Being “in the grip both of extreme fear and uncontrollable rage” they shriek, “Maar! Maar! Kill! Kill!” (Ghosh 292). Piya tries her best to stop the killing but unfortunately fails. The novel projects two opinions on tiger-killing, one favors environmentalism and the other humanism. Brahma Dutta Sharma says, “environmentalism is championed by Piyali Roy and 1979 Left Front government of West Bengal, while humanism is being held by Kusum, Kanai Dutt and Nirmal Bose” (15). To justify her thinking, Piya says to Kanai, “Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What’ll be left then? Aren’t we alone enough in the universe” (Ghosh 301)?

Ghosh assigns to Piya a special role quite similar to that of ‘Greenpeace’- a transnational environmental group that creates awareness through campaigns to protect environment. Piya tries to give meaning to her life by connecting herself deeply to biology. She strongly faces all odd circumstances- her disturbed childhood, limited funds for her research project, language problem in Sundarbans, Callous behavior of the Forest officers, disconnection from her family and all relatives, arduous task of staying in water for days. But her passion for her work gives her strength to ignore all these discomforts.

By introducing an Indian historical incident of Morichjhapi, Ghosh reveals an endangered ecosystem where people are forced to survive against the attacks of animals and

tides. Now here raises an ethical question regarding the right on land. The novel seems to pose a question- who has more right on land; humans or animals. The implementation of Project Tiger and the biosphere reserve programme has created a lot of trouble in the inhabitants' life. The avoidance of human needs and a single-perspective approach to environment conservation lead to devastating consequences. According to Ranjan Chakrabarti's report, International wildlife biologists have suggested that the tiger reserve area should be 3000 square km, but in India it has been limited to less than 1500 sq. km. It seems the basic flaw of the conservation scheme in which it fails to provide proper space for tiger habitation and keeping them at a distance to human beings.

The novel does not provide any clear-cut solution to complex problem involving imbalance in environment, human-animal rights or conservation of wild life. But it presents different perspectives to these problems through debate and discussion of characters. Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* generates ecological sensitivity and awareness to protect our environment among the readers. Such texts should be included in the curriculum to develop an understanding of environment, animals, and ecosystems among peoples. It would sensitize people to conserve and sustain planet earth for future generations.

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