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Nature, Culture, and Literature: Exploring Ecocultural Elements in the Literary Works of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

The paper aims to explore the concept of 'ecoculture' and its relevance to literary studies in raising awareness about the intertwined relationship between culture and the environment. It specifically focuses on the works of Amitav Ghosh, both his fiction and non-fiction, by analysing Ghosh's writings through an ecocritical lens, the paper aims to contribute to the field of ecocriticism and its goal of addressing the pressing global crisis. Ecocriticism has emerged as an important field, seeking to address urgent environmental challenges and envision a world where humans and the natural world coexist harmoniously. By examining literary stances associated with ecoculture and sustainable economy, the paper aims to challenge the current norms of an altered, unsustainable society. Amitav Ghosh's works are highlighted as they offer profound insights into environmental concerns and the crisis of culture and imagination. By critically analysing Ghosh's literary works, the paper seeks to shed light on the importance of ecological and cultural consciousness in the face of the impending global ecological crisis. Overall, the paper endeavours to foster a global understanding of the relationship between culture and the environment, urging readers to reevaluate their perspectives and contribute to the conservation of the planet. Through a critical examination of various literary works, including those by Ghosh, the paper aims to inspire change and address the challenges posed by climate change and cultural crisis.

Keywords: culture, environment, cultural crisis, unsustainable economy, ecocriticism.

Culture and environment are the two fundamental elements that shape human existence. Culture represents the identity of a society and encompasses essential aspects such as food, language, clothing, festivals, ideology, beliefs, values, and behaviours. Raymond Williams defines culture as which “includes the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which govern or express social relationships, the characteristic

forms through which members of the society communicate” (58). Consequently, culture molds individuals, who acquire it from their fellow community members, as stated by Margaret Mead, who describes culture as "the learned behaviour of a society."

On the contrary, the physical environment encompasses the natural world, including plants, water, wildlife, climate, air, natural vegetation, land, and all the natural resources that facilitate human growth, learning, interaction, and above all, life. The natural world extends beyond the mere depiction of the natural landscape; it serves as a foundation for the flourishing of human existence, and its responsible utilization fulfills the needs of human beings. Human life is intricately interconnected with the natural world, thus exerting an impact on the environment, either positively or negatively, through human actions.

Ecocultural theory is an interdisciplinary framework that examines the interconnectedness of culture and ecology, emphasizing the ways in which cultural practices and beliefs shape and are shaped by the environment. Today, ecocultural theory continues to evolve and expand as scholars explore new perspectives and approaches to understand the complex relationships between humans and the natural world. Some key aspects of ecocultural theory in contemporary scholarship are environmental justice, Posthumanism, and non-human agency, indigenous knowledge and cosmologies, ecopoetics and environmental literature, climate change and ecocriticism, and other transdisciplinary approaches.

The convergence of culture and environment within the realm of literature gained momentum with the emergence of a new literary theory known as "ecocriticism" in the 1990s. The advent of ecocritical theory brought environmental awareness into academia and initially captivated the attention of individuals in America. The twentieth century witnessed numerous natural disasters and ecological crises, which consequently instilled a sense of unease among writers. The connection between human beings and the natural world came under scrutiny, and ecocriticism aimed to bridge the divide between the two.

Nature/culture is one of the binary oppositions that has been highlighted with the rise of science and technology. Arne Naess articulates this notion by stating, "the introduction of Western, predominantly non-ecological, technology has a profound impact on culture and the state of the economy, necessitating imports and 'assistance,' and widening the gap between the rich and the poor" (145). Likewise, the adverse consequences of technology on culture have resulted in an ecological backlash, consequently blurring the boundaries between nature and culture. In various ways, the environment and culture are intricately interconnected and mutually dependent upon each other.

Amidst the escalating ecological catastrophes and urgent crises witnessed globally, certain ecocritics have delved into exploring primitive cultures as a means of addressing contemporary environmental issues. The inseparable connection between culture and environment can be discerned in numerous literary works spanning from ancient times to the works of traditionalist writers, although it gained recognition with the emergence of the ecocriticism genre. Within the realm of literary academia, there are various cultural aspects that intersect with the environment. These include race, gender, class, ethnicity, globalization, capitalism, technology, human health, ideology, indigenous practices, imperialism, post-colonialism, and more.

Ecocultural studies in English literature focus on the intersection of literature and the environment, examining how literary texts represent and engage with ecological concerns and the cultural and social contexts in which these representations emerge. It explores the ways in which literature reflects and shapes our understanding of the natural world, environmental issues, and human interactions with the environment. In ecocultural studies, scholars analyze various literary genres, such as poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and drama, to explore ecological themes and perspectives.

They examine how authors portray landscapes, animals, plants, and ecological systems, and how these depictions reflect cultural attitudes towards nature. Ecocultural studies in English literature provide a framework for understanding the complex ways in which literature engages with ecological concerns, enabling scholars to explore the dynamic relationship between nature, culture, and literature. It offers valuable insights into the ways in which literature can shape our understanding of the environment and influence environmental discourse and action.

Gary Snyder, an esteemed American eco-poet, is renowned for his approach that harkens back to ancient times, where he explores the culture and traditions of primitive societies in relation to their interaction with the environment. The way in which the ancestors of the land were deeply connected with nature has inspired the present generation to strive for a similar harmony between nature and human beings. Environmental movements originated in the United States as a response to the re-evaluation of contemporary culture, which was causing the degradation of the natural world. The need to curtail environmental abuse was felt throughout the nation. Naess suggests that revolutionary actions in terms of cultural transformation to preserve the environment may be the ultimate solution to address the ecological crisis. Naess writes:

Many people active in the fight against the ecological crisis look forward to green societies where children from the time they are able to walk have access to patches of nature without crossing dangerous streets. But this requires architectural revolutions. As it is now, the street is a cultural center. (148)

Amitav Ghosh, a renowned and highly regarded Indian writer, holds the belief that the climate crisis is, without a doubt, one of the most significant challenges ever faced by culture in its broadest sense. He asserts that the climate crisis is not solely an environmental crisis but also a crisis of culture and imagination. Ghosh emphasizes that contemporary culture is intertwined with a "carbon economy" and an unsustainable way of life driven by the vested interests and pleasures of human beings. However, Ghosh's primary concern lies in the changing climatic conditions, which he addresses in his works with profound thoughtfulness.

Capitalism emerges as a pivotal element of contemporary culture, exerting a profound influence on global ecology. This aspect is prominently highlighted in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island*, which serves as a commentary on capitalism and its destructive consequences on the Sundarbans Forest region, ultimately contributing to climate change. The character Tipu, a smuggler involved in the illicit transportation of Indians and Bangladeshis to other countries for financial gain, informs the protagonist Deen about the deteriorating condition of the land and water in the Sundarbans. The traditional workers, who rely on activities such as logging, bamboo collection, and farming for their livelihood, find themselves bereft of natural resources in their own region, compelling them to seek opportunities abroad in pursuit of profits. Tipu says:

In these parts, there's a whole bunch of dirt-poor, illiterate people scratching out a living by fishing or farming or going into the jungle to collect bamboo and honey. Or at least that's what they used to do. But now the fish catch is down, the land's turning salty, and you can't go into the jungle without bribing the forest guards. On top of that every other year you get hit by a storm that blows everything to pieces. So what are people supposed to do? What would anyone do? (87-88)

Gun Island intertwines historical events and ecological contexts. The novel delves into the historical transformations of the Sundarbans and the ways in which human activities have impacted this fragile ecosystem. It examines the consequences of colonization, deforestation, and the exploitation of natural resources on the region's ecology. The novel explores the role of cultural heritage in environmental stewardship. It emphasizes the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge, folklore, and traditional practices for sustainable relationships with the

environment. The characters' engagement with their cultural heritage reflects a broader understanding of the need for cultural and ecological conservation.

Another prominent cultural factor in Ghosh's novels is the impact of "class and caste," which determines the treatment and social standing of individuals in a society divided by these factors. Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide*, narrates the stories of ecological refugees, predominantly Dalits, who have lost their rights to their ancestral land and are forced to settle in the Sundarbans. These marginalized communities struggle daily with the precarious balance between their own survival and the presence of the Royal Bengal tigers in the Sundarbans. This cultural displacement has resulted in the loss of lives, both of impoverished human beings and the endangered tigers that would otherwise require preservation.

Scientific and technological progress has become an integral part of popular culture in contemporary society, with a nation's development often measured by the extent of these advancements. Science and technology have seamlessly integrated into culture, offering various gifts to human beings such as mobile phones, automobiles, and the countless machines that surround our daily lives. In Ghosh's novel, *The Glass Palace*, the interference of technology in the natural processes of the environment is explored. The novel portrays the use of technology for cloning trees and cultivating vast expanses of cloned trees, which Ghosh condemns. He believes that nature retaliates against the harm inflicted upon it by human beings. The character Matthew, serving as Ghosh's mouthpiece, comes to realize the negative consequences of human interference in nature. He acknowledges that even if he were to create the best-run kingdom in the world, nature would still resist, as he states, "It's nature: the nature that created these trees and the nature that created us" (Chapter 18).

Cultural imperialism or cultural domination serves as a central theme in many of Ghosh's novels, highlighting its role as a driving force behind ecological degradation and climate change. The roots of cultural domination can be traced back to the colonial era in India, and various practices established during that time continue to perpetuate environmental ostracization. In the novel *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh depicts the adverse effects of continuous opium farming and industrial pollution during the colonial period, resulting in disrupted land conditions and alterations in the climate.

One central aspect of the ecocultural analysis of Ghosh's fiction is his exploration of the impact of colonialism and globalization on the environment. In novels such as *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh portrays the ecological consequences of colonial expansion, highlighting how human activities disrupt and transform ecosystems. He delves into themes

such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, and the exploitation of natural resources, shedding light on the environmental legacies of colonialism.

In his non-fiction book *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh expresses his astonishment and concern regarding the contemporary culture of consumerism, where people excessively exploit natural resources for products that are not essential for basic living. In an interview, Ghosh criticizes the practice of constructing lawns in homes and maintaining them with abundant water usage, especially during a global water crisis. He also highlights the trend of building structures on or near the seashore, with individuals purchasing apartments for the sole purpose of enjoying a sea view from their homes. However, Ghosh warns that this popular cultural trend may prove precarious in the face of climate change. Sea-level rise and increased storm activity can pose significant risks to coastal areas, potentially leading to the destruction of communities and substantial losses for nations.

Ghosh holds the belief that the value of bourgeois culture, particularly the notion of positivism that assumes everything will inevitably improve, does not benefit the planet. According to him, "its this bourgeois idea of everything always getting better that is actually being overturned by the planet, it's the planet that's acting to show us that this is delusion born of a certain moment in history" (Ghosh 38:23). Ghosh argues that this belief is a delusion rooted in a specific historical moment. He emphasizes the importance of instilling a sense of fear regarding high-risk and ecological catastrophes in people's minds. By recognizing and understanding the potential dangers, individuals can work towards conserving the planet and mitigating the effects of climate change, which is already being experienced worldwide.

In the essay "In an Antique Land," (included in the collection of essays *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*) he delves into the traditional agricultural practices and ecological wisdom of Egyptian villagers, highlighting the value of indigenous knowledge in sustainable agriculture and land stewardship. *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* is a collection of essays in which Ghosh covers a range of socio-political issues, including several that touch on environmental concerns. For instance, the essay "The Lotos and the Robot" discusses the ecological implications of technological advancement and industrialization, questioning the potential long-term consequences of human-driven environmental changes. Furthermore, his lecture "Stories in the Time of Climate Change" highlights the power of storytelling and literature in addressing environmental issues and fostering cultural change. During interviews and public engagements, Ghosh frequently discusses the interplay between culture and the environment. He addresses the need for a shift

in cultural attitudes and practices to address climate change and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging diverse cultural perspectives in environmental conversations.

In his recent verse fiction, *Jungle Nama*, set in the Sundarbans, Ghosh incorporates elements of folklore and culture to highlight his concerns for the environment. The narrative revolves around the Bengali folktale of *Bonbibi*, the goddess of the forest. Ghosh views the Bon Bibi legend as a remarkable example of hybridity, as its central principles of curbing greed and maintaining a balance between human needs and the needs of other beings transcend any single tradition. These values, according to Ghosh, are essential in the current era of planetary crisis. The novel explores the theme of restoring ecological balance to address climate change, drawing upon mythological and cultural elements to recreate the folktale and convey Ghosh's message.

Ghosh's fiction often incorporates scientific research and ecological knowledge, demonstrating his interest in interdisciplinary approaches to environmental issues. He weaves scientific concepts and environmental research into his narratives, presenting complex ecological phenomena in accessible ways. Through this integration of scientific and literary perspectives, Ghosh contributes to a broader understanding of the complexities of environmental challenges.

The integration of culture and environment in Ghosh's writings serves to dismantle the longstanding dichotomy between nature and culture perpetuated by anthropocentric societies, which contribute to ecological crises. Ghosh's perspective aligns with Lawrence Buell's definition of the ecological crisis as a "crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it" (2). Ghosh believes that rectifying culture is essential, as it will naturally foster heightened environmental consciousness and promote sustainable living. Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of presenting these ideas through literature on a larger scale, as the Western literary discourse has thus far been lacking in this regard.

Thus, ecocultural theory tends to hold immense significance today as it allows for a more holistic understanding of the complex relationships between humans, culture, and the environment. It recognizes that cultural beliefs, practices, and values influence our interactions with nature, and in turn, the environment shapes culture. By studying these interconnections, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of environmental challenges and work towards sustainable solutions. It emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural diversity and traditional knowledge systems in environmental stewardship. It recognizes the valuable contributions of indigenous cultures and local communities in sustainable practices and

environmental conservation. By integrating cultural perspectives and practices into sustainability efforts, ecocultural theory promotes the preservation of cultural heritage alongside ecological preservation. Ghosh wins in promoting ecological awareness as well as cultural knowledge through his writings, through his writings and public engagements, Ghosh contributes to the understanding of the complex relationship between culture, society, and the environment, promoting a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach to environmental issues.

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