



A Study on the Intrinsic Value of Beings in Amitav Gosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

The Hungry Tide is a novel that deals with a peculiar environment and its inhabitants. The postcolonial consciousness in Amitav Gosh makes him track the histories and provide his audience with the draft of Dalit refugees from Bangladesh. With the environmental issue as the main concern of the conservation group and the forceful throwing out, of Bangladeshi refugees from the island, a battle line is drawn between the conservation group who, support the non-humans in the island and human rights group who, stand for underprivileged and disadvantaged people of the Sunderbans. The paper thus analyses the injustice that are carried on to the land and to its people paving way for ecological wisdom and focuses on the importance of ecosophia specially in places like Sunderbans.

Keywords: ecological wisdom, ecosophy integrative relation, hierarchic relation, anthropocentrism, ecological justice.

1. Introduction

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh is a novel that speaks for the doubly marginalized people. The novel carries themes like humanism and environmentalism. The characters face threats from nature and the hegemonic group. Amitav Ghosh predominantly, being a postcolonial writer, uncovers stories that have been removed from the government records of the past, and sets them backdrop of his work.

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1.1. Literature review

A vast range of study has been made on this particular novel. An extensive study on the quest for identity analysing the plight of under privileged people is widely made in more than one article. Yet another interesting study on the two groups where one is the refugees and the other conservationist. Analysis in the possibility of their relationship and with their immediate environment is made in the article, *The Home, the Tide, and the World: Eco-Cosmopolitan Encounters in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide*. The paper thus makes a systematic analysis on the injustice that is done to the island and the people who toom refuge in the island. The concept of ecological wisdom and ecological justice being employed gives the audience the possibility of justice to both humans and non-humans inhabitants of the place.

1.2. Research questions

As Aldo Leopold states, the possibility of ideal landscape and its necessity for the evacuation of its occupants from the place as a question is analysed in the paper. Sunderbans being a shelter for both rare species and humans who are in plight of finding a place for living, the question of their existence and co-existence is addresses in the paper.

2. Sunderbans- a Place for Humans and non-Humans:

Naes explains ecosophy through an important tenet which is self-realization. He says self-realization could be achieved in many ways, wherein the sense of self can be extended to a broader realm that surpasses ego. Humans naturally have the tendency to focus beyond self-ego to a wider sphere of relationships that can include non-humans. The goodness of humans and non-humans on earth can thus be achieved through the practice of realizing our own self with other living beings which is possible only when we understand and accept the inherent value of every being on earth that contributes to the good going of the biosphere.

The novel, *The Hungry Tide*, is constructed with two parts 'The Ebb' and 'The Flood' portraying the incidents in the lives of a few westerners and refugees and the natives alternatively merging the stories occasionally. As the novel proceeds the distinctions between the sections becomes unclear, bringing out the interdependencies. The story unwinds in the island of Sunderbans. The tides and seasons are highly unpredictable at the Sunderbans Island. The tides are mighty enough to shape and 'reshape' the islands as the land and water has no constant boundary line. The author never fails to surprise his characters along with his readers through the behaviours of highly unpredictable ways of the land. "But here, in

the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days” (Gosh 224).

With this setting the novel, carries yet another interesting background, that traces back to the history of the Bangladesh war of 1971. The history traces the painful stories of the denial, that the refugees faced after the war. The rich and the middle class settled in West Bengal while the underprivileged and the low class couldn't find a place in the city. They were sent to the refugee camps in Dandakaranya which was nothing less than a dry desert. After their bleak stay in the wretched earth, they felt the need to think otherwise. They found Sunderbans to be the only option. They had no choice, but to occupy the uninhabitable island Morichijhapi of Sundarbans. The delta region is again the habitation, for a number of endangered species like Bengal tigers and Irrawaddy Dolphins. Thus, this is a landscape where river, animals and humans exist and coexist, at times in peace but often in conflict. The island being their only hope, the refugees had occupied the land in such a huge number. “It’s only in films, you know that jungles are empty of people. Here there are places that are as crowded as any Kolkata bazaar. And on some of the rivers you’ll find more boats than there are trucks on the Grand Trunk Road” (Gosh 17). However, meeting the basic needs for the refugees became a challenge, as they had to lay down their lives to the crocodiles, tigers, snakes and shark on their way to collect firewood, honey or fruits which became their food.

Despite the fact that the people had a rough time for survival, certain characters were wise enough to understand their place and the place of the non-humans on earth. Regardless of the frightening environment with its consuming tides and man-eating tigers and crocodiles, it is the way they understood the inherent value of each other that, erased the differences of class, creed, and nationality and helped them go beyond the destructive forces. Just like the tides that wipes out the unending division between land and sea, the characters no matter to whatever social class they belonged to, sooner or later realized the end of fleeting divisions between them. This in turn helped them share the environment instead of ruling over the environment even through the most fragile situations. Ghosh presents a few characters, who through their living would explain the intersection of the interdependency among the humans and non-humans

Fokir, a fisherman, is presented as a looking glass through which the life of the refugees can be realized. Ghosh has drawn the character to portray a picture on how the deep ecologists consider their relationship with the nature. He associates every moment of his life both serene and vigorous times, with that of a river. Lusibari for Fokir is a place that chokes his life out as it is preoccupied with the thought of livelihood, where they look for life everywhere except on the very earth upon which they exist. This kind of frame of mind associates with that of deep ecologists who believe that the humans and the non-humans are all one and the same with no specific dividing line. Glen A. Love in her essay: “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism” says that, “I find myself siding here with the contemporary “deep” ecologists, who argue that we must break through our preoccupation with meditating only

human issues, the belief that as Warwick Fox puts it, “all will become ecologically well with the world if we just put this or that inter-human concern first” (Love 18).

Knowledge of the Place:

Ghosh has thus sketched the character of Fokir who is set apart for his deep understanding and relationship with the sea, the river, and the animals. He is endowed with an ecological wisdom which Westerners often resist. Piya Roy a cytologist and Kanai a translator who has come to Lusibari for research in their respective fields are so much equipped with all that they need to survive a tide country. Yet they, could not understand the way of tide country, while Fokir, with nothing other than a deep understanding and innate knowledge completely sees through the waters. Fokir finds life in the rivers which compliments neither boundaries nor culture to explore, innumerable possibilities. It is the knowledge of place that helps the people to lead a communal living which gives forth to a culture that is based on the nature of the place rather than the nature of self. The self as Neil Everden suggests receives its identity from the place rather than the desires of the self. As Glen A. Love quotes Nelson in her essay, “What makes a place special is the way it buries itself inside the heart, not whether it's flat or rugged, rich or austere, wet or arid, gentle or harsh, warm or cold, wild or tame. Every place, like every person, is elevated by the love and respect shown toward it, and by the way in which its bounty is received” (xii).

Ghosh brings out incidents which sets a model for the understanding of how the system works, through a powerful character Piya Roy. He also exhibits the significance that lies in the acceptance of both animate and inanimate. Ghosh's character Piya, is one who embodies the western civilization in the novel, where she is all the more anxious about the eco system and its working. Piya stands for the concept that prevails in the ecosphere, where the existence of the biggest form of nature, (i.e) the planet earth; and the dwellings of the most trivial creatures is of same significance. Their functions are of equal importance in the natural cycle of the biosphere.

Intrinsic Value of Nature:

The novel brings out a common state of mind of humans, where they consider themselves to be the superior over non humans. They hardly realize that they are just a speck in the universe and act in ways that shakes the very base of life which is the biosphere. One such incident is when the people try to kill a tiger caught in their captive in order to let out their anger against the animal. This very scene pictures how people consider non humans nothing more than their subservient. Gosh brings in a contrast between characters like Kanai and Piya by expressing their perspective about the non human that is very much native to the region. Gosh expresses how humans end up being intruders in ecological places like

Sunderbans where much of sensitivity and understanding towards the place is expected from the humans who co inhabit the place. Thus, Kanai finding it totally fine to kill an animal for safety, greatly contradicts Piya's perspective of the act. Piya who exactly understands the importance of non-humans and their existence gets the shock of her life at the very incident of killing an animal. She says, "This is an animal, Kanai, "Piya said. 'You can't take revenge on an animal'" (Gosh 294).

Integrative relation believes the power relations to be both horizontal and vertical at the same time. This explains the sharing of power and thus being responsible rather than authoritative. "Duties, obligations and rights bind people, spirits, and nature together quite intricately" (Selvamony, Neo-tinai Poetics 124). Therefore, Piya felt the most helpless when she could do nothing about a tiger being "set on fire". All her efforts to stop the crowd resulted in vain. Piya argues that it is nature's way to keep the animal in their respective habitat which is unquestionable. This scenario indirectly proposes a solution which abolishes all the hierarchy between humans and non-humans establishing integration. Thus the author insists on the sharing of responsibility, resulting in freedom, wherein either settlers or the government could pave way for the ever rising problem of animal attacks rather than exhibiting authority and thereby destroying them. Piya wonders at this kind of attitude where the non-humans are looked down. She says, that "Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What'll be left then? Aren't we alone enough in the universe?" (Gosh 301). The novel is thus a prick against the ego-centred society. Ego consciousness is made explicit in the novel. One such character who is again ego-centred is Kannai. He is a translator and an interpreter. Kannai is thus portrayed as a character who is never struck by emotions and the natural world. However, a time comes when his attempt to translate the history of the island drives him into a translated world instead, where he realizes both human and environmental issues.

Ecological wisdom surpassing cultural and natural diversity:

Ghosh exhibits yet another wild attack in his novel wherein, a crocodile attacks Piya, from which she narrowly escapes as Fokir pull her by her wrist from the waters. Piya was so struck by the shock that she was not able to get over it. This has affected Kanai, to an extent wherein he imagined a tiger stalking him to attack him when he was left alone by Fokir for a few minutes. He even had a clear-cut imagination of the movement and splendid features of the tiger that he prepared himself for a blow only to be found rescued by the people. He broods over both the attacks and says, "The tiger seems to be merciful because death is instant. You felt no pain when it happened; you were dead already of the shock induced by the tiger's roar, just before the moment of impact" (Gosh 325). The one moment panic attack that placed his life at stake changed his viewpoint further, developing an understanding of, the uncompromising majesty of non-humans on this earth.

The kind of life that Piya displayed, wherein she dedicated her whole life realizing the significance of the life of a trivial creature in the whole of biosphere led Kanai to a realization of a greater cause, of

being ecologically wise. For the first time he understands that the social set up and the natural environment goes hand in hand and are inseparable. Though he leaves for Delhi after the panic attack he returns to Sunderbans somehow, on his own decision. Kanai thus becomes the change that has to happen in the biosphere as he figures out that, understanding the environmental behaviour is more important than acquiring scientific knowledge to make a living within the ecosphere. Arnae Naess in his book *The Ecology of wisdom* has postulated eight points where he states that, “An ideological change would essentially entail seeking a better quality of life rather than a raised standard of living” (Naess 26).

Role of the inanimate beings of the island:

Amitav Gosh continues to explain how both animate and inanimate beings, carry a definite intrinsic value. He describes that it is the mangroves of the tide country that protects the plains of Kolkata. He says that the Casurina trees and the coconut palms acts as fortress against the forceful storm and tsunami. Gosh by emphasizing the function of animate and inanimate which humans hardly notice, brings into notice the importance of every single member in ecology. Even his characters are made to realize the unfailing guidance of nature, where the retired school master, Nirmal feels all the more relieved from thoughts of not being able to teach children anymore. When the storm changed the direction of children from Morichjhapi towards him, he says that “It was the storm that showed me that a man can be transformed even in retirement; that he can begin again” (179). Ghosh introduces a character named Henry Piddington who is a shipping inspector. The author has introduced this character to show his readers how, humans once adored nature so much and how they can fall in love with nature. Piddington is one such person who pays attention to nature and tries to analyse and understand them.

His understanding and interest in his surrounding extends to a measure, when every other inhabitant of the island could see only the disastrous and monstrous part of the tide country he looks at it as a protective layer of the city. He says, “... the mangroves were Bengal's defence against the Bay, he said- they served as a barrier against nature's fury, absorbing the initial on slaughter 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” (286).

Anthropocentrism view in ecology means the failure to recognize the inherent value of beings other than human to an extent where one would destroy any form of life solely for human convenience or profit. Anthropocentrism that acts as a counter concept to ecocentrism or biocentrism falls short in understanding the fact that humans and non-humans form a larger part in each other's life and that human life can never be separated from that of earth from which it began. While certain characters glorify nature on one hand, Ghosh on the other hand produces characters who are totally anthropocentric and hierarchical. Neo-tinai poetics holds an explanation, where the members in the biosphere position themselves in a hierarchal relationship in which an order is maintained with the Sacred, which is God is

placed first, humans and nature come next respectively. This is a unit where the power is exercised in a vertical order.

The Vertically Directed Order between Humans and Non Humans:

Amitav Ghosh throws an ironical picture of interconnection of humans and non-human from the island Sunderbans, through an English visionary Daniel Hamilton, who wholly believed in oneness in the island but failed a great time. Sunderbans is an unoccupied land where no living being were present except animals, water and land. “No one - in the beginning. Remember, at that time there was nothing but forest here. There were no people, no embankments, no field. Just... mud and mangrove... And everywhere you looked there were predators - tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards” (Gosh 51).

Daniel offered to create a society for the people who had nowhere to go, on one condition where they should exercise neither class difference nor cultural difference among them. Daniel Hamilton who was thus, able to understand the interdependent working between humans, totally ignored the co-existence with non-humans. He wanted to create a society where no one would exploit anyone in the island. Daniel's sole purpose of creating a noble human centred society was to excavate all odds like cast and cultural difference, so that nobody would exploit anybody within the island. But it is ironical that the odds included animals. He made all possible facilities available for humans but hardly realized the significance in the interdependency between humans and non-humans. He was totally anthropocentric in contrast to ecocentricism, to an extent where he would award people from the island, who successfully kills the animal predators. Humans killing the animals with spears and arrows exhibits the power relation, where humans execute a vertically directed power over animals, as nature is the most powerless in the hierarchical order. He was even ready to kill animals for the sole convenience of humans, totally denying the inherent value of the being and thereby contributing to the greatest threat to the very ecosphere in which they desperately wanted to make a living.

Hypocrisy of the Conservationists:

Ghosh, apart from displaying the wrongs that are done to the place, also portrays the injustice that are done to the refugees of the place bringing out the right platform for the display of environmental justice. He means to say that a good environment is not just defending of the environment but also the people present within. It is the realization of the injustices that happen to both society and environment, and thus focusing on the wellbeing of environment and society having them in equal balance. This simply means repairing of the damaged places providing due respect to both nature and cultural integrity of the society. Robert Bullard, an academician says how environmental justice has altered environmentalism as he defines the movement in an interview that, “It basically says that the environment is everything: where we live, work, play, go to school, as well as the physical and natural world. And so we can't

separate the physical environment from the cultural environment” (Bullard 8). Ghosh supports this way of ecology through intense portrayal of issues in the novel.

Life at Sunderbans, was a battle for survival against the storms that were both natural and manmade. The existence of every human and non-human became challenging enough, where one has to defeat the other for their mere survival. Thus Sunderbans beyond being a monstrous place has another part which is filled with rich resources. People who came as refugees had to adapt to occupations like farming and honey collecting for their food, hence living in harmony with the non-humans was going good, until the human greed intruded. The rich resources have served the government well. The irony is that the government that destroys the forest and its resources announces the region to be a protected region under Reserve Forest Act. The occupation of this region by the refugees was considered to be illegal by the Government. Ghosh equally attacks the western organization and the Indian government; the western organization for its hypocrisy, and the Indian government for its greed. For the environmental organization from the west, protection of environment means just the protection of non-humans in it, where they value lives of humans less than that of non-humans. As Sunderbans is the only habitat for the Bengal Tigers, the western officials force the Indian government to evacuate its people from Sunderbans. Ghosh brings out the scandalous activities of the Indian government where they evacuate people through rigorous actions. They even kill people and block the supply of food and water. They have turned it into a sacrifice zone, being least concerned about people in order to rear the tigers, at the cost of their own countrymen. This kind of evacuation means ecological injustice as the ground tenet of ecological criticism asserts the inherent value of beings. Ghosh thus mocks at the foolishness of people in higher authority, who can understand the sufferings of non-human but not humans, when only the presence of the two, can make a biosphere. ,

The master-slave attitude is the base for the social injustice that prevails. The people of the lower class are treated like some insignificant creature in the biosphere. The authoritative people in the novel do not realize the co working of the society while the underprivileged do. This is explicit in the novel, as the refugees clear the island to make it fit for farming and fishing.

The True Inhabitants of the Place:

Neil Evernden, explains one’s belongingness to a place, as he says that the tourists look at a place superficially, while the one who belongs there understands what has occurred there. “the outcome of how it got there and the outside of what goes on inside” (Evernden 99). However, they feel totally displaced when they had been evacuated from the island. “But no matter how we tried, we couldn’t settle there: rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood” (Gosh 165). The quote is a hint on how they refused the industrial buildings that raised up destroying the rich natural resources. This is a silent condemning of the hypocritical foreign officials and the policy makers who seem to protect the

environment but do nothing less than exploitation of the resources. The greatest terror that frightened refugee was “A lifetime of toil, in a city of rust?” (Gosh 165).

The refugees are the people of change that the author wishes to visualize on earth. They, when guided by nature and ethics that follows, make land their primary concern, even when they were denied from their basic needs. Though they had all access to the rich resources, they used them not beyond their vital need. This confirms their ecological justice, where they exhibit justice in the society and thereby on the environment. Nirmal rightly says, “A place is what you make of it” (Gosh 283). This has turned even the most fragile land, where even the borders are erased from time to time, into a place where they find their sense of self firmly placed.

3. Conclusions

The threatening description all over the novel is an indirect message to the adamant human race who cause damage over the face of the earth. Ghosh proposes an urgent call to the humans, who consider the peculiar behaviour of earth to be temporary. The author thus brings out to light the lack of ecological wisdom which asserts that even the smallest act of humans on non-humans has the greatest impact in the whole of biosphere. They barely realize that the very existence of even an insignificant creature contributes for their very survival.

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