

THE TROPES OF PASTORAL RETREAT AND WILDERNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE* - AN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Like environmental studies and other social sciences, literature too, plays an important role in addressing the various issues pertaining to the environment. This role is brought into focus by a relatively new school of criticism that emerged in the 1990s called “ecocriticism”. As we rapidly get entangled into a mechanical way of life with modern science and technology reaching unprecedented heights, I feel it is essential to stop and realize our huge indebtedness to nature and to acknowledge and appreciate the world that extends beyond the human race. My interest in ecocriticism is fundamentally derived from this realization and this is why I choose to analyze Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) through an ecocritical lens. This paper is an attempt to explore the tropes of “the pastoral” and “wilderness”, identified by Greg Garrad as central to the study of ecocriticism, in Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*.

Keywords: city-countryside, ecocriticism, pastoral retreat, wilderness.

Introduction:

*The business of art is to reveal the relation between
man and his circumambient universe at a living
moment*

D. H. Lawrence

“Morality and the Novel”

Ecocriticism explores the relationship between literature and the physical world. It examines the ways in which nature is “represented/ re-presented” in literature. One important question posed by ecocriticism is: “In addition to race, class and gender should *place* become a new critical category?” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: xix). “Place” obviously plays an important role in shaping the social, cultural and psychological lives of the characters in any fictional work which concentrates on the relationship between the human and the non-human world. Amitav Ghosh is a writer who is well known for his intricate description of the natural environment both in his fictional and non-fictional works. “Place” assumes special significance in his works. In *An Antique Land*, it is the Nile Delta; in *The Glass Palace*, it is Burma; in *The Hungry Tide*, it is the Sundarbans. Since the Romantic age, pastoral narratives have played an important role in shaping our “constructions” of nature (Garrad 33). According to Garrad “the pastoral trope must and will remain a key concern for ecocritics” (33). Three different features of the pastoral as identified by Terry Gifford are:

- a. [T]he specifically literary tradition involving a retreat from the city to the countryside.
 - b. [M]ore generally, ‘any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to urban.’
 - c. [And] the pejorative sense in which pastoral implies an idealization of rural life that obscures the realities of labour and hardship. (qtd. in Garrad 33)
- Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* reflects all the three

features. Firstly, the outsiders who visit the Sundarbans welcome the shift from city to countryside as we see in the case of Nirmal, Nilima and Piyali, except for Kanai who has a difficult time adjusting with the locale. Secondly, by bringing in these outsiders, Ghosh explores the contrasting features of city life and village life. And thirdly, he shows how encounter with the realities of village life causes a shift in the outsider’s preconceived notions of the countryside.

In the novel, Nirmal and Nilima are characters who have spent several years in the Sundarbans. But, they are actually outsiders by origin. They come to the Sundarbans to seek an escape from the troubles of city life. Ecocritics, however, examine such pastoral retreats through a different lens. While on the one hand, human beings exploit natural resources in numerous ways, on the other hand, they seek solace and escape from daily mundane life in nature’s lap. This highlights the double standards inherent in human society. Jonathan Bate in his *The Song of the Earth* rightly says, “We value nature...for the very reason that we are destroying it; the more we ‘tame’ nature in our everyday lives, the more we value ‘wild’ nature in our leisure time” (35).

But, Nirmal and Nilima’s first visit to the place shocks them. It is because their idyllic picture of village life gets completely disrupted when faced with reality:

Nothing was familiar; everything was new. What little they knew of rural life was derived from the villages of the plains: *the realities of the tide country were beyond reckoning.* (THT[1]79 italics mine)

They are alarmed by the pathetic and dangerous living conditions of the people there. It has none of the comforts and security that a city life offers:

Hunger drove them [the people] to hunting and fishing and the results were often disastrous. Many died of drowning, and many more were picked off by

crocodiles and estuarine sharks. (79)

What is worse is the condition of women. An alarming majority of women in Lucibari are widows because their husbands who go for fishing hardly return back safe.

In *THT*, Ghosh further emphasizes the dualism of city-countryside by bringing together two different characters from metropolitan locales, Kanai and Piya. Piya, the cetologist, who comes to the Sundarbans to study the river dolphins, feels completely relieved and enchanted while she is on the boat with Fokir and Tutul, serenely listening to dolphin's echoes and Fokir's magnificent recitation of the Bon Bibi myth. Thus, even for her, visit to the Sundarbans, in a way, becomes a kind of "pastoral retreat". Though she is an outsider, she comfortably adjusts with the natural environment of the Sundarbans. She says:

What greater happiness could there be than this: to be on the water with someone you trusted, at this magical hour, listening to the serene sound of these animals?(157-158).

Of all the characters in the novel, Kanai is the least adaptable to the Sundarbans. His alienation from the place can be examined by exploring the trope of wilderness in the novel.

Wilderness generally refers to an unclaimed, uncultivated land devoid of human habitation and unaltered by civilization. But, according to Alison Byerly, though "the idea of wilderness refers to the absence of humanity, yet "wilderness" has no meaning outside the context of the civilization that defines it" (qtd. in Glotfelty and Fromm 54). Metaphorically, wilderness could also refer to a place of terrible confusion and unpredictability. In this regard, the island of Garjontolain the novel can be regarded as a wilderness area because it is uninhabited by humans and also because the place tricks and confuses the outsider, Kanai.

According to ecocritics, encounter with the wilderness brings us close to our true self. For Kanai, it is the unpredictable Sundarbans that becomes the true "mirror" which unveils his deceptive attitudes. From the beginning, Kanai seems doomed to have a troubled relationship with the landscape and the native folks of the Sundarbans because of his metropolitan attitude as well as due to his effortlessness in understanding and respecting his natural surroundings. His condescending attitude towards Fokir, the simple, native fisherman, vividly reveals this.

We witness this when Kanai gets helplessly trapped in the island of Garjontola until Piya, Fokir and Horen come to his rescue. Here we see a very

different Kanai; a Kanai whose polite-talks get reduced to terrible abuses which he hurls at Fokir, "sources whose very existence he would have denied: townsman's mistrust of the rustic; the city's antagonism to the village" (*THT* 326). Unmasking happens when Kanai's anger overtakes him:

[D]espite his knowledge of the phenomenon, he was powerless to stop the torrent of obscenities that were pouring out of his mouth now. When Fokir offered a hand to help, he slapped it aside: 'Jashuorerbachcha, beriye ja! Get away you son of a pig!' (326)

Another typical feature of wilderness tropes is the 'nature-culture' dichotomy. Western culture has always defined "humanity" by its difference from the "not-human", wherein the "not-human" stands for the uncivilized, the savage, animal, animalistic. Kanai's abusive language "animalizes" Fokir. But, what happens is a shift, wherein Kanai becomes the animal he associates Fokir with. As Kate Soper puts it: [B]y associating all our 'lowlier' characteristics and bodily functions with animality, we assert the importance of sustaining those higher or more spiritual attributes that grant us human sovereignty over the beast...[Thus] in each exercise of dominion the antithetical position emerges: *humans become the animals they attempt to dominate*. (qtd. in Garrad 143 italics mine)

Here, Kanai's treatment of Fokir seems analogous to man's condescending and disrespectful treatment of nature.

Yet another feature of wilderness narratives is that they distinguish wild animals from domestic animals on the basis of a "gendered hierarchy" (Garrad 150). That is, wild animals are associated with masculine courage, power and freedom. They are the predators. The domestic animals, on the other hand, are looked upon as the feminine victims of the powerful predators. In *THT*, tigers and crocodiles seem to exhibit great masculine powers. For instance, while Kanai listens to the various sounds made by different small creatures, he experiences the sudden vibrations of a tiger's roar which silences all other sounds even while being miles away from them:

The echo...bespoke a nakedness of assertion, a power and menace, that had no relationship to its volume. Small as it was, every other sound seemed to wither for an instant, only to be followed by a loud and furious outbreak of disquiet. (*THT* 154)

Thus, by linking the tropes of the "pastoral" and the "wilderness", Ghosh directs us to examine the complex interdependence of the human and the non-human world from an altogether different dimension in *The Hungry Tide*.

References:

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6. All further references to *The Hungry Tide* will appear as THT.

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