Fiction for Sustainability: An Ecocritical Assessment of Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide"

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Abstract

Ecofiction can be seen as an umbrella for many genres like contemporary, speculative, literary, and much more. According to John Yunker "Ecofiction is fiction with a conscience." It has an inclination towards the natural world in relation to various story-telling platforms: mystery, thriller, suspense, dystopian, crime, detective and romance. Ecofiction is touched upon by many authors all over the world. It is written with a desire to protect the natural ecological systems that encompasses all borders, languages and ethnicities. This paper attempts to analyze Amitav Ghosh's award winning novel, "The Hungry Tide," from an eco-critical perspective. This novel weaves the cross-purpose love interests of its characters: Kannai, Piya, Fokir and Moyna; with the region's volatile political climate, environmental issues, history and mythology. In midst of this constantly changing territory of Sundarbans, the residents live under the dual threat of man-eating tigers and devastating storms; where everything is uncertain. Being true to its evolutionary nature, Ecofiction thus, encapsulates the most consistent of our environmental crisis: climate change.

Key Words: Ecofiction, environment, climate change

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Ecocriticism analyzes literary texts with respect to various environmental concerns along with; the different ways in which literature treats the subject of nature. The primary concern of ecocriticism in literature is to find probable solutions for the contemporary environmental situation. Ecocriticism is a relatively broad approach which is referred by many other names like "green studies", "ecopoetics", "environmental literary criticism" and

many more. The salient feature of environmental literature is that nature is not merely a setting or backdrop for human action, but an actual factor in the plot, that is, a character and sometimes even a protagonist. This is particularly obvious in nature and wilderness writing, which originate in the narrator's transformative encounters with a landscape and its inhabitants. (282, qtd. in Tallmadge) In "The Ecocriticism Reader," Cheryll Glotfelty defines "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment"[2] Lawrence Buell, who is considered as the pioneer of ecocriticism, defines 'ecocriticism' as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.' Overall, eco-criticism brings an earth centered approach to literary studies. As rightly said by Gerard Manley Hopkins: "What would the world be, once bereft of wet and of wildness? Let them be left, O let them be left, wildness and wet; Long live the weeds and the wildness yet." (33, Inversnaid, Poems 1918) Nature writing has dwelled in the literary sphere for many years. It is found in classics like James Thomson's "The Seasons," Henry David Thoreau's "Walden", and Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring." Thus, eco-critics encourage others to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications.

At present, very few people are aware about climate science and sustainability. Environmental problems are still overshadowed by mankind. Thus, the challenge is to embed these sustainability themes in the minds of the audience; that they work their way into the subconscious of the reader. One such attempt is made by the Australian novelist Guy Lane with an aim to help understand sustainability. Because it is to be believed that, fiction novels are not mere text-books, but the themes need to be indulged subtly, in the minds of the readers. In his story of "Yongala", this writer has strived to portray the theme of climate science. The book considers that scientists have understood the basics of global warming since the turn of the 20th century. Lane's writing process embeds this theme into a context. In the case of *Yongala*, the context describes a fateful voyage of the steamship 'Yongala'. On March 20, 1911, Yongala departed Brisbane, Queensland, heading for Townsville. However, she didn't make it, sinking in a tropical cyclone on the night of 23 March with the loss of all 120 people aboard. A coal burning ship suffering an extreme weather event is deemed to be an appropriate context for a story about climate science. Yongala is a narrative through which the writer, attempts to create a story that finds its way into the consciousness of an audience who may have never considered climate change. In this way, he seeks to plant a seed, a simple idea that it's okay to talk about global warming, because people have been doing just that for a very long time.

Amitav Ghosh, perhaps called as the master of the travel narrative, very vividly describes a landscape, a city, a village on the edge of a desert: it is these images that we summon from his novels when we are distanced from them in memory. Travel writing, is thus, a form whose contours are shaped by places and their histories. His most recent book, "The Hungry Tide",

describes his insights into colonial past, is set in the Sundarbans, the vast, intermittently submerged archipelago. It is largely covered by mangrove forests that form the delta of the Ganges as it debouches into the Bay of Bengal. Every day thousands of mangrove forests merge and re-emerge as the tides engulf several islands. The powerful currents of tides reach as far as 300 kms inland, which results in the disappearance of thousands of acres of forests, "a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable" (74, The Hungry Tide). This land discovered is often referred as 'bhatir desh', as Ghosh calls it, in a remarkable and poetic application of the term used in Mughal land-records. It is a matter of pity that the tidal surroundings bring not only numberless hazards and risks to the lives of inhabitants there but a constant fear and paranoia, "Think of what it was like: think of the tigers, crocodiles and snakes that lived in the creeks and nalas that covered the islands. This was a feast for them. They killed hundreds of people" (44, The Hungry Tide).

Here, comes a young cetologist from the United States. She is on an expedition of a breed of freshwater dolphin, the Orcaella brevirostris, and a middle-aged linguist who runs a translation bureau in Delhi. The two are thrown together by chance, and for a time the male translator, Kanai Dutt, accompanies the female scientist, Piya Roy, as an unofficial interpreter. But the novel is not really about their developing acquaintance. Much more centrally and in a far more extended way, it is about the many histories of the region they have come to. Piya's struggles to find the rare species of dolphins, whose population used to be abundant in the past, is one of the many examples of humans' negative impact on nature. The decline of fish population, shallowing of rivers, terrible cyclones; as mentioned in the story, depicts the people's negligence on the climate. Ghosh's mention of these episodes of disasters and depletion of the species of dolphins for sake of oil and diesel fuel to be used in boats and motorcycles parallels with Kit Wright's "Song of the Whale" which shows how whales are killed for manufacture of lipstick and shoe polish,

"Great whale crying for your life

Crying for your kind I know

How we would use your dying

Lipstick for our painted faces

Polish for our shoes." (48, qtd. in Sumathy)

Ghosh interlaces together two narratives: one unfolding through Nirmal's journal narrating the Morichjhapi episode and the second through Piya's expedition, revealing the contemporary situation of the humans, the flora and fauna of Sundarbans. Ghosh published the novel in 2004 when the corporate house, Sahara India Parivar was adamant to take over large areas of Sundarban to convert it into an ecotourism area. There were no comprehensive environmental impact assessments and local consultations taken into consideration prior to the sanctioning of the takeover. Ghosh skilfully brings in a postcolonial political conflict between demands of wildlife conservation and needs of inhabitants. He claims that the environmental crisis is a result of particular social relations, of the hierarchical structures of society. Ghosh acts as a social ecologist as he advocates the understanding of the role of hierarchy

and domination as the root cause of ecological crisis.

The novel explores the plight of displaced people, their struggle for settlement and survival in an endangered ecosystem. These poor settlers undergo environmental injustice, undue pain and discrimination which elicit an outburst from Kusum, a poor settler: . . . the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. "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. (261, The Hungry Tide)

References:

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