



The Ecological Attitudes To The Tide Country In The Hungry Tide By Amitava Ghosh

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's realistic portrayals of Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide*, as mysterious and enchanting, leave an indelible mark on our minds. The work deftly weaves together science, geology, mythology, history, climate, earth sciences, and anthropology. In this tidal land, where change is the only constant, the mangroves and the dolphins, carnivorous hunters, fishes, thunderstorms, and currents remain interacting with each other and keep merging with myth, culture, and history to create a fascinating human drama. An empathy is achieved while witnessing the coexistence of humans and nonhumans in a shared ecosystem. The present study attempts to explore how Ghosh juxtaposes the microsensory aspect of ecological reasoning against a macrosensory backdrop of deep sociopolitical history, before unfolding a story of ecocosmopolitan connections between human and other realms, and how his success lies in his deliberate attempt to weigh and balance these two poles.

Keywords: Bon Bibi, ecocosmopolitanism, mangrove, migration, nature, Sundarban.

Amitava Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a fascinating story of a habitat and its inhabitants set in the backdrop of the Sundarbans, an immense archipelago of islands at the mohana of a number of rivers in the Bay of Bengal. This labyrinth of islands, some densely populated while others completely uninhabited, sprawl for almost three hundred kilometers across India and Bangladesh. The Bengali name 'Sundarbans' which generally means 'the beautiful forest,' is named after the Sundari tree, *Heritiera minor*, the most common species of mangrove in this ecosystem (Yesapogu 2016). This territory is also called 'bhatirdesh,' or the tide country, by the residents of the islands. Some call this estuarine region as

atherobhatirdesh, the land of eighteen tides. This multiplicity of names reflects the transient characteristics of its general nature for the islands are continually inundated and chiselled by recurring storms and hungry giant waves. The verdurous lands remain half-submerged at high tide only to raise their heads in falling tides.

"The islands are the trailing threads of Indian fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the achol that follows her half wetted by the sea. They number in the thousands, these islands; some are immense and some no longer than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago" (Ghosh 6-7).

The islands are the offsprings of the several water channels that stretched like a thin mesh net over the landscape; some water channels are wide and mighty while some are thin and lank, but each is a river in its own right. When these canals meet in clusters, the water stretches to horizon, creating mohana. Shrouded in the mist of mysticism, mohana represents a region where there is no dividing line between fresh and salt water, and the boundaries between land and water are constantly shifting.

The wetland, which is surrounded by rivers and has a distinct ecosystem, is known for its mangrove forest, which is a world unto itself (Sree 2018). Unlike other forests and jungles, mangroves may spread so quickly that they can engulf an entire island in only a few years. "Mangrove leaves are long and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense." This dense foliage is hostile as well as resourceful. For its unique ecosystem and biodiversity, it became the natural habitat for the Bengal tiger, crocodiles, salty tidal riverbed dolphins, crabs, and other creatures. The numerous rare and endangered flora and fauna found here, are identified with their geological diversity. However, the natural landscape is most



unhomely for human settlement. Every year countless woodcutters, honey and wax collectors, crabbers, and fishermen get killed by tigers, snakes, and crocodiles. The watery world, where raging storms may wipe out countless lives in a single massive wave, is a common ground where animals and humans, myth and reality intermingle in a ritual battle for existence.

The Hungry Tide upholds a hypnotic tale of adventure, ambition, dream, love, loss, and hope. But behind his fascinating story, Ghosh explores a far darker and elusive jungle, the human heart, and calls forth a unique place with its history, language, and mythology. The region is hostile in all the sense of the world. In this hostile, boundless transitory zone, which is neither land nor sea, the local folk lives under constant threats of the attack of tigers, tidal flood, eviction, and poverty, and shares an ambivalent relationship with nature. Both, as a part of nature and apart from nature, reflect the tension between humanity striving to live in harmony with nature, and humanity in the struggle with nature. Ghosh has repeatedly highlighted this tension. Just as the forest gives man shelter and sustenance for living, it also takes its toll through the attacks of wild animals and reptiles, and the devastation caused by high tides and storms.

Likewise, the intrusion of human settlements unbalances a matchless variety of marine and riparian life in the mangroves. Ghosh displays this complex relationship by illustrating the scientific and technical details about the ecosystem and biodiversity of the Sundarbans in such a way as to paint and categorise their work. To explore the effective and sensory response to the environment in which both humans and nonhumans play an important role, he again presents a cosmopolitan subject. Local underprivileged people's fight against colonial authorities further confuses the struggle narrative. As a result, Ghosh creates an interactive environment by weaving a tale of several emotive interactions and relationships among natural entities, indigenous settlers, and cosmopolitan outsiders with the achievement of alternative and affective perception.

The novel begins with Piyali Ray, a cetologist, an Indian emigrant from Seattle, who is unable to communicate in her mother tongue and travels to Bengal's Sundarbans to explore river dolphins, *Orcaella Brivirostris*. On her way, she meets Kanai Dutta, a New Delhi-based proud businessman, and translator by profession. Kanai visits Lusibari some thirty years after being

summoned by his aunt Nilima Bose. Nilima was a well-known social service agent who handles the Badabon Trust, which advocates for impoverished and underprivileged people's rights by offering manyfold services. Kanai comes here on account of a posthumously discovered notebook written by his uncle Nirmal addressed to him. Piya and Kanai, these two urban people, in the course of their quests, become involved with Fokir, an uneducated local fisherman. Having known the water mazes of the Sundarbans far better than anybody else, Fokir helps Piya in her discovery to locate dolphins in the remote Garjontola pool. These three people make up a story of ambition, aspiration, and dream. Parallel to this narrative structure runs another one. From the notebook of Nirmal, the character and experience of the retired headmaster of Hamilton School become explicit to us. Nirmal was a visionary poet, scholar, intellectual and leftwing thinker. He was a man who lived his life through poetry. During his return journey from one of the farewell programmes held on a faraway island, Nirmal was caught in a violent storm and took refuge along with the boatman Horen in Morichjhapi where Kusum lived with her son little Fokir. Morichjhapi was then the shelter of the refugees. Kusum, being one of them, motivated Nirmal to involve himself in aiding and assisting the displaced refugee population. Horen, the relative turned lover of Kusum, helped Nirmal in this revolutionary involvement in every possible way. Thus another story of dream, resolution, hope, and loss is created. These two stories, the one of the past lurking through the notebook and the other of the present, intertwine with each other to structure the narrative of the novel. This narrative structure in its characteristic way can be identified with the topography of the region. Just as the estuarine rivers entangle with each other, the two stories, consisting of several plots, are unfolded in a braided manner.

The novel is allocated into two parts "The Ebb" and "The Flood". This division is significant with regard to the structure, theme, content, and characterization. Like tide the narrative flows spontaneously through major characters of the novel, weaving between timeframes. Through Kanai's retrospection, the readers become acquainted with his firsthand childhood experience of the topography, history, and culture of Sundarban. Similarly, Nirmal's notebook records the history of an individual as the representative of the indigenous islanders. The pensive story of Kusum—her search for her mother, loss of her husband, her final settlement in Morichjhapi with her only son



Fokir, her fatal death in the Morichjhapi massacre – unfolds leaving the hints of the last days and mysterious death of Nirmal. On the other hand, another adventurous story, involving the present characters like Kanai, Piya, and Fokir, runs parallel. Kanai invites Piya to visit him in Lusibari. Piya comes to Lusibari with the help of Fokir. Then she hires him for a week to help her survey the dolphins in the remote region and takes Kanai as a translator. Taking Horen's boat, they set off on their adventurous journey. They come across various incidents from the killing of the tiger by the angry villagers to the experience of Kanai having faced the tiger on an isolated island. The story reaches its culminating point with the coming of a cyclone and ends tragically. In the end, Fokir dies crushed by a large flying tree stump while saving Piya. Piya returns to Lusibari and takes the responsibility for Fokir's wife and son. She determines to acquire permanent residency on the ground of her Indian citizenship and starts her scientific project on the river dolphins under the sponsorship of Nilima's Badabon Trust to create the scope for helping the poor islanders.

The setting is Lusibari. The name itself is a throwback to the colonial period. It is a conch shell-shaped southernmost inhabited island cutoff from other lands by encircling rivers. Lucy Hamilton was the daughter of Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scottish shipping entrepreneur. So Lusibari means Lucy's house. Lusibari was the home of Nirmal and Nilima, so also it becomes the home of all the other characters of the novel. To escape persecution, the radical leftist Nirmal took the post of headmaster at the school on Lusibari originally founded by Sir Daniel Hamilton. Daniel was a man of extraordinary vision who recognized the immense possibility of this doormat of the country, “the threshold of a teeming subcontinent.” He learnt that “everyone who has ever taken the eastern route in the Gangetic heartland has to pass through it – the Arakanese, the Khmer, the Javanese, the Dutch, the Malays, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the English” (Ghosh 50). So the tide country has never been uninhabited. But the irony of the land lies in the littered traces of dilapidated man-made structures which makes the reason explicit that mangroves are never allowed to recolonize the land. But Hamilton had an innovative vision of building a new sort of state, a new form of civilization. It would be a cooperatively controlled property (Tsai 2017) with no exploitation and everyone having an equal share. In this regard, Daniel Hamilton actually purchased 20,000 hectares of Sundarban's property from the government of India in order to give it

away for free to those willing to work on the ground that they accepted all others as equals regardless of caste, or race, or ethnicity. In response to Daniel's call people from different states came flooding here and braved the predators of the land by clearing the forest to make the land habitable. This historical moment is repeated in the settlement project of Morichjhapi as identified by the visionary poet and revolutionary dreamer Nirmal. He recognizes the subaltern and self-libertarian version of this dream in the settlement of the dispossessed on Morichjhapi. The same individuals who were attempting to make the idea a reality had dreamed it. Morichjhapi was a sociological experiment created by persons without knowledge or influence. However the difference between the two lies in the consequence. The brutal eviction of the settlers on the Morichjhapi in the name of conservation of wild animals by the government turns this local and self-sustained version of Hamilton's cosmopolitan dream into a nightmare. Ghosh's mention of the story of Morichjhapi as told in retrospect through Nirmal's notebook can be traced back to the partitioning of India in 1947. After the partition, rich and upper-caste Hindus from Bangladesh came to India securing a new life, but the poor came in waves. In 1979 a gathering of refugees originally from the Khulna area of East Bengal began walking from the settlement camp of Dandakaranya of Madhyapradesh to Morichjhapi, a lonely island of Sundarbans with the trust that the modern Communist Government would satisfy their guarantee of resettlement (Pradittasane 2018). But opposite to their expectation, the state beleaguered their economy and sunk the pontoons of the islanders subsequently diminishing Morichjhapi to a disconnected panopticon-like edifice. Ghosh here unveils the palimpsestic histories of inhuman exploitation and suppression of the rootless poor settlers in giving an account of the encroachment of the empty virgin land by the developers and conservationists. According to the authorities, the migrants were occupying Morichjhapi, a government reserve forest in the Sundarbans, without permission, breaching the Forest Act. Yes, the Sundarbans is the only area where Royal Bengal Tigers continue to reside in the wild, despite their falling numbers, and the project tiger strives to preserve a robust tiger stock in the natural surroundings. This endeavour was jeopardised by the rapid presence of migrants in Morichjhapi. The government's apparent preference for ecological demands above those of disadvantaged poor people demonstrates a startling



level of ecological awareness. Human lives, however, are jeopardised in the interest of tiger conservation, since the majority of tigers in the Sundarbans are man-eaters that habitually maul and murder inhabitants and their animals (Ambethkar 2012). In this respect the question about the human cost of wildlife preservation raised by Ghosh, is heard in the voice of Kanai who asks Piya, as she screams out in shock at the thought of murdering a Tiger: "Isn't that a horror too that we can feel the suffering of an animal but not of human beings?" (Ghosh 300-301). The same question, raising debate between environmentalists and survivalists rings loud in the words of Kusum, who a few days before, being raped and murdered in the name of conservation, wonders: "who are these people? Who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their name?" (Ghosh 261-262). Ghosh here encompasses the reality of the marginalized inhabitants of the Sundarbans where life is lived on the margin of greater events. The South Asian scholar Annus Julius points out this ethically bankrupt and logically flawed position of the people of the Sundarbans not only as a specific betrayal of marginalized Bengali settlers but also as a betrayal of the poor in general.

The Hungry Tide is a whirlwind of imagination and reality. But in this whirlwind the ecological impact, be it on the life story of rustic Kusum or the adventurous lifestyle of Piya, is highly prominent all through the novel. Just as through the tumultuous life of Kusum, Ghosh tries to show the effort on the prospect of ecological balance in the history of the dispossessed in an unhomely land, the sensuous relationship shared by Fokir and Piya, the two protagonists of the story upholds another theory of ecocosmopolitanism. Piya's quest for rare Irrawaddy dolphins leads her through the tidal country's twisting rivers until she ends up on the tiny boat of Fokir, a youthful fisherman who gathers crabs with his boy Tutul. There is a wide gap between Piya and Fokir, one metropolitan scientist and the other illiterate rustic. Despite her Bengali root, Piya does not know Bengali and Fokir is unfamiliar with the foreign language. But without the exchange of a single word, they seem to understand each other perfectly. Fokir's life is attuned to the rhythm of waterways and Piya who solves the mysteries in water feels an affinity for him. They achieve intimacy beyond words through the reciprocal intuition of bare requirements. This mutual relationship reasserts that there is something platonic beyond the sphere

of physical nature where language is a secondary thing.

As Sarika Pradi Prao Aurodhkar comments: "the novel is in part about mankind's relationship with nature. But central to the story is the possibility and impossibility of human relationship" (Aurodhkar 2007).

The bond is formed through a shared interest in and understanding of dolphins, rivers, and the environment. But in spite of this attachment to the common ground, there remains a large difference in cultural and intellectual perspectives. Fokir's perception of dolphins based on deeply rooted rustic belief on the tideland as a populated area encircled by wilderness is quite different from Piya's scientific knowledge of cetacean life. To Fokir dolphins are the messengers of Bon Bibi just as the tigers are the embodiment of evil force or death represented by Dokhin Rai. Piya's conception of the dolphins and the Royal Bengal tigers, on the other hand, is conceptualized by a scientific discourse as a specimen of endangered species. Similarly, when searching for accuracy and rationale, statistics, and numbers in the tide nation, what Piya refers to as 'field,' Fokir refers to as 'home' (Chen 2018). The rivers have become a residential environment for him, where he lives and works in response to the tide's pulse and follows the dolphins' migratory path. Piya feels at ease in his riverboat, and the two create an emotional bond through sharing "the domestic space" of the riverboat. This attachment enables Piya to free herself from the narrow limited conception of nature, formed by western hegemonic cultural literacy, and to embrace the broader perception of the surrounding which included both humans and nonhumans. Fokir sings a tune mirroring her feelings, and as she sat there listening to his voice against the rhythmic counterpoint of the dolphins' breathing, she had a wonderful sense of satisfaction. What could be happier than being on the river with someone you can trust at this special hour and hearing these creatures' calming calls? The mutual participation of the metropolitan girl and the local fisherman in the way of life through sensuous connection merges them with the rough realities in the wilderness of the place. Through the immersion into the uncanny world, they feel attached to the nonhuman elements of the place.

Alexa Weik provides an eco-cosmopolitan interpretation of the book. Ursula Heise invented the term "ecocosmopolitanism" to bring a biospheric connectivity beyond the circumstances of human social experience and to build links between animate and inanimate networks of



influence and trade. HomiBhabha, PhengCheah, Walter Mignolo, and Bruce Robbins used the word as a method of conceptualising forms of belonging beyond the local and the national in the late twentieth century. This shows that in the era of globalisation, the fast increase of global effects on individual locales may be identified. Ecocosmopolitanism developed a foundation for an environmental connection theory by isolating cosmopolitanism from the database idea of nationalism and globalisation. As a result, it emphasises the relationship between diverse natural and cultural sites, as well as how the human environment influences the process of bonding. Through her sensual connection with Fokir, Piya develops this form of ecocosmopolitanism through seeing the interconnectedness of humans and other creatures. Piya uncovers in her study on the Irrawaddy dolphins' odd life cycle that the dolphins in this location, navigating the mix of fresh and saline water, have reduced their yearly seasonal migration to a daily cycle in order to adapt to the daily tidal rhythm. With this, she had an epiphany, realising the connection between the river and sea waters, as well as the expansion of a diversity of aquatic species. This revelation on these connections and interrelations provides Piya with ecological philosophy, or a way of thinking that embraces the huge, spreading web of connectivity among species, to use Timothy Morton's word. This empathy stems from Morton's definition of ecological love as the emotional capacity "to care after all sentient creatures." The tide country's strange character is what leads to the realisation of this complicated connection with ontological resonance.

Hungry Tide deals with another ecological issue that is climate change. The new genre cli-fi or climate change fiction deals with climate change and global warming. The term cli-fi is popularized by Dan Bloom who examines in the climate change novel the climate change debate at an emotional level. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* creates a fascinating picture of the tide country suggesting the notions of climate change obliquely. The instability of the region is focused on various environmental issues conveyed either through the observation or experience of the locals. Nirmal observes the signs of death as "there is not much water in the river nowadays and at low tide it gets very shallow ". Fishes are on the verge of extinction, according to Moyna, owing to the utilization of "new nylone nets", which are so thin that they capture the eggs of so many other fishes too. In the water, Piya detects an odour or, more

accurately, a metallic odour. It is because of the change in the environment that the water level in the Bay of Bengal is rising rapidly submerging the islands. The mangroves are destroyed because of the rising sea levels and human settlement in the area. The destruction of the mangroves causes a threat to the biodiversity and the natural defense system of the area gets affected. The flora and fauna found here are constantly under this threat. It is because of changes in the environment the rare species of dolphins and other fishes are dwindling day by day. The tigers in the area were unique but they are also under the threat of these environmental changes. The birds are vanishing. Water buffaloes, swamp deer, marsh crocodiles, hog deers, and many more species are on the verge of extinction. The changes in fragment in the climate can create a chain of changes, thus bringing great disaster, affecting the lives of the flora, and fauna as well as the local people of this area.

Ghosh, who is fascinated by the land and its creatures as an anthropologist, offers the local story, which provides the context of an "ecological, biophysical, and psychological level" (Vatsyayan). He substantiates the use of myths as an instrument for moulding environmentally conscious communities' unconscious belief. Human myth and the legend of BonBibi, the goddess of the forest told throughout the novel, are particularly important for developing the relationship with the land. The Bon Bibi mythology creates and defines a link between people and the natural environment via the power of narrative. Nowhere in the Bon Bibi mythology does the word "Nature" or anything like appear, yet neither is nature's awareness missing. The legend runs in the blood of the people. It is a belief system that acts as a survival guide for locals in the harsh climate, as well as a wide ecological notion originating from successive cultural exchanges in this area throughout time.

The mythology of Bon Bibi - Bon BibirKaramati or Bon BibirJahuranama (Bon Bibi's miracle or the story of Her Glory) is heavily influenced by Islamic ideas. It exemplifies the archipelago's indigenous culture's and religion's synchronic nature, as well as the local knowledge of natural values. Bon Bibi, the Sundarbans' ruling deity, symbolises good, while DokkhinRai, the arch adversary, signifies evil. DokkhinRai, the demon king who took the guise of a tiger, ruled the jungles of the tidal nation and despised humanity. BonBibi, the forgiving goddess, overcomes him with the help of SahJangoli. Bon Bibi agrees to share the tidal land with DokkhinRai after she wins the war. DokkhinRai governs half of the region as a



wilderness, while Bon Bibi dominates the other half and transforms it into a protected haven for human inhabitants. Thus the tale tells the story of the division of the island between the habitable and the inhabitable for humans and tigers.

The most essential beliefs about Bon Bibi, according to Ghosh, have to do with the management of human want. Thus, the Bon Bibi myth is essentially a parable about the viciousness of human greed: its central message is that there can be no balance in the interaction between the forest and the sown unless human needs are limited (Sumati 2015). For Bon Bibi's followers, the stories reflect the concept that the forest should never be approached unless there is a clear need.

In the myth's dramatic plot, greed consumes one of the inhabitants, Dhona, who takes a poor child named Dukhey on an adventure into the untamed woods and deals with the demon to have the boy killed in exchange for boatloads of honey and wax. He leaves the young boy in the woods, who cries for help from Bon Bibi before yielding to the tiger. Bon Bibi saves him and drives the demon away once more, after which he is permitted to return to the wilds with the certainty of human fear and respect for not harming humans. The tale of Bon Bibi has a clear and simple lesson. It calls for the recognition of the dark force's domain in nature, which must be respected and restricts the entry of humans. An ecological perspective can be traced to the message conveyed in the myth. Jessica Schmonsky agrees with this hidden sense of equilibrium: "Belief systems have a considerable effect on environmental attitudes and can therefore play a major role in ecological conservation practices [...] Seemingly one of the most popular forms of conservation through folklore is by taboos or trepidation. When human regards plants and animals, stars and planets, rocks and soil as integral parts of their world, then they take certain action to protect and manage them, either indirectly by tradition, ritual or taboo" (Schmonsky 2012). The cultural appreciation of nature is prevalent here. As a result, the locals regard the whimsicality of the wetland environment as a valid sensation, because the unpredictability of nature is a requirement for settlers to reclaim the region as their home.

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