
A Critique of *The Hungry Tide* By Amitav Ghosh through the Lens of Anthropocene

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Abstract

"The Hungry Tide" By Amitav Ghosh is set against the background of a large mangrove forest, the Sundarbans in the Bay of Bengal. Ghosh addresses the ecological, economic, and political challenges faced by the marginalised people of the archipelago called the Sundarbans. The novel explores the implications of living and dying in the contemporary moment. Piya's warm interaction with Orcaella, and Fokir's knowledge of the struggles with the tides showcase how humans interact with nature on different planes, making sustainable coexistence possible and impossible at the same time. The objective of this paper is to explore the conflicting relation of man and nature as projected in the novel. An attempt would be made to locate how culture and nature are entangled in the lives of the inhabitants of the tide country. It will also examine the ecological issues in the Anthropocene raised in the novel through the presentation of the conflicting coexistence of humanity and nature. Ghosh hints at how human-induced climate change has impacted the region as well as the lives of its inhabitants.

Keywords: Mangrove forest, marginalised, Anthropocene, human, culture, and nature.

Introduction

In the 21st century, Anthropocene literature has evolved as part of a multidisciplinary approach, enabling literature to delve beyond established forms, themes, and concepts. Therefore, practitioners of literature have come up with a wide range of creations, making Anthropocentrism a key theme directly or indirectly. Ecocriticism is an approach that studies the relation between the physical environment and literature. American poets Emerson and Thoreau had employed ecocriticism in their writing. They were strong believers in environmentalism. They severely criticised industrialisation. Since then, writers have employed ecocriticism in their writings. After the millennium, Anthropocene has become a popular phrase, and literature with traces of Anthropocene is receiving considerable attention in academia. In the recent past, human activities have become the leading factor influencing the Earth's climate and have badly affected the environment. Nobel-winning chemist Paul J. Crutzen and his collaborator, Eugene F. Stoermer, a marine science specialist, proposed the term Anthropocene for the new geological age in 2000. Wilson, E. O. (2008) opines in 'Foreword to Jeffrey Sachs, Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet' that humanity has consumed or transformed enough of Earth's irreplaceable resources to be in better shape than ever before. Human beings are clever enough to achieve self-understanding as a unified species. Humans would be sensible to consider themselves as a species just like other species. Chakrabarty, D., in the year 2009, published a paper in the Chicago Journals entitled 'The Climate of History: Four Theses.' In this essay, he urges academics to address the issue of climate and engage in serious research to address Anthropocene, a crisis of many dimensions. In 'Introduction: The Literature of the Anthropocene.' (2018), Cristofaro and Cordle opine that Anthropocene stresses that human beings look beyond the trajectories of temporal

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(human life time of an individual), spatial (locality, territory), and existential (existence in human terms) to understand this geological epoch. Bhusan, V. (2021), in his paper 'An Ecology and Ecocriticism in Amitabh Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*', locates environmentalism and destabilisation as major themes of the novel. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* can very well be studied in the light of Anthropocene. In recent times, climate catastrophes have become frequent owing to the Anthropocene and are raging across the whole world with the alarm of the sixth extinction event on Earth. The irreparable loss of biodiversity due to the loss of habitats of many species, climate change, and overexploitation of resources is changing the Earth as never before. This is happening because humans have emerged as the dominant species over other species, jeopardizing the different ecologies of this planet called 'Earth'.

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh is a staunch reminder of human impact on Earth (Anthropocene). The setting of the novel is the archipelago of Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest. The name Sundarbans is derived from 'Sundari' (*Heritiera minor*), the dominant mangrove species of the delta. Besides 'Sundari', other significant species like 'Garjan', 'Garan', and 'Gewa' are found there. It also vividly portrays the environment and ecology of the region. The novel draws the landscape of rivers, forests, sea, and land with vivid details. The tide country is formed by the conjunction of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. Morichjhāpi is one of the biggest islands in the tide country. Its shoreline extends about a dozen miles. At the same time, it presents how human beings struggle to survive in that land, braving the wildlife and climate catastrophe. The everyday struggle of the inhabitants there raises the question of the sustainability of both humans and animals in that territory. Ghosh has worked on different aspects of existence in that land. He has unfolded themes like the myth, religion, language, livelihood, political interference, ecological concerns, philosophical belief, etc., in the novel. The novel illustrates the perilous coexistence of man with a challenging physical environment. It explores the implications of living and dying in the contemporary moment. Piya's warm interaction with Orcaella, and Fokir's knowledge of the struggles with the tides showcase how humans interact with nature on different planes, making sustainable coexistence possible and impossible at the same time.

Objectives: The paper will investigate the conflicting relationship of human beings with nature as projected in the novel. An attempt would be made to locate how culture and nature are entangled in the lives of the inhabitants of the tide country. It will also examine the ecological issues of the Anthropocene raised in the novel through the presentation of the conflicting coexistence of humanity and nature.

Methodology

A descriptive approach for analysis and synthesis of concepts and information has been adopted. The researcher's insight has been used to put the novel in the framework of Anthropocene and to examine the interrelation of man, nature, and culture. Documentary Sources, like articles from reputable journals, books, and online databases related to the topic, have been utilized.

Man, and Nature in *The Hungry Tide*

Man shares an intricate relation with Nature as nature provides sustenance to all organisms, including man on Earth. An increasing number of human beings with their intelligence has made man the dominant species on earth. Yet for almost everything man depends on nature-

be it food, fuel, or fodder. Unfortunately, man's myopic vision limited him to see beyond temporal (De Cristofaro and Cordle). Human impact on Earth as a significant species has led to irreversible environmental degradation. Harmful social, economic, and environmental side effects of consumerist development are resulting in the extinction of species, loss of biodiversity, and suffering of human beings. In the capitalist development, marginalised people suffer the most as they are disadvantaged, underprivileged, and powerless. They hardly have access to decision-making. The Morichjhāpi resistance also testifies to the fact that the refugees wanted to take shelter in the lap of nature, building a world of their own. The island is reserved for tigers, where human movement is illegal. The island must be saved for the flora and fauna of the region, for the animals of land and water. The conservation project for the island is funded by people from all over the world.

Here arises the natural conflict between animal and man as both share the natural world. Due to the increasing human population, wild habitats are also occupied by human beings. The land has the capacity to sustain human beings. In the Sundarbans, there had been more species of fish found than in the whole of inland Europe. The land would also sustain other animals inhabiting the island, who also have their claims. There seemed to be a never-ending resentment of the land against the presence of human beings there. Human beings are aware of the cunning and resourcefulness of the land at the same time. Every year, dozens of people succumbed to death in the hold of that dense vegetation, killed by fierce animals like tigers, snakes, and crocodiles.

On the other hand, for Piya, the cetologist, marine animals like dolphins have a special place in her heart. She is also against the tiger-killing in the Sundarbans. She wondered if there were any more examples of synergy between the human and the wild. There could not be any limit to the wonderful cetacean gift for springing surprises, she speculated.

Starvation and calamity were everyday matters in the day-to-day existence of the people of the tide country. Survival is an everyday challenge for the people who depend on the natural resources of the forests, rivers, and the sea. The encroachment of humans even in the most difficult terrain raises manifold questions. Why are these marginalised people pushed to fight daily death? Why are they not allocated land in the mainland? Why do the outcomes of development not reach them? All these questions need to be answered to understand the relationship between man, environment, and development.

Culture and Nature in *The Hungry Tide*: In the Sundarbans, people are worshippers of 'Bon Bibi', who is a saviour to them from the demonic attacks by the big cats, crocodiles, poisonous snakes, or cyclones. They, too, have the capability of myth-making like other dominant cultural communities. Their cultural practices display their struggles, realities, and fears. At Lusibari, Nilima was astounded to notice that many of the women of the island were dressed as widows in the apprehension of losing their husbands, who had gone to the sea to catch fish for survival. The cultural practice shows how wilderness holds fear in its heart. The wild can take human lives at any moment.

But there was another aspect of their living. They worship the Goddess 'Bon Bibi', the protector of their lives. The people of the island are believers of 'Bon Bibi', the deity of the forest. 'Bon Bibi' and her brother 'Shah Jangali' are the saviours of good souls. If someone calls 'Bon Bibi' with a pure heart, she appears to protect him from the demons of the Jungle. Nirmal informed Kanai that the residents believe in the miracles of gods and saints, and they worship

the statue of 'Bon Bibi'. They believe that 'Bon Bibi' is the ruler of the jungle. She has absolute control over the wild animals- tigers, crocodiles, and other animals. They all listen to her command.

'Haven't you noticed the little shrines outside the houses here? The statues are of Bon Bibi.' (Ghosh 95)

Like Nirmal, his wife Nilima also came to know about the wonders of Bon Bibi in the jungle. In fact, 'Bon Bibi Johurnama' tells the mythological tales which have been transmitted orally as well as in written form. Kanai had come to know Bon Bibi from the performance of Bon Bibi he witnessed during his stay in Lusibari. But surprisingly, the mythic story's setting is not in the heavens or banks of the Ganges. The opening scene is set in the city of Medina in Arabia, with mosques and minarets. A childless Sufi faqir named Ibrahim lived in the city of Medina. With the interference of Archangel Gabriel, Ibrahim becomes the father of twins: a daughter named Bon Bibi and a son named Shah Jangoli. When they grew up, they were designated with the divine mission to travel to 'the country of eighteen tides' with the mission of making the land appropriate for human inhabitation. After this, the siblings set out for the mangrove delta in the robes of Sufi mendicants. The 'country of eighteen tides' was at that time under the rule of a rancorous demon king, Dokkhin Rai. He had control over every animal, ghou, ghost, and evil spirit in the country of eighteen tides. He bore hatred for humankind and had an insatiable desire to have pleasure in human flesh. One day, he became alarmed by the 'azán', Muslim prayer. He became mindful of the presence of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli, the trespassers in his dominion. After a tough fight, Bon Bibi ultimately won but was kind enough to allow him to enjoy one half of the country, which would be in the wilderness. The other half of the forest was under Bon Bibi, and she would make this part safe for human habitation. Thus, the country of eighteen tides was divided into two parts: one was reserved for wilderness, and the other for cultivation and human habitat. This seemed to be a perfect arrangement until greed gripped man. Once, a man named Dhona wanted to make a fortune from the wilderness. He arranged a fleet of seven ships to set sail for the jungle. At that time, it was discovered that the crew was short of one man. He coaxed the ailing and old mother of Dukhey to allow him to set sail for the journey. The mother reluctantly permitted her son to leave with the instruction that whenever he is in danger, he must call Bon Bibi to save him. Bon Bibi, the saviour of the distressed and weak, has been considered as a mother of mercy. She is compassionate to the poor and meek. Bon Bibi would always come to rescue Dukhey. Dhona, on reaching the shore, agreed to keep Dukhey in the forest for Dakkhin Rai to feast on him in exchange for honey and wax. Accordingly, leaving the boy behind, the ship sailed back. The boy, on seeing the demon in the guise of a tiger, called for help from Bon Bibi and fainted. Immediately, both Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli came to the boy's rescue. Shah Jongoli chased the demon and forced it to run away from the place. Bon Bibi nursed the boy, cured him, and finally sent him back home with the reward of honey and wax. Thus, the virtuous are rewarded, and the demonic forces are kept at bay.

What is intriguing in this story is the share of wild habitat and human habitat. The balance is lost due to human greed, or when humans trespass into the wilderness, he is sure to incur problems. The mythic tales of Bon Bibi have been written down in a booklet by a Muslim Abdur Rahim under the title 'Bon Bibir Karamoti or that Bon Bibi Johuranama (The Miracles of Bon Bibi or The Narrative of Her Glory).' (Ghosh 220) The legend perhaps got its present shape in the late 19th century or in the early 20th century. It was a time when a new surge

of travellers moved to the tide country. In this land, people lived in the margins of larger events. People here spent days living a life of apprehension, uncertainty, and hunger. As the hunger of the tides as well as the hunger of wild animals brought an everyday risk to life. Yet they had the strong urge to live, fighting all odds. They strongly believe in the wonders of Bon Bibi, the saviour and the protector. It is believed that she would rescue them in times of trouble, so she is praised and worshipped. Her glory and magnificence have been passed verbally from generation to generation. Kusum had told her son Fokir about the glory of Bon Bibi, and he knew it by heart. Fokir knew the story by heart, and at the age of five, he could recite from memory many of the verses on the legend of Bon Bibi, the protector of the forest. Fokir also had a strong belief in the magical power of Bon Bibi, so he remained confident to survive the deadly cyclone.

The Hungry Tide as Anthropocene Literature

The Hungry Tide can well be studied as Anthropocene Literature, as the author points out how human activities have changed the terrains of the Sundarbans. Climate change and contamination of air, water, and soil are threatening human existence on Earth. Anthropocene has become a point of argument in different disciplines like Geology, History, Economics, Literature, Arts. Anthropocene is attracting the attention of different disciplines because of its relevance and significance. Anthropocentric activities of human beings have played havoc on the climate. The causes of Anthropocene are overpopulation, global pollution, degradation of oceans, and other forms of natural resources due to human actions. Climate change and its impact are one of the biggest concerns on Earth. The 13th Sustainable Goal of the United Nations is Climate Action. Human-induced climate change has disrupted the ecology of Earth, causing species extinction every single day. Considering the impending danger ahead, academicians of different disciplines, politicians, researchers, and common people must work hand in hand to mitigate this global crisis. Nothing can be of importance when the very survival of the human species is at risk. The people around the globe obviously are taking actions, but the question is whether the actions are sufficient to alleviate this problem. The people in power must take initiative to address this problem. Only collective effort and goodwill can bring forth some result. As long as people from the margins are not involved in the decision-making on climate issues, the SDGs adopted by the UN cannot be achieved.

The tide country was once covered with a mangrove forest with no human habitation. The islands are besieged by receding and flowing tides and reshape themselves. The wilderness accommodated wild animals. Once, there was nothing but jungle there. There was no trace of people. Neither was there any embankment nor farmland. 'Just kādā ār bādā, mud and mangrove.' (Ghosh, 52) Most of the land remained submerged during high tide. Only fierce animals like tigers, crocodiles, sharks, and leopards could be spotted. This is the original state of the land, but with people invading it, the equation has changed. Man claims the land as his own, but in actuality, it is for the original inhabitants, where man is none but an intruder. But the people invading the land have got their justification. They reasoned out that humans have created settlements by clearing land, ploughing, sowing, and fishing. They do not think that they indulged in any unfair activity. The archipelago has become crowded over a period of time. It has become packed with a rising population and limited means to sustain itself. The Sundarbans supported thousands of people. Some of these men were the descendants of the first settlers who went there in the 1920s. After the partition of India in 1947, more people

came to settle there. And more arrived to settle there after the Bangladesh war in 1971. These people take the risk of life to get a square meal. Their marginalised life makes them prey to the predators. But to survive, man also takes revenge on the animals. They kill them to make humans safe. The marine scientist Piya argued with Kanai that animals preyed on the villages for years. That's how animals also live, preying on other animals- goats and cows, and even men. Piya strongly opposed the idea of revenging on animals.

People started to settle in 'Morichjhāpi', an island strictly reserved for conserving tigers. As it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland, a huge number of people suddenly gathered there in 1978. Thousands of people congregated overnight and made the land a human habitat. They cleared the mangrove, erected an embankment, and made their dwellings. At first, people did not know where these people gathered. Gradually, it was clear that they were refugees from Bangladesh. Some of these refugees had taken shelter in India after Partition, while others had gradually infiltrated. They were the poorest people in Bangladesh. They had been oppressed and exploited both by the communal Muslims and the upper caste Hindus. The settlement is not legal as it occupies a reserved place for conservation. Piya, the cetologist, is against the killing of tigers for human benefit, whereas Kanai is complicit regarding this and cannot ignore the deaths of people. Piya tries to make him understand how important it is to allow every other species to live. Otherwise, human beings will become lonely and eventually kill the most deprived and underprivileged. Human beings are so absorbed in themselves that they often forget that the earth also belongs to other species. The conflict of opinion comes from whether, at human cost, other animals should be protected or whether humans recognise the need and value of the existence of other animals on earth.

'Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What'll be left then? Aren't we alone enough in the universe? And do you think it'll stop at that? Once we decide we can kill off other species, it'll be people next — just the kind of people you're thinking of, people who're poor and unnoticed.' (Ghosh 265)

The need of the hour is, as pointed out by Timothy Clark (2015), that humans must recognise themselves as a species. This would help humans to revere the need and existence of other species on Earth. Timothy appeals to the different disciplines to contribute as a redemptive force to overcome the impending collective danger ahead. The aim, nevertheless, is that politics, culture, and art should now promote a sort of species-consciousness, so that the worst outcomes of environmental degradation can be countered by the redemptive force of an increased and shared self-recognition, and the human Leviathan achieves some kind of responsible consciousness, argues Morton.

Likewise, Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* hints at how human-induced climate change (Anthropocene) has impacted the region as well as the lives of its inhabitants. The death of Fokir in the cyclone proves that, however adept and powerful a man is to tackle natural calamities, he falls short in front of Nature's wrath and fury. The novel has projected several devastating storms in the historical past that devoured many ships and their crews. The novel ends with a similar cyclonic storm that kills Fokir. Fakir had remarkable knowledge of the land and sea. He saved Piya from drowning. He is a serious and intense observer of nature, both the sea and the sky. He notices the dolphins and knows where they can be found. Looking at the sky's colour, Fakir could visualise the advent of the storm. Although illiterate, Fakir has the wisdom to understand nature. Yet all his knowledge is futile in front of Nature's claim. In his desperate attempt to save Piya in the storm, he was struck by a log: 'He'd been hit by

something very big and very heavy, an uprooted stump; it had hit him so hard that she too had been crushed against the trunk of the tree they were sitting on.’ (Ghosh 340)

Conclusion

The world’s teeming millions are pushing towards the hills and the waterbodies. The world has become too crowded. Human encroachment in the reserved area for wildlife poses danger for both humans and animals. The climate catastrophes are not always natural; they are caused by human interference with the natural processes of the Earth. We must wake up at least now, as the alarm has been sounded. In this risky adventure of interfering with the Earth’s system, humans would perish, causing irreparable damage to the different ecosystems on the Earth. Man’s supremacy on earth has taken human beings two steps forward and one step backward. Man resides in a utopian world, believing in prosperity, whereas it is pseudo-prosperity. The prosperity based on greed has only the seeds of ruin for humanity. Amitabh Ghosh has interwoven the saga of man, nature, and culture in the Anthropocene. The novel signals the warning that, despite being adept at tackling natural calamity, it can destroy him just like Fokir. He dies, knocked down by a hard log in the cyclone. Fokir had not seen any cyclone before this, as the last one had hit the land in the 1970s. The death of Fokir ironically symbolises the extinction of human beings on earth. The novel emphasises coexistence, humility, and respect for ecosystems. Myths in the novel are interwoven with ecological truths. It is a critique of modern, utilitarian approaches to Nature in the Anthropocene.

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