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## AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*: A STUDY THROUGH THE LENS OF GREEN POST COLONIALISM

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### **Abstract:**

*In the present world-order system there is a growing need to bring together 'postcolonial' and 'ecological' issues to challenge imperialist modes of social and environmental subjugation. Though the agreement between postcolonial and environmental studies is not simple, 'green post colonialism' as an emerging field is vying to provide alternatives to western ideologies of development. The environmental historian Richard Grove has rightly pointed out that in colonised areas of the world European naturalists, scientists and administrators first realised the need for conservation measure and then started to implement strategies of preservation. Amitav Ghosh in 'The Hungry Tides', however, shows very successfully how the petty self-interest of the colonial power is directed towards the demolition of the humans in the name of preservation of wildlife. This study will show how the shift of emphasis from anthropocentric to environment-based (ecocentric) philosophies and practices brings havoc to the settlers in 'The Hungry Tide'. In the name of conservation the imperialist society is destroying the basic rights of the inhabitants of that area. Finally the question comes who will be given priority-human or non-human?*

**Key-words:** Ecosystem, Ecocriticism, Human rights, Environmentalist.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is the testimony of the fact that the juxtaposition of humanity and environmental issue could open up a new vista of discourse. This new dimension unveils Ghosh's poise between human and non-human. Ghosh is in favor of conservation of nature and animal but that is not at the cost of human lives and existence. Ghosh portrays a land which was made habitable for settlers by eliminating the wildlife by an English colonist. Conversely the land is again proposed to be made livable for the wildlife by expelling the settlers. Ghosh criticizes the environmental group who in the name of preserving the wildlife threatens the existence of the settlers. To Ghosh, there is no alternative to peaceful coexistence. He further believes that let the fate and fortune of the indigenous people or the settlers be decided by them and let nobody should intervene in their harmonious cohabitation with nature and animals. This article will explore how the so called neo-colonialists cause destruction in the lives of the human and nonhuman and thus create havoc in the biosphere for the petty self-interest.

One of the major functions of the green post-colonialism or postcolonial ecocriticism is to counter western ideologies of development. So as an emergent field postcolonial ecocriticism is trying to provide sustainable alternatives to western ideologies of development. Many radical Third-World critiques have a tendency to look at this development as little more than a disguised form of neo-colonialism, a massive instrument to satisfy the economic and political interests of the west (Huggan and Tiffin 2015: 29). After analyzing several critiques Huggan and Tiffin infer that development is a myth promulgated by the west. Under the pretext of supported modernization they are actually enhancing the gap (social, political, economic) between First and Third Worlds.

'Green postcolonialism' and 'postcolonial ecocriticism' are often used interchangeably. 'Green postcolonialism' is a term used by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in their paper called *Green Postcolonialism*. In its editorial Huggan and Tiffin regard the environment as "The incursion of European into other areas of the world from the fifteenth century onwards catastrophically resulted in genocide or the dispossession and marginalization of indigenous people across the globe. It also caused drastic changes in

extra-European temperature as well as tropical environments. Huggan and Tiffin further showed that under this European colonial rule 'the invaded, conquered and settled territories' faced severe environmental disaster causing a widespread damage to the ecosystem. They exploited the land of these areas for their own benefit and imperial profit. Soil lost fertility and the worst case was Shahara, which turned into a desert. The natives of these regions have soon become dispossessed facing poverty and starvation. So 'the original accommodated relations between environment, humans and animals were fractured, sometimes beyond repair' (Huggan and Tiffin).

Amitav Ghosh wrote his novel *The Hungry Tide* in the backdrop of beautiful sights and sounds of the Sunderbans in Southern Bangladesh "a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable"(18). Here Ghosh portrays a vast landscape where the sea, the river, the land, humans and animals all coexist at a state of harmony and conflict. What is significant about Ghosh is that he applies perfect sensitivity and balance in bringing together history, myth, culture, politics in the same canvas. But his main focus is the environmental issue. Being a social anthropologist, Ghosh traces an acute conflict between conservation and human rights in this novel. Indicating this conflict between humanist and environmentalist, Petrie Meyer in his article "Selling Nature to Humanist and Humanity to Environmentalists: Existence and Coexistence in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" shows "a battle line has come to be drawn between environmentally conscious groups fighting on the side of non-human nature, and human rights groups on the side of the poor, the dispossessed and underdeveloped people of the world". Referring to *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh where the constant battle between evicted settlers and Ganges tiger is evident, Huggan and Tiffin quote Robert Cribb:

A separate conflict between conservation and human rights has become more acute. The conflict is based on the compelling argument that conservation measures inevitably focus on areas which have been relatively unaffected by development. These areas are often those parts of the globe where indigenous peoples are struggling to preserve their livelihoods and cultures against external encroachment (4).

Now the conflict is between pseudo conservation of ecosystem and the human need for simple survival. This battle is brewed up by two groups- environment conservation group and the human rights group who regulate their movements living in technologically advanced western world and who have barely anything to do with either environment or with humanity. Here comes the emergence of neo-colonialists who dominate over the lives of this ecosystem sending the human, animal and nature within this system to play the role of "other". So the "other" becomes powerless and voiceless. They do not have the power or the voice to determine their own future. They are marginalized and subjugated for the petty interests of the so-called environmental and human-rights group. The crux of the matter is the native indigenous people who in their desperate struggle for survival are alleged to destroy the non-replaceable ecosystems.

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh presents a vivid description of the multifaceted ecosystem of the tide country. Ghosh very dexterously handles all these highly complex issues together that it is better to reflect light on any facet of the entire ecology in isolation. Pramod Nayar, for instance, chooses to focus on human-rights aspect which is evident in the title of his paper "The Postcolonial Uncanny: The Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" where he shows that the dispossessed population belong to nowhere. These populations have been deprived of their habitat as a result of the colonial legacy. So these people are always on the move for a permanent settlement. By 'uncanny' Nayar connotes a "perception of a space where the perceiver finds himself simultaneously "at home" and "not at home", (the) experience of double perception of any space which is at once familiar and strange, safe and threatening, "mine" and "not mine"(89). Here comes the politics of the environmentalist group who are making decisions and policies staying far away from the actual place, who cannot have the true understanding of the 'at home' position. These people through the lens of the western knowledge set the

hypothesis that the indigenous people who are not in close contact with their natural environment are destroying the environment because of their lack of knowledge. So their over-exploitation of the nature causes environmental catastrophe. Conversely, Hoogan and Tiffin are in favour of “the sensible policy of no conservation without local consultation and participation” (5). Hoogan and Tiffin identify the European incursion as “both prime cause and continuing consequence of environmental change incurred through the post-1492 European diasporic intrusions” (1). Huggan and Tiffin further show that the growing concern in the developed countries for ever declining environment during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries resulted in a “shift in emphasis from anthropocentric to environment-based (ecocentric) philosophies and practices” in order to “preserve non-human animal and plant species, and what 'pristine' environments remained” (3). Ironically this shift causes disaster for the native or voiceless population who are farther driven to the periphery, occupying a position much below animals and plants in the hierarchical ladder.

Amitav Ghosh's multi-layered novel *The Hungry Tide* is based upon a vital issue- contending human-animal priorities. This has become an increasingly popular debate among postcolonial and environmental critics. These critics are conscious of the dilemma of conserving the endangered ecosystems and animals and safeguarding the equally vulnerable local (subaltern) people. The situation becomes of grave concern when both human and environment demand prioritization. Even independence cannot protect the rights of the dispossessed population. On the other hand, there are plenty of incidents throughout the world where the subaltern people become the target of their own government who are in collaboration with international agencies evict these people from their land to materialize their petty self-interest. In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism Literature, Animals, Environment* Huggan and Tiffin show “Whether or not such collusion against one's own nationals occurs with the cooperation of International corporations, it is often precisely those animals and humans allegedly being protected who are the first to suffer from its destructive effects.” (203)

Ghosh's novel is developed against the historical background of an incident in 1979. The then West Bengal government launched a fierce action to drive away thousands of refugees from the island of Morichjhapi in the delta region of Sunderbans to get the favour of the WWF (World Wildlife Fund). That place was also “the last refuge of the Bengal Tiger, hunted to near extinction in other parts of India, especially during colonial times” (Huggan and Tiffin 203). So the WWF undertook a massive project of reserving a large section of region for the conservation of tiger. With that end in view, in the form of reward WWF put pressure on the incumbent Left Front government to protect the area from human infiltration. These Morichjhapi refugees were not the native of that area. They were banished first by the displacement during the Partition and “later, in the early 1970s, by the break-up of East and West Pakistan and the founding of Bangladesh” ((Huggan and Tiffin 203). These settlers facing inhuman subjugation and neglect became united against the government which resulted in economic blockade. Failing to evict the refugees from that area government engaged off-duty policemen and even criminal gangs to 'remove' the refugees. In some extreme cases during this expulsion program some refugees faced murder and rape though they were carried out unofficially.

The dilemma of human rights and conservation has been presented in a brilliant way in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. What Ghosh tries to show that neither the Morichjhapi Massacre refugees nor their descendants (villagers of Ghosh's novel) are the indigenous people of that region. The prolonged history of displacement forced them to get settled in that area “which constantly shifting between a state of land and a state of water, provides an objective correlative for their own unstable past” ((Huggan and Tiffin 204). Despite this gruesome setting *The Hungry Tide* presents a brilliant blending of esoteric sights, sounds and smells of the delta region beyond Kolkata. The inhabitants of this place not only become acclimatize with the ever-shifting rhythms and moods of that area but also depend on it. And here the readers are introduced with the two protagonists from entirely two different backgrounds- Piya, an American citizen of Bengali descent and Kanai, a city-based translator and self-styled cosmopolitan living in Delhi. From the very

beginning they tended to show their irreconcilable attitudes towards environmental and social issues. Piya, being a highly-educated scientist falls in love with Fokir, a local illiterate fisherman. Fokir's clear concept about the region and his intuitive knowledge about the endangered river dolphin brought Piya close to Fokir. These dolphins are the one on which Piya came all the way from America to do her research project. Nevertheless, Piya is rescued by Fokir twice-first from the corrupt park warden and his partner, a local captain and second at the cost of his own life, he protects her from the tempest. Ghosh, though sympathetic towards Piya, is critical about both Piya and Kanai because of "their shared tendency to dismiss local social/ ecological knowledge." (Huggan and Tiffin 204). Nilima, on the other hand, though not so much aware of dolphin or environment conservation, attunes her life to the happiness and sorrows of that region. Thus Piya is enraged at the traumatic scene of the tiger being killed defenseless by the villagers. On the other hand, she fails to take into consideration the innumerable lives of the villagers taken by these cruel animals.

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh seems to side with the displaced population. Huggan and Tiffin infer "People, Ghosh seems to assume, necessarily take precedence over animals" (204). Fokir's mother Kusum was the victim of the Morichjhapi massacre. Fokir's vigorous participation in the killing of the tiger is a symbolic vengeance of the villagers against the government. In the case of the villagers they sometimes encroach on the territories of the tigers and thus fall a prey to this man-eater. Ghosh's environment is, however, much stronger than humans or the animals. Fokir and Piya take shelter in a tree to protect themselves not from man-eater but from the tempest as does the tiger as fellow inhabitant of that hostile environment.

Sundarbans is portrayed by Ghosh not merely as a location but as an epitome of human and animal qualities, which has its root in myth. Thus it touches the elemental side of the human psyche and takes us beyond the rational understanding. The inanimate river and islands of Sundarbans are animated by the myth of goddess Ganga whose "descent from the heavens" was brought under control by Shiva. Ghosh portrays river not just as a living being but as a reverberation of the ebb and flow of the lives of people of this region.

This region was once untouched by the human influence until the arrival of the English visionary, Daniel Hamilton, the first settler who discovered that the whole region is full of predators. In the words of Mashima, "in the beginning (...) there was nothing but forest here. There were no people, no embankments, no fields. Just *kadaarbada*, mud and mangrove (...) And everywhere you looked there were predators-tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards" (HT107). At a time "when people were so desperate for land that they were willing to sell themselves in exchange for a *bigha* or two" (107), Hamilton ventured to establish a settlement where there "would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas", where "(e)veryone would have to live and work together" (109). This was a perfect model for human settlement where people "pouring in" from different parts. As a result, the conflict with the predators became imminent. This huge influx of people creates "a feast for them" with the animals killing "hundreds of people" (109). Hamilton declares rewards to "anyone who kills a tiger or crocodile", which ends up with killing spree, with people killing animals "with their hands. With knives. With bamboo spears. (With) whatever they could find at hand" (109). This is the paradise created by Hamilton for humans which is void of animals.

But the myth of Bon Bibi unveils a new story of relationship between human settlers and the predators. The myth introduces us with Bon Bibi, the tiger goddess, who "rules over the jungle, that the tigers, crocodiles and other animals do her bidding" (210). Born from a "pious Muslim through the intervention of the archangel Gabriel", Bon Bibi and her twin are assigned with the task by Gabriel to perform the "divine mission" of making "the country of eighteen tides (...) fit for human habitation" (213)- an area under the command of the demon king Dokkhin Rai. Bon Bibi defeats Dokkhin Rai in a battle, and divides the region into two parts-one for humans, and one for Dokkhin Rai "and his demon hordes". From

then onward, Bon Bibi rules both the human world and the animal world safeguarding “the law of the forest, which was that the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and the righteous were rewarded” (217).

Ghosh has not transported us into a romanticized pastoral world where man and beast coexist in a tranquil environment; rather he chooses realism to let his readers show empathy towards the fate of humans, animals and nature in a shared ecosystem. Huggan and Tiffin conclude their editorial by saying that as far as environmental problem is concerned “neither a practical nor a physical management of the problem is offered” (5) Ghosh, however, takes us at the heart of the conflict between environmentalist and humanist with an appeal to acknowledge and understand the plight of the poor by environmentalist and that of the animals and nature by human rights group. Ghosh gives us a vivid expression to the fact that these two groups in the guise of neo-colonialists exploiting the lives of the marginalized and the voiceless.

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