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Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* as a Climate Change Fiction

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Abstract:

In the 21st century, a new genre of Anglophone fiction has emerged—the climate change novel, often abbreviated as “cli-fi.” Many successful authors of literary fiction, such as Margaret Atwood, Paolo Bacigalupi, T. C. Boyle, Michael Crichton, Ian McEwan, Amitav Ghosh, Barbara Kingsolver, Ursula Le Guin, Lydia Millet, David Mitchell, Ruth Ozeki, Nathaniel Rich, Kim Stanley Robinson, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Marcel Theroux, have contributed to this new genre’s efforts to imagine the causes, effects, and feeling of global warming. Together, their work pulls the issue-oriented and didactic approach of activist fiction into contact with the intensive description and site specificity of Romantic nature writing. Cli-fi knits these tendencies together into a description of the effects of a dramatic change in the Earth’s climate on a particular location and a vision of the options available to a population seeking to adapt to or mitigate those effects. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is a perfect example for the genre cli-fi. It is a novel most able to engage creativity with complex ecological issues.

Keywords: Cli-fi, Anglophone fiction, global warming, activism, *The Hungry Tide*.

The new genre Cli-fi or Climate Change Fiction or Climate Fiction deals with climate change and global warming. Not necessarily speculative in nature, works of Cli-fi takes place in the world as we know it or in the near future. The term Cli-fi is popularized by journalist and climate change activist Dann Bloom. Dann Bloom came up with the word “Cli-fi”, hoping to convert the dull phrase climate fiction into something compelling. He wanted to come up with a catchy buzz word to raise awareness about global warming. According to Dann Bloom a central function of the climate novel is to examine the climate change debate at an emotional level. Elsewhere, it is suggested that the novel might be a way to communicate the message in an approachable and engaging way, allowing it to reach a broader audience. Rodge Glass discusses in *The Guardian*, the cli-fi can bring the issue of climate change into conception and relevance.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, published in 2004, and is an early example of cli-fi set in the Sundarbans. It is a novel most able to engage creativity with complex ecological issues. It is rare in its ability to create a fascinating full and detailed story while accounting for the various social and ecological factors relating to environmental issues especially climate change. The novel is distinct in being able to portray nature meaningfully and honestly. The

novel depicts a balanced and symbolic encountering of human world and nonhuman world. Though such attributes are found in other climate novels, none possess the encompassing achievements found in Ghosh's work.

The Hungry Tide is set in the ecologically and geographically dynamic sensitive Sundarbans. The novel opens with Piya, an American marine biologist arrives in Sundarban for her research on Orcaella, an endangered river dolphin. On her way Piya encounters Kanai, an arrogant business man from Delhi. He arrived at Sundarban to collect the memoir of his diseased uncle, Nirmal. Nirmal's story gives a historical, social and mythical account of the island. Fokir, an illiterate fisherman is a character who is in both the present and the past narratives about the island. Fokir and Piya develop a close bond though they share common language. The narrative ends in a massive cyclone that kills Fokir and inspires Piya to remain on the island and fully investigate the disappearing dolphins.

The Hungry Tide doesn't deal with climate change directly. Notions related to climate change are subtly interwoven throughout the novel. There for the story is engaging and not distracted by a difficult subject. But it is still able to attend the importance of the issue. Climate change is presented through subtle local observations which a reader might experience and understand it. Nirmal's observance of the signs of death, he notices: "What was happening here... was that the wheel of time was spinning too fast to be seen. In other places it took decades, even centuries [...] could it be that the very rhythms of the earth were quickened here so that they unfolded at an accelerated pace?" Moyna's reference to the impending extinction of fishes due to the use of "new nylon nets" which are "so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well", Piya's feeling of "a smell or rather a metallic savor" in the waters, and Horen's experienced observance on the cyclone's coming "quicker" than he expected, are some hints at the crisis disturbing the surroundings.

Climate change details in the novel come in the form of fleeting remarks "there isn't as much water in the river nowadays and at low tide it gets very shallow (p25).though it is a considerable detail available to an individual it claims an environmental change. It is through the example of the experience and attention to the local that the issue can become relevant and real. Nirmal experiences environmental change through small observations. Nirmal's observations are alarming and not over whelming. They are informative and engaging. These observations allow a deeply political and scientific issue, climate change, to be communicated without didacticism. And it offers more aesthetic engagement to the novel. This information enhances the sense of natural world and do not distract the narrative by trying to capture a complex global issue.

Climate change is undeniable in the novel. It is because of changes in the environment that rare species of dolphins and other fishes are dwindling, the population of the tigers is thinning day by day. The ecosystem of the area is on the verge of collapse. It is under threat because of drastic changes in the climate. Submersion of islands is not a fiction but reality. The water level in the Bay of Bengal is rising very rapidly. The ecosystems are very important aspects of the environment.

Piya, a cytologist comes to do survey of the marine mammals of the Sundarbans. Her special interests are Gangetic Dolphins and Irrawaddy Dolphins. Once dolphins in the area were in abundance, but now it is very hard to find them. According to the Piya's hypothesis these fresh water dolphins are a kind of new Orcaellas, who adopted the tidal ecology. These unique Orcaellas are threatened and their existence is depended on the conservation of their natural habitat. Only few hundreds of them are left. The climate change has destroyed natural habitats of the fishes and they are dwindling day by day. Piya remembers a study which says that "there were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe" (238-39) Once area was unpopulated and rivers and rivulets were in abundance in the area but now these are claimed by the civilization, causing great damage to the ecosystem. A single problem in an ecosystem can start a chain of problems.

The tigers in the area are also unique but their lives are also threatened. Water buffaloes, swamp deer, marsh crocodiles, hog deer and many more species are on the verge of extinction. The destruction of the mangroves of the Sundarbans, the natural defense system of the area, is causing great threat to the islands found there. The biodiversity of the area is also in danger. As Nirmal says "mangroves were Bengal's deface against the bay, he said - they served as a barrier against nature's fury, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges." (271) Small changes in the climate can create a chain of changes, and can bring great disasters. People and animals both are affected by climate change in the Sundarbans. The rare species of animals like Royal Bengal Tigers and Gangetic dolphins are on the verge of extinction. Floras found there are also in danger; thick mangroves are destroyed because of rising of the sea levels and colonization of the area. Occasionally tsunamis and cyclones cause destructions. The local people are adversely affected by conservation policies carried out by the government and international organizations, which creates conflicts between human rights and animal rights.

Environmental issues are the main focus of the narrative of *The Hungry Tide*. Yet it is always discussed in relation to real events and processes. The matter becomes more urgent because it is brought into a framework of meaning and relevance rather something separate, far off and unrelated. The form of the novel, *The Hungry Tide*, is its great success as an ecological text. The structure and the narration adapt the unique tidal landscape of the Sundarbans. Critic Jen Martin Gurr remarks how the environment in the novel functions as more than just setting but the central motif in which everything – content themes, characters, style- is organized around and influenced by: 'The underlying deep structure of the ebb and flood, land and water, not only structures the text in terms of form, but is closely mirrored and echoed in the constellation of characters and also directly propels the plot'. The ecological world influences the characterization and forms part of the character's identity, 'rivers ran in our heads, the tide were in our blood' (p164).

The novel is divided into two parts 'The Ebb' and 'The Flood'. These divisions are significant across the structure, theme, content, characterization and style of the novel. In the first part Ebb narration is clear and detailed like a receding tide. The narration is systematic

and clear in its moves between different focalizations. Like the tide, the narration flows between Kannai's, Piya's Nirmal's and Fokir's perspectives. The style changes in 'The Flood'. The perspective became gradually less distinct. The pace of the novel also changes with the incoming flood and storm. The novel provides lengthy geographical details and we gain through sense of the landscape and movements of the tidal community. Conversations between characters are also carefully narrated. This creates a sense of clear and full picture.

The novel offers many different focuses. It retells stories in alternating versions. The narrative also blends many different styles through the incorporation of Bangla idioms, local vernaculars, song and rhyme. It weaves between time frames. The narrative has several subplots that mixes fact and fiction, incorporate mythology, social history and personal accounts. These techniques contribute to the novel's ecological focus. Employing this multi-perspective overview points the novel is more able to reflex the complexity variety and interconnection owing to the environment. Encompassing different perspective and view point is central to ecological thinking. It allows for the incorporation of distinct forms of knowledge whether scientific or traditional. Since nature holds different interpretation and relevance across cultures individual way of knowing and connecting to the environment is also important. This narrative technique which intermingle different reference points and perspectives presents us with new mode of knowing and thinking. This aims to include different viewpoints, voices and knowing into a perspective which is ultimately a more appropriate method for addressing climate change. A pure practical scientific approach fails to accounts for complexities and wider social factors of the environmental issues. The intermingling allows the understanding of the environment to be open to interpretation and methods of relating to it.

An ecological novel is the one that is able to convey the interrelation between the human and nonhuman world and vitality of environment. We can find such a networked ecological relation in Ghosh's novel. Piya's musing about the island's crab population demonstrates their role within the ecosystem and in connecting her and Fokir.

He does not pay attention only to the physical interconnections of how human existence is reliant on the natural world, how these interconnections also bear ontological resonance. Nirmal suggests that the scales of myths are very similar to ones found in the natural world. Geology is a method for communicating the indescribable aspects of nature. The novel warns against a possessive or sentimental view of nature. Rather we need to seek one that is balanced and humans and nature live together.

Ghosh uses a variety of tactics, including framing devices and indigenous language to address issues of climate change and sustainability while engaging the reader on an emotional level. The novel's primary framing device is a journal written by Nirmal, the uncle of one of the main characters, a New Delhi entrepreneur named Kanai. Nirmal's journal provides first-hand descriptions of the Sundarbans' ecology and its shifting, constantly threatened nature.

The environment is described here in such a way that the reader is able not only to grasp the image of the Sundarbans, but also its essential instability as well. Threads of fabric – as of a sari or a net – in water convey a certain fragility and impermanence to those unfamiliar with the local geography that the simple word island cannot. The reader is being given a distinct representation of landscape by one who lives within it, which lends a degree of authenticity despite the absence of scientific data. The environment of the Sundarbans is effectively smuggled into the consciousness of readers who may never have known of its existence. Not only does Nirmal's journal portray the physical properties of the Sundarbans, it imbues the landscape with character. Nirmal describes the mangrove forests that cover the Sundarban islands, where the vegetation is "tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassibly dense.... At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility...of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them" (7). Like the "tigers, snakes and crocodiles," that roam its topography, the land is a wild, predatory being (Ibid). This understanding of the region's character allows the reader to more readily identify with the emotions, fears and desires of the novel's characters.

Another frame, which Ghosh uses intermittently throughout the novel, is the reference to scientific studies by the protagonist, a cytologist named Piya. In these moments, too, a kind of smuggling transpires, providing the reader with factual details under the guise of narrative. One such instance occurs as Piya is recording the movements of the endangered Orcaella, a variety of dolphin. The novel creates a didactic between scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge. The scientific knowledge is represented by Piya and Fokir represents the traditional local knowledge. Piya's scientific knowledge is limited and at first she cannot understand the value of Fokir's local knowledge. By shifting her outlook Piya eventually comes to know the importance and value of Fokir's knowledge. Together they represent the intersection between local and global knowledge and it is in the combining of them that a full understanding can be gathered. Piya undergoes a transformation from a narrow scientist only concerned with single species, into a biologist capable of the way of knowing needed for full and non destructive environmental thoughts.

In cli-fi nature is most often depicted as an avenging force seeking destruction after continued mistreatment from mankind. In *The Hungry Tide* nature is represented as multifaceted. The novel depicts the scientific, cultural and mythological association of nature. The novel does not claim a single correct way to relate and understand nature. It portrays the complexity of the human relationship with nature. It also seeks to represent nature, animals, and environment as vibrant and important.

The Hungry Tide more closely and deliberately gives attention to nature. The novel is able to foreground the environment not only as a feature in its plot, but also as a content determinant of its structure, style and characterization. The novel does not directly mention climate change, yet manages to closely reflect upon the issue through landscape and species observation. This opens the literary space to imaginative interaction. It engages the reader to engage with the issue and think about the issue. The slow pace permits reflection about the topic. *The Hungry Tide* creates a deep and layered narrative holding multiple interactions and perspective. It does not present a single view point or way of knowing. The novel

interweaves and exposes the various tensions relating to environmental issues such as human-animal relations, globalization and development. The story successfully captures how there are interrelated and impact upon one another. The novel reflects the networked relationship across the human and nonhuman worlds.

Amitav Ghosh validates myths as a shaping tool of environmentally aware unconscious community. This islander's myth makes them consider the human friendly dolphins as "Bonbibi's messengers" and thus, in the absence of a scientific explanation of their behavioral pattern, their belief keeps them from harming this mammal. Jessica Schmonsky writes about this sense of equilibrium. Human myths and stories are significant in knowing and understanding the environment. The Legend of Bon Bibi, the goddess of forest told throughout the novel is particularly important for developing a relationship with the land. Nirmal is surprised when the illiterate young Fokir is able to recite the legend. The song connects Fokir to his environment. The story is spiritually important for the islanders and informs an understanding of the land. It is powerful enough to develop ecological responsibility. The tale is that Bon Bibi divides the islands between habitable and inhabitable for humans and tigers. The story evokes the feeling that both human and nonhuman have the equal rights to live on earth. And they are dependent each other. Myth, stories and legends have a role in connecting us to environment. This suggests that developing a cultural appreciation of nature is also important. This suggests that developing a cultural appreciation of nature is also important. This is pointing to alternative ways of connecting and understanding in to nature. It is not only scientific interpretation and knowledge but also myth, legends and stories help to understand and value environment.

What Ghosh tells of the myth of Bonbibi holds true for the various mythological elements permeating the whole narrative: "the Bon Bibi legend uses the power of fiction to create and define a relationship between human beings and the natural world. Nowhere does a term equivalent to 'Nature' figure in the legend of Bon Bibi, yet nowhere is its consciousness absent". (?) There is no direct mentioning of climate change or global warming except some scattered discreet but loaded hints: besides Nirmal's observance of the signs of death.

Fortunately, due to the growing popularity of cli-fi like *The Hungry Tide*, efforts by corporations to produce and market sustainable goods, and word preservation of researchers like Macfarlane, issues of sustainability and preservation comprise an ever-increasing portion of global consciousness. It is critical, however, that language remains at the forefront of conversations regarding climate-change and other associated ecological concerns. Global citizens must be given the opportunity to visualize and comprehend the ecological desolation and the resulting implications for human survival. Without language and literature to preserve the world's landscapes for future generations, engage individuals both factually and emotionally, establish and maintain human relationships with the environment, the struggle to achieve a sustainable future falls prey to complacency and apathy.

The Hungry Tide is also exhibits in cultural, mythical understanding of environment and shows alternatives to the importance of developing imaginative narratives about nature

suggesting that scientific fact is not the only means for understanding and connecting with the issues like climate change. The novel balances different ways of creating an ecological way of knowing and perceiving. It does not attempt to simplify environmental issues or nature to fit a digestible narrative. It attempts to the complexities and multiple interpretations by using various frames of reference to build an ecological aware account.

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