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Social and ethical convolutions in *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is an intense novel delineating psychological and environmental concerns in an intricate social background. The behaviour and destinies of various characters are interconnected to each other as well as to their immediate and to the larger environment. This paper analyses how Ghosh minutely observes and portrays the workings of the human mind and addresses various dimensions of human as well as human- non human relationships. Ghosh introduces a collage of characters like Piyali Roy, the cetologist whose life though pole apart from that of Fokir, an illiterate boatman and his wife Moyna, an educated, good-looking nurse gets tied up to theirs. Then there are the couple Neelima and Nirmal who do not share a cordial marital relationship. Kanai Dutt is a forty-two year old bachelor sharing experiences with all the other characters in the novel. The episodes are connected with the Indian forests and the conditions, necessity and dangers posed to the co-existence of nature and man has been dealt with in a reflective and introspective manner. The author successfully brings to the surface the natural instincts of love, friendship, envy, suspicion, disbelief and caution that are true to human nature.

Keywords: Human, non-human environment, co-existence, introspection

Introduction

Understanding human relationships is a complicated task specially when it is studied through the lens of psychology. This complex phenomenon is in a constant mode of transformation owing to changes in the circumstances and the environment. Environment whether it be physical or cultural, constituting of values and ethics has a direct impact on human relationships. Sometimes these relationships can be surprisingly coordinating and complementing thereby contributing to emotional and materialistic growth while at other times they can be distressing and depressing leading to one's subversion and even annihilation. Amitav Ghosh presents the progress of various characters in the novel as they move through the maze of conflict between different cultural ethos, between tradition and modernity, between humans and nature, to a point where illusion merges with reality presenting the essence of unity of existence of man and nature. It conveys two points of view about environment, one is if humans can be self-centred to the extent of destroying environment, nature in turn will whip back while on the other hand the realization that humans seek their survival from soil and water. This is the way humans have always lived by agriculture, fishing and using natural resources. A timely balance between the two has to be established for the peaceful existence of both. The claim of co- existence is completely justified.

The novel begins by introducing the protagonist Kanai Dutt, a high caste translator from New Delhi who stands on the crowded platform of Canning, the station closest to Sunderban Islands. There he spots Piyali Roy who attracts his attention because of her unique disposition, facial features, complexion etc. Kanai believes himself to be a connoisseur of females and an adroit judge of people and wonders what brought her here into:

“..a universe unto itself there is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in”. (7)

Kanai is a self-limiting but inquisitive man. His gesture and posture which radiate his internal satisfaction draw Piya's attention towards him. He stared at everyone trying to sort them and analyse them, grouping them into classes. He loved his qualities and felt self-important. Ghosh pictures the characters of Kanai and Piya in such a way that the readers are made to notice how men and women who are strangers to one another notice each other in their daily encounters and assess each other. Kanai is single but has had passing affairs with many women all of which he handled with great ease.

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He was well versed in six languages and knew many dialects. He intentionally takes a seat near Piya in the train and offers her to come to Lusibari along with him for a tour. He was going to Lucy very to see his aunt Nilima as his uncle had died succumbing to a long illness. He was attracted by Piya's otherness while Piya needed someone amongst the crowd who would understand her and help her during her visit. She finds an interpreter in Kanai and is impressed by his educated appearance and when she finds that he understands the meaning of Cetologist, a marine biologist. She knew that he could serve her purpose in Canning. Although initially Kanai wishes to establish an emotional connect with Piya but he fails to do so and the relationship between them continues to be only professional propagated by Piya's requirement of a communicator. Both belong to different places and cultures but Ghosh makes his characters cross the social, national and linguistic borders. Kanai being clear headed does not mind Piya's lack of attention towards him for long and moves on to to lure Kusum, his childhood friend. The post-colonial practicality is laid bare through the interaction of Piya and Kanai. Desire is the initiating force behind every relationship and then it is preserved and strengthened by an emotional bond opening up new and wide arenas. As the climax approaches both Kanai and Piya feel naturally bound to the place where they had arrived just on an expedition.

Piya's eagerness to study marine mammals bring her to Sunderbans. For this she is willing to visit any country and adapt and adjust to multiple surroundings and culture. She happily accepts the difficulties she encounters during the course of her research work, being aware of the vulnerability of scientists. Her visit to India is of a short duration of a fortnight. There she makes a comparative study of the sea and fresh water mammals and charts a project for her future research work. Piya stumbles upon many people during her venture. She had to hire a guide and a boat to go on her expedition into the forest. There behaviour unfortunately turns out to be obscene and exploitative. Mejd the launch owner tries to assault her sexually and take undue advantage of her being a foreigner. She feels an excruciating pain at their unexpected behaviour and thinks:

"Would these people have adopted the same attitude if she had been say, a white European or Japanese? She doubted it. Nor for that matter but they have dared to behave similarly with her Kolkata cousins, who wielded the insignia of their upper middle-class upbringing like laser guided weaponry. They would have known exactly how to deploy those armaments against men like this and they would have called it putting them in their place". (34-35)

She had a feeling of alienness and helplessness. Her education could not rescue her from her existential dilemma. The insensitive people tried to take advantage of her and she had no one to stand beside her. She has had to make these compromises and bear the trauma to fulfil her academic goal. She however feels perplexed and troubled by the selfish attitude of these locals.

In contrast, is her relationship with Fokir, an illiterate fisherman who is married to Moyna and has a son named Tutul. Fokir saves her from drowning. The Hungry Tide surfaces the amazing fact that human interaction need not be verbal every time to be meaningful and compatible. Sometimes non-verbal communication proves to be more meaningful and complete. Amitav puts this theme in novel through the thoughts of Piya after Fokir passed away:

"She remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved- and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words". (393)

Fokir shows concern for Piya and becomes her guide taking her to areas where she could find Oracella fish in large numbers. Though they spoke different languages and did not understand each other's words but they perfectly understood one another's feelings by their gestures and even by silence. As Amitav says:

"But that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously – people who could exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another's heads – for more than surprising: it seemed almost miraculous".(141)

Ghosh highlights that culture or language can never be a barrier if they wish to establish an emotional connect. This communion is inexplicable and deep. Piya becomes so attached to Fokir that when he dies accidentally in a storm, she considers it her moral responsibility to support his family. Their bond is so strong that she begins to consider Sunderbans as her home territory only. It is through this relationship that she understands that the fishermen need to hunt in order to survive and that conservation of nature comes at the cost of the people who directly depend on it for their living. This conflict has been presented as perpetual and unpreventable. Through the dynamics of romantic relationships concerns over ecological balance of the island have been projected.

Moyna and Fokir are two characters that are contradictory to each other. Moyna longs to improve the plight of her life and believes that she can do so by determination and hard work owing to her education. She has an attractive appearance and is ambitious and vivacious. Moyna is a caring and responsible mother who wishes to educate her son so that he may lead a respectable life, unlike them. She even undertakes training at the Trust Hospital and completes the Barefoot Nurse project successfully. Since childhood she had dreamt Ye to cross the limitations and boundaries that her village forced upon her. It was she who brought Fokir to Lusibari in the hope of providing her family a better living. Fokir, however is satisfied to live in company of nature and catch fish and crabs to provide for his family. He shares no high aspirations of Moyna for himself or his family, including his son. He is a loving father and trains his son in running the boat, fishing and catching grabs. He is reserved, submissive and lets others treat him as they like it. He loves his tide country and has a good knowledge of the ways of nature and its creatures. Though there is nothing common between the two but Amitav exploring the inner reverberations of the human mind presents how Moyna feels jealous, as a wife and a woman, to find that Fokir was paying undue attention to Piya, another woman, and asks Kanai to keep an eye on Piya and Fokir. Her apprehensions are brought to the surface and the weaker and insecure part of personality takes over her stronger self. Fokir's spending time with some another person was intolerable for her and she wanted to check her husband.

There is also the character of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess, the belief in whom intimidates everyone into observing certain codes of behaviour and action while they are in the forest region. The villagers invoked her blessings which was

not easy to get except by strict code of action and respect to nature. The message in the backdrop is of keeping human greed and human needs within limits such that it does not cause harm to environment.

Amitav Ghosh, thus, mirrors the actuality of human emotions and reflects in his works his deep knowledge of human relationships and that of humanity and nature. As an anthropologist he is concerned with the inner world of his characters rather than just concentrating on their external experiences. What is compelling is his unique ability to situate his superior knowledge in his fictional explorations.

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