

"CONSERVATION: THE NEED OF THE HOUR"

An Ecocritical Analysis of Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Markandaya's *Nectar In A Sieve*

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Introduction

Literature is generally defined as the medium that serves to mirror life and all its facets. In the recent times, it explains the relationship between the human world and the physical environment. Particularly, it showcases the concerns that comes along with the constantly changing face of human connectivity with the natural world. Our natural world needs ecology and ecosystems to be maintained and balanced, so that both human society and other living species can have a good life in the present and in future. That is, with sustainable development and with the limited use of available resources, living beings can have a safe and secure future generation. All the earthly beings are blessed with the natural resources from which they get food and produce food and that is how they survive. Every living being is dependent on one or the other living beings, that forms the ecological pyramid.

From the last few decades, there has been a lot of disasters ruining the lives on the Earth. Misuse and over-usage of natural resources spoils the ecological pyramid and have left us at the brink of destruction. Cutting down of trees, fast depletion of fossil fuels, disorder in the seasonal cycles and all contributes to ecological disaster, which is happening now all over the globe. With the help of literature, this paper aims to highlight the practical difficulties that human beings face from Nature and how they manipulate and consume things from Nature according to their needs, considering themselves superior. These are analysed from the works of two Indian novelists. First one is the winner of Jnanpith Award 2018, Amitav Ghosh and the other person is one of the most prominent Indian novelists, Kamala Markandaya.

Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide" focuses on the practical difficulties of people and, the changes in climate and environment are highlighted. The theme of the novel can be connected to the report from 'The Guardian',

"Earth has lost half of its wildlife in the past 40 years since 1970, says WWF: Species across land, rivers and seas decimated as humans kill for food in unsustainable numbers and destroy habitats."

Kamala Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve" portrays the theme of poverty, starvation and the degradation caused by poverty. As mentioned rightly by Professor Ken Albala,

"The agricultural revolution is probably the single most important event in human history... ..how people figured out a way to support their growing population by moving toward an agricultural-based society" (KA12).

Oppressions in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* gives importance to nature and environment and how human beings enjoy the nature and eventually exploit nature for their own benefits. Misuse and over-usage have led to depletion, destruction and annihilation of the face of earth to an unrecognizable state that has resulted in the phenomenon of climate change. Nature has started paying back humankind and other living things in the severest manner. Humanity has to rethink, reevaluate and re-designate its relationship with its surroundings by acknowledging the fact that, we are part of our environment and in no way superior to it.

This novel reveals the interactions between the fauna and flora and the physical environment, both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that were inherent in the conservation efforts in the Sundarbans. In this novel, Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and therefore, it is simultaneously changed by humanity.

'Nature' is personified as a character, whom Ghosh introduces in the first chapter, 'The Tide communities Country'; It is described by its beauty, physical and geographical settings. As it is said, "...A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself...". (THT 9)

The novel highlights not only Nature's fascinating features, when it is ecologically balanced, but also its aggressive aspects when the balance collapses. These lines are quoted from the text:

"...Every year, dozens of people... .. killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles everyday, thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater..." (THT 25)

Nature is depicted in its dual nature. It is paradoxical, that it is as a coin with two sides,

Nature is pictured as 'a creator - destroyer', it's appealing characteristics and the disastrous hostility; the supporter of life's survival as well as the destroyer of many lives.

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In the novel, the characters Nilima and Nirmal are the social activists, who start the NGO Badabon Development Trust to help the poor people providing those basic amenities of drinking water, electricity, education and medical help. Nirmal keeps a notebook in which he records the place, the people, the history and the environment with the idea of compiling a book about the tide country, Sundarbans. Having come there in his youth after thirty years in the late 70's, he finds that the millions of swarming crabs and birds were fast disappearing, the fish were dwindling, and the land from day to day was being reclaimed by the sea. He also records the happenings at Morichjhapi island, where the settlers were being forced to relocate to the main lands and vacate the forests. He writes how Kusum (belonging to the indigenous people of Sundarbans) explains the situation when the police laid siege to Morichjhapi and its people who were starved by the authorities whose action might force them to quit the island:

"...the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people all around the world . . . this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime was that we were just human being, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human being could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived-by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil" (THT 261-262)

Ghosh makes a case for the indigenous inhabitants who were considered a direct threat to the lands, forests and reserve areas and who in turn were dispossessed of their homes to accommodate more space for the tigers. These people had to fight against not only the unstable and menacing natural environment, the cyclones, tigers and crocodiles but also other powerful human beings.

Piya, a cetologist sights a group of seven Orcaella and describes the behavioral pattern of one of the smallest in the group, a calf that as she observed, —coming to the surface in a "corkscrew pattern with its little head protruding out of the water—an indication that it still had to learn to breathe smoothly" (THT 114).

This mammalian species is considered to be critically endangered and Piya believes that trying to decipher the movements of the Orcaella adapting itself to the tidal ecology might provide clues to conservation of this endangered species. She also gets to learn how these dolphins cooperate with the humans in their cast-net fishing sightings. The region needs to be protected all the more from such human infringement, as the incident in the novel is highlighted, when Piya and

Fokir (a nature lover) on one of their forays in to the Garjontola are shocked to find the carcass of the calf, that she had been happy to witness at the first instance of spotting the dolphin along with its mother. She learns that the propeller of one of the fast-moving motorboats of the coastguard or the police or even the forest officials had hit the calf and caused its death.

Fokir also points out that he had come across three such instances along the river that emphasizes the need for conservation and habitat preservation. The Sundarbans is the only mangrove forest in the world that houses the tiger with the highest tiger population in the world being found in this tiger reserve. That's how the Royal Bengal Tigers, at the same time are marginalizing the people of the islands. With the increase in tiger population, there raises the question of how much space has been actually earmarked for the movement of the increase in the number of the species. There is danger of tigers wandering into human habitation and end up eating men, women, children and cattle.

An incident is described where one is wondering at the credibility of conservation of one particular species at the cost of another. Piya, Kanai, Fokir and Horen witness the killing of a tiger by a mob. The tiger had already encroached upon human habitation having killed a buffalo and revisiting a second time is caught by the furious mob waiting to kill it:

"By the light of the torches they saw that the village was made up of clusters of mud huts, so arranged as to run parallel to the embankment. There was a small mud-walled structure with a thatched roof in front of them. More than a hundred people had gathered around this little hut: most of them were men and many were armed with sharpened bamboo poles: they were plunging in to the hut over and again. Their faces were contorted in such a way that they seemed to be in the grip both of extreme fear and uncontrollable rage. Many of the women and children in the crowd were shrieking, Maar! Maar! Kill! Kill!" (THT 291, 292)

The Hindu OP-ED in its Jan14, 2012 edition discusses the issue and suggests that "the answer to this human-tiger conflict lies in good conservation science and in mitigation measures that help people co-exist with the carnivores at the landscape level and the relocation of people from tiger territory with handsome compensatory packages is a superior alternative to crisis management techniques, providing a wider prey base within its habitation will ensure the tiger not seeking the cattle. And creating wider undisturbed habitat will benefit both".

As mentioned in *The Guardian*, "We have lost one half of the animal population and knowing this is driven by human consumption, this is clearly a call to arms and we must act now," said Mike Barratt, director of science and policy at WWF. He said more of the Earth must be

protected from development and deforestation, while food and energy had to be produced sustainably.

The steep decline of animal, fish and bird numbers was calculated by analysing 10,000 different populations, covering 3,000 species in total. This data was then, for the first time, used to create a representative “Living Planet Index” (LPI), reflecting the state of all 45,000 known vertebrates.

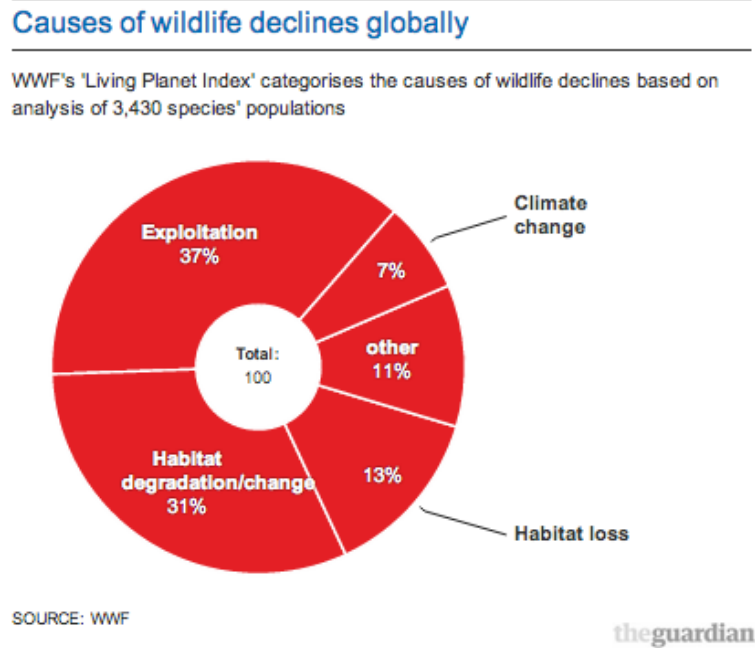


Fig. 1

Farming and Food Production in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

While we discussed about the cruelties that happen when nature retaliates, here, in this novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, there is a contrast, where Kamala Markandaya portrays the Environment, Rukmani, the protagonist and Ira as oppressed beings. Rukmani's work in the garden and total dependence on this farming through her hard labour depicts her deep-rooted link with nature. She gets pleasure when she sees the growth of her crop. It becomes clear when she says, “our freedom to work in the forest and to farm is very important” (NS 241)

Nathan, Rukmani's husband was a farmer. They had six children, of which five were boys and one girl child, Ira. Their lives were dependent on land, farming and food production. Their only concern is producing food and surviving on it. It is on the harvest and the yield, that their joy, survival and family is holding upon every year. When Rukmani thinks about the difficult times, about the sons leaving the farm lands to a distant place like Ceylon and when she laments, Nathan shows her the green ripening fields and utters these words with a strong hope of future:

"Nathan said, 'You...think only of your trials, not of the joys that are still with us. Look at our land -- is it not beautiful? The fields are green, and the grain is ripening. It will be a good harvest year, there will be plenty'. Nathan went and plucked a few green stems and brought them...

'See how firm and strong they are -- no sign of disease at all. And look, the grain is already forming'" (NS 82)

She misses nature and organic form of living when she is alienated from her land, finds trouble in getting charity food and finally gets back preferring her organic company to get pleasure of life. Markandaya has portrayed a true picture of village life, where Rukmani and Nathan are not single characters, but they represent the whole community. They are left into poverty and when rains fail, their crops are not giving a good yield. Thus, their survival becomes a great question mark. This novel clearly showcases the problems faced by our farmers these days in our society. How are we reacting to it, even after knowing these people's emotional connections with farming and their lands?

Life is in the verge of destruction, though there are plenty of food produced. "Even though the world produces enough food to feed twice the world's present population, food wastage is ironically behind the billions of people who are malnourished. The number of hungry people in India has increased by 65 million more than the population of France" as per the statistics mentioned in *The World Today*.

As Ken Albala has quoted in his "Food: A Cultural Culinary History",

"... population pressure forced some people to find new ways of getting food, it did not free them from the recurrent crises, food shortages, and famines.." (12)

Not even stopping with famines, it leads people to death ultimately.

Conclusion

There are several other endangered ecosystems on planet earth. It is the moral responsibility and accountability on the part of every human to conserve our environment, as it is increasingly threatening to each and all of its members, human or nonhuman, where each requires in its own space to be. Animals are more eco-sensitive than humans. Global warming is responsible for the fast depleting spaces, thereby driving many species to extinction and puts human existence itself in a conflict. The need of the hour is to build a future that strikes a balance between man and his surroundings, to live in harmony with his environment, maintaining the ecology, expelling his human dominating-ego, as shown in Fig.2, taken from Web for reference.

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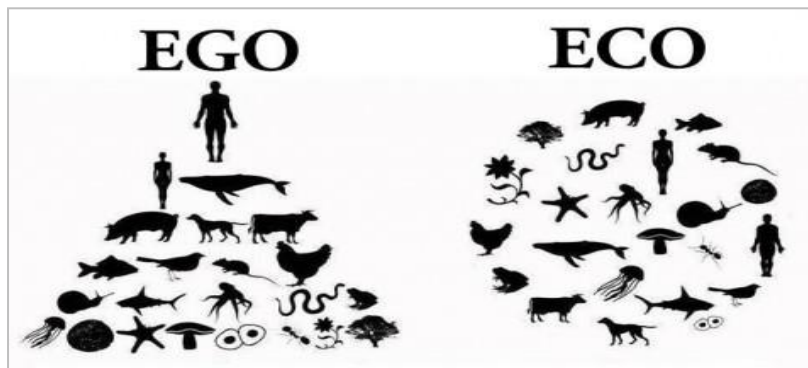


Fig.2

The transformation of attitude of human kind from all-exploiting self-declared rulers to co-existent species of planet Earth is the crying need of the hour. I would like to conclude the paper with the quotes by Aldo Leopold,

"Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. By land, it is meant all of the things on, over, or in the earth. Harmony with land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left. That is to say, you cannot love game and hate predators; you cannot conserve the waters and waste the ranges; you cannot build the forest and mine the farm. The land is one organism. Its parts, like our own parts, compete with each other and co-operate with each other. The competitions are as much a part of the inner workings as the co-operations. You can regulate them—cautiously—but not abolish them."

As Alice Walker puts it, "Activism is the rent I pay for living on planet Earth", let us all become environmental activists to preserve our nature and conserve the environment.

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Figure References

Fig. 1: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf>

Fig. 2: <http://neighborhoodeconomics.org/ecosystem-vs-egosystem/>

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