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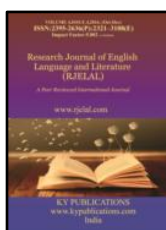
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ECO-MARXSIM IN *THE HUNGRY TIDE* BY AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

Eco-Marxism speaks about relationship of the human beings and the environment and the condition of the refugees. Marxism, which condemns capitalists for destroying the proletariat class, led ecomarxists to believe that capitalists are to blame for every ecological problem that we face today. Marx's notion of human emancipation was linked to his vision of overcoming human beings isolated from nature through the development of a socialist society. By referring to Morichjhapi and aftermath of partition in *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh has shown openness, factual authenticity, and compassion that instigate us to look into certain humanitarian concerns in implementing conservation programs.

Keywords – Amitav Ghosh , The Hungry Tide, Eco- Marxism.

Literature is “a political medium of conscious change and an increased ecological sensibility which however indirectly can help to contribute to a change of political and social practise” (Sumathy 6). Social ecology, green socialism and metabolic rift are the ideologies that merge with the aspects of Ecomarxism. Closing decades of the twentieth century have been crucial to discern literature from ecological perspective. These ideologies share not only the environmental damage but also the scarcity of the natural resources created by capitalistic forms of production that depend on the manipulation of the dynamic supply and demand. Ecomarxism is an anthropocentric view which sharply criticizes capitalist system for negatively influences the relation of human beings and nature. The fundamental flaw of the capitalist is that they view nature as a commodity that presents itself for humans to exploit.

According to Marx, the only way to solve the problem of environmental degradation, and the dreadful conditions of the worker, was through

liberation from the capitalist system; Marx's notion of human emancipation was linked to his vision of overcoming human beings isolated from nature through the development of a socialist society. For humanity to progress beyond alienation, it is necessary to govern the human development on par with nature in a rational way, a goal only obtainable with the elimination of capitalism.

The Hungry Tide exhaustively deals with the ecological conditions immensely affecting the local rhythms of life in Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands spread between the sea and the plains of Bengal on the easternmost coast of India. Survival is an everyday battle for the settlers of the Sundarbans who have learned to strike a balance with nature. Eviction of Bengali refugees by the government of Bengal from the Sundarbans constitutes the focal point of the novel. Government laid rules to preserve the wild life but had no concern for the people who live there. The lives of the tigers are valued more than the lives of the people. “They were providing waters for the tigers!

In a place where nobody thinks twice about human beings going thirsty" (THT 241).

The real historical event of migration, refugee resettlement and consequent violence and bloodshed in Morichjhapi island has been skillfully blended in the plot and narrative of *The Hungry Tide*. Amitav Ghosh explores the plight of a group of refugees who were sent by the West Bengal government to Dandkaranya in Madhya Pradesh in 1961. Dandkaranya situated deep in the forest of Madhya Pradesh was conceived as a long lasting solution to the problem of rehabilitation of Bengali refugees. Ironically here the poor migrants felt alienated as it was a semi-arid and rocky place, an area culturally, physically and emotionally removed from their known world. The refugees left the place and returned to West Bengal in May 1978 and settled on Morichjhapi island in West Bengal in the Sunderbans. Here these homeless people died of hunger and bullet wounds while resisting the policies of West Bengal Government to turn the area into a reserve forest to conserve the tiger.

Once we lived in Bangladesh, in Khulna jila: we're tide country people, from the Sunderbans' edge. When the war broke out, our village was burnt to ash; we crossed the border, there was nowhere else to go. We were met by the police and taken away; in buses they drove us, to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red it seemed to be stained with blood. For those who lived there, that dust was as good as gold, they loved it just as we love our tide country mud. But no matter how we tried, we couldn't settle there: rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood. (THT 165)

Ghosh traces the disputed terrain where the Government supports the tiger and opposes the humans. Sunderbans is the only habitate for Royal Bengal Tigers. So many international environmental order the Government to preserve the area and so the Government had declared the Morichjhapi as 'Tiger Reserve' and forced people to evict from it. This shows the cruel act of the government who

gives more importance to tigers than the marginalized poor settlers. It is ironical that one of the world hunt animals for sport and commercial, where as the other half force humans to evict so that animals can live. The outcry of the local people is broughtout "... who love animals are willing to kill us for them?"(THT 262).

This novel focuses on the environmental and human position. Archana Prasad's Environmentalism and the Left states, "The environment movement is an umbrella term used to describe aseies of local struggles and conflicts that highlight the issues of livelihood and ecological security in the development debate" (11). This shows how the modern environmental preservation in the care of preserving one species becomes a treat to another.

Daniel Hamilton, the Englishman who bought a vast area of ten thousand acres in the Sunderbans from the British Government in 1903 distributed it free to all the Indians who were willing to settle there. Thus a new country, the 'Bhatir Desh' or 'the tide country' came into being. The islands came to be inhabited by underprivileged and poor landless people. Hamilton had dreamt of creating history by establishing an egalitarian society. "Here there would be no Brahmins or untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together" (THT 51). "Nilima had often said that she admired what Sir Daniel Hamilton did. What was the difference then? Were the dreams of these settlers less valuable than those of a man like Sir Daniel just because he was a rich shahib and they impoverished refugees?" (THT 213)

The tide country also provided shelter to these refugees who settled there to escape political persecution. Some went there in 1947 and some in 1971, the years unforgettable in human history for the brutal massacre of human beings. They preferred the dangers of the tide country to the atrocities that were meted out to them in their native country and refugee camps respectively. "Such setting makes an apt symbol for the ebb and flow of history and the uprooting of populations" (THT 132).

Morichjhapi ...was a tide country island....

In 1978, it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi. In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight. Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built badhs and put up huts. It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to be learnt that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh. Some had come to India after Partition, while others had trickled over later. In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes. Most of them were Dalits, as we say now, Harijans, as we used to say then. (THT 118)

Ghosh's fictional representation of the events at Morichjhapi in 1979 keeps very close to what actually happened, and he has successfully shown the various ways in which Morichjhapi was markedly different from other refugee settlements. The refugees there were terribly displaced people as they had moved from East Pakistan to West Bengal in the late 1950's, then from West Bengal to Dandkaranya at Madhya Pradesh in 1961 and then again from Madhya Pradesh to the Sunderbans in 1978, yet in Morichjhapi they had found a place where they were no longer at the mercy of the local people or even the government, initially. They found vast tracts of free land in the Sunderbans and created a world of their own.

Their aims were quite straight forward. They just wanted a little land to settle on but for that they were willing to pit themselves against the government. They were prepared to resist until the end. But the government had proved unbending in their determination to evict the settlers. Over a period of about a year there had been a series of confrontations between the settlers and government forces. And the final clash...was in mid May of the year 1979. (THT 119)

The refugees rapidly established Morichjhapi as one of the best developed islands of the Sundarbans within a few months. The refugees at Morichjhapi showed initiative and organization in their attempt to build a new life. The refugees transformed a barren island into a bustling locality. They tried, as far as possible, to be self-reliant, but at the same time they were conscious of the need to garner social and political support for their work. To this end the refugees held a feast, and invited dignitaries to the island to see their enterprises first hand. "Speeches were made, extolling the achievements of the settlers. It was universally agreed that the significance of Morichjhapi extended far beyond the island itself" (THT 191). The politicians, who came from Calcutta, despite their lofty speeches, already knew that these settlers would eventually be evicted.

The refugees' case was also unique in another respect as it was intimately linked up with an environmental issue. "Morichjhapi wasn't really forest even before the settlers came. Parts of it were already used by the government for plantation and so on. What's been said about the danger to the environment was just a shame in order to evict these people who have nowhere to go" (THT 213-14). The western industrialization in the name of modernization destroys the environment. "Postcolonial societies have taken up the civilizing benefits of modernity, only to find themselves the barbaric instigators of environmental damage. In such ways the dynamic of imperial power is maintained globally" (The Empire Writes Back 213).

On January 26, 1979, the West Bengal government started an economic blockade of the settlement with thirty police launches. The community was tear-gassed, huts were razed, and fisheries and tube wells were destroyed in an attempt to deprive refugees of food and water. "The seize went on for many day food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tube wells and there was no potable water left; the settlers were drinking from puddles and an epidemic of cholera had broken out" (THT 260).

The rehabilitation debate basically boiled down to the question: which is more

important—conserving forests for animals or allowing humans to live. Kusum articulates the peculiar predicament of the Morichjhapi refugees. The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, with hunger gnawing at our bellies and listen to the policemen say... '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 tiger, which is paid by the people all over the world.' Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? (THT 262-63)

However, the refugee's supporters appealed to the Calcutta High Court, which ruled out that barricading the settlers was illegal and ordered; the seize to be lifted. The government then denied that the refugees were not subject to any blockade but continued the blockade in defiance of the High Court. The police continued to patrol the island urging the settlers to abandon their homes. Though some of them died of starvation and disease, the refugees would not give up. There was no failing in courage and confidence.

Government ordered the forcible evacuation of the refugees, which took place between May14 to May 16, 1979. At least several hundred men, women and children were said to have been killed in the operation and their bodies dumped in the river. Horen, the local boatman narrates the incident.

I know no more than anyone else knows. It was all just rumour. The gangsters...were carried over in boats and dinghies and bhotbhotis. They burnt the settlers huts they sank their boats, they laid waste to their fields. No one knows for sure... a group of women were taken away by force, Kusum among them people say they were used and thrown into the rivers so that they would be washed away by the tides. Dozens of settlers were killed...The sea claimed them all. (THT 279)

It is evident that nothing concrete was ever known about the brutal assault on the settlers.

Morichjhapi was declared out of the bounds for everyone including the journalists. The settlers at Morichjhapi, terribly displaced as they were, proved to be a defiant lot. Till their last breath, they fought the injustice of the government. And in the very last phase of their struggle, when they were forcibly evicted by a 1500-strong police force their battle-cry became the voice of the dispossessed. "Who are we? We are the dispossessed. We'll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may' (THT 254). "The novel demonstrates how environmentalism and conservation, nevertheless, has its own costs, and it explores the ethical dilemmas that result from this". (Rahman 94)

Ghosh points out that in the name of tiger preservation human lives were threatened and destroyed. Pitting the conservation of the tiger at the cost of the extermination of its human settlers highlights several paradoxes that find no easy answers. Conservation is absolutely necessary but not at the cost of the poor and the underprivileged who are always short-changed in the process. As a Bengali newspaper observed, "The lives of the trees in Sundarban are certainly of value but surely the lives of these shelter seekers are not without value" (qtd in Kaiti 267).

By referring to Morichjhapi and aftermath of partition Ghosh has shown, factual authenticity and compassion that instigate us to look into certain humanitarian concerns in implementing conservation programs. Had it not been for this very successful novel, this particular incident of Morichjhapi would have lapsed into total oblivion and we would have forgotten some very remarkable acts of courage and resistance by the people who were poor, helpless, deprived and dispossessed. This almost forgotten incident, which is a historical fact, motivated Ghosh to write his novel about the trauma and struggle of these migrants. Kailash Nath and Madhumita Pati rightly observe: "Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie and the recent Booker Prize winner, Arvind Adiga and several others are considered postmodern in the sense that they have tried to portray the tension between the indigenous/marginal people's stakes and the impositions of the all-powerful State (13). Ghosh triumphs as an author for he has successfully upheld

the cause of under privileged voiceless victims whose historical saga would have been wiped away in the course of time.

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