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Publications

Eco Feminism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

*Ecology is the study of the relationship between human groups and their physical and social environments. Feminism can be defined as the thought and movement toward the political, economic and social equality of women on par with men. Combining the words ecology and feminism, ecofeminism embraces the idea that the oppression of women and the oppression or destruction of nature is closely connected. Acclaimed as "the best work in English fiction", Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), winner of Hutch Crossword Book Award of 2004, is acclaimed as the best work in English fiction a stunning work of fiction that exhaustively deals with the ecological and environmental conditions immensely affecting the local rhythms of life in Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands spread between the sea and the plains of Bengal on the easternmost coast of India. This focuses on Ghosh's women characters and how their life seems to revolve around an historical event which has left or finally leaves a deep impact on their lives.*

Combining the words ecology and feminism, **ecofeminism** embraces the idea that the oppression of women and the oppression or destruction of nature is closely connected. Elements of the feminist movement, the peace movement and the environmentalist and green movements can be seen in ecofeminism. Activist, educator and author Ynestra King went so far as to call ecofeminism as the third wave of the feminist movement. The term was coined in 1974 from the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne's work, *Leféminismeoulamort*. Feminism can be defined as the thought and movement toward the political, economic and social equality of women on par with men. Ecology is the study of the relationship between human groups and their physical and social environments.

Eco-feminism also echoes beyond the lines. It re-imagines what the non-human world would achieve in the elimination of institutionalized oppression based on gender, class, race and sexual preference, and what may aid in changing woman, but at the same time, reshapes the culture with the help of her male counterparts.

Amitav Ghosh was born on July 11, 1956, in Kolkata to Shailendra Chandra and Ansali Ghosh. He travelled frequently to Bangladesh, Srilanka, Iran and India. Ghosh attended Delhi University and received his B.A and M.A and began his studies at Oxford and from there he was sent to Egyptian village for his research. The village was located in the delta of the river Nile and Ghosh lived among the "Fellaheen" or the Egyptian peasants. He graduated from Oxford earning

Ph.D and he worked in the Department of Sociology. His first novel *The Circle of Reason* was awarded France Prix Medic Etrangere. Some of his other novels are *The Shadow Lines, An Antique Land, The Calcutta Chromosome, The Glass Palace, Sea of Poppies, The River of Smoke, The Flood of Fire and The Hungry Tide*.

The Hungry Tide tells about a very contemporary story of adventure and unlikely love, identity and history, set in the most fascinating regions on the earth, off the easternmost coast of India, in the Bay of Bengal, lays the tiny island known as Sundarbans. For settlers here, life is extremely dangerous because of deadly tiger attacks. Unrest and eviction are constant threats. Tidal floods rise and surge over the land and occur without any warning leaving it devastated. In this vengeful beautiful island, the lives of three different people collide. Piyali Roy is a young marine biologist who comes in search of a rare endangered river Dolphin, Irrawaddy. Her journey begins with a disaster when she falls into crocodile infested water. Rescue comes in the form of young illiterate fisherman Fokir. Although they couldn't language between each other, they are powerfully drawn. Piya engages Fokir to help with her research and finds a translator Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi whose Aunt and Uncle are long time settlers in the Sundarbans. All the three launch into isolated backwaters and experience powerful ravaging tidal surge. *The Hungry Tide* is an international success and a prophetic novel of remarkable insight, beauty and humanity.

The time period of *The Hungry Tide* represents the contemporary world. Each of the four prominent women characters life seems to revolve around an historical event which has left or finally leaves a deep impact in their lives. Nilima, who is the oldest female character, is shown to be the most ambitious character in the book. She shatters the traditional view of treating Indian women as Goddesses. She is not ready to compromise and let go of her lifelong dreams for the sake of supporting a group of refugees who are finally massacred. She is the dominant person in the household and the decision maker. She breaks away from the traditional view of women being demure and portrays an ambitious and authoritative personality. Her decision of not helping the people of Morichjhapi somehow ruins her family life as her husband gets more reclusive after the massacre.

Nirmal and Nilima try to carry forward the cultural legitimacy of Daniel Hamilton's utopian society. Nilima Mashima of Lusibari belonged to an aristocratic family with a good educational background. The reforms of William Bentick and Raj Ram Mohan Roy for the cause of woman, the spread of higher English education and the Western individualistic ideal prepared the ground for women to play active roles outside their limited family circle. The empowering elite section was in the process of converting the traditional past to modernity that percolated as a new sensibility about women's duties and responsibilities. This historical perspective though ambivalent in the context of colonial women's modernity, proved useful at times. Nilima at a point says, "I am not capable of dealing with the whole world's problems. For me the challenge of making a few little things a little better for in one small place is enough. That place for me is Lusibari" (THT 387). Unlike her idealistic dreamy husband, she remains within possible and practicable limits. In the process she is stern and strict. Yet she reveals her deep love, though suffering immense pain at his incongruous behaviour. Nilima is strongly an ecofeminist. She works for the welfare of the locale people by forming a trust and educating people around. This would enhance the minds of the people so that it would prevent them from cutting trees, poaching and so on.

Kusum is akin to nature and she cannot stay away from the tide country. "Many months passed and we spoke of coming here: that place was not home; there was nothing for us there.

Walking on the iron, we longed for the touch of the mud; incircled by rails, we dreamed of Raimangal in flood” (THT 164). This closeness brings her back to Morichjhapi.

She is very strong in her traditional beliefs and considers dolphins as the messengers of God. “I call them Bob Bibi messengers”. All through the time, the boat was at the spot, the creatures kept breaking the water. Kanai cannot imagine why it came there and what made them linger. Kanai said, “There came a moment when one of them broke the surface with its head and looked right at me. Now I saw why Kusum found it so easy to believe that these animal were something other than they are. For where had seen a sign of Bob Bibi, I saw instead, the gaze of the poet” (THT 235).

Kusum strongly believes, Dokkhin Roi is the evil, in the manifestation of tiger. She thinks, “The animal was none other than Dokkhin Roi in disguise and the demon shook the earth with a roar as he started his charge. At the sight of that immense body and those vast jowls, flapping in the wind like snails, mortal terror seized Dukhey’s soul. Even as he was losing consciousness, he recalled his mother’s parting words, and called out: O mother of mercy, Bon Bibi, save me, come to my side”(THT 235).

Kusum, feels as an outsider on the main land. Tide country's nostalgic past calls her back, and she flees to Morichjhapi with her son Fokir to join the refugees of Bangladesh, who become the cause of her life. This concept of self as potentially unified with a place and an aspiration for psychic unity with the needy becomes her hub of freedom. This self-assertion leads her to the tide country and makes her stretch out a helping hand to refugees and tribal. She asks for Nilima's help to safeguard her people through her trust. Nilima refuses, as she cannot go against the government. The equivocal voices of these refugees allow for the deconstruction of historical and ideological categories of tribal settlement. Kusum instigates the radical spirit in Nirmal in his old age he breaks away with his armchair past and joins her, developing an ideological intimacy. Kusum is a person whom one cannot define in terms of modern or traditional. Kusum has an unfortunate childhood as her parents meet unfortunate ends, her father being killed by a man-eater and her mother being tricked into prostitution. She escapes to the town to run away from Dilip, the man who sold her mother and now was after her. Here she meets Rajan whom she marries but her happiness is shortlived as he is run over by a train.

Kusum becomes a part of a forgotten past which finds no mention in the history. The reason being the Government of India tried its best to cover up the massacre as it would have spilled mud on its image and dirtied it. In case of Nilima, history affects her life but in the case of Kusum she became a part of history which eventually kills her but she dies content; dying for a cause she believes in.

Piya is filled with scientific ideas and believes in facts. She brings out the scientific description and the data with regard to the Irrawady dolphins. Her interest in the research of the dolphins is spotted out when she cares for the dolphins and also the eagerness and the excitement in knowing more about it.

Piya had a bad childhood due to the quarrels between her parents and she might have taken up the job of a scientist so that the research work kept her away from her home especially after the death of her mother. She gets Moyna's husband Fokir involved in her research work by hiring him as her boatman. Towards the end of the story we see that the tide carry them to Garjontola which coincidentally also happens to be the last place Fokir's mother Kusum travelled on before being massacred in the Morichjhapi incident. Fokir loses his life in an attempt to save Piya. The incident makes Piya comeback to India and settle in Lusibari as she feels that she is responsible for Moyna and her son, Tutul and to start a trust to save the dolphins.

Modernity provides the new women with a reformulated society based on a discourse of science. She is aware of her vulnerable conditions as a scientist. The massive storm brings death and erases her long held notions. It also reveals her concern for Fokir. Fokir, the illiterate, simple, untrained fisherman, saves her with his basic instincts. He recites the legend of BonBibi, a mythical tiger Goddess of the tide country which is translated by Kanai for Piya. "Tilting back his head, began to chant and suddenly the language and the music were all around her, flowing like a river, and all of it made sense; she understood it all. Although the sound of the voice was Fokir's, the meaning was Kanai's, and in the depths of her heart she knew she would always be torn between the one and the other" (THT 360). She is torn between the poetry of Fokir's unspoilt life and the attraction of Kanai's prosaic lifestyle.

One cannot perceive the character of a person, words and actions are like the air above the water sending ripples on the surface but reality lies deep beneath it. Though Piya and Fokir cannot understand each other's language but they communicate effectively. Fokir though illiterate understand the needs of Piya when they are left stranded on a boat. Piya is impressed by Fokir's gentleness hidden beneath his raw covering and his immense knowledge of the river. Fokir is married to Moyna but loves Piya for her commitment towards the dolphins. Piya is the only person who has acknowledged and understood the intellect and talent within Fokir. The story continuously unfolds and reaches the stage when Piya leaves Lusibari only to come back and show her true measure, to perform her duty towards her fellow being. She comes back to start a memorial and dedicates it to Fokir.

Moyna, working as a nurse in the trust is noted for her self-respect and dignity. She wants to educate her son, so that his future would be better than hers. She works for the betterment of the people. Moyna Mondal and Piyali Roy represent two different social spectrums. Moyna's life is a struggle. As a tribal, acquiring basic necessity and living life with dignity itself, is problematic. In addition she is a woman with soaring aspirations, unlikely for one of tribal descent, she stands in the novel as a woman with self-respect. These women, Nilima and Kusum, Piya and Moyna, share a commonality of experience. It is their desire for continuous reaffirmation that makes them strong. They never lose their faith in the essential grandeur of their existence.

A lot of similarities can be drawn between Piyali Roy and Moyna even though their lives are miles apart. Piya is a cetologist who comes to Lusibari to do her research about a rare river dolphin. She is of Indian parentage but is an American citizen. Moyna, on the other hand, is a local who works as a nurse and wants something better in life maybe to become a doctor or to educate her son so that he can have a better future.

In continuity of the tradition developed by Tagore, Narayan, Sahgal, Ghosh develops women who are strong, can express themselves, do things, travel, come to their own decisions and live independently. They are out of the purposive control of men. They practice ideas which they value the most. They are symbols of growth, progress and forward movement. In Kusum there is a fusion of psychological and sociological trauma. They are strong women for whom sex, though important, plays a small part and on their own terms. It results more as a culmination in a relationship, as of Kusum with Horen. Ghosh's major women character get rid of their dependency needs, reveal their identity, breaking the pattern of sexuality and sensuality, and take their place as whole human beings freely and equally along with men.

It is evident that history and tradition play a very important role in shaping the life of the women. On one hand, we have characters like Moyna and Nilima who are trying to change the traditional identity which have been forced upon the Indian women through the passage of

history. Times have changed but new factors form part of the shadow lines which divide women's world. Both Kusum and Piya are directly responsible for the betterment of ecology whereas Nilima and Moyna are indirectly responsible; they educate people who are directly associated with nature for livelihood.

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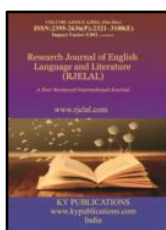
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ECO-MARXSIM IN *THE HUNGRY TIDE* BY AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

Eco-Marxism speaks about relationship of the human beings and the environment and the condition of the refugees. Marxism, which condemns capitalists for destroying the proletariat class, led ecomarxists to believe that capitalists are to blame for every ecological problem that we face today. Marx's notion of human emancipation was linked to his vision of overcoming human beings isolated from nature through the development of a socialist society. By referring to Morichjhapi and aftermath of partition in *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh has shown openness, factual authenticity, and compassion that instigate us to look into certain humanitarian concerns in implementing conservation programs.

Keywords – Amitav Ghosh , The Hungry Tide, Eco- Marxism.

Literature is “a political medium of conscious change and an increased ecological sensibility which however indirectly can help to contribute to a change of political and social practise” (Sumathy 6). Social ecology, green socialism and metabolic rift are the ideologies that merge with the aspects of Ecomarxism. Closing decades of the twentieth century have been crucial to discern literature from ecological perspective. These ideologies share not only the environmental damage but also the scarcity of the natural resources created by capitalistic forms of production that depend on the manipulation of the dynamic supply and demand. Ecomarxism is an anthropocentric view which sharply criticizes capitalist system for negatively influences the relation of human beings and nature. The fundamental flaw of the capitalist is that they view nature as a commodity that presents itself for humans to exploit.

According to Marx, the only way to solve the problem of environmental degradation, and the dreadful conditions of the worker, was through

liberation from the capitalist system; Marx's notion of human emancipation was linked to his vision of overcoming human beings isolated from nature through the development of a socialist society. For humanity to progress beyond alienation, it is necessary to govern the human development on par with nature in a rational way, a goal only obtainable with the elimination of capitalism.

The Hungry Tide exhaustively deals with the ecological conditions immensely affecting the local rhythms of life in Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands spread between the sea and the plains of Bengal on the easternmost coast of India. Survival is an everyday battle for the settlers of the Sundarbans who have learned to strike a balance with nature. Eviction of Bengali refugees by the government of Bengal from the Sundarbans constitutes the focal point of the novel. Government laid rules to preserve the wild life but had no concern for the people who live there. The lives of the tigers are valued more than the lives of the people. “They were providing waters for the tigers!

In a place where nobody thinks twice about human beings going thirsty" (THT 241).

The real historical event of migration, refugee resettlement and consequent violence and bloodshed in Morichjhapi island has been skillfully blended in the plot and narrative of *The Hungry Tide*. Amitav Ghosh explores the plight of a group of refugees who were sent by the West Bengal government to Dandkaranya in Madhya Pradesh in 1961. Dandkaranya situated deep in the forest of Madhya Pradesh was conceived as a long lasting solution to the problem of rehabilitation of Bengali refugees. Ironically here the poor migrants felt alienated as it was a semi-arid and rocky place, an area culturally, physically and emotionally removed from their known world. The refugees left the place and returned to West Bengal in May 1978 and settled on Morichjhapi island in West Bengal in the Sunderbans. Here these homeless people died of hunger and bullet wounds while resisting the policies of West Bengal Government to turn the area into a reserve forest to conserve the tiger.

Once we lived in Bangladesh, in Khulna jila: we're tide country people, from the Sunderbans' edge. When the war broke out, our village was burnt to ash; we crossed the border, there was nowhere else to go. We were met by the police and taken away; in buses they drove us, to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red it seemed to be stained with blood. For those who lived there, that dust was as good as gold, they loved it just as we love our tide country mud. But no matter how we tried, we couldn't settle there: rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood. (THT 165)

Ghosh traces the disputed terrain where the Government supports the tiger and opposes the humans. Sunderbans is the only habitate for Royal Bengal Tigers. So many international environmental order the Government to preserve the area and so the Government had declared the Morichjhapi as 'Tiger Reserve' and forced people to evict from it. This shows the cruel act of the government who

gives more importance to tigers than the marginalized poor settlers. It is ironical that one of the world hunt animals for sport and commercial, where as the other half force humans to evict so that animals can live. The outcry of the local people is broughtout "... who love animals are willing to kill us for them?"(THT 262).

This novel focuses on the environmental and human position. Archana Prasad's Environmentalism and the Left states, "The environment movement is an umbrella term used to describe aseies of local struggles and conflicts that highlight the issues of livelihood and ecological security in the development debate" (11). This shows how the modern environmental preservation in the care of preserving one species becomes a treat to another.

Daniel Hamilton, the Englishman who bought a vast area of ten thousand acres in the Sunderbans from the British Government in 1903 distributed it free to all the Indians who were willing to settle there. Thus a new country, the 'Bhatir Desh' or 'the tide country' came into being. The islands came to be inhabited by underprivileged and poor landless people. Hamilton had dreamt of creating history by establishing an egalitarian society. "Here there would be no Brahmins or untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together" (THT 51). "Nilima had often said that she admired what Sir Daniel Hamilton did. What was the difference then? Were the dreams of these settlers less valuable than those of a man like Sir Daniel just because he was a rich shahib and they impoverished refugees?" (THT 213)

The tide country also provided shelter to these refugees who settled there to escape political persecution. Some went there in 1947 and some in 1971, the years unforgettable in human history for the brutal massacre of human beings. They preferred the dangers of the tide country to the atrocities that were meted out to them in their native country and refugee camps respectively. "Such setting makes an apt symbol for the ebb and flow of history and the uprooting of populations" (THT 132).

Morichjhapi ...was a tide country island....

In 1978, it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi. In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight. Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built badhs and put up huts. It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to be learnt that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh. Some had come to India after Partition, while others had trickled over later. In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes. Most of them were Dalits, as we say now, Harijans, as we used to say then. (THT 118)

Ghosh's fictional representation of the events at Morichjhapi in 1979 keeps very close to what actually happened, and he has successfully shown the various ways in which Morichjhapi was markedly different from other refugee settlements. The refugees there were terribly displaced people as they had moved from East Pakistan to West Bengal in the late 1950's, then from West Bengal to Dandkaranya at Madhya Pradesh in 1961 and then again from Madhya Pradesh to the Sunderbans in 1978, yet in Morichjhapi they had found a place where they were no longer at the mercy of the local people or even the government, initially. They found vast tracts of free land in the Sunderbans and created a world of their own.

Their aims were quite straight forward. They just wanted a little land to settle on but for that they were willing to pit themselves against the government. They were prepared to resist until the end. But the government had proved unbending in their determination to evict the settlers. Over a period of about a year there had been a series of confrontations between the settlers and government forces. And the final clash...was in mid May of the year 1979. (THT 119)

The refugees rapidly established Morichjhapi as one of the best developed islands of the Sundarbans within a few months. The refugees at Morichjhapi showed initiative and organization in their attempt to build a new life. The refugees transformed a barren island into a bustling locality. They tried, as far as possible, to be self-reliant, but at the same time they were conscious of the need to garner social and political support for their work. To this end the refugees held a feast, and invited dignitaries to the island to see their enterprises first hand. "Speeches were made, extolling the achievements of the settlers. It was universally agreed that the significance of Morichjhapi extended far beyond the island itself" (THT 191). The politicians, who came from Calcutta, despite their lofty speeches, already knew that these settlers would eventually be evicted.

The refugees' case was also unique in another respect as it was intimately linked up with an environmental issue. "Morichjhapi wasn't really forest even before the settlers came. Parts of it were already used by the government for plantation and so on. What's been said about the danger to the environment was just a shame in order to evict these people who have nowhere to go" (THT 213-14). The western industrialization in the name of modernization destroys the environment. "Postcolonial societies have taken up the civilizing benefits of modernity, only to find themselves the barbaric instigators of environmental damage. In such ways the dynamic of imperial power is maintained globally" (The Empire Writes Back 213).

On January 26, 1979, the West Bengal government started an economic blockade of the settlement with thirty police launches. The community was tear-gassed, huts were razed, and fisheries and tube wells were destroyed in an attempt to deprive refugees of food and water. "The seize went on for many day food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tube wells and there was no potable water left; the settlers were drinking from puddles and an epidemic of cholera had broken out" (THT 260).

The rehabilitation debate basically boiled down to the question: which is more

important—conserving forests for animals or allowing humans to live. Kusum articulates the peculiar predicament of the Morichjhapi refugees. The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, with hunger gnawing at our bellies and listen to the policemen say... 'This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals...it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tiger, which is paid by the people all over the world.' Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? (THT 262-63)

However, the refugee's supporters appealed to the Calcutta High Court, which ruled out that barricading the settlers was illegal and ordered; the seize to be lifted. The government then denied that the refugees were not subject to any blockade but continued the blockade in defiance of the High Court. The police continued to patrol the island urging the settlers to abandon their homes. Though some of them died of starvation and disease, the refugees would not give up. There was no failing in courage and confidence.

Government ordered the forcible evacuation of the refugees, which took place between May14 to May 16, 1979. At least several hundred men, women and children were said to have been killed in the operation and their bodies dumped in the river. Horen, the local boatman narrates the incident.

I know no more than anyone else knows. It was all just rumour. The gangsters...were carried over in boats and dinghies and bhotbhotis. They burnt the settlers huts they sank their boats, they laid waste to their fields. No one knows for sure... a group of women were taken away by force, Kusum among them people say they were used and thrown into the rivers so that they would be washed away by the tides. Dozens of settlers were killed...The sea claimed them all. (THT 279)

It is evident that nothing concrete was ever known about the brutal assault on the settlers.

Morichjhapi was declared out of the bounds for everyone including the journalists. The settlers at Morichjhapi, terribly displaced as they were, proved to be a defiant lot. Till their last breath, they fought the injustice of the government. And in the very last phase of their struggle, when they were forcibly evicted by a 1500-strong police force their battle-cry became the voice of the dispossessed. "Who are we? We are the dispossessed. We'll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may' (THT 254). "The novel demonstrates how environmentalism and conservation, nevertheless, has its own costs, and it explores the ethical dilemmas that result from this". (Rahman 94)

Ghosh points out that in the name of tiger preservation human lives were threatened and destroyed. Pitting the conservation of the tiger at the cost of the extermination of its human settlers highlights several paradoxes that find no easy answers. Conservation is absolutely necessary but not at the cost of the poor and the underprivileged who are always short-changed in the process. As a Bengali newspaper observed, "The lives of the trees in Sundarban are certainly of value but surely the lives of these shelter seekers are not without value" (qtd in Kaiti 267).

By referring to Morichjhapi and aftermath of partition Ghosh has shown, factual authenticity and compassion that instigate us to look into certain humanitarian concerns in implementing conservation programs. Had it not been for this very successful novel, this particular incident of Morichjhapi would have lapsed into total oblivion and we would have forgotten some very remarkable acts of courage and resistance by the people who were poor, helpless, deprived and dispossessed. This almost forgotten incident, which is a historical fact, motivated Ghosh to write his novel about the trauma and struggle of these migrants. Kailash Nath and Madhumita Pati rightly observe: "Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie and the recent Booker Prize winner, Arvind Adiga and several others are considered postmodern in the sense that they have tried to portray the tension between the indigenous/marginal people's stakes and the impositions of the all-powerful State (13). Ghosh triumphs as an author for he has successfully upheld

the cause of under privileged voiceless victims whose historical saga would have been wiped away in the course of time.

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ECOMARXISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IBIS TRILOGY

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Abstract: The paper aims at analyzing the novels of Ibis trilogy *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* from the point of view of Ecomarxist ideology. Ecomarxism deals with the tendency of the capitalist to destroy nature and exploit the marginalized section of society in the process of increasing their profit. *Sea of Poppies* explains the British government forcing the farmers throughout north India to cultivate poppy which makes the staple food costly and results in turning the farmers into indentured labourers. *River of Smoke* explains the commercial exploration of acquiring Chinese plants for European trade through the character of Fitcher Penrose. *Flood of Fire* explains the plight of poor Indian soldiers who are recruited to fight for the British in China. These poor soldiers had to pledge their life so that the British could yield more profit by indulging in Opium trade. Chinese economy was destroyed by the British government through the opium trade. The import of tea from China was stopped by establishing tea plantations in India. Colonial rulers in their need to expand their trade economy had exploited human rights and denied relationship between people and their land.

Keywords: Ecomarxism, Amitav Ghosh, Ibis Trilogy

Introduction

Ecocriticism opens up new dimensions to redefine our interdependence and connectivity to nature. According to ecomarxists, fundamental flaw of the capitalist system is the process of under-production, which means that capitalists treat nature as if it were a free commodity. There is a tendency inherent to capitalism to undervalue, and thus under-produce the conditions of production. Ecomarxism is an anthropocentric view which sharply criticizes capitalism; ecomarxist claim that capitalist system negatively influences the relation of human beings and nature. Marxism plays a major role in developing green critical approaches by connecting it to political economy and to environmental crisis.

According to Marx, the only way to solve the problem of environmental degradation, and the dreadful conditions of the worker, is through liberation from the capitalist system; Marx's notion of human emancipation was linked to his vision of overcoming human beings isolated from nature through the development of a socialist society. For humanity to progress beyond alienation, it is necessary to govern human development on par with nature in a rational way, a goal only obtainable with the elimination of capitalism.

The first novel of the trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* is set in the 19th Century. The story opens with the central character Deeti, who is married to Hukhum Singh, an opium addict who is employed in Ghaziapur Opium Factory. After the death of her husband she is forced to perform Sati while Kaula, an untouchable rescues her and they join the ship Ibis as indentured labourers. Neel Ratan Halder, a wealthy landlord loses all his wealth and joins Ibis as a convict. Paulette, a French orphan joins the Ibis in order to explore her future. The second novel, *River of Smoke* opens with the storm in Canton coast in 1838. The ship Ibis which carries indentured labourers, Anihata owned by Bahram Moddie and Rudruth owned by Fitcher Penrose are hit by storm. Bahram Moddie, plans to ship large consignment of opium to earn the export division in spite of the opium ban in China. Fitcher Penrose along with Paulette is on an expedition to China to collect rare plants. The final novel, *Flood of Fire* is set during the opium war in 1839 while Britain and China are preparing for war. The war breaks out and the British win. The opium flows into market like a monsoon flood.

Amitav Ghosh speaks about the unwanted gift of colonialism, starting with the British attitude towards agriculture and harvesting. Their need for the poppy seeds grew day by day like a haunting beast, turning whole of North India into a colourless and joyless region. The useful crops like wheat, dhal, vegetables gradually stopped shrinking in acreage. The peasants became poor debtors and they had gone to the extent of selling their lands. They had no choice but to sign the indentured labour contract. They were forced by the Britishers to cultivate only poppy to produce opium which would be exported at a huge profit. The British agents of Ghaziapur Opium Factory went from home to home asking for cash in advance, making them sign contracts by forging their

imprints. Ghosh brings out the sufferings of the farmers thus: "...at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three and half sica rupees just above enough to pay off your advance" (SOP 30). Staple food become costlier and poppy was procured at very low cost from the farmers. Because of this there was huge crash in poppy price which made the farmers poor debtors and people moved to and other regions as indentured labourers. The colonists did not bother about the plight of the farmers but kept exploiting them. The result was, "a snow... of white poppies" (SOP 13) all over the area starting along the Ganges, drowning people in the sea of poverty and drowsiness of despair. The natural cycle of crop rotation from spring to autumn was done away with and people were left to starve. The farmers were forced into poppy cultivation and harvest brought no happiness. Deeti, who is involved in agriculture, is very upset on seeing the condition of the fields and the farmers.

... what her own fields looked like, and were she at home today, she would have been asking herself what she would eat in the months ahead: where were the vegetables, the grains? She had only to look around to know that here, as in the village she had left, everyone's land was in hock to the agents of the opium factory: every farmer had been served with a contract, the fulfilling of which left them with no option but to stew their land with poppies. And now, with the harvest over and little grain at home, they would have to plunge still deeper into debt to feed their families. (SOP 193)

In the regions of Malwa, Bihar wheat was the major cultivation but owing to the great demand for opium in China, the farmers were forced to cultivate poppy. Farmers were not ready to grow poppy because of the difficult work it took at the time of the harvest. Many people felt growing poppy was punishment and they wanted to grow wheat and other vegetables.

But those toothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage: now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asami contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you had not accepted money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. At the end of it, your earnings would come to know more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay of your advance. (SOP 29)

Deeti was forced to hire workers for poppy harvest. She was happily pondering about the money that she is going to get. But the poppy harvest fetches her very little money she is very upset and worries about how to run the family. She looked disbelievingly at the discoloured coins that were laid before her: "Just six dams for the whole harvest? It's not enough to feed a child, let alone a family"(SOP 155). When Deeti was dumpstruck thinking about it, she was snapped telling "Go to the money lender. Sell your sons. Send them off to Mareech. It's not as if you don't have any choices"(SOP 155).

Deeti and Kaula fled from the village in search of work, they found people like themselves; farmers turned to paupers. "Land that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples or sip the starchy water from the pot in which the rice had been boiled"(SOP 202). The Britishers forced the farmers to cultivate poppy to produce opium which led to the fall in price and the farmers quit their villages and set off to far off countries as bonded labourers. "They are girmitiyas ..., they were called so because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmits'- agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld" (SOP 72). The farmers who became bonded labourers worked in sugarcane plantations in Fiji, Mauritius and other parts of the world. A landlord of Mauritius Mr. M. d' Epinay urges Mr Burnam an opium trader turned labour contactor based in Calutta to send him indentured labourers. "My canes are rotting in the field, Mr Reid, said the planter. Tell Mr. Burnham that I need men" (SOP 21). There has been a great demand for indentured labourers in Mauritius as slave trade was abolished.

Dispossession is a part of accumulation process which shapes the modern social world especially green political theory. Social inequality which results in dispossession has deep environmental implications thus separating people from land and natural resources. Thomson says, "Marxism sees history as a class struggle, a struggle for control and socialization of production and resources" (Qtd in Layfield 5).

Ghosh in his trilogy does not directly speak about environmental crisis instead he juxtaposes economy and environmental condition through opium trade and Fitcher's commercial exploration in acquiring Chinese plants for European trade. The British botanist James Cuninghame went to China and discovered that Chinese were skilled in realistic portrayal of plants, flowers and trees. In those days it was difficult to bring live specimens from China to Europe by sea, so they collected seeds and assembled dried gardens. "To Cunningham it was added another kind of collection, the painted garden" (ROS 122).

Fredrick Fitcher Penrose a man of considerable wealth, a noted nursery man and a plant-hunter, "he had made a great deal of money through marketing of seeds, sapling, cutting and horticultural implements" (ROS 35). He owned a nursery called Penrose & Sons, "which imported especially the varieties of Plumbago flowering quince and wintersweet" (ROS 35). They were plant hunters, "marketing seeds, saplings, cuttings, horticultural implements" (ROS 35). The lands of Asia, Africa, and Europe are strewn with flowers, seeds, herbs, shrubs which tried to pass across borders and continents.

Ghosh minutely brings out the details of moving delicate plants from one place to another on ships travelling thousands of miles bearing the scorching sun, rain lashes, storms and the vagaries of unending journey carrying Antirrhinums, Lobelias and Georgians. The shipmen and horticulturalist protect the plants and they are called as the green ships. The “wardian cases” were used on the Redruth ship as “miniature green houses” (ROS 76).

The plant collectors in the novel accessed the whole world in collecting plants and to exploit them for economic benefit. Although it is done under the lucrative trade mode, it is because of the Britishers that the gardens are made across the empire. “It was well known said Sir Joseph that the gardens at Kew possessed sizable collections of plants from some of the remotest corners of the earth. But there was one region which was but poorly represented there, and this was China” (qtd in C. Lee 135).

The biologist at Kew gardens were called as plant imperialist or nature’s government. The Kew garden and Canton nurseries had rare species which were a part of foreign trade. Ah Fey pictures Kew garden as “pots, pots, pots- that is all you see at the outset. But then as your eyes grow accustomed to the surroundings, you notice that the containers have been skillfully grouped to create an impression of a landscape, complete with winding paths, grassy meadows, wooded hills and dense forests” (ROS 287).

Richard Drayton states, “The future of Kew in the age of Sir Joseph Banks rested on his faith that empires might purchase their right to rule with plants and gardens” (Drayton 44). This statement becomes real for opium is priced high reversing the economic flow of profit by the purchase of tea from the Chinese by the British. He also states that Sir Joseph Banks, encouraged stealing plants from China mainly after the opium wars. This happened because of the opening of the ports and transfer of plants was organized by British East India Company. Robert Fortune, a famous plant collector, brought 2000 tea plants and 17000 tea seeds from China to India. Fitcher is in search of golden camellia and this directly related to the search of tea plants in the later part of the century.

Joseph Dalton Hooker states that Calcutta’s Botanical garden as “amongst its greatest triumphs may be considered the introduction of the tea-plant from China” (qtd in C. Lee 138). He also stated that “the establishment of tea trade in the Himalaya and Assam is almost entirely the work of the superintendents of the gardens of Calcutta” (qtd in C. Lee 138). Chinese economy was destroyed by the British government’s opium trade and on the other hand, Assam became the largest tea exporter to Britain. All this happened because, “it was free market capitalism at the barrel of a gun and through the hypnotic smoke of the opium pipe” (qtd in C. Lee 139). To stop this flow of opium trade is really hard in China because the hunger for it grew high in demand. Nothing would stop the flow because it’s like holding back the tides. “It was like a natural phenomenon – a flood. Its flow was governed by abstract laws like those that Mr Newton had applied to the movements of the planets” (FOF 375). “Socialism itself must develop to its logical end: that is, it must move beyond its present homocentrism, . . . to a new awareness: that of a solidarity with other living beings; what Marxists advocate with regard to social systems we must extend to ecosystems . . .” (D. Lee 15).

Both the Chinese and the Britishers were preparing for war. There had been great changes in the camp and the riverside areas, where the troops and the soldiers had started camping. A large fort was raised extending like a gigantic raft and it stretched around the corners and the building looked like a dam. “Hundreds of acres of forest had been cut down from the construction of the raft, the coast had been borne by the merchants of the Co-Hong: they were rumoured to spend thousands of silver teals on the timber alone” (FOF 494). Ghosh beautifully brings out that in the name of fighting and winning, man destroys nature brutally.

Gosh throws light on the soldiers who suffered under the hands of the Britishers. Kesri Singh belonged to the landowning family of the Benaras region, due to the failure of the agricultural crops, they were forced to cultivate poppy by the colonizers. This made them to join in the army. In the East India Company army, the Indian soldiers were treated low. They are provided with inferior weapons, “They send us to fight with old equipment and then they complain us to fight with old equipment and then they complain that sepoy’s don’t match up to white troops ” (FOF 280). They are also made to starve “to eat potatoes and other stuffs or they are left to die of starvation and disease” (FOF 287). The Indian soldiers went on a expedition to China, they suffered much after months long journey and it is mainly because of the Indian soldiers, the Britishers were able to open ports to expand their opium trade. These scenes vividly portrays the power, position and the injustice metted out to the Indian soldiers by the British colonizers.

Marx states, “all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the most long-lasting source of that fertility”(qtd in Layfield 638). Marx theory of rift represents, “the material estrangement of human beings within capitalist society from the natural conditions which formed, the basis for the existence – what he called ‘the everlasting nature – imposed conditions of human existence’” (qtd in Layfield 163). Bellamy Foster connects Marxism to that of environmental stability, “to insist that large scale capitalist production created such a metabolic rift between human beings and the soil was to argue that the nature-imposed conditions of sustainability have been violated” (qtd in Layfield163).

Ghosh points out that the capitalist’s materialistic outlook of profit alone havocked the lives of those who were living directly off the environment. Using market disciple, military force and political power the world muddles through ecological catastrophe. Ghosh does not let go the traces of the dust laden path of history, the violent ways of colonialism or imperialism, political policies which are the anthropological evidence for devastation of natural resources and exploitation of the marginalized. Ghosh as a

prolific writer always has concerns for the voiceless and protection of human rights and conservation of nature creeps throughout his work.

Abbreviation

SOP - Sea of Poppies

ROS - River of Smoke

FOF - Flood of Fire

References

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