

PORTRAYAL OF THE NATURAL WORLD IN AMITAV GHOSH'S “THE HUNGRY TIDE”

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the well known fiction of Amitav Ghosh's, “The Hungry Tide”. This fiction was published in 2004. Amitav's works mostly speaks about the ecological issues and it mainly consists of the historical elements. The novel is set in the Sundarbans delta, easternmost coast of India, Bay of Bengal. The novel deals with so many aspects of environmental issues and humanitarianism. When it comes to the part of environmental issues, the author has beautifully portrayed the 'the other side' of the nature, which is quite a savior at times and a demolisher most times. The geographical area with a unique pattern of climatic and tidal conditions of the easternmost coast has been a livelihood for many people and it also acted as the most dangerous habitat at times. And he also portrayed the wild beauty of the nature including the 'Irrawaddy dolphins and other deadly creatures' of the area. Even though the geographical area of the habitat acts as vulnerable or prone to the natural calamities, people live in that place with an emotion of motherland and never had or even have a second thought of leaving the same. Whatever the struggles they had faced or facing, they wanted to live a life in the hands of the motherly earth rather than in a busy urban life where people come far away from the mother nature. The life of the people who has a cordial relationship with the ups and downs of the mother earth has been captured well by the author in the fiction.

Key words: Ecological Concern, Climatic Changes, Nature, Motherland, Cordial Relationship

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Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in the year 1956. He has authored ten fictions and eight non – fiction works in his literary career. Ghosh's work has been translated into more than twenty languages. His essays have been published in the New Yorker, the New Republic and the New York Times. In 2007, he was awarded with Padma Shri, one of the India's highest civilian honours. Most of his works revolve around historical elements, colonialism, environmental change as well as environmental concern and mainly on human psychology.

Amitav Ghosh in his fiction, "The Hungry Tide" speaks about lot of issues such as environmental degradation, lack of humanitarianism, mindset of the urban and the rustic people. So this paper is going to speak about the portrayal of natural world in the above said fiction. The fiction revolves around the Sundarbans Delta located in the coast of West Bengal, which is still an abode of heaven in this world of science and technology. In between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands. Some of them are vast and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others have just washed into being. These are Sundarbans.

"Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that here, interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands. But that is what it is: an archipelago, stretching for almost three hundred kilometers, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh." (6)

And the below mentioned lines states the depletion of the water bodies found in the fiction. "That's the problem, you see: there isn't as much water in the river nowadays and at low tide it gets very shallow." (25) Yeah, the author has captured both the beautiful and the unfair side of the Mother nature in the work. May be so many reasons can be there for it, but he never fails to warn us that humans are the most influential factor of this ecological disaster. Not only here in this fiction, in most of the cities of the country, water resources are highly depleted or either polluted and it remains the same without any action to clean it. Commonly, people have a mindset that, they are the ones who are taking care of the natural elements and water bodies. But the fact is that, without water for a single day human beings would perish. The main issue is that even after knowing all these facts, humans take the nature and natural resources for granted.

The natural world depicted in this fiction will be examined with the theory of ecocriticism. To define this theory in simple words, it is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'. The author has implied one of the significant term of the ecocriticism, "solastalgia" in his work. It describes the sense of psychic distress caused by environmental change. Here in this tidal country, people are undergoing the same psychological stress especially woman which has been clearly portrayed in the below lines:

"Making inquiries, she learnt that in the tide country girls were brought up on the assumption that if they were married, they would be widowed in their twenties – their thirties if they were lucky. This assumption was woven, like a skein of dark wool, into the fabric of their lives: when the menfolk went fishing it was the custom for their wives to change into the garments of widowhood." (80)

Actually this inquiry was made my one of the prominent characters of the work, i.e., Nilima. She was puzzled on the custom being practiced in the tidal country and she is being told that, as women practiced this custom of widowhood when their husband is alive, their husband could live longer with them. But Nilima is pondering over the custom and she is feeling that whether it is a way of preparing themselves for that which they knew to be inevitable.

The people in the tidal country live in a cordial relationship with the nature. With the usage of all the elements from the nature even for firewood they depend on it and they also very well aware of the unsafe conditions prevailing in the forest. But whatever happens they believe in the mother nature and live in their own home - tidal country. This has been explained in the upcoming lines: "Kusum was from the nearby island of Satjelia. Her father had died while foraging for firewood in a place that was off-limits to villagers." (100) The people who live in the tidal country never had a thought of leaving of because of some trivial issues.

The people in the tidal country believe that the forest and its surroundings have been protected by Bon Bibi, a tiger-goddess. And hence the people live by the laws of the forest shown by the Goddess. It is deeply instilled in the minds of the younger children which can be seen as: "You mean you don't know the story of Bon Bibi?" "No." "Then whom do you call on when you're afraid?" (101). So the children are brought up with the firm belief that greedy will be punished and the righteous will be rewarded and mainly the poor who are in need of help will surely be saved.

One more important term, 'ecological disaster' can be highly connected to this fiction. Ecological disaster is nothing but a catastrophic event in the natural environment mainly due to the human activity. One such incident is given below:

"Mashima says that in fifteen years the fish will all be gone, what with the new nets and all."

'What new nets?'

"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."

'Why?'

"Why else?" she said. 'Because there's lot of money in prawns and the traders had paid off the politicians." (134)

So, it is clearly evident from the lines that even after knowing the consequences of avaricious attitude, they are depleting the aquatic life immensely. And hence humans are facing ecological disasters and will be facing them in the near future too.

Not only the prawns but also the varieties of dolphin have been killed based on the intention to earn money.

“Mr Sloane had fallen victim to the flourishing clandestine trade in wildlife. New aquariums were opening throughout eastern Asia and the demand for river dolphins was growing. Mr Sloane was a valuable commodity – Irrawaddy dolphins had been known to fetch as much as one hundred thousand dollars on the black market.” (306)

‘Mr Sloane’ here refers to an Irrawaddy dolphin which has been killed intentionally for the purpose of money. Not only this incident, so many incidents are happening around the society, which gradually leads them to the extinction which creates an imbalance in the ecosystem.

The author has explained so many instances in which the humans are depleting the natural resources. And he never fails to portray how nature plays a vital role to enhance the effective ecosystem in the planet earth.

“But now, as she watched the creatures scuttling about in the hold, she found herself wishing that she knew more about crabs.

...

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.” (142)

Nature, here plays the vital role of the environment’s ecosystem and how artistically and scientifically these ecosystems have been interwoven with the apt living creatures in such a way to maintain the biomass.

‘Nature’, a single word has so many interpretations. One such interpretation according to Alan Liu is, that social inequality is being ‘naturalised’, that is, literally, disguised as nature, and viewed as a situation which is ‘God-given’ and inescapable, when actually it is the product of a specific politics and power structure. When matching with the above concept in the following lines, a group of people who are known as refugees, shifted from the refugee camp of Madhya Pradesh to one of the island of tidal country known as ‘Morichjhapi’ has been brutally evacuated and taken back to the camp by the forces of central government. It is very clear from the lines that, it is important to save the lives of the animals but it is equally important for a government to take care of its citizens too. But it miserably failed to do so.

“‘Saar’, she said, wiping her face, ‘the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust. “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world.”” (261)

Actually the above paragraph refers to the Morichjhapi massacre in which the refugees were forcibly evacuated to the camps which led to the death of innocent people. When humans fight for the right to save animals, remain quite when it happens to them. And this remains a question mark.

And finally the paper comes to an end after discussing so many aspects of the natural elements such as beauty and worsening ecological conditions of the majestic panorama in the eastern coast. Not only the natural elements, but how the social issues have been naturalised in the society has been discussed. It is the sole responsibility of the humans to save the mother nature in order to have a safe habitat for the same humans.

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