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## POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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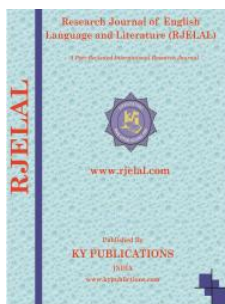
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### ABSTRACT

In the current scenario, there are number of novelists who are depicting the history of human race and society in their novels. Same is the case with Amitav Ghosh as he has also shown a great concern for the human pathos. Although Ghosh does not fit into any single category, but on the basis of later part of his career, he shares some features of postcolonial literature. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to study *The Hungry Tide* from two different angles: Postcolonialism and ecocriticism. As the novel is a perfect blend of both these sensibilities, main emphasis here is find the middle line where both of these are matching with each other. In this novel the aspects of postcolonialism and the practices of ecocritical theory finds equal importance and have been emphasized in the course of the present paper.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism, imperialism, environment, Sunderbans

### Introduction

In the current scenario, a shifting interest towards the history of human race and society has been noticed in the works of so-called modern Indian novelists and can be witnessed in their particular treatment of themes. Amitav Ghosh is no exception as ever since the start of his career as a novelist he has shown great concern to human life and related history. At the initial phase of his literary career he was inclined towards Diaspora but as his career bloomed he shifted his attention towards more complicated themes such as exile by punishment, cultural fusion and the gradual destruction of our true culture. These traits of the later phase of his career put Ghosh in the category of postcolonial novelists but he has never desired to be categorized as one. As a matter of fact, the main feature of postcolonialism is to destroy the binaries

of hierarchy as they consider them as the Western means which were designed to control and silence us. In his novels, Ghosh has always raised his voice against such methods. His novels depict the illogical concepts of national boundaries which has separated people from each other. Amitav has accepted this fact in his interview with John Hawley in which he commented that "I don't fell for the lines that people have drawn between fact and fiction as these lines are meant to regulate our thoughts and therefore must be disregarded." (Hawley, 9) For him, the cultural and political divisions not only break countries but also the true spirit of humanity among us. In this regard, Tabish Kahir's observation truly justifies the idea: "Amitav Ghosh is an expert to move his themes between anthropology and historical records in such a

manner that these manmade boundaries seem to have been broken.” (Kahir, 13)

In my research paper, I will be exploring these notions in *The Hungry Tide*, a wonderful construct expounding the spirit of postcolonialism keeping in mind the practices of ecocritical theory. This novel is a classical example of the blending of ecocritical and postcolonial literature. As far as these domains are concerned, Ecocriticism examines how the relation between nature and man has been established in literature whereas Postcolonialism focus upon the effects whether dreadful or beneficial of Imperialism upon their colonies which are still being exercised even after gaining independence. *The Hungry Tide*, as a novel, gives way to both these themes in the course of its narrative and leaves the readers open to many interpretations as through this novel Ghosh has attempted to portray the painful plight of a nation which was earlier colonized and is now bearing the direct or indirect impacts of adopting the Western practices.

As a theory, Postcolonialism centers upon the persistent influence of imperialism which can be felt in the buildings, language, art forms, lifestyle, clothes and even the structure of government. Western countries have always considered their birthright to treat them as superior and all left as inferior who are in a great need of upliftment for the sake of civilization. Therefore, in their attempts of guarantying civilization, they have destroyed the culture which was already beautiful and complete.

To achieve this end, the colonists showed their grandeur through constructing massive building, influencing and dominating natives through their elegant clothing and by conversing in Western language. As they were successful in exercising their superiority, they were accepted and gradually become rulers. As far as the natives are concerned, they started accepting everything whatever was told to them by their Western counterparts. The impact of their commands is so great that even after conferring independence their presence can still be felt. This happened because after a long period of living with the inferiority complex the earlier colonized people were not able to find their roots

again which were lost due to the sway of western language and culture. It happened everywhere as the nation they left were completely different from its earlier version. With due course of time, the painful reality of these earlier colonized nations started attracting attention from various realm of literature where the main focus of the writers was to highlight the plight of their nations at world level. *The Hungry Tide* is one such work which highlights the problem of environmental degradation in Sunderbans which, in its own turn, is the result of western preaching.

Many critics hail *The Hungry Tide* as an astonishing piece of work highlighting the notions of ecocritical practices. As a critical theory, ecocriticism centers upon the depiction of environmental problems which are triggered by our own doings. These problems have many connotations and are tackled by many nations in their own peculiar ways. With the passage of time, environmental concerns gained prominence because of the political interests associated with it. But, even now, the developed and dominating countries consider these issues as less important because for them conversing environment was not a part of their imperialistic spirit. For them environment is just another mean to conquer and to control by which they ensure their superiority upon their colonies. But, in the present scenario, these notions cannot be cherished if we want the world to survive forever.

The above mentioned concern for our co-survival with environment is given an expression in *The Hungry Tide* where almost all the characters cultivate their own differing views regarding their natural surroundings. The novel also marks a difference in the opinions related to the conversation of environmental and the unique ways to achieve this end. One of the most important attractions of this novel is that it presents the environment as an important character which is powerful enough to affect the lives of other characters as all these typesets have their own debts to the environment which they are supposed to pay. In addition, the novel portrays nature in its varied moods, sometimes pleasing and beneficial and at times furious. By doing so, Amitav has actually tried to broaden the horizons of our own levels of

understandings. He has given us an option to choose. We can either choose to dominate nature as we want to or we can learn to live in harmony with it if we are willing to ensure our endurance. In this regard, Kumari Shikha has opined that "Amitav Ghosh creates emotional dilemma among us as to whom to support and to choose." (Shikha Web) The novel, as a whole, builds the idea of the degradation of nature that is induced because of the western influence upon our mindsets which we continue to use even after gaining independence. To reinforce the idea, I would like to cite the observations made by Abul Azad who has suggested:

In the present scenario, civilization is divided into two segments—unfair and local people and their forced and sophisticated ex-rulers which was a construct of the West to create a margin so to differentiate them from their subjects. This self-created difference is so influential that the so-called colonized people are left upon the mercy of their western counterparts. This conflicting relationship, in its turn, yields to the double culture which becomes an obstruction in the realm of society and politics where the idea of civilization is felt like chasing the American dream. (Abul 111)

In this novel, Ghosh has portrayed the scenario of Sunderbans after independence which has received every blow of cultural and political shift in terms of civilization. Ghosh has crafted the characters of this novel in such a way that they reflect the spirit and pain of the people who have received the ill-fates of an alien hegemony. Anyone who is seeking the roots of our own culture can delve deep into *The Hungry Tide* so to find the answers. The cruel practices of the Imperialists to manipulate nature for their own monetary benefit and the native's traditions of living in hand-to-hand with nature finds its way in due course of this novel.

Imperialism has exercised many side effects upon the nations it dealt with. Even after granting independence, they remained successful in altering the attitude of their colonies towards natural environment. As per the newly formed notions, these so-called colonized natives were no longer

interested to co-exist with nature rather they are more inclined towards exploiting nature just like their masters. The impacts of this imperialistic hegemony can even be felt in the structure of their governments. In the novel, Piya's encounter with the guards of forest department justifies this notion. Instead of protecting environment they were more interested in harassing Piya for the sake of money. In addition, inhuman ways which the native government employed to remove the settlers from Morichjhapi further reinforce this idea. The novel, as a whole, depicts many such instances which clearly exemplify the impact of imperialism left upon our consciousness.

One of the main attractions of *The Hungry Tide* is that it does not focus upon any single character rather it yields many perspectives which comes from its diverse characterization. For example, we have character like Piyali Roy or Piya who was nourished by her parents in America and still has a close association with nature whereas Monya was born in the Sunderbans and has her own inclination towards western practices. Similarly Fokir has his own perception towards nature which is entirely based upon pure give and take. In his comparison, we have Kanai who was born in Sunderbans but nurtured in Calcutta and thus remains a city man throughout his stay at Sunderbans. Then we have Nirmal who is a visionary whereas Nilima is pragmatic in their approach and treatment towards environment. All these characters present different outlooks towards nature as some of them are the embodiments of postcolonial temperaments whereas some are of ecocritical.

Amitav Ghosh, through the interplay of conflicts and contrast, leaves the reader with straight focus upon the main theme. Although all these characters have their own mindsets and resulting conflicts but still there are numerous instances of their working together in the novel. To cite few, one can find Piya and Fokir working together on their expeditions. The following lines from the novel reinforces the above depicted idea:

But that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends

simultaneously—people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in the other one's head—was far more than surprising: it seemed almost miraculous.

(Ghosh 118)

This idea could be summed up with the changed perception of Piya in which she starts seeing the world as it really is, in its real beauty which is undivided. This is the message of Amitav Ghosh which he has tried to pass through this novel. If this spirit of co-existence is realized by Postcolonial and ecocritical thinking we can actually change the world. All we need to adjust the way we think about our survival. We have to decide: whether we want to last forever or just continue to boast about our superiority upon others.

In this novel, most of the environmental problems are the result of our homage to the colonialism. At the same time, the solution to these problems is also presented through the co-working of people who are otherwise divided because of the differences in their outlook. In a broad sense, *The Hungry Tide* welcomes both Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism concerns with open heart.

The struggle between both these theories could be symbolized with tiger. The western thought is in the support of preserving tigers and is ready to pay any cost. On the other hand we have the natives of Sunderbans who are against this preservation as the tigers have killed their kins and still pose a constant threat. Although these natives have taken every precaution against this threat but at times killing a tiger remains their last option. The western thought does not see this and thus call these natives barbaric who are in a great need of being civilized.

These tigers also present another angel to see this novel. They stand for the wrath of nature which is unleashed when we human become hungry and start exploiting nature to satisfy our greed. One of the examples of our avarice is depicted in the practices of fishermen who for the sake of profits use nylon nets. "These new nylon nets they use to catch *chingrimeen*—the spawn of tiger prawns. The nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well." (Ghosh 111-112) These nets are

the gift of these so-called imperial countries. Now as we continue to harm nature, the environment which is symbolized with the legend of Bon Bibi finally decides to let loose its tigers upon us.

In nut-shell, *The Hungry Tide* is a wonderful novel giving equal significance to Postcolonial and Ecocritical theories. It has emerged as a mean to voice the plight of these maltreated downtrodden subjects as both the nature and the native people are equally exploited. This novel has presented the still persisting problem of Sunderbans at world level and has remained successful in attracting the cause of living in hand-to-hand with nature which is the only way to ensure our own survival.

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