

The Environment and Animals: Eco-consciousness in *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh

SHAFIQR RAHMAN

Research Scholar, (Ph.D.)

Department of English

Aligarh Muslim University, India

Abstract:

This paper analyses the environmental issues and the relationship between humans and animals, appear in the novel, The Hungry Tide. The rising sea level and different natural disasters are constant threat to the islands in the Sundarbans. Many species in the area are on the verge of extinction. Local peoples and the environmentalists have different opinions regarding common environmental issues. The local peoples are directly affected by environmental projects but they do not have say in planning and execution of these projects. The issues of the conflict between animal rights and the question of human survival are deftly dealt with in this paper. The paper also investigates complex issues like confrontation between the government and the local people on land rights, evictions and resettlements and animal rights verses human rights. These issues need proper attention by governments, environmentalists, organizations and common peoples.

Key words: the Sundarbans, environment, climate change, dolphins, tigers, conservations, resettlements, ecosystems.

Introduction

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh can be studied from different angles but ecocritical perspective is dominant and

clear. It deals with the ecosystem of the Sundarbans, the climate change, conservations, resettlements, land rights, governmental policies concerning environment, conflict between humans and animals and the discovery, history, abundance and extinction of species. The division of the book is based on most important phenomenon of the Sundarbans the ebb and the flow. The part one of the book is named the ebb: *bhata* and the part two is named the flood: *jawar*. People living there face tough weather of the Bay of Bengal like cyclones and tsunamis. They have to confront different dangerous animals living in dense mangroves like tigers, snakes and crocodiles. They are severely affected by climate change and different conservation policies of the government. Because of the global warming, which causes rising of the sea level, the existence of the Sundarbans islands and flora and fauna found there are in danger. The biodiversity of the area is threatened because of encroachments, poaching and the climate change.

The Sundarbans

The setting of *The Hungry Tide* is the Sundarbans, which is famous for its biodiversity and is also known as *bhatir desh* (tide country). The Sundarbans is found on the deltas of Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. It is full of small islands having mangrove-forests. In Ghosh words “interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands. But that is what it is: an archipelago, stretching for almost two hundred miles, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh” (Ghosh 19-20) The ebb and flow of the Bay of Bengal create new islands and many old islands are submerged under the sea. The island of Lusibari in the Sundarbans is the main setting of the novel; the events in the novel take place in and around this island. The submersion of the island is a constant environmental threat for the poor people living there.

Kanai's conversation with Nirmal as well as his diary gives abundance of information about the weather, the climate, the topography and the culture of the Sundarbans. Nirmal gives a detailed history of the weather and the climate of the area. In describing different environmental events he goes as far as 1737 when the area was hit by a great cyclone. Most of the islands are below the sea level. In order to prevent it from floods and storms embankments are made around the islands. Many times embankments are broken paving the way for salty waters and silts as well as causing damage to lives and properties. Salty waters and silts make the land infertile. Because of poor quality of soil, people are not able to do farming as narrator says "After decades of settlement, the land had still not been wholly leached of its salt." (Ghosh 154) The only mean of existence of the people is fishing. Once fishes were in abundance there, but because of the climate change, human encroachments and nylon nets, the population of fishes is dwindling. Thus people living there are poor and with little means of survival.

The Climate Change

Climate change is undeniable and visible thing in the novel. It is because of changes in the environment that rare species of dolphins and other fishes are dwindling, the population of the tigers is thinning day by day. The ecosystem of the area is on the verge of collapse. It is under threat because of drastic changes in the climate. There are signs of change everywhere as Nirmal says:

...it was as if I could see those signs everywhere, not just in myself but in this place that I had lived in for almost thirty years. The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take to submerge the tide country? (Ghosh 407)

Submersion of islands is not a fiction but reality. The water level in the Bay of Bengal is rising very rapidly. A lot of report and articles are being published on the environmental threat of the Sundarban islands. For instance an article 'Sea change: the Bay of Bengal's vanishing islands' published by *The Guardian* says "Rapid erosion and rising sea levels are increasingly threatening the existence of islands off the coast of Bangladesh and India." It describes the story of Kutubdia Island which was swallowed by sea and now is under several feet of water. Now 40,000 people are living as environmental refugees. Kutubdia is one of many examples.

The ecosystems are very important aspects of the environment. A single problem in an ecosystem can start a chain of problems. Describing the importance of ecosystem and every biome of the system Piya says:

some kinds of crabs actually laundered the mud they lived in, scrubbing it grain by grain. Their feet and their sides were lined with hairs that formed microscopic brushes and spoons. They used these to scrape off the diatoms and other edible matter attached to each grain of sand. They were a sanitation department and a janitorial team rolled into one: they kept the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris. Didn't they represent some fantastically large proportion of the system's biomass? (Ghosh 540)

The destruction of the mangroves of the Sundarbans, the natural defence system of the area, is causing great threat to the islands found there. The biodiversity of the area is also in danger. As Nirmal says "mangroves were Bengal's defence against the bay, he said — they served as a barrier against nature's fury, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges." (Ghosh 271) Small changes in the climate can create a chain of changes, and can bring great disasters.

Endangered Species

Piyali Roy, a cytologist comes to do survey of the marine mammals of the Sundarbans. Her special interests are Gangetic Dolphins and Irrawaddy Dolphins. The novel gives a detail description of dolphins, their discovery, history, behaviours and problems faced by them. Once dolphins in the area were in abundance, but now it is very hard to find them. Piya have to wait for hours to spot one of them. There was a time when their habitat was not in danger and they adapted to the environment and developed unique behaviours different from other dolphins of the world. According to the Piyali Roy's hypothesis these fresh water dolphins are a kind of new orcaellas, who adopted the tidal ecology. These unique orcaellas are threatened and their existence is depended on the conservation of their natural habitat. Only few hundreds of them are left. Piya says that "(the discoverer) of the Gangetic dolphin, William Roxburgh, had said explicitly that the fresh-water dolphins of the Ganges delighted in the 'labyrinth of rivers and creeks to the South and South-East of Calcutta.'" (Ghosh 86) But now they are not having the luxuries of creeks and rivers near Kolkata, because development had changed the landscape.

The climate change has destroyed natural habitats of the fishes and they are dwindling day by day. Piyali Roy remembers a study which says that "there were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe" (Ghosh 238-39) Once area was unpopulated and rivers and rivulets were in abundance in the area but now these are claimed by the civilization, causing great damage to the ecosystem. The tigers in the area are also unique but their lives are also threatened. A study in 2015 suggests that only 170 tigers are left in the Sundarbans. Water buffaloes, swamp deer, marsh crocodiles, hog deer and many more species are on the verge of extinction.

Ecocentrism vs Anthropocentrism

The novel highlights the conflict between environmentalism and humanism. According to Brahma Dutta “environmentalism is champion by Piyali Roy and 1979 Left Front government of West Bengal, while humanism is being held by Kusum, Kanai Dutt and Nirmal Bose.” (15) Piyali believes that every thing is the part of the system, every biome has importance, without them there will be imbalance. But villagers do not think on this line. They killed the tiger who came to their habitat. Piyali Roy does not favor killing of the tiger, she says “this is an animal you can not take revenge on an animal.” (Ghosh 553) According to Nilima tigers are constant threat to the people of the Sundarbans, about two hundreds persons are killed by tigers every year. She also gives references from historical records when more people were killed. In 1860-1866, 4218 peoples were killed at that time population was only a fraction of the present. The villagers consider killing of the tiger as defence and necessary for their survival. But Piyali does not think on that line. She thinks that the survival of tigers and local peoples both is a crucial thing. She believes that killings by the tigers is like an accident, humans are not going to get extinct by this, but killings of the tigers can finish their species from the earth.

There are two opinions on the killing of the tiger, one justifies it and another condemns it. Kanai and Fokir justify the killing. Kanai says “Isn’t that a horror too — that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?” (Ghosh 567) On the other hand Piyali Roy considers the killing by tigers a routine accident; she says “everywhere in the world dozens of people are killed every day — on roads, in cars, in traffic. Why is this any worse?” (Ghosh 567) Kanai claims that the conservation is carried on the cost of human to favour their western patrons. He is of the view that tigers can be kept in captivity. He argues that in America there are more tiger in captivity than all tigers India. Kanai says that India “made a

push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs.” (Ghosh 567) But according to Piyali Roy it was “by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive” (Ghosh 568) to keep the tigers and animals in their natural habitat. She says that no one has right to deny the animals their natural habitat, it is the scheme of the nature. She says to Kanai Dutt “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 568-69) She thinks that every biome of the ecosystem, especially tigers that are endangered species, is important, by neglecting one of them we are creating imbalance.

Earlier human was considered superior; all decisions were taken in favour of humans. But because of deep ecologist movement and global conservative drive well-being of animals came also into consideration. But genetic makeup and mind set of human cannot be changed in such a small time. As long as animals are not harmful to human or they are useful to humans, then it is good. But the real conflict starts when there are any kinds of harm by animals to humans. In the novel villagers kill a tiger despite Piyali Roy’s pleading and warning against it. They kill it because it killed two persons and many animals. The experience of a local about tigers is totally different from city dwellers or environmentalists. In the village no one is thinking on the line of ecologists and conservationists. When men were killing the tiger, women and children were encouraging them to kill. Everyone was “in the grip of both extreme fear and uncontrollable rage.”(Ghosh 549) They are people who are facing predators daily, their experience is totally different from others. Fokir, the local fisherman is in the favour of killing, he says “when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die” (Ghosh 557) Kanai, educated city dweller, is also justifying the killing. He argues that it is the local people who suffer the horror of tigers on daily basis not so-called environmentalists living in cities. These are huge

differences in the opinions of the humanists and environmentalists, both sides have strong evidences and arguments in their favour.

No one knows the environment and flora and fauna of the Sundarbans better than locals. The locals know the behavior of the species of their area better than anyone else. Piya would have not been able to trace the dolphins without the help of Fokir, the local fisherman. He knew about the dolphins, their behavior and habitat better than many environmentalists. The question is that can we impose something foreign or external on the local people? Do they need some lesson on how to behave with local species. Should a person from outside give instructions to them on things which they know better than him. The environmental problems of the world is not because of the poor people living in small huts and homes in villages and jungles. The real cause is over consumerism and luxurious lives of the upper and middle class people. The poor locals do not use more than necessity.

Land Rights: Humans or Animals

The conflict between Bangladeshi refugees and government authorities on a piece of land reserved for Royal Bengal Tiger raises perplex ethical questions. Who have more right on land, humans or animals? The novel informs that refugees came to India during partition of India in 1947 and 1971 war; they were shifted in central India in a climate unlike their own. They were living like in concentration camps and prisons under heavy surveillance and hostile behaviour of the locals. The island of Morichjhapi was having the same climatic condition like their Khulna district in Bangladesh. They settled there in 1978 in Morichjhapi and were not ready to leave the place. In 1979 people were evicted from the island forcefully by the government and many of them were killed in resistance. Many women were kidnapped, raped and thrown in the river. The

authorities wanted to evict Morichjhapi, but the occupants of the island “just wanted a little land to settle on.” (Ghosh 229) They thought that they have more right to occupy the island than the tigers. Their view was right or wrong is a matter of debate. But it looks that the sympathy of the novel is with settlers of Morichjhapi, otherwise the novel is deeply concerned with the environmental problems and the ecology of the Sundarbans. Like Morichjhapi many islands were evicted by authorities for conservation projects.

Socio-economic conditions in India are totally different from the West. The rich countries are having small population and more resources. They have ample lands for conservations and national parks. The percentage of the poor is very low in those countries. The process of resettlement and rehabilitation is very quick and it is done very effectively without any corruption and delay. While in India the process of resettlement is a herculean task. It is a half-hearted process marred with corruption, nepotism and red-tapism. In India in the process of resettlement the livelihood of peoples is not given importance. The resettlement can not be completed by giving a house and little land until and unless peoples are not provided with adequate livelihood. The livelihood of refugees from Bangladesh was fishing and a type of farming which needed ample water. Having no lands and no sea in Madhya Pradesh, they were burden on the government and a curse on the local people. The locals were hostile toward them. It compelled them to resettle on the island of Morichjhapi. Their resettlement was not to live a luxurious life. Their purpose was to live an independent life without being burden on anyone. Their purpose was to live in an environment they were familiar with.

Conclusion

People and animals both are affected by climate change in the Sundarbans. The rare species of animals like Royal Bengal

Tigers and Gangetic dolphins are on the verge of extinction. Floras found there are also in danger, thick mangroves are destroyed because of rising of the sea levels and colonization of the area. Occasionally, tsunamis and cyclones, cause destructions. The local people are adversely affected by conservation policies carried out by the government and international organisations, which creates conflicts between human rights and animal rights. Finding a quick and complete solution to all problems is not an easy task. The inclusion of the local people in policy making can solve some problems. Ghosh seems to take middle ground in these controversies, while advocating the fulfilment of basic needs of the local people, he advocates the conservation of endangered species and finding indigenous solutions to the local problems.

WORKS CITED

1. Gosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004.
2. Huggan, Graham, Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London & New York: Routledge, 2010.
3. Sharma, Brahma Dutta. "Environmentalism Versus Humanism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" in *The Journal of Contemporary Literature*. ISSN 0975-1637, Vol 4, No 2, August 2012.
4. Thieme, John. "Reading Places: The Geography of Literature" *Coldnoon: Travel Poetics Quarterly of Travelogy*. ISSN 2278-9650, No 2. 3, July 2013.
5. Vidal, John. 'Sea change the; the Bay of Bengal's vanishing islands' in *The Guardian*, 29 January 2013. available at <http://www.theguardian.com> Web. 05-04-2015