

Consciousness-Raising in Amitav Ghosh's Ecocritical Novel *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Ecocriticism, which studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment, has already permeated several other fields of literary study to create combinations like ecofeminism and ecopostcolonialism. As a novelist, Amitav Ghosh does not deal with ecological concerns with the declared open intent of novelists like Barbara Kingsolver. Most critics of Ghosh consider *The Hungry Tide* a novel about borders, refugees, history, and language. Some, though, have discussed it as an ecopostcolonial novel. The contention of this essay is that the twin narratives of the novel provide enough evidence of its engagement with ecocritical concerns. Piya, who dominates its main narrative, is a professional cetologist and a confirmed environmentalist whose actions and thinking have a bearing on ecological issues. The second narrative, though ostensibly about the refugees of the subaltern variety, is deeply engaged with the politics of human-animal relationships. So both narratives have a significant ecocritical component, which is meant to raise the consciousness of the readers.

Keywords: Ecology, Ecocriticism, Environmentalism, Consciousness-raising, Human-animal Relationships

Ecocriticism became a part of literary studies because academics from all over the world felt the pressure of what Cheryll Glotfelty calls the “global environmental crisis” (xv). During the 1970s, they responded to the crisis from their lonely perches. In the early 1990s, they came together to formally announce ecocriticism as a study “of the relationship between literature and the physical environment ... an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (xviii), based on the “fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (xix). In this approach, literature transcends the confines of the human world, to embrace the “entire ecosphere” (xix).

Glotfelty has mapped the broad contours of ecocritical activity over time to trace its steady evolution from the study of the representations of nature in literature to the study of literary works that deal, openly or not so openly, with a variety of ecological concerns. Lawrence Buell, Ursula Heise, and Karen Thornber provide a variation on this by charting the growth of ecocritical scholarship in two major waves. In the first one, environment is equated with nature and writers use traditional genres of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction to show the intimate bonding of the human and the natural. In the second wave, writers use both old and new genres and aesthetic forms



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to focus on urban locations and industrialization for dealing with the benefits and risks from the environment across race, class, and gender and issues of environmental justice. Because of this, ecocriticism gets connected with postcolonial studies and minority literatures (Buell et al. 419), creating critical categories like eco-feminism and eco-postcolonialism. But in almost all of them, as Glotfelty rightly observes, the main concern is “raising consciousness about the environment” (xxiv), which is invariably involved with aesthetic and ethical concerns.

Almost in a similar vein, Richard Kerridge states that

the ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place ... in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. (5)

Problems related to the environment result from human actions and in turn impact human lives within varied cultural frames. That is why Greg Garrard says that

one “ecocritical” way of reading is to see contributions to environmental debate as examples of rhetoric, in which culture [is] rhetoric, although not in the strict sense understood by the rhetoricians, but as the production, reproduction and transformation of large scale metaphors. (7)

Garrard calls these metaphors tropes, and discusses them under several heads: pollution, pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse, and animals. Thus an ecocritical reading focuses on how writers/novelists use their writings to deal with issues that touch humans in relation to their ecosphere, which includes their relation to the natural world, to land, water, forests, and other species of life, and also comments on the kind of self-consciousness with which they deal with them. Since making choices is a political act, the reading also unveils how this politics has a bearing on the choices the writers exercise in fashioning their writing/fictional style.

Another aspect of ecocritical reading, which has a bearing on consciousness-raising, has been suggested by William Howarth, who stresses the Greek roots of eco-critic – oikos and kritis – to suggest that such a critic is a “house judge,” that is, “a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action” (69).

In this formulation, the critic is projected as an “arbiter of taste,” who judges writings on the basis of their attitude towards environment. Howarth also wants writers who deal with the spoiling of environment to recommend remedial action. This is almost like the position that was taken by the eighteenth-century satirists of England, like John Dryden, who stated that the job of a satirist is not just to expose

the reprehensible aspects of society but also to provide viable alternatives to what is attacked.

Dryden's position has not been accepted by later-day writers, especially of the twentieth century, like John Wyndham, who says that the satirist is not a moralist and is not obligated to provide remedies. Writers can help societies even by drawing the attention of people to rotten aspects of their society. One could say the same about writers who are troubled by environmental degradation. They can improve the awareness of people by drawing their attention to varied aspects of their relationship with their environment, which includes various manifestations of nature and other forms of life, like animals and other species, and may not suggest solutions for what they consider wrong or improper.

As a novelist, Amitav Ghosh is supremely conscious of the role of environment in the making of novels, as is clear from what he writes in one of his essays: "The novel as a form is founded on a myth of parochiality, in the exact sense of a parish – a place named and charted, a definite location" (Ghosh, "The March of the Novel" 294), which constitutes its setting and atmosphere. It comes close to Ian Watt's formulation of the "concept of realistic particularity" (17) as the essential feature of a novel: creating a credible environment for letting the characters come to life. Ghosh, like Watt, uses the concept to contrast the novel with the non-realistic settings of a romance and not to suggest his involvement with the environment in its ecological sense, even though the environment may acquire the proportions of a character in its own right, as in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

I stress this because Ghosh is a little different from writers like Barbara Kingsolver who deal with ecological concerns in their fiction with an openly declared intent. In one of her interviews, she says:

Certainly an appreciation for nature is an important feature of my work, and it arose in part because I grew up running wild in the woods with little adult supervision and I studied biology as a college student and then went to graduate school in biology. I am one of thousands of species that live in this place, and I don't ever forget the other ones are there. Species diversity is a biological fact. I think a lot about the world out there beyond the artifice that human beings have created. (Fisher 27)

Kingsolver's interest is also reflected in her non-fictional writings which combine her interest in nature with social activism. These include *Small Wonder*, in which she writes about rivers and natural beauties "and the strong bond between the human and the animal" (Wagner-Martin 157), *High Tide in Tuscan: Essays from Now or Never*, and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, which she co-authored with Steven Hopp and Camille Kingsolver.

Ghosh has given several interviews and has also published non-fictional writings about several unpleasant aspects of our times, such as hazards of nuclearization,

political crises and disasters, and threats posed by fundamentalism. These are mostly social and political matters, and not perceived as threats to ecology. It is only lately, in 2016, that he published *The Great Derangement*, in which he laments that the writers have failed humankind by ignoring pressing issues related to climate change.

The contention of this essay is that *The Hungry Tide* is a carefully crafted multi-layered novel, characterized by narrative fecundity, powerful characterization, and textural richness. It celebrates its location, in which land and water are enveloped in a pleasing fluidity, the power of the unspoken word, and the place of music and poetry in human lives. Because of this, its critical response has also been quite varied, as is clear from the short discussion that follows. Some critics have commented on its eco-critical aspect, but mostly on the human-animal connection in conjunction with postcolonial concerns.

In her introduction to the volume of essays on the novelist, Chitra Sankaran admits that apart from dealing with “human condition in its simplicity and starkness,” Ghosh’s fiction deals with “compelling questions relating to the preservation of a delicate ecosystem and changing environment on humans and animals, and the responsibilities these generate” (xix). But none of the four essays on *The Hungry Tide* deal wholly with such questions.

Federica Zullo examines the hybrid nature of the novel’s location, in which Ghosh carries out a “valid and profound examination of the complex relations between man and nature, man and community, the nation and its boundaries and fractures” (96). But the essay explores how the place is seen differently by Kanai, Hamilton, and Horen, as varieties of imagined communities. Likewise, Thomas Huttunen states that the novel has themes that “have been central through all the novels by Ghosh,” including the “quest for connections,” which “in this narrative covers the relationship of human beings to nature and animals” (122). But the essay largely examines “the linguistic and epistemological alienation of human from their circumstances and from one another” (122), by using the concepts of ethics and language formulated by Emmanuel Levinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein (123).

Ismail Talib’s essay is about Ghosh’s complicated “binary relationship with English” that goes beyond its negative and positive use in the novel, for it “not only dwells on the limitations of English, but questions the ability of language itself to explain or convey everything, including entities or situations that are profoundly important to human condition, such as mutual understanding and love” (142). Shao-Pin Luo uses Julia Kristeva’s insight to uncover the ramifications of the intricate intertextuality in the novel, “from Rainer Maria Rilke’s poetry, to Nirmal’s testimonies, to Kanai’s translations, to Kusum’s folklore of the ‘Bon Bibi,’ to Piyā’s scientific notebooks, and to Fokir’s mystical chants and songs” (145).

Among the critical studies of Ghosh, Anshuman Mondal’s reads into the novel “the theme of modernity and development ... braided, moreover, with the issues of

scientific knowledge and its relationship to subaltern ways of thinking and being” (17), though he does mention “environmentalism and conservation” and the “ethical dilemmas that result from this” (18). John Hawley critiques the novel along with *In An Antique Land* and *The Glass Palace* as a study of the “ebb and flow of peoples across continents and generations” (83). The tide provides the right kind of symbol for this flow of “history and the uprooting of populations, both of which have come to be seen as ‘Ghosh-ian’ themes” (132). This is stressed also by Piyas Chakrabarti, who remarks that “The landscape is constantly changing, remaking itself like the people who inhabit this land. Fixity is unacceptable and even impossible; flux is the order of the day” (162). In this way, virtually most of the responses to the novel deal with concerns that were outlined by Tabish Khair in his preface to a volume of essays on his fiction: “Travelling,” “history,” and “subaltern studies” (vii).

The *Annual Environment Resource, 2011* comments on *The Hungry Tide* within the frame of postcolonial ecocriticism. A discussion on similar lines figures in the books by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, and Pablo Mukherjee, and in two essays in a volume edited by L Volkman, et al. An essay in the Volkman anthology by Jens Martin Gurr emphasizes the primacy of its narrative form and states that the “texts’s narrative and ecological concerns are interwoven” (70). In fact, “the narrative form is central to its environmental concerns” (70). Because of this, his essay focuses exclusively on its form and unravels its surface and deep structure by using the concepts of emplotment of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur.

The discussion that follows pays attention to the formal aspects of the novel and explores the major environmental issues embedded in it to show the kind of ecocritical consciousness it seeks to promote in the readers and the manner in which Ghosh makes that possible.

The plotline of *The Hungry Tide* revolves round Piyali Roy, nicknamed Piya, researcher from the US on marine mammals and an environmentalist, who comes to the Sundarbans to study the dolphins. Immediately upon arrival, she meets Kanai, who is on his way to Lusibari to see his aunt Nilima because her husband Nirmal has left a sealed packet for him. In her company, he also remembers his previous visit to the place as a schoolboy.

After a scary brush with an unscrupulous boat-driver and a forest guard, Piya makes contact with Fokir, an ordinary, unlettered fisherman, who saves her from falling into the water and helps her in tracing dolphins because of his knowledge of the sea and its creatures. When the trip is over, she goes to Lusibari with him and stays there for some days with Kanai and Nilima. On her next trip to the sea, Kanai joins her and also acts as her interpreter, for Fokir knows no English. This expedition ends disastrously. Kanai returns to Lusibari in another boat. Piya and Fokir are caught in a storm, in which Fokir dies. After leaving India, Piya returns to Lusibari to continue her work in collaboration with Fokir’s wife.

Embedded in this narrative is another account of the rebellion in one part of the Sundarbans, which is made available to Kanai through his uncle's diary. The details of how and why this happened adds a significant postcolonial dimension to the novel in which the lives of humans are entwined with those of tigers, raising issues of human-animal connections, which has been commented upon by the critics already mentioned.

Some critics have studied this part of the narrative from the perspective of marginalized refugees, for the people who were prevented from staying there had come from Bangladesh. Amrita Ghosh calls the Sundarbans heterotopia where the refugee becomes a homo sacer (108). Susmita Roye discusses the novel as a conflict between the elite and the subaltern, "the betrayal of the weak by the strong, the betrayal of the dispossessed by the possessor" (59). Nishi Pulugurtha states that the novel gives voice to the subaltern and deals with issues related to migration and diaspora, and "abiding concerns about habitat, territory, ecology, and conservation" (89).

The two interpenetrating narratives in the novel create the broad canvas of a credible realistic narrative in which incidents and details have a bearing on matters ecological, which are based on Ghosh's meticulous research. In the "Author's Note" to *The Hungry Tide*, he writes how he conceived the tide country by acquiring information about it from different sources. He travelled the entire terrain with Annus Jalais and made use of her research "into the history and culture of the region" (401). He also met many more people, mentioned in the "Note," to get information about the places of the old Hamilton estate. So there is a mix of place names that really exist and those that do not, but are based on reliable information.

Piya's work as a cetologist is largely based on the information Ghosh collected from Professor Helene Marsh. He also accompanied her student Isabel Beasley on a survey expedition to Mekong to know about the Irrawaddy dolphins, which provides a solid substance to Piya's account in the novel.

For the incident that constitutes the embedded narrative, that has remained relatively less known than many other incidents of this kind, Ghosh mentions Ross Mallick's work on the Marichjhapi massacre and the unpublished research of Nilanjana Chatterjee and Annus Jalais. Ghosh's details function like a paratext, which, according to narrative theorists, "inflect our experience of the narrative, sometimes subtly, sometimes deeply" (Abbott 26). The details provided in the paratext stress that the ecological issues, especially about the human-animal relationship, in the novel arise from a lived reality and deserve careful attention. They also build faith in the readers about the ecological lessons that the novel suggests, for they give evidence of what Louise Westling calls an awareness of "scientific literacy" (82), without which the intended lessons would not have carried conviction. The lessons embrace several areas of ecocriticism, which include the right approach for understanding the

natural world and the ethics and politics of human-animal relations from national, postcolonial, and global perspectives.

A considerable part of the narrative deals with Piya's movement on water in the tide country. Her motivation for coming to this part of India is important because this has a bearing on what she finds and learns during the course of her research on Irrawady dolphins. In her conversation with Kanai during her second trip on the boat, she tells him how the declining numbers of the dolphin population in the Mekong area of Cambodia caused her deep distress. The decline was because of the exploitative ways of the humans, which constitute the single most important threat to the environment. The dolphins were destroyed by the American carpet bombing; they were massacred by cadres of the Khmer Rouge by "rifles and explosives" (Ghosh, *Hungry* 305) to convert their fat into oil for running boats and motorcycles; and they were removed from their natural habitat by unscrupulous businessmen for selling them to new aquariums. Because of this, she resolves to study the dolphins in the place of their origin in India, and tells Nilima that, for her, "home is where Orcaella are" (*Hungry* 400).

Piya is a dedicated, thorough-bred professional, whose professionalism is backed by sophisticated technology, a "beltful of equipment hanging at her waist" (*Hungry* 72). In her conversations with other characters, she comes off as a well-read person in her field of work and keen on finding new things. She is also well-intentioned and willing to take risks, as pioneers have always done.

Piya's expedition is adequately contextualized at the very beginning of the novel, and two of its major strands are directed at an improved understanding of the connection between the human and the non-human. The clue is provided in the description of the tide country in the beginning when Kanai reads it in Bengali during his train journey: that it cannot be dissociated from the mythic element that has been woven into it and is confirmed in a number of later scenes. This is important because though Piya is an American-Indian, "neither her father nor her mother had ever thought to tell her about any aspect of her Indian 'heritage' that would have held her interest" (*Hungry* 95). She does not even know the Bengali language.

What Kanai reads from the pages is a legendary account of the river, as "a heavenly braid ... an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain" and then towards the end of its course, the braid gets undone, for "Lord Shiva's hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle" (*Hungry* 6). Since Piya is totally unacquainted with her Indian heritage, she does not know this complex connection. The world around the humans may be studied scientifically but it cannot be totally dissociated from the cultural beliefs that link them with their environment.

The second is a realistic understanding of nature, which is different from the versions of nature in early ecological works, in which nature is tranquil, serene, and

harmonious. Quite contrary to this, the tide country is a place where people are “killed by tigers, snakes, crocodiles” (*Hungry* 6). This has a bearing on the human-animal relationship that is at the center of the embedded narrative in the novel.

A substantial part of the narrative is devoted to Piya's movement over water and is used by the novelist to do a number of things simultaneously. He creates a well-rounded portrait of Piya by building her association with Fokir and providing details about her past. Though she lacks knowledge about the heritage of the country of her birth, she was lucky to hear stories from her mother, “of playing in sunlit gardens, of cruises on the river” (*Hungry* 95), and from her father about the fish, which created her interest in studying dolphins. At the end of the novel she returns to Lusibari to continue with her work in her new home with the Orcaella.

Although Piya is laced with technology, that alone is not sufficient to conduct ecological studies. Right from the beginning, Fokir is the one who spots the dolphins. In fact, his guesses about their movement and the exact timing of their appearance are so accurate that Piya is really “puzzled by it” (*Hungry* 15). This is another lesson for her: that any work in that area cannot be conducted effectively without the support of local people who have a rich experience of the world around them. After Fokir's death, she returns to the place to carry out a project based on all that she has learnt from his knowledge of the watery terrain.

Throughout her movement on water, she also learns many other things, which are meant for the readers as well: that species are modified by their “choice of habitat” (*Hungry* 123), for the dolphins had “found a novel way of adapting to their behaviour to this tidal ecology” (*Hungry* 124). She sees around her “different ecological niches,” or “micro environments” (*Hungry* 125), and finds how “dolphins are sensitive to atmospheric pressure, and that there are keystone species of the entire system,” which constitute a “large proportion of the system's biomass” and that nature is “everything not formed by human intention” (*Hungry* 142). She understands the reasons for the proliferation of a dazzling variety of aquatic forms: that the waters of sea and river do not just intermingle, they interpenetrate.

Piya watches with fascination how the dolphins help fishermen to catch fish and also get a portion from this for their own use, creating what she calls a “remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals” (*Hungry* 169). The experience of watching dolphins turns into a magical one, filling her with unparalleled happiness. In fact, it has another salutary lesson for her: “the idea that to ‘see’ was also to ‘speak’ to others of your kind, where simply to exist was to communicate” (*Hungry* 159). That is how she communicates with Fokir, too, for he does not know the language she speaks.

Another narrative in the novel relates to happenings in Marichjhapi, which have a strong bearing on the relationship between humans and animals, and are intimately connected with the lives of Nilima and Nirmal, who had come from Calcutta to

settle in Lusibari. Details about this part of the tidal country are made available from three sources: from the account written by Nirmal, from the conversations between Nilima and Kanai, and between Kanai and Horen. The context for the happenings is both realistic and mythical.

The realistic part is narrated by Nilima to Kanai, in which the readers learn that thousands of acres of the tidal country were bought by S Daniel from the British Sarkar in the 1930s to set up a colony where people could live in peace and harmony: “Here there would be no Brahmins and Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together” (*Hungry* 51). Tigers and crocodiles, who lived there, fed on them, and they, in turn, killed them. This is strongly reminiscent of the human-animal relationship in a pre-industrial setting, where love for animals and their killing is natural and quite acceptable.

In the myth surrounding the place, Bon Bibi had defeated the demon king Dokkhin Rai who would often take the form of a lion, but allowed him to stay in control of half the place, and thus restore order: the wild half meant for animals, and the sown half meant for humans, thus maintaining a healthy balance in the place. She, in fact, creates a “law of the forest,” in which the “poor and righteous” are rewarded.

In Nirmal’s version, the island was inhabited by humans, but after 1978, it was reserved for tiger conservation. The humans were actually refugees from East Pakistan and later from Bangla Desh, who had been forced to leave their homes, and sent to a forest in Madhya Pradesh, into an environment “that was nothing like they had ever known” (*Hungry* 118). Treated as intruders by the locals, they had been attacked by bows, arrows, and weapons. Since the Left government had come into power in West Bengal, these people had left their oppressive environment and settled on the island.

One of the active members of the rehabilitation program is Kusum, the mother of Fokir. She tells Nirmal that their stay in the Dandkarniya was unnatural because “rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood. Our fathers had once answered Hamilton’s call” (*Hungry* 165). But the government disregards their situation and condemns their actions by calling them “squatters and land-grabbers” (*Hungry* 190). When Nirmal goes there, he is impressed by their organizational skills, their ability to convert the place into an efficient and harmonious location, and feels sad that they are being harassed by the government. He provides a detailed account of how the people there try to fight the government and how they are eventually massacred.

On this issue, Nirmal and Nilima have differences. Nilima believes that the place is the property of the government, and she invokes the environment argument: “What will become of the forest, the environment?” (*Hungry* 213). When Nirmal invokes Daniel in his support, Nilima’s answer is that conditions had changed since then. She warns her husband to keep off from the happenings there. The government will be “vengeful towards everyone who gets mixed up in the business” (*Hungry* 214).

Nirmal contests the government policy and tells Nilima that

the island wasn't forest even before the settlers came. Parts of it were already being used by the government, for plantations and so on. What's been said about the danger to the government is just a sham, in order to evict these people, who have nowhere else to go. (*Hungry* 213-14)

The government authorities invoke provisions of Section 144 of the Forest Preservation Act to send police to warn the settlers. And that is where the argument of man versus the animal sharpens. The settlers say that

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 from all around the world. (*Hungry* 261)

Kusum asks Nirmal

who are these people ... who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? As I thought of these things it seems to me that this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings. (*Hungry* 262)

Earlier, the tigers killed whoever came to settle there, but now, in the name of the tiger, the people living there were being killed, only because the money is coming from some foreign agency. Considering that the whole affair was being put under wraps, Nirmal thinks it necessary to leave an account for posterity. In this human-animal confrontation, the element of politics is quite pervasive. The government wants to get even with people who oppose its policies and use the preservation of animals as an excuse.

Considering that the human population that is being targeted consists of the deprived classes, of poor peasants and landless laborers who have already suffered displacements, one can easily understand its postcolonial dimension, of the exercise of power by the state over the poor and powerless. But considering also that the argument of the government against them in the name of environmental protection is backed by a grant from an international organization, it acquires another dimension as well, of globalized vested interests that work in league with political corruption at the national level. The manner in which the government torments the hapless people by stopping supplies from the outside and then finally destroying them by letting loose goons and discredited elements from the society on them is quite revolting and clearly suggests Ghosh's disapproval of their actions.

Another example of confrontation with a tiger in the narrative is related to Piya, when during her second stint on the river, she finds that a tiger who had moved into a village is being attacked by people. She is loud in her protest and openly says that revenge on an animal is an act of cowardice. She is taken away from the scene,

though she keeps on repeating that it is a horrifying act. She is shocked because Fokir too is involved in this. Kanai has to tell her that Fokir is not a “grass-roots ecologist,” and that he “kills animals for a living” (*Hungry* 297), and that tigers do kill many people, “and she is wrong in feeling the suffering of animals but not of human beings” (*Hungry* 301), which echoes what happens on the island.

This leads to a crucial debate between Piya and Kanai. Kanai blames people like her who advocate for the protection of wildlife without taking into account the human cost, and the Indians who “curry favour with their Western patrons” (*Hungry* 301). When he draws her attention to the tigers in America, she tells him that there is a “difference between preserving a species in captivity and keeping it in its habitat” (*Hungry* 301). Her answer is that the difference is intended by “nature, by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive. Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves” (*Hungry* 301).

Piya has been groomed in America and trained to think about the environment in a way that makes her incapable of understanding the gravity of the argument presented by Kanai, which is also connected with the happenings on the island. Their exchanges reflect a debate that has been going on in the ecocritical camp between the local and the universal, which is similar to the debate within the postcolonial, in which universalism is generally understood as a disguised form of Eurocentrism. This debate is of immense significance and has been discussed in its fullness in an essay by Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughray, in which they plead for a serious consideration of the views of Ramachandra Guha, articulated in his essay in *Environmental Ethics* in which he argues that a globalized view of the environment may not suit the social reality of Third World countries: “Guha’s work foregrounds questions of agency, the limitations of deep ecology, the reinscription of a centre-periphery binary, and the unmarked pervasiveness of American exceptionalist discourse” (72). The thrust of the conversations on this in the novel clearly suggests that all the species deserve respect, but in case of confrontations between the humans and animals, absolutist judgments may not work, for what may be a proper solution in one situation may not work in another situation.

This argument gains strength, when Nilima draws attention to the unusual character of the tigers of the tide country. She tells Kanai that “In other habitats, tigers only attacked human beings in abnormal circumstances: if they happened to be crippled or were otherwise unable to hunt down any other kind of prey. But this was not true of tide country’s tigers; even young and healthy animals were known to attack human beings” (*Hungry* 241). She offers several explanations for this. One of them is linked to ecology, when she says that this propensity in tigers is linked to the “peculiar conditions of the tidal ecology, in which large parts of the forest were subjected to daily submersions” (*Hungry* 241). This washes away “their scent

markings,” and “confused their territorial instincts” (*Hungry* 241). So the tidal tigers are more aggressive than normal tigers, and therefore, have to be treated differently from tigers elsewhere.

Piya is a staunch environmentalist who has great respect for wild animals. When a tiger is attacked by the people, she is shocked, and is not willing to change her stance even when she is told that they too kill humans. In fact, in the village where the tiger had been spotted, he had already killed two people, and that is why Kanai tells her that an ideal argument cannot provide the way out, for it does not take sufficient cognizance of the context of the human-animal confrontation. Huggan and Tiffin attempt to see the incident in its context, as they understand it, and offer an explanation that seems a bit difficult to accept: “while the villagers are certainly taking revenge on a ‘man-eating animal,’ they are also symbolically avenging their persecution at the hands of the Bengali state” (188-89).

The environmental argument for saving the species suits Piya, for it is easy for her to save dolphins. But it is difficult to accept it in the case of tigers, partly because they are a different variety of animals and partly because she does not know them well enough as tidal tigers. Ghosh evinces consciousness of the troubled boundary between the humans and the tigers, which has been made more complicated by national and global politics. In such a scenario, Fokir provides a way out by voicing what can only be called cultural wisdom: “when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die” (*Hungry* 295).

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