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Post-Colonial Ecocritical Dynamics in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

The dynamics of ecological systems of the bioregion i.e., the Sundarbans of the Bay of Bengal dominates the novel '*The Hungry Tide*' by Amitav Ghosh. Here, I analyze how the text destabilizes and subverts the Universalist claim of Western superiority based on false dichotomy between nature and culture by applying postcolonial eco-critical insights. The basic tenet of postcolonial ecocriticism is that social injustice is embedded in the injustice of nature and it sees equity in both by rejecting Universalist claims of Eurocentrism which sees nature and local communities as resources. To prove the claim, the researcher has gone through theoretical critical insight of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin who talk about postcolonial ecocriticism. Besides, the researcher also used the eco-critical insight as per the need of the paper. The qualitative interpretative research is based on the textual analysis of the primary text applying the postcolonial eco-critical insights. The paper concludes that social inequality and injustice in nature must be eradicated so as to liberate both.

Keywords: ecocriticism, environmental, morichjhapi, post colonialism, sundarbans

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Introduction

Human beings have to rely on nature extensively in the course of prolonging their race of life. Their relationships are always not always courteous; they can be intimidating too. Ghosh's *'The Hungry Tide'* (2004) explores an interplay among nature, animals, and humans. The ecosystem which was in balance before has now been on the verge of gradual deterioration due to the pollution it suffered and other environmental hazards. So it is a novel about environmental and social injustice in a postcolonial space nature, and local people are used and misused. The refugees who settled in Sunderbans began to live harmoniously with nature, they learnt many useful tips to survive in extreme climatic situation. They are being evicted or killed in the name of environmental protection.

Post-colonial literature and criticism deal with dispossession and displacement. It critiques capitalism and modernization that take conservation, dam construction, and industries as the indication of prolonged prosperity. While doing so, intrinsic flare for capitalism displaces people making them rootless and homeless. Piya's love to the uneducated fisherman—Fokir is a surrender to his keen and intimate knowledge of flora and fauna as well as the survival strategies which are not written in a text but already learnt through culture. Fokir's knowledge of fishing and river dolphins attract Piyali towards him. She is a scientist who falls in love with him. He is the learnt and intellectual fellow for her and society which undermines the Eurocentric understanding of him as a 'noble savage'. Thus, the paper aims to investigate how social injustice and natural injustice were taken as easy things by European people who claim to know everything about local area and environment.

Literature Review

Nayer (2012) in *Postcolonial Uncanny; The Politics of Dispossession* in Ghosh's *'The Hungry Tide'* talks about postcolonial India dealing with displaced and the Dalits in relation to the novel *'The Hungry Tide'*:

It is in a postcolonial India, with its colonial past and continued claims for social justice from the displaced, the Dalits, the minorities and women that refugees are "created." Morichjhāpi's spectral refugee is emblematic of the inadequacy of the postcolonial state to provide a safe "home," Dalits, minorities and other marginalized occupy an "unhomely" space in the postcolonial nation—in fact, many of the refugees in the Sunderbans are Dalits. (p.89)

Nayer (2012) explores that Morichjhāpi's victims are the refugees whose emblematic identity of postcolonial state obstruct them to get a safe place to live. Dalits, minorities and other marginalized occupy an unsafe space. The refugees in the Sunderbans are Dalits. Nayer also sheds light on Bon Bibi myth where forests are protected because of Bon Bibi, "The Bon Bibi legend demonstrates a supernatural intervention in human affairs, the triumph of innocence, and the power of the tide country gods. The "social order" in the tide country is, Nirmal and years later Piya discover, based on the strengths of the myth itself" (p.99). The cultural aspect of Bon, Bini story, according to Nayer, is significant for the people living in the tide country.

According to Giles (2014), Gosh's *'The Hungry Tide'* (2005) delves into "human vulnerability before the power of nature, especially that of the marginalized underclasses, raising essential questions about the tensions between traditional land use and government plans, about identity and social justice" (p.1). Giles says that the novel brings the issue of marginalized groups into the fore. He further writes:

The novel traces the narratives of Kanai Dutt, a footloose New Delhi translator and businessman; Roy, a Bengali-American cetologist in search of the Irrawaddy, or Orcaella, dolphin native to the region; and the journal of Kanai's uncle Nirmal, who became involved in the cause of the Morichjhapi refugees in 1979. Each is profoundly influenced by Fokir; the illiterate fisherman whose intimate knowledge of the Sundarbans informs their journeys. Through their stories, 'The Hungry Tide' chronicles the difficulties of transitioning from the colonial past to a future that does not merely reinscribe the binary ideologies of history in a globalized neocolonial present. (p. 2)

According to the novel shows the conflicting relation of town people to countryside people (Government and refugee). It also shows the difficulties of transitioning from the colonial past to a future in the time of globalized neocolonial present. Weik (2007) in *The Home, the Tide, and the World: Eco-cosmopolitan Encounters in Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide'*, talks about space and human relation: "In '*The Hungry Tide*', the spatial proximity of the Sundarbans with Kolkata is as important as the temporal proximity of and cultural interconnection between India's colonial past and the novel's postcolonial present" (p.120). Weik (2007) claims that the novel talks about space and human relation showing colonial implication. The spatial proximity of the Sundarbans with Kolkata is as important as the temporal proximity of and cultural interconnection between India's colonial past and the novel's postcolonial present. He wants to say that the India today is not independent of colonial implication. The above mentioned literature talk about the novel from issue of displacement, colonial implication in post-colonial setting, and space human relation. The papers so far as I have understood, have not dealt with the conflation of human injustice and nature injustice which I want to explore.

Methodology

The research employs the qualitative research design employing textual analysis as primary research tool and follows interpretivism as research approach. While selecting the lines from the text, it makes careful observation. The hermeneutics model of interpretation is done to carry out the research.

Conflation of Social Justice and Ecological Justice in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

"*The Hungry Tide*" (2004) basically deals with Nirmal's diary that Kanai reads and tries to decode the meaning. Kanai is going to the Sundarban islands to see his aunt and take a look at the journal of his uncle 'Nirmal'. His diary goes as Kanai reads, "I had thought that on the way to Lusibari my face would lose the flush it had acquired in Morichjhāpi: the brisk air of the river would cool my skin and the rocking of Horen's boat would slow the pace of my heart. But no, exactly the opposite happened: with every turn a new vista seemed to open in front of me. I could not keep still. I put away my umbrella and stood up, opening my arms as if to embrace the wind" (p.179). His feeling for nature including the brisk air, river, Horen's boating, and cooling wind in Lusibari made him more sentimental as the offering of nature is sufficient. He pays a tribute to the nature. For him, a new vision and a new insight come not from book but from brook. The journal continues unfolding a series of things. Nirmal shows a map to Horen and says, "This map shows that in geology, as in myth, there is a visible Ganga and a hidden Ganga: one flows on land and one beneath the water. Put them together and you have what is by far the greatest of the earth's rivers" (p. 181). The image of Ganga in both forms visible and invisible, make the river both decipherable and indecipherable. This mythic meaning is ignored by the colonial discourse.

Banerjee (2016) in "Ecocriticism and Postcolonial Studies" writes, "postcolonial ecocriticism is inextricably connected to notions of indigeneity, and the necessity of seeing the land not only as an object of exploitation, but also as a protagonist in its own right" (p.194). As talked by Banerjee, postcolonial ecocriticism deals with the issues of local cultures which treat land not a mere site of exploitation but a character in itself having a sense of agency. Though post colonialism and ecocriticism are two different mode of literary criticism, they share common ground. Banerjee asserts, " Despite these different temporalities, however, postcolonial studies and ecocriticism share a signal concern: the idea that the task of literature and of cultural criticism is to expose and to correct 'flawed' ways of being in the world" (p.195). Both of the studies show the mistakes human beings have committed. They aim to correct the flawed human action which ultimately protects land and people at the margins. While doing so, humans transform from anthropocentricity to biocentrism, "The task of ecocriticism, in this context, would be to move from the metaphorical to the material, and from anthropocentrism as "human-centeredness" to an account which balances human and non-human environments" (p.196). Anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism, and androcentric world views put human other and nature at the bottom of hierarchy. The binary thinking that operate in the colonial mindset is in the novel as the hierarchy between local people as uncivilized and foreign people are civilized. It suggests that Western culture creates a boundary like human/nature, mind/matter superior/inferior which is not only is gendered, raced, and classed, but also constructs a colonialist identity as superior. However, this tendency has been challenged in the novel through the characterization of Fokir and nature itself because nature does not stay as designed by people over there. The dams are destroyed and the rivers become one. Plumwood (2005) further sheds light on the dualist mechanisms that help biased structures function. Plumwood (2005) writes: Drawing on developments in psychology, philosophy, economics, and political science, Plumwood describes the five linking operations that function together in creating this Master Model: backgrounding (in which the Master utilizes the services of the other and yet denies his dependency), radical exclusion (in which the Master magnifies differences between self and other, and minimizes commonalities), incorporation (in which the Master's traits are the standard against with the other is measured), instrumentalism (in which the other is constructed as having no purpose other than to serve the Master), and homogenization –in which the dominated class of others is seen as uniform and undifferentiated (pp.42–56).The quote says that the Master utilizes the services of the other and denies his dependency, Master magnifies differences between self and other, and minimizes commonalities, the other is constructed as having no purpose other than to serve the Master), and the dominated class of others is seen as uniform and undifferentiated. These value dualisms make value hierarchies that construct a superior Master identity by giving evidence for the inferiority, subordination, and colonization nature, and local people. As shown in the novel, Kanai who lives in New Delhi cannot associate to the people of the islands of Sundarbans when he comes there in search of his uncle's note book. The elite people see themselves detached from the local community and customs. Piya is an American citizen of Bengali descent and Kanai Dutt is a city-based translator. Jonah (2020) shows the linkage between post colonialism and ecocriticism by bringing the reference of Frantz Fanon, "When Frantz Fanon (1961) argued that "for a colonised people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity" (Jonah, 2020, p. 38 as cited in 2020). As the quote indicate, the most valuable thing for the colonized people is the land. Their connection to land is a part of culture which help them to prosper and bread. The dominated other in postcolonial nation are the colonial subjects, "The "Other" in postcolonial discourse, which is often represented as the dominated natives (colonised) is thus stretched to include the non-human world of forest, soil, animals, rocks and valleys,

among others, as they are the site of extraction" (Jonah, 2020, p.43). Jonah views that the people who are repressed and put in the margin even after freeing the country from direct colonization. He further discusses, Postcolonial-ecocriticism's rejection of Western states' notion of taxonomizing non- Western States as "developing", "underdeveloping" and as Third and Fourth Worlds. They base their argument on rejecting the idea of development which is the core of globalisation. For them, "one of the central tasks of postcolonial-ecocriticism as an emergent field has been to contest also to provide viable alternatives to – Western ideologies of development. (Jonah, 2020, p. 45 cited in 2020) Since, both post colonialism and ecocriticism are related to each other due the social injustices they want to eliminate, it (postcolonial ecocriticism) rejects Western notion of taxonomy and definition of non-Western nations as under developing. It rejects Western notion of development. Nayer (2014) again in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* talks about how people are evicted in postcolonial nation like the ones in colonized countries, "People are evicted from lands they have occupied for centuries under the project of conserving wildlife. . . notions of development in Third World countries like India are based on Western models of modernity. Similarly, ecological ideas about conservation come from the West and ignore the ancient social and cultural practices of local areas" (pp. 337-338). Seen from the eyes of Western model of modernity and development, the dwellers in the land are uncivilized and cultural and ecological ideas largely stem from the colonial influence.

The colonial implication is found in twofold: Morichjhāpi incident where thousands of poor people were evicted by the government and construction of conservation site. Talking about why and how rootless people came to Morichjhāpi, Nirmal shares his ideas in the journal, "I described as best I could the drama of the settlers' arrival; I told her about the quest that had brought them from their banishment in central India to the edge of the tide country; I explained their plans, their program for building a new future for themselves, their determination to create a new land in which to live" (p.189). The new settlers in the Mrichjhapi came to search a land, a connection to the land. Indigenous people like Fokir the fisherman enjoys playing with natural things, "Fokir is sitting here with a crab line, what is called a don in the tide country, and as I watch him play with it, my heart spills over. There is so much to say, so much in my head, so much that will remain unsaid" (p. 193). The refugees have come to Sundarbans searching land and soil without which their life is meaningless.

Huggan and Tiffin (2015) also talks about post-colonial environmental studies, "One way out of this morass is to insist that the proper subject of post colonialism is colonialism, and to look accordingly for the colonial/imperial underpinnings of environmental practices in both 'colonizing' and 'colonised' societies of the present and the past" (p.3). The colonial practice of treating native and environment is same, because nature and native people are treated as resources. They again assert: Postcolonial studies has come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically – and persistently – depend. Not only were other people often regarded as part of nature – and thus treated instrumentally as animals – but also they were forced or co-opted over time into Western views of the environment, thereby rendering cultural and environmental restitution difficult if not impossible to achieve. (p.6) Postcolonial literary studies have come to think about environmental issues. The other people are regarded as part of nature – and thus they were treated instrumentally as animals and they were forced to see their position as inferior having no agency. They again claim, "postcolonial ecocriticism the exploration of conflicted areas and problems: wildlife protection and conservation on land needed for poor human communities; human

communities evicted from their homeland to make way for game parks to benefit wealthy tourists; and, contained within these and other examples, a deep concern for rights"(p. 18). Thus, human communities are evicted from the environment because these areas are the target area for colonizers. Talking about postcolonial ecocriticism, Huggan and Tiffin argue, "In the first section, we argue that one of the central tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism to date has been to contest Western ideologies of development, but without necessarily dismissing the idea of 'development' itself as a mere tool of the technocratic West" (p.19). The postcolonial scholarship contest with the Western model of development and ideologies.

The narration of Nirmal Bose in his note indicates the postcolonial ecological hint, "The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcement hearing them say that our lives our existence were worthless than dirt or dust" (p. 261). The policemen representing the government, a neocolonial force, is evicting the people in the name of conservation which is again artificial jail for the animals. Nirmal's act of fishing in the sea is better because he does it without poisoning the water, "This is how humans have always lived— by fishing, by clearing land, and planting the land" (p. 262). However, the government in the name of policemen does not understand the soil and toil relation of people.

This novel explores human vulnerability and fragile situation of nature and marginalized group before the power of human but nature's rage is what they have ignored. It is all about the tensions between traditional land use and government plans. Nirmal has been involved in the cause of the Morichjhapi refugees in 1979. The illiterate fisherman Fokir whose intimate knowledge of the Sundarbans saves life of alien people. The view of nature as free agent reintroduces nature as a subject that colonial force takes as an object or resource. But in postcolonial underpinning, it is a subject and agent. The subaltern character the fisherman Fokir has subaltern fisherman Fokir as an "indigenous subjective knowledge" that colonial discourse fails to understand. Talking about knowledge embedded in local culture and people living there, the narrator says:

To me, a townsman, the tide country's jungle was an emptiness, a place where time stood still. I saw now that this was an illusion, that exactly the opposite was true. What was happening here, I realized, was that the wheel of time was spinning too fast to be seen. In other places it took decades, even centuries, for a river to change course; it took an epoch for an island to appear. But here in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days. In other places forests take centuries, even millennia, to regenerate; but mangroves can recolonize a denuded island in ten to fifteen years (p. 224).

Viewing jungle as barbaric, empty, and barren, the colonial discourse of making false meaning is deconstructed in the passage above because the jungle for the indigenous people like Fokir is jungle is connected with river and it regenerates life. This regeneration is like transformation of life. The neo-colonialism represented by the then government of Calcutta who used the people of Morichjhapi as voters only, plans to evict them from the land who were simply searching a land to live but they were deserted through violence. There is twin oppression in the novel, oppression to the people and oppression to the land through conservation policy. In this regards, the narrator ponders on, "It is afternoon now in Morichjhāpi and Kusum and Horen have just returned from a meeting of the settlers of this ward. The rumors have been confirmed. The gangsters who have massed on the far shore will be brought in to drive the settlers out. But the attack, they say, will likely start tomorrow, not today. I still have a few hours left" (p.225). The local

people Kusum and Horen living in Morichjhapi are going to be evicted along with other people, may be killed. Their right to live in harmony is disturbed. They could face the challenges in nature like flooding, storms etc. For example, how Nirmal's father escaped near-death situation during a flood while fishing is an instance to say that man-nature relation is not always predictable. Nirmal reports an event of his father:

It happened long, long ago, before I was born; fishing alone, my father was caught in a storm. The wind raged like a fiend and tore apart his boat; his hands fell on a log and somehow he stayed afloat. Swept by the current, he came to Garjontola; climbing a tree, he tied himself with his gamchha. Attached to the trunk, he held on against the gale till suddenly the wind stopped and a silence fell. The waves were quieted, the tree stood straight again, but there was no moon and not a thing could be seen. (p. 233)

The horrible situation of Kusum's father in the flooding could be tragic irrespective of his knowledge of rescue through a log and tying in a tree. Fishing alone he was caught in a storm. The wind raged like a fiend and tore apart his boat. Fortunately, his hands fell on a log and somehow he stayed afloat. He came to a tree Garjontola, he tied himself with his gamchha. Attached to the trunk, he saved himself. The garjon tree, which grows in great abundance there saved Kusum's father. It's a nature that saved him though the flooding which seemed barbaric to colonial discourse, is natural for postcolonial environmental discourse. What the colonial mentality calls barbaric could be seen in the atrocities of police force who destroyed the living, food, water system of local people who were going to be evicted due to the conservation policy of the government. The narrator shows the horrible picture:

The siege went on for many days and we were powerless to affect the outcome. All we heard were rumors: that despite careful rationing, 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 ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out. One of the settlers managed to get through the police cordon by swimming across the Gāral River an amazing feat in its own right. (p. 260)

The police brutality is everywhere. They destroyed the living of the local people which went on for many days and the people powerless to affect the outcome. The food had run out and the people were compelled to eat grass. The police had destroyed the tube wells and there was no potable water left. They drank water from puddles and ponds and as a result an epidemic of cholera had broken out resulting in human death. One of them manage to escape police cordon by swimming across the Garal River an amazing feat in its own right which is his indigenous talency. The social injustice and injustice to nature were interconnected. The local people while enjoying their live did not do any injustice to land, nature, and river. But when the government made a plan to prepare the conservation area where the people were living began to do injustice to both land and people.

Conclusion

The Hungry Tide is a wonderful sketch of genesis, love and the interconnectedness between human beings and the existing nature. Both human beings and nature co-exist and are envious to each other. Ghosh's novel embeds socio-political themes, indigenous lifestyle, culture, traditions, myths, folklore, deities, and superstitions of the people. The most striking delivery of the text is the cost of conservation of nature so as to

sustain life in the earth along with human nature reciprocity. The novel successfully explores the issues of bioregionalism and environmental conservation so as to paint picture of realization that protection efforts should be made for the prolongation of human beings in the environment and the ecology itself. The ecology fails to sustain until the rigorous human beings appear to conserve it.

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