

NATURE - THE GUIDE, THE GUARDIAN AND THE PHILOSOPHER
NATURE AS A SYMBOL IN AMITAV GHOSH AND INDRA SINHA WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO *THE HUNGRY TIDE, SEA OF POPPIES* AND *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the thematic desire to establish an ecological human bond with nature in three contemporary novels. Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship. India is a country with variety of ecosystems which ranges from Himalayas in the North to plateaus of South and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the East to dry Thar of the West. However our ecosystems have been affected due to increase in population and avarice of mankind in conquering more lands. As Environment and Literature are entwined, it is the duty of everyone to protect nature through words.

Ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary criticism. Although there are not many, there are few novels that can be read through the lens of ecocriticism. In the same way, Amitav Ghosh and Indra Sinha have riveted in unveiling the concept of ecology in their novels. In *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* Amitav Ghosh depicts the land of Sunderbans and chronicles the fictional lives of a diverse group of Indian, British, American, French, Arakan and Chinese characters whose destinies all converge on the schooner, Ibis. In *Animal's People*, Indra Sinha brings to limelight, the corporate crime of Bhopal gas attack in 1984. Amitav Ghosh and Indra Sinha have done a rigorous research in their specific area of writing. Nature has been used as an important backdrop in which the story of these novels develops. Natural ecological threats and Man-made environmental crisis can be traced in these novels.

Emerson says "Nature is the language of the creator, the human language which is the medium of perception sees divinity in and through its counterpart."^[1] According to certain group of Tribal sects, the land cannot be bought or sold because they imagine it as their mother. In the ancient days children are exposed to various plants and animals and are explained the significance and the use of such species. Environmental ethics were taught to young people through verbal in their childhood itself.

Ecocriticism has attained prominence in the past few decades due to the environmental crisis all over the world.

Ecological perception and awareness are not new to our nation. Even civilization of the nation has flourished on the banks of the rivers. India has been a country of mighty rivers and oceans. The name of India is derived from the river Indus though the river Ganga occupies the dominant place in literature and epics. Nature has been intimately connected with life in Indian tradition. Mountains, particularly Himalayas are said to be the abode of God. Rivers are considered and worshipped as goddesses, especially the holiest of holy rivers Ganga is a source of salvation for anyone. Forests have been the abode of great sages and were the center of great intellectual activity as most of the *gurukulas* were located in forests. In addition to this, the five elements of nature are worshipped as Gods in our nation.

In the present scenario environmental issue is banal throughout the world. The reason for the immediate crisis is due to the lack of interest and unawareness regarding the protection of ecology. As people have become self-centered and selfish, only very few take steps to make the environment clean and green. The great ancestors each and everyone saved their atmosphere with eco consciousness. They have drawn Kolam only with the rice flour so that it can be eaten by ants as their food. They seldom used pesticides and killed small insects, instead natural manures were used for the production of healthy fruits and vegetables. People have started realizing the perishing condition of the land and the ecological awareness is created worldwide through literature. Always there is a great response for things which are transmitted through printed forms. It may reach the target audience within the stipulated time. The need of the present paper is to create awareness among people about nature through green revolution. In the same way few writers have taken much pain in writing eco centered fiction. Among them the research scholar has chosen Amitav Ghosh and Indra Sinha for the analysis of the particular topic.

Amitav Ghosh and Indra Sinha have taken absolute effort to reveal the environmental degradation inside our nation to people across the globe. Both the writers belong to India i.e., Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and Indra Sinha in Mumbai. These writers more or less belong to the same period of time and prefer to write about the ecological deprivation that happened in India. Indra Sinha spent nearly one and a half years in helping the victims of Bhopal. These writers do not write only for the sake of money and fame, rather, they want each and everyone to know about the difficulties that

are undergone daily by the socially downtrodden of our nation. The voices of such unheard people are brought to limelight only through literary works. Though both the writers chose their main plots with historical significance, they preferred to fictionalize the history. Amitav Ghosh takes the location of archipelago and Sunderbans in *The Hungry Tide* and in *Sea of Poppies*, he explicates about East-India Company and Poppy seeds. In *Animal's People* Indra Sinha focuses on the after-math of Bhopal gas attack that occurred in 1984. Even in fictionalizing the history, the writers have done thorough research in their area of writing.

The ecological dharma could be traced from the ancient kings who were well known for their love even for small plants, birds and animals. The King Paari had offered his chariot for the jasmine creepers to live its life to the fullest. In case of the King of Kings Cibi, he had proffered the share of his thighs in order to equal the weight of the arrowed pigeon. Another king of our nation Manu Neethi Chozhan was daring enough to sacrifice his son's life in order to equal the pain of dead calf's mother-cow. Such was the kind of ecological justice that was maintained by our great ancestors. Hence, there was a harmony between people and nature before some decades. Vallalaar grew remorse whenever he witnessed the dried crops in the fields due to lack of water. Even at the time of harvest in the month of *aadi*, people of this land celebrate it as a grand occasion in the name of *thaith thirunal*. At the time of breeding season of fish, people seldom go for fishing. The nation has come to the stage of perishing as people do not realise their responsibility. The ancient kings were aware of ecological justice and showered their love for all the living beings without any partiality.

In the present scenario, the ecological problems are mainly due to the uncouth politicians. Politics play a major role in the environmental crisis that happened in the historical backdrop of these select novels. In *Animal's People*, knowing that the environmental massacre was done by Union Carbide, Government did not take any necessary steps to arrest the Chairman of the 'Kampani'. In September 1982, Bhopal Journalist Raj Keswani wrote a terrifying story that Bhopal was about to be annihilated soon. In the words of Keswani "It will take just an hour, at most an hour and a half, for every one of us to die."^[2] The unrevealed truth about the Union Carbide Factory was unveiled by a staff who said that one of the workers has been killed in a Phosgene spill. "The first world war gas was used in the production of MIC (methyl-isocyanate), a substance five hundred times deadlier than hydrogen cyanide and so volatile."^[2] Union carbide Factory was set up in Bhopal in order to produce pesticides for India's 'green revolution.' Yet, even after warning about the hazardous effects the company going to cause, politicians and the Chairman of the 'Kampani' did not take any safety measures for the

surrounding people before the tragedy took place. "Pyaar Bai was married to Aftaab, and he worked in the Kampani's factory, and he told her how dangerous were the chemicals in there. If by chance you got any on your hand, Aftaab said, the skin would blister." (83)

The Government of India tried to hush up the matter when the incident was brought to their notice. The duplicity of the politicians is exactly revealed in the climactic scene of *Animal's People* in which the 'Kampani' lawyers try to broker another undercover deal with the government. The compensation was given to the victims only after a long period without knowing that the money they offered will not help the poor people in any way. Because the damage they have caused is not only for one generation, but for many generations together. For many years after the tragedy, the factory was not given orders to clean the leaked gas. As a result, soil, air and water are contaminated totally.

Sea of Poppies records the mass migration of impoverished Indian peasants as indentured labourers to the Mauritius Islands in the schooner, Ibis. In the name of East India Company, British took advantage over the land of India. There was tremendous change in the political and social conditions of the nation. The transformation of feudal system to a zamindari system of land ownership made the people to pay tax to the proprietor of the land, zamindar. Instead of helping the people of the land in reducing tax, zamindars were keen in minting money through all possible ways. One such way was in obeying the rules of British without knowing the consequences that were going to affect the people of native land. The agricultural production was forced to change from staple wheat, pulses, cereals and other food items to the cultivation of costly cash crops like opium, the drug whose exports brought good turn over the Empire. In the words of Ghosh "All the empirical facts show you that British rule was a disaster for India. Before the British came twenty five per cent of the world trade originated in India. By the time they left it was less than one per cent."^[3] The role of the Raja is to save the life of his kingdom whatever difficult the situation may be. But the Rajas who belonged to the time of East India Company negotiated business dealings with the colonizers. The corrupt politics of British is revealed through the character Mr. Burnham, who declares in public as he is totally against the system of war. Yet, in private conversation with Neel Rattan, he confesses that the reason for British entering war was that their empire cannot do anything without importing tea and silks from China, but the Chinese were not interested in British products. Forcing opium on China was the only way to create imbalance of trades between the two nations.

Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* throws light on the history that has long been forgotten by the people

of India. In 1979, the government of West Bengal forcefully evicted the thousands of refugees from the island of Morichjhapi in the northern western forest region of the Sundarbans. However, the eviction of refugees was justified by the government on environmental grounds. By seeing such atrocities for the common people, through the character Nirmal, the author provides an alternative perspective on conservation of wildlife and biological species by raising his question: "whether human lives should be less valued than the biological and animal species in the Sunderbans?" The number of people killed by tigers has fluctuated between 66 in 1975-76, 15 in 1989. These people were the refugees who have travelled from Bangladesh to the Island. Every year people are killed in plenty yet no politicians have concern over such destitute.

Environmental issue can be categorized as Man-made crisis and Natural environmental crisis. Man-made crisis is lucid in the novel *Animal's People*. Like Indra Sinha, Rabindranath Tagore had fear of scientific advancement in our nation. He even unveils his fear in his notable play *Muktadhara*. In the play he even addresses machine/dam, a symbolic development of science as a 'demon.' When the debate gets on to the 'kampani', in the name of producing pesticides to help the farmers, the company has ruined the lives of people in tens and thousands.

December 2/3, 1984 was one of the coldest winter nights in Bhopal. The majority of more than 3.5 lakh people living in 30 out of 56 wards of the city were wrapped up in sleep. Suddenly, something wrenched the people from their slumber. They felt a burning sensation in eyes, then fits of choking and breathlessness.^[4]

Thousands of people have become prey for the MIC gas leak "One child was born with holes where his eyes should have been." This cruel attack was happened due to the lack of altruism in people who belong to the particular factory and politics. Health damage is inevitable through the leak of powerful gas. Due to the exhalation of such strong gas, people are reported to have respiratory problems, i.e., lung infection; eye sight problem, impairment of physical inability and abortion. "Cerebral damage was also found in those victims who died within three to five hours of exposure to the gas."^[5] When are they going to get any change in life? What sin have they committed to undergo such cruel death sentence and physical pain? If the disaster is natural, then the victims have to suffer only for some days over their loss. When it comes to man-made ecological crisis, then the impact of such dreadful condition lasts for many generations. Even the human bodies are contaminated including water, soil and air. If such is the case, there is no hopeful future ahead of them.

'My breasts are killing me.' ... 'I won't feed my kid poison.' She's leant forward to cast the last dribbles of her milk onto the ground... The granny replies, 'We have looked upon the milke and it semeth to muche thinne and watry. Plus it enclyneth to reddenesse, which is unnaturall and euill... Says the mother to Elli 'Our wells are full of poison. It's in the soil, water in our blood, it's in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here long enough, you will be too. (107)

In the same way, man-made disaster can be witnessed in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. The land which is considered the embodiment of culture and tradition has been annihilated totally by the British Empire, the self-centered Zamindars and the Kings. The subaltern people have no voice or human rights. Hence, against the tenure of land, the peasants of India have been forced to grow poppy instead of their regular cultivation to run their life. The annual agricultural time slot of a nation had met up with severe change. Deeti remembers the good old days when the fields "would be heavy with wheat in the winter... now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare... poppy had been luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crop." The land in the novel is no more flourishing to give the detailed account the culture and tradition as it is totally uprooted because of colonisation. People are so avarice in grabbing the portion of land to rule over. Even Alexander, the great has kept his hand outside of his graveyard to denote the world that he hasn't possessed anything with him. Such is the case, why do people fight for the small portion of land without any reason? According to Deeti,

She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever on outcaste; to know that you would never again enter your father's house; that you would never throw your arms around your mother; ... And to know also that for the rest of your days you would eke out a living on some wild, demon plagued island? (72)

In *The Hungry Tide* the natural landscape of an archipelago of Sunderban Island is portrayed in a vivid style. Even in *Sea of Poppies*, the schooner Ibis crosses over the same island. Amitav Ghosh is deeply attached with the serenity of the place. In the novel *The Hungry Tide* natural ecological crisis could be sensed. Amitav Ghosh gives the detailed information about Sunderbans through the characters of Kanai and Nirmal.

It is like an onion; one can just keep peeling layers upon layers and never come to a core; there is always more. This proved to be exactly the case with the Sunderbans.

There was layered upon layer of things to be seen and heard. This is not surprising. The Sunderbans was the approach route to the Gangetic lands; for millennia people have been coming through there. (9)

The novel talks about a conflict between human space and animal space in the geographical setting. The animals could win over humans in occupying the land. It is a routine cold war between the animals and the humans in saving their life against one another. The insiders of the land pay close attention in saving nature like Fokir. Even Nirmal wants the children of Morichjhapi settlers to know about the history and geography of the land "This map shows that in geology, as in myth, there is a visible Ganga and a hidden Ganga." Some of the men are also there to create man made crisis in the environment like the Forest officers. They remain keen in minting money than in saving the life of innocent victims and the animals. Once when these officers were on their motor boat, the propeller hit the dolphin and it was floating in the river. The safety measures have to be taken by these officers to protect the wild life. It is totally unfair that the negligent officials do not follow the general eco rules of life.

The titles *Animal's People*, *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* symbolize the actual history behind these novels. Through the title *Animal's People* Indra Sinha tries to represent a group of victimized people who were not paid any attention so far in the society and the voice of such people will not be heeded and given significance by anyone like the myriad voices of the animals. Animals can't appoint anybody to raise their problems in the society. In the same way, people of Khaufpur (fictionalized Bhopal) do not have any one to talk or protest on behalf of them. In the same way, he has portrayed a character as jawar, an animal who doesn't think himself as human. Janwar's could not remember his good old days. He can only "remember from that time, my first memory is that fire. It was so bad I could not lift my head." Through this noteworthy character, he also means that the people of Bhopal underestimate themselves though they have high potential to fight against the 'kampani.' *The Hungry Tide* portrays the nature of tide in which how anxious the tides are to devour a piece of land. The hunger of the tides in taking the lives of people, animals and land is portrayed clearly. It doesn't have any boundary to flow. When the nature (tide) is peaceful it lives along with the people in an amiable situation. Once the temper is lost, thousands will be victimized for the wrath of tide. As Bengal is said to be the tidal land and the native land of Amitav Ghosh, he has paid much interest in unveiling the truth of the island. In *Sea of Poppies*, the writer Ghosh expounds the political scenario in which how poppy seeds have been planted across the nation and how the seeds have remained as the mode of

initiating war between the two nations. As the issue of poppy has crossed the nation and gone worldwide, the novelist has given such a suitable title for the work.

As it is mentioned earlier, the novels have set with the forgotten Indian history as their backdrop. These two writers have portrayed the land itself as the major character. In addition to that, in the selected novel of Indra Sinha, he pays much attention to two characters i.e., Janwar, an animal and Zafar who give moral support for the animal. Indra Sinha tries to exhibit the cruelties of the 'Kampani' through the character Ma Franci. However, she tells very often that the apocalypse would take the life of everyone. She tells Jaanwar "The people ache, their bodies are bottles into which fresh pain is poured every day. Their flesh is melting, coming off their bones in flakes of fire, their bones are burning, they're turning into light, probably they're becoming angels." The writer was influenced by the real life incident and has inserted as the characters in the novel. In a conversation between Mark Thwaite and Indra Sinha, the writer said: "One day a friend said he had met a boy who went on all fours. Two days later my daughter Tara told me about an old Frenchwoman she had met, who had forgotten how to speak all languages except her childhood French and thought everyone else was just making meaningless noises. Thus were Animal and Ma Franci born....." He also adds that he worked for eighteen-hour days as a volunteer for the Bhopal justice campaign. "What triggered this was the fear that a friend would die in a desperate hunger strike. The story is told here. This is how I knew what it was like to fast without water in temperatures of 140 degrees Fahrenheit. [6]

In *The Hungry Tide* the earthy character Fokir and Kusum grab the attention of the readers. These characters are rooted with the land and can't be separated from it. These characters help the other characters of the novel to identify them deep within their heart. The changed nature of Kanai could be witnessed when he was ready to go back to his town once he entered the land of Bon-Bibi. There was a huge metamorphosis in many of the characters. More than Piya, Fokir understands the signs of nature and takes much effort in protecting the organisms that live in the tidal land. In *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti occupies the minds of the reader as she undergoes so many obstacles in her life. She feels ready to shed his religion and caste once he is out of her husband's home. Here again history is repeated that the writer talks of the age old custom of forcefully burning the widowed wives in pyre. In an interview with Amitav Ghosh, he expresses his views about the characters of the novel as "Deeti was, for me, the central character in this book: whenever I was at a loss, I always looked to her to help me out, and somehow she always came through." [7] He says that he also loves "Paulette, Zachary, Baboo Nob Kissin, Neel and Jodu. Mrs. Burnham is not onstage very long, but she quickly became

another favourite.”^[7]

Each and every one should protect the ecology of our land. Both man-made disasters and natural crisis occur due to the avarice of man-kind. If people are aware of using renewable resources and non-renewable resources in a right way, nature will be saved. When the natural resources are not used properly it results in natural crisis. Hence, the ecology of a land depends on the mind and maturity of people who abodes in the land. The land is not ready to face yet another tragedy like Bhopal, Hiroshima and Tsunami. Let this tragedy keeps end stop for the ecological imbalance. Let the concept of saving nature be taught to the younger generation right from their childhood days.

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