

Unveiling Human-Nature Interaction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Ashitha. A. A¹ and Dr. J. G. Duresh²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar (Reg. No: 22113164012010)
Department of English and Centre for Research,
Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu.
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.

²Research Supervisor, Associate Professor and Head,
Department of English and Centre for Research,
Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu.
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.

Abstract

The paper titled “Unveiling Human-Nature Interaction in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*” explores the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. This paper examines how the environment and human survival are often interconnected, but it also explores how the human actions can lead to conflict and destruction. Ecocritical works have a very powerful and lasting impact in the twenty first century. Environmental concerns are currently a prominent topic in contemporary literature. *The Hungry Tide* is a tale about the settlers and their relationship with the physical environment in the Sundarbans, a unique and fragile ecosystem. The setting of the novel is at the very heart of nature - The Sundarbans, the mangrove forest between the sea and the plains of Bengal. The ecological balance in this part of India, with a population comprising of the poorest of the poor, is seriously being threatened. Human life is impossible without the existence of nature. Nature is a bountiful mother as well as a hostile force for the inhabitants of the islands. The storms, tigers, crocodiles and snakes are the forms in which nature expresses its hostility to human beings. Nature comes out as hostile and antagonistic to human beings right at the outset of the novel. The extreme hostility of the terrain is evident in most of the details of its physical aspects. The gentler aspects of nature are represented by the river dolphin. This fictional work investigates the interconnectedness between man and nature. The protection and preservation of the environment is the need of the hour. This fictional work addresses the most relevant issues of the time with responsibility and conviction.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecological, Environment, Nature, Sundarbans, Tide country.

Nature writing has emerged as a powerful force in contemporary literature. Nature plays a crucial role in shaping human perspectives and practices. The biosphere and essential planetary conditions are inevitable for human existence. Ecocriticism redefines our relationship with the environment and nature. It is concerned with the environmental implications in the literary texts. Human beings cannot live in isolation. Human world and the

natural world are interdependent. The study examines how the environment and human survival are often interconnected, but it also explores how the human actions can lead to conflict and destruction.

The setting of the novel is the exquisite islands of Sundarbans, which comprises more than ten thousand square kilometres. The Sundarbans has been brought to life by Ghosh not only through the detailed description of its flora and fauna but also through the minute details of local populace. The novel discusses at length the logic of modernity and the ensuing politics of ecology as well as the ways of life of indigenous people and their relationship to the environment. The novel explores the uncertainties resulting from the clash between different ways of viewing environmentalism and conservation. The Government of India has taken steps to preserve its natural resources which include the endangered species like the royal Bengal tiger and the gangetic dolphins. The preservation of the Sundarbans has given rise to confrontation with the local people and this conflict provides a part of the historical background of the novel.

The setting of the novel in the very heart of nature, puts the ecological perspective at the forefront. An avid reader can even consider nature as the chief protagonist of this work. Ghosh depicts a rich and diverse ecosystem where man, animal and other beings strive for their survival in these clusters of islands in the Sundarbans. The author gives importance to nature and environment and how human beings adore nature and eventually exploit it for their own benefits. The novel questions and challenges the anthropocentric attitude of man that nature is meant for human beings alone.

The author presents diverse human and non-human characters in this fictional work. Ghosh also portray the lives of Piyali Roy, Kanai Dutt, Nirmal, Nilima, Fokir and Kusum through this novel. The bunch of non-human characters present in the novel includes the flora and fauna of Sundarbans, the terrific royal Bengal tiger, the dangerous crocodiles, the river dolphins, the snakes and the crabs. All these characters showcase the non-anthropocentric voice in the novel against the human counterparts. This contributes to once realisation that nature is incomplete with human beings alone. At the very outset of the novel, Ghosh warns us of the hostility of nature towards human beings : “Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles” (Ghosh 8).

Ghosh chooses a significant location - the Sundarbans, as the setting of the novel. The place is believed to have derived its name because of the mangroves which is locally known as the ‘Sundari tree’. The term ‘Sundarban’ means ‘the beautiful forest’. But the beautiful forest at times transforms into a dreadful forest. The author uses several ideas to support this transformation. “Think of what it was like: think of the tigers, crocodiles and snakes that lived in the creeks and nalas that covered the islands. This was a feast for them. They killed hundreds of people” (55). The extreme hostility of the terrain is evident in most of the details of its physical aspects.

The author has depicted nature’s resistance towards its regimentation and strict categorisation in this novel. It is vividly seen that nature has its own workings that are beyond

human control. In the Sundarbans the boundaries collapse and rivers merge with each other. The land and water are closely connected in the world's largest mangrove ecosystem - the Sundarbans. There is no boundaries between land and water. These lines clearly depict this idea: "There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerged hours later"(7). Just as the tides erase the permanent boundaries between land and sea, Ghosh dissolves the barriers and divisions between individuals irrespective of their social class.

The crabs in the Sundarbans, which are the agents of nature, can be regarded as the sanitation force. The lines from the novel itself support this idea. "They were a sanitation department and a janitorial team rolled into one: they kept the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris" (149). The crabs in the island are also the source of livelihood. Fokir and other fishermen of the ecosystem depend completely on the crabs for their livelihood.

Likewise, the gentler aspects of nature are represented by the river dolphin which Kusum names for her son as 'God's messengers'. Even the slightest change in river waters or big threats like cyclones can be predicted with a change in the dolphin's behaviour and appearance in and out of water. Thus, the natural resources can be used both as the sources of livelihood as well as the indicator of natural calamities.

For the inhabitants of the islands, nature is a bountiful mother as well as a hostile force. The storms and the tigers are the forms in which nature expresses its hostility to human beings. Piyali Roy, the cetologist is against the inhabitants of Sundarbans who were avenging the cruelty of these forces. Piya's strong reaction to the incident when a trapped tiger is being tortured by people from an island who had earlier lost many men and livestock to the beast shows the environmentalist in her.

The novel presents strong ecological concerns of the Sundarbans, the mangrove forests between the sea and the plains of Bengal, which is slowly being denuded of its biodiversity. The ecological balance in this part of India, with a population comprising the poorest of the poor, is being seriously threatened. The Mashima in the novel is desolate regarding the diminishing aquatic life. Moyna tells Kanai how Nilima wanted to get the nylon nets banned. "These new nylon nets, which they use to catch chingrir meen - the spawn of tiger prawns. The nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well. Mashima wanted to get the nets banned, but it was impossible" (140).

Piya tends to sentimentalise the animal world and its imagined beneficent relation to humanity. She was awestruck when a group of dolphins seemed to be consciously sharing a catch of fish with their human acquaintances. Piya even thought like this: "Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals?" (179) But it is later sharply taken to task by the tiger burning episode and the awkward questions it raises. The tiger burning episode underscores the human-nature conflict in the Sundarbans as well as the varying views on wildlife protection and conservation.

The geographical location of the Sundarbans serves as a significant metaphor in the novel. The physical environment is a representation of an active force that connects the plant, animal and human life together and one is affected by the other directly or indirectly. The environment is not only important to form the narrative structure but also it highlights the mystery and fate of an individual's existence even in the midst of a dangerous but at the same time a beauty of nature. The people living in close proximity with nature have their own myths and legends about Mother Nature. The Bonbibi myth in the novel had a great relevance. The people who are residing in Sundarbans believes in various myths, legends, cultures and traditions. It is necessary in the formation of an identity for the people of this Tide country.

Bon Bibi is the benevolent goddess of the Sundarbans. The goddess along with her brother, Shah Jongoli protects the area from evil and from the vicious natural world. Many believe that Bon Bibi will rescue anyone good at heart. There is Bon Bibi's evil counterpart named Dokkhin Rai, tiger demon. This evil spirit haunts the people of the Sundarbans. But Bon Bibi is always there to rescue the innocent people of the Tide country. These myths and legends help the people to live in close communion with nature. It often promotes respect for natural resources and ecosystems. Many myths depict nature as sacred, with spirits inhabiting forests, rivers, or mountains, encouraging reverence and protection of these areas.

The novel analyses the impact of human activity on the environment. Most of the characters in the novel are struggling to maintain their connection to the natural world. Throughout the novel, Ghosh explores the impact of human activity on the environment. The Sundarbans is a unique ecosystem that is vulnerable to human activity. A devastating cyclone hits the Sundarbans in the climax of the novel. Fokir and Piya are trapped in the whirlwind of the cyclone. This description is the classic example of the relationship between man and nature. The cyclone is a metaphor for the impact of human activity on the environment. It is a reminder of the fragility of life and the interconnectedness of all things. The novel ends on a note of contemplation, emphasizing the enduring impact of the characters' journeys and the timeless, turbulent beauty of the Sundarbans.

The Hungry Tide is a novel that highlights the importance and exigent need of environmental protection and sustainable development. Fostering awareness about the environment is crucial for encouraging individuals to indulge themselves in the sustainable practices that focus on the protection of nature. Ghosh has warned mankind against the overt exploitation of nature. The novel presents numerous examples of the relationship between humans and the natural world. The study serves as a cautionary reminder to humanity that the continuous exploitation of the natural world will eventually result in a backlash from nature.

Works Cited

1. Dalal, Meenakshi. *Amitav Ghosh Critical Perspectives*. Shree Kala Prakashan, 2014.
2. Digambar Kokane, Govind. *Ecocriticism Vital Concerns of Ecology in Critical Theory*. Atlantic Publishers, 2022.
3. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. Penguin Books, 2004.

4. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Pearson, 2019.
5. Pandian, I.D. *Amitav Ghosh Life and Works*. Bhasker Publications Kanpur, 2009.