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Nature's Retribution: An Ecocritical Perspective on Human-Environment Conflict in *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract— *In the field of contemporary Indian English fiction, Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide (2004) is one of the richest and most sensuous literary depictions of the complex ecology between nature and humanity. The novel is set in the ecologically fragile Sundarbans, where nature is not only a scenic backdrop but an active entity that contributes ceaselessly towards the shaping of human communities, their lives, their identities, and destinies. Ghosh focuses on the conflict here between the conservation of the environment, the efforts to make a living, state policies and indigenous inscribed knowledge through the overlapping experiences of Piya Roy, Kanai Dutt, Fokir and Nirmal. This paper aims to apply ecocritical approaches to The Hungry Tide to reinterpret the novel in the context of a more ethical and sustainable view of human existence in nature, which will doubtless involve a contestation of anthropocentrism. It adopts an ecocritical approach to support its interpretation that Ghosh depicts ecology as an interactive gathering in which the very survival of the human species is contingent upon coexistence with others, and not domination. Moreover, "The Tides of Numenera" sheds light on the environmental injustices faced by the residents of the Sundarbans, and it also poses challenging questions about the conservation policies that ignore human suffering for the sake of preserving biodiversity. Finally, The Hungry Tide argues that ecological sustainability and human survival are not separate, making the question of environmental ethics a major issue in the social and political debate of today.*

Keywords— ***Ecology, Human Survival, Sundarbans, Environmental Justice, Amitav Ghosh and Ecocriticism***

I. INTRODUCTION

Now more than ever, the twenty-first century has put us in full awareness of environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, rising sea levels and the like displacement caused by climate change. The profound and confounding ecological crises have become some of the most significant issues negotiated, challenged, and re-imagined in literature. Ecocriticism, an environmental literature criticism, suggests that the relationship of man and nature is jointly moulded by the literary work and the nature of that world and that ecological crises are also social, political and moral crises. Ecocritical studies do not only treat nature as an inert element to be manipulated by humans but are thought to be the ones which explore the agency of nature in its relationship with human beings that are revealed in literary texts. Cheryll Glotfelty comments that "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (Glotfelty p.18) Amitav Ghosh may hold a unique position among novelists of the contemporary era in India due to his consistent participation in the themes of environment history, climate change, migration and ecological justice. *The Hungry Tide* places these issues against the backdrop of the peculiar Sundarbans environment—home to one of the biggest mangrove forests and a place of mud-brick islands and tide-fed rivers, cyclones and endangered animals, and human settlements that are also at risk. Through Ghosh's depiction, the Sundarbans are alive; their rhythms continuously change the map of geography on the surface

of the earth and the lives of people. The instability, firstly, of the landscape is highlighted during the very start of the novel with Nilima noticing that even the river has shifted. "Because of the river… It's changed" (Ghosh 79), she explains to Kanai. There's nothing very complicated about this obvious statement, which starts to pose one of the novel's main issues: Ecology changes forever, and human beings have to keep up when they are not in a position of control. The Sundarbans are not giving up on the transitory nature. Changing river courses, submerging islands, shifting forests and always vulnerable human settlements. Through Kanai's shock and awe at the dwindled Matla River, Ghosh illustrates the shifting terrain. The once mighty river is now "no wider than a narrow ditch" (Ghosh 83). proof that the environment is not stagnant. These kinds of descriptions obscure the fact that nature is not solid and is not a resource to be consumed by man. Throughout the book, the reader is constantly reminded that in the tidal country one must be humble to all the ways of nature. In the vast lands of the Sundarbans, human intelligence, technological progress and political power are very limited. In its geographical location, it shows that nature has a power of its own to alter human history just as the environment changes irrespective of any political borders and economic aspirations. The Hungry Tide – ecocritically read as a book – has an explicit antipathy towards anthropocentrism – the concept of the centrality of the human in creation. Rather, it is a narrative about humans as just a part of a bigger ecosystem that includes rivers, tides, forests, animals, the weather, and all of the species that interact. Therefore, there is no problem in conquest of nature but only in comprehending its modes. The book is a critique of dominant development theories based on the material progress at the expense of nature. Environmental concerns are affected by industrial development, conservation policies, and the location of, and governmental interventions for, refugees. Without any doubt, human survival goes hand in hand with ecological sustainability, Ghosh notes, because when ecological degradation happens, it will surely pose threats to human communities. Greg Garrard observes that "Environmental problems are fundamentally cultural problems because we act according to the stories, we tell ourselves." (Garrard p.8)

In many novels, a landscape serves as a mere backdrop to human conflict; in *The Hungry Tide,* the Sundarbans are an active character. The mangrove forests, tidal rivers, estuaries, mudflats and wildlife constantly shape every character's action, emotions, and destiny. Be aware, nature is not passive; it acts. This is the angle in which Nirmal's reflections introduce themselves from the get-go. According to him, "On the banks of every great river you'll find a monument to excess" (Ghosh 82). The former 'observation' connects human endeavour and ecosystem fragility. Rivers have been conquered by civilisations many times, but people always end up realising how weak they are. Throughout this journey through Canning, Kanai is so him to reinforce this. He recalls the Matla River as a grand body of water, and finds the changed ecology astounding. The narrator depicts the river as down, "its vast bed exposed beneath layers of fresh silt "(Ghosh 83–84). This is not a geographical description, but Ghosh uses the changed river as a symbolic representation on instability which permeates ecology and human existence. Use of sensory language to depict the natural world. The rain-freshly deposited silt, to quote Ghosh, "glistened in the sun like dunes of melted chocolate" (Ghosh 84), and the bubbles which bubble through the mud seemed to be on the verge of speech. These pictures give personality to the landscape, as though there were means of communication that nature could have beyond human language. The tidal world also teaches the close connection between ecological processes and daily living. "Nilima discusses the real-life implications of environmental change: "There isn't as much water in the river nowadays, and at low tide it gets very shallow" (Ghosh 86). The fact that she observes it here shows the connection between ecological change and aspects of everyday life for local people, including transportation, trade, health care and communication. Climate and geography become material conditions that affect all of the aspects of human life. So much in this novel is good because it conveys the uncertainty of ecology as a normal way of being, not an extraordinary catastrophe. The people of these Sundarbans live in a life adapted to tides, cyclones, monsoons, animals and seasons. Their knowledge is based not on scientific abstraction, but on their lived ecological experience. An intimacy with nature emerges particularly in the figure of Fokir. Despite never going to school, he has an amazing knowledge of river, dolphin, tides and sea navigation. He does not have to learn through an institution, but rather through generations of interaction with the environment. Piya, on the other hand, starts in the Sundarbans with a scientific methodology using maps, equipment and doing biological research. As their relationship unfolds, Ghosh shows how the scientific and indigenous understanding of the ecology need not be mutually exclusive. Rather, both are complementary approaches to knowledge of nature. The Sundarbans also defy the boundaries between the civilised and the wild. Forests are home to tigers, crocodiles, snakes, dolphins and a myriad other species, and in fact human settlements are inextricably linked to it. Lawrence Buell criticises the attitude of humans; he says, "Nature writing and environmental literature challenge the assumption that

nature exists merely for human use." (Buell p.7) The wildlife is not romanticised or demonised, but rather seen as another species, a legitimate part of the ecological community in which man is an inhabitant as well. Aung San Suu Kyi refers to the beliefs about Bon Bibi that exist in the area in which the author grew up: "people believe she rules over all the animals of the jungle" "(Ghosh 95). It is a belief system that offers an alternative vision of an environmental ethics of coexistence to one of domination. Bon Bibi serves as a cultural reminder that forests are not solely humans' territory; they also belong to other forms of life. Thus, it is important to acknowledge limits in order to achieve ecological balance. There are many species of animals that can be found in these landscapes, each of which has equal value and importance for the environment, and for which human beings have no absolute right of ownership. This is a different knowledge from the existing economic models of development which treat forests as an instrument of production. The ecological imagination then calls upon a reader to have a different thought about nature in which he or she dwells in *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh's idea of humanity is not separate from nature but just one that is in need of recognition as a prerequisite for survival. Such forests living inside other forests are an illustration of the fact that it is the nature that always transforms human life, and to adapt, to be humble, to live in harmony with nature is better than to conquer and occupy. *The Hungry Tide* confronts squarely the dilemma between the uncertainty of the environment and the survival of humans. Even today, activities in the Sundarban forests are affected by forces beyond man's control, such as the changing direction of the river, the Cyclone, tidal floods, tiger attacks, crocodile attack, erosion etc. all pose a threat to the life and livelihood of the people. Ghosh is no idealiser of Nature, of rural life. Instead, he paints a picture of survival being a precarious dance of human strength and nature's unpredictability. Overall, the Sundarbans seem to be a landscape where living in harmony is not merely a survival skill, but a way of living with nature's changing patterns. As the climate suggests, economic fragility soon follows when the ecology is fragile, the book reveals. The majority of residents who live in the tide country are engaged in fishing, crab catching, honey harvesting and wood collection – all jobs that help them to be directly in contact with hazardous environments. Everybody that ventures into the woods has a chance at survival, as well as a confrontation with death. Nature then is a great giver and taker. This duality is what makes the "wilderness" discussion that sticks to the ecologic side, and views wilderness as "good" and "bad", incorrect. This ecological instability is represented by the changing Matla River. Nilima explains to Kanai about the state of the water in the river, which has gone down. This observation does not just refer to the surface geology. The effect on the lack of accessibility is manifested in its effects on the transportation system, delays in providing medical services, loss of economic transactions, and isolation of communities from essential services. Environmental transformation thus becomes a social and economic crisis, as well as simply a natural phenomenon. Sitting on the roadside, Kanai sees these effects and sees those passengers struggling to get through the exposed mudflats. Rob Nixon questions this state: "Environmental justice asks who bears the burden of environmental risk." (Nixon p.4) The narrator writes about how each of the travellers" sank slowly into the mud" before laboriously moving forward (Ghosh 85). The scene depicts environmental change placing a physical burden on ordinary citizens who are directly dependent on the environment. Unlike in cities where the protection of modern infrastructure shields people from ecological change, people in the Sundarbans feel it every day, in each of their bodies. But one thing which is highlighted by ecocriticism is that environmental degradation primarily has an impact on the marginalised communities, and Ghosh powerfully brings to light this reality. The tide nationals have no technological protection, nor political influence. But not only from natural hazards, but their vulnerability is also determined by the lack of access to economic and governmental resources. The science of human survival is at stake, which is the science of environmental justice. The novel's message in its quest is repeatedly casts doubts over the developmental models which are more interested in urban development and ignore ecological frontiers. Whereas some communities benefit from modernization, others living within fragile ecosystems are still failing to rise to the challenges of environmental risks which barely register with policymakers. Ghosh thus unveils a differential pattern of ecological insecurity among social classes. Rivers are even unpredictable, complicating the chances of human survival. In Nirmal's words: "On the banks of every great river you'll find a monument to excess" (Ghosh 82). It's an historical statement as well as an ecological one. Every time human beings try to control rivers, be it for engineering reasons, settlement or commercial activity, they ultimately have to face the might of nature. The rivers are forever changing the face of the earth, thereby reminding people of their own powerlessness in earthly processes. Ghosh's conception of survival is a communal one based on the Amalekite idea of cooperation. The Badabon Trust and other local groups, as well as fishing communities and even families, rely upon each other for mutual support against environmental challenges. Thus, ecological resilience is created in the community rather

than in isolation and a sense of self-sufficiency. Indigenous ecological knowledge and environmental ethics. One significant achievement of *The Hungry Tide* is to be the first to acknowledge indigenous ecological knowledge as a valid and complex approach to nature. Ursula K. Heise believes that "Ecological knowledge is always locally situated." (Heise p.33) Ghosh questions the notion of the supposed authoritative interpretations of environmental systems offered by scientific knowledge. Rather, he shows how embodied experiences of generations create understandings of the ecology that would not be encountered through formal institutions. Fokir and Piya Roy most represent this antithesis. Trained in Western scientific traditions, Piya is an accomplished marine biologist. She studies the Irrawaddy dolphins based on observation, data, complicated equipment and classification. By contrast, Fokir has no formal education and yet his knowledge of rivers, tides, currents, weather and animal behaviour always goes beyond the bounds of science. At first Piya sees the Sundarbans largely from the perspective of biological research. However, as the friendship between her and Fokir grows, she finds out that an intimate understanding of ecology cannot be limited to science. Fokir's mastery of dolphin movements, understanding of tides and waterways, and navigation of these intricate environments showcase how intelligent systems and processes live within the everyday. Ghosh therefore declines to prioritise the scientific knowledge over indigenous knowledge. The book proposes rather that it is the dialogue between different epistemologies that is required to produce real ecological knowledge. The two types of information, scientific research and traditional ecological knowledge, carry out empirical analysis and provide knowledge that results from longstanding interaction with specific environments, respectively. This ecological knowledge goes beyond mere survivalism and comes to cultural and spiritual practices. The story of Bon Bibi is a legend which represents an environmental ethics of co-existence, instead of domination. Kanai asks about Bon Bibi, and Nilima tells him, "The goddess of the forest… people believe she rules over all the animals of the jungle" (Ghosh 95). Bon Bibi represents an ethic of relations where woods are shared spaces and not to be understood as solely human property. The myth teaches restraint, respect and mutual responsibility on the part of man to non-human beings. In contrast to the current industrial paradigm, which sees nature mostly as a resource to be used, Bon Bibi's heritage is aware of ecological constraints and interdependence. From the ecocritical point of view, these cultural stories are, if you like, a set of environmental ethos embedded in the 'folklore'. They promote interactions between human communities and ecological systems that are compatible for their continued survival and their lack of encouragement of excessive use. Thus, by glyphing mythology as superstition, Ghosh considers it as an ecological philosophy that is other than the hegemonic one, and one which could be used for environmental balancing. In the novel, one figure – Fokir – represents this philosophy. The bond with rivers, dolphins, birds and forests is a bond of familiarity, not domination. He tries to learn to love nature, rather than make it love him. His knowledge is both hands-on and bona fide and celebrates nature. Over time, Piya realizes that in order to have a chance at successfully conserving the environment, these forms of local knowledge must be respected. The dynamic geography of the Sundarbans is such that their scientific knowledge is not enough. All indigenous ecological methods, evolved over generations, become essential to conservation and survival. Thus, Ghosh's actam is a defiant assertion of defiance against the colonial line of thought which equates education with institutional education. The novel assumes that ecological literacy is not solely formal, belonging to the realm of the school, and that rustic and marginal groups know a lot about the environment that is not part of the discourse of present-day science. Livelihood and ecological dilemma, Conservation versus Livelihood. One of the most complicated ecological issues touched upon in *The Hungry Tide* is the balance between the protection of wildlife and human lives. Ghosh isn't a man of simple sentiment, and considers conservation and livelihood to be equally powerful and sometimes conflicting ideals. The Sundarbans are known the world over because of their exceptional biodiversity, including the endangered Royal Bengal tiger and the Irrawaddy dolphin. The conservation policies involve limiting access of people to protected forests to conserve these species. But these forests are also vital livelihood of thousands of poor people. Issues of basic ethics emerge in the conflict. In the event of endangered species, should these species take precedence over impoverished human communities? Does there exist any form of support for the conservation of environment when the human species is endangered? Ghosh actually refrains from giving hard and fast answers. Through the Badabon Trust, Nilima strives to resolve these paradoxes in her work in humanitarian fields in a manner that enhances education, health and economic opportunities while supporting environmental conservation. Throughout her career, she has shown that ecological and social justice goals are not mutually exclusive. She (Kanai) highly admires her commitment because she had dedicated herself "for the betterment of the people who lived" in the tie country (Ghosh 72). Her efforts prove that protecting the environment should also involve attention to man's dignity.

Another episode in the Morichjhãpi furthers that debate. Refugees need land and find conservation of the protected forest areas hostile to their survival. Their displacement indicates the potential for, and the actual consequences of, social injustice having as its unintended effects conservation policies that fail to take into account human needs while considering ecological objectives. *The Hungry Tide* highlights the positive role that vulnerable populations of humans can play in environmental ethics from an ecocritical point of view. But there must be a balance between biodiversity and economic justice – both systems, human and ecological, are closely intertwined.

In addition to its analysis of ecological fragility, *The Hungry Tide* puts diplomatic environmental change on the front burner in relation to historical memory. Ghosh shows landscapes that carry histories that are erased from official archival representations. Rivers, forests, and islands carry human suffering, migration, displacement and resilience. Therefore, ecologies of the Sundarbans are not amenable to being comprehended without the political. Most notably, the novel's historical episode, the massacre of Morichjhãpi, is one that shows the interplay between environmental protection and violence of the state. Refugees who have found shelter on the island were forcibly evicted as part of a campaign to 'save' the reserve forest; this demonstrates that the ecomodernist concept could also be used for political exclusion. Nilima explains to Kanai that "Some refugees had occupied one of the islands in the forest. There was a confrontation with the authorities that resulted in a lot of violence" (Ghosh 89). This declaration reveals the sad irony in which the Partition and economic deprivation victims were conserved policies victims, as well. Observes by Nixon "The environmentalism of the poor is inseparable from struggles over survival." (Nixon p.17) Environmental justice has become an important aspect of ecocriticism because it demands an equally balanced consideration of the preservation of the environment as well as human rights. Ghosh showcases, through his work, that it is impossible for conservation to be ethically viable if it does not take in to account the marginalised people's survival. The episode Morichjhãpi thus challenges the traditional environmental discourse, revealing the close association of environmental protection with that of social justice. The ecology politics are further reinforced by the memory of the films of Nirmal. His feelings towards the refugees testaments to his belief in the moral dimension of the environment. The island is not an uninhabited paradise that awaits protection, but it is a land occupied by human desires, miseries, and collective memory. "Places are repositories of memory as well as ecological systems." (Heise p.56) The ecological space here in Nirmal's diary is transformed into a historical testimony by Ghosh. The book also predicts issues that are current today, such as climate change. *The Hungry Tide* is a novel that was written prior to climate change dominating literary conversations in the world, but it often addresses the issues of climate change, including rising waters, changing river channels, coastal erosion, and ecological instability. Nirmal's mournful shriek: "The Matla will rise! The Matla will rise!" "(Ghosh 91) . The river represents nature's power, something that is out of humanity's control. Rising sea levels are now jeopardising the existence of many of the Sundarbans islands, and Ghosh's ecological vision is all too prescient. His tale indicates that environmental crises are already a reality and are affecting exposed populations. Environmental justice also arises out of dis-ecological risk distribution. While the city dwellers are relatively protected from floods, cyclones, and wildlife attacks, the dwellers of tide country have to face all such challenges on a daily basis. In this way, Ghosh challenges social systems that allow for the social elite to profit from the ecological exploitation of the environment, while the poor suffer the effects.

The idea of water is the main theme in *The Hungry Tide*. Physical and philosophical aspects of the novel are constantly remoulded by rivers, tides, estuaries, rain, cyclones, and oceans. Whereas most literary symbolism suggests water as a sign of rebirth, purification, or new life, Ghosh's water can be a source of both life and death and is not so predictable. Hubert Zapf observes that "Literature functions as cultural ecology by preserving ecological knowledge." (Zapf p.3) The rising and falling of the tide represents the constant change in form. Islands are formed and lost; river banks are washed away; settlements move; humanity's insecurities disintegrate. In the Sundarbans, nothing is permanent as the geographical reality is being constantly reshaped by the movements of the tides. This instability reflects a questioning of anthropocentric perspectives in which the human is assumed to have a permanent dominion over nature. Water is a symbol of connectedness as well. All ecology of the Sundarbans mangrove forests, dolphins, crocodiles, birds, tigers and human communities are tide dependent. Thus, the life of Man is linked to marine life. The scientific research of Irrawaddy dolphins that Piya continues to conduct there adds to the above symbolism. As her research has a great deal to offer in terms of understanding the incredible diversity that can be maintained in an estuarine environment, as her growing appreciation for Fokir shows, there is more to this knowledge than merely science – there's emotion involved. Together, they sail across rivers, creating symbolic explorations of how people and nature can live together. The continuity of the dolphins is an ecology. Like human communities, their survival is

dependent and linked to healthy river systems, which are vital for transportation, fishing and agriculture. Ghosh therefore makes it a point that the environment is degraded, so not only individual species, but whole ecological networks are under threat. The novel's climax of the cyclone is the strongest manifestation of nature's action. Human technologies, knowledge, politics and economies all pale in comparison to the might of the storm. The Cyclone eradicates the concepts of civilisation and wilderness, revealing that men are not living above nature. Fokir's death from the cyclone is not just a personal tragedy. It represents the weakness of the people whose lives are most close to nature. But at the same time his death reinforces the global ecological wisdom he gave in the novel. Fokir does imply that the real environmental ethics comes from coexistence, humility and respect for nature's processes and not through domination, says Ghosh.

CONCLUSION

A Hungry Tide is a complex novel in many ways, a book which steadfastly rejects easy depictions of nature and man, and because of this, the novel is in fact one of the most important ecocritical novels of contemporary Indian English literature. This statement is thought-provoking: "The environmental imagination asks readers to rethink the relationship between human culture and the natural world." (Buell p.2) Amitav Ghosh depicts Sundarbans as a dynamic ecological system where rivers, forests, animals, tides and human communities live in a state of deep interdependence. The novel shows how the environmental crises must be approached on a scientific, political, economic, but also on an ethical, historical, and cultural level. An environmental criticism shows that throughout the novella, Ghosh has consistently deprovincialized nature by positioning it as an active element, instead of a mere background. Human fates are moulded by nature, as human activity can affect nature. Survival consequently relies on understanding how they are mutually dependent and not how one dominates the other. Aside from that, the novel also tries to state that environmental protection would not be possible unless there are equilibriums at the social level. Ghosh unmasked the moral shortcomings of conservation policies which ignore the existence of marginalised human communities, as in the case of the Morichjhãpi tragedy. Likewise, the narration of Piya and Fokir shows that no two types of knowledge, namely scientific and indigenous ecological, are incompatible as environmental knowledge. Water, tide, forest and wildlife all represent ecological systems that constantly defy our efforts to exert lasting control as human beings. The Sundarbans also remind the reader that environmental uncertainty is not unusual, but the basic condition of life in this world! It is not until man learns to live with nature's rhythm that he lives. In sum, *The Hungry Tide* provides an environmental philosophy of humility, coexistence, and environmental responsibility. Ghosh's novel is even more relevant at this particular juncture in history when the climate is changing, biodiversity is being lost and ever more people are displaced from their environment. It reminds today's society that human life is closely connected with the health of the environment as well as with the vulnerable people who inhabit the environment, all of which, in turn, is interconnected with sustainable future generations.

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