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LITERARY IN TO ECOLOGICAL STUDIES ECOLOGICAL SUBTEXTS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SEA OF POPPIES*

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ABSTRACT

The issue of environment has assumed a centrality in contemporary discourse. It is no more confined to ecologists, environmentalists and scientists. Social scientists and writers, even novelists, have voiced concern, not just about the Anthropocene and the apocalyptic doom that looms large but about the need to sensitize people, both locally and globally. Celebrated Indian author, Amitav Ghosh in his recently published non-fiction, *The Great Derangement* has lamented that issues of such collective concern as “climate change” and “global warming” has resisted representation in serious literature in our times. Taking this concern as the starting point, this paper takes up Ghosh's novel, *The Sea of Poppies* to study a very limited aspect of this broad issue – the importance of a “sense of place” as one of the defining characteristic of ecocritical studies. It won't be wrong to say that we are heading towards an “ecological turn” in literature. Passages from *The Sea of Poppies* have been quoted to illustrate the corresponding idea and theoretical premise. The paper also throws hints at the possibility of further exploration of ecological subtexts in contemporary fiction in the light of poststructural and postcolonial discourses.

Keywords : Anthropocene, ecocriticism, postcolonial, displacement

In his recently published *The Great Derangement*, a fascinating study of ecology in relation to culture, politics and power, celebrated Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh has taken issue with one of the most influential figures in the American literary firmament, John Updike, on certain aspects of the form and function of the modern novel. In order to present the issues in proper perspective a little background exposition will not be out of place. In 1992 Ghosh reviewed *The Cities of Salt*, the first in the five-part series of novels on the Oil Encounter by Jordanian-born writer Abdel Rahman Munif without being aware of the fact that the same novel had been reviewed four years earlier by Updike.

While Updike had denigrated the novel for lacking “that sense of individual moral adventure”, Ghosh regarded the novel “as a work of immense significance”.

Ghosh, invoking an ecological and political perspective on the Oil Encounter between the West and the Arab peninsula, envisions its tremendously disruptive potential and deplores that this reality ‘has almost no presence in our imaginative lives, in art, music, dance, or literature’. He wrote: “Try and imagine a major American writer taking on the Oil Encounter. The idea is literally inconceivable... The truth is that we do not yet possess the form that can give the Oil Encounter a literary expression. For this

reason alone *Cities of Salt* ... ought to be regarded as a work of immense significance. It so happens that the first novel in the cycle is also in many ways a wonderful work of fiction, perhaps even in parts a great one". (Ghosh,2016: 102)

Now, John Updike in his review had observed : ' it is unfortunate, given the epic potential of the topic, that Mr. Munif ... appears to be ... insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel ... There is almost none of that sense of individual moral adventure – of the evolving individual in varied and roughly equal battle with a world of circumstance - which since "Don Quixote" and "Robinson Crusoe", has distinguished the novel from the fable and the chronicle ; "Cities of Salt" is concerned, instead, with men in the aggregate.' (Ghosh,2016:102-103)

Ghosh makes no bones about his disagreement with Updike that 'individual moral adventure' is the hallmark of the modern novel and its treatment of 'men in the aggregate' is not that significant for consideration of its literary merit. In Updike's mapping of the territory of the novel this valorisation of the "individual" to the exclusion of the "collective" is something that Ghosh finds himself at odds with . Ghosh does admit that 'contemporary novel has become ever more radically centred on the individual psyche while the collective – ' men in the aggregate'- has receded both in the cultural and fictional imagination'. But he does not think that 'this turn in contemporary fiction has anything to do with the novel as a form'. Ghosh continues, " It is a matter of record that historically many novelists from Tolstoy and Dickens to Steinback and Chinua Achebe have written very effectively about 'men in the aggregate'. In many parts of the world , they continue to do so even now". (Ghosh,2016:105-106)

Rob Nixon observes that 'Munif is scarcely alone in working with a crowded canvas and with themes of collective transformation'; Emile Zola , Upton Sinclair, and many others have also treated individual character as secondary to collective metamorphosis' (Ghosh,2016:105)

Now, what emerges from the above viewpoints is the very significant question of the adequacy and

suitability of the fictional form in addressing the issue of our collective destiny vis a vis the challenges of climate change and some other aspects of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene is the age of human impact . It is defined as a proposed epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on the earth's geology and ecosystems. Ghosh's preoccupation with the Anthropocene stems from his ethico-political concern as a writer and his farsightedness as a humanist vis a vis the merciless march of civilisation and its concomitant rapacity and insensate destruction of natural resources. His entire fictional oeuvre as well as his non-fictional writing bear ample testimony to his being an impassioned apologist for the preservation of our planet . Starting with *The Countdown* with its trenchant criticism of the 1998 Pokharan nuclear testing by India to the *Incendiary Circumstances* with its collection of memorable essays and now *The Great Derangement* , Ghosh's voice is vehement and unrelenting in its disavowal of the short-sighted politics of environmental issues. But what draws the attention of the votaries of art is Ghosh's unflinching call as a novelist to bring their art to relate to occurrences and phenomena, both natural and man-made in our contemporary times.

In this paper I have made an attempt to show how Amitav Ghosh's novels exemplify his overriding concern to make use of the novel as an art form to capture the modern predicament of the Anthropocene. The central argument in this paper is that by invoking a strong sense of place in his novels, Ghosh offers a nuanced picture of life in the context of its culture, history and environment. Recent developments in ecocriticism has brought new perspectives to the study of literature and postcolonial writers in their preoccupation with displacement have been found to foreground issues like environmental injustice and resistance, e.g., land grabs, exploitative labour practices, racist marginalization and have thus extended the ambit of eco-literary studies.

As Lawrence Buell has argued , " literature and other media can offer unique resources for activating concern and creative thinking about the planet's environmental future. By themselves,

creative depictions of environmental harm are unlikely to free societies from lifestyles that depend on radically transforming ecosystems. But reflecting on works of imagination may prompt intensified concern about the consequences of such choices and possible alternatives to them." (Buell,2011:418)

Environment does not mean simply the flora and fauna of a region. It includes human beings and their connection with their surroundings. Environment encompasses both the natural environment and social environment and their interaction. As Tiiu Speek remarks , " 'our reported contacts with our surroundings are always culturally mediated, intersocially and intertextually constructed; but they are also responses to nature, and environment is one of the variables that influences culture, text, and personality. (Speek, 2011:162)

Tiiu Speek, writing on Buel's ecocritical perspective notes that environment and place are as much social, cultural and ideological entities as they are physical ones. "Reconstructions of larger landscapes or immediate surroundings are always inevitably selective and fragmentary, the world sieved through a number of filters: perceptual, ideological, and literary ...While literature can reduce nature to a specific ideological or humanistic agenda, it can also represent an alternative kind of human-nature relationship facilitating green consciousness and place bonding." (Speek, 2011:162) .

The backdrop to Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies* is the Opium Wars of the 19th century. Behind the story of this inglorious chapter in the history of the British Empire lies the brutalities, the displacement and the human devastation of the opium trade. From a socio-environmental perspective the novel is a telling narrative of a man-made disaster that disrupted the economic ,domestic and cultural stability of life in northern India in the 19th century.

Sea of Poppies is set in India in 1838. The East India Company was doing a roaring business by growing opium and illegally exporting it to China. Opium was grown in India under an extreme form of contract farming in parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the 1830s to be sold by the East India

Company to China. This large-scale enforced farming of a single cash crop disturbed the subsistence agriculture of the region for it did not allow the farmers to grow food for their own consumption. "Lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped with the rising tide of poppies". Opium cultivation impoverished the farmer as the monopolistic East India Company offered low returns for the poppy crop. When the Chinese emperor banned the drug that turned his subjects in to opium addicts, British traders resorted to guile and in the name of ensuring free trade resolved to use force against the Chinese.

Against this background, 'Sea of Poppies' paints a poignant picture of the human devastation caused by imperialism.

The story begins in a village on the outskirts of Ghazipur, some fifty miles east of Benares. Deeti, a young woman married to an opium addict, Hukum Singh and with a seven year old daughter, Kabutri , somehow manages her household with a small plot of land used for poppy harvest. When her husband had a seizure and he succumbed to it after a few days , Deeti finds herself in dire straits. Her debt increases , her land is mortgaged with no hope of getting it back and the profit from that year's poppy harvest amounting to almost nothing, she is at a loss. To add to her woes, there comes the shock of the discovery of the real father of her child. On her wedding night her husband's brother, Chandan Singh with the connivance of some family members , made her unconscious by administering opium and impregnated her since her opium-addict husband was incapable. This Chandan Singh is now making lewd advances to Deeti and throws offer of marriage but her loathing for this man, for what he had done to her, made her reject him and she prefers to burn herself instead and perform "sati" . Deeti sends her daughter to her brother's house and prepares for the "sati" rites when she was miraculously rescued from the pyre by Kalua , the untouchable ox-man . They were pursued by hostile relatives and villagers and Deeti and Kalua finally landed up in Calcutta and registered themselves as indentured labourers (girmityas) to escape to Mauritius .

A large cast of characters assembles in Calcutta. The *Ibis*, a former slave ship, is being

refitted to take a large group of indentured coolies to Mauritius. As to the people on board they are a motley array of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts, thrown together by fate. From a bankrupt Raja to a widowed village-woman, from a mulatto American freedman to a free-spirited European orphan the Ibis had a truly diverse cast of Indians and Westerners. As they sail down the Hooghly and into the sea, their old family ties are washed away, and they view themselves as jahaj-bhais, or ship-brothers, who will build whole new lives for themselves in the remote islands where they are being taken.

The above outline of the novel is just an inkling of the epic sweep of the narrative with its multitude of characters and incidents but will just do for purpose of this article.

Buell distinguishes four levels of reference and environmental responsiveness in literary discourse: "the intratextual; the intertextual (the world of other texts); the autorepresentational (the text figured as a text), and the outer mimetic (the world outside the text). All come into play here: the concern to establish a narrative coherence, to signal participation of the story in a world of texts, ... to acknowledge that the narrative may have created its own world, and to make the narrative faithful to the world." (Buell, 1995:93)

At the intratextual level the point of relevance in this novel, from the environment aspect, is the sense of place. Boel has observed that 'the concept of place has always been of central interest to literature-environment studies'. (Buell, 2011:420) The interconnectedness between human life/history and physical environments have been common in literature.

I will refer to a few passages in support of my argument. In the second paragraph of the opening chapter we have this description:

"... for mile after mile, from Benares onwards, the Ganga seemed to be flowing between two glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white-petalled flowers. It was as if the snows of the high Himalayas had descended on the planes to await the arrival of Holi and its spring time profusion of colour." (Ghosh,2008 :3)

And then this passage:

"The sun was past its zenith and a haze was dancing over the flowers, in the warmth of the afternoon... As her steps lengthened, she saw that on some nearby fields, the crop was well in advance of her own: some of her neighbours had already nicked their pods and the white ooze of the sap could be seen congealing around the parallel incisions of the nukha. The sweet, heady odor of the bleeding pods had drawn swarms of insects, and the air was buzzing with bees, grasshoppers and wasps"... She stopped to glance in the direction of their hut, which was just visible in the distance: it looked like a tiny raft, floating upon a river of poppies. The hut's roof was urgently in need of repairs, but in this age of flowers, thatch was not easy to come by: in the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had hatch to spare – "(Ghosh,2008 : 28-29).

What strikes me in this passage is the remarkable sense of attachment to place and the intense and inextricable mix of a human element in a symbiotic and sublime coexistence with nature.

I can't help recall Barry Lopez's point on how imagination mediates between landscape and desire and how human subjectivity is moulded by the contours of the landscape. This sense of place is ruptured when dislocation takes place. The social, economic and political compulsions that snaps the intimate bond between man and place results in an irreparable discord that leaves a subtle trauma behind. The many stories recounted by the women in the Ibis are memories of this sense of place and dislocation.

In comparison with the previous passages let's now examine this one:

Soon after this, the pulwar crossed an invisible boundary, taking them in to a watery, rain-drowned land where the

people spoke an incomprehensible tongue: ... To add to the migrants' growing unease, the landscape changed : the flat , fertile, populous plains yielded to swamps and marshes; the river turned brackish, so that its water could no longer be drunk; ... as they sweated in the steamy heat of the jungle , their fears and apprehensions bubbled over. The pulwar became a cauldron of rumours : ... The most frightening of the rumours was centered upon the question of why the white men were so insistent on procuring the young and the juvenile, rather than those who were wise, knowing and rich in experience : it was because they were after an oil that was to be found only in the human brain – the coveted mimiai-ka-tel , which was known to be most plentiful among people who had recently reached maturity. The method employed in extracting this substance was to hang the victims upside down , by their ankles, with small wholes bored in to their skulls: this allowed the oil to drip slowly in to a pan.” (Ghosh, 2008 : 246)

It goes to Ghosh's remarkable ability to demonstrate how a change of place gives rise to unease and generates fear, anxiety and horrible imaginings . Dislocations also bring back memories of the lost place .

“Among the women the talk was of the past, and the little things that they would never see, nor hear, nor smell again : the colour of poppies, spilling across the fields like *abir* on a rain drenched Holi ; the haunting smell of cooking-fires drifting across the river, bearing news of a wedding in a distant village; the sunset sound of temple bells and the evening azan ; late nights in the courtyard, listening to the tales of the elderly. No matter how hard the times at home may have been, in the ashes of every past there were a few cinders of memory that glowed with warmth – and now, those embers of recollection took on a new life, in the light of which their presence here, in the belly of a ship that was about to be cast in to an abyss, seemed incomprehensible, a thing that could not be

explained except as a lapse from sanity.” (Ghosh, 2008 : 397)

Boel's observation is apt in this context. “Ecocritical thinking broadly accords with humanistic geographers who conceive place-sense as a fusion of personal allegiance, social construction, and physiographic matrix. (Buel, 2011:420)

Tiu Speak recognises that ‘Ecocritics are interested in how discursive conventions enable and constrain our contact with environment and place, how much does place inform representations, and how do the means of representations inform our sense of place. They examine significant tropes and myths that shape our environmental imagination and action.’ She further notes that ‘Speaking for other forms of life, ecocritics also speak for human minorities whose exploitation is often closely interlinked with exploitation of nature – the fact that is often concealed in hegemonic naturism. What ecocritics do, in short, is attempting to discover nature as absence, silence in texts, and construe environmental representation as a relevant category of literary, aesthetic, and political analysis; often in conjunction with a focus on gender, class and race issues in literary texts.’ (Speak,2011: 161)

Poststructural and postcolonial writers and critics have extended their interest in the human “other” – subaltern , marginalised individuals and groups and women -, to nature as the “silenced other”. Recent ecocriticism scrutinizes more intensively the relationships between imperialism and ecological distress within postcolonial literatures.

Ghosh's attention to literature's engagement with both local ecological concerns and global environmental issues, including toxification, climate change, and environmental injustice on the one hand and his advocacy for initiating an “ecological turn” with ‘men in the aggregate’ at the heart of the fictional art in our modern times is a sane voice which, if heeded, will not only enrich our enjoyment of literature but also connect us to our environment in an elemental way.

For Amitav Ghosh and other postcolonial writers, the theme of colonial domination and ecological degradation is getting priority in fiction too because it is through storytelling that a

successful and emotive communication is better facilitated than through nonfiction. As Tania Lombrozo argues, "The beauty of fiction is the experience that infuses the content — when you finish a novel, you step out of the fictional world and into your life a slightly different person, perhaps understanding two sides of an issue more deeply, even if you haven't changed your mind about it." (Lombrozo, 2017)

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