



Environmental Concerns in Amitav Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide'

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Abstract :

Environmental concerns in creative writing have undergone tremendous change in recent years. Environmental conservation is a universal concern and many writers have expressed them in their writings. Amitav Ghosh in his novel 'The Hungry Tide' written in 2004 highlighted many environmental issues in the Sundarban Delta in the Bay of Bengal. The story revolves around three major characters Kanai Dutt Delhi-based Businessman, Piyali Ghosh Indian-born American and a local fisherman Fokir. The novel has another narrative from the past history of Nirmal and Nilima Bose which runs parallel to the main narrative. Through the novel Ghosh points out the conflict between man and nature where man is helpless against the powerful nature. It highlights how conservation efforts are worsening the already fragile conditions of the locals living there.

Key words: environment, Sundarban, conservation, fragile conditions, narrative

Nature has always been reflected in literature because nature is an integral part of human life. Man has always shared a deep bond with nature. Romanticists have deep reverence with nature and attached a spiritual significance to it. For William Wordsworth nature is mother, nurse and guardian of his thought. However contemporary writers' concerns with nature have undergone a sea-change. Literature has reflected the degradation of nature caused by natural and man-made activities. As literature is a mirror to the life it has reflected the threat to the humanity caused by continuous misuse of the environment. Degradation of nature and its threat to human existence is a universal concern. This has led to new critical theory that is eco-criticism. Writers from many corners of the world had voiced deep concerns for the environment. 'Oil on Water' by Helon Habila takes place in the Niger neocolonial delta. It deals with environmental and societal damages caused by oil extraction on the riverbanks. 'Memory of Water' by Emmi Itaranta is a Finnish science fiction which focuses on water crisis. In Indian English writing eco-critical issues are discussed at large. Anita Desai's 'Fire on the Mountain' discusses the issue of creature murdering, populace blast, moral debasement of man. Kamala Markandaya 'Nector in Sieve' speaks about a nature as a destroyer and preserver of life. The writer has indicated how the disasters of industrialisation ruin the sweet agreement of a worker's life. Ruskin Bond's 'No Room for the Leopard' shows the pitiable state of the creatures after deforestation. In her 'Inheritance of Loss' Kiran Desai shows how Kanchanjunga pays for the severity of human hostility.

Jnanpith awardee Amitav Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide' strongly expresses environmental concerns in the Sundarbans one of the most dynamic ecosystems of the world. It throws light on the human life against the vengeful nature. Sundarbans is a group of low-lying islands in the Bay of Bengal which is spread across the border of India and Bangladesh. It is the largest delta region in the world formed by the confluence of three rivers Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghana. It is famous for its unique mangrove forest which has protected the coastal area from storm and deforestation. The area is endowed with spectacular scenic beauty and natural resources. It is

known all over the world for its biodiversity of mangrove forest. It shelters many rare and globally threatened wildlife species such as the estuarine crocodile, royal Bengal tiger, Water monitor lizard, Gangetic dolphin, and olive ridley turtle. The land has unique physiology as it is moulded by tidal action. It supports sizable population of tigers, crocodiles and snakes and nurtures the mangrove trees. However, after Independence interference of human activity has disturbed its bio-diversity. Its popularity all over the world has made the system vulnerable. At present the bio network of the Sundarbans is being threatened by natural and man-made activities.

The novel 'The Hungry Tide' has been set against area of Sundarbans. As the narrative evolves the setting plays almost as important role as a character of a novel. Sundarban is a wetland, hence it is hybrid and multivalent. They are neither land or water alone, they are waterland; continuum between terra and aqua. In their wildness, wetlands dissolve old order and lead toward new order. Entire plot grows out of fundamentally characteristics of landscape. Dichotomy of land and water, ebb and flood are central to the novel and novel consistently employs this dichotomy. The nature does not appear mere as a locality but as a protagonist. Human beings are so greatly impacted by the environment that they function as an illustration of features of the eco-system.

The novel 'The Hungry Tide' is unfolded through the eyes of two modern city-based educated individuals who happens to meet each other towards their journey to Sundarbans. Kanai Dutt, is born in Bengal but at present settled in Delhi. He is a businessman and a translator who visits Lusibari to meet his aunt Nilima and get some documents his dead uncle, Nirmal left for him. The documents reveal the account of his uncle's last days on the island of Morichjhapi. It is account of Kusum and her son Fokir, who are forced to leave the island of Morichjhapi. Two narratives are woven together by the novelist. The first narrative depicts Morichjhapi episode which happened around 1978. It is unfolded through Nirmal's letters. The second narrative deals with Piya's expedition to study Gangetic River Dolphins which also involves Fokir and Kanai. Ghosh puts together these two narrative and highlights predicament of poor people both in the past and present.

People who reside here belong to two opposite cultures. One group is of the people who are helpless to stay here. They are refugees from Bangladesh like Kusum or Fokir who do manual low-paid jobs and they are socially and economically weak. For such people life is a hell because of natural and man-made calamities. They are under constant threat of deadly tigers, crocodiles, snakes and other such animals. As this is a tide country, tide rise over the land without warning leaving devastation at the wake. On the other hand, government officials threaten to evict these people as this is a protected area for animals. Another type of people who reside here are of rare interest. They are carried by a noble cause to serve the downtrodden living here. Such type of people is represented by Nirmal, Nilima and Piya who have deliberately left their comfortable life to help the people living here.

Ghosh has powerfully portrayed the character of Fokir. 'Fakir' is the anglicized form of 'Fokir', the forest guide. Although he is illiterate, Fokir has accurate and in-depth knowledge of the forest, its waterways and its creatures. He also inherits centuries old oral traditions. His life is always at risk as they are man-eating tigers, crocodiles, sharks and snakes. In addition, he has to give bribe to government officials. He is very expert forest guide who helps hunters, woodcutters and tourists in their journey into the forest. Fokir accompanies Piya in her search of rare species

of dolphins. Piya is surprised to see the knowledge Fokir has. Though she does not know the language of him, she is able to communicate with him. Later both are accompanied by Kanai and Fokir guide them through the waterways. He sacrifices his life in to help outsiders come out safely through the forests. Although the land is visited by educated research scholars with advanced technology like GPS, they depend on a fakir to navigate the waters. Ghosh has hopes from persons like Fokir who will help to keep ecological balance.

Theme of the novel is the conflict between man and nature in which man appears weak and frugal as against cruel nature. It also portrays the conflict between government officials who conserve natural world against the local residents. Piya, at the beginning was unaware of the plight of the humans living there. Being a cetologist, she was insisting on saving natural world at the cost of anything else. Her time in Sundarbans changes her mind and realised that conservation efforts are not sufficient for the welfare of the world. Although the wildlife conservation is admirable goal, Ghose poses questions on how these efforts are carried out. It exposes how government justifies violence against vulnerable people in the name of ecological preservation. It highlights the notion of environmental justice that conservation efforts must be directed to save the natural world and the people who depend on that world for their survival.

The novel depicts an incident where villagers capture and burn a tiger that killed two people. It is difficult for Seattle based Piya to believe in the society where tigers are got tortured and killed. Kanai asks Piya to think over the reasons why they want to kill the tiger. Kanai points out that tigers are threat to survival of people. They kill many people every week. But because of the residents are poor, their deaths are not ignored. Government and government group give priority to tigers than their human victims. Victims are neglected as they are poor and there is profit and political favour in promoting conservation efforts.

Similar conflict rose in Morichjhapi in 1978-79. The place was kept reserve for wildlife refuge and refugees chose to settle on the same place. The settlement was a threat to government for many other reasons. But in the name of wildlife preservation, violence was meted out against the refugees. Kusum, one of the victims wonders that for the sake of animals people are willing to kill the humans. At the end Kusum realises that being human and poor is considered as a crime in this world.

The novel closes much before any resolution of balancing human life and protecting the environment. However, Piya plans to study Orcaella dolphins living there. She has changed her mind to help local fisherman in their work. She has realised that it would be injustice to make them stop their work. She also decides to share some of the research money to Babadon Trust, which provides locals with healthcare and services.

The novel underscores the fact that novel is a form of ecological consciousness. The publication of 'The Hungry Tide' has made world aware of the current condition of the Sundarbans. Expansion of tourism industry in this area is also a major threat to the environment. The novel spreads awareness of the fragile ecosystem and endangered biodiversity of the region. It has led to close down mega tourism projects.

Although 'The Hungry Tide' is a fictional narrative, it gave Amitav Ghosh opportunity to highlight environmental issues faced by the area of Sundarbans and plight of the natives living there. It also points out that political efforts for conservation are just disguises to achieve political ends.



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