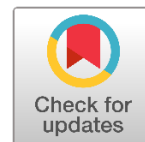


Original Article

FROM TIDE COUNTRY TO LIVING MOUNTAIN: PLANETARY KINSHIP, NONHUMAN AGENCY AND THE ANTHROPOCENE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S ECOLOGICAL FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh has persistently addressed dominant ecocritical concerns in his writings. His theoretical framework in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), highlights how serious fiction has not yet documented the urgent implications of climate change. Ghosh insists on the interconnected nature of ecological crises and believes that literature should take this into consideration. This paper examines three works by Ghosh – *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island* and *The Living Mountain* and focuses on how Ghosh consistently reimagines the nonhuman world as an active agency in the human background. He exposes the fallacies of the anthropocentric beliefs that form the bedrock of contemporary society. The study of the three texts exposes a unifying principle – the interconnectedness of ecosystems. Human and nonhuman ecosystems, local and planetary ecosystems are minutely scrutinised to delineate broader perspectives. He urges literature, collective imagination and politics to create new forms of telling stories, stories capable of grasping scales beyond individual human experience.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate Change, Displacement, Interconnected Ecosystems, Multispecies Ethics

INTRODUCTION

The growing concern regarding the climate crisis has engendered a parallel response in literary studies. Ecocritical theory, which originally focussed on the politics of literature and the physical environment, has since widened to include planetary consciousness, environmental legalities, the boundaries within which species exist and the challenges posed by climate change (Glottfelty xviii). Amitav Ghosh has persistently addressed these concerns through his writings. His manifesto regarding what he described as a 'derangement' in his work *Ghosh (2016)*, shaped his own work and highlighted how serious fiction had not yet documented the urgent and immediate implications of climate change. Ghosh argued that the realist novel was not suited to represent the unpredictable and improbable consequences of wavering climatic situations like floods, avalanches, etc. Ghosh insisted on the interconnected nature of ecological crises and believed that literature and politics should take this into consideration. Thus he critiqued the Western Cartesian divide between the human and the nonhuman.

This paper examines three works by Ghosh – *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island* and *The Living Mountain*. A novel based on the Sunderbans, located in the delta of three rivers, *The Hungry Tide* explores the tidal ecology of the world's largest mangrove forest, a unique, biotic space. The continuous ebb and flow of water transform the chain of islands constantly. Blending modern reality, myth and environmental disturbances, *Gun Island* explores the interconnected crises of climate change, displacement and globalisation.

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The Living Mountain, an allegorical novelette, distils his concerns regarding how the natural world is being exploited by human beings. Ghosh's ecological poetics can be discerned in all three works – from a rendering of a fragile, natural ecosystem, to a blending of resurrected myth with the displacement associated with climate migration, to a final amalgamation of everything in a fable about greed and planetary revolt. This paper examines how Ghosh consistently reimagines the nonhuman world as active factors in the human background and thus exposes the fallacies of the anthropocentric beliefs that form the bedrock of contemporary society.

OBJECTIVES

The study has the following objectives:

- 1) To demonstrate how Ghosh's fiction can be situated within Anthropocentric discourse.
- 2) To explore the variety of species depicted across the three works and to delineate how they are affected by changes in the environment.
- 3) To investigate how changing climatic conditions are depicted as living, embodied realities.
- 4) To delineate the similarities between human and nonhuman displacement.
- 5) To examine the unifying, structural principle embedded in the interconnectedness of ecosystems.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The theoretical framework laid out in Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* is subjected to test here in this paper by reading it against the three works chosen. Thus the study is significant not only in literary circles but also regarding environmental discourse. On an academic level, it provides information regarding the growing body of ecoliterature based on climate fiction from the South Asian region. Environmental policy is linked to public discourse, as Ghosh argues that research on ecological balance and climate vulnerability cannot be conducted without taking into consideration histories of colonialism and related issues. This environmental justice framework assumes importance here and is presented as inseparable from history, culture and politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecocriticism which first emerged in the 1990s highlights aspects regarding the natural world and preservation of wilderness. Scholars including Glotfelty and Fromm laid the foundational tenets of ecocriticism. Later this growing body widened its scope to incorporate urban ecologies and the widespread ecological dangers across diverse geographical terrains. Scholars, like Rob Nixon, pointed out the gradual, yet disturbing aspects of environmental dangers – the slow violence – that though not overtly perceptible, had detrimental effects on people at the grassroot level. Recently, scholarly discussions on the Anthropocene – the geographical epoch when human activity has culminated in unprecedented interference on environment and climatic changes has redirected ecocritical focus on issues including species-being and temporality. In his essay 'The Climate of History,' Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that the anthropocene compels us to consider humanity as a geological force rather than as a social agent [Chakrabarty \(2009\)](#). Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* diagnoses the failure of the literary agency – described by him as 'derangement' – to represent the catastrophic aspects of climate change. He claims that contemporary, realist novels are not structurally equipped to engage with the catastrophic and collective reality of climate change. A literature review on the three works reveals that scholarly focus has been turned to the biodiversity of the ecology of the Sunderbans and the Morichjhapī massacre in *The Hungry Tide*; on the refugee crises in the Mediterranean and the growing concerns regarding climatic change in *Gun Island* and the indigenous cosmologies of nature as animate in *The Living Mountain*. This paper reads all three works together as an evolving ecopoetic development, rather than as individual case studies.

METHOD OF PROCEDURE

This paper adopts a textual-analytical method of procedure. The primary texts have been subjected to close reading through an ecocritical lens incorporating the concepts of the Anthropocene, slow violence, environmental bio-diversity, the 'great derangement,' the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the climatic crises. A comparative literary scrutiny across all three texts has been exercised theoretically, organising the discussion on ecological factors. Secondary sources have been used to contextualize the reading. This comparative approach enables the study to trace the contours of Ghosh's ecological thought across two decades, while paying due attention to the distinct characteristics of each work.

DISCUSSION

ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Ghosh's fiction is deeply immersed in the concept of anthropocentrism. It critiques the discourse in a dual manner; acknowledging the fact that humanity's planetary impact is a reality to be reckoned with and insisting on the importance of

addressing the uneven political distribution of responsibility regarding the same. The viewpoint is most pointedly addressed in *The Living Mountain*. The Anthropoi, a word that deliberately invokes the word ‘anthropocene,’ is responsible for the destruction of the mountain. This colonising group, which plunders the mountain of its precious fruits, herbs and products, represents historical patterns of colonial extraction. The capitalist accumulation is not part of generic human nature, but is specific to select few. In *The Living Mountain* sustainable relationship of the community of Mahaparbat stands in sharp contrast to the greedy logic of the Anthropoi. Jason W Moore argues that the term ‘capitalocene’ should be applied to the epoch, which is prone to capitalist accumulation and warns mankind of the ecological catastrophe that is imminent [Moore \(2015\)](#). *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* also link ecological disruptions to specific historical events including post-colonial violence resource extraction, and global capitalism. Ghosh insists that it is not an abstract human failing, rather the consequences of calculated and deliberate attempts by some to exploit others.

MULTISPECIES ETHICS

Ghosh’s fiction is filled with a variety of nonhuman species, each significant from an ecocritical point of view. The endangered Irrawaddy dolphin occupies centre stage in *The Hungry Tide*. Piyali Roy, an American cetologist, reaches the Sunderbans to study about the behaviour of the Oracella dolphins. She asserts that “Home is where the Oracella are” (400), depicting the transcultural, ecocritical commitment that stems from a professional approach. The dolphins struggle as warming waters and fluctuating salinity levels disrupt their habitat. Their migratory behaviour becomes prominent in the novel and Piya’s scientific training enables her to follow the dolphin with precise calculation. However, Fokir, the illiterate fisherman, who possesses a deep understanding of the currents, animal behaviour and seasonal changes, proves to be indispensable, even lifesaving, as he assists Piya in her endeavours. Through her relationship with Fokir and the impoverished, human community, the novel hints at an ecological agenda that considers the symbiotic co-dependency of all species, both human and nonhuman.

The endangered Royal Bengal tiger is also a significant part of the novel and the conflict between conservation politics and human survival is depicted here. Many villagers are killed by tigers, their livestock are carried away, and they receive no protection or compensation. Strict rules and wildlife preservation regulations also hinder them from using forest resources for daily life. Ghosh insists that environmental protection must take into consideration the needs of marginalised human communities. The Morichjhapi massacre subplot in the novel highlights this. One of the projects of the Indira Gandhi government, Project Tiger, sought to save the endangered Bengal Tiger from extinction. Morichjhapi was the site of a bloody showdown at the cost of human life. The refugees from East Pakistan, who had been forced to settle in Madhya Pradesh, registered their revolt, by marching into the Sunderbans, and settling down there in one of the islands which was not occupied. The Indian government retaliated and forcibly evicted them, claiming that the land had been preserved for tigers. Kusum, Fokir’s mother, lashes out in the novel against the irrational logic of human beings becoming expendable in favour of the tiger.

The Sunderbans looms large as the central character in *The Hungry Tide*. A huge archipelago of islands, consisting of some which are immense and have existed for many years, and others that are daily destroyed; the Sunderbans is situated in the Bay of Bengal. Attention is drawn to its unpredictable tides, the shifting contours of the island and the thick, dense forests. Ravaged by floods and cyclones, snakes and wild animals, the islanders struggle to survive each day. The species catalogue in *Gun Island* extends to snakes, venomous spiders, birds and whales. As the wildfires ravage the countryside, the spiders swarm about in an attempt to escape the heat. They are connected to the legend of Manasa Devi and Bonduki Sadagar, and recur almost mythically. Snakes, especially cobras, migrate to distant places and are often seen with unusual frequency and aggression, in unprecedented circumstances. Extreme weather conditions and rising temperatures lead to the death of many birds. Marine life including jellyfish blooms and unprecedented fish deaths point to acidification and rising temperature levels of the water in oceans. The depiction of unusual animal behaviour is suggestive of disrupted ecological patterns. The recurring presence of wild creatures indicates ecological imbalance and environmental exploitation. The boundaries between science and mythology are opaque, as Ghosh suggests that attempts to exploit the natural world will end in disaster.

The mountain ecosystem in *The Living Mountain* is rich with trees, mushrooms, minerals, fruits, herbs, rivers and wildlife. Everything is wrapped up as a single living entity – the Mahaparbat. The harmonious bond between the previous inhabitants and the mountain is rooted in sustainable rituals, generational memory and deliberate restraint in using its resources. This precious balance is shattered later when the Anthropoi appear on the scene.

Environmental factors, including wildfires, droughts, avalanches, unseasonal storms, tides and cyclones function as active plot forces in all three texts. They have a direct impact on species behaviour and Ghosh consistently presents them as interdependent. The diversity of species highlights the crucial need to have a holistic outlook. Much environmental writing tend to focus on a single species, Ghosh addresses this in his novels, insisting on surveying the complexity of various ecosystems.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Ghosh’s fiction depicts climate vulnerability as embodied, experienced disruptions. The landscape in *The Hungry Tide* is precarious for permanent human settlement as the frequent cyclones and the rising waters submerge the island occasionally and

make it unfit for habitation. Nature is presented as a living, dynamic entity that decides the destinies of people. Its immense power is depicted in the devastating cyclone, in which Fokir loses his life while protecting Piya. This not only illustrates the power of the natural elements, but also reminds one about the great environmental risks to those who live close to it. *Gun Island* raises this concern to global levels: California is devastated by unprecedented wildfires, Venice is stricken by sudden, unprecedented storms and species are forced out of their natural habitats. These climatic events in separate geographical locations point to a single planetary system barraged by ecological upheavals. Ghosh links everything to emphasise the interconnectedness of ecosystems.

The Living Mountain renders ecological collapse in epic proportions. The cataclysmic eruption of the mountain at the end is a microcosmic rendering of ecological tipping points. The fable is a profound warning about the catastrophic possibilities in the future. Ghosh believes that climatic disruptions must be experienced through powerful narrative texts as a force to be reckoned with.

SPECIES DISPLACEMENT

Ghosh has also pointedly focussed on the refugee crises in his works. Both human and nonhuman species find mention in this respect. In *The Hungry Tide*, the fragile shape shifting landscape of the Sunderbans parallels the lives of local inhabitants and refugees. The 1979 Marichjhapi massacre is woven into the narrative to critique state terror, displacement and ethical concerns. The Bengali refugees who had undergone trauma during the Partition of India and during other revolts in the state, were later forced to move from their settlements, when the tiger conservation laws came into being. The vulnerable group, uprooted and traumatised by events that had already happened in their lives, were later displaced due to the hassles of environmental policy.

In *Gun Island* the contemporary refugee crisis receives prominent attention. Tipu and Rafi travel from Bangladesh to Europe. This journey is juxtaposed to the migration of spiders, snakes and marine species, compelled to leave their natural habitats due to emerging climatic conditions. The disrupted biospheric condition affects human life and nonhuman life in parallel ways. This condition transcends state boundaries and emerges as a global concern. Changes in the weather, rising seas, scarcity of resources etc has global significance that is alarming in its proportions.

The Living Mountain has been designed as a fable allegory that also portrays this displacement. The ancestral relationship between the early inhabitants and the living mountain is gradually contaminated by the Anthropoi. The people are persuaded into complicity with the agents destroying their land and blindly allow their resources to be appropriated. These suggest that the refugee crisis is intricately bound up with ecological collapse and the victims who bear the consequences (climate refugees) are those who are least responsible for the collapse. This has sociological implications on a global scale.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF ECOSYSTEMS

The study of the three texts exposes a unifying principle – the interconnectedness of ecosystems. Human and nonhuman ecosystems, local and planetary ecosystems are minutely scrutinised to delineate the broader perspectives. In *The Hungry Tide* the Sunderbans represent a liminal ecosystem in which land and water bodies, human and nonhuman are in continuous negotiation. The interdependence is a crucial and informing aspect of the particular ecosystem. This connection is extended to a planetary scale in *Gun Island* tracing instances of the butterfly effect. A single mythical thread is extended from the Sunderbans through Los Angeles to Venice. Ghosh often turns to myth and folklore as narrative means of depicting ecological realities. In *Gun Island* this strategy is developed fully: the novel's uncanny ecological upheavals are traced to the resurrected legend of the Gun Merchant and Manasa Devi, the serpent goddess. Nature seems to possess an agency for retribution against human transgression. Ghosh believed that many improbable events could only be represented through modes of storytelling willing to accommodate the mythic. Events occurring in one part of the world are linked through atmospheric and oceanic systems to happenings in another part of the world. A miniature version of this is visible in *The Living Mountain*. Everything – forests, minerals, wildlife, plants, human community etc – is interdependent, so that when one element is extracted, the whole ecosystem collapses. Thus the three texts model an ecological representation in which nothing can remain in isolation. This vision stands in contrast to the fragmented vision that Ghosh presented as part of the 'great derangement,' which has always prevented sufficient literary engagement with climate politics.

CONCLUSION

Read as a related body of ecocritical work, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island* and *The Living Mountain* offer an informed case study about the changes and development in this field. Different ways of relating to nature are evident in *The Hungry Tide*. Piya uses intellectual capacity to study nature's creations; Fokir lives harmoniously with nature; responding to its rhythms pulsating in his body. The tiger represents the Blakean archetype of the immense natural force and the violent tidal storm that wreaks havoc as it rages is also an instance of the destructive power of nature. The Wordsworthian reverence for nature is also evident in some scenes as when Piya watches the dolphins playing gently in the shallow pools.

The Anthropocene epoch which follows the Holocene epoch bears significance in Ghosh's works, as he depicts the impact of human activity on agricultural, industrial, demographical, technological and ideological structures. Geologists have constantly issued warning about the accelerated growth in all sectors and the alarming consequences that may ensue in the coming eras. He also

discusses about the interconnectedness of ecosystems across all three texts, touching on other pertinent factors including the importance of validating vernacular ecological knowledge, studying about the cohabitation of multispecies, both human and nonhuman. He registers changing climatic factors as embodied realities and depicts refugee migration side by side with nonhuman displacement.

In many of his works, Ghosh traces the far reaching consequences of colonial extraction, fossil fuel driven empire and capitalist accumulation on the climatic variations that are on the rise. According to him, economic and political equations created during imperial expansion were also responsible for the current climatic crises. In *The Living Mountain*, the Magic Tree is known for its rare nature – the leaves repel insects; the wood is not damaged by fire; nectar can be extracted from the flowers; the fruit is medicinal. When the Anthropoi attack the Varavoi, they strip the trees of all treasures and also carry away the rare mushrooms and minerals found in the mountain. Later, when they disappear, the Varavoi ascend the slope of the mountain, which had been sacrosanct hitherto. Motivated by greed and covetousness, they rush up the slopes in large numbers in an attempt to set foot at the summit of the mountain. The frenzied surge dislodges the snow on the lower slopes leading to avalanches and landslides that destroy the village below.

Ghosh's fiction remains as a sustained experiment in an attempt to tell ecologically enlightening stories – stories in which mountains, tides, tigers, wildlife and forests are not mere accessories in the human drama but are co-authors in the planet's story. He describes changes in the climatic condition as creating a sense of the uncanny – nonhuman factors reasserting agency in strange ways that unsettle human narratives. He urges literature, collective imagination and politics to create new forms of telling stories, stories capable of portraying the current situation.

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