

AMITAV GHOSH'S ECOCRITICAL CANVAS: A LITERARY EXPLORATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the realm of ecocriticism in the literary works of acclaimed Indian author Amitav Ghosh. Recognized for his ability to weave intricate narratives that intertwine history, culture, and the environment, Ghosh's novels present a rich tapestry of human experiences set against the backdrop of ecological challenges. The paper explores how Ghosh employs ecocritical perspectives to articulate the intricate connections between humans and the environment, offering nuanced reflections on the impacts of globalization, climate change, and human activities on the natural world. By analyzing *The Hungry Tide*, the *Ibis Trilogy* and *The Great Derangement*, this paper aims to illuminate Ghosh's contribution to the environmental discourse within the context of contemporary literature.

Key words: Ecocriticism, environment, literature

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh, a distinguished Indian author known for his intricate narratives, has left an indelible mark on contemporary literature. Beyond the exploration of historical and cultural dimensions, Ghosh's works are imbued with a profound ecological consciousness. From the Sundarbans to the opium trade and climate change, Ghosh's storytelling transcends mere narratives, offering a profound exploration of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

1.1 Background

Amitav Ghosh has gained international acclaim for his thought-provoking narratives that navigate the complex intersections of history, culture, and the environment. Ecocriticism, a burgeoning field within literary studies, provides a lens through which one can analyze the environmental dimensions of literary works. Ghosh's novels, spanning historical fiction and contemporary narratives, offer a rich terrain for ecocritical exploration.

1.2 Purpose of the Paper

This paper seeks to examine the ecological themes and environmental consciousness embedded in Ghosh's literary oeuvre. Through an ecocritical lens, we will explore how Ghosh's works engage with issues such as climate change, ecological imbalances, and the human impact on the environment. By analyzing key novels and essays, we aim to shed light on Ghosh's unique contribution to the discourse on the environment in literature.

2. Understanding Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Glotfelty's working definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader* is that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment", and one of the implicit goals of the approach is to recoup professional dignity for what Glotfelty calls the "undervalued genre of nature writing". Lawrence Buell defines 'ecocriticism' as study of the "relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis".

Some ecocritics brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation, though not all ecocritics agree on the purpose, methodology, or scope of ecocriticism. In the United States, ecocriticism is often associated with the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which hosts biennial meetings for scholars who deal with environmental matters in literature. ASLE publishes a journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) in which current international scholarship can be found.

Many critics emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of the enquiry, which is informed by ecological science, politics, ethics, women's studies, Native American studies, and history, among other academic fields. The term "ecocriticism" was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Interest in the study of nature writing and with reading literature with a focus on "green" issues grew through the 1980s, and by the early 1990s ecocriticism had emerged as a recognizable discipline within literature departments of American universities.

Environmental ethics are founded on the awareness, that we all living beings are the part of nature and man being the most intelligent is considered as patron to the nature. Co-existence of man and nature is interdependent. Nature provides the necessary support to man and other living beings. On the other hand living beings help nature to grow and develop. In any natural system the well being of a species is dependent on the growth and harmony of the whole ecosystem. Species other than man has poor understanding of personal and natural growth and development, so it is fundamental ethical responsibility of man to respect and protect nature, its resources and its life supporting systems. Nature should not be taken for granted. Whenever man has exploited the natural resources unethically, nature has responded furiously in the form of ferocious floods, earthquakes, landslide, tsunami and other natural calamities etc. Man might have reached to any level of growth and advancement but the importance of ecological balance for the survival of living beings is same as it was in primitive times. Besides scientists, environmentalists, ecologists and nature lovers, the artists, poets, philosophers, thinkers and writers also have great concern and deep rooted interest for maintenance of the ecological balance and nurturing care for environment. Concern of literary community may be well felt in the literature. If we undertake a literary journey through the literature of any community or language, poets and writers have tried their best to care, protect and preserve the environment. Present research is an attempt to study, investigate and understand environmental concerns in the selected works of Amitav Ghosh.

3. Importance of the Study

Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as is evidenced in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world. Today the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized in all departments of knowledge and development. The literary critic tries to study how this close relationship between nature and society has been textualized by the writers in their works. In this context two terms have become very important today—ecology and ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of eco-degradation that afflict planet Earth today. In this, ecocriticism concurs with other branches of the environmental humanities ethics, history, religious studies, anthropology, humanistic geography in holding that environmental phenomena must be comprehended, and that today's burgeoning array of environmental concerns must be addressed qualitatively as well as quantitatively.

4. Ecocritical Perspectives in Amitav Ghosh's Works

4.1 *The Hungry Tide* (2004)

The Hungry Tide unfolds in the vast delta of the Sundarbans, a region that serves as a central character in Ghosh's narrative. Against the backdrop of the dynamic ecosystem of mangrove forests and tidal waters, the novel navigates the complexities of human relationships and environmental challenges.

4.1.1 Mangroves as Metaphor: A Delicate Balance

4.1.1.2 The Sundarbans as a Living Entity

Ghosh's portrayal of the Sundarbans goes beyond a mere backdrop; it transforms the landscape into a living entity with its own voice. The mangrove forests, with their intricate roots and dynamic tides, serve as a metaphor for the delicate balance of ecosystems. This novel delves into Ghosh's vivid descriptions of the Sundarbans, highlighting how nature becomes an active participant in the unfolding narrative.

4.1.1.3 The Impact of Human Activities

The Hungry Tide carefully examines the impact of human activities on the Sundarbans' ecology. The clash between traditional ways of life and the forces of globalization becomes a central theme, and Ghosh explores how these tensions disrupt the delicate equilibrium of the mangrove ecosystem. By scrutinizing the characters' interactions with nature, we can discern the novel's ecocritical commentary on the consequences of human intervention.

4.1.2 Climate Change and Environmental Resilience

4.1.2.1 Climate Change in the Sundarbans

Ghosh's narrative is acutely aware of the looming specter of climate change. As the characters navigate the unpredictable waters of the Sundarbans, the novel reflects the environmental uncertainties and disruptions caused by climate change. *The Hungry Tide* serves as a literary reflection on the real-world challenges posed by rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and their impact on the Sundarbans. Ghosh says,

“The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear under water only to re-emerge hours later. The current are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily [...] when the tides create newland, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover anew inland within a few short years”. (*The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh 7)

4.1.2.2 The Resilience of Nature and Communities

Amidst the challenges, Ghosh also emphasizes the resilience of both nature and the indigenous communities within the Sundarbans. The novel portrays the ability of ecosystems to adapt and regenerate, offering a nuanced perspective on the potential for coexistence between humans and the environment. Examining the characters' responses to environmental adversity reveals a narrative that underscores the importance of sustainable practices and the need for harmonious cohabitation.

4.1.3 Indigenous Knowledge and Ecological Wisdom

4.1.3.1 Navigating Environmental Challenges

The Hungry Tide places a spotlight on indigenous knowledge and the ecological wisdom embedded in local communities. Characters grapple with the clash between traditional practices and the encroaching forces of industrialization. Ghosh's exploration of indigenous perspectives becomes a focal point in the ecocritical analysis, revealing how the novel advocates for the preservation of ancestral wisdom as a means of navigating environmental challenges.

4.1.3.2 A Call for Environmental Consciousness

Ghosh's narrative does not merely present a lament for the changing environment; it serves as a call for environmental consciousness. By integrating indigenous perspectives, *The Hungry Tide* advocates for a deeper understanding of the intricate relationships between humans and nature. The novel encourages readers to reflect on their own roles in environmental stewardship and the potential for a more sustainable future.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* emerges as a significant contribution to the field of ecocriticism, offering a nuanced exploration of the delicate balance between humans and the environment. As readers navigate

the narrative currents of *The Hungry Tide*, they are invited to confront the complexities of environmental challenges and consider the role each individual plays in the preservation of our shared planet.

4.2 *The Ibis Trilogy* (2008-2015)

Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, comprising *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*, unfolds against the backdrop of historical events, global trade, and the intricate interplay between diverse cultures. The *Ibis Trilogy* is a historical epic that traverses the 19th century, exploring the complexities of the opium trade, migration, and global interconnectedness. Against the backdrop of historical events, Ghosh weaves a narrative that illuminates the ecological consequences of human actions.

4.2.1 Opium Trade and Environmental Transformation

4.2.1.1 The Opium Trade as a Narrative Catalyst

The opium trade forms the crux of the *Ibis Trilogy*, acting as a catalyst for environmental transformation. This trilogy examines how Ghosh delves into the cultivation and trade of opium, unraveling the ecological consequences of this global enterprise. The trilogy becomes a platform for ecocritical analysis, offering insights into the environmental costs of economic pursuits.

4.2.1.2 Deforestation and Soil Degradation

Ghosh's exploration of the opium trade extends to the environmental impact of cultivation practices. The narrative portrays the deforestation and soil degradation resulting from the cultivation of opium. Through an ecocritical lens, the trilogy scrutinizes how Ghosh engages with the ecological consequences of large-scale agricultural practices within the context of the opium trade. As Ghosh has pointed out: "In the old days the field would be heavy with wheat in winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now with the shahibs, forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare." (*Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh 29)

4.2.2 Globalization and Ecological Impact

4.2.2.1 Interconnectedness of Societies and Economies

The *Ibis Trilogy* unfolds against a backdrop of global trade, emphasizing the interconnectedness of societies and economies. The trilogy explores how Ghosh's narrative reflects the far-reaching consequences of human actions on ecosystems. Through an ecocritical analysis, we unravel the trilogy's examination of the environmental implications of historical events and global enterprises.

4.2.2.2 Ecological Consequences of Industrialization

As the trilogy progresses into the 19th century, it reflects the industrialization that accompanies globalization. It scrutinizes Ghosh's portrayal of the ecological consequences of industrialization, including pollution, resource depletion, and the transformation of landscapes. The narrative becomes a canvas for an ecocritical exploration of the environmental costs associated with the march of progress.

4.2.3 Indigenous Perspectives and Environmental Consciousness

4.2.3.1 Indigenous Voices and Ecological Wisdom

The *Ibis Trilogy* introduces readers to diverse cultures and communities, including indigenous perspectives. The trilogy explores how Ghosh engages with indigenous voices and ecological wisdom, emphasizing the importance of preserving traditional knowledge for navigating environmental challenges. It becomes a space for ecocritical reflection on the significance of indigenous perspectives in environmental discourse.

4.2.3.2 Resilience and Adaptation

Ghosh's narrative also highlights the resilience of communities in the face of environmental challenges. The trilogy analyzes how characters adapt to changing ecosystems and navigate the complexities of global transformations. Through an ecocritical lens, we explore the portrayal of resilience as a response to environmental adversity.

Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* stands as a monumental contribution to the field of ecocriticism, weaving together historical events, global trade, and environmental consequences. Through the opium trade, globalization, and indigenous perspectives, the trilogy becomes a canvas for exploring the intricate relationships between human societies and ecosystems. This ecocritical analysis underscores Ghosh's ability to illuminate the environmental dimensions of historical narratives and encourages readers to reflect on the interconnectedness of human actions and the natural world. As we navigate the tides of change, Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* invites us to consider the environmental costs of our collective past and the responsibilities inherent in shaping a sustainable future.

4.3 The Great Derangement (2016)

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh departs from fiction to delve into the non-fictional realm of climate change and its implications for literature. This collection of essays serves as a manifesto for the role of literature in addressing the urgent environmental challenges of our time.

4.3.1 The Climate Crisis and Literature

The Great Derangement confronts the paradoxical absence of climate change narratives within literature, positing that the urgency of the climate crisis demands a reconsideration of storytelling traditions. Ghosh's work becomes a call to arms for writers to confront the "unthinkable" and engage with the reality of climate change within the realm of literature.

4.3.2 Climate Change and the Unthinkable

4.3.2.1 Literature's Silence on Climate Change

Ghosh challenges the conventional structures of literature for their reticence in addressing climate change. The text delves into the reasons behind this silence, exploring how existing literary traditions have struggled to incorporate the enormity and complexity of the environmental challenges we face. Ghosh's critique becomes a starting point for an ecocritical examination of the exploration of the "unthinkable." Ghosh points out, "All of this makes climate change events particularly resistant to the customary frames that literature has applied to "Nature": they are too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory to be written about in a lyrical, or elegiac, or romantic vein." (*The Great Derangement*, Ghosh 33)

4.3.2.2 The "Unthinkable" and Narrative Structures

The Great Derangement grapples with the notion of the "unthinkable," referring to the inherent difficulty of imagining and narrating the consequences of climate change. Ghosh argues that prevailing narrative structures are ill-equipped to capture the scale and urgency of environmental crises. The text analyzes how Ghosh encourages a reevaluation of storytelling techniques to better convey the challenges posed by climate change.

4.3.3 Cultural and Psychological Aspects of Climate Change Denial

4.3.3.1 The Cultural Inertia

Ghosh explores the cultural inertia that hinders societies from comprehensively addressing climate change. The text examines how cultural practices, economic systems, and historical legacies contribute to a collective denial of the impending environmental crises. Ghosh's analysis becomes a crucial ecocritical lens through which to understand the cultural barriers that impede effective climate action.

4.3.3.2 The Psychological Resistance

The Great Derangement also delves into the psychological resistance to acknowledging and addressing climate change. Ghosh contends that the psychological distance between individuals and the unfolding environmental crisis is a significant factor in climate change denial. The text explores how Ghosh engages with the psychological aspects of climate change and advocates for a shift in consciousness to overcome denial.

4.3.4. Literature's Role in Shaping Environmental Awareness

4.3.4.1 The Power of Literature

Ghosh posits that literature has the power to shape cultural perceptions and influence collective consciousness. The text explores how literature, as a form of cultural production, can play a transformative role in fostering environmental awareness. Ghosh's argument becomes a central ecocritical theme, emphasizing the potential of literature to bridge the gap between the "thinkable" and the "unthinkable."

4.3.4.2 Environmental Imagination

The text advocates for the development of an environmental imagination that transcends existing cultural and literary norms. Ghosh contends that writers have a responsibility to engage with the environmental challenges of our time and spur readers to imagine alternative futures. This text examines the concept of environmental imagination and its implications for the ecocritical discourse.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* emerges as a crucial work within the realm of ecocriticism, challenging literary traditions and advocating for a more engaged and responsive approach to climate change within literature. Through an ecocritical lens, Ghosh has examined the literary world's silence, its exploration of the "unthinkable," and its call for a reevaluation of narrative structures. Ghosh's work serves as an invitation for writers and readers alike to confront the urgent realities of climate change and recognize literature's potential as a catalyst for environmental awareness and action.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Amitav Ghosh's writings stand as a significant contribution to the realm of ecocriticism, weaving together intricate narratives that traverse the delicate interplay between humans and the environment. From the vivid portrayal of the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* to the exploration of the opium trade and globalization in the *Ibis Trilogy*, Ghosh invites readers to engage with the ecological complexities of our world. His works act as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness between nature and culture, urging us to contemplate the environmental consequences of historical events and human actions. Through Ghosh's unique lens, ecocriticism becomes not only a literary analysis but also a call to environmental consciousness, fostering a deeper understanding of our role in shaping the planet's destiny. As we navigate the narratives of Ghosh's literary landscape, we are prompted to reflect on the profound implications of our choices and the imperative to forge a harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world.

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