

Protectors of Nature: An Ecocritical Rendering Of Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

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Abstract

The escalating environmental problems and its impact pose a major threat to the humans and the environment. Man is always left in the lurch by natural disasters like famine, drought, flood and earthquake etc. We are facing the global crisis today mainly because we are concerned more about the functioning of the ethical system rather worrying about the functioning of the ecosystem. The only solution to solve the crisis is finding the lacking element in the functioning of ecosystem and trying to reform them. The survival of human life is impossible without the natural world. Nature is regenerative and inturn a revenger, the mother earth has an infinite power to cause destruction to humans and it is left in the hands of human to handle the natural world with care and caution. Due to this prevailing environmental degradation there came up a range of environmental movements and activists voiced for the protection of the environment. Some of the prominent activists include Aldo Leopold, Wangari Maathai, and Rachael Carson. Inspite of these movements and activists there were people from various disciplines who have come forward to voice for the voiceless. Literature being the mirror of society reflects the actual contemporary world issues and writers feel it is their responsibility to bring about some changes in the accelerating environmental problems through their writings. Amitav Ghosh is one of the reputed Indian writers whose novels project the social, political, cultural and the environmental issues of the past and present. His novel "The Hungry Tide" deals with the wrath of nature and the colonial suppression in a predominantly. This paper aims to bring to light some of the major and minor characters who raise their voice in order to protect nature and their immediate environment.

Keywords: Eco-patriots, Nature, Environment, Ecocriticism, Culture, Ecology.

Introduction

Ecocriticism:

Eco-criticism is a response that grew out of the environmental awareness that was created in the 60's and 70's and it is for humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in today's eco-conscious generation. "Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature" (Glotfelty). Ecocriticism is a signified subject of

study-gained momentum in The United States around 80's. In USA it is noted that ecocriticism takes its relevant connection from the three major nineteenth –century American writers whose writings deal with the nature, life force, and the wilderness. These American writers include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. All three were the "members" of different groups such as New England Writers, essayists, philosophers and these three were collectively known as 'Transcendentalists'.

The concept of ecocriticism arose around the 1970's in the meetings of WLA. Loretta Johnson mentions some of the pioneers in the field of ecocriticism in her article entitled "Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism" the book traces the origin and coinage of the term "Ecocriticism" by William Rueckert who first used the term in his book entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". Loretta Johnson also purport the value of the book "The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology" written by Cheryll Glotfelty that remains as a "benchmark text in the field because of the passion of its contributors and with its diversity of essays" (Johnson 8). Johnson also highlights Glen Love who put all her efforts to bridge the gap between science and humanities by bringing them close as tool to promote interdisciplinary approach to ecocriticism.

On account of the above discussed thoughts by various pioneers it is apparent that many ecocritics attempts to give their contribution through their writings. The increased damage and devastations of the ecosystem is a threatening call to the existing human race which has made the mankind to think about safeguarding his environment.

To say, in simple words, it is to make humans to be more responsible about the mother earth. Ecocriticism refers to how human and nature are interlinked. Ecocriticism can be referred as the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. It is noted that, "Ecocriticism has been influenced by insights from Philosophy, development studies in sociology, ecology(science), feminism, Marxism and other disciplines and approaches" (Nayar 243). According to Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism can be defined as "The study of relationship between literature and physical environment" (Glotfelty xxviii). Ecocriticism can also be referred as "E-theory" "green criticism", green cultural studies, ecopoetics and environmental literary studies. Ecocriticism is just a theory which creates an awareness regarding environmental issues. Barry Lopez, an American

author, essayist, fiction writer who is known for his humanitarian and environmental related works says: "I hope that practice and study of nature writing may someday provide the foundation for a reorganization of American political thought" (Don cheese). He believes that ecocriticism will gain its value when it is combined with the other literary theories. It is necessary that when ecocriticism is interrelated with the other literary theories for a discussion it might result in better understanding of nature and nature writing.

Added to this, Ecocriticism not only deals with the ecological issues but also deals with the theoretical approach towards the international considerations of nature and culture. Ecocriticism is totally shift transnational gained its force. As Heise argues:

In spite of widespread resistance to processes of globalization in environmentalism and ecocriticism, however, the concept of "diversity" has functioned as a means of recuperating the oppositional stance associated with the transnational subject through two narrative strategies: the portrayal of multicultural and sometimes transnational nuclear families as the narrative solution to environmental and political problems, on one hand, and metaphorical superimpositions of biological and cultural diversity, on the other. Both of these strategies remain problematic as they attempt to derive ethical principles from the functioning of ecosystems, and as they embrace certain cultural aspects of globalization without acknowledging their entanglement in its economic dimensions. As the following analysis suggests, environmental literature and ecocriticism need to engage more fully with the insights of recent theories of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. (Heise 383)

In a sense that it expresses one thing clearly that there is a rift between nature and culture. "Moreover, ecocriticism has sought to investigate how particular templates of storytelling and shaping the humans' real-life interactions with the natural world in ways that are historically and culturally distinctive" (Heise 419). Similarly, Glotfelty also emphasizes that the literary critics should come forward in developing their perspective in viewing literature from an ecological approach Ecocriticism even identifies how this theory affects the literary text and how the characters in the text can be interpreted.

Ecocritical Principles:

Ecocriticism has got some principles and it does investigation about the relation between human and natural world in the literary text, the way in which the environmental issues, cultural issues regarding environment and its attitudes are projected. It also even works on how individuals in the society react and behave with respect to nature and ecological aspects and finally it also seeks to explore and analyse the way literary studies is linked to environmental activism. Added to this there are some objectives that ecocriticism follows i. e literature and humans as inseparable part, the broader understanding literature and environment and seeing man as threat to the environment, understanding the role of environment in shaping the character of the individuals and it also creating awareness regarding environment through ecocritical approach.

Glotfelty the pioneer in the field of ecocriticism created a history when she was appointed as Professor in the University of Nevada, Glotfelty calls ecocriticism "undervalued genre of nature writing" (Glotfelty xxxi). In juxtaposition with the E-principles this paper aims at highlighting the role main characters in the Amitav Ghosh novel *The Hungry Tide* who are connected to nature and show their active and passive participation in conserving environment.

Author Biography:

Amitav Ghosh was born on 11th July 1956, Kolkata. Ghosh was well-known for his essays, fiction, travelogues, and non-fictions. He did his early education from Doon School and bachelors from St. Stephen's college, Delhi University. He completed his post-graduate in social anthropology in Delhi and he got his doctorate in the same subject at Oxford. Ghosh went to teach at university of Delhi, The American College in Cairo, Columbia University in New York City and Queens College (New York) and other institutions. After his first job at "Indian Express", he turned out to be a full time writer. He is one of the ambitious writers among the contemporary Indian writers in English. He is known for his complex narrative structures which especially probes the nature of national and personal identity particularly of the people in India. His first novel was *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and his works are *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Sea of Poppies* (2009), *The River of Smoke* (2011) and he has even written some non-fictions namely *Dancing in Cambodia*, *At Large in Burma* (1998), *The Imam and The Indian* (2002). It is notable that *The Shadow Lines* and *The Circle of Reason*, both were widely translated in many languages. His novels are known for the blending of the actual facts with characters.

The Hungry Tide: Summary

The Hungry Tide is one of his famous novels which revolve around human and natural ecosystems of the most endangered part of India. The setting of the novel is in and around Sunderbans. The story moves to and fro between the adventurous life of Piyali Roy and Kanai who arrives at Sunderbans for their own purpose. Kanai, is a Delhi based business man who is in his early forties, arrives at Lusibari on request of his aunt Nilima. Nilima who runs a hospital in Lusibari wanted him to read the journal that accounts the Morichjhapi Massacre which happened twenty-eight years earlier, which was recorded and left by his uncle Nirmal, a Marxist. Piyali Roy, in her twenties, an Indo-American scientist from Seattle visits Sundarbans to carry out her research on Irrawaddy Dolphins (*Orcaella Brevirostris*) whose population is under threat. These two parallel narratives give an account about the issues and problems of biosphere conservation and its related social causes faced by the people who are economically and socially down. The novel highlights the factual incident of Morichjhapi massacre where the human encroachment leads to ecological disturbance. The specialty of Sundarbans as a victim and victimizer gives the

serious connection among the three main characters. The Hungry tide is a novel of beauty, insights and humanity.

Eco-Patriots:

In giving detailed account on geographical description of this a place as abode of heaven; As Ghosh highlights the beauty of the Sunderbans through his lines:

“Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost imposable to believe that here, interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands...the islands are trailing threads of India’s fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the achol that follows her, half-wetted by the sea... when the channels meet, the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumour of land(HT 67).

The author reveals several other issues which disturb the life and the existence of this diverse ecosystem. In the recent years, environmental consciousness plays a vital role in the lives of human society. Life is an interconnected web. There exists a strong bond between human and his immediate surroundings. Scott Momaday, “In First American views his Lands”:

Nowadays, the sole purpose of the land is instrumental; there is not a respect for its beauty and spirit. It is the difference in perspectives that separates our harmful interactions with nature from Native American’s symbiotic relationship with nature (Katherine). In juxtaposition to it Ghosh voices out the greediness and the smart thinking of man and selfish attitude of humans through Daniel Hamilton, a Scotsman who valued the worth of Bengal’s mud, who saw the worthiness of the land and its mud, :“when this Scotsman looked upon the crab-covered shores of tide country, he saw not mud, but something that shone brighter than gold, look how much this mud is worth”(HT 49), this made S’Daniel excited about the fertility of the soil because it is said that “A single acre of Bengal’s mud yields fifteen maunds of rice”(HT 49). These line clearly describes human lives are dependent on its environment. The fertility of the soil will yield good harvest.

Before the arrival of S’Daniel, the land was unrecognized by the people and it was untouched only predators survived: “There were no people, no embankments, no fields, and land vanished under water. And everywhere you looked there were predators-tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards”(HT 51). It is deliberately conveyed through the words of Mashima: “for the land, Kanai. What else? This was at a time when people were so desperate for the land that they were willing to sell themselves in the exchange for a bigha or two” (HT 51). S’ Daniel exclaimed “there would be no Brahmins, or untouchables, no Bengalis and no oriyas, everyone would have to live and work together when the news of this spread, people came pouring in from northern Orissa, whatever else they could lay hands on” (HT51-52). As more humans came pouring in it was feast for the predators which was surviving there, this was the system brought in by the S’Daniel which totally disturbed the animal ecosystem for the selfishness of the people. S’ Daniel gave a ecosystem which paved no space for the animal lives. In spite of these negatives, Ghosh deliberately picturizes two major characters who are being close to nature. The third voice of this ecological narrative is

Fokir, who is an illiterate fisherman and moreover a Biophilian. The very description of Fokir through Ghosh’s words shows evidently that nature has become part and parcel of Fokir’s daily livelihood. Ghosh describes the contours of his body in a tranquil aquatic tone:

Piya could see the bones of Fokir’s chest, pushing against his skin, like the ribs of a tin that had been stripped of its label. The water made patterns around him, slicing off the contours of his body as though it were tumbling down the tiers of mountain (HT85).

Fokir is a naive child of the Mother Nature who has dedicated his time by fishing and catching crabs wandering in the river and sea. He is a representative of local people in this nexus of relationships who makes his survival out of the forest. He is always in close contact with the sea. Fokir is “the only person who seems to exist in dialogic relation with all these different sensibilities” since he “lives in idealized harmony with the rhythms of the tide country” (Kaur 135). Once he saves Piya, when she slip drowning into muddy waters of Ganges due her arguments with the forest guards. However, it is important to realize where Fokir stands unique in his own way. Fokir is a fisherman who catches crabs and fish for a living and he is only familiar with the Orcaella as far as they help the fisherman by herding the fish into the nets and Fokir knows the routes the Orcaella uses in the canals of the river, because he has to follow them in order to catch his day’s food to make his living. Yet, Fokir’s practical knowledge no way makes him a lesser man when compared to Piya, who is intellect in all way:

“could it be that this was the spot he had been aiming for the night before-with the idea of showing her the dolphins” this baffled her still more: how could he have known that they would run into a group of Orcaella, right then and right in that place”(HT 113). Thus, through these lines Ghosh establishes a link between human and natural landscape. This gives us a picture, he accepts nature as his home creating a space for his it shows he is not only the son of nature but ardent lover of nature who has tolerance to accept the sudden changes that nature brings to him. He is even aware of the details of the place he chooses to spend a night, Fokir says:

He started in charm on realizing that this was where she was planning to spend the night, Shaking his head, he raised his finger of warnings to point to forest shores in the distance...only by inference did she understood that his warning concerned an animal or predator (HT98).

This makes us realize that he has a wide knowledge about the environment and his surrounding the pros and cons of the place. He helps Piya throughout in her research to locate the movement of Irrawaddy dolphin. Though he is not that much familiar with the languages spoken by his friends, he very well understands the language of water and nature even he prophecies the movement of Irrawaddy dolphin and its population in and around the waterways. Fokir with his indigenous knowledge knows the exact location of where dolphin Piya understands the efficiency of humans than her GPS device. Fokir has a good rapport with his immediate environment and water which makes his characterization very interesting. Once Piya wondered when Fokir had chosen to anchor his boat and Piya is not aware of the reason for why he stopped but she was surprised:

She was about to drop off again when she heard something... a few minutes of close attention was all it took to know that there were several dolphins in the vicinity of the boat... and she knew exactly what they were only the Irrawaddy Dolphin, *Orcaella Brevirostris*". Listen! She cried, holding a hand, He nodded but without surprise ... he had already known all along that they would be there... this baffled her still more : how could he have known that they would run into group of Orcaella right then and right in that place?(HT113).

These actions of Fokir leave the Piya as well as readers awestruck. It is obvious how frequently he would have crossed this place than Piya. Though not educated he knows more about dolphins and he was so smart enough to locate the place even without the help of technology. He proves himself to be the Prince raised by the nature queen. Fokir is one among many characters who directly as well as maintains symbiotic relationship with nature.

The actual representative of "protectors of nature" is Piyali Roy, a Seattle based researcher who comes to canning to do survey of the marine mammals of the Sunderbans.. The real act of conservation of nature starts from Piyali because her role has much to do with research on this marine mammal's extinction. When Kanai asks Piyali about her purpose for coming to Canning Piyali says: "She said the Cetacean population has a kind of disappeared from. No one knows whether it's because they're gone or because they haven't been studied. There hasn't been a proper survey" (HT 11). She leads her life among the world of predators. Her life can be more apt to be referred adventurous rather referring it as simply as dangerous. Being a woman she accepted the way of life that her profession gives carrying GPS tracking the movements of marine mammals. Piya, being a cetologist, not only cares for marine mammals but also for the welfare of all other animals. Once Fokir, Piya, Kanai and Horen comes across a village where people are trying to kill and burn the tiger which is trying to claw a hole in roof top and which already had killed the two people twice. As the villagers were trying to catch hold of the tiger and pierced the spear into its flesh and they even burnt the tiger this scene disturbed her alot Piya screamed and pleading Fokir to vacate the place soon. Fokir to Piya: "You should not be upset

Piya: How can I not be upset? That's the most horrifying thing I've ever seen-tiger set on fire" (HT 295). The lines convey us the way Piya's true for the animal against this activity. For Piya the act of burning is a "Horrifying thing". For an environmentalist like Piya, Royal Bengal tiger is a species to be preserved. Piya here rightly voices out for the voiceless at one point when anthropologist like Kanai who defends Piya for being so restless after that killing incident. Through Piya Ghosh condemns the atrocities meted out to the royal tigers& voices out the need to preserve the natural habitat. Through Piya's argument Ghosh tries to explain that conservation of species lies in the future of mankind. She strongly keeps the point it is only nature which keeps us all alive, if we human beings come to a point where we think life of humans matters more than any other species it will take us to a dangerous situation leaving the universe with only humans rather other species. This will disturb the entire food chain of the ecosystem. As an environmentalists he believes in the existence of the balanced ecosystem

Conclusion

The active participation of humans towards the environmental concerns during late 20th and early 21st century makes us realize that man is just not a social animal rather he is indeed the child of environment. The novel clearly shows the perfect link between Man and environment. Ghosh beautifully picturizes the co-existence of animals and humans. He indirectly highlights the symbiotic relationship with nature.

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