



## CONFLICT BETWEEN ECOCENTRICISM AND ANTHROPOCENTRICISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S 'THE HUNGRY TIDE'

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents animals colonization with post modernism as a form of western mindset through the novel 'The Hungry Tide' by Amitav Ghosh. The focus is laid on the anthropocentric attitude of human being manifested through the killing of animals without mercy. It also studies the killing of local villagers by wild animals tracing the conflict it creates between human life and wild life. Environmental ethics is defined as the moral relationship between humans and the natural environment. Ecocentric reality and anthropocentric reality are the two kinds of environmental ethics. Anthropocentrism in environmental philosophy concedes only an instrumental value to nature and non-human beings. They believed that nature should be used; governed and renewed wisely. Environmental philosophy faces a lot of conflict due to the different notions in terms of ethical perceptions. This paper can be read out as the conflict between the wildlife and human life as both are negatively impacting each other. The present paper investigates the connection between the modernity of the European world, being manifested in their treatment of nature in India during the colonial period and its aftermath in the context of Indian wildlife in Sunderban region. The setting of the novel is so enchanting that the readers get an experience of the Sunderbans and the threats that both the wild animals and the poor villagers face to survive.*

### INTRODUCTION

Environmental ethics is defined as the moral relationship between humans and the natural environment. Ecocentric reality and anthropocentric reality are the two kinds of

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environmental ethics. Ecocentric reality is the very fact that man is nature. What you do to nature is the same that you do to yourself. The fact is that there is no separation between man, animals and nature. Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism are the two paradigms of environmental ethics. Anthropocentrism in environmental philosophy concedes only an instrumental value to nature and non-human beings. They believed that nature should be used; governed and renewed wisely. Environmental philosophy faces a lot of conflict due to the different notions in terms of ethical perceptions. Traditional and religious vision places humans as the central force of the world. Anthropocentrism as against ecocentrism is human domination over nature. Some people believe that they were given dominion over nature's plants and animals to serve their needs. Anthropocentrism states that humans are the sole bearers of intrinsic value and all other living beings are there to sustain human's existence. Often the values of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism overlap. A balance of anthropocentric and ecocentric values would create a long term, human utilized biologically diverse and healthy ecosystem that includes human as natural components. Anthropocentrism is human's greed over need. Looting of nature's wealth without thinking of its abutting end is happening throughout history. Without nature, human beings never exist and without human beings literature never exist. So literature and nature is interrelated. This paper presents animals colonization with post modernism as a form of western mindset through the novel 'The Hungry Tide' by Amitav Ghosh. 'The Hungry Tide' is the sixth novel by Amitav Ghosh. The focus is laid on the anthropocentric attitude of human being manifested through the killing of animals without mercy. It also studies the killing of local villagers by wild animals tracing the conflict it creates between human life and wild life.

*"Isn't that a horror too that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings" (Ghosh, 249)*

Sense of place is a unique quality which stands out in every work of Amitav Ghosh. 'The Hungry Tide' is set in the myths and history of the Sunderban. Sunderban is a vast forest in the coastal region of the Bay of Bengal. For settlers here, life is extremely hazardous. It is a unique forest which is considered as one of the natural wonders of the world. It is world's largest coastal mangrove forest. The Sunderban, the world's largest delta formed by three great rivers, the Ganga, the Brahmaputra and the Meghana, spreads over India and Bangladesh. The deadly forest is called Sunderban meaning 'the beautiful forest' named after the sundari tree (heriteria minar) a species of the mangrove. With its tough and thick foliage the mangrove forests are extremely hostile towards humans who are killed in dozens. The Indian portion of the Sunderban encompasses an area of 9,600sq km, comprising 102 islands – of these 54 islands have human settlements.

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*“People lived here once, but they were driven away by tempests and tides, tigers and crocodiles”. (Ghosh 43)*

The rest areas are thick mangrove forests – home to the Royal Bengal Tigers, crocodiles and some of the world’s deadliest snakes. They accommodate a National park, a tiger reserve and three wildlife Sanctuaries. The Rivers and creeks that crisscross the delta are infested with crocodiles and snakes. The Orcaella, a fresh water dolphin is earth’s rarest creature. The novel is a river journey in search of this creature. In this exotic land, marine biologist Piya Roy, fisherman Fokir and translator Kanai meet. As they travel into the deep mangroves they experience a territory risk. It is the arrival of Piyali Roy, of Indian parentage but stubbornly American, and Kanai Dutt, a sophisticated Delhi businessman, that sets in motion a fateful tragedy. Kanai has come to visit his widowed aunt and to review some writings left behind by her husband, a political radical who died mysteriously in the aftermath of a local uprising. He meets Piya on the train from Calcutta and learns she has come to the Sundarban in search of a rare species of river dolphin. When she hires Fokir, an illiterate, yet proud local fisherman to guide her through the mazelike backwaters, Kanai becomes her translator. From this moment, the tide begins to turn. The novel is a fight between western assumptions and Indian reality. Landscape in which the sea, the river, the land, humans and animals all co-exist sometimes in harmony but often in competition. This river delta, consisting of innumerable islands which appear and disappear according to the whims of tides and seasons. Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water.

*“The tides reach as far as two hundred miles inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to remerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily.”(Ghosh, 5)*

For years many novelists have pitied on the poor philosophy of modern materialised people. The time has come for the decision to be made at last with the community of ecocritics and environmental writers to pay attention to the many examples of positive healthy attitude towards natural world. The survival of humanity is altogether at the mercy of ecosystem.

*“Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles” (Ghosh 2)*

Most philosophers have agreed that humans are the most intelligent of all beings. The anthropocentric perspective fabricates wildlife in colonial India; Amitav Ghosh brilliantly dissipates human-centrism in the novel ‘*The Hungry Tide*’. This paper can be read out as the conflict between the wildlife and human life as both are negatively impacting each other. The present paper investigates the connection between the modernity of the European world,

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being manifested in their treatment of nature in India during the colonial period and its aftermath in the context of Indian wildlife in Sunderban region. This study of *'The Hungry Tide'* is a critique of modernity which liberalises the humans to act freely and individually as the colonials are trying to establish their supremacy over the animals. Yet the achievement of *'The Hungry Tide'* is in its exploration of a far darker and more unknowable jungle, the human heart. It is a novel that asks at every turn: what danger resides there, and what delusion? What man can take the true measure of another?

*"Yet to the world at large this archipelago is known as the Sunderbans, which means the beautiful forest." (Ghosh 7)*

The Indian villages notably at the fringes of the jungles were highly dependent on the resources provided by the forest for their livelihood. Although the animals harmed people, it was less accounted for because it was tolerable.

*"Bon bibi granted me enough honey to fill the two bottles" (Ghosh 24)*

Bon bibi is considered as the goddess of the forest. The people who lived in the Sunderban were highly dependent on the resources provided by the forest. Even though there were predators, people were never driven away from this place. The settlers of the Sundarban believe that anyone who dares venture into the vast watery labyrinth without a pure heart will never return.

*"And everywhere you looked there were predators-tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards". (Ghosh 44)*

The tigers are deeply engaged in human killings. The man-eating animals have become the reason of complete danger in the Sunderban villages. There is a reign of terror in the Sunderban area that anyone coming from the outside should feel that he had stepped right into a world of stark realities and the rule of the tooth and claw.

*"Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles." (Ghosh 7)*

In the chapter The Glory of Bon Bibi, Kusum, a girl from the nearby island of Satjelia tells the fatal story of her father who died while foraging for firewood in a place that was off-limits to villagers. He didn't have a permit at the time, so Kusum's mother never received compensation.



*“Bon Bibi. The day my father died I saw it all, it happened in front of me and I called her again and again (Ghosh 89)*

The poor villager's belief was that the Goddess Bon Bibi hears their prayers. There was money in the house and food as well, because her father had come back just the day before from a long and successful fishing trip. Most of the families depend on fishing. Kusum's father had gone to the forest to fetch firewood when the mishap happened. Even though the place was a reserve, it was common for people of their village to forage for firewood.

*“He rowed across the river. He was pushing the boat up the bank when she saw it not the whole animal but enough of its flashing black and gold coat to know it was there.”(Ghosh 90)*

The animal was hiding between the trees that lined the shore. It had watched the boat as it came across the river. Kusum's loud scream called her mother and other villager's up to the embankment. But her father could not hear the scream. The animal was stalking her father. The villagers tried to get the attention of her father by making loud noises as they could, but it made no difference. The animal knew that the people on the bank were powerless against these gusts. Intent on its prey it went racing along the shore.

*“The great cats of the tide country were like ghosts, never revealing their presence except through marks, sounds and smells.”(Ghosh 91)*

Kusum cried to Bon Bibi to save her father.

*“Help, O Mother of mercy, O Bon Bibi, save my father.”(Ghosh 91)*

Kusum shut her eyes but she heard everything. She heard the sound of his bones cracking as the animal swiped a paw across his neck, she heard the rustle of the mangrove as the animal dragged the corpse into the forest. Every villager had some terrorful stories about their loved once being brutally killed by these man eaters. The question that comes to the mind of the readers is whether the villagers should kill these man eaters who come to their settlements and kill their beloved ones or should they remain as a silent observer in fear of the Forest department officials fearing the arrests and fines. The poor are always the sufferers. No one cares about their life and understands that they keep their life at risk only to survive. They have to eat, their families have to eat. People willingly endure such suffering. The prospect of horrible death does not deter them. So day in and day out, the poor villagers in the Sunderban risk their life to get an income so they can provide for their families. The risk to life is so high because of the threat from man-eaters. Due to poverty, the residents of the Sunderban have to



keep their life at risk. They enter the reserve without any permit. There will be arrests and fines if the Forest department is informed.

Post colonialism and ecocriticism are seen in the novel. There is an ever-ending struggle between the tigers and the people. The western ideology is placing humans as the patrons of all living creatures. The people who lived in the Sunderban want to kill the tigers because every day one or the other is becoming the prey of the man eaters. The innocent poor people suffer a lot for a living. Anthropocentric arguments include those relating to the moral status of an action, such as killing a lion. There is bound to be public preserve to remove every tiger that has killed people. Anthropocentricists are human centred as they relate to human morality although the actions may have repercussions on animals. The people who lived in Sunderban were feast to the predators. So many were killed.

*“No day seemed to pass without news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile” (Ghosh 68)*

Consequently the man eaters destroyed many families. The western characters in the novel want to save the tigers regardless of how many people were killed by them. The native people want to kill the tigers because of how many of their fellows were killed. The native people tried different ways to prevent the man-eaters to stop killing the people but everything went in vain. Based on interviewing local people it was found that the main reasons for tiger-killing by people were attacks on humans and cattle.

*“That’s the most horrifying thing I have ever seen, a tiger set on fire”*

The local people say that when a tiger comes to a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die. There was bound to be trouble once the news of the killing reached the Forest department. In the novel it states that there these killing of animals had led to riots, shootings and large scale arrests.

*“There will be arrests, fines...” (Ghosh 244)*

Accidental deaths are mostly in defence. A tigress with cubs is typically high-string. As are all big cats during a hard earned meal. A surprised tiger is rarely a pleased tiger, just ask a grass cutter who has chanced upon a sleeping beauty. There is also a room for mistaken identity like someone bending down or on their haunches many look like a prey animal. Environmentalists say unless it is a desperate tigress encumbered by cubs, a big cat rarely eats a human being. It kills accidentally. Anyway the consumption of a human kill alone is not enough proof that a tiger is a man eater. But on some occasion, a tiger may deliberately seek

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out human prey, often by stalking, given an opportunity; such a tiger consumes every human kill and drags the corpse away to secure the remains. While most accidental attacks are meant to be non-lethal – a swipe of the paw frequently deliberate attacks are men at to kill and usually involves precisions canine punctures or injuries in the neck. The inability to take down wild prey due to age or injury is the usual reason for human kill. But healthy tigers in their prime are also known to turn on human beings. According to NTCA's, such an aberrant tiger must be caught and sent to the nearest recognised zoo and not released in the wild. Conservation is about saving the species. Letting man-eaters continue in the wild will surely lead to more attacks turning local poor people against the Forest Department. The forest guards are also insecure as they must patrol on foot to secure the reserve. The plantation workers also suffer from these kinds of attacks. There are some people who claim that predators can develop a taste for human flesh after trying it once which may explain why one individual animal is sometimes responsible for several human attacks. Since human blood has more salt than animal blood once wild animals get the taste of salty blood, they do not like other animals like deer. With increasing human encroachment into their reserves, tigers often compete for resources with nearby villages, leading to conflicts. It is not the greediness of the people which made them enter into the reserve area of the species and cause threat to their life; it is only for a livelihood. Besides this there are honey collectors locally called as moulis who enter the forest legally and illegally every year, when the mangroves flower and attract bees. Woodcutters also enter the forest in violation of the rule. It is mostly fisherman who gets killed by the tigers followed by honey collectors, woodcutters and forest staffs. The novel evokes an empathetic feeling on marginalised communities that depends on natural resources for their livelihood and survival.

*“It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. These killings are never reported and the reason is just that these people are poor to matter”  
(Ghosh 249)*

At a philosophical level, it engages with the complexities that lie with the human-animal and human-nature relationships. Post colonial anthropocentrism can be observed if we look at the situation comparing tigers to nature itself. The other side is tiger's pathetic situation of fighting back against the inhabitants who have become greedy and westernized. Imperialism's profit over people, greed over need, and love over nature remain even after the westerners have left the country. Many people depend on fish for their main source of living. It is the poor who depend most on their ecosystems.

*“Did you think he was some kind of grass roots ecologists? He is not- he is a fisherman – he kills animals for a living.”(Ghosh 245)*

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Around 7,500 sq km of the Sunderban falling in Indian Territory is open for fishing, leaving just 2,100 sq km of the core area unavailable. However villagers do not restrict themselves to the permitted zones. In the novel it says that the fisherman have adopted unsustainable fishing practices in pursuit of profit.

*“The nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well”  
(Ghosh 111)*

Thousands of villagers enter the forest to catch fish, crabs and collect honey every year. A majority do not have permit issued by the forest department. When these illegal entrants are killed by crocodiles and tigers, the families rarely inform the authorities out of fear. The forest is a rich biodiversity of various species of insects, birds, snakes and animals.

*“Mosquitoes were the least of the creatures this net was intended to exclude; its absence; would have been an invitation for snakes and scorpions” (Ghosh 73)*

The western characters in the novel want to save the tigers without considering how many people were attacked or even killed by them. Once Piya Roy witnessed a tiger attack on the villagers. The people were very arrogant that they wanted to somehow kill the tiger to keep themselves safe.

*“The man’s spear point was stained with blood. She snatched it from the man’s hand and placed her foot on it, breaking it into two” (Ghosh 237)*

The studies show the nature of tigers that do not turn to human flesh usually. But the author’s lines say that the tigers are deeply engaged in human killings. Man animal conflicts are an age old problem in the sunderbans. There have been several instances of locals getting killed or mauled by tiger even if they remain within the permitted zones. Complications occur when the bodies are not found. The tiger was not new to their village. It had killed many people and had long been preying on their livestock. Healthy animals were known to attack human beings. In the 1980’s, a German naturalist suggested that the tigers preference for human flesh was somehow connected with the shortage of fresh water in the sunderbans. In the novel the author is mentioning that 4218 people were killed by the Bengal tigers in six years period between 1860 and 1866. During 1990’s over a hundred people were killed by tigers each year.





*“If you include the Bangladesh side, the figure is probably twice that .If you put the figures together , it means that a human being is killed by a tiger every other day in the Sunderbans – at the very least” (Ghosh 200)*

*“The great cats of the tide country were like ghosts...to behold one was to be as good as dead” (Ghosh 90)*

There have also been instances of tigers and crocodiles entering the villages though they are not known to attack them and the animals are also not killed either. Many families were broken because of the brutal death of the family members who depend the forest for a living. “She heard the sound of his bones cracking as the animal swiped a paw across his neck... She heard the rustle of the mangrove as the animal dragged the corpse into the forest” (Ghosh 90) However, crocodile attacks are common in rivers near the villages where they often come to lay eggs. The crocodiles have digestive juices that are so strong that it can even digest a steel rail.

*“Crocodiles can move faster on mud than a man run on grass...It won't kill you on land, it will drag you into the water where you are still breathing , nobody finds the remains of people who are killed by crocodiles.” (Ghosh 276)*

Like all Ghosh's novel, 'The Hungry Tide' contains a wide array of characters and setting that intersect throughout the novel. The novel starts when Kannai Dutt a translator reaches the Sundarban to visit her aunt to read a writing written by his deceased uncle. He meets Piya Roy, an American scientist of Indian descent who came to Sunderban to do research in a special breed of dolphins. She joins Fokir, a local fisherman, to tour the area. Kanai is jealous of Piya's growing closeness with Fokir, and he insists on coming along to serve as a translator as well. The expedition was full of terror as they faced the breath going incidents. To come back alive from the mangroves was a miracle that would rarely happen as they faced weird encounters.

*“Fokir was standing braced against his boat's hood, pointing down river, Kumir! a crocodile..” (Ghosh 217)*

They knew that it was very difficult for them to come back safe. Mashima and many villagers warned them of the terrifying encounters they will surely face with all the deadliest beasts. The expedition is going well at first, but soon they court disaster. Fokir and Piya split off from the group in a smaller boat through some of the hidden canals of the jungle. The rest came to know that a major storm is bearing down on the site. Although they wait as long as they can for Piya and Fokir to return, but Kanai and his crew are eventually forced to make the

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difficult decision to go back without them, leaving them in the storm. The storm was too powerful that they took refuge in the Mangrove forest. During the storm, Fokir does his best to shield them both, but eventually he is killed by flying debris. Piya survives against the odds, and manages to return the boat to Lusibari and notify Fokir's family of his fate and heroism. She leaves the Sundarbans to stay with family in Calcutta, but returns a month later having raised money to support Fokir's family. She also establishes a research foundation to study the Irrawaddy dolphin, which she names after Fokir in honor of all his help in her research. The setting of the novel is so enchanting that the readers get an experience of the Sunderbans and the threats that both the wild animals and the poor villagers face to survive.

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