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**Ecocriticism and Ecocritical Interpretations of Selected Recent Indian Writings in English****Dr. Shivani Jha***Department of English, Bharati College, Delhi University (Delhi), India***Abstract**

Technological progress and human greed have alarming implications not only on the environment and the nonhuman denizens residing therein but also the humans. English Departments can no more remain insular, cut off from their responsibility towards the environment. Time has come to view Literature with a fresh perspective. Till now ecocriticism in the English department has been marginalized as belonging to an interdisciplinary mode of thought little in relation with literature. An ecocritical perspective helps evaluate texts with the aim of environmental justice in mind. Re-definition of the environment to include both urban and rural landscape will allow ecocritical consideration to include not only the narrow definition of nature as the pastoral but the environment as a whole. It has been pointed out that the prevailing conception of nature is informed by a racial and class bias with no place for “people” who are an integral part of the landscape and the environment.

Environment must be conceived of as more than an ecological setting. We imagine most people living in historically temperate climates. But is this view point correct? How do historical and material forces shape the culture and the politics of exploitation in both human and non-human context are the ideas to be taken up in the paper. In order to do so I will discuss Kishwor Desai’s *Witness the Night* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The sea of poppies* and *The Hungry Tide*.

**Key words:** Ecocriticism, environment, exploitation

In the blind march of progress humans have not only neglected their environment but have ruthlessly exploited the external world with alarming implications not only on the environment and the nonhuman denizens residing therein but that which also threatens the humans. English Departments can no more remain insular, cut off from their responsibility towards the environment. Time has come to view Literature with a fresh perspective, till now ecocriticism in the English department has been marginalized as belonging to an interdisciplinary mode of thought little in relation with literature. An ecocritical perspective helps evaluate texts with the aim of environmental justice in mind.

Re-definition of the environment to include both urban and rural landscape will allow ecocritical consideration to include not only the narrow definition of nature as the pastoral but the environment as a whole.

It has been pointed out that the prevailing conception of nature is informed by a racial and class bias with no place for “people” who are an integral part of the landscape and the environment. Environment must be conceived of as more than an ecological setting. We imagine most people living in historically temperate climates. But is this view point correct? How do historical and material forces shape the culture and the politics of exploitation in both human and non-human

context are the some of the ideas discussed with the help of Kishwor Desai's *Witness the Night* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide*.

While examining the attitude of Culture towards Nature ecocriticism aims to link and integrate various branches of theoretical paradigms and knowledge towards a common goal: If the human race desires longevity then a harmonious relationship with the non-human world is elemental. As a word tends to lose its meaning in the absence of the structure of language, humans tend to lose meaning in the absence of the social structure both human and non-human. It is also said that Ecocriticism finds its origin in, and is a response to, ecological crisis. No other attribute better distinguishes ecological text better than its presumption of environmental fragility and looming disintegration.

In literary works till now the role of Nature has been marginalized, relegated to the background of human activities. It has never gained the desired importance, a fact reflective of the attitudinal dispositions of humans toward the nonhuman world. Whenever writers have given Nature importance it has been termed as "Nature Writing". A misconception that is likely to arise in such a scenario is that Ecocriticism is no different from the genre of Nature writing for the aim of both is appreciation of Nature. Here I would like to point out that the similarity between the two genre ends at its focus on Nature for where Nature writing takes its roots in the appreciation of Nature, Ecocriticism takes its energy from there and aims toward environmental praxis, displaying an attitude of commitment toward justice and protection toward the Natural world. Ursula Heise says:

...ecocriticism has nothing specifically to do with nature writing. Again, this does not imply that ecocriticism does not ever deal

with nature writing; clearly, it often does. But to suggest that it deals with nothing else is comparable to claiming that feminism is only applicable to texts by or about women. Ecocriticism analyzes the ways in which literature represents the human relation to nature at particular moments of history, what values are assigned to nature and why, and how perceptions of the natural shape literary tropes and genres. In turn, it examines how such literary figures contribute to shaping social and cultural attitudes toward the environment. In this project, nature writing has a role to play as one particular way of figuring the natural, but there are many others-in fact, no genre is in principle exempt from this kind of analysis. (*PMLA*, 1097)

Some other pertinent questions that arise are: How far can ecocriticism go from "nature" and still be ecocriticism? What can discussions about texts that are silent on nature give us? Are there revealing links between environmentally and socially oppressive systems, overlapping and interlocking structures that need to be examined? How far can we go without avoiding anthropocentrism? <sup>1</sup>

The first text exemplified is Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. The locale of the *The Hungry Tide* is the archipelago of islands in India known as the "Sunderbans". Sunderbans is a conglomeration of islands with mangrove jungles, Lusibari being one of these islands. Stretching about two kilometers from one end to another Lusibari is the most southerly of the inhabited island of the tide country which at a low tide; when the embankment or *badh* rides high on the water it looks like some gigantic earthen ark, floating serenely above its surroundings. Only at high tide is it evident that the interior of the island lies well below the level of water. At such times the unsinkable ship of a few hours before takes on the appearance of a flimsy saucer that could tip over at any moment and go circling down into the depths. (*The Hungry Tide*, 37)

Apart from humans, Sunderbans also provides sanctuary to many of the nonhuman elements like the threatened Bengal tiger, snakes, crocodiles, dolphins and other wild animals, with the Bengal tiger also being the most fearful of threats to the human beings residing in the area. The tidal waves are the other one, sometimes so devastating in magnitude so as to cover almost three hundred kilometers, giving new contours to both land and lives in its wake. It is also the promised-land that Sir David Hamilton envisaged when he offered free land to those who wanted to settle there as long as the divisions of class, caste and creed did not enter the utopian society he planned. Due to the plethora of perils life was precarious in these lands.

The three significant characters from the point of view of an ecocritical reading of the text are: Piyali Roy, a marine biologist an American of Indian Origin working on the rare species of the endangered dolphin-*oracellabrevirostris*; Fokir-an illiterate fisherman, Piya's friend, protector and guide in the Sunderbans who also rescues her from crocodile infested waters into which she falls once, and ultimately sacrifices his life protecting her from the elemental forces; and Kanai Dutt, a translation business owner based in Delhi who comes to visit his aunt, a long time settler of these lands.

The nature-culture dichotomy has been a central dogma in anthropology to have come to light recently. Where on the one hand Nature is considered as a basic determinant of social action, by 'Materialists', by 'structuralists' or the followers of 'symbolic Anthropology', the nature-culture opposition is used as an analytical device for the

interpretation of myths, rituals, systems and other aspects of social life. Human behavior, social institutions and specific cultural features were perceived as adaptive responses to the basic environmental or genetic constraints. The "natural beliefs" of the people of Lusibari can be read as an example of 'symbolic Anthropology' with the nature-culture opposition used as an analytical device for the interpretation of myths, rituals, systems and other aspects of social life. The residents of Lusibari believed that 'Bon Bibi' was the goddess of the forest ruling over all the animals of the jungle. A play that was staged on an evening clarifies the idea: The setting of the play was Medina (one of the holiest place in Islam) where a man called Ibrahim lived as a Sufi *faqir* who through the intervention of the archangel Gabriel, became the father of twins: "Bon Bibi" and "Shah Jongoli". The twins on coming of age were given the task of making the jungles of 'the country of eighteen tides'/Sunderbans fit for human habitation, which was till then the realm of "Dokkhin Rai", a powerful demon king who harbored a particular hatred for mankind coupled with insatiable desires, for the pleasures afforded by human flesh. One day Dokkhin Rai heard strange new voices in the jungle calling out the *azan* (the Muslim call to prayer) this was indication that Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli had arrived in his realm, incensed, rousing his demon army he set upon the trespassers only to be put to rout in a pitched battle. But Bon Bibi was merciful in victory and she decided that one half of the tide country would remain in wilderness; this part of the forest she left to Dokkhin Rai and his demon hordes. The rest she claimed for herself, and under her rule the once -forested

domain was soon made safe for human settlement bringing order to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order. (*The Hungry Tide*, 103) The myth works as an explanation to the nature-culture opposition as witnessed in the natural world.

The environmental angle is further explored in *The Hungry Tide* in the background of the Morichjhapi massacre incident of 1978-79, when the newly elected CPI (M) government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island. The battle between the government and the refugees took an ugly turn and the revolting settlers were on the brink of starvation, at this point in the novel Kusum, a refugee settled in Morichjhapi, makes her heart rending plea giving rise to a poignant debate:

This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world." Every day, sitting here with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again, Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers?...No one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived- by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (261-262)

Defending the right of the animals to dwell in freedom in human funded forest reserves- another major character in the novel the scientist- Piya says to Kanai at one point in the novel:

'there's big difference between preserving species in captivity and keeping it in its habitat....'

'The difference is that it was what was *intended*-not by you or me, but by nature, by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive. Just suppose we cross that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What'll be left then? Aren't we alone enough in the universe? And do you think it'll stop at that? Once we decide we can kill off other species, it'll be people next-just the kind of people you are thinking of, people who'll be poor and unnoticed.' (301)

Thus *The Hungry Tide* becomes an ecocritical testament that shows the path towards the desired equilibrium between the human and the nonhuman world, so that such heart rending and pathetic situations as encountered in the novel are minimized in real life.

Addressing the criticism that the prevailing conception of nature is informed by a racial and class bias with no place for "people" a re-definition of the environment is but imminent. Kishwor Desai's *Witness the Night* and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* are exemplified with the purpose in mind..Set in the year 1838 the *Sea of Poppies* focuses on the two glaring features of the 19th century India: the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market by the Britishers and the transport of Indian indentured workers to cut sugar canes for the British on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad.<sup>2</sup> The story is set on the banks of the river Ganges in Calcutta where the "Ibis", a former slave ship, is being readied to take a large group of "giritiyas" or labourers -on-contract- basis to Mauritius. The lives of the central characters are woven around these two themes exploring the working of the East India Company-run opium factory at

Ghazipur, affecting the lives of the workers dependent upon it. History bears witness that this class of people, “the girmitiyas” bore severe trials and tribulations in order to flee from poverty and other restricting social conditions looking for a better life supplying cheap labor.

The devastating role of the imperialistic agenda in the life of these people- common and royal is etched in graphic detail. The common masses as well as the Royal class are equally exploited and have to pay the price of colonization. The fertile farms of the Gangetic plain are seen blooming only with poppies as against other crops helpful in daily subsistence indebting the farmers to moneylenders and landowners who would also become indebted to the East India Company officers eventually, as happens with the Raja of Rasakhali.<sup>2</sup> However, it was not only the imperial powers exploiting the colonies, exploitation was rampant on other levels of the society too. The Lower castes were exploited by the people of the higher castes, Kalua’s (belonging to lower caste) humiliation and plight is a glaring case in point. Women were exploited by men in the name of religious and social custom, Deeti’s designed pregnancy by her brother in law and her subsequent measures to rule out further incidents are also examples of the same. Perhaps it is her plight that makes her and Kalua identify and sympathise with each other that leads to his eventual act of heroism in rescuing Deeti from being burnt at her husband’s pyre in the name of “Sati Pratha.” In the novel where humans are seen working against one another it is once again Nature ( sea) seen as acting as that strong force which united people from diverse backgrounds.

Zachary the crew member who was also supervising the outfitting of the Ibis thought of the lascar company working for the ship:

This was Zachary’s first experience of this species of sailor. He had thought that lascars were a tribe or nation, like the Chrokee or Sioux: *he discovered now that they came from places that were far apart, and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese. They came in groups of ten or fifteen, each with a leader who spoke on their behalf. To break up these groups was impossible; they had to be taken together or not at all, and although they came cheap, they had their own ideas of how much work they would do and how many men would share each job-which seemed to mean that three or four lascars had to be hired for jobs that could well be done by a single able seaman. The Captain declared them to be as lazy as bunch of niggers as he had ever seen, but to Zachary they appeared more ridiculous than anything else. (13-14) (Italics mine)*

In *Witness the Night* Kishwor Desai discusses the plight of women as in the orthodox society of Punjab. In such a society girls are seen as “curse” and boys the mode of carrying on the family lineage, it is also a society where dowry system as a norm is strictly followed, and dowry deaths accepted. It is a society where honor killings are the unwritten law for transgressors and which believes in silencing its girls. Those who refuse to do so are treated as Sharda is, or are seen as “lost cases” as the NGO worker Simran. It was in such a society that Sharda dared to take birth as a girl and refused to die even after numerous attempts were made to do away with her. As a new born she refused to die from opium, refused to drown in a pot of milk, stuck to existence even when buried in

the earth in a pot till finally rescued. It was in such a society that Sharda took the liberty to be intelligent and sensitive and commit the unforgivable crime of falling in love with her tutor-Harpreet Singh, a crime which was never forgiven by her family and determined the miserable course of events in her life. Sharda's younger sister Durga felt that the situation would have been completely different for Sharda had she been a boy, but her crime was to have been born as a girl and then to have fallen in love and that too with a man much lower to her in terms of class and caste. In a society where girls are required to follow the norms set by the elders unquestioningly Sharda was an aberration thus had to be silenced. Durga, the younger sister, writes in her diary, "They tried to do everything they had done to her when she was born. The same Jitu who had saved her life, now wanted to extinguish it. How is it that a girl can, in sixteen years, go through exactly the same experiences twice over. Except that they couldn't put her in a clay pot, she was too big now". (*Witness the Night*, 82) Unlike the NGO activist Simran Singh, Sharda is not only unsupported by her family but becomes a victim at their hands forced to lose all holds on sanity, reduced to a vegetative state of existence, confined to a prison, treated ruthlessly, her baby taken away from her. The resultant state of mental ruin is so complete that it difficult for her to come back to any semblance of normalcy. Desai writes:

.....even in the twenty first century, mental health hospitals in India were still largely a dumping ground for the 'inconvenient'....Many women were locked up simply because they were not wanted by their families, and minor incidents were blown into catastrophic

events. A large proportion of women in these hospitals was well into their middle age and often had husbands or families who found them difficult to live with- too aggressive or argumentative. Sometimes there were issues of inheritance, or the husband wanted to get re-married. It was certainly a cheaper option than a divorce. (*Witness the Night*, 103)

Women in some parts of the Indian society are not seen as individuals but commodities, "Paraya Dhan", ironically "wealth", that which does not belong to oneself but is others. The creation of the social as appropriation/ inscription occurs through marketing as the creation of debt. The pointer here is toward attitudinal dispositions leading to exploitation of one gender over the other, the attitude to silence and to dominate, to marginalize and to negate the rightful existence of freedom and choices.

In the light of the above readings I would like to conclude with the idea that if the attitude of exploitation and subjugation present in the human psyche is allowed to grow it will lead to a tales of subjugation and exploitation at all fronts, at all levels, from human to the non-human hence today the task of criticism is to go beyond this narrow way of thinking and develop an attitude of empathy and sensitivity towards one and all, which shall be the beginning of ecological consciousness.

**Notes:**

1. See *PMLA* Vol.114, Oct.1999. (1096)
2. The Raja of Rasakhali as mentioned in the novel is Neel Haldar who is stripped of his riches and title and is reduced to a poor prisoner on the charge of not making his debt good as owed to Mr. Burnham of the East India Company.

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4. *PMLA*, Vol.114, Oct. 1999.