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The Quintessence of Ecology in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

The nature and literature goes hand in hand and the world of literature throngs with the works dealing with beauty and power of nature. Indeed, the concern for ecology and the threat - the continuous misuse of the environment - has recently caught the attention of writers not only of science but of humanities too. This sense has given rise to a new branch of literary study called Ecocriticism which express its idea that the literary world must include the entire ecosphere of the universe. The term 'ecology' is defined by Haeckel as the scientific study of the relationship between the organisms and the environment. In other words it is defined as the study of *oikos*, the Greek term which means 'household'. Amitav Ghosh has become the first Indian writer, who strongly engage with ecological issues in Indian English fiction. Ghosh's

The Hungry Tide allocates with the study of the nature writing and the book is about one of the most dynamic nature of ecological systems of the world. This novel clearly brings out the wrath of nature and fragility of humans who are always at the mercy of nature. *The Hungry Tide* reveals how ecological concerns and conservation efforts serve as a mere disguise to camouflage the pursuit of political ends. Ghosh draws a mediating line between his work *The Hungry Tide* and ecocriticism that opens the eyes of man to look upon the plight of Sunderbans where both animals and human beings live a life of animosity. The spirit of the ecology goes up and down throughout the novel and the author maintains his narration fairly in relation to the ecological issues pertaining to an island of Sunderbans.

Keywords

Ecocriticism; Ecology; Amitav Ghosh; *The Hungry Tide*.

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Besides being an epoch of progress in science and technology, ours is also an era of environmental destruction which is the consequence of man's parting from natural world. All the enhancements of technology, science and commerce in the name of growth are mainly anthropocentric and certainly abandon the claims of our natural environment. India is a country with a variety of ecosystem which fluctuates from the Himalayas in the North to the plateaus in the South and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the East to dry Thar of the West. However these ecosystems have been unfavorably affected due to the increasing population and greed of mankind. The nature and literature goes hand in hand and the world of literature throngs with the works dealing with beauty and power of nature. Indeed, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of the environment has recently caught the attention of writers not only of science but of humanities too. This sense has given rise to a new branch of literary study called Ecocriticism which

express its idea that the literary world must include the entire ecosphere of the universe.

The term Ecology is defined by Haeckel as the scientific study of the relationship between the organisms and the environment. In other words it is defined as the study of *oikos*, the Greek term which means 'household'. The early counterpart of *oikos* is '*tinai*'. The Oikocriticism employs the household concepts as the central theme. Nowadays social and human ecology are emerging in association with the human society and natural phenomena which bring together the humans and the environment. The traditional ecology occupies nature as the center and not the humans. In the *Ecocriticism Reader*, ecocriticism is defined as "the study of relation between literature and the physical environment" (Selvamony 18). The western academy looks at ecocriticism as an environmental criticism. It has one foot on literature and other on the land. In order to bring an ecological education is mandatory so that it will become a world view of the learning community and later the society at large.

Amitav Ghosh has become the first Indian writer, who strongly engage ecological issues in Indian English fiction. Amitav Ghosh who has emerged as one of the most distinguished and eminent Indian English novelists was born in Calcutta on July 11, 1956, to Lieutenant Colonel Shailendra Chandra Ghosh. His fiction opus- *Ibis Trilogy*, *The Circle of Reason* [1986], *The Shadow Lines* [1988], *The Calcutta Chromosome* [1995], *The Glass Palace* [2000], *The Hungry Tide* [2004], *Sea of Poppies* [2008] and *River of Smoke* [2011]. Ghosh's nifty training as a social anthropologist has empowered him to enrich his narrative with the different cultures and histories of various places and people, revealing the reservoir of his knowledge. He said "I write novels because novels are about people" (Sharma 6).

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* deals with the study of the nature writing and the book is about one of the most dynamic nature of ecological systems of the

world. This novel clearly brings out the wrath of nature and fragility of humans who are always at the mercy of nature. In short, this novel is about the struggle of each person to find a place in the world and his existence against the natural barriers. By writing this novel, Ghosh proves himself to be a successful craftsman who has brilliantly foregrounded the multicultural and multilayered intricacies of the islanders and inmates of Sunderbans. This novel raises national and global awareness about the history of violence inscribed in the Sunderbans, throwing into relief the continuing exploitation of the place.

The Hungry Tide reveals through the eyes of two aspiring, educated individuals who undertake a journey to the tide country. The aim of this novel is to unearth the eco-political and eco-social issues that it addresses in the context of the contemporary, historical and social events crucial in determining the conservation policies of the Sunderbans. *The Hungry Tide* shows its own servitude to the Sunderbans through section headings titled *The Ebb* and *The Flood*, as well as a plot in which nearly every turn is predicated by an act of nature. *The Hungry Tide* has much on its myriad thematic mind, and its concerns, ranging from the ironies of the human “translated world” (Ghosh 14) to the fragility of various ecosystems.

The term Sunderbans translates as “the beautiful forest” (Ghosh 9) The Sunderbans are an archipelago of islands in the Bay of Bengal known as “tide country” (Ghosh 10). They are made up of islands, sandbars and mangrove forests, rivers, creeks and channels. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh presents nature as violent, adverse, unfriendly, and vengeful on the humans. Therefore, in Sunderbans everyone is an equal in the struggle to survive in the hostile environment. The tides change the environment daily breaking the essence of every person down to its core and obliterating all social distinctions.

The entire action of the novel takes place in India’s Sunderbans. The sheath of the book tells about the setting that there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt water, river from sea, even land from water. *The Hungry*

Tide begins with the expedition of Piyali Roy and Kanai Dutt to the tide country. Piya, an American-born Cetologist of Indian origin, travels to Sunderbans for conducting a field study on the endangered Gangetic river dolphins, marine mammals, nation, culture, boundary, ethnicity, immigrants and history of the ecological consciousness. Kanai undertakes the journey to Lusibari to claim a package left for him by his deceased uncle, Nirmal. Piya's expedition into the waterways of the Sunderbans reveals to her the plight of not just the dolphins but of the people and their day-to-day struggle to survive. In the course of her stay in the islands, Fokir, the illiterate fisherman saves Piya's life twice. He guides Piya and Kanai through the treacherous canals in search of the dolphins, which are portrayed as the most unprivileged, vulnerable to both the natural hazards and the oppression of officious bureaucratic machinery. Fokir with his enormous knowledge of the tide country also serves as a counterpoise to Piya and Kanai, equipped with their language, dependent on him for their safety in the Sunderbans. The setting of the novel is the Sunderbans, the vast delta of the Ganges where the mighty river meets the sea throwing up numerous paradoxes and contradictions.

In this novel Ghosh had liberty to talk about the violence unleashed upon the natives, the flora and fauna of the Sunderbans. *The Hungry Tide* reveals how ecological concerns and conservation efforts serve as a mere disguise to camouflage the pursuit of political ends. Piya's enjoyment of fauna and flora, understanding of ecology, mythology and human life and observation of the proliferation of aquatic life in this macro environment provide her with the Newton's apple and form the Archimedes bath tub to find Orcaella Eureka for her research.

The novel is an overflowing repository of local myths. It provides a creative outlook on the lifecycle in the learning of man's fight against nature, the eternal and inherent instinct of man. The settlers in the Sunderbans believe that anyone without a pure heart venturing the watery labyrinth will

never return. It is the arrival of Piya and Kanai that disturbs the emotional, social and economic ebb and flow of the settlement of life in the tide country. The environmental crisis becomes apparent to Piya during her expeditions through the crisscross waterways of the island country guided by Fokir. The importance on the wilderness is essentially a First World ecologist's perspective that aims for a bio-centric world, which is represented through Piya's convictions as an environmentalist.

The people of the island were facing the hunger and catastrophe because of the salty water of the river which causes the land infertile. This drove them into the fish culture and hunting, to overcome the disaster thrust on them and for this reason the climate of Sunderbans get affected. The fisherman do fishing and take out everything they want from the water and also the lucrative prawn for that they get a fair amount which creates complete ecological disaster. Ghosh wants to pay attention of the common people, to save the life of human beings and the animal world of Sunderbans. This novel portrays the terrifying beauty of forest and river that bring forth a perfect connection to the ecological studies. Ghosh draws a mediating line between his work *The Hungry Tide* and ecocriticism that opens the eyes of man to look upon the plight of Sundarbans where both animals and human beings live a life of animosity. Ghosh says, "Beauty is nothing but the start of terror we can hardly bear and we adore it because of the serene scorn, it would kill us with . . ." (Sharma 69).

This novel highlights the place and human relationships where Kanai and Piya both are fond of nature but Kanai more caring the lives of human beings than the predators and for Piya, animal life is also important. From an ecological point of view the life of both the human beings and the animals are equally important to maintain the balance of ecosystem. If any of the species disappears totally from the land then the ecological imbalance will occur and the ecosystem gets endangered. The spirit of ecology is seen in every chapter of the novel which makes the people to be aware of the natural happenings that

lead man to end up in destruction. Man's reason for demolition with the help of science and technology plays a primitive role in the text and at the same time the motivated spirit of ecology is well portrayed by Ghosh through his characters.

Thus, the novel *The Hungry Tide* stands as the best representation of ecology. The spirit of the ecology goes up and down throughout the novel and the author maintains his narration fairly in relation to the ecological issues pertaining to an island of Sunderbans. Nature and humans go hand in hand in these islands and both stand as the best demolishers of the other. The entry of Piya and Kanai helps to understand the novel moving in an ecocritical aspect and the writer proves himself to be the best man in depicting the relationship between the humans, animals and nature. The characters in the novel have created justice by bringing out the plight of the people of the islands and also the endangered ecology is saved by Piya, Fokir and Kanai as the novel grows. The principal action of spirit of ecology is clearly shown by Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* which highlights the plight and daily actions taking place in the Sunderbans.

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