

ECOCATASTROPHE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*: A DELINEATION

Dr. R. Raja, Assistant Professor of English, The Madura College (Autonomous), Madurai, TN
N. Arunkarthik, Assistant Professor of English, VHNSN College (Autonomous), Virudhunagar

Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's writing deals in the epic themes of travel and diaspora, history and memory, political struggle and communal violence, love and loss, while all the time crossing the generic boundaries between anthropology and art work. Both his fictional and non-fictional narratives tend to be transnational in sweep, moving restlessly across countries, continents and oceans. Formidably learned and meticulously researched, there is something equally epic about the scale of scholarship that sits behind each of his books. However, Ghosh never loses sight of the intimate human dimension of things. It is no coincidence that his writing ritually returns to Calcutta (the author's birth place), and, for all its global ambition, is thickly accented by the registers and referents of Bengali and South Asian culture. The Hungry Tide is one of his famous novels published in 2005. Taking place in the aftermath of the devastating 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean that devastated the entire area. This novel takes place primarily in the Sundarbans, a massive mangrove forest that is split between West Bengal in India and Bangladesh. Containing tigers, crocodiles, and various other predators, it serves as a dramatic backdrop for Ghosh's story of the environment, faith, class structure, and the complex history of India in terms of colonialism and sectarian conflict. Among these themes I include Ecocatastrophe in his characters and settings that intersect throughout the novel.

Key words: *diaspora, transnational, generic boundaries, communal violence, political struggle, ecocatastrophe.*

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines *Ecocatastrophe* as a major destructive upset in the balance of nature especially when caused by the action of humans. Nature is a gift to mankind. Human beings have to take more measures for afforestation. But human society betrays nature ironically. As a result, human beings are punished with natural calamities, like Tsunami, earthquakes, etc. Amitav Ghosh is one of the writers who concentrate on these issues in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004).

During Bhuj earthquake of 2001, in the Indian state of Gujarat on the Pakistan boundary, more than 20,000 people killed and nearly 1, 50,000 people were injured. During Tsunami of 2004, in the Indian Ocean, nearly 225,000 people lost their life. Ghosh shows his concern for the environment in this novel. He describes how nature is impelled to react against human society.

The novel takes place after the effects of Tsunami in 2004 in the Indian Ocean. The story of *The Hungry Tide* takes place primarily in the Sundarbans, a massive mangrove forest that is split between West Bengal in India and Bangladesh. The tiny islands, known as Sundarbans, have deadly creatures like tigers, crocodiles and various other predators. The environment serves as a background to where faith, class structure, and the complex history of India in terms of colonialism and sectarian conflict. Like all of

Ghosh's novels, *The Hungry Tide* portrays the actions of a wide range of characters.

Fokir sacrifices his life for Piya's dream. Fokir helps Piya, a marine biologist, in her research work. Piya is excited and she admires fins and dolphins. She wants to prevent them from danger. She does not find difference between human beings and animals. She recalls those moments which she has seen for the first

time:

Piya remembered how her heart had leapt when she first saw the newborn surfacing beside its mother and she could not bear to look at the carcass any longer. She gestured to Fokir to pick it up by the flukes while she took hold of the fins. Between them, they swung it back and forth a couple of times and then heaved it out into the river. She had expected it to bob up again, immediately, but to her surprise it sank quickly from view. (346-47)

Piya and Fokir spend much time at such places. Fokir is also surprised to see Piya's involvement in her research works. He is also happy to be with her. He decides even to endanger his life. He moves with Piya to help her find more animals in the deltas. He is described as follows:

As the current was pulling them away, Fokir stood up and began to point, upriver and downriver, east and west. Presently, as his gestures became more explicit, she understood he was telling her that what she had seen was not an uncommon sight. He had come upon three such carcasses: one of them had washed up a short distance downriver from this very place that was why he had thought of coming to this way. (347)

Piya and Fokir enjoy in observing the movements of dolphins. They keep on appearing and disappearing. Piya is astonished at the behavior of these animals. Ghosh describes it beautifully.

By the time they were in mid-river, the dolphin's appeared to be dispersing except for one, which seemed to be lingering in the wake of the pod. Piya had the sense that this animal was circling over the sunken carcass as the currents rolled it along the river bed. Was this the mother? There was no way of knowing for sure. (347)

The dolphins appear near them. They produce noise and they disappear. But it is impossible for them to catch those dolphins. The waves become more powerful and it becomes very difficult to Piya and Fokir to resist any longer. They wait there for a long time. Ghosh narrates all the events with minute details:

Then, at once, the dolphins sounded and disappeared. Piya would have liked to follow them, but she knew it would be impossible. It was a little past four in the afternoon now and the tide was flooding in. The currents, which had favoured them in the morning, were now pushing powerfully against them. Even with two of them rowing, their progress was certain to be painfully slow. (347)

In his deep trip with Piya, Fokir tries his best in helping her. Though the weather is not conducive for the journey in the river, they continue. They are unaware of the inevitable danger to be caused by the wind. The wind blows faster. Now Fokir understands the danger in the river. He realizes that the wind is hostile to them. But he does not show fear.

In a few minutes, the line became a densely spun web, anchoring the boat to the forest. Yet, despite the care he had taken, Fokir has not been able to keep the line's attachments out of his way. By the time he was done, his face and chest were cross-hatched with nicks and cuts. (378)

Fokir determines to save Piya by risking his life. He conveys to Piya several tricks in order to save her life from this danger:

Now, Fokir took hold of Piya's arm and led her deeper into the island, crouching almost double against the wind. They came to a tree that was, for a mangrove, unusually tall and thick trunked. Fokir gestured to her to climb up and he followed at her heels as she pulled herself into the branches, when they were about three meters from the ground, he chose a sturdy branch and motioned to her to sit astride it, facing the trunk. (378)

The life of Piya is very important for him. In the midst of fatal weather, he battles against nature. The dense forest poses many problems. The evening becomes darker and it is difficult for him to see anything in that fatal darkness. The gentle breeze turns into a storm. Amitav Ghosh depicts the scenery with a realistic touch:

Powerful as it already was, the gale had been picking up strength all along. At a certain point its noise had reached a volume where its very quality had undergone a change. It sounded no longer like the wind but like some other element the usual blowing, sighing and rustling had turned into a deep, earsplitting rumble, as if the earth itself had begun to move. (378-79)

In that fatal evening, Piya and Fokir try to protect themselves. Fokir becomes a shield to Piya. Amitav Ghosh gives a vivid description.

Their bodies were so close, so firmly merged that she could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not: it had fused them together and made them one. (390)

During the hurricane, Fokir loses his life while saving Piya. Later Piya narrates the events to Kanai. She tells him that Fokir has uttered the names of Moyana and Tutul in his last moments of life. Piya glorifies heroic act of Fokir.

His mouth was close enough to her ear so that she'd been able to hear him. He'd said Moyna's name and Tutul's before the breath faded on his lips. She'd left his body on the tree, tied to the trunk with Moyna's sari, to keep it safe from animals they would have to go back to Gajrontola to cut it down. (392)

Piya is disturbed by Fokir's death. For Piya, Fokir is a man of her mission, dream and ambition. As Piya has promised Fokir, she wants to show her gratitude to his wife and child. She recalls her promises:

She recalled the promises she had made to him, in the silence of her heart, and how, in those last moments, with the wind and the rain still raging around them, she had been unable to do anything for him other than to hold a bottle of water to his lips. She remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words. (277)

Thus *The Hungry Tide* is an excellent novel in which Amitav Ghosh shows his unique talent in the field of science, nature and geography. After Fokir's death, Piya joins Badabon Trust. She wants to provide financial assistance to Fokir's son, Tutul for his education. She also wants to save dolphins from danger. She calls Nilima's house as her new home. She wants to continue her research there. Finally she does not want to move anymore.

The Hungry Tide is a lesson to mankind. Ghosh illustrates the laws of nature in the novel. Though man enjoys supremacy, he is always bounded to nature.

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