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Research Article

Ecology, Politics, and Aestheticism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a broad field which is located at the intersection of ecology, politics, and aestheticism. This research paper applies the theoretical framework of ecocriticism to analyze Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide*, an important work of ecofiction wherein the author brings in several questions involving man-animal conflicts, conservationism, climate changes, and endangerment of species as well as the location of women in the nature. Ghosh's representation of environmental issues is completely different from Romantic poets because his representation of nature is situated at the intersection of ecology, politics, and aestheticism. Unlike the refuge in nature that the Romantic poets often implied when it came to going 'back to nature,' Ghosh's aestheticism is completely different. The struggle to protect environment on the one hand and the complicity of various organizations with capitalism and capitalism sponsored government agencies is foregrounded by Ghosh in the text. The paper also foregrounds the sexualisation of nature in the form of a woman's body. This aesthetics of literature wherein women are equated with nature and the description of one becomes the description of the other is questioned by using the arguments put forward by Val Plumwood.*

Keywords: *Ecofiction, aestheticism, socioeconomic injustices, environmental destruction, sexualisation, erotic and exotic feminine*

Introduction

Ecocriticism is a broad field which is established at the intersection of ecology, politics, and aestheticism therefore in the words of Lawrence Buell the role of an eco-critic is to explore literary

texts as, "refractions of physical environments and human interactions with those environments, notwithstanding the artifactual properties of textual representation and their mediation by ideological and other socio-historical factors" (30). Divya Anand in her research paper "Words on Water: Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*", foregrounds this relationship in the following words:

In this vein, Ghosh's novel reveals the interactions between the state, the poor, the fauna and flora, and the physical environment, and in doing so this work highlights both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that were inherent in the conservation efforts in the Sundarbans. More precisely, it is the discursive construction of the Sundarbans' waterscape in Ghosh's novel that helps achieve this purpose. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity. Ghosh sets his novel in the Sundarbans, the tide country where the contours of land constantly change with the ebb and flow of water (22-23).

Review of Literature

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* has been reviewed from different theoretical prospectives. It is an important work of ecofiction where the author brings to attention several questions involving man-animal conflicts, conservationism, climate changes, and endangerment of species as well as the women's question in nature.

Amitav Ghosh's representation of environmental issues is completely different from Romantic poets. Amitav Ghosh's representation of nature is situated at the intersection point of ecology, politics, and aestheticism. Unlike the refuge in nature that the Romantic poets often implied when it came to going 'back to nature,' the contemporary aestheticism is completely different. The Romantic refuge is one that is privileged and does not take into account class differences and the intricacies of gender. Therefore, it was highly idealistic in nature and needed correction and revision as Peter Quigley points out in his "Introduction": To combat this insulated and "idealized refuge" that protects one from dealing with the socioeconomic injustices that saturate daily life, beauty (and one can include here, for ecocritical purposes, nature, place, the individual) must be reined in under the sign of the political. (4)

The last few decades have seen the politicisation of nature with people's movements that stand for its protection and conservation in the face of mass deforestation by capitalist ventures. The MayDay Parade in South Minneapolis that Greta Gaard talks about in her essay is one among these (100). Gaard is able to define eco-aesthetics as something that's as simple as "reused materials, the absence of corporate sponsors, the clear agency of trees and animal species in the parade, and the presence of community involvement" (127). However, in this struggle for nature's survival, its beauty often goes unnoticed as a major factor that requires conservation and can in fact, drive conservation. At this juncture, it is also essential to understand that the role of beauty is often seen as a bonus in conservation rather than a prerequisite. Quigley also points out the popular assumption that beauty hides inequalities: "beauty and nature are now defined as "universals" that conceal political inequities and thereby serve to defend, cloak, and protect ongoing injustices" (5). Ecocriticism has a crucial role to play by changing this misconception.

McKusick writes about the poetry of Sensibility as something that added to the Romantic sensibility when it came to nature: "This increased respect for autonomy of the natural world, and the corresponding view of human beings as responsible for the integrity of that world, was

a vital legacy of the poetry of Sensibility" (23-24). This is deeply connected to the notion of beauty as well. In the context of Jeffers' poetry, Hunt suggests that "knowing nature through the more objective perceptual mechanisms of science is neither an end in itself nor sufficient" (52). To elaborate, the scientific benefits of nature and reasons to protect it are highly factual and easily available to the masses. However, this is proven ineffective, shown by the lack of empathy or urgency that has often become the trademark of popular discussions on climate change and environmental destruction. These interventions are also known to lack any deliberations on aesthetic beauty or value. In fact, this is more often undermined and given little consideration in the face of more 'pressing' matters of environmental concern. This perception is key to understanding the multidimensional and holistic framework to ecocriticism that is inclusive of aestheticism.

Textual Analysis

The struggle to protect environment on the one hand and the complicity of various organizations with capitalism and capitalism sponsored government agencies is foregrounded by Amitav Ghosh in his *The Hungry Tide*. This particular aspect is evident in Nilima's personal politics of appeasing the government while attaining basic amenities for the residents of Lusibari reflects an ambivalence towards attitudes for the greater good. There exists a strong link between State interests and business conglomerates such that the latter's interests are always more important. The latter's interests also lead to conflicts with nature and conservation. In addition to this, there are western global efforts for conservation that are entirely devoid of consideration for the needs of the indigenous people. People like Nilima juggle with this aspect of welfare, charity and environmental conservation which is why she never got entangled with the revolt at Morichjhãpi. Even Nirmal's interests in the settled island came from his own unrecognised dreams of revolution. As Nilima says:

(A)s a young man Nirmal was in love with the idea of revolution… It is to them what childbirth is to a woman, or war to a mercenary… these settlers weren't revolutionaries… They just wanted a little land to settle on… This was the closest Nirmal would ever come to a revolutionary moment. He desperately wanted to be a part of it. (Ghosh 112)

Therefore, the novel shows that it is always personal interests that take precedence when nature and man are at conflict. The question related to the empowerment of women is also seen as a part of the project of environmental conservation and ecoaestheticism in the novel. As *The Hungry Tide* shows, it is often the women on whom the question of conservation falls upon heavily. We have the major female characters Nilima and Piya who desperately do their fair share in their responsibility towards nature. To them, it is not about a personal gain and it is more about a shared social responsibility for what matters to them. For Piya nothing matters more than bringing back stable populations of the Irrawady Dolphins and preventing their extinction: "If I thought giving up my life might make the rivers safe again for the Irrawaddy dolphin, the answer is yes, I would. But the trouble is that my life, your life, a thousand lives would make no difference" (Ghosh 273). On the other hand, men like Kanai find it difficult to associate with this perspective. He is in awe when Piya watches the water for the dolphins: "He had almost forgotten what it meant to look at something so ardently - an immaterial thing, not a commodity nor a convenience nor an object of erotic interest" (Ghosh 245). Piya also mentions the difficulty of being a woman in her field. The conditions are almost always adverse and physically demanding when she says:

I have no home, no money and no prospects. My friends are thousands of miles away and I get to see them maybe once a year, if I'm lucky. And that's the least of it. On top of that is the knowledge that what I'm doing is more or less futile. (Ghosh 273)

There is also a blatant sexualisation of the *mohona* in *The Hungry Tide* - it is detailed as something erotic and exotic, strengthening the argument that the aesthetic quality of nature often relies on the feminine in order to make its point.

When these channels meet, it is often in clusters of four, five or even six: at these confluences, the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumor of land, echoing back from the horizon. In the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a mohona - an oddly seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement. (Ghosh 12)

The violence in the word is however hidden within the sexualisation of it:

The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily - some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. (Ghosh 12)

This aesthetics of literature wherein women are equated with nature and the description of one becomes the description of the other is questioned by Val Plumwood's argument that "women's inclusion in the sphere of nature has been a major tool in their oppression" was made in her landmark book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (19).

This is reminiscent of Kolodny's description of the creation of the American pastoral poetry: "that literature hailed the essential femininity of the terrain in a way European pastoral never had" (175). In this way, the aestheticism of novel initiates a deliberation on the concept of 'wilderness' in the context of ecofiction and aestheticism:

Wilderness means something different to those who come upon it from a modern city" and for this very reason it meant green forests and fields for British Romantic poets who had only seen "smoke, crowded streets, and noisy machinery of London, where they lived for most of their lives. (McKusick 1).

However, in the American context, it could mean "an empty space, virgin land, or pathless void" where they can write the destiny of a new nation (McKusick 3). However, the truth behind this wilderness is far removed from this notion:

"entire ecosystems, with their unique flora and fauna, indigenous peo-ples, autonomous cultures, free-flowing waterways, and unfenced horizons, were mapped, plowed, hunted, eradicated, exterminated, ditched, dammed, bulldozed, channelized, and utterly destroyed in the westward course of American empire. (McKusick 3)

Thus, the American wilderness is entirely a constructed myth. Unfortunately, this is also the case for most wilderness in modern landscapes. It is usually an artificially constructed space, devoid of any real biological diversity. It also gives more meaning to Kolodny's observation that, "The tantalizing possibility that metaphor, or symbolizing in general, both helps to give coherence to the otherwise inchoate succession of discrete sense data" (178).

The transition from feudalism to capitalism did not bring out any positive change in the outlook of people towards nature as well as women, who are still equated with nature. All marginalized sections including women, working class, farming communities etc. are deeply are impacted by capitalism. The deep links between State interests and capitalism also suggests that the interests of the State often fall at odds with that of nature, and thereby with women and the working class. The history of the fictional Lusibari Amitav Ghosh foregrounds this intricate relationship.

The dreams harboured by the immigrants who settled on the Morichjhãpi Island were ones that seemed simple on the outside - they settle on a strait of land left unused for centuries to raise a community that lives closely with nature and its resources as Nilima says, "the authorities had declared that Morichjhãpi was a protected forest reserve and they 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" (Ghosh 111).

Political attitudes towards environment conservation are also often deceptive in their aims - they often aim at profiteering and do very little to restore biodiversity. Power is a major contributing factor to these shifts in approach. This flip side of this coin is State-sponsored environmental conservation that results in mass murder of the subaltern as in *The Hungry Tide*. Drawing from Baudrillard, the 'wilderness' that is hence created is simply a simulation and it "threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary"" (Baudrillard 4). Sadly, this is also true for most wild areas in modern environments. Baudrillard's concept of Disneyland is relevant in this context because of the constructed "hyperreal" nature of the mangroves and conserved forest areas (Baudrillard 10). This simulacrum of forests is an artificial reality that is far removed from the natural forest landscape. Its ability to be as convincing as a natural forest coexists with the mass murder of people - the uprooted, the marginalised and the homeless.

The question of the value of man in comparison to nature is also called to attention in this novel. A dialogue surrounding conservationism exists but this is often at the cost of subaltern lives. An important instance that demonstrates this ambivalence is the absence of record keeping of residents of Lusibari who are victim to tiger killings on the island. This indicates the double standards in valuing some lives over others. Similarly, the incident of attack on the settlers at Morichjhãpi by law enforcement points towards a narrative of devaluing human life in the name of 'environment conservation'. Further, Piya's urban philosophy of not killing wild animals despite human life being at stake against the villagers' attempt at survival by killing the tiger. Her comment that "You can't take revenge on an animal" falls flat in the face of the real dangers of man-animal conflicts in third world countries (Ghosh 265). To her, killing a tiger is a horrifying thing and it makes the villagers also a part of the horror for her: "In a way that makes them a part of the horror too, doesn't it?" (Ghosh 271). In contrast, Fokir believes in the law of settlements at the fringes of forests, where "when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die" (Ghosh 265). For them, there is no other rational thought that makes more sense than this law when it is a question of human survival in the face of wildlife conservation. This is also evident when Kusum questions why human life is undervalued over a small patch of conserved mangrove forests. She demands to see these so-called conservationists who pay money to evict them and deny them of their right to settle and live dignified lives. The answer is given by the protagonist Kanai himself: "the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter" (Ghosh 272).

Thus, these questions of man's significance in nature brings to attention communities living in forest fringes that are constantly in conflict with wildlife and nature. While man makes constant attempts at feminising this danger or sexualising this landscape, the inherent danger that it poses is always one to resist against. The nature-woman parallel and paradigm is thus a very relevant in this regard. The portrayal of both women as nature and subjects of exploitation leads to a subsequent juxtaposition of their conditions with each other. Therefore, other qualities of nature are ascribed to women that lead to their further exploitation. Nature as creator, as a passive force, as a selfless source that keeps giving etc. However, when the 'nature as destroyer' narrative is portrayed, woman

assumes an agency of anger. However, when this anger takes center stage, the portrayal is akin to storm that follows the calm during which her tolerance is tested.

In *The Hungry Tide* however, the aesthetic elements of nature coexist with this political aspect. When Piya watches the dolphins in the river, she says she "could watch… this play of tides… forever" (Ghosh 280). As Scarry points out, there is a wrong assumption that "beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements" (57-58). In contrast, just as the water bodies contain beauty, its beauty also draws Piya closer to the cause of the Irrawaddy dolphins. Here aesthetics, combined with a shared social responsibility of conservation draws humans to nature. This is in fact a way of embracing nature and life: "Finding beauty in nature can survive as a gesture toward life over death; it could be a statement of the primitive impulse but no longer a culture in itself" (Luccarelli 91). Piya also appreciates the relationship between the fishermen and the dolphins when she thinks, "Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals? She could not think of one" (Ghosh 154).

Xiangzhan establishes the idealistic goal of ecoaesthetics as "to use somehow a combination of philosophy and aesthetic response to nature itself and to human expression as a way of seeking to "harmonize" human actions and the world of nature" (786). This is the human-animal conflict emphasised in the novel provides a look into the many ways in which traditional environmental conservation does not adopt a holistic approach. When Piya talks about the 'horror' of the tiger killing incident in the village, Kanai retorts,

That tiger had killed two people… And that was just in one village. It happens every week… How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers… these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too - that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings? (432)

This is reminiscent of a scenario where green politics can be seen as red ecocriticism as talked about by McKusick in his *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology.* He argues "'red' criticism is needed to reveal the class snobbery and elitism that are supposedly implicit in any call for the preservation of remote and scenic areas" (75). At an important point in the novel, where the village comes head to head with a tiger that has entered a human settlement, Kani makes a statement that causes Piya a deep dissatisfaction: "people like you… made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs… Indians of my class, that is - have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favor with their Western patrons" (Ghosh 272). This reveals a subtle class difference when it comes to appreciation of nature. Here, one comes to think of the 'right' population that can have access to nature and its bounty. When it is the poor settlers at Morichjhãpi, it is called encroachment. However, when colonisers occupied places like Canning and Lusibari in the name of business, it is called development. This aesthetics of development is something that India as a country later utilises for its own benefit to set itself apart as a nation that is fast developing. Prasad calls this the developmental aesthetic in which "the allegory of transition from colonial domination to independence, in which the object of transformation appears to be the bureaucracy, which represents the continuity between the colonial state and the independent one" (Prasad 191).

At this juncture, a deeper appreciation of what Kolodny calls the "psychology behind a feminine landscape and the rhetoric of "regression and violation"" is also necessary (Kolodny 176).

Howarth indicates that "Some feminists equate anatomy with geography, envisioning the female body/text as a "no man's land" aligned against a hostile masculine world, the patriarchal settlement" (82). Kanai at one point in the narrative writes: "He had almost forgotten what it meant to look at something so ardently - an immaterial thing, not a commodity nor a convenience nor an object of erotic interest" (Ghosh 245). This comes from the phallocentric need to experience nature as an object of sexual interest to man. Kolodny writes in her essay "Unearthing Herstory" that:

(There was) perhaps a need to experience the land as a nurturing, giving maternal breast because of the threatening, alien, and potentially emasculating terror of the unknown... dark, uncharted, and prowled by howling beasts. In a sense, to make the new continent 'Woman' was already to civilize it a bit, casting the stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed. (Kolodny 176)

Perhaps, this indicates a deeper problem in the way nature associates to the human psyche with relation to women. The question lies not in the association of woman with nature, but with the non-association of men with nature. This perspective of viewing nature is rarely noticed in first world ecofiction, and is rather a by-product of cultural differences in Indian and world literature. These nuances rather than being suppressed, require a deeper contextual appreciation. Context is often lost due to lack of interest or simply the dominance of hegemonical structures within the reading of texts from the Global South.

Conclusion

In order to understand the political hidden in aesthetic components it is also essential to do a religious appraisal of the culture at Lusibari. The myth of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli suggest a religious anomaly that is unique to forest settlements. They have their own mythological retellings and ways of poojas that is unlike the Saraswati or Kali of savarna myths. Their religious writings are written in a script that is "a strange variety of Bangla, deeply interpenetrated by Arabic and Persian" (Ghosh 224). Further, a line that stays relevant along all these thoughts that Kanai has when learning about the people from the mangrove islands is profound "the tide country's faith is something like one of its great mohonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a roundabout people can use to pass in many directions - from country to country and even between faiths and religions" (Ghosh 225). The secular nature of their myths point towards the varied aesthetics of religion in the tide country. Mainland traditions and laws seem to fail in this part of the country - they differ from that of the mainland.

Thus, it is only apt to echo Quigley's view that a new ecocritical aesthetics may be in the formation with a renewed interest in topics like justice, Marxist theory and feminist discourse. Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* demonstrates this shift in discussions on the political hidden under the green cover of nature. Through the various notions of red ecocriticism, wilderness and dialogues surrounding human-animal conflicts, it becomes all the more necessary to understand the complexities involved in understanding ecoaesthetics as a concept. By engaging with this aestheticism, not only do we supplement already existing frameworks of conservation and nature consciousness, but we also work towards a holistic appreciation of literature that understands and appreciates beauty. This valuation is necessary to produce an impact in the larger framework of ecocriticism.

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