



Islandness Of The Sundarbans: An Eco-Critical Reading Of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract: The global ecological crisis makes it a compelling necessity to evolve a “green vision” and to move beyond the anthropocentric views for the conservation and preservation of nature. The continuing assault on nature by man has awakened the need for corrective action to halt the desecration of the planet. Writers like Amitav Ghosh try to bring about a change in our anthropocentric views through their works. An ecocritical view which has one foot in literature and the other on the land help us to be more open to the issues of the ecology and ecosystem. Amitav Ghosh focuses on the ecology of islands and articulates the ecological crises that is evident today through his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) set in Sundarbans- an archipelago of islands. He engages with some of the burning issues of the day and showcases an array of characters who are advocates of both deep ecology and shallow ecology. The two characters in the novel, Piya, a cetologist who is on her mission to survey the marine population of the Sundarbans advocates deep ecology whereas Kanai Dutt, a translator puts forward the ideals of shallow ecology.

Ghosh mixes facts and fiction and focuses on the geography and history of the place in order to speak out loud about the current environmental issues. The Sundarban islands referred to as the “tide country” is the most important character in the novel. Ghosh elevates its position from that of a setting to a character. The Sundarbans which is the world's largest mangrove forest is a home to a multitude of living organisms. The encroachments of human beings have disrupted its natural ecological balance and has affected its flora and fauna. Refugees after partition has made it a home and the pristine island has started to lose its primordial uninterrupted phase. This paper attempts to look at how Amitav Ghosh problematizes the islandness of the Sundarbans to examine the ecological imbalance that has occurred as an aftermath of human invasion.

Index Terms - Ecology, Islandness, Ecological Crises, The Sundarbans, Ecological Balance, Flora and Fauna.

“Islands are the river’s restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift” (Ghosh 7).

An island is a landform that is surrounded by water on all sides, it can be water from the sea, ocean, river or lake. These insular spaces are formed mainly through three different ways; by solidifying volcanoes, by the collision of continental plates, and by the deposits of sediments that come from erosion. Island studies as a discipline emerged with an aim to provide deep insights into the life of its inhabitants-both human and non-human, their survival strategies against natural hazards like floods, cyclones, regular inundation, soil erosion, devastating tidal waves, its biodiversity and the unique features peculiar to the island. The Sundarbans is “an immense archipelago of islands” (Ghosh 6) which stretches “for almost three hundred kilometres, from the Hooghly River in the West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh” (Ghosh 6). The islands of the Sundarbans are formed from sediments deposited by the three great rivers; the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna. It has been widely known as the land of eight tides; the distinctive physiology of the island has been moulded by the tidal waves. The Sundarban Delta where the three rivers converge is widely acclaimed as the world’s largest mangrove ecosystem and a home to a multitude of living organisms. Human interventions on the island through the influx of refugees and migrants, and the engagement in developmental activities and technological advancement have led to an ecological imbalance adversely affecting its flora and fauna. Refugees after partition have made it a home and the pristine island has started to lose its primordial uninterrupted phase.

Amitav Ghosh, the first Indian English writer to be honoured with the Jnanpith award articulates the ecological crises in the Sundarbans through his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004). He engages with some of the burning issues of the day, and showcases an array of characters mainly it’s marginalized and the dispossessed inhabitants as well as its visitors to capture the dynamism of the island and the diversity in experiencing the islandness of the island. He engages with diverse fields such as ecology, climatic change, language and culture. This paper attempts to look at how Amitav Ghosh problematizes the islandness of the Sundarbans, and probes us to think in new ways regarding the conservation and preservation of the ecosystem in order to evolve a new mode of sustainable development which envisages a harmonious coexistence of all living beings. He critiques the existing system which largely ignores the voices of the marginalized and the dispossessed.

The Sundarbans is a complex socioecological system with a variegated societal structure that includes various castes, creeds and communities such as Hindus, Muslims and a sizeable tribal population (Adithya Ghosh 35). It is “a microcosm of a representative, ecologically fragile rural system where people of diverse classes, ethnicities and cultures share a common resource pool” (Adithya Ghosh 37). They speak different languages like Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi and Arakanese. An amalgamation of different religions, belief

systems and worshiping practises are the characteristic features of the tide country. As Adithya Ghosh observes:

Islam prohibits both idol worship and women deities that *Bonbibi* manifests, and these ‘cultural mingles’ make the Sundarbans’ local culture a unique one. Indeed, the Sundarbans’ Muslim are perhaps the only idol-worshipping Muslim community in the world and Hindus the only worshippers of a goddess named after Islam (*bibi*). (Adithya Ghosh 37)

The dwellers of the Sundarbans eke out their living by fishing in the water bodies and by collecting honey, wax and firewood from the forests which require a license and a permit. But all these are risky and very challenging jobs as they are left at the mercy of tigers, snakes and crocodiles and there is also the danger of getting drowned in the muddy waters.

The web of rivulets, creeks, marsh and backwater along the Bay of Bengal have created a unique landscape spreading across 16,000 km² across India and Bangladesh. Apart from areas connected to mainland, it comprises 104 islands in the Indian side, of which 52 are inhabited by the humans and the rest by tigers, crocodiles and other wild animals. (Adithya Ghosh 5)

Ghosh uses his signature technique of mixing facts and fiction in the novel to give us an idea about the actual geography of the land. The Sundarban islands referred to as the “tide country” is the most important character in the novel. Ghosh elevates its position from that of a setting to a character. The Sundarbans islands which are the haven of Royal Bengal Tiger is inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List, and is described as “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 mangroves are the protectors of the land, they are the shield that withstand cyclones, storms and huge tides. The word “the Sundarban” which means “the beautiful forest” is believed to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove-the *sundari* tree, *Heriteria* minor. But to the inhabitants this place is known as “*bhatir desh*-the tide country” (Ghosh 8). This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in *falling* that the water gives birth to the forest. The land and water are in a peculiar relationship which exhibits a fluidity of boundaries. Mangrove forests are hostile to human beings. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage killed by tigers, snakes or crocodiles. Through his novel, Ghosh puts forward the different ways in which the islandness of the Sundarbans is experienced or understood by various characters in the novel. Each inhabitant, human and non-human experiences the island in different ways. Among the humans there are characters who are advocates of deep ecology as well as shallow ecology. They differ in their perspectives regarding conservation of nature and her ecosystem and their attitude towards animals.

Ghosh introduces the Bon bibi myth-the story that binds the human as well as non-human. “The jungles of the country of eighteen tides” which were the realm of Dokkhin Rai-the demon king who “harboured hatred coupled with insatiable desires-for the pleasures afforded by the human flesh” is taken over by Bon bibi- the one who rules over the jungle. Bon bibi was merciful in victory and she decided that one half of the tide country would remain a wilderness and left it to the demon king. The rest she claimed for herself and made it safe for human settlement. Thus, she brought an order to “the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order” (Ghosh 103).

Ghosh looks at ecocriticism and nature preservation from a different point of view. A new wave of ecocriticism which critiques the hitherto existing eco critical arguments has emerged to bring about environmental justice. The United Nations Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. Environmental justice seeks to address the issues faced by the minorities from the dominant groups of the society, the ones who are the victims of environmental injustice. They aim to incorporate a sustainable kind of development.

Ramachandra Guha takes on a similar stand regrading such environmental issues. He opines that “India is a long-settled and densely populated country in which agrarian populations have a finely balanced relationship with nature, the setting aside of wilderness areas has resulted in a direct transfer of resources from the poor to the rich. . . . The designation of tiger reserves was made possible only by the physical displacement of existing villages and their inhabitants”, creating a new category of “ecological refugees” in the process (Guha 95-107).

The Hungry Tide centres around three major characters Piyali Roy (Piya), Kanai and Fokir. Piya, the cetologist is a spokesperson of deep ecology and is on her mission to survey the marine population of the Sundarbans. She is an Indian-American who has been send to the Sundarbans to do a survey on the vanishing species of dolphins particularly Irrawady dolphins (*Oracella brevirostris*) and Gangetic dolphins and to find out the reasons for their decrease in number. She knew that whatever came of her research would not revolutionize the science but she was grateful for however minimal her contribution to science would be. Piya gets her moment of epiphany during her observation of a dolphin and its calf. She decides to dedicate her life to the study of Irrawady dolphins. Piya enters Canning and makes acquaintances (which later grew into deep relationships) with Fokir and Kanai. The unexpected meeting with Kanai in the train introduces her to the island of Lusibari and the assistance he offers provides her a reassurance to embark on her mission. The island and its inhabitants, even though a part of her ancestral land was alien to her. Though a Bengali by birth, she did neither learn the language nor its customs. But an inexplicable bond was developed with Fokir despite the absence of a common language. With the expertise of a veteran Fokir rescued Piya when she fell accidentally

into the muddy water during her first journey through water. The relation gradually develops and Fokir becomes a part of her journey in the Sundarbans. Fokir offers care, protection and respect to Piya as they move towards shore in his boat. Piya is able to scan the waters and spot the dolphins of Sundarbans using the GPS monitor and the assistance of Fokir. Piya understands that “there were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe”. The unusually varied composition of the water contributed to a proliferation of aquatic life. Piya develops a sense of belonging as the island takes her into its fold.

She considers herself deeply connected to nature and regards herself to possess an “ecological self” which is in perfect harmony with nature. She is ready to abide by the norms of nature and her ideals are in tune with Arne Naess’ deep ecology. Deep ecology argues that environmental movements must shift from anthropocentric to a biocentric perspective (Merchant 282). She exhibits her protest at an instance when a tiger which intruded into the human habitat was pierced in the eyes and burnt alive. But the local residents even when they led a life in harmony with nature were not ready to allow an animal to enter their habitat to prey upon human beings. They had clearly demarcated boundaries and do not want any mixing up of the wilderness and the human habitat.

Fokir who is an adept in fishing and catching crabs is able to provide many useful information to Piya. He has a thorough knowledge of the labyrinthine waterways of the Sundarbans and the specific locations where the dolphins congregate. A mere look at the post card with the dolphin’s picture was enough for Fokir to identify the particular variety of the dolphin which Piya was referring to. Fokir, his son Tutul and Piya develop a fine rapport. While Piya was busily engaged in carrying out her research work, Fokir was busy in his subsistence crab catching. The impending threat from the forest guards was an issue of concern to Fokir and he was afraid of their harassment accusing him to be a poacher. Being a local resident, Fokir is one with nature and he knows her bends and curves. He can predict in advance the ebb and flow of the tide, the outbreak of cyclones and the places and methods of rescue. Despite all these Fokir faces a very tragic death in the devastating cyclone during his attempt to save Piya.

Kanai Dutt, a translator by profession reaches Lusibari at the invitation of his aunt Nilima. She is the owner of a trust which works for the upliftment of the people of the island. Her husband Nirmal has left a package of his writings which he desires to be delivered to Kanai. He believes that Kanai has a better reach to the world than him. The writings were about the events that happened at Morichjhapi. It explicitly showcases Nirmal’s spirited nature as that of a revolutionary. He gives a detailed description of the refugees and about Kusum with whom Kanai had created a special bond during his stay at the island in his childhood. From Nirmal, Kanai learns about Sir Daniel Hamilton who has established the island with an aim to build a new society, a new kind of country where nobody is exploited in the name of caste, class, creed or colour.

Ghosh speaks vehemently about the refugees who had to flee their land and take recourse to the island of Lusibari. Some of them arrived in the 1920s, others after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and after the Bangladesh War in 1971. Many took refuge in this small island when the nearby island was depopulated in the name of wildlife conservation projects. (Ghosh 59). Kanai gets a picture of the dreadful incidents of Morichjhapi in May 1979 and how the refugees resisted the pressures put upon them by the Left Front government of West Bengal. The island was surrounded by policemen preventing them to move in and out of it and this resulted in hunger and starvation. The plaintive cry of the settlers wafting across the water can be heard “Amra Kara? Bastuhara. Who are we? We are the dispossessed” (Ghosh 254). They were strong in their stand and shouted the refrain “Morichjhapi Chharbona. We’ll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may” (Ghosh 254). The agonising experiences of the settlers is expressed through Kusum’s words:

the worst part was not hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. 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 over the world. (Ghosh 261)

Hunger and catastrophe were the way of life in Lusibari. Soil of Lusibari bore poor crops due to salty water and infertile soil. Many of the farmers led a poverty-stricken life. Fishing was risky because they may be picked off by tigers or killed by crocodiles and sharks or drowned to death. The life at the islands was never easy for its inhabitants. They always lived in the fear of death. Most of the women were widowed at their twenties or thirties. The women folk were exploited and human trafficking was prevalent. The estate was almost bankrupt, funds for education, clinics and other institutions were appropriated by estate managers and the overseer’s henchmen. When the settlers protested they were beaten and an atmosphere of a prison camp prevailed in the island. The inhuman ways in which the officials of Bengal treated the settlers and their attempt to evict them made Nirmal wonder: “Who was I? Where did I belong? In Kolkata or in the tide country? In India or across the border?” He himself tried to find an answer when he says: “Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave” (Ghosh 254).

Amitav Ghosh uses the example of a vulnerable and fragile environment of the Sundarbans to underscore the precarious existence of human beings who are displaced from their homelands as well as the endangered species of flora and fauna. He asserts that the centre of concern needs to be shifted from anthropocentrism and probes us to re-imagine our views by considering human being “not as predator but partner” (Adithya Ghosh x). It is a compelling necessity to evolve a “green vision” in order to tackle the global ecological crisis that is taking place across the world. The continuing assault on nature by man has awakened the need for corrective action to halt the desecration of the planet and to evolve a better plan implementing the ideals of the movement for environmental justice.

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