

International Journal of Humanities and Education Research

ISSN Print: 2664-9799
ISSN Online: 2664-9802
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.2
IJHER 2024; 6(1): 83-85
www.humanitiesjournal.net
Received: 18-01-2024
Accepted: 28-02-2024

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Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: A study of eco-criticism

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26649799.2024.v6.i1b.76>

Abstract

The study of the intricate relationship between nature and humans is explored in literature through a new term, 'Eco-criticism'. Eco-critical theory underscores the importance of both humans and the physical environment as depicted in literature. In the 21st century, eco-criticism highlights an increasing awareness of environmental issues. Currently, environmental degradation has become a significant global concern. Global warming and carbon emissions are among the contributors to this degradation. If the negative effects of ecological degradation are not addressed promptly, our modern civilization may collapse. Jnanpith award winner Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *The Hungry Tide*, discusses nature, people, environmental issues, and climate change in the Sundarbans tidal area. This is why I have chosen *The Hungry Tide* as my case study to explore the connection between humans and nature. This paper will demonstrate how human activities, driven by a lack of awareness about conservation, impact nature. It will examine how nature and humans are portrayed in *The Hungry Tide*—whether as protectors or destroyers of each other. Additionally, I aim to highlight the role of humans in maintaining harmony between humanity and nature, ensuring the survival of both in the era of globalization.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, global concern, humanity nature, physical environment

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is the first Indian English fiction writer who raises the ecological issues in this novel *The Hungry Tide* in 2004. Ghosh has also written extensively on various issues i.e. terrorism, religious fundamentalism, displacement and so many post-colonial realities of the Third World as he was also a leading journalist. Humans have interacted with nature and progressed over the years. The evolutionary process has made humans more conciliatory and compatible with nature, but as time progresses, human intervention in nature has increased for survival. Initially, survival was the primary concern. According to the principle that every action has an equal and opposite reaction, nature responds to human intervention. This intensifies the conflict between humans and nature. As this conflict grows, humans have developed forms, groups, and societies to live collectively. Modern humans, influenced by capitalist market forces, use technology and modern lifestyles to harm nature while simultaneously advocating for its preservation. In this context, Darwin's theory of evolution and the 'survival of the fittest' applies. Modern technology has made environmental degradation a significant challenge today. Consequently, the relationship between humans and the physical environment has become a focus in literature, termed Eco-criticism. Including environmental and ecological issues in literary works helps raise environmental awareness among the public. Terms like Eco-criticism, environmental ethics, and environmental humanities should be popularized to increase climate change awareness among the general population.

Eco-criticism means a critical approach to literature and culture that focuses on the relationship between human-beings and the natural world. It is the study of literature where literature scholar analyses the text to illustrate environment concerns. Eco-criticism is also known as environmental literary criticism. The term was first introduced by eco-critic William Ruckert in his 1978 essay "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*"^[1]. Eco-criticism promotes sustainable development for the future benefit of humanity. It asserts that the ethical stance of a text enhances human accountability.

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This theory examines environmental issues and evaluates texts based on their ability to express ecological contexts, expanding the concept of 'the world' to encompass the entire ecosphere. Ecology examines the complex relationships between living organisms and their natural environment, asserting that all organisms have the right to exist in their own ways. Literary works addressing environmental issues often highlight the interconnection between humans and nature as a central theme in both literature and theoretical discourse. Amitav Ghosh, a Jnanpith Award winner, frequently reflects his environmental concerns and commitment to human well-being in his fiction. This theory underscores the importance of both human and non-human elements in literature. In the 21st century, eco-criticism has shown an increasing awareness of environmental issues, using literature as a foundational text for its discussions.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* illustrates the connection between humanity and nature. In this fiction, Ghosh masterfully intertwines the beauty of nature with the conflict between human and non-human elements, both integral to the natural world. The people, habitats, and dolphins of the Sundarbans represent the ecological systems of the archipelago. Ghosh seamlessly integrates literature and environmental studies to explore ethical evaluations of human responsibility towards the environment, of which humans are also a part.

The Hungry Tide vividly portrays the Sundarbans, a bioregion with endangered flora, fauna, and marginalized communities striving to create a niche amidst the challenges of the 'tide country'. Ghosh describes the dynamic nature of the Sundarbans, with islands that emerge and vanish over time, highlighting the diverse ecosystem where humans, animals, and other beings fight for survival. He emphasizes the conflict between humans and powerful species like the tiger, the diminishing biodiversity due to increasing salinity, and the endangered status of various species, including the Gangetic and Irrawaddy dolphins and crocodiles.

The novel critiques the anthropocentric view that humans are the most important entities in the universe, highlighting the harm caused to nature by human actions. It features non-human characters such as sundari trees, the majestic Royal Bengal tiger, treacherous crocodiles, and Orcella the crab dolphins, representing a non-anthropocentric perspective. Through the female protagonist Piyali Roy's protest against tiger killings, Ghosh asserts that non-human creatures have the right to exist in nature.

Discussion on environmental issue

'Human beings' sense of superiority over nature disappears when they face its terrifying aspects, leading to a realization of life's fragility on earth. This is demonstrated in the novel when Kanai encounters a fierce tiger and when Piyali and Fokir are caught in a cyclone. In the tiger episode, referred to as 'the horror' in the novel, the predator's invasion into human habitats is seen as a punishable crime, while the destruction and killing of other species are often not considered serious crimes by many.

The Hungry Tide illustrates a state of Nash equilibrium between human survival and nature conservation. The inhabitants of the Sundarbans threaten the sensitive ecoregion, while the treacherous waves threaten the islanders. The tides reshape the land, uprooting anything permanent and claiming lives. The author poignantly depicts Moyna's plight when she loses her husband, Fokir, to the

tide and cyclone. Fisherman Fokir and marine biologist Piyali are both deeply connected to nature but have different approaches to conservation.

The tides of the Sundarbans, along with the tiger and crocodiles, are central to the novel's climax. The novel highlights the struggles of the Sundarbans' inhabitants, who, despite living in harmony with nature, are poor and marginalized. One significant issue is the conflict between refugees and the government, which orders them to leave the island to preserve the environment. These people rely on their immediate natural surroundings for survival and often lose their lives to wild animal attacks. Characters like Fokir, Horen, and Kusum are consistently marginalized and without choices. Addressing the needs of these dispossessed and poor people could reduce the stress caused by poverty, marginalization, and environmental degradation, which exacerbate each other.

The writer portrays the intertwining of human life with nature's incidents. In *The Hungry Tide* Piyali Roy experiences both difficulties and happiness during her research on Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sundarbans. She hired a guide and a forest department guard, but they were neither knowledgeable about water animals nor able to protect her. Her happiness came from meeting Fokir, who, despite being uneducated, had extensive knowledge about dolphins and safe areas. Fokir saved Piyali from drowning during a sea storm, bringing her joy, but this happiness turned into agony when Fokir died saving her. The author illustrates how happiness and agony revolve like nature's climate changes, emphasizing the deep-rooted connection between humans and nature.

Mythological Discussion

Ghosh vividly captures nature with his words: "It was late November and the weather was crisp and cool with a gentle breeze and honeyed sunlight" [2]. Simultaneously, through Kanai's observations, the author highlights people's ignorance towards nature, as they are often too busy with their own lives to appreciate its beauty. Ghosh also explores the myth surrounding nature in *The Hungry Tide* particularly the legend of Bon Bibi, the Goddess of the forest, who is believed by Sundarbans' inhabitants to protect them from tigers. This myth is central to their way of life.

The complex topography of the Sundarbans makes living there challenging. Nature in this context is divided between human and non-human entities, and a perfect balance between these two is essential for survival. The myth that prevents islanders from entering the domain of beasts can be seen as pro-naturalistic. Ecology, nature, and myths act as motivators, fostering fundamental convictions that sustain human efforts towards ecological responsibility, akin to the Bon Bibi myth that instills a protective fear.

When Nirmal learns about the imaginary boundary between Bon Bibi's realm and Dokhin Roy's realm, he reflects, "I realized with a sense of shock that this chimerical line was, to her and to Horen, as real as a barbed wire fence might be to me" [3]. Ghosh also references Indian culture, where nature is revered through plants and animals, worshipped as spiritual or mythological figures. This underscores the interrelation between nature and culture.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh explores various aspects of nature to highlight the connection between human life and the natural

world. In *The Hungry Tide*, he emphasizes that any human action disrupting nature's elements ultimately leads to life's destruction. Human existence and progress are deeply intertwined with nature, and harmony is achieved when humans recognize that all their needs and forms of life are sustained by nature. Each species plays a vital role in the completeness of nature and has a right to live on earth. However, humanity's anthropocentric attitude has led to excessive domination over nature, not realizing that destroying nature equates to destroying mankind itself. Ghosh's work raises awareness and sensitizes readers to the unique mangrove forests of the world. He proposes a different, non-programmatic response to climate change, blending history and the current planetary crisis in his refined climate fiction. This narrative validates myths as tools for fostering environmental awareness and providing comfort, particularly for indigenous communities facing existential crises. Set in the ecologically and geographically dynamic and sensitive archipelago of the Sundarbans, *The Hungry Tide* offers a unique and compelling narrative.

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