

## Multi culturalism and Environment Constructs in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

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### Abstract

*Multiculturalism is the central theme of Amitav Ghosh's novels. Amitav Ghosh reflected the different cultures of India, as he is engaged in search of a solo culture for his characters. Multiculturalism is the appreciation, acceptance or promotion of multiple cultures, applied to the demographic make-up of a specific place, usually at the organizational level, e.g. schools, businesses, neighborhoods, cities or nations. It is often contrasted with the concept of assimilationism and has been described as a "salad bowl" or "cultural mosaic" rather than a "melting pot." It can be defined as that can go beyond human activities to give us a clear multi-dimensional comprehension of cultural interaction and cultural isolation. In his novels, Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of nationhood and diaspora, ideas that involve relationship between individuals belonging to the same or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders.*

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, nature, harmony, tradition, survival

In one of his most notable novels *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh has very beautifully engraved a panoramic view of multiculturalism with *The Sunderbans* in its vicinity where two poles of the society co-exist with their varied social cultural and economic identities. The novel begins with a quest for fresh water Dolphins, one of the most endangered species and least favored creatures. Well-known to be cousin of the killer whale which looks like a pig in its moments. Piya or Piyali Ghosh, the equatic biologist finally happens to spot one Dolphin. Her translator as well as companion Kanai is somewhat overwhelmed, "I just cannot believe, we have come all the way to look at these ridiculous porcine little things. If you going to risk jail for an animal, couldn't you have picked something with a little more sex appeal?"

Kannai is businessman who has already given up his early enthusiasm for Bengali poetry to find a successful job of an interpreter in New Delhi. He himself comments "there is a lot going in India right now and it is exciting to be part of it." At the call of an aunt once again Kanai returns to his homeland in the Sunderbans, the hostile archipelago of islands, situated at the mouth of the

Ganges. By accident, he bumps into Piya, The Dolphin biologist, on a train. Both these characters, one devoted to explore the secret of nature, the other possessed by penetrating deep into the interior of other languages, find themselves sailing on the tides of shifting tongue. The Sunderbans are India's doormat frequently settled and re-settled by frequent waves of migrants like the waters which are neither absolutely fresh nor salty. They also talk in many linguistic currents "Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else? They create proliferation of small world." The limitation of the language well exposed causing it to break down all together. Kanai is suddenly cut off from his party in jungles and he enters into realm of states when "his mind emptied itself of languages the sound and shines that had served in combination as the sluices between his mind and his senses, head collapsed; his mind was swamp by the flood of pure sensation."

Piya also happens to pass through such a situation, when she finds herself in the company of the simple boatman, Fokir, most moving in perfectly musical moment, Fokir quotes the legends Bon Bibi, a mythical tiger goddess of the tide country. While Kanai attempts to translate "Suddenly the language and the music were all around her, flowing around her, flowing like a river, and all of its made sense.... Although the sound of the voice was Fokir, the meaning was Kanai, and in depth of her heart, she knew she would always be torn between the one and the other."

At this Juncture like perfect story writer, Ghosh holds the story in absolute suspension between the world of language and silence. From then on begins a strange and unlikely romance, unspoken and perhaps even unacknowledged, between the two who cannot even converse with one another yet due to their professions, have bond which makes their causes common. Once Fokir takes her to the island of Lucibari, Piya decides to enlist his invaluable knowledge of the tide country waters and marine life in her observation project. She finds refuge with Nilima, of whom she has heard from Kanai, they briefly met on the train from Calcutta to Canning. Kanai, meanwhile, after having met and invitation to Piya, to

whom he is attracted, to say at his aunt's while she is in the tide country, reaches his aunt's home on the island of Lucibari. He begins to read the manuscript left by his uncle, Nirmal, an idealistic professor. Kanai is led into a world of the past, shortly before Nirmal's death, when the latter began to take interest in the island of Morchjhapi, Kusum. Nirmal's interest in both had to do with his left leanings as Morchjhapi is illegally settled by a group of poor and landless people including Kusum. Nirmal, after his retirement, began to take a great interest in these people's affairs, hoping, at the end of his life, to kindle the fire of revolution once.

Kanai and Piya meet at Nilima's house and Kanai tries to woo her, to little avail. He also hears of her encounter with Fokir from Fokir's wife, Moyana. Moyana is an ambitious woman driven to educate herself and her son to get at head in a modernizing world, in contrast to her husband, Fokir, who is content to just fish, as his ancestors have done. Moyana, upon hearing that Piya wants to hire Fokir for her project is immediately and simultaneously jealous and joyous. This jealousy seems to infect Kanai too and he suggest that he shall go with Piya and Fokir on the expedition to act as the translator between the two. The fateful expedition that ensues brings together the various strands of the story in a manner both satisfying and heart-rending.

The book is replete with evocative description of tide country scenery and traditions, colonial history and the Irrawaddy dolphins; while simultaneously the writer has the gift to leave unwritten what is better left to the reader's imagination. The book raises provocative questions about modern and traditional societies, revolution and social work, language and its limit.

Nature, its usage and associations have had multiple connotations in history and the relationship between human beings and nature has constantly changed over time, affecting it and affected by it. During the olden days nature was considered as a deity to be worshiped for its bounty. But with the passage of time this overview has changed into that of controlling nature and its resources. The perception towards nature has altered drastically with the advent of science and technology during the industrial revolution. The development of science and technology has given immense power to man. Science is a way of knowing and is a tool and is not harmful in itself, but human desires are endless. No doubt, our tools have become very powerful and if not used or handled with discretion they have and will become a threat to life on earth. The sudden decline in the species is also because of the hazardous chemicals that humans are using to

increase the agricultural production and therefore, the per capita income. These elixirs of death are used indiscriminately throughout the world which has challenged the whole circle of survival. Anthropocentric and androcentric visions have become a treat to the symbiosis and kinship among all forms of life. The human species annihilated all life on this planet, therefore it becomes imperative that we challenge the ideologies and hierarchical structures of power and should redefine, revision and reframe our definitions of nature and our outlook by submerging these differences.

Amitav Ghosh, an Indian English writer also brings forth many important questions as far as animals and their survival are concerned through his novel *The Hungry Tide*. Animals, i.e. the non-human nature, are used and abused by humans for their own purpose Ghosh tries to bring a more comprehensive concern of nature which is similar to ecofeminism through his novel *The Hungry Tide*. The novel depicts the environmental degradation and exploitation of the non-human nature and the poor people in the tide country in the name of conservation. Ghosh highlights the corruption and hypocrisy of the forest department in doing their duty to preserve and conserve animals. The conservation rights adopted by the forest department of the Sunderbans are based on the Western model of environmentalism. The officials of the forest department are more concerned about their mundane desires rather than the lives of poor people or the innocent animals. The carcass of the new-born calf which was hit by a speeding boat of the forest department shows the negligence of the officials towards the innocent creatures. Aldo Leopold who was considered the father of wildlife conservation in America in a collection of essays named "*A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here And There?*" says:

Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. By land is meant all of the things on, over, or in the earth.... The land is an organism. Its parts, like our own parts, compete with each other and co-operate with each other. The competitions are as much a part of the inner workings as the cooperations. You can regulate them - cautiously - but not abolish them.

Can harmony be achieved if we employ such environmental ethics in which nonhuman species were given importance over other species? The imprudent decisions of environmentalists have led to incidents like the Morichjappi, where thousands of refugees were put under siege and died because the area is considered as a reserve for tigers, and another fallout of such decision is the burning of the tiger by the enraged village mob. Kusum

the marginalized tribal very well describes the conflict between sustainability and conservation when she expressed her concern to Nirmal:

"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 tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world."

Every day, sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? (261-262)

This is what Ynestra King means by the systematic denigration of the poor people and animals that is connected to the dualism. These hierarchies are very much responsible for breeding hatred and exploitation of the nature. So far as conservation is concerned it is not bad but certain remedial practices need to be adopted so that it does not hamper the interest of the people residing in such areas. The existence of any being cannot be taken for granted, when Kusum expressed to Nirmal that "... our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt of dust? (261). The conservationists in Sunderbans, in their attempt to protect the wildlife made it a trivial act.

In the novel Ghosh encourages co-operative kinship between humans and non-humans and emphasizes that everything on this earth, big or small, is important. He says this with reference to crabs which act as 'sanitation department' to the mangrove trees. The symbiosis is further emphasized through dolphins which help the fishermen in casting their nets. On the other hand man uses dolphins to make oil which can supplement the dwindling supplies of petroleum, which has led to the extinction of these species.

"These dolphins were hunted with rifles and explosives and their carcasses were hung up in the sun so that their fat would drip into buckets. This oil was then used to run boats and motorcycles." (305-306)

Man is unable to comprehend these relationships and to fulfill his desires falls into temptation and has brought about his own destruction, just like moth attracted by light fall into a flame.

The *Hungry Tide* depicts nature both as a preserver and a destroyer. Through Fokir, the author tries to highlight that

being an inhabitant of the Sunderbans, his and many others livelihood is dependent on nature. Nature provides them the food and shelter and at times they fight for their survival with nature. When Fokir and Piya were caught in the storm, they took shelter on a tree and tied themselves around a branch. Similar kinship is expressed towards nature in the Chipko movement where women hugged trees to protect their families' lives.

The novel encourages respect and humility towards nature and all its inhabitants. It highlights human participation in forming an environmentally responsible culture as opposed to that of domination and oppression and its well addressed in the end by Piya who develops an affinity both with human and non-human species of the Sunderbans.

"...I don't want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it. If I was to take on a project here, I'd want it to be under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust, so it could be done in consultation with the fishermen who live in these parts" (397).

Therefore, Ghosh makes us perceive the sacredness and interconnectedness of all life forms through his novel. Amitav Ghosh makes us realize that it is important to return to nature. He formulates the original way of understanding the world by cultivating a new and more elaborate mentality towards understanding nature and its intricacies. The author has tried to convey that it is now time for us to learn how to construct our relationship with nature. Everything is sacred on this earth and needs to be preserved and the loss of the earth's sacredness is of concern to both men and women. The survival of humans is dependent on their ability to change themselves and not their environment.

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