

# Impact of Nature in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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**ABSTRACT:** Nature plays a vital role in the lives of human beings. Human beings are encountered with nature and ecology at each and every moment of their lives. But the constant misuse of the environment has converted its beauty into fury. In today's world, two terms – Ecocriticism and Ecology have become significant.

In the present article, it is intended to focus on the impact of nature on the lives of the characters of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. It also emphasizes the pathetic ordeal of the displaced refugees facing all the odds in search of their identity in Morichjhapi. The setting of the novel is Sundarbans, "beautiful forests". It is often exposed to storms, floods and famine. It is the home for the royal Bengal White Tiger and the gangetic dolphins known as Orcaella. The Morichjhapi episode narrates the consequences of environmental conservation projects on the subalterns. The novel sensitizes the reader to understand the need to strive for the peaceful co-existence between humans and nature.

**Keywords:** Nature, ecosystem, hungry tide, Morichjhapi, island, suffering, environment, refugees, tiger, co-existence,

Since time immemorial, poets and writers have been dealing with the topics of nature and its beauty. Nature plays a significant role in the lives of human beings. Life without nature is unimaginable. Human beings are encountered with nature and ecology at every step of their lives. But the continuous misuse of the environment has converted nature's beauty into fury. This threat caught the attention of the authors and stands the theme of their works. As a result, a new branch of literary theory has come up namely "Ecocriticism". In 1978, Willaim Reuckert used the word *ecocriticism* first in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". In 1989, Cheryl Glotfelty, a graduate student at Cornell (now Assistant Professor of Literature and Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno) worked for its use in the critical field which thereafter had been used as 'the study of nature writing'. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Wikipedia). In today's world, two terms – Ecocriticism and Ecology have become significant.

Ecology is defined as a new science which deals with the study of relationship between living organisms and environment. It tells how the plants, animals and human beings are interrelated with each other and interdependent on their environments. Any change or disturbance in one disturbs the other. India is known for having a variety of ecosystems which range from the Himalayas in the north to plateau of south and from the dynamic Sundarbans in the east to the dry Thar of the west.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* deals with the study of nature writing. It is affluent with all the ecocritical elements like the submerged forests, storms, floods, famine, man-eating tigers and crocodiles. The setting of the novel is Sundarbans, "beautiful forests", the world's largest mangrove system spreading over ten thousand square kilometers situated between the sea and the plains of Bengal. It is often exposed to storms, floods and famine and the home for the royal Bengal White Tiger and the gangetic dolphins known as Orcaella. Death is the stalk reality in Sundarbans. Tidal floods rise very often leaving the island beyond recognition. Eviction is the constant threat to the people living there. The government of India takes measures to preserve the natural environment to save the endangered species tiger which is opposed by the local people. This forms the backdrop of the novel. The critics, Huggan and Helen argue, "*The Hungry Tide...* advocates the sensible policy of no conservation without local consultation and participation" (Huggan, 2011, p.105).

In the present article, it is intended to focus on the impact of nature on the lives of the characters of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, their travails in order to battle with the extreme forces of furious nature and how it rules their lives. It also emphasizes the pathetic ordeal of the displaced refugees facing all the odds in search of their *identity* in Morichjhapi. It advocates the importance of environment and the need to strive for the peaceful co-existence between humans and nature.

The novel is divided into two parts – the *Ebb* and the *Flood* and is a story of three people – Piya, Kanai and Fokir. Piyali Roy is a young American of Indian descent. A Marine Biologist by profession, Piya comes to Lusibari on her research work on a rare endangered river dolphin "Orcaella brevirostris". Kanai Dutt, a linguist and an interpreter runs a Bureau of Translators and Interpreters in New Delhi. Kanai Dutt is also heading towards Lusibari on his aunt's (Nilima Bose) request.

His aunt informs him about a notebook left by his uncle (Nirmal Bose) before his death. Major protagonist of the novel, Fokir is an illiterate fisherman.

Amitav Ghosh presents how the poor island-dwellers encounter the disastrous environment to obtain their daily single meal. Being a poor fisherman, Fokir could scarcely manage to meet both the ends. He faces his wife's resentment and disappointment when he returns from his fishing journey with just a few crabs because "there was no food in the house and no money either" (Ghosh, 2009, p. 209). Whenever the men go into the waters for fishing, their wives remove their marital symbols and wear white saris. Widowhood is common to the women of Sundarbans. Ghosh explains about the tradition of the tide country:

"when the men folk went fishing it was the custom for their wives to change into she garments of widowhood. They would put away their marital reds and dress in white saris; they will take off their bangles and wash the vermilion from their heads. It was as though they were trying to hold misfortune at bay by living through it over and over again" (Ghosh, 2009, p.85-86).

Ghosh portrays another ecocritical element - the "BonBibi" myth in this novel. The villagers strongly believe that Bonbibi is responsible for their prosperity and adversity and saves them from the tigers and the tides. They believe that 'bonbibi' goes to her own place on Fridays and if anybody goes to *jangal* on Friday, will be inviting danger.

Although Kanai and Piya are educated and belong to elite class, Piya rejects Kanai's proposal and gets drawn towards Fokir though she does not understand his language. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal accurately says, "Kanai is unable to communicate with the heart of Piya, while the illiterate fisherman is able to enter the emotional tide of her heart" (Agarwal, p. 190).

Fokir accepts Piya's request and takes her to Garjontola pool where the species of dolphins is found. Kanai also goes on this expedition as a translator to Piya and Fokir as they don't understand each other's language. They engage Horen's bhotbhoti 'Megha' and start their expedition by towing Fokir's small boat to it. Fokir's love for the river and Piya's passion for Irawaddy dolphins form the base for their affection for each other.

Ghosh takes the reader through a fleet of events. He shows the cultural differences between Piya and Fokir in the tiger killing incident. The villagers captivate a tiger in a livestock-pen when it attacks a buffalo. It kills two men and many of livestock animals previously. So the villagers including women and children in the crowd were shrieking, 'Maar! Maar! Kill! Kill!' with an extreme fear and uncontrollable rage. Piya is surprised to see all this and tries to stop it but fails in her attempt. The tiger is set on fire. Fokir asks Piya not to be upset as it is common practice there. Kanai translates his words to Piya, "when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die" (Ghosh, 2009, p. 295). Though Fokir adores her intensely, he refuses to help Piya in protecting the tiger. She gets disturbed by this incident. Piya is unaware of the fact that thousands of villagers were killed by the tigers. Ghosh tries to emphasize the need to encourage the cross cultural relations with this incident.

There is another couple in the novel who settled in Sundarbans - Nirmal and Nilima. Nirmal is a school teacher and wants to help the people of Morichjhapi island and fights for their rights whereas Nilima is a social worker though, is indifferent to the sufferings of people of Morichjhapi island. Hawley rightly comments, "Nirmal and Nilima live side by side for years but are unknown to each other, divided by different dreams for their lives, and by a lack of respect for the other's way of embracing life" (Hawley, 2005, p. 132-133).

As the plot develops, readers learn that Fokir is the son of Kusum. Kanai reads about Kusum in his uncle's notebook which gives the details of "Morichjhapi massacre" that happened twenty eight years earlier. Kusum, Fokir and Moyna are the refugees from Bangladesh and the victims of eviction. Nirmal admires Kusum for her revolutionary thoughts. Kanai transforms to a great measure after reading Nirmal's book. Neelima describes Morichjhapi to Kanai, "Morichjhapi was a tide country island, a couple of hours from Lusibari by boat. It fell within part of the Sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation but unlike many such islands it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland. In 1978 it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi" (Ghosh, 2009, p. 118).

Morichjhapi is an island set in the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans in West Bengal, India. The government of India has taken steps to preserve the endangered species and decided to make Morichjhapi a tiger preservation project. It is mostly remembered today for the Morichjhapi massacre of 1979. In the name of wild life conservation, many islanders were killed. Kusum wonders "who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them" (Ghosh, 2009, p. 261). Government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had

settled on the island. Police brutality, diseases and starvation resulted in deaths of many refugees. Nirmal and Kusum fight for justice for the refugees settled in Morichjhapi at the cost of their lives. They sacrifice their lives for the sake of the settlers. All this environmental degradation is due to over population.

Fokir and Piya go to Garjontola pool in Fokir's small boat in search of the dolphins and are trapped in a terrible storm. They take shelter on a branch of a mangrove tree trunk. Piya sits facing the trunk and Fokir sits behind her shielding and protecting her from getting injured and eventually Fokir sacrifices his life to save Piya. Piya stays back in Sundarbans to take the responsibility of Fokir's family. By this it is understood that there is a need to strengthen the bond between the elite and impoverished in the society.

Amitav Ghosh wonderfully depicts the great sacrifice of Fokir for the sake of a stranger setting an example for humanity. Although Piya and Kanai belong to the elite class, they depend on a fisherman to navigate the waters. Despite having the educational background, Piya has to depend on an illiterate to find the dolphins.

The Morichjhapi episode narrates the consequences of environmental conservation projects on the subalterns. It shows the sufferings of the settlers and how desperate they were to have a home or land of their own for which they sacrificed their lives. One should have such strong conviction to give meaning to life.

## CONCLUSION

Nature is seen in its beauty and in its fury as well based on the human actions. Human beings cannot escape the natural disasters. At the same time nature also suffer the harm caused by human beings. Their unsympathetic, irresponsible actions affect the ecosystem. Therefore, human beings and nature are interrelated and interconnected in the string of ecosystem. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* confirms very clearly that nature, no doubt has a great impact on human beings and it rules over the lives of people. The novel clearly shows the terror of nature and the dire need to protect our ecosystem. It makes the reader sensitised to understand the importance of environment and the need to strive for the peaceful co-existence between humans and nature.

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