

## *Postmodern, Postcolonial and Ecological perspectives in the novels of Amitav Ghosh*

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**Abstract** - In the contemporary Indian literary scenario Amitav Ghosh is the only writer who reflects the truth of Indian reality. All the post colonial and post modern predicaments are wrestled to demonstrate a high level of self consciousness which continues interrogate the social, philosophical, cultural issues of the world in all its relevance and freshness. A conscious eco-critical approach can be seen in some novels from Indian writing in English.

**Keywords**- Postmodern, Postcolonial, ecology, Utopian society, aesthetics

**The Glass Palace.** Set in the Sundarbans, an immense archipelago of islands on the easternmost coast of India, straddling the sea and the plains of Bengal, *The Hungry Tide* is, broadly speaking, a tale of development versus ecology, a plea as well as a testimony to the many other songs of the earth, sung by the many different people who live on it and claim some portion of it as their own; a plea that they do not go unheard, that they are not swamped by the hungry tides of either development or environmentalism. Survival is an everyday battle for the hapless settlers of the delta who have somehow managed to strike a delicate balance with nature. But the arrival of Piyali Roy, a cetologist (one who studies marine animals) of Indian parentage but stubbornly American, and of Kanai Dutt, an unmarried Delhi businessman of some sophistication, threatens to upset this balance. When Piya, who is on the track of the rare freshwater river dolphins, hires Fokir, an illiterate but proud local man to guide her through the backwaters, Kanai becomes her translator. The Morich jhapi massacre of 1979, mentioned in the notebook left for Kanai by his deceased uncle Nirmal, dramatizes the conflict between different ways of thinking and being, between the logic of modernity and development and the ensuing politics of ecology on one hand, and the ways of life of the indigenous peoples and their relationship to the environment on the other. Lastly, it is the 'tide

country' – the novel's central metaphor – that constitutes the common point of reference that binds Piya, Kanai and Fokir together.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh has discovered not only another new fascinating territory, but also, and more significantly so, a far more unknowable jungle: the human spirit and this invests it with 'a dark, elegiac elegance'. Additionally, of course, the novel has been interpreted as one of most bold and beautiful postcolonial, postmodern enunciation of an eco-critical approach by Ghosh.

**Sea of Poppies**, the first in Ghosh's new trilogy of novels, refers to the compulsory cultivation of opium poppies imposed on Indians by the East India Company. At the heart of this stunningly vibrant and intensely human epic saga is a vast ship, the *Ibis*. Its destiny is a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean to the Mauritius Islands. In a time of colonial upheaval in the mid nineteenth century, fate has thrown together a motley array of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts, besides a bankrupt Raja, a widowed village-woman etc. as they sail down the Hooghly and into the sea, their old family ties are washed away, and they view themselves as *jahaj-bhais*, or ship-brothers, who will build whole new lives for themselves in the remote islands.

Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* totally inverts the Indian conception of fate. The narrative delineates the economic, social and individual conditions of the '*Ibis* family' intertwined and engulfed with unavoidable Fate, reversal of fortune and uncertain future determining an individual's thirst for a utopian society. In a teasing reversal of cultural stereotypes, it is the British who emerge as fatalists whereas their colonial victims do not acquiesce to their pre-ordained fate and embark on the vast ship, *Ibis*, to frame their own destiny.

Ghosh published in 2011 the second book of his *Ibis* trilogy, *River of Smoke*. This is a historical fiction on

the Opium trade and Opium War in the 1830s which focuses on the Indian diaspora. It has the backdrop for the Anglo-Chinese opium wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The story is about migration, a subject Ghosh has chronicled since 1986 in most of his novels. Amitav Ghosh has embarked on a trilogy about the experience of emigration, both forced and voluntary, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the grand scale of historical epic, *River of Smoke* follows its storm – tossed characters on the seas to the crowded harbours of China. There, despite efforts of the emperor to stop them, ships from Europe and India exchange their cargoes of opium for boxes of tea, silk, porcelain and silver. Among them are Bahram Modi, a wealthy Parsi opium merchant out of Bombay. All these characters of lives are affected by the colonial forces of the then vicious circle of opium-trade. ‘Movement’, as Ghosh visualizes as in some way fundamental to human experience, does not necessarily imply physical journey, though it often does so, but also a potentiality that inhabits the consciousness of even those people often regarded as ‘settled’, such as peasants. Indeed, Ghosh works challenge the assumption that human history is basically one of ‘settled’ populations and ‘stable’ cultures.

The crux of the hypothesis of the present research, therefore, is that for Amitav Ghosh, as it is for many Indian intellectuals, the vision of a secular democratic nation-state/society that accommodates India’s baggage of ‘diversity’ into a syncretic unity remains an indispensable bulwark against the forces of religious and ethnic chauvinism, and the further political disintegration or violent ethnic cleansing that might result. Also, Ghosh’s novels singularly deal with the fate of common man, or the subaltern study, as it were. Coupled with a scintillating prose, a well-wrought plot structure, brilliant use of wit and humour, all these thematic nuances of his novels serve to establish Ghosh as one of the most significant Indian writers of the contemporary age

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh routes the debate on eco-environment and cultural issues through the intrusion of the West into East. *The Circle of Reason* is an allegory about the destruction of traditional village life by the modernizing influx of western culture and the subsequent displacement of non European peoples by imperialism

“Natural beauty is the trace of the no identical in things under the spell of universal identity,” Adorno declares

(73). Put another way, nature functions as the repository of the “nonexistent” that Adorno identifies as the basis of all genuine utopian thinking. The existence of natural beauty is utopian not because it provides a sign of the more humane natural world or an image of a reconciled Nature and humanity, as it did for Kant, but because it indicates that capitalism can never entirely appropriate all features of existence. The formal features of the novel encourage readers to downplay the artifice inherent in having characters articulate and dispute conceptions of beauty

The jungle becomes an embodiment of the sublime, something whose grandeur exceeds the capacity of the imagination to understand, thereby filling the witness with feelings of horror and pleasure. What capitalism requires, then, according to this narrative, is the domestication of the sublime into the beautiful. The literal imposition of order by destroying and then replanting the trees becomes a metaphorical imposition of a political, social and moral order.

Elsa’s husband Matthew similarly understands capitalism to involve the introduction of the aesthetic into non-Western spaces. When the District Collector’s widow Uma describes the workers as slaves, Matthew is quick to re-invoke the language of aesthetics. He says:

“It’s no easy thing to run a plantation, you know. To look at, it’s all very green and beautiful—sort of like a forest. But actually it’s a vast machine, made of wood and flesh. And at every turn, every little piece of this machine is resisting you, fighting you, waiting for you to give in” (*The Glass Palace* 201).

The logic here is that the apparent beauty is not natural, but rather the product of human (that is, Western) labour. The language of beauty also enables an interesting slippage, whereby the humanity of the labourers is denied: they are simply a part of the totality of the scene—part of nature—as indicated by his description of the “machine” as “wood and flesh.” And the description of this system as a machine further enables him to suggest that everything is a product of his labour, denying any pre-existing social order or ecosystem.

Thus, resistance becomes a feature of nature itself, and nature in turn becomes a potential metaphor for the inevitability of resistance to capitalism. Uma recognizes this when she asks the question,

*"What on earth are you going to do if your tappers decide to take a lesson from your trees?" (The Glass Palace 202).*

Amitav Ghosh shows the same child Matthew as a grown up man, educated in America who establishes the Morningside Rubber Estate with the help of another significant character Raj Kumar Raha-colonizing the vast and dense expanses of Eastern Burma.

They literally plant 'the money tree' (*The Glass Palace*, 177) in the form of rubber. This estate comes out as an empire in itself where Matthew John rules like a modern *Robinson Crusoe*, not only over the Malay and Tamil indentured labourers but also upon the very earth and its magnificent and bounteous capacity to yield to man.

Ghosh makes Matthew say,

*"...To look at, it's all very green and beautiful-sort of like a forest. But actually it's a vast machine, made of wood and flesh" (The Glass Palace, 232) ...It was made of wood and 'flesh' because they said "every rubber tree was paid for with an India life..." (The Glass Palace, 233)*

Thus, Ghosh advocates for a balanced ecosystem which can be sufficiently assisted with the technological means one should not use one's neo-magical scientific wonders for destruction of environment only. We can always have a constructive way out. *The Glass Palace* is also significantly ecology-oriented for the reason that it dwells upon a live study of elephants too, in very close quarters. The author's fondness for this very Asian-Indian animal is obvious when he amplifies the science and art involved in the taming, rearing and training of these huge beings by frail men like Doh Say and Neel Rattan. Raj Kumar owned a whole farmyard of elephants for his burgeoning timber-trade. As William Blake wrote in another context, unaware and unconscious of our ecological point of view, perhaps:

*"I plucked a hollow reed.  
And I made a rural pen,  
I stained the water clear  
And I wrote my happy songs." (Blake, Songs, 1789)*

Be it the oil in Middle East, sugar, cotton and silk in Africa or poppy and indigo in India (a theme taken in

*Sea of Poppies* by Ghosh again) they outshine all humanity in their cruelty towards ecology. The events lead to the massacre of the inhabitants of the island, which emphasizes the theme of the relationship between humans and nature. It seems that these people are ranked below trees and animals in the government's hierarchy.

Generally speaking, eco-criticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the jargon one usually employs when talking about it. The discipline, if we may call it so, tends to align itself with ecological activism and socio-literary theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environmental, while seeking to generate and enhance awareness about it and linking itself and literary texts, in a true spirit of inter-disciplinarity, with other ecological sciences and approaches. As Cheryll Glotfelty, the founder of the literary theory of eco-criticism, says,

*"...Simply defined eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (Glotfelty, 1996, 18)*

*The Hungry Tide* may easily be read as eco-critical nature writing with various other subtle nuances like subaltern, trans-nationalism and politics of ambivalence etc. The natural backdrop of the fiction is the splendid Sunderbans, an immense archipelago of islands extending between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India – a veritable 'tide country', or "*bhatirdesh*" or the land of ebb-tide as the very first chapter's title says.

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