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Ecofeminism in Indian Fiction: A Select Study

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and political theory which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male hegemony of society. It is evident that the values of patriarchal and paternalistic/capitalistic society bring about deleterious effects as man in his studied ignorance is hell-bent on exploiting nature's resources in order to advance his misdirected rank interests. Consequently it has led up to an undesirable split between the environs and culture. Eco or ecological feminism explores the inter-connections between women and nature striving to bring about equality between genders, a revaluing of non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures, and a view of the world that respects organic processes, holistic connections, and the merits of intuition and collaboration. There are scores of writers belonging to Indian literature who seek to focus on the outcome of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature.

The focus of the paper is to bring out ecofeministic concerns in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), among a few other novels. While doing so, the papers critiques the need to make a concerted effort to bring all initiatives under one umbrella to safeguard the blue planet lest her very existence is at peril.

Keywords: Nature, Woman, Exploitation, Ecofeminism, Lusibari, Ecosystem.

The values of patriarchal and paternalistic/capitalistic society bring about pernicious changes in Nature as man in his informed ignorance is hell-bent on exploiting her resources. While he enjoys the looted bounty, woman and Nature suffer. His brushes aside the ultimate values of life to be at peace with him and the world about him.

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Consequently the flawed perspective has led up to an undesirable split between the environs and culture.

Ecofeminism primarily "analyzes the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature" (Bressler 236). It seeks to dwell into the inter-connections between women and nature striving to bring about equality between genders, a revaluing of non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures, and a view of the world that respects organic processes, holistic connections, and the merits of intuition and collaboration. There are scores of women writers belonging to Indian literature who seek to focus on the outcome of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and Nature. They bring out an alternative construct that values the earth as a congenial place bringing the point home that humanity's dependency on the natural world, and embraces all life as valuable. Indefatigably, Eco feminists have striven to keep the centrality of insights to environmental philosophy and feminism on the pedestal. They descant upon the insidious nature of man in appropriating Nature's laws thereby shedding light on the commodification of Nature and of women. The paper seeks to explore some pertinent issues under question. It is divided into three parts. The first part shows how Nature and woman have been victimized by men. In the second part, the corollary of argument is presented and the last part shows some observations drawn from the study.

I

The writers across all literary genres suggest that sensitivity to our environs should be cultivated and humanity should learn to live in harmonious co-existence. Many of them also dwell on the redeeming role of women in offering alternative discourses. The focus of the paper is to bring out ecofeministic concerns in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Cursory references are also made to Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Arundhathi Roy's The *God of Small Things* (1997), Arvind Adiga's The White Tiger (2008) among a few other novels.

Though my main thrust of the paper is to map out the eco-feminist thought in a few novels, it does not subscribe to the ever-overarching notions showing Nature and women as victims and man as a ravisher. It stands to reason that woman and Nature are exploited by menfolk. However, men are generally considered Messaiahs of Nature but they are the ones who are out to molest and ransack Nature. There is a pressing need to show women's "epistemic privilege" and the need for "feminist" standpoint epistemologies. It also looks at the practices that currently feminize nature and naturalize women and the practices of anthropocentric and andocentric bias.

Amitav Ghosh' s novel is, widely considered a work of bioregionalism dealing with the vengeful beauty of the Sunderbans. A scholar by name Piyali Roy, a cetologist who is visiting the Sundarbans to conduct a survey of the marine mammals. She is keen on studying the pattern of behaviour of Dolphins. She discovers some strange behavioural quirks amongst Irawaddy Dolphins in a tide pool while visiting the islands on a grant. A young, illiterate fisherman, Fokir, comes to her rescue when she is thrown from a boat into crocodile-infested waters.

While visiting the Sunderbans on a study grant, Piyali comes upon two individuals who are diametrically opposite in temperament. One is Kanai, a complacent refined hailing from Delhi and an illiterate and haughty local man belonging to Lusibari. As the three of them launch into the elaborate backwaters, they are drawn unawares into the hidden undercurrents of this isolated world, where political turmoil exacts a personal toll that is every bit as powerful as the ravaging tide. The humans share a complex and dangerous ecosystem with animals. Piyali is drawn towards the raw charm of Fokir and finds herself attracted towards the natural and pure world that Fokir represents. The clash of interest can be seen in Fokir's fear of outsiders like Kania who are civilized. It is an exploration of the plight of the homeless refugees for a green island home, because Bangladesh, their original homeland, happened to be so green and so full of rivers. The hunger is never lost sight of both metaphorically and physically. The author has upheld the cause of the settlers at Marichjhan.

II

Ghosh's ecofeminist activism calls into question the injustice meted out to the nonhuman world and woman. Set mostly in the Sunderbans, an archipelago, Ghosh talks about the vast bioregion and scrutinizes its flora and fauna and the people living precariously in the region. The novel has two plots; the first, it explores the plight of the displaced – a group of refugees from Bangladesh who found themselves in direct confrontation with the Indian government in 1979. Another issue being raised is how human beings share a complex and dangerous ecosystem with animals The novelist's ecological sensitivity and awareness is keen as he mingles history, myth and fiction to delve into the treacherous terrains of Sundarbans where human destinies are shaped and structured by the ebb and flow of water. The novel juxtaposes two temporal narratives-that of the Morichjhapi massacre and Piyali, a young marine biologist's research on the Irrawaddy dolphins - to highlight the central conflict between animal conservation and human rights. The two principal settings, Lusibari and Garjontola are fictitious while the other locations, Canning, Morichijhapi etc., are real.

The flora of Sunderbans is unique. It is one of the largest forests lying on the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers on the Bay of Bengal. The terrain with rich ecological significance is intersected by a complex network of tidal waterways and tiny islands of salt-tolerant mangrove forests and presents an excellent example of ongoing ecological processes. The area is known for wide range of fauna, including the quirky dolphin, Bengal tiger and other threatened species like estuarine crocodile. Ghost foregrounds the terrain creates "defamiliarization" through linguistic (i.e., pertaining to language) "dislocation" that calls readers' attention to the strangeness of the world or the perception of the world portrayed or depicted in the literary work. Ghosh transcends the normal communicative resources of the language, and awakens the reader, by freeing him from the grooves of cliche and banal expressions, to a new perceptivity. The landscape that the novelist presents is like "compilation of pages that overlap without any two ever being the same" (224).

Most of the action takes place in Lusibari which looks like "a huge earthen arc, floating serenely above its surroundings at low tide while at high tide the same island looks like flimsy saucer that could tip over at any moment and go circling down the depths" (116). Hundreds and thousands acres of tidal forested area disappear underwater and re-emerge hours later. "Some days the water tears away entire ….peninsulas ….at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before" (7). As Buell posits that the impermanence of tidal terrain assumes great importance in eco-critical analysis. Ghosh shows that place is relative and uncertain in the novel. In the same way, time runs at a deer's pace. Huge carcasses, the remains of gigantic ships which were capsized get assimilated by the hungry tides. "Nothing escapes from the maw of the tides (225). Nature cannot be a benign mother that can be found in eco-criticism is mostly absent here in the work. In a way, the destructive forces of Nature like the storm, the rains and the tide on the one hand and crocodile and tiger on the other are described in detail. The individuals who are well-prepared to survive are best adapted to their environment. This bio-spherical egalitarianism can be seen in the novel. Man slaying the tiger and tiger killing man happen continually. Nelima says " ….in the twenty first century, it is difficult for you to imagine yourself being attacked by a tiger ….it's not in the least bit out of the ordinary. It happens several times a week" (240).

The Sunderbans seems to be a mysterious place; in legends and fairy tales, they are usually inhabited by ferocious creatures. It is a place of troubles and turbulence, a realm of death holding the secrets of nature which man must penetrate to find meaning. In analytical psychology, the forest represents feminity. However, it is the young woman, Piyali who seeks to unravel and explore some of its mysteries unknown. It stands for the unconscious and its mysteries. The forest has great connection with the symbolism of the mother; it is a place where life thrives. However, it must also be noted that it can be seen as a contrast with the city and comfort of the home, the forest harbors all kinds of dangers and demons, animals, enemies and diseases.

Ghosh divulges how Piya and the dolphin are susceptible to male domination and exploitation. Many a time Piyali feels that she is as vulnerable as the animals. The young local representative of the Fisheries Department, Mr. Rath, tried to intimate with Piya, who in all her innocence, divulges her misfortunes befell her childhood. With little sensitivity, he made them known to all. She felt that "… the most intimate details of her life were common knowledge among the men of the town" (314) and therefore, she had to move away in ". . . sheer humiliation of having had her life laid bare before the whole town" (314). On going back to her place, Piyali was flummoxed as the fate of women doing research in the field of biology was no different: "It was as if what I'd been through wasn't even my own story - just a script we were all doomed to live out" (314). Opening of aquariums in Eastern Asia where the Irrawaddy dolphins were treated "valuable commodity" (306), speaks volumes for the commodification of nature and spreading of the rabid man-made consumerist culture. Arundhati Roy also contests the insidious ways such hierarchies percolate through patriarchical ideology and an apparently rational economic logic.

Piya partakes of Mother Nature quality in herself. When people want to prey upon the tiger for killing the herds and people, she raises an objection: "This is an animal... You can't take revenge on an animal" (294). Kanai, however, justifies the villagers' action. She has her own valid reasons for vehemently opposing such stance: "Once we decide we can kill off other species, it'll be the people next. . . people who're poor and unnoticed" (301). Later she was informed that that the tiger had gone past her boat. Her remark has a ring of sarcasm: ". . . since we were all asleep, it was in no danger of being spotted" (291).

The novelist also shows that the instinctive fear is beneficial to humans in many ways. He also shows that the association between fear of a number of animals and perceptions of the animals as uncontrollable, unpredictable, dangerous and disgusting is not good. Fokir wants Kani to fear the fear: "….it's the fear that protects you, saar; it's what keeps you alive. Without it the danger doubles" (244). The government is also protective. But in the name of tiger preservation human lives are threatened: the tigers routinely maul and often kill islanders.

The Lusibari island is often punctuated by the fierce growls of tigers. Kanai has got rid of a tiger which is on its prowl and is ready to pounce upon him. However, Heren feels that if the tiger had been there, Kanai would have been killed as the Bengal does not let people go scot-free. Thus the whole narrative is replete with many animal assaults. " Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by a tiger, snake or crocodile…." (79). Piya escapes a crocodile's attack by hair breadth. "Nobody finds the remains of people who're killed by crocodiles" (328). Kusum's father was also killed by a tiger. It is for this reason that those who kill tiger will be rewarded. For instance, Horen's uncle Bolai who had killed a tiger was rewarded with two bighas of land in Lusibari. Piya's research shows that the marine mammals, Dolphins and other animals are on the decline owing to motor boats and nylon nets. Without the imposing presence of tigers, the Sunderbans would disappear. However, with their habitat loss and dwindling prey, they sneak into the villages and human habitations. Man in his greed would like to poach the tigers for their claws and skin, the felling of Mangrove trees, killing of dolphins for their magic oil, the steady destruction of flora and fauna makes one wonder whether the Sunderbans could escape man's onslaughts.

However, the novelist underscores the importance of man getting along with all other animals. The deity of the forest, Bon Bibi reigns supreme and all wild creature in particular act at her bidding. Many people who repose faith in her believes in her omnipotence. "No man who is good at heart has anything to fear in this place" (324).

When nature's fury gets unleashed, the image of Mother Nature and her bounty does not come to one's mind. The malevolence of Nature is given threadbare. When the cyclones have struck the land with tragic regularity, describing the cyclone, he says: "the usual blowing and sighing and rustling had turned into a deep, ear-splitting rumble as if the earth itself had begun to move" (379). The wall of water that hits Piya and Fokir makes them feel as if a dam had broken over their face with death and makes her beg that her death should happen not on water but on land. The archipalego

Sunderbans is a metaphor for that ephemerality. Whole islands are washed away by the cyclones that sweep in with huge tidal surges. Thousands of human beings and animals routinely die in these storms. The cyclone is a great leveler reducing the bird and the beast and man. It kills Fokir, a man of Sunderbans sacrificing himself for Piyali who decides to engage with the fisherman for her idealistic project in the tide country – her new home. The river in *The God of Small Things (1997)* and many other novels gets polluted and the space was encroached.

III

The forest cover has become less dense with the trees getting dwarfed and bushy. Loss of mangroves and consequent habitat fragmentation is a major concern throughout the world's tropical countries. Conversion of mangrove habitat due to aquaculture, agriculture, urbanization and industrialization, ecotourism, overlapping bureaucracy and conflicting policies is occurring at a striking rate. Loss of mangroves is now a prominent global issue, associated with the loss of biodiversity, deterioration of habitat integrity, climatic changes, the amount of carbon sequestration, and resulting sea-level rise. "Formerly man had been part of nature; now he is the exploiter of nature" (White 8).

To conclude, the paper critiques the need to make concerted effort to bring all initiatives to safeguard the blue planet and woman lest their very existence should be at peril. In positing a polarized and rigid notion of 'feminine' and 'masculine' values, claiming that women are more empathic than men seems suspect as seen in *Hungry Tide*. A closer textual examination illustrates a more ambiguous reality. Piyali empathizes with the forested terrain and even illiterate and boorish men as she has reciprocated much of her ardour. Kanai is a different case. He is urbane and therefore, has some entrenched prejudices against nature. And this cannot be pressed into service saying that men are indifferent and callous to nature. Shiva's argument, that in some cultural and historical moments (some) women are 'closer to nature' than (some) men, may be justified. But structuring a mutual inferiorisation of 'women' and 'nature' may not possible here in the novel. Therefore, the assertion of eco-feminists that the oppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures go together cannot be brought out in the novel. Fokir who always looks docile resembles a caged bird in the presence of his ambitious wife Moyna. Therefore, he shows his predilection to confine himself to his boat. In Anita Desai's Raka's announcement that she has set the forest on fire provides another example of man's insensitivity to nature. The "fire" metaphorically smolders within her before it literally ignites a beautiful place. While there are few important "events" in the rest of the novel, Anita Desai prepares the reader for the horrific ending by carefully embedding violence in her imagery and in her symbolism. In effect, the "fire" metaphorically smolders within her characters before it literally ignites the mountains.

In the novel, *The Hungry Tide* all the female characters do not orchestrate plans to their personal life. Piya clamours for the endangered species, dolphins and tigers; Kusum pawns down her life for the settlers; Nilima forgoes her cozy city life for the

sake of enhancing the quality of the locals living in the archipelago; even the illiterate fisherman's wife, Moyna is tense about the consequences of man's inroads into nature. According to Ghosh, man must have some spiritual affinity with the world and its inhabitants. Ecofeminism urges humans to have a more balanced sustainable development. Ghosh's advocacy of "ecological democracy" and ecohumanitarianism can only absolve the planet of the present impending doom of extinction.

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