

Environmental Catastrophe in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. Despite nearly a century of propaganda, conservation still proceeds at a snail's pace; progress still consists largely of letterhead pieties and convention oratory. ... we still slip two steps backward for each forward stride. (Leopold, 1968, p. 207)

Since time immemorial men have ruled nature, escalated environmental issues and caused irreparable losses, posing a threat to their very own survival. Due to the negligence and degradation of the ecosystem, environmental concerns have become a global crisis. Aldo Leopold, Wangari Maathai and Rachael Carson are some of the prominent activists who raised their voices for the protection of nature. Amitav Ghosh (2007) in his novel *The Hungry Tide* set in the Sundarbans, meaning beautiful forests, emphasises the understanding and conservation of life in the Sundarbans, depicting a global issue in a local setting. The novel deals with the wrath of nature and colonial suppression. This paper intends to depict the environmental issues of the Sundarbans faced by its human and non-human inhabitants as well as bring out the human and environmental relationships in the novel. It also seeks to depict natural and manmade calamities in this rare ecologically rich biodiversity and the clarion call given by the author to save the environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Environment, the complex of physical, chemical, and biotic factors that act upon an organism or an ecological community and ultimately determine its form and survival." (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

"The natural world in which people, animals and plants live." (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary)

The environment in simple terms is the natural surrounding around us. The biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) elements along with their influence on human beings comprise the environment. While biotic elements include animals (both land and aquatic), plants, trees and birds, abiotic elements are water, land, sunlight, rocks, and air. The environment entails the interplay of humans with natural ecosystems.

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The environment provides us with resources, both renewable and non-renewable, which are necessary for the sustenance of human life. It also enhances the quality of life by getting rid of waste and spreading beauty.

As defined by the Ecological Society of America (2021), “Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment; it seeks to understand the vital connections between plants and animals and the world around them.” (par. 1)

Man has forever harnessed nature for its benefits. He has been so engrossed in his well-being that he has forgotten to realize that our very existence depends on nature. This has resulted in the fury of nature and environmental problems seem to crop up every day putting human life at stake. Mounting issues have made life difficult. Healthy ecosystems significantly reduce the impact of floods, catastrophic storms, serious droughts and carbon dioxide emissions. However, the avarice of the human race has led to widespread and deadly pandemics, a rise in the level of water bodies, an increase in temperature causing global warming, ruined habitats, uncontrollable wildfires and other catastrophes aptly put by Glavovic et al. (2022) as “the tragedy of climate change science is that at the same time as compelling evidence is gathered, fresh warnings issued and novel methodologies developed, indicators of adverse global change rise year upon year” (p. 1). The need of the hour is to focus on a nature-friendly lifestyle and reinforce the protection and management of the ecosystems to act as a buffer against natural disasters.

‘We live near the Bay of Bengal; therefore we have to contend with cyclones like Sidr, Aila, Nargis and Mahasen. The mangroves save us from such devastating disasters. At the same time, they act as a nursing and feeding ground for fish, absorb carbon, and protect land from erosion, increasing biodiversity - the value of which cannot be converted into cash.’ - Ismail Hosen, Panpottry, Galachipa, Patuakhali (Smith, 2018, par. 11)

There are various types of disasters which seem to envelop us with their fangs, leaving us in the lurch. Disasters can be natural or man-made. Natural disasters include famine, drought, flood, earthquake etc while intentional acts of nuclear war are man-made. An environmental disaster is any cataclysmic event against nature either caused or aggravated by human activity. They also showcase the long-lasting penalties and consequences of human interference. They lead to the death and disruption of humans, wildlife and vegetation at times displacing communities.

People all over the world are creating awareness and taking appropriate actions for the conservation of nature. Several environmental movements are being organised by environmentalists as well as rules and regulations are being formed to preserve nature from further damage. Conservation and renewal of biodiversity, protection and sustainable use of natural resources and combating climate change must be focussed upon to stop the global crisis looming at large. An example of an environmental focussed policy is the *National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA) of the United States. “NEPA requires Federal agencies to consider the effects of their actions on the environment, including interrelated social, cultural, and economic effects.” (Council on Environmental Quality, 2021, p. 4) The Environment Agency (EA) established in 1966 in the United Kingdom enforces environmental conservation in the country.

Pioneering ecosystem-based adaptation actions yielded significant benefits which need to be taken to scale. One stunning example comes from Colombia.

‘I have guavas, lemons, oranges, tangerines, coconuts, passion fruits, chilies, eggplants, yuccas, yams and rice. We raise the areas under cultivation so that they are not flooded. Alternatively, we make circular gardens by digging ring-like ditches. The arable part is in the centre, elevated and protected from the water. In this way, the soil conserves humidity during the dry season.’ - Zoila Guerra, Colombia. (United Nations Development Programme, 2020, par. 16)

The environment is deteriorating at an alarming rate warning us of devastating climate change. These mounting environmental issues cause a menace to humans. It is imperative to find effective solutions to avert irreversible damage. Aldo Leopold (1968) stated “We abuse the land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” (p. viii) Wangari Maathai, a Nobel prize winner, an environmentalist, started the Green Belt Movement in 1977 and campaigned against deforestation. She stressed that there was a deep relationship between the natural environment and the people living there. “The need of the hour, in the words of Wangari Maathai, is to realise that ‘in making sure that other species survive we will be ensuring the survival of our own.’ ” (Krishnan, 2010, par. 1)

According to Sasha Lilley (2012), in the introduction of the book *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*, “Catastrophism presumes that society is headed for a collapse, whether economic, ecological, social, or spiritual.” (p. 19) Author Eddie Yuen in his essay *The Politics of Failure Have Failed: The Environmental Movement and Catastrophism*, claims environmentalism to be different as we leading to:

what is unquestionably a genuine catastrophic moment in human and planetary history.... Of all of the forms of catastrophic discourse on offer, the collapse of ecological systems is unique in that it is definitively verified by a consensus within the scientific community. ... It is absolutely urgent to address this by effectively and rapidly changing the direction of human society. (Lilley et al., 2012, p. 31)

Literature which mirrors society as well as creates alertness towards positive change is constantly playing a significant role. Several well-known environmentalists and activists have written on climate change to caution against the terrible and terrifying situation and suggest ways to tackle the problem at hand. One of the famous works is *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962), a marine biologist, which started the environmental, conservational, green and kindred movements and is still relevant today inspiring many. The compiled evidence of two biodynamic farmers, Marjorie Spock and Mary T. Richards of Long Island, New York about the destruction caused to their property due to government policy of DDT spraying formed the primary source material of Carson’s book. The book discussed in detail the ecological damage due to the indiscriminate usage of pesticides. It’s horrifying that Carson’s predictions about global warming and damages due to chemicals have proved correct.

David Wallace-Wells’ (2019) *The Uninhabitable Earth* is a frightening depiction of the future of the climate changes taking place due to devastating effects on nature. It illustrates the dire projections of the problem and the horrifying effects because realising the problem is the first step towards finding the solution. Wallace-Wells compares the scale of devastation by the rising ocean to the destruction caused by nuclear wars. He points out that the problem is much more than being comprehended.

The book’s longest section, entitled Elements of Chaos, is composed of 12 short and brutal chapters, each of which foretells a specific dimension of our forecast doom, and whose titles alone - Heat Death; Dying Oceans; Unbreathable Air; Plagues of Warming - are enough to induce an honest-to-God panic attack. (O’ Connell, 2019, par. 2)

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He stresses the problem of denialism and avoidance by the people as well as the government of the climate change consequences. However, the positive thing is that according to Wallace-Wells we have all the apparatus we need to avoid the detrimental effects:

a carbon tax and the political apparatus to aggressively phase out dirty energy; a new approach to agricultural practices and a shift away from beef and dairy in the global diet; and public investment in green energy and carbon capture. (O'Connell, 2019, par. 9)

This book is effective in giving panic attacks to the readers by its brutal portrait of climate change but it also provides ways to evade it.

Amitav Ghosh's (2016) *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* laments the climate changes caused due to human greed. He asks us to take action to control further degradation. Ghosh observes our helplessness from the perspective of literature, history and politics to understand the amount and ferocity of climate change in this nonfiction. He summonses the culture-makers and points at the need for change in a narrative to include environmental conservation. He also asks us to overcome climate denialism. According to him, the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and therefore also a crisis of imagination.

Excerpts from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* introduce the reader to 'environmental responsibility.' Carson and Leopold never claimed to shape ethics but their moving accounts of how man had interfered with nature and its ways portrayed the flaws in man's value judgments on the environment around him, thus bringing out the need for 'normative environmental ethics' to govern human actions vis-a-vis nature. (Krishnan, 2010, par. 3)

George Turner's (1987) *The Sea and Summer*, James Bradley's (2015) *Clade*, Barbara Kingsolver's (2012) *Flight Behavior*, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and Richard Powers' (2018) *The Overstory* are some of the milestone novels which focus on climate hazards.

Amitav Ghosh is a contemporary Indian diasporic writer who resides in New York and teaches at Columbia University. He was a recipient of several notable awards such as the Jnanpith Award, Sahitya Akademi Award, Ananda Puruskar, Dan David Prize and Padma Shri. "Ghosh's ambitious novels use complex narrative strategies to probe the nature of national and personal identity, particularly of the people of India and Southeast Asia." (Luebering, 2021, par. 1) Several of his works are on climate change and environmental issues. Some of his famous works include *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), *Flood of Fire* (2015), *Gun Island* (2019) and *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016).

Ghosh's own book from 2019, *Gun Island*, deals with issues like global warming and the danger to fish from chemical wastes in the Sunderbans. But Ghosh still has a problem with most current fiction works on global warming, a genre often referred to as eco-fiction, climate fiction, or cli-fi. He argues that it displaces natural disasters from the present time, when in fact it's all happening right now

Ghosh cites an example: "New York City was hit by a terrible cyclone in 2012. It was called Hurricane Sandy, and it devastated New York. And New York City has so many writers, poets, filmmakers, artists and so on, but you'll find very little written about Hurricane Sandy, yet you'll find many books about the future drowning of New York."

He says this could reflect a denial of lived reality.

“Today, what is so obvious is that this is an overwhelming reality, for those people in Germany, for example,” Ghosh says. “They keep saying it’s unbelievable, they can’t believe it, it’s never happened before. And that’s just the point. The whole point is, it’s not just unbelievable: It’s real, it’s happening. It’s happening to us right now.” (Welle 2021: par. 9-12)

In his shortest book yet, *The Living Mountain: A Fable of our Times* (2022), “Ghosh shows how ideas of reverence, ownership and responsibility in the collective human conscience underlie our relationship with the natural world.” (Warrier, 2022, par. 2) Despite being short in its narrative the book has a global impact.

Short in its narrative, the book is long in its reach. Like Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*, or Richard Bach’s *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, the dream story in the book is an allegory for a universal environmental history starting from animism, through colonialism, globalisation, neo-classical economics, to the current climate change discussions. (Warrier, 2022, par. 5)

Ghosh talks of denial of lived reality. He warns that the world should realize this new reality as humans worldwide are facing the same predicament. He strongly feels about the effects of climate change and natural disasters in South Asian countries. The sensitive ecological zone, the Sunderbans is under severe threat owing to global warming. He used these mangrove forests in the Bay of Bengal, as the setting in the novels like *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and the verse *Jungle Nama* (2021).

Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* deals with the farming of opium and its detrimental impacts on the life of the people and the environment. He shows the crisis of social, cultural and natural dominance in the novel. The cultivation of poppies immensely reduced the cultivation of food crops. There are many forms of environmental degradation which results due to changes made in the environment to suit mankind’s need.

According to Cheryll Glatfelter, Eco criticism is the study of the association between literature and the physical milieu which states that nature and human culture are mingled. *The Glass Palace* is a historical novel showing events like the colonization of Burma by the British, the First World War, the subjugation of Japan over Russia and the changes shaped by World War II. Ghosh depicts in the novel that colonialization in South Asia caused environmental degradation and spoiled the green culture. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010) observes in *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*,

Surely, any field purporting to theorize the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism . . . cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as the state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts (p. 144)

Several environmental scholars and historians Alfred Crosby, Ramachandra Guha, Richard Grove, David Arnold and others have pointed to the ecological damage done by the European intervention in other parts of the globe. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Eco-Criticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2015) talk of “greening postcolonialism”. Ghosh’s eco-narrative is a creative type of fiction that represents the above. He proposes a new outlook of apprehensions and discussions that affect the whole world and these problems can be emphasised through eco-narrative versus eco-tourism, eco-critical activism, environmental advocacy and aesthetics according to Huggan and Tiffin. It is seen that Ghosh’s fictional initiative comes under the scope of postcolonial eco-criticism that explores the issues of conserving biodiversity. The growing consciousness of environmental degradation and harm due to excessive use and manhandling of nature to satisfy man’s needs

and the effects of disasters have made an increasing number of scholars include green concerns in their works.

2. THE HUNGRY TIDE

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*, set in Sundarbans, meaning beautiful forest, discusses questions of environmental issues. He was the recipient of the Crossword Book Prize for *The Hungry Tide* in 2004. He combines scientific facts with fiction to discuss nature and the environment with context to human life, portraying their relationship. He has tried to mend the broken earth. Ghosh wrote an essay in 2004, *Folly in the Sundarbans*, to express his concern over the Sahara India Pariwar's plan of turning the Sundarbans into a tourist place. The environmental issues in the local setting of Sundarbans, its habitats, people, tigers and dolphins and man-made disasters have been depicted to have a global impact. Ghosh reminds us of our responsibilities to protect nature by imploring us to conserve life in the Sundarbans.

The Sundarbans region is supposed to derive its name from the 'sundari' tree, as the mangrove is locally called in his book. Ghosh has depicted a graphic representation of Sundarbans and the problems of living there, the evolving connection between humans and nature, taking into account the view of both sides. For ages, man has abused nature as a colonial master exploiting it for its greedy desires. This resulted in the destruction and devastation of the earth, putting to question the survival of humankind. Nature has been cornered, forcing it to retaliate aggressively. Therefore, it is high time that we realize the significance of our relationship with nature and mend our ways. Ecocriticism talks about the human-earth relationship.

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. (Buell et. al., 2011, p. 418)

Sundarbans, nominated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site and Biosphere Reserve, is an exclusive and enormous archipelago inhabiting several thousand species. The changing tides reflect the changing nature of lives in this vast biodiversity. The novel portrays the life of three of its major characters caught in the tide of life. It also shows the changing power dynamics of humans and their co-inhabitants in their struggle for survival. Ghosh (2007) vividly portrays the beautiful Sundarbans in the novel.

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later. ... When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, ... Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (p. 7-8)

Sundarbans have lots of mangrove trees which protect the region from soil erosion as well as cyclonic destruction. There are mudflats as well as innumerable rivers, with realistic descriptions.

They number in the thousands, these islands; some are immense and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago. ... The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are

always mutating, always unpredictable. Some of these channels are mighty waterways, so wide across that one shore is invisible from the other; others are no more than two or three kilometres long and only a few hundred metres across. (Ghosh, 2007, p. 6-7)

The Sundarbans of Ghosh's novel enfolds fact as well as fiction. The last important appearance of the trauma of Bengal's partition, a historical event about the expulsion of migrants from the island of Morichjhapi in the Sunderbans by the Left Front government of West Bengal in 1979 has a vital place in the novel. The novel discusses several issues about human as well as animal lives in the diverse ecosystem of Sundarbans. The tigers, Gangetic and Irrawaddy dolphins, crocodiles and deer with other fauna and flora are all struggling for survival. Piya who is from the United States and has Indian origin is a young cetologist in Ghosh's text. She studies the trajectory of a breed of freshwater dolphin, the Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) with the help of the native guide, Fokir. Kannai, a middle-aged linguist who runs a translation bureau in Delhi acts as an interpreter to Piya. Piya found a group of seven *Orcaella* and details the behaviour of the calf. "Time and again she observed it 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." (Ghosh, 2007, p. 114)

Since these dolphins are considered to be critically endangered Piya thinks that studying their adapting technique to the tidal ecology might help save them. She also finds that these dolphins and human beings are helpful to each other in catching fish. Piya wonders: "Did there exist anymore remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals?" (Ghosh, 2007, p. 169). Fokir passes on the information about dolphins, which he had learnt from his mother, Kusum to Piya and Kanai. He also talks about the dolphins in Garjontola and how they had premonitions about floods and gave signals.

Piya finds the Gangetic dolphins (*Platanistaganetica*) later on which helps her to predict the approaching storm since they are extremely sensitive to atmospheric pressure. Leopold suggests the coexistence of both struggle and support between man and animal, each playing an important role in the ecosystem. Piya also found estuarine crocodiles and other small creatures which were due to the unusual composition of water present there. Therefore, it is home to a rich diversity of aquatic and terrestrial flora and fauna as well as fishes.

The waters of river and sea did not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta; rather, they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of fresh water running along the floors of some channels, creating variations of salinity and turbidity. These micro-environments were like balloons suspended in the water ... Each balloon was a floating biodome, filled with endemic fauna and flora ... This proliferation of environments was responsible for creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms - from the gargantuan crocodile to microscopic fish. (Ghosh, 2007, p. 125)

However, human intervention in the form of globalization, economic development and eco-tourism continuously exploit the biosphere. Protest by environmentalists and writers has spread awareness among the common people as well. Since a major portion of Sundarbans falls in Bangladesh, they have been trying to commercialize it. It is necessary to protect it from human infringement. This is highlighted in the novel when Piya and Fokir on one of their ventures to the Garjantola find the same calf dead, which they had felt happy to see early on. A hit from a motorboat had led to its death. Fokir also emphasizes the need for conservation and preservation.

Sundarbans has the highest tiger population among all the mangrove forests in the world. However, Ghosh mentions their encroachment on human habitation leading to death

among both tigers and humans. Piya, Kanai, Fokir and Horen witness the killing of a tiger by a furious mob.

When they neared the crest of the embankment Horen pointed to a large mark in the dust and gestured to indicate that this was the place from which the animal had surveyed the village and picked its prey. ... Directly in front of them, a few hundred metres away, was a small mud-walled structure with a thatched roof. More than a hundred people had gathered around this little hut ... many were armed with sharpened bamboo poles: these 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! (Ghosh, 2007, p. 291- 292)

An editorial piece in *The Hindu* (2021) discusses the problem “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. ... Creating wider undisturbed habitat will benefit both.” (par. 1-2)

The predator had already harmed humans so the mob killed it for its survival. However next day newspaper reports were published about their conduct. The Wildlife authorities have recommended rules and regulations to stop mobs from such behaviour. Chakrabarti (2009) discusses in his article *Local People and the Global Tiger: An Environmental History of the Sundarbans* that the conflict between man and the animal must be taken seriously.

... the setting up of a tiger reserve and its maintenance in this unique mangrove swamp involved dealing with a whole range of unknowns. It was imperative to find answers to a number of questions ... how to ensure the availability of the tigers' natural food without causing any harm to the biodiversity of this unique zone, and so on. The Sundarbans Project Tiger itself was a project for the managing of the unknown, but in its turn has triggered off new, unanticipated unknowns. (p. 87-88)

Nature seems to add to the problem of tiger-man conflicts and the shrinking of mangrove trees, which is a threat to the endangered species. Global warming, cyclones, tidal waves and human development have led to the destruction of vast areas of coastal vegetation every year.

Ghosh makes a case for the native people who were considered a direct threat to the lands and were evicted from their homes to make more space for the tigers. They had to fight against animals, natural disasters as well as authoritative human beings. These people have knowledge which is useful for conservation contrary to the authorities' belief. The text reminds us to respect the environment despite its unpredictable and threatening nature. In spite of the sustained efforts by both the government and non-government organizations to conserve the ecosystem of Sundarbans, climate change combined with global warming and coastal erosion has been slowly destroying our environment. Although the conflict seems to be between man and animal, natural disasters are not discriminatory.

Since Sundarbans is one of the unique environmental resources of India which needs to be protected. Rules and regulations should be made to solve ecological problems. However, Sundarbans is only one such example. It is the moral duty of every individual to conserve the environment and spread awareness for their very survival. In Ghosh's text, Piya and Kanai take an inspiring decision to relocate to the Sundarbans to save the people and the environment. Enlightening young minds through nature writings alerts them and inclines them towards conserving and sustaining planet earth for the future of humanity.

3. CONCLUSION

Escalating environmental issues are hazardous for human existence causing severe climate change. Nature has become hostile towards mankind seeking revenge due to the reckless attitude of human beings, thus shedding its regenerative and life-giving properties. Eco-catastrophism presents an apocalyptic vision as well as warns us to take requisite measures to prevent it. Due to the prevailing environmental degradation, environmentalist and writers all over the world are giving a clarion call to us, to take action and stop the environment's destruction. The global crisis has been caused due to negligence of the ecosystem to fulfil our greedy desires. Amitav Ghosh, a well-known Indian writer presents the social, political, cultural and environmental issues creatively. In his novel *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh depicts the rage of nature and human suppression as well as the voices who affirm to protect nature. The novel portrays the global issue in a local setting. Through his novel, Ghosh spreads awareness among people, to make them realize the importance and need for conserving and sustaining our planet, for ourselves as well as future generations.

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