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Mapping Home in an Endangered Landscape: Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* presents the dichotomy of wildlife versus human suffering and the destruction of the ecosystem versus human survival. Set in the Sunderbans, a place where nature's beauty is harsh and vengeful, the struggle for human existence is an intense task, the novel explores the plight of displaced people, the struggle for land and the constant fight for survival in a dangerous and fragile ecosystem which humans share with animals (tigers, dolphins). As various environmental groups zealously strive to protect the tiger habitats, human lives are threatened. Nirmal, Kusum, Horen and Piyali, Fokir, Kanai are drawn into the hidden undercurrents of this isolated world through various events and they all find 'home' in the tide country where the land itself is inconstant.

Piyali's research on the endangered Irawaddy Dolphins brings her home to a place she would always like to live in. Strange encounters and his uncle's letters translate Kanai's world into one with deeper responsibilities as he translates the epic narrative of Bon Bibi. The political turmoil and the plight of the displaced people, highlighted in the Morichjhapi incident show the forgotten struggle of man to lay claim on a portion of the earth as their home.

As environmental issues continue to gain larger spaces, they require analysis not only in scientific terms but also as cultural figurations. This paper is an attempt to study how humans live in awe and wonder at the dark and destructive potential of nature and are yet able to map a home where human lives are threatened and are valued less than that of animals and their surroundings. The sense of connection between people that transcends class, cultures, language and gender explored in the novel shows the triumph of the human spirit to survive in a world where their lives are as much endangered as their environment.

Keywords: environmental ethics, fragile ecosystem, human existence

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....who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them...this

whole world has become a place for animals, and our fault, our crime was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human being could think this crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived- by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (*The Hungry Tide*, 261-261)

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* presents the dichotomy of wild life versus human suffering and the destruction of the ecosystem versus human survival. Set in the Sundarbans, a place where nature is harsh and vengeful making the struggle for human existence an intense task, the novel explores the plight of displaced people in their struggle for land and the constant fight for survival in a dangerous and fragile ecosystem which humans share with animals. Environmental groups zealously strive to protect the tiger habitats and as environmental issues continue to gain larger spaces, human lives are threatened and valued lesser than that of animals and their surroundings. The hidden undercurrents of this isolated world however do not prevent man from mapping home in the tide country where the land itself is inconstant and their lives are as much endangered as their environment.

The tide country has been home to both man and animals with marked boundaries, yet environmentalists under international pressure view man as the illegal settler. The space of struggle between species conservation and the dispossession of man result in conflicts pitting man against nature, raising moral questions of environmental ethics, human interactions with nature, relations between animals and humans and the consideration of animal rights. *The Hungry Tide* explores what the Sundarbans mean to those who inhabit this fragile ecosystem after having fought and survived to lay claim to a portion of the earth as their home; the legends of the archipelago which create an ecological balance and individual struggles to find their place.

The Hungry Tide is set in the immense labyrinth of tiny islands known as the Sundarbans. Here life is extremely precarious, attacks by tigers common and unrest and eviction are constant threats. Without warning, tidal floods rise and surge over the land, leaving devastation in their wake. The vengeful beauty of the Sundarbans is described in an explicative passage:

There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as "the Sundarban", which means the, "the beautiful forest." There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove- the *sundari* tree, *Heriteria minor*. But the word's origin is no easier to account for than is its present prevalence, for in the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide-*bhati*. And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as *bhatir desh*- the

tide country-except that bhati is not just the “tide” but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the *bhata*. This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in *falling* that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwived by the moon, is to know why the name “tide country” is not just right but necessary. (*The Hungry Tide*:8)

The sublime presentation of the tide country belies the threatening proximity of the wilderness as well as the wildlife and man’s marginalized space. Here one is reminded of H.D Thoreau’s *Maine Woods* where he writes:

It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast, and drear, and inhuman... Nature here was something savage and awful, though beautiful. (*Maine Woods*:71)

The Sundarbans have been declared a Tiger Reserve in 1973; National Park in 1984; World Heritage Site in 1985 and a Biosphere reserve in 1989. With so much space for wild life and nature, where does it leave room for man. In a place where the land itself is inconstant- subject to late summer storms when whole islands are washed away by the cyclones that sweep in with huge tidal surges routinely killing human beings and animals – man finds himself in confrontation with the politics of eviction, the dangerous ecosystem and environmental groups. The novel shows that man’s dwelling here is not transient but has a long association with the landscape through memory, death, ritual, life and work.

Amitav Ghosh’s anthropologist’s fascination for local mythologies, combined with the legend of Bon Bibi and the legacy of Sir Hamilton subvert the efforts of environmental groups to maintain this tiger habitat, denying man’s right to this land in the name of tiger preservation. He begins with the Hindu legend of goddess Ganga’s descent from the heavens, whose torrential flow was tamed by Lord Shiva’s matted ash-smearred locks. At one time Lord Shiva’s matted hair is washed apart and the river throws off its bindings and separates into thousand tangled strands, with each strand forming an island. The islands “...are the rivers’ restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift.”(*The Hungry Tide*:7) The currents are so powerful that they reshape the islands. This beautiful land is not kind to man as:

When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and

leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (*The Hungry Tide*:7-8)

In this hazardous terrain, the inhabitants have an epic narrative of origins that they pass on orally – the legend of Bon Bibi, which narrate the co-existence of man and animals with marked boundaries for both, where the crossings into each other's territories changes and shifts nature's equation. The story begins in Medina where Ibrahim, a pious Muslim is blessed with the birth of twins – Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli who have been chosen for a divine mission – to make the 'country of eighteen tides' fit for human habitation.

The jungles of 'the country of eighteen tides' were then the realm of Dokkhin Rai, a powerful demon king, who held sway over every being that lived in the forest – every animal as well as every ghoul, ghost and malevolent spirit. Towards mankind he harboured a hatred coupled with insatiable desires – for the pleasures afforded by human flesh he had a craving that knew no limit.

One day Dokkhin Rai heard strange new voices in the jungle calling out the *azan*, the Muslim call to prayer; this was his notice that Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli had come into his realm. Rousing his hordes the incensed demon 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 a 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 this once-forested domain was soon made safe for human settlement. Thus order was brought to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. (*The Hungry Tide*:13)

The novel also mentions Sir Daniel Scotsman, a visionary who founded a utopian settlement where people of all races, classes and religions could live together.

All was well until the state intruded to upset the order. The Morichjhapi incident of 1979 fictionalised in the novel, shows how the government in its determination to evict settlers, led to a series of confrontations between the settlers and government forces, leaving many dead. The confrontations were with the refugees from Bangladesh who fled from a government resettlement camp in Dandakaranya to Morichjhapi, a protected forest reserve. The place had no inhabitants and almost overnight, mangroves were cleared, *badhs* were built to put up huts. The story of Nirmal, Horen and Kusum in the novel

explores the plight of the displaced people who are denied to claim a portion of the earth as their home. From being oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and uppercaste Hindus in Bangladesh; to living in an unfriendly environment at Dandakaranya; and finally their escape to Morichjhapi, it had been a journey which never led them to a home.

Years later, the story moves to two people, Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy who do not belong to this land but are drawn to it as if by its undercurrents which not only changes their lives but also their concept of home. Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi, arrives at Lucibari, a fictional island in the Sundarbans on being summoned by his aunt Nilima because of a package left for him by his uncle Nirmal, found twenty years after his death. The package left behind for him contains accounts of the events at the end of Nirmal's life, which revolved around Kusum and the catastrophic struggle of the disposed to form a new society on the island of Morichjhapi. Kanai, educated as translator and owner of a successful business, is proud and arrogant and uses his status to get his own way. He sets foot on a land where everyone is on an even footing, being at the mercy of nature. The hostile environment erases all societal divisions because everyone is an equal in the struggle to survive. Here Kanai's wealth does not have any value.

Kanai meets Piyali Roy, a young marine biologist of Indian descent, who is in search of the endangered Irawaddy dolphin, *Orcaella brevirostris*. She seeks the help of Fokir, an illiterate fisherman to take her into the backwaters. Though they have no language between them, they share an uncanny instinct for the ways of the sea. She needs Fokir's local knowledge of the river and wildlife to do her research and Kanai's translation skills. Fokir, the truest soul in the novel possesses more knowledge of the land and sea and the rhythms of his environment than any of the outsiders who do not understand him. His journey into the heart of the tide country with Piyali shows the sense of connection between people that transcends class, cultures and language and also brings in lasting changes. The ravaging storm exacts a personal toll. Fokir does not survive the storm, but not before saving Piyali's life, and in the last fading moments she tries to "...find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved – and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words."(*The Hungry Tide*:393) When the storm subsides, she manages to reach land with the help of her GPS.

Lives are changed for ever. The epilogue of the novel titled 'Home' finds Kanai promising to return back to translate his uncle's words for the world to remember a forgotten story of man to find home in the midst of direct confrontations with forces and an equally hostile environment. Piyali, with the help of her animal loving friends raises money to help Fokir's family. She decides to remain in the Sundarbans to retrieve her data on dolphin sightings, helped by the interest and funding from environment conservation groups. And for her "... home is where the Orcaella are: so there's no reason why this couldn't be it."(*The Hungry Tide*:400)

As Piyali and Kanai find their purpose and meaning to set home in the island, there are two women in the novel who have always considered it home – Moyna and Nilima. Fokir’s wife Moyna strives each day to train herself as a nurse and earn so that she and her son can live here, even knowing that the land and water can claim lives as that of Fokir and his mother Kusum. Nilima had come here with her husband Nirmal, armed with revolutionary ideas. She founded a co-operative which brought help, medicine and a hospital to Lucibari, gaining respect and gratitude from the locals. And so for her home is wherever she can “brew a pot of good tea.” (*The Hungry Tide*:400)

Mapping home in this endangered landscape has not been easy, but this is how man has always lived in awe and wonder of nature, have felt the immensity of its presence, have been overwhelmed by its beauty, have sometimes tried to claim an upper hand over it and failed, and have finally returned to his home, not away from nature but to its midst. *The Hungry Tide* reflects the commitment of a writer who not only writes about a fascinating region of the world with all its beauty, but also highlights the ravages of nature and man’s dwindling numbers. Through stories that people tell, and their struggles to survive in the islands, the novel does not fail to reflect the triumph of the human spirit. This historically and politically engaged work of fiction brings into force the power of the written word to make the world aware of an isolated region where man require as much attention as that of the protection of wildlife habitats.

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