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AMITAV GHOSH'S THE HUNGRY TIDE: AN ECO-CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is an ecocritical masterpiece that intricately explores the fragile coexistence of humanity and nature within the unpredictable landscapes of the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove ecosystem. Set against the backdrop of postcolonial displacement and ecological turbulence, the novel captures the struggle for survival of both humans and non-human species amid natural calamities and socio-political upheavals. This paper reads *The Hungry Tide* through an ecological and humanitarian lens, examining how Ghosh interweaves the narratives of displacement, identity, and environmental consciousness. The novel's portrayal of the recurring tides—metaphors for destruction and regeneration—mirrors the instability of human life and the constant reshaping of both land and identity. The intersection of cultures, languages, and global-local encounters embodied in characters such as Piya, Fokir, and Kanai underscores Ghosh's concern with the ethics of coexistence and ecological humility. Through the representation of refugee resettlement in Morichjhapi, the conflict between wildlife preservation and human survival, and the transcultural exchanges between science and indigenous wisdom, the paper highlights Ghosh's prophetic vision of environmental crisis and moral responsibility. Ultimately, *The Hungry Tide* becomes not only a narrative about the Sundarbans but also a philosophical meditation on the interdependence of all life forms, reminding readers that human destiny is inseparable from the fate of the earth.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Displacement; Identity; Sustainability; Ecological Consciousness.

Introduction

The Hungry Tide is a prophetic novel of remarkable insight, beauty and humanity. Human life is inconceivable without the existence of nature. Man is aware of his dependence on the bountiful flora and fauna. It is not just the artistic and aesthetic

aspect of life which breathes the abundance of the beautiful earth. It is a precondition for survival itself. Like any other literary movement, ecological literary criticism is gaining momentum in the present day context of environmental concerns. The title of this paper indicates the reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* which is set in the world's largest

mangrove ecosystem-the Sundarbans, which comprises both water and earth and the intersection of landscape, water, human beings and their culture. The tide which is always hungry comes in twice daily, resulting in a constant reshaping of the land and an uprooting of anything permanent.

During partition in 1947, mass migration of East Bengali Hindus to West Bengal in India took place. It was especially the higher-class Hindus who were persecuted by low class Muslim tenants. They fled and found refuge in the homes of their affluent friends and relatives of Calcutta. But low-class Hindus 'squatted' on public and private land. The tides in Sunderbans reach nearly three hundred kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater. It re-emerges hours later. The island is reshaped almost daily by powerful currents. The theme of the novel ranges from history to the current events which he reinterprets and weaves together. Though the novel deals with the danger of Sunderbans with the lurking tiger in the jungle and harmless looking but deadly crocodiles in the water, the fisherman who eke out a living, the study of Dolphins by Piya, a cetologist, Kanai a translator, the core of the novel lies in the ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistan refugees who had run away from the Dandakaranya refugee camps to Morichjhampi as they felt that the latter region would provide them with familiar environs and therefore a better life. This is a reality which is almost forgotten.

The story centres on two visitors to Sunderban Community. It is a story about adventure and unlikely love, identity and history, set in one of the most fascinating regions on the earth. Amitav portrays the globalization embodied in Americanized Piya with her hi-tech GPS device, local identity symbolized by Fokir, and Kanai the Delhi resident. Part globalized modern entrepreneurs shifting in between a transcultural shift is seen when Kanai reads extracts from his uncle's journals, the extracts are reproduced in English but the reader is asked to imagine Kanai reading them in Bengali. Some of the places mentioned in the novel are Lusibari, Garjontola. Canning, GosabaSatjelia, Morichjhampi and EmilybariLusibari and Garjontola are fictitious. Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhampi and

Emilybari are real places inhabited by refugees from East Bengal and other dispossessed factions of society. (401) Lusibari becomes the main focus-a places in the process of development.

Lusibari is a small island that supports a population of several thousand. Some of the people were descended from the first settlers, who had arrived in 1920s. Others had come successively, some after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and some after the Bangladesh war of 1971. Many had come even more recently, when other nearby islands were forcibly depopulated. The focus of their arrival was to make room for wildlife conservation projects. Nature is a great reminder of the transient nature of the divisions between individuals of whatever social class. In the wake of rising natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunami this paper will highlight the following factors – the power of Nature and its borderless state, lives of people living in such unusual settings and it also underscores the fragility of man's brief time on earth. The study reminds one that human beings are weaklings in the hands of immortal nature and emphasizes forcefully the struggle of humans for survival in adverse conditions and the humility that is demanded in the face of nature and the place of man in it.

Human settlement in the place meant for plants and animals, reclamation of coastal areas for the construction of buildings, and destruction of mangroves which are habitat for seabirds, amphibians and the aquatic animals are traced out as the root cause for the ecological and environmental problems and the source for hungry tides and earthquakes. But the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess is of the view that humans are neither the rulers nor the centre of the universe, but are embedded in a vast living matrix and are subject to the laws of reciprocity.

This is explicit in this novel focuses on man's indomitable struggle with nature. Life is precarious in the marshy land of Sunderban, an archipelago of islands, spread between the sea and plains of Bengal, there are no borderlines to separate fresh water from salt, river from sea and land from water. Survival is an everybody battles for the settlers of the Sundarbans who have learned to strike a balance

with nature. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys; mangrove leaves are tough and the thick foliage hampers the visibility. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, 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. The waves here are treacherous.

The tides reach several miles inland and everyday thousands of mangrove forests disappear to re-emerge hours later. No one dares to make a home there except the truly dispossessed and displaced who are unwanted and who have nowhere to go. They have settled there to eke out a living from the barren, unyielding salty tracts of land. The men are mostly fishermen who depend on the river and the sand for fish and crabs for sustenance. Each day of their lives is therefore unpredictable, making survival precarious on those islands, also referred to as the "tide country". Ghosh blends ethnography and history. Ethnography in which Ghosh delineates a series of cultural features of the tide country's micro community. It speaks about the Utopia community founder in the Sunderbans at the beginning of the 20th century by the visionary scot Daniel Hamilton. 'S' Daniel's schooling was in Scotland, a harsh cold and rocky place. His teachers taught him that life's most important lesson is "labour conquers everything". A time came when Daniel Hamilton with his countrymen had to leave his native land to seek his fortune and he chose India. He came to Calcutta and joined Mackinnon & McKenzie, a company with which he had a family connection. This company sold tickets for the P&O shipping line, which was then one of the largest in the world. Young Daniel worked hard and sold many first class, second class, third class, steerage Ghosh has made tremendous research work and has presented the evolutionary system of creation in a unique way. He has been preoccupied with the presence of animistic creation and its ecological balance in that region. He imparts so much information about gigantic dolphin, and about flora

and fauna of the locality. He also shows Sunderban is not only the confluence of rivers and the sea; the place is an amazing meeting point of different cultures, which seems impossible at any other place. It is also a strange love story of two lovers Piya and Fokir. They spent days and nights in the vast stretches of the river on the tree. Where both the lovers could not exchange words each other.

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is set in the mangrove islands of Sunderbans, West Bengal. *The Hungry Tide* explores refugee resettlement in the forest reserves of Marichjhapi, Sunderban and the complex Man-Animal relationship in the archipelago's ecosystem. This novel focuses on the ongoing tension between humanity and the environment in the Sunderbans, the Tide country of West Bengal, India and Bangladesh. This paper will give a new insight to the readers about the untouched parts of this novel. This sixth novel of Amitav Ghosh, considers the conflicts between the environment and its tenacious residents, and between those groups intent on preserving the Sunderbans unique aquatic life and tiger population; sometime at the expense of its residents. The novel's centre character is a scientist, the American Piyali Roy of India decent. So, it is not surprising that technology appears with some frequency throughout *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh offers both warnings and cautions of how it can mix with nature.

Amitav Ghosh has discovered yet another new territory, summoning a singular place from its history, language and the myth and bringing it to life. Yet the achievement of *The Hungry Tide* is in its exploration of a far darker and more unknowable jungle, the human heart. This novel is at its best when it describes the wild, untameable and fierce qualities of nature, which do not bend to human, will. This novel is full of vivid descriptions of tigers and their human prey, crocodiles, snakes, large forest of mangroves, storms and fatal typhoons. *The Hungry Tide* is set in a remote part of northeast India known as the Sunderbans which consists of thousands of small islands formed by the interflow of two rivers as they flow into the Bay of Bengal.

Life is precarious with shifting islands, tigers and other predators, poor soil, and minimal contact

with the outside world. Ghosh describes the people of the Sunderbans, their history, and their struggles with natural world. It is an amazing story of the land and the people of Sunderban. The struggle of the people is against nature, the tide, the storm, the tiger, and the fearful surroundings. The novel seeks to link the human stories with the broader story of the ecological and environmental forces that have acted on the region. Acknowledging the animals allows Nirmal to begin to listen to the voices of others, and find his humanity not in its exclusivity and permanence but in its continuity with the transience and transformative processes of the natural world. Their relationship with that world is not defined by abstracted concepts such as conservation. The natural world is one with which they live in mutual dependency, fishing it and when necessary, defending themselves against it. It is different but, in a way, more profound relationship with the natural that Piya has to accept when she is forced to realise that Fokir is not a projection of her ideal understanding and preserving nature. When Fokir joins in the killing of the trapped tiger that has attacked the villagers she is shocked and disappointed since she has assumed that he would share her beliefs. When Fokir offers her his view of the event, that when a tiger comes into a human settlement it wants to die, she refuses to hear it and literally covers her ears. But in short order she realises that her rejection of the villager's viewpoint of the tiger places her in the same camp as the foresters, when she sees the same corrupt guard that she had encountered on her trip to Lusibari on his way to beat and bully and extort bribes from the village for its self-preservative action. The tiger killing leads to the most explicit discussion of the issue of conservation and its human effects in the novel. Piya's counter that 'if we do not respect what was intended not by you or me but by nature, by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive' if we 'cross that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves.

The Hungry Tide considers not only the issue of environmental conservation and how it might be achieved but the issue of how we might begin to understand the diversity of the human not only as a

readjustment between different kinds of human societies and values, the rich, the poor, the developed, the undeveloped, the articulate and the silenced. But also, as a readjustment of the idea of how the human is defined in itself and how this needs to reflect the broader categories of life across species and even across the idea of the whole interrelated pattern of living forces that constitute the planet.

Conclusion

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh crafts an eloquent narrative that transcends the boundaries of geography, history, and culture to present a profound ecological parable. The novel foregrounds the symbiotic relationship between man and nature while exposing the moral and existential dilemmas arising from modernity's encroachment upon the natural world. The fragile balance of life in the Sunderbans—where land and water, human and animal, civilization and wilderness ceaselessly merge and separate—symbolizes the precarious condition of humanity in the Anthropocene age. Ghosh's treatment of the Morichjhapi massacre situates ecological degradation within a framework of social injustice and political displacement, emphasizing that environmental ethics cannot be divorced from humanitarian concerns. Characters like Piya, Fokir, and Kanai illustrate the intersections of science, emotion, and cultural identity, demonstrating that understanding the natural world requires empathy as much as intellect. The novel's depiction of the tides as both destroyers and nurturers mirrors the dual nature of existence itself—where survival depends upon adaptability, humility, and respect for the interconnectedness of all beings. Thus, *The Hungry Tide* stands as a prophetic call for ecological awareness and spiritual renewal, urging humankind to acknowledge its place not as the master of nature but as an integral participant in the planet's living continuum. Through its lyrical prose and moral depth, Ghosh's narrative affirms that the true measure of civilization lies in its harmony with nature's eternal rhythm.

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