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## Reflecting Human Reality and Environmental Concerns through Literature

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### **Abstract:**

Literature has always been a medium of reflecting the human reality and Nature has been a key element of human existence. Western colonial expansions have not only afflicted irreversible damage to the people and their cultures but have harmed the environment as well in the dual process of exploitation of man and nature. Colonial process and imperialism led to commodification of environment and its resources and eventually today the decolonized individual is unable to re-establish that lost connect with his environment.

Set against the backdrop of Sundarbans, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* highlights how man has traditionally lived in harmony with nature but it was only with the advent of colonial powers that this harmony got disrupted. The paper will also examine how Ghosh's novel effectively portrays that today's consumer ridden society is exploiting environment and its resources for its own consumption and shifting the onus to the poor and the marginal and thus pushing them further to the margins and subjecting them to unspeakable atrocities.

**Keywords: Ecocriticism, eco-tourism, sustainable development, imperialism, colonialism, postcolonial literature.**

### **Introduction:**

Global warming and talks about imminent environmental crisis have made us realize the importance of understanding our environment and also the need of preserving it. Sustainable development in the globalized world like ours is the only way out of the looming environmental crisis. It is here that role of literature comes in as it acts as an effective medium of bringing home the message of respecting not only man but his environment as well. Literature is more effective in bringing out scientific and environmental issues out of the restricted environs of scientific conclaves and laboratories to the very heart and minds of individuals wherein motivating them to play their own part in the conservation of nature and also understand the urgency for corrective measures as we are fast moving towards total annihilation.

Postcolonial literature in particular registers its concerns for man and his environment and ecocriticism has emerged as a "study of this relationship between literature and the physical environment". (Glotfelty 1996: xix). Ecocriticism acts as a bridge of understanding between

literature and environment and as Lawrence Buell, Karen Thomber, and Ursula K. Heise assert that:

Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof—by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern – can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of eco degradation that afflict planet earth today. (Buell et al, 2011: 418)

The conviction that creative writings can contribute significantly in promoting environmental concerns for their sheer “power of word” and imaginative portrayal holds significant truth which is beautifully reaffirmed by the novel *The Hungry Tide*; where the boundaries of literature and environmental studies merge together as it raises some very serious issues about environment and also endeavors to answer those in a gripping story of human love and treachery where man and animal share a very special bond which is temporarily threatened by people like Kanai and Piya who disrupt the fine balance between man and Nature.

### **Historicizing Nature: Narrating the Real “Folly in the Sundarbans”**

The islands are the trailing threads of India’s fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the achol that follows her, half wetted by the sea. (Ghosh 2008: 7)

Amitav Ghosh sets his novel *The Hungry Tide* in the backdrop of enigmatic, enchanting yet dangerous Sundarbans, “an immense archipelago of islands” (7) where there are no fixities between land and water as “everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear under water only to reemerge later” (7) and this liquidity of movement he passes on to the text itself as he effortlessly weaves fact with fiction about which he writes in author’s note:

The characters of this novel are fictitious as are its two principal settings, Lusibari and Gorjontola. However the secondary locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhapi and Emilybari do indeed exist and were indeed founded or settled in the manner alluded to here. (428)

Amitav Ghosh’s treatment and presentation of the history and geography of the Sundarbans essentially brings to light the real “folly in the Sundarbans” which doesn’t merely lie in the proposed project of Sahara India to open up an eco- tourism resort in the Sundarbans but traces the folly to the imperialistic tendencies and colonial rule in India where the British Colonizers saw the Sunderbans as vast open spaces where they could continue with their material expansion by exploiting both human and natural resources. The above point can best be illustrated through

various episodes in the book relating to the history of human settlement in Sundarbans. One such episode is regarding the establishment of Port Canning on the banks of river Matla. This act of Lord Canning can be seen as an act of human domination over nature --- a human folly which subjected future generation of settlers to bear the furies of nature about which Ghosh writes:

...it was crazy to build a town so deep in the tide country; the mangroves were Bengal's defence against the Bay... they served as barriers against nature's fury, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges. If not for the tide country, the plains would have been drowned long before: it was the mangroves that kept the hinterland alive. (309)

Lord Canning symbolizes western belief that nature can be tamed and that humans can accomplish the impossible. The foolishness of man's aspirations were soon shattered by nature as the Matla river showed its furies and the region was devastated by a mild cyclone and within no time "the town was all but gone; only the bleached skeleton remained". (310) But everyone is not insensitive to the power of nature; there are people like Nirmal who understand that there is something in Sundarbans which makes it unfit for human habitation and perhaps it is Nature's way to deal with human intrusion, he writes:

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. (8)

Ghosh raised his voice against the commodification of natural resources of the Sundarbans as this would have led to irreparable damage to the already fragile ecosystem and loss of its unique biodiversity. As a writer Ghosh is acutely conscious about his responsibilities towards people as well as environment, in an interview with Alessandro Vescovi, he says:

...I do think that writers of my generation have a duty to address issues of the environment. When we look at writers of the Thirties and Forties, we ask "where did you stand on fascism?" In the future they will look at us and say "where did you stand on the environment?" I think this is absolutely the fundamental question of our time. (Ghosh 2010: 137)

### **Piya's journey into the Sundarbans through the eyes of Fokir: global knowledge versus local understanding**

*The Hungry Tide* is not only the story of Piya's journey into the inner recesses of Sundarbans and her chance encounter with two men i.e. Kanai and Fokir, one representing the global

cosmopolitan and the other a local fisherman but it is also the tale of Nirmal and Nilima who got settled in the tide country helping the poor and the marginalized with their daily struggles of life by establishing Badab on trust and as Huggan and Tiffin write are better “attuned to both the pleasures and perils it affords”. (Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 188) People have been pouring into this remote land in the past as well giving shape to their dreams and aspirations --- Lord Canning and the fictionalized Sir Daniel Hamilton are the cases in point.

Piya’s search for river dolphins --- Irrawaddy (*Orcaellabrevirostris*) and Gangetic dolphins (*Platanistaganetica*) --- brings her to this land where “transformation is the rule of life” as “islands are made and unmade in days” (241). Here comes in the role of the innocent local Fokir who takes Piya to the remote and unexplored waterways, niches and creeks where she discovers rare sightings of Irrawaddy dolphins swimming together in a pool near Gorjontola. Piya is overwhelmed with joy when she watches the mother dolphin swimming alongside her calf; she is also made witness to a ritual puja performed by Fokir and Tutul to Bon Bibi, the savior goddess of Sundarbans. Piya is greatly impressed by the “incredible instinct” of Fokir and when he spots Gangetic dolphins she tells Kanai that “I’ve worked with many experienced fisherman before but I’ve never met anyone with such an incredible instinct: it’s as if he can see right into the river’s heart”. (289)

Piya discovers this land with all its richness through the eyes of Fokir --- a land seeped in myths and folklores of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli her brother --- and Kanai comes to know about the forgotten history of Morichjhapikillings through the diary of his uncle Nirmal. The past helps readers to understand that how man exploited nature and its resources on one hand and then went on to exploit the marginalized other on the pretext of nature conservation consequently creating a crisis for both. The vested interests of neo imperialists are the true causes of this conflict between human and nature.

On one side of the spectrum is Fokir, the local who is at once the part of nature and lives by nature as well. For him nature is an entity which ordains reverence from his side. People like him understand the law of the jungle and as per their belief they understand and respect their limits and thus their survival depends on this understanding. On the other side are the forest guards and the so called environmentalists with little regard or understanding about the tide country and its rich biodiversity. The killing of the new born calf of the dolphin by the propeller of the motorboat used by the forest guards highlights the kind of professed conservation taken up by these ill trained people.

Piya’s shock on being witness to the tiger killing and tiger burning reflects the inability of the cosmopolitan environmentalist to empathize with the plight of the poor and as Kanai retorts that the real horror lies in their insensitivity towards this marginalized lot:

‘...It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that?... these killings are never reported, never

written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too --- that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?' (325)

The poor not only bear the furies of nature and its predators but are exposed to the atrocities of corrupt government officials of the forest department as well, as Horen tells that tiger killings in the past "had led to riots, shootings and large-scale arrests". (320)

Piya's journey into the Sundarbans has been a journey of making and unmaking --- feeling the last breaths of Fokir as the gale raged on she is born a new self as she experiences death and sacrifice sitting on the branch she experiences "a dissolution of the very binaries on which her known world had previously been constructed: earth and water, solid and fluid, east and west". (Huggan and Tiffin: 191)

### **Conclusion:**

Through this novel Amitav Ghosh tries to express that any conservation should not be at the cost of humans and environment conservation can truly be possible by taking locals into consideration and with their help as they have deep knowledge of their surroundings. Besides this it is the rich and the powerful who have pitched nature and humans against each other in their materialistic hunger and short sightedness of vision. The refugees of Morichjhapi had to bear the brunt of tiger conservation as hundreds were killed and women were raped and tortured in order to evacuate the land. Through the character of Kusum Amitav Ghosh questions this kind of conservation where the poor and the marginalized have to pay the price for being human:

*... 'the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policeman 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." 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? (284)*

Ghosh brings out the irony of all such conservation projects by going into the murky cycle of settlement and evacuation practiced by the consumer ridden society which was about to be repeated in the proposed plan of ecotourism project where Sundarbans would have been exploited for their virgin beauty giving tourists a glimpse of the wilderness while being provided for all the luxuries in plush hotels and resorts. All of this would have been done while the locals are struggling to eke out a living and risking their lives being continuously under the threat from

nature and government as well. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* not only succeeds in raising important ecological issues but also effective in generating awareness and thereby putting pressure on the Central Ministry of Environment and Forests to abort the Sahara India Project of ecotourism in Sundarbans which could have threatened this already fragile world abounding in rare species of flora and fauna.

Ghosh's evocative portrayal of the Sundarbans had made it alive to the readers with all the follies of humans and furies of nature and it is nature as the great leveler that will ultimately prevail. Writing about Ghosh's treatment of setting in his novels Anshuman Modal writes "space is not an inert physical dimension exterior to human consciousness but is rather intimately shaped by the particular ways in which it is imagined..." (Mondal 2007: 4)

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