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A Study of Amitav Ghosh's '*The Hungry Tide*' from on Eco-Critical Perspective

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Over the last three decades, Amitav Ghosh has established himself as a writer of uncommon talent who combines literary flair with a rare seriousness of purpose. Ghosh's writing spans a variety of genres. From the publication of his first novel The Circle of Reason in 1986 to the Flood of Fire which is to be released shortly, it has been an illustrious and rewarding journey. The Hungry Tide which was published in 2004 won him the Hutch Crossword Book prize in 2006 and the Grinzane Cavour prize in Turin, Italy. Each of his works is unique and personal and his appeal lies in his ability to weave Indo-nostalgic elements into more serious themes.

The Hungry Tide is a whirlwind work of the imagination, epic in scope and ambition. The backdrop of the novel is that immense archipelago of islands, the Sunderbans. These islands have lasted centuries through various periods of history. Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. They are situated in that area between the plains of Bengal and the mighty ocean. The tides reach more than two hundred miles inland and everyday thousands of acres of mangrove forest disappear only to reemerge hours later. For hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed and the hopeless dreamers of the world have braved the man-eaters and the crocodiles who rule there to eke out a precarious existence from the unyielding mud.

The settlers of the Sunderbans believe that anyone who dares venture into the vast watery labyrinth without a pure heart will never return. It is the arrival of Piyali Roy, of Indian parentage but stubbornly American and Kanai Dutt, a sophisticated Delhi businessman, that disturbs the delicate balance of settlement life and sets in motion a fateful cataclysm. Kanai has come to visit his widowed aunt and to review some writings left behind by her husband, a political radical who died mysteriously in the aftermath of a local uprising. He meets Piya on the train from Calcutta and learns she has come to the Sunderbans in search of a rare species of river dolphin. When she hires Fakir, an illiterate, yet proud local fisherman to guide her through the maze like backwater, Kanai becomes her translator. From this moment, the tide begins to turn. Amitav Ghosh has discovered yet another new territory, summoning a singular place from its history, language and 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. It is a novel like Conrad's Heart of Darkness that deals with the dangers and delusions that lurk within the human heart.

The novel is an environmentally oriented book and it suggests that human history is always caught up in natural history. The novel explores the plight of displaced people, the struggle for land and survival in an endangered ecosystem.

Gayatri Spirak has said the human subaltern cannot always be heard without the mediation of more privileged supporters (qtd in Rigby 165). Ghosh's vision of the world is huge and through his novels we can infer that where domination exists on the basis of race and class, there also co-exists domination of women and the natural world. Such multiple levels of domination both of people and of Nature is explored in great depth and detail by Ghosh in The Hungry Tide. He gives the subaltern, in this case Mother Nature a voice

Amitav Ghosh questions all patriarchal, capitalist and racist values. Kate Rigby raises a very pertinent question in her essay. She says "If as Gayatri Spivak had argued the human subaltern cannot always be heard without the mediation of the more privileged how much more is this true of the subordinated non human" (165). However as we see in Ghosh's novel ,nature is not always subordinate. It can communicate. 'Human language' points out Rigby 'always takes its place alongside and in communication with the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves and waterfalls - a world of autonomous speakers whose interests one ignores at one's peril'(166).

Towards the conclusion of her essay Rigby says,

As our world becomes more ecologically impoverished and technologically manipulated we need writers and artists who can draw our attention to the beauty, complexity and potential fragility of the earth, mediating the voices of non human others whose being and meaning we can never fully comprehend. (168)

The Hungry Tide can be read against the emerging ecocritical theories, which deal with the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ghosh here points out that human well being is linked to healthy natural surroundings. In this novel, Nature is presented not as a setting of picturesque beauty alone but as a force hungry for human blood.

Ghosh is a keen observer of Nature, a prerequisite for any writer with ecological concerns. The devastating aspect of Nature is described thus:

When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, unlike other woodlands or jungles…. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness 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 Hungry Tide 7-8)

The Sunderbans means "the beautiful forest" but this 'tide country' and threshold to the teeming subcontinent is a grim testimony to man's intervention in the world of Nature, that has only brought back peril to him. The above passage unfolds the tremendously unreceptive approach of Nature towards Man.

The novel on its broadest level is a story about the Sunderbans themselves the sort that help us understand the fascinating and sensitive ecology of this 'tide country' as well as the crucial importance of this region's continued existence. It is also a story about environment and social injustice in a postcolonial space, about people massacred or forcefully evicted from what they consider their homes on the grounds of a dubious environmental policy. Ghosh seems to caution

against environmental directives which do not consider the welfare of the people. Nature and Man share a oneness of existence and the human and natural environment are both equally important.

The concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only recently caught the attention of writers and Ghosh stands at the very forefront of writers with a strong sense of eco awareness. Again the sheer brute force of Nature and the powerlessness of diminutive Man against it is shown by Ghosh in the following lines:

On stepping off the plank there was a long-drawn-out moment when each passenger sank slowly into the mud, like a spoon disappearing into a bowl of very thick daal… with their legs hidden from light, all that was visible of their struggle was the twisting of their upper bodies (HT 24-25).

A complex network of tidal waterways meandering among thousands of tiny islands, supporting one of the largest mangrove forests in the world, Ghosh could hardly have selected a greener and more troubled setting for his novel than this unique system. Rigby states in her essay 'Ecocriticism', that we live "at a time when there is allegedly no place on earth that has not been affected in some way by humanity's alteration of the natural environment" (154). To a reader not familiar with the tide country, it would be difficult to imagine what the daily onslaught of tidal water means for the lives the islanders. The dichotomy of wildlife versus human suffering, or destruction of the ecosystem versus human survival could not have been put in better words than Ghosh. He uses language and Nature in a perfect blend:

At low tide, when the embankment was riding high on the water, Lusibari looked like some gigantic earthen ark, floating serenely above its surroundings. Only at high tide was it evident that the interior of the island lay well below the level of the water. At such times the unsinkable. Ship of a few hours before took on the appearance of a flimsy saucer that could tip over at any moment and go circling down into the depths. (HT 37).

For Ghosh, like many writers of our time, the defence of Nature is vitally connected with the pursuit of social justice. He seems to echo Jonathan Bate's view that "Human culture can only function through links and reciprocal relations with nature". (Rigby 158)

The novelist meticulously offers the nexus: the complex interactions between Man and Nature throughout the novel. Like the manifest threats posed by human settlement to the unique diversity of aquatic and terrestrial life in the mangrove swamps and the constant depletion of aquatic species by fishing and trawling, the human settlers too fall victim to constant erosion of dryness and embankments, the silting up channels and the flooding by storm waters.

Piya and Fokir forge a connection that springs from their common interest and knowledge of dolphins, waterways and Nature. They have an intuitive connection that helps them to bridge their cultural and linguistic gap. Kanai on the other hand for whom 'Language was both a livelihood and addiction' is unable to communicate with the heart of Piya. Fokir's local expertise connot in the end protect him from either the man-eating tigers or the lethal force of the cyclone but his knowledge saves Piya from drowning in the storm tide. He has to make the decision between Piya's life and his own. Sheltering Piya from the raging storm with his own body, he dies in a terrible but 'natural' way in the place he knows and loves best.

In the end Piya is determined to regard the unstable, always endangered Lusibari as her 'home'. After all home for her is 'where the orcaella are, so there's no reason why this couldn't be it' (HT 329) Kanai meanwhile moves his company from Delhi to Kolkata to be closer to the Sunderbans, which has also become for him more of a home, now that he knows the story of his uncle's notebook. The notebook gains relevance as it becomes one of the few surviving chronicles of a massacre which the poor and disenfranchised of India suffered for a state policy that failed to see a space for humans in the environment Nilima understands that the cyclone shelter that her husband Nirmal had built on Lusibari was probably the most important thing he did in his entire life, as it saved thousands of lives. As in all Ghosh's novels, the saga ends on a hopeful note.

Ghosh had been witness to the tremendous environmental transformations in the Sunderbans area in the course of his travels in that region. He pioneered the argument among writers for protecting our natural regions. He has been an inspiration to other writers who developed an environmental philosophy and made issues such as conservation and sustainability, an integral past of their thinking. Ghosh seems to suggest that the more we exploit Nature, the more our options are reduced until we may have only one left: to fight for survival.

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