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Impact of Environmental Crisis on Wild Life and Human Relationship in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

Acclaimed as “the best work in English fiction”, *Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide* (2004), winner of Hutch Crossword Book Award of 2004, is a stunning work of fiction that exhaustively deals with the ecological and environmental conditions immensely affecting the local rhythms of life in Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands spread between the sea and plains of Bengal on the easternmost coast of India. Here there are no borderlines to separate fresh water from salt, river from sea and land from water. Survival is an everyday battle for the settlers of the Sundarbans who have learned to strike a balance with nature. The novel extensively deals with the ecology of the tide country that includes a couple of small villages such as Lusibari, Gajrontola, Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhapi and Emilybari. In this isolated world the lives of three people from different backgrounds collide. Piyali Roy, an American biologist of Indian origin, engaged in research on a rare endangered dolphin which is rumored to be alive in the rivers of the tide country, engages the fisherman, Fokir, to help her in her research and finds a translator in Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi. As the trio launches into the sea water for the purpose of finding out dolphin, they are drawn unawares into the hidden under-currents of this isolated world inhabited by thousands of Bengali refugees whose eviction by the government of Bengal from the Sunderbans constitutes the focal point of the story of the novel which explores the topics like humanism and environmentalism, especially when they come into a conflict of interest with each other. This paper aims to highlight these topics with a particular emphasis on the scenes of jungles and forests, flora and fauna, crabs and dolphins, tigers and crocodiles, rivers and streams, and government's growing interference in wildlife portrayed in the novel.

Keywords: Amitav Ghos, Sundarbans,tide country,Relationship

Kanai and Piya come close to the ecology of the tide country through Neelima who has been running a hospital in Lusibari since her husband's death. Neelima's husband, Nirmal Bose, was a school headmaster in Calcutta. On being diagnosed with a terminal disease, Nirmal is advised to settle in the Sunderbans to avail of the benefit of pollution free environment. Following the doctor's advice, Nirmal and Neelima leave Calcutta and settle in Lusibari, a tightly packed settlement of palm thatched huts and bamboo walled stalls and shacks. Lusibari was developed as a model village by Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scotsman who left his native land to seek his fortune in India. From Scotland Hamilton directly came to Calcutta and joined a shipping company. As a result of his hard labour, shortly after joining the company Hamilton became the head of the company and master of an immense fortune, one of the richest men in India. Having immense wealth at his command, Hamilton purchased

ten thousand acres of land in the tide country from the British government. Having no regard to the ecology of the tide country Hamilton used this land as a means to augment his wealth and ensure a better future for his coming generation. He named this area as Lusibari after his niece, Lucy. Introducing Kanai to the history of Lusibari Nirmal says:

Remember, at the time there was nothing but forest here. There were no people, no embankments, no fields. Just mud and mangrove. At high tide most of the land vanished under water and everywhere you looked there were tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards*.

For the purpose of converting eco-sensitive area of Lusibari into a lucrative business place, Hamilton ordered killing of the wild animals. Expressing his anguish at Hamilton's insensitivity to the wildlife, Nirmal says to Kanai:

Think of what it was like: think of tigers, crocodiles and snakes that lived in the creeks and nalas that covered the island. This was a feast for them. They killed hundreds of people. So many were killed that Hamilton began to give out rewards to any who killed a tiger or a crocodile. (p.55)

Morichjhapi is a eco-sensitive island, a couple of hours from Lusibari by boat. It falls within a part of the Sunderbans reserved for tiger conservation but unlike many island it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland. In 1978 it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi, cleared the plants and trees, built dams and put up huts. It happened so quickly that in the beginning none even knew who these people were but in time it came to be learnt that they were refugees from the government settlement camp in Dandakaranya, deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of kilometers from Bengal. Here they found that "the soil was rocky and environment was nothing like they had ever known". (p125) A few months after their settlement in this eco-sensitive area, the government authorities declared Morichjhapi a protected forest reserve and made an announcement that the settlers would have to leave the island at the earliest. As the settlers were adamant on staying in the island whatever be the consequences, there had been a series of confrontations between the settlers and the government forces. The government authorities spread the message in the area that they would do all that was possible to evict the settlers: anyone suspected of helping them was sure to get into trouble. As the settlers were well organized, the police did not succeed in evicting them from the island. With no option left, the policemen employed the gangsters to drive the settlers out and announced that all movements in and out of Morichjhapi was banned under the provisions of The Forest Preservation Act and Section 144 was imposed on the whole area. Hundreds of policemen barricaded the settlements, stopped the supply of food items as a result of which the settlers were reduced to eating grass causing damage to the ecology of the area. As the tube wells were also destroyed and as a result thereof there was no drinking water, the settlers drank from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of Cholera had broken out. Disclosing their motive behind perpetrating atrocities against the settlers the policemen announced:

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. (p.284)

Fokir's mother, Kusum, bears the brunt of policemen's brutality. She feels untold agony at the announcements after announcements made by the policemen. Giving vent to her pain, she says to Nirmal:

The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making announcement, hearing them say that our lives, our existence was worth less than dirt or dust. Every day, sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to the 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? As I thought of these things, it seemed to me that this 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 here, from the water and the soil. No human being 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.(p.284)

Piya is a leading character in the novel. Her excessive interest in mammals drives her to undertake a project aimed at surveying the marine mammals of the Sunderbans. As a part of her project, she visits the Sunderbans as she has heard that the rare endangered dolphins are found in the rivers of the Sunderbans. She is well equipped to face the challenges that are likely to confront her during survey. She is having data sheets and all equipments necessary for research on dolphins. The very first challenge that she faces is with regard to language. As the boatman, Fokir, whose services are indispensable to her, does not understand her language, she cannot communicate to him nor can he guide her as efficiently as he could have if she had understood his language. To address the linguistic hurdle, Piya requests Kanai Dutt to act as a link between her and Fokir so that she may pursue her project to its completion. Kanai agrees to serve as her translator and does his best to satisfy her questions with regard to the ecology of the Sunderbans on the basis of the information provided by Fokir in Bengali. During one night, in the moonlight, while sitting in the boat, Piya realizes her dream of seeing the dolphins from a distance.

A few minutes of close attention was all it took to know that there were several dolphins in the vicinity of the boat. The sounds were scattered in the direction and seemed to change location frequently: some were faint and far away while others were close at hand. She had spent great lengths of time listening to these muffled grunts and she knew exactly what they were: only the Irrawaddy dolphin, *Orcaella brevirostris*, produced this particular kind of sound (p.119).

The chief objective of her project work is to study the physical appearance of dolphin and its patterns of behavior. After spotting the dolphins in the river, she felt satisfaction to think that the major objective of her journey to the Sunderbans has been served. She is extremely happy as "something very interesting was going on here-something that might be very important to the understanding of the dolphin and its pattern of behavior" (p.121).

Piya is obsessed with dolphins. To her home is there where the dolphins are. A few years back, she studied a book that showed that there were more species of fish in the Sunderbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe. Seeing her excessive interest in dolphins, Fokir takes her to the pools where the dolphins can be easily spotted. Purposefully, he carries his boat to Ganrantola pool which is also known as dolphins' tidal pool. Here she got a chance to see dolphins and confirm the fact that when the water level falls, the dolphins appear and when it rises, they disappear. It also became clear to her that the dolphins gather in the pool to wait out the ebb tide until the water rose again.

Fokir' chief concern is to catch crabs and put them in a pot full of water. One day, Piya happens to see fifteen crabs inside the pot. She feels elated on seeing them tumbling out in a chain with an outburst of clicking and clattering. The activities of the crabs bombard her mind with a volley of questions with regard to their role in eco-system. Unfolding the questions of her mind she says:

Didn't they represent some fantastically large proportion of the system's biomass? Didn't they outweigh even the trees and the leaves? Hadn't someone said that the intertidal forests should be named after crabs rather than mangroves since it was they- certainly not the crocodile or the tiger or the dolphin-who were the keystone species of the entire eco-system? (p.150)

The settlers of the Sunderbans have affinity with the tigers, crocodiles and fishes and vice-versa. Piya, during her survey, came across a number of occasions when she witnessed this affinity. On one such occasion she expressed her astonishment:

Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals. (p.179)

Thus, the novel is devoted to the treatment of ecology of the Sunderbans. The novelist is very sensitive to the problems and challenges that confront those who depend on nature for their existence. He has specially highlighted the exploitation of the settlers of Morichjhapi by policemen to bring to light what is happening in the eco-sensitive areas in the name of development and preservation of wildlife.

Work Cited:

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