

**ECO-CRITICAL STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE***  
**A LOOK INTO THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE WORK OF AMITAV GHOSH**

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**ABSTRACT:**

'Humans cannot survive without nature but nature can survive.'

Taking this issue in consideration, ecology is an important aspect in the current society. In literature, ecology seems to be lacking in the works of early Indian English writers. But the contemporary writers in Indian English Literature prefer to create awareness of the consequences of human actions which damages the planets basic life support system. Amitav Ghosh is one of those writers who concentrated on writing about eco-criticism in his works. This presentation on the Eco-Critical Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* explores the human relationship with nature because the story is set in the world's largest mangrove ecosystem – the Sundarbans. The novel portrays the life of animals, plants, and refugees in northeastern India.

**KEYWORDS:** Ecology, Literature, Nature, Eco-Criticism, Environment

A Sahitya Akademi Award winner, Amitav Ghosh, an Indian writer was born on July 11, 1956 in Kolkata. He has completed his studies in Dehradun, New Delhi. He was so interested in writing a novel about the national and personal identity, across the Indian and Southeast Asian people. He completed both his undergraduate and postgraduate at the University of Delhi. In 1982, he did his Ph.D. in social anthropology at the University of Oxford, following that he was teaching in many prestigious institutions like American University, Columbia University, and Queens College of the Town University of latest York. His first novel was *The Circle of Reason* which was published in 1986. It deals with terrorists and leaves India for Northern Africa and the Middle East. Next he wrote *The Shadow Lines* (1988) which portrays the departure of British

people from India during 1947. These two works were a major part of his career as they got him the attention of an International readership and these two were written in English. He has won many prestigious awards across the world. The Hungry Tide has won the Hutch Crossword Book Prize in 2006.

The Hungry Tide begins with Kanai, a translator from New Delhi and Piya, a cetologist. Kanai, as soon as he saw Piya, he was astonished by the way she held herself. Piya wants to do a research on a rare species of dolphins in Canning. Kanai came to know that she is a foreigner. Kanai goes to Lusibari to read the diary to his aunt, Nilima, which was written by his uncle, Nirmal, before he died. Piya and Kanai travel to Sundarbans.

“It was true of course that this line was the only rail connection to the Sundarbans. But so far as he knew it was never used by tourists – the few who travelled in that direction usually went by boat, hiring steamers or launches on Kolkata’s riverfont.” – (pg. 4)

Later, Kanai invites Piya to Lusibari. He visits his aunt and he soon realizes that Nilima is still affected by Nirmal’s death twenty years ago. Kanai remembers the landmarks of Sundarbans and thinks about Sir Daniel Hamilton who set up a cooperative society for people to live with no regard to caste or religion. Then Kanai learns the truth that Kusum was killed in Massacre in 1979. Her son, Fokir, now lives on the islands with his wife, Moyna and son, Tutul. Now Kanai reads the notebook which was written in May 1979. Nirmal mentioned that he was with Kusum on the Islands and he made sure what happened was not forgotten. Nilima gets very upset as Nirmal didn’t mention anything about her. Kanai met Kusum in 1970 and had become friends. They had gone to performances of the local legend The Glory of Bon Bibi. As soon as the

performance got over one night, Horen took Kusum away for her safety and Nirmal never saw her again for years.

On the other hand, Piya gets permission from the Forest Department and begins her research accompanied by a forest guard and a boat pilot, Mejda. Both men were not helping her, so she decides to ask a fisherman about the dolphins. Piya realizes that the forest guard wants to fine the fisherman and his son. The fisherman says to Piya that he often sees dolphins in the area. Piya wants to give money to the fisherman and falls into the water as the Forest Department boat pulls away. The fisherman saves Piya and pulls her into his boat. She wants to go with the fisherman as she is afraid to go with the forest guard. She asks the fisherman if he can take her to Lusibari. To that, he agrees that he can take her to Lusibari. Then the fisherman introduces himself as Fokir and his son Tutul. He treats her with respect. Next day, they make a visit to a place called Garjontola where they see seven Irrawaddy Dolphins swimming. Piya was shocked to see the dolphins behaving in a different way, as she believed, because the dolphins migrate daily out of a pool rather than twice a year. The next day, she observed the dolphins and was mapping the riverbed. Fokir and Piya are in joy as they can communicate with each other well. The mapping of the riverbed by rowing in straight lines helps Fokir with the opportunity to fish for crabs. Piya loses her hand to a crocodile. Then she and Fokir row to Lusibari. There, Nilima invites Piya to stay in the guesthouse with Kanai and he decides to help Piya by translating what Fokir says the next day.

In the next several days, he reads Nirmal's notebook and he comes to know how Nirmal found involved with the settlement on Morichjhapi after he retired from teaching. During his early days, Nirmal was a famous Marxist in Calcutta. He was arrested and suffered from a mental breakdown, so he had to leave the city, so he spent thirty years as a teacher in Lusibari. In

the course of that period, he wrote nothing. But he remained a firm believer in Marxist Theory, and his wife was annoyed by this thing. His wife spent those days developing the Babadon Trust, which provides healthcare and other services to the locals. She also developed a Women's Union to help the many widows on Lusibari, as it's common for men to die while out fishing.

Nirmal started visiting schools with the help of Horen after his retirement. One day, Nirmal and Horen were caught in a storm and they met Kusum on the Island of Morichjhapi. She told them about everything, like from finding her mother to joining the refugee march from central India to the Sundarbans. Nirmal was very happy that Morichjhapi was developed in a Marxist way, so he offered to teach the children there. Nilima found out that Nirmal was involved in the issue. She was very angry and insisted him about the refugees and said that the land was protected by forestland. Nilima refused to provide medical services to the people on the islands. Nirmal promised to keep his involvement secret and continued to go to Morichjhapi with Horen.

A restriction was started by the police on the island, which Kusum and Fokir survived. Though Kusum survived, she was worried about the settlers who had been killed by the people for the sake of animals. Then Nirmal heard that the police were going to attack the islands. Nirmal and Horen went to warn Kusum about the attack and while they were on their way, Nirmal completed the notebook. While Horen took Fokir away and saved the notebook for Kanai, Nirmal decided to stay on the Island. After some days, Nilima finds Nirmal in Canning. He died after a few months.

Piya and Kanai negotiate with Fokir and Moyna as they have to go out for a week to survey dolphins in Garjontola. Horen took them to his bhotbhoti, the Megha. Kanai accompanies

them as a translator. Nilima is worried about the risks after she comes to know that Kanai is going with Piya. She says that the tigers kill many people every week. When she realizes that Kanai is interested in Piya, she tells him to be careful. Then Moyna asks Kanai to intervene between Fokir and Piya. To that, Kanai tries to convince Moyna by saying that he would be a better partner than Fokir, which angers Moyna. They all leave for Lusibari the next day. Kanai is very jealous of Fokir and Piya despite the language barriers. In the afternoon, the Megha's engine dies, but Horen manages to float it to a village where his relative will help fix the boat.

During the evening, Piya and Kanai hear the sound of water buffalo giving birth. They also hear voices on the nearby islands so they decided to go and investigate. They came to know that a tiger which killed two people had been caught in a building with a water buffalo, so the villagers were poking bamboo poles inside the building. Piya is angry and tries to break up the mob and Fokir pulls her way because the villagers want to burn the tiger alive. The next day, Piya and Kanai discussed what happened. Piya is shocked, but Kanai says that things like that happen because environmentalists like Piya try to save tigers rather than people who are also a part of the habitat. He says that the government does not care about the poor people who are actually the real victims.

The following day, Piya, Kanai, and Fokir go to Garjontola to observe the dolphins. Piya talks about how she got interested in dolphins, and Fokir says that he knows of this place because Kusum talked about it. Then Fokir started to say some chants, as Kanai is the translator he said it is too hard to translate for Piya. After a few hours, Kanai agrees to help in observing the dolphins the following day on Fokir's boat. The next day, Kanai tried to make conversation with Fokir but it didn't work out. They reach Garjontola and Fokir points out those fresh tiger tracks and talks about how goddess Bon Bibi will protect people with good heart. He implied that we can check

if Kanai has a good heart. After reaching there, Kanai falls in the mud and gets angry, this leads Fokir to leave. Soon after that, Kanai crashes inland to escape from the crocodile. He comes across a trigger and is rescued by Piya, Fokir and Horen. As they don't believe that he saw a tiger, he leaves for Lusibari.

The next day, Kanai leaves Piya and Fokir while he goes with Horen to Lusibari on the Megha. In the middle of their travel, they come to know about an upcoming cyclone and decide to go back to get Piya and Fokir. When they came back, the boat was missing so they decided to wait overnight for them. Piya and Fokir went to track the dolphins and found them circling a dead calf. That night, they drop the anchor far away from Garjontola, and Piya reads Kanai's letter. It had the translation of the chant that Fokir was chanting about the goddess Bon Bibi.

Early the next morning, Horen reveals to Kanai that both he and Nirmal were in love with Kusum. Kusum only liked Horen. Hours later, they come to a conclusion that they can't wait for Piya and Fokir, so they leave Garjontola. As Kanai walks to the shore, he slips and the notebook he was carrying for Nirmal falls into the turbulent water. Later, when Kanai and Nilima are staying in the guesthouse during the storm, she tells him that the most important thing Nirmal did was build a cyclone shelter at the hospital. As he has lost the notebook, Kanai says he will rewrite Nirmal's story from his memory and Nilima's request to include her perspective within the tale.

During the storm, Fokir and Piya tie themselves to a tree on Garjontola, with Piya squeezed between Fokir and the trunk. After the storm's eye passes and wind changes, they spot a tiger. Unfortunately Fokir is fatally struck by a large object soon after. Piya, able to steer Fokir's boat toward Lusibari the next day, recounts the events to Kanai and Horen when they

find her aboard the Megha. She stays in Lusibari for a few weeks and then returns a month later, much to Nilima's surprise. She shares her plan to collaborate with the Babadon Trust to establish a conservation program in the area, intended to involve local fishermen, and she wishes to name the program after Fokir.

“The Hungry Tide” by Amitav Ghosh weaves an intricate narrative that encompasses various themes including ecology, migration, love, and grief. Ghosh's title “The Hungry Tide” emphasizes the significance of the environment within the context of the novel. Through vivid storytelling, he portrays the lives of individuals residing in the Sundarbans, capturing the beauty and challenges of this unique setting. His narrative serves as a powerful exploration of the interplay between human lives and the natural world, emphasizing the profound impacts of environmental changes and the complex relationship between the inhabitants of the Sundarbans and their fragile ecosystem. The novel effectively connects the human relationship with nature, illustrating how human actions both cause and are caused by the environment. Human activities like deforestation, fishing, and shrimp farming have a direct impact on the Sundarban's ecosystem. The novel delves into the spiritual connection between the characters and the environment. The beliefs and customs of the local communities are deeply rooted in nature, and they find solace, guidance, and meaning in their surroundings. The Hungry Tide provides a rich tapestry of the complex and interconnected relationship between humans and nature. It shows how human activities both impact and are influenced by the natural environment, emphasizing the delicate balance that exists in this unique and ecologically significant setting. The author approaches the themes of nature and human interaction in an ecocentric way. This means that, in his perspective, nature takes a central role, and the well-being of the environment is of utmost importance. Ghosh presents an ecocentric perspective that emphasizes the intrinsic value of

nature and the need for a harmonious relationship between humans and the environment. Sundarbans mangrove forest plays a crucial and symbolic role throughout the narrative. The Sundarbans, a vast and complex ecosystem of tidal rivers, estuaries, and mangrove forests, serves as a powerful backdrop to the story and carries a symbolic meaning: Harsh Beauty and Danger: The beauty of the Sundarbans is contrasted with its inherent danger. It's a place of breathtaking natural beauty, but it's also a harsh and unforgiving environment, reflecting the dualities in human nature and relationships in the story. He captures the conflict between the environment and the resilient inhabitants of the Sundarbans.

This novel gives an overview of beauty and humanity. The following lines describes the nature as,

When we see a green lawn that has been watered with desalinated water in Abu Dhabi or Southern California been content to spend their water thriftily in nurturing a single vine or shrub, we are looking at an expression of a yearning that may have been midwived by the novels Jane Austen. (pg. 13)

Through the lens of ecological literary criticism, the novel delves into the current environmental challenges faced by the region, emphasizing the delicate balance between the natural elements of water and Earth. Ghosh skillfully portrays the complex connections between the landscapes, the communities living within it, the water that defines their existence, and the cultural differences that shape their lives. His narrative underscores the enduring struggle between the inhabitants and their surroundings, highlighting the profound impact of environmental changes and the resilient spirit of those who call the Sundarbans their home. The changes in the Sundarbans serve as a backdrop for the evolving relationships and challenges



faced by the characters in the novel. It underscores the dynamic and interconnected nature of both the natural environment and the human experiences depicted in the story. The force of nature is a central theme, and the lives of the characters are intricately woven into the extraordinary environment of the Sundarbans.

Humans have reshaped the entire island they converted the forest and the mangroves into the destruction of a forest but cutting down all the trees around them by constructing buildings and these changes destroyed the life of habit for seabirds, animals living place, etc., traced out as the root cause for the ecological and environmental problems and the source for hungry tides and earthquakes.

I had planned to stay late, but the unseasonal weather led to change of mind and I decided to leave. But the weather continued to worsen as we were chatting so after a few minutes I decided to head straight back by a route that I rarely needed to take. (pg. 15 – 16)

The novel underscores the delicate and complex nature of human existence on our fragile planet. The *Hungry Tide* weaves a narrative that underscores the power fragility, and interconnectedness of human existence within a remarkable, but perilous, natural environment. It serves as a reflection on the broader implications of how humans interact with the natural world on our planet. Moreover, the tigers in *The Hungry Tide* symbolize the resilience and power of nature. They also act as a reflection of the characters' own internal conflicts and struggles. Like the tigers, the characters grapple with their own inner demons and desires, mirroring the broader theme of the human-nature connection.

Wasn't this why people who lived in close proximity with tigers so often regarded them as being something more than just animals? Because the tiger was the only animal that forgave you for being so ill at ease in your translated world?

Thus the novel deals with the issues faced by the people and it is important to address these problems and find a solution to these issues. Safeguarding the environment is imperative for ensuring the sustainability of our planet by implementing sustainable practices, conserving natural resources, reducing pollution, and protecting biodiversity, we can strive to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change and promote a healthier and more sustainable world. It is essential for individuals, communities, and governments to work together in adopting responsible and eco-friendly practices to ensure a harmonious coexistence with nature.

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