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# **Research Chronicler**

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**Editor-In-Chief**

**Prof. K. N. Shelke**

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**A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed  
Multidisciplinary International Research Journal**

**Volume IV Issue I: January – 2016**

Editor-In-Chief

**Prof. K.N. Shelke**

Head, Department of English,  
Barns College of Arts, Science and Commerce, New Panvel, India

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**Prof. K.N. Shelke**

Flat No. 01,  
Nirman Sagar Coop. Housing Society,  
Thana Naka, Panvel, Navi Mumbai. (MS), India. 410206. [knshelke@yahoo.in](mailto:knshelke@yahoo.in)

Cell: +91-7588058508

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## Of Man and Nature in 'The Hungry Tide' Ecocritical Perspectives on Amitav Ghosh's Novel 'The Hungry Tide'

Dr. Hemangi Bhagwat

*Associate professor, K J Somaiya College of Science and Commerce, Vidyavihar, Mumbai & Research Guide in English, University of Mumbai, M. S. (India)*

Sugandha Indulkar

*Research Student, Department of English, University of Mumbai (M.S.) India*

### Abstract

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh is an exemplary piece of writing, especially as it presents a realistic depiction of nature, its adversities, wonders and more; woven intricately into a plot which uses Nature as its basis for development. The uniqueness of Nature forms the fundamental premise for the novel to progress and deeply affects the life of all characters and their mutual relations. Nature situated in the world's most intriguing location -- the Sundarbans, rich with diverse ecosystems, flora, fauna and distinctive aquatic life along with its extraordinary geographical features forms the hotbed for the plot to expand and shape lives of characters in the novel. The author's research-based writing makes an insightful read and offers learning and thrill to every avid reader. The Indian peninsula and importantly its eastern coast are blessed with unique natural formations. 'Between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands. Some are vast and some no larger than sandbars, some have lasted through recorded history while others have just washed into being. These are the Sundarbans. Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. Here, for hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed braved the man-eating tigers and the crocodiles who rule there, to eke a precarious existence from the mud. The settlers of Sundarbans believe that anyone without a pure heart who ventures into the watery labyrinth will never return.'<sup>1</sup>

This extract of The Hungry Tide aptly describes the magnitude of influence Nature has had on the novel and how its unique features have woven themselves intricately into the fabric of the plot, its characterization and narrative structure. Thus, it offers an excellent scope for ecocriticism and allows the researcher to explore how the man versus Nature tug-of-war pulls through.

**Key Words** : Ecocriticism, backwaters, floods, badh, Bon Bibi, dolphins, bagh, Dokhini, fishermen, tiger conservation, refugees, human-animal conflict, ecotourism

### Introduction

'No writer in modern India has held a novelistic lamp to the subcontinent's densely thicketed past as vividly and acutely as Amitav Ghosh. Since the

publication of "The Circle of Reason," in the mid-1980s, Ghosh's work has been animated by its inventive collages and connections' writes Chandrasah Choudhury, book reviewer in the New York Times, October 9, 2011 about Ghosh.

Amitav Ghosh, the 'author extraordinaire' of bestsellers like 'The Shadow Lines', 'The Glass Palace', 'The Hungry Tide' and 'Sea Of Poppies' is a noted novelist, an essayist and a nonfiction writer, his standing in the realm of literature is creditable. Recipient of prestigious awards like the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Padma Shri and the Prix Medicis Etranger for excellence in writing, the author's feat in both fiction and nonfiction literature is laudable. His quintessential style of weaving a riveting narrative with a bit of pedagogy lends his writings their unmistakable appeal. Although a Ph.D. in anthropology, his love for history is evident from his writings. Apart from authoring a slew of books, he has been actively involved in writing columns for magazines and has even taught in universities of Delhi, Columbia, Queens College and Harvard. He was conferred an honorary doctorate by Queens College, New York, and the Sorbonne, Paris.

His father's army background and the family's postings across the country seem to have fed young Amitav's imagination and formed patterns of imagery which recur in his novels along with those which a matured Amitav's doctorate in Anthropology must have gathered. Thereby, giving readers a nuanced reading experience, which is at once innocent and mature. All of these elements are richly reflected in his writing and more so in *The Hungry Tide*, a novel, which got him, the Hutch Crossword Prize in addition to other awards and accolades. He also received Dan David Prize for his innovative interdisciplinary research across traditional bounds and prototypes.

The author's erudition, imagination and a thorough research of Nature, science and

anthropology make an excellent basis for the development of *The Hungry Tide*, a name which aptly puns on 'hunger' (which also stands for poverty) which remains a major element that fuels much passion and action across the eastern coast of India, and also determines the choices that people make, both in reality and in this novel. These choices, later adorn the plot with qualitative features of conflict, success, failure, sorrow, faith, social work, love and separation. The author highlights all of these aspects in a tale, which is fascinating, intriguing and educative, all at once.

### **An Overview of the Hungry Tide:**

: The novel is set in the Sundarbans where the environment is known to determine the fate of man; at least it does so in the novel. Despite being a work of fiction, the novel is extraordinarily realistic because of the author's in-depth research, which creates a world, where simple villagers and their beliefs and jungle lore assume iconic proportions in contrast to the lives of urbanites Kanai Dutt and Indian-American naturalist (cetologist) Piyali (Piya) Roy the two lead characters. In the tide country, their lives meet on an even footing, where everything else is uneven and ever-changing. The compelling irony is wrought by a precise description of the tide country. It's constantly transforming landscape and tales of tigers, pose a constant danger to life so much so that women in the village actually don a widow's garb to ward off death. Each evening as their husbands return home, these women again wear their customary vermilion and bangles like a newly wedded wife. It is as if the environment bears an uncanny resemblance to their lives, which are determined by the tide.

The tide's insatiable hunger can swallow their very existence. All of these elements and the detailing with which the researcher-turned-author Amitav Ghosh in the novel paints a neat verbal portrait of the lives of these simple village folk, their beliefs, superstitions is juxtaposed with an impressive political ideology, which is communist and interestingly not democratic as is made to believe.

In the words of essayist and reviewer W R Greer:

'The Hungry Tide' is a novel full of ideas... In Kanai's and Piya's world, they prefer the structure of science or business where they can view everything as black or white. In the Sundarbans where the tide changes the environment daily, nothing is certain and everything in life is a shade of gray. It's a place where tigers kill hundreds of people a year, but since they're a protected species, killing a tiger that has been preying on a village brings in the government authorities to mete out punishment. In an environment where life is fragile, the essence of any person is broken down to its core. Amitav Ghosh lets the tide country break down the barriers of both society and his characters.

His late uncle Nirmal has left Kanai a package, which pulls him to the tide country, a long forgotten place, which holds memories of his teenage years. Other characters in the book are introduced steadily, there's his aunt Nilima, a leader of the masses. Nilima is an ardent social worker, a doting wife who gives up her home, for the sake of restoring health and mental peace of her husband Nirmal, who is evicted from Calcutta on the pretext of some help that he had rendered a visiting Burmese delegation. He was touted to be a

rebel in the eyes of a colonial Western intelligence agency, which was investigating the Communist insurgency in Burma. The effect of the two-day detainment shattered Nirmal's nerve. He'd lost his courage to face the world, in which he was a law-abiding professor, a perfectionist and idealist who could commit no offence. He was newly married and therefore had lost whatever little standing he had in the eyes of his family and his wife's family and more importantly in his own. The incident proved to be a life-changing one for Nirmal and invariably Nilima, his partner for life. They then shifted base to Hamilton Estate in the tide country, which just like their newly forming life was ever-forming and reforming itself, owing to its unique geography and ecology. This hamlet called Lusibari served as a haven for Nirmal and Nilima, who made it their home. The place has remnants of colonial rule, a rich Scottish visionary Sir Daniel Hamilton had setup a school and a hospital there the reins of which the duo took up and began their work and life here.

Ghosh weaves together two temporal narratives: one unfolding through Nirmal's journals recounting the Morichjhapi episode that happened twenty-eight years earlier, and the second through Piya's expedition, revealing the contemporary situation of the people and the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans. The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights the chief conflict in the novel—the problems and issues of wilderness conservation and its related social costs in areas populated by the socially and economically underprivileged both in the past and the present.



Sir Daniel Hamilton, the Scottish visionary who first transformed Sundarbans, the tide country gave its new inhabitants a place to call their own and a respectable vocation, most of them were refugees and the destitute who had no hope in life, Sir Daniel's new land brought to their hearts a new hope of a future they all set out to carve. The tide country was inhabited and there began man's constant tug of war with nature. All people were treated equal, no caste, religion, region and even gender could divide them. They worked hard for a living, primarily, fishing and trading crabs for a living. They sought life partners, bred families and Hamilton in the true colonizer's spirit set up schools, essential services and more in the tide country.

Change was the only constant here. Kanai and Piya who were slated to be the novelist's urban voices in this rustic setting found themselves speechless in the face of dire circumstances and life and death situations, which abound throughout the novel quite subtly and powerfully. It was rustic wisdom that proved more capable than the entire world's knowledge gathered through formal education and Fokir, Moyna and their likes overshadowed the author's protagonists with their simplicity and uncanny knack to defeat every danger. Instances of man's harmony with nature abound through the novel, as much as his constant struggle against it.

On a romantic note, the novel could also be called a saga of man's bittersweet and tumultuous love affair with nature. In terms of aesthetics, a sense of equality and humaneness are themes that dominate the divisive turns of fate, which surface through the simple twists and turns in the plot. The narrative is charmingly simple.

Its grip is loose yet unyielding, just like the ecology of the place, which seems harmless from a distance, yet is filled with life-threatening dangers lurking around every corner. Crocodiles, poisonous reptiles, tigers, ravaging storms all of which are a constant threat to human existence, yet there's this constant lure to defeat all of these, which keeps bringing more and more people into the tide country, all because of their inability to adjust with the mundane city life.

The politics of the novel is set against that of nature, which is supreme, yet shares a democratic relation with its people. People challenge nature in as much as it challenges them. Deified ideologies offer a shaky anchor to the simpletons who feel Bon Bibi (the goddess of the forest) will protect them in all circumstances. This belief is interestingly pitched against the belief in the demon Dokkhin Rai, which signifies the evil, which lurks in the terrain uninhabited by man. The author is possibly trying to create individual spaces for nature and man with territories for each marked invisibly through the reigns of the two deities, because no man would dare to step in Dokkhin Rai's territory. Amidst all of this, growth in human population owing to natural and migratory sources poses a threat to this territorial divide and refugees flock to the island called Morichjhapi, which they claim to be theirs against the rule of nature and that of the Indian Government. It's a battle of man versus forces of nature as much as it is a war against the people in power and this duality highlights the plight of the proletariat – the refugees who are left at the mercy of both the powers. In addition to this power struggle that man wages

against nature and people in power, there's the rule of technology.

Science plays a pivotal role throughout the plot. Science, whether it is Piya's role as a cetologist or medical science which comes to the rescue of the villagers through the nursing courses that are run in Lusibari under the aegis of the Badabon Trust or the overruling scientific research, a study of the Gangetic dolphins that brings Piya to the tide country, in the first place and fuses her existence with that of the locals and as the plot progresses Fokir's role in assisting her work and placing her work and her life far above his own are remarkable in their own way. It underscores the importance of science and education and respect for the 'educated class' as against illiteracy and ignorance, despite the fact that Fokir is better equipped than all the other characters in the novel when it comes to combating against the harsh forces of nature. The novel has its own layers and grasps of Diaspora, when Piya looks upon Fokir praying to the shrine of Bon Bibi at one point, her ignorance of Indian customs and alienation from practices which once could have been a part of her own culture are indeed interesting to note. Yet the global citizenship that she's taken over in exchange allows her to declare at the end of the novel:

*"You know Nilima," she said at last, 'for me, home is where the Orcaella are: so there's no reason why this couldn't be it.'"*

Here one finds the triumph of man over the brutal forces of nature and death. And how '...hope springs eternal in human breast,' as quoted by Alexander Pope in *An Essay on Man, Epistle I, 1733*.

The novel is an excellent depiction of the plight of a postcolonial nation in the clutches of a new power that of the ruling political party along with all the vices that democracy awards its people and in a place like Sundarbans that of nature, which seems to be in a constant competition with the ruling party as to which can inflict more hardship on the masses. The novel is tragic as much as it is heroic and liberating in its own way. It bridges the class and gender divide quite subtly. It proves to the reader that human being is supreme in his (or her) own right and can find hope in the most trying circumstances.

As researcher Divya Anand in her *Words on water: Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide*, *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 34.1 March 2008: 21-44 submitted to the La Trobe University, Australia notes:

*For both Piya and Kanai the expedition and the storm at the end of the novel that remaps the landscape facilitate a renewed and more specific understanding of the Sundarbans, the place and the people. W. R. Greer suggests that choosing the Sundarbans as his setting allows Ghosh "to create a setting where everyone is on an even footing . . . the hostile environment erases all social strata because everyone is an equal in the struggle to survive in the hostile environment." Situated in the face of the threatening topography of the Sundarbans, social differences between both the urban and rural sets of characters are gradually elided, resulting in an increasing tension between their cultural and social identities. The novel in this*

*sense is suffused with multiple social transitions, between the First World and the Third World, local and global, rural and urban, traditional and modern, and among linguistic, religious, and class barriers, all played out in the context of the unpredictable Nature. Only in the face of a hostile environment are the social barriers broken down and overcome, and Nature serves as the agent to level all social and cultural hierarchies.*

### **Man versus Nature**

The real problem in the novel revolves around the tug-of-war between Man and Nature and how the former is rendered weak and helpless when bigger powers decide to uproot his very existence. Nirmal finds a new haven and purpose in life in Morichjhapi, where he goes after retiring as a school principal. This poet-turned educator has had a tough life, yet during the dusk of his life he finds a renewed spring in his step when he senses revolution. Nirmal has rebellion running like blood in his veins.

*'You have to remember, Kanai, that as a young man Nirmal was in love with the idea of revolution. Men like that, even when they turn their backs on their party and their comrades, can never let go of the idea: it's the secret god that rules their hearts. It is what makes them come alive; they revel in the danger, the exquisite pain.'*(Page 119)

Nilima explains to Kanai quite aptly when she speaks about Nirmal's new-found passion for this refugee haven called Morichjhapi. She is shown to be a mature woman with a nuanced understanding,

backed by immense practical wisdom and energy to carry out her strong will. She runs the Badabon Trust, which provides medical services to the poor fisherfolk in Lusibari. The author explains in the course of the novel the background of this place called Morichjhapi, where the central incident in the novel takes place, turning the fates of all characters who are caught in it.

*'In 1978 it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi. In this place where there were now thousands, almost overnight...But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhapi; it was from a Government resettlement camp in central India... they called it 'resettlement' but it people say it was more like a concentration camp, or a prison.'*(Page 118)

The above extract describes the plight of people who came to this place, which was initially left to rot for years by local people and the Government for lack of their capacity to make it habitable. Despite this, when a few New Age thinkers from the Government thought about making a Tiger Reserve, possibly to raise funds from a global source for conservation of endangered species. Also to raise the brand value of the country, which could now boast of having a Tiger Reserve of its own, and thereby attract tourists and foreign currency. For filling Government coffers they were willing to render thousands of poor, homeless and helpless. It is a clear case of how Man uses Nature to manipulate conditions of his own fellow beings. The acute agony of the condition

of the refugees is felt in the words of Kusum:

‘This island has to be saved for trees, it has to be saved for 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... 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...the whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have... by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil.’ (Page 262)

These words strike a chord in the minds of sensitive readers. Can sensitivity towards animals at the cost of being insensitive to other hapless human beings be justified? The author, however, takes no stand. He cites a problem, which has too many facets and numerous arguments both for and against the problem. It parodies the erudition of city dwellers who cannot see the plight of the rural poor, and claim to ‘feel’ for tigers who prey upon these weak beings. For once, one feels alienated by one’s own kind. The novel in a way mocks at the inhumanness of this whole ‘eco friendly’ stance that men of letters have taken and turned a blind eye to the sufferings of thousands. Once again the eternal battle between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ comes to fore, however, with no concrete solution, because as man ‘develops’ his problems become more and more complex.

#### **Other major themes and their influences**

#### **Cosmopolitanism**

Cosmopolitanism emerges as a major theme in the novel. Kanai Dutt the protagonist is an Indian urbanite. He is a linguist, who has good command over five European languages. In introducing Kanai in the opening chapter of the book Ghosh writes (Page 5):

‘Kanai was the other ‘outsider’ on the platform and he quickly attracted his own share of attention... as a result he was besieged by hawkers, urchins and bands of youths who were raising funds for a varied assortment of causes: it was only when the green-and-yellow electric train finally pulled in that he was able to shake off this importuning entourage.’

Kanai runs a translating bureau in Delhi and yet his heart remains in the Sundarbans where he has spent many vacations as a school boy. The teenaged Kanai has fond memories of this place and is closely attached to his aunt Nilima, a social worker in Lusibari and her husband Nirmal, a school teacher.

‘When he encountered children of his age they seemed either too simple-minded, silent or inexplicably hostile. Knowing that his suspension from school would be over in a few weeks, he felt no particular compulsion to unbend towards these rustics...’ (Page 90)

During one of such visits to Lusibari, he had met this particular village lass named Kusum, yet another interesting and powerful female character in the novel. Her unabashedness had struck him as different from rest of the villagers and they both struck a chord with each other, which lasted long after he grew older and she got married. Though, there is no direct allusion to any romantic involvement between the

two. There were stories about her way with men, including Nirmal, which gave her a bad name. All the same, there are no hints in the novel about her falling in character. In yet another instance, Piya Roy the Indian-American cetologist who has come to Sundarbans as part of her research work seems to be interested in the boatman, a local named Fokir. Despite his lack of literacy and her erudition they strike a chord right from the time she sees him falling prey to local Government officials who extort money from him.

In a small yet interesting incident in the novel, one realizes how the universal quality of music helps Piya and Fokir overcome their differences in upbringing, education and status in life.

‘... He sang a few notes. The melody surprised her for it bore no resemblance to any Indian music she had heard before... she would have liked to know what he was singing about and what the lyrics meant – but she knew too that a river of words would not be able to tell her exactly what made the song sound as it did right then, in that place.’ (Page 99)

### **Environmentalism**

Sundarbans were inscribed as a UNESCO world heritage site in 1997. The whole region is estimated to be about 4,110 square kilometers, of which about 1,700 square kilometers are occupied by water bodies in the forms of rivers, canals and creeks of width varying from a few metres to several kilometers. Part of the islands has been converted into a commercial Tiger Reserve, which is known to attract tourists from world over. All of this information with the historic knowledge that the author had about this

region and his love for this terrain could have made him set the novel in this region.

In a major subplot of the novel, where the action of Morichjhapi is brought out through Nirmal’s diary left for Kanai, the Indian government physically enforced eviction of refugees on this island because it was earmarked as a nature reserve. The fundamental question here is: Can the Indian Government’s act of coercing poor refugees who were trying to eke out a living in Morichjhapi be justified under the pretext of environment conservation? What is more important: lives of thousands of hapless human beings or the wilderness, which is in any case rotting with the onslaught of natural forces? These are crucial issues the novel raises, providing the thinking reader food for thought. In yet another interesting incident where a man-eater tiger is being burnt alive by the local villagers, because it had attacked the villagers is no cause of worry or concern for all male characters in the book. Piya, however, the Nature lover, at heart is stunned by such lack of apathy on the part of Kanai and Fokir, the two men in the novel, whose humanness appeals to her on most other occasions. The incident somehow asserts that environmental concern is the privilege of the educated class, which is well protected from its perils. The poor man is at the mercy of many forces, and environment is of these.

### **Class struggle**

In *The Hungry Tide*, one comes across a constant class struggle, which combines with ideas about conservation of nature, and raises questions about the motives of those who make plans for communities but who refuse to include the masses in the making of these plans. Like so many other

moments in *The Hungry Tide*, an encounter with the landscape and its inhabitants prompts a realization of the complex interactions between class, nationality, gender, and power. In each instance the class distinction is well juxtaposed with that of the turns and twists of climate and ecology, both of which shape the plot.

### **Feminism**

The novel abounds in strong female characters. Piya Roy, the lead female emerges as a stronger character than her counterpart Kanai. She has travelled to many remote locations all by herself for her research work and often in most dangerous and trying circumstances, all of her exploits have taught her to fend for herself, despite being surrounded by illiterate folk. Nilima is yet another strong willed female character in the novel. She is Kanai's aunt and is shown to be more dominating than her husband Nirmal. She is a forthright decision maker. Compared to her, Nirmal is shown to be weak; both physically and mentally. Kusum, the help in Nilima's house also is shown to be quite dominating and bold in nature. She makes most decisions of her life on her own. Interestingly her daughter-in-law Moyna also comes across as a woman of iron will. Moyna pursues her career in nursing, an occupation she looks upon as her passport to a higher class and better life as compared to that of her husband Fokir. He is illiterate and a man of Nature who goes fishing and crab hunting all the time. Moyna feels proud of herself, yet is shown to be a doting wife. Her love for Fokir is strong and laden with possessiveness so much so that despite her low standing in life she has the audacity to suspect whether Piya and Fokir have something more going

on between them, apart from their overt 'professional' relation of a tourist and a guide, respectively.

### **Diaspora**

Alongside all the action, of the present and past, one is also introduced to Piya Roy, a cetologist whose research on Gangetic dolphins brings her to Sundarbans and there she meets Kanai. Interestingly Piya is attracted to Fokir, an illiterate and father of a five-year-old boy. Fokir saves her life on every occasion. Quite unconventionally, the relation between the two is humane in nature and not romantic. In fact, she met Fokir first when he jumped after her into the waters filled with poisonous creatures and muck, when she fell off the boat she had hired and was being run by a local police official. Here, Piya is introduced to the viciousness that officialdom gives people in power and how they use it to exploit the rural poor. The incident also highlights how Piya, despite having her roots in this country is now treated as an 'outsider.' Despite her feelings of alienation, she feels deeply connected to Nature and the plight of the poor people caught up between a dual turmoil of Nature and human power play.

Despite shades of diaspora being reflected in Piya's character and its relation to other characters, the novel doesn't dwell upon it for long. The young scientist is on her own, in a land, which now seems totally foreign to her despite the fact that she was born there. Her upbringing in the USA accounts for her lack of knowledge of social customs, religious practices and beliefs of India and more so of the Sundarbans, where she finds herself at home, because in her words: 'for me, home is where the Orcaella are...'

Orcaella, meaning Gangetic dolphins are subjects of her research.

### Post Colonial influences

Throughout the novel the characters of the villagers and refugees are shown to display colonial influences, despite Indian independence, these poor villagers have not been liberated of their poverty and dire conditions. Now, their rulers in addition to the elected representatives of free India are forces of Nature and wild animals. They are also ruled by their own narrow-minded beliefs, superstitions and constraints, which have made their living extremely precarious.

This small paragraph from the novel illustrates the truth of the above statements:

‘I saw them coming, young and old, quick and halt, with their lives bundled on their heads, and knew it was of them the Poet had spoken when he said:

‘Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited ones to whom neither the past nor the future belongs.’

This was an excerpt from Nirmal’s notes of the Morichjhapi incident, where the Indian Government evicted thousands of refugees because it wanted the space for making a Tiger Reserve. It was man versus

Nature, and the latter proved to be powerful and invariably Government, the other power too sided by it. And the inhabitants of the place, the refugees who had made their way to this treacherous land were rendered hapless and homeless. They were slaves of their own circumstances and no one on their side to battle it out.

### Conclusion

*The Hungry Tide* is a nuanced depiction of the human predicament, which is often at the mercy of superior forces, the forces Amitav Ghosh highlights in this novel are dual: the people in power (the Government) and Nature. When they meet, the proletariat is bound to be crushed. And that is precisely what happens in the novel. In each instance the author interestingly weaves his plot with various elements of Nature used symbolically to determine the fate of all major characters in the novel. Each time the common man despite his education formal or otherwise is shown to be at the mercy of both these powers. The novel is a fine mesh of human sentiments mirrored repeatedly through elements in Nature. Each time the reader along with the progression of the plot gains newer insights and is prodded to think about his perennial battle with forces of Nature.

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**Editor-In-Chief**

**Prof. K. N. Shelke**

**Dhanashree Publications**

Flat No. 01, Nirman Sagar Coop. Housing Society, Thana Naka,  
Panvel. PIN - 410206. Cell: 07588058508