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Female Empathy Towards Nature: An Ecofeminist Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Suchismita Sarkar
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Dinabandhu Mahavidyalaya,
West Bengal.

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a testimony of women's deep connection with and empathetic attitude towards nature. The novel demonstrates the multifarious relationship between Man and Nature, and therefore, it is critically analysed from an Eco-critical perspective. In this research paper, I would like to adopt a new approach to interpret the novel from a fresher perspective to unravel a woman's empathetic attitude and invisible but unbreakable bond with mother nature celebrated throughout the ages in the local folktales of deities like Bon Bibi. The novel will be further critically analysed using the concepts of Gaia hypothesis and Eco grief, transformative and Ecofeminism to detangle the knots of the intricate relationship. This paper is an attempt to investigate and establish a link between the ecological and environmental forces and women through a detailed analysis of the legend of the female deity Bon Bibi, who has been depicted as the preserver and protector of the forest and the journey of Piyali Roy, the central character Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide*. An analytical approach will be adapted to assess the importance and value of female empathy towards nature.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Gaia, Eco grief, transformative Feminism, female empathy.

Introduction:

Amitav Ghosh's fourth novel, *The Hungry Tide*, explores multiple facets of human relationships, such as unrequited love, identity, and nostalgia. The original story is often interrupted by reminiscences of a haunting past imbued with traumatic memories of the Marichjhapi massacre. This novel exhibits the power of nature over human lives in the form of

natural disasters and attacks of ferocious wild animals and the struggle of human beings in the face of these adversities to survive natural calamities.

The setting of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is the largest mangrove ecosystem popularly known as the Sundarbans. The tidal area is inundated twice a day as if nature is constantly reconfiguring the entire shape of the landscape. The malevolent forces of nature are lurking out there in the form of predators such as tigers and crocodiles. However, it is also interesting to note that there are also endangered species of Gangetic dolphins who are fortunate enough to secure the empathy of the female protagonist, Piyali Roy. Likewise, all the carnivorous creatures and non-violent creatures coexist in the area under the supervision of the benevolent goddess, Bon Bibi. Bon Bibi is a goddess popular among the inhabitants of the Sundarban region. It is believed that she is the protector and preserver of the forest. Those who come to the forest with a pure heart are always guided and protected by Bon Bibi. If one acts driven by greed and harbours cruel intentions or performs nefarious activities, the goddess brutally punishes one. The local people also believe that the tigers are appointed as the vigilantes of Bon Bibi and often attack these offenders to castigate them on her behalf. The concept of a female deity, who preserves and protects both humans and animals and acts as the benefactor of nature, can be examined from an ecofeminist perspective.

Ecofeminism is a recent trend developed much later to integrate Feminism and political ecology. Ecofeminists use the concept of gender to analyse the relationship between women and the natural world. The term was used for the first time by the French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. In India, the advent of the ecofeminist movement was marked by the Chipko Andolan, which was led mainly by the indigenous women who were affected by the rapid deforestation in the 1970s. The Green Belt Movement in Kenya is another quintessential event of the ecofeminist movement.

More precisely, Ecofeminism is a multidisciplinary intellectual and political movement that culminated during the 1980s. It can be regarded as an amalgamation of Environmental studies and Feminism. This theory examines the way women and nature interact with each other. 'Ecofeminism is a portmanteau-Ecology and Feminism. 'It is an umbrella term that encapsulates 'the philosophical and analytical study of the exploitation of women and nature.'(Patil,87) Noel Sturgeon defines the term as 'a double political intervention, of environmentalism into feminism and feminism into environmentalism'(Sturgeon,1997:169)

Ecofeminism addresses the numerous ways in which sexism, heteronormativity, racism, colonialism and ableism affect each other, and it analyses the technique in which these forces intersect, producing less violent, more just practices. (Adams, Gruen,8) Ecofeminism also finds

expression in the fact that it correlates with the subordination and operation of women and nature. Exploiting and devaluing the earth and women has become a common aspect in the world of patriarchal domination. According to Julia Mason, ecofeminist and Professor of Gender Studies, Ecofeminism can be used to analyse the connection between environmental justice and gender justice. It challenges some of the deeply held assumptions of racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppression.

It seeks the answer to the question- 'Who or what is the root cause of the exploitation of women and nature?' The obvious answer to the question is the patriarchal society. (Patil,176)

In the 1990s, feminists found this concept of Ecofeminism as a solution to the perceived problem in feminist theory, animal advocacy, and environmentalism, namely, a lack of attention to the intersecting structures of power that reinforce the 'othering' of women and animals, and to contribute to the increasing deduction to the environment. Ecofeminism helps us to conceptualise healthier relationships among women, animals and the environment. Simultaneously, this theory justifies the need for universal judgement.

The thriving ecological concern and the gradual development of Feminism in India occurred simultaneously during the late 20th century, offering the feminists kind of identity politics to be appropriated in the emergence of the new political concern.' (Patil,90) The common ground for this identity politics was the fact that men exploited both women and nature. The patriarchal oppression prevalent in the society became the main adversary in this context.

Another novel term related to Ecofeminism is eco-grief. Eco-grief is the loss and despair of witnessing environmental destruction and climate change. It is typically a feminine emotion that can only be experienced by women.

Eco-grief is manifested in the protagonist of *The Hungry Tide*, Piyali Roy, a cetologist and an environmentalist. American by nationality but of Indian origin, Piyali is the novel's central character, an empowered woman with a strong determination. She comes to explore the territory of the Sundarban in search of endangered species of Gangetic dolphins. Even when the area is unknown to her and unfamiliar with the language the inhabitants speak, she ventures through the perilous forests to fulfil her mission, just like goddess Bonbibi, who came into the mangrove area with a sacred mission to fulfil her destiny. She defies societal norms by refusing to wear conventional female attire. Piya represents the global identity with her Hi-Tech GPS device, which contradicts her counterpart Fokir's local identity. Despite being a resident of the urban world, she feels eco-grief whenever she sees the Gangetic dolphin's almost extinct state or when the villagers brutally kill the tiger. No justification was enough to convince her that

the incident was not atrocious. She harbours an empathetic attitude towards Mother Nature. Her endeavours to protect wildlife have been rewarded by nature as she survives the natural disaster while Fokir does.

The author conflates the female narrative of exploitation and environmental crisis to formulate a new discourse in Ecofeminism. The praxis of yoking together the female and environmental problems later transpired into this new theory of Ecofeminism. (Patil,96) Ghosh's novel addressed the issue of the environmental crisis. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* has attempted to disentangle the convoluted web of the relationship among human beings, wild animals and nature. The novel expresses the novelist's anthropocentric attitude. It dismantles issues like ineffectual government policies and conflict between government and environmentalists. Ghosh's novel includes mythological background and the ethnography of animal sacrifice. The novel's storyline barely remains confined within the boundary of literary narrative. Instead, it transcends it to investigate the myriads of ecology and environmental issues.

Ecofeminism initiates ecological movements using women's values, experiences, thoughts and perspectives. Piya realises that, like women, animals are also oppressed, repressed and stressed as they are constantly on the move in their quest for hunting grounds. Piya is the link between the ecological and environmental forces prevalent in the region. Piya's character can be analysed from the perspective of transformative feminism. Although the term incorporates various issues of female experience, the pivotal concept of transformative feminism is that women can help transform the meaning of their connection to nature and culture. It emphasises that Ecofeminism, grounded in women's traditional feminine virtues, maternal roles, and unique relationship to nature, need not be reactionary. It can be revolutionary. By the novel's end, Piya envisions establishing an ecological foundation, proving her commitment to preserving and transforming the environment. In a manner, Piya's association transformed male characters like Fokir and Kanai and changed their perspectives regarding nature. Piya's ability to transform other people's perspectives evinces her expertise in influencing human beings, just like Mother Nature.

Piya's character also believes in the concept of Gaia. Gaia is a notion of a mutual dependency between human beings and the environment. It also proposes that the earth is a living organism and that human beings are part of the living system. Organisms interact with their surroundings to form a synergistic, self-regulating, complex system. This system helps to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life. According to Michael Werner, Ecofeminism rejects the idea of "God the father", replacing the notion with a different model that resonates

with the woman's emotions. It adapts the model that focuses on "immanence rather than transcendence." With its intuitive, holistic, nurturing, and non-dogmatic approaches, Ecofeminism uses rituals, spirituality, and symbolism for analytical purposes. Werner adds, "using a liberal definition of life, one could even say that earth itself is a living creature. "In Greek mythology, Gaia is the goddess who nurtures all life on earth. This mythological goddess's story inspired the Gaia hypothesis, which is also named after her.

The Gaia hypothesis that was introduced by J.E. Lovelock in 1979 states that "the plants, animals and microorganisms control the earth's climate and surface environment in it. This theory was supported by another reputed scientist, Lynn Margulis. Therefore, Piyali is shocked to see the native torturing a trapped tiger. She is taken aback when Fokir also joins the holocaust, as earlier, she believed that Fokir's ideology regarding nature conforms to hers. She refuses to listen to any explanation for the heinous act and covers her ears because no amount of explanation can justify the gruesome murder of an animal. This brings the readers to the most explicit discussion of the novel, which is the issue of conservation and its effects on human lives. Piya warns that

'if we do not respect what was intended not by you or me but by nature, the earth, and the planet that keeps us all alive. If we cross that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves,' our future is doomed.'

A relationship develops between Piya and Fokir because of his love and strange bond with nature. Piya survives an attack from crocodiles. It is also interesting to note that it was Piya, not Fokir, who survived the tumultuous storm, as if nature protected her from the calamity as a reward for being kind and empathetic towards nature.

She ventures through the perilous forests to fulfil her mission, just like the goddess Bon Bibi, who came into the mangrove area with a sacred mission to fulfil her destiny. The local folklore narrates Bon Bibi as the benevolent protector of the forest creatures. Piyali is fascinated by the folktales of Bon Bibi. She forms an instant connection with the concept of the goddess to the point where she almost starts to worship her.

The legend of Bon Bibi was told through a play in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, in the chapter The Glory of Bon Bibi, where Kanai and Kusum were the spectators. It was also mentioned through Kusum's recapitulation of the story of her father's death that his father was mauled and killed by a tiger. Despite Kusum's fervent prayers to the Bon Bibi for sparing the life of her father, the tragedy happened. Finally, Horen spoke these words of consolation and said those who are dear to the goddess are taken too soon by her.

The popular belief about Bon Bibi is that she is the benevolent goddess of the forest. The native people of the mangrove forest also consider every green tree to be the abode of the almighty God. They have a firm conviction that Bon Bibi will protect their family and act for the welfare of her devotees. She is perceived as the guardian spirit of the forest. Honey collectors and wood gatherers always pray to Bon Bibi and beseech her protection before starting their journey. The legend of Bon Bibi includes the story of Donna and Dukkhey. In the aforementioned chapter, the story of 'Dukkhey's Redemption' was mentioned through a performance. Bon Bibi was born in Madina. His father was Ibrahim. She was destined to fulfil a divine mission. Her archenemy is the demon king Dakkhin Ray. After a tremendous fight, Bonbibibi defeated Dakkin Ray. However, as she was very generous, she left the part of the wilderness under the rule of Dakkhin Ray. For herself, she kept a portion of the country of eighteen tides to rule, where she settled order and made it suitable for human settlement. Bon Bibi's area was the haven for human settlement, a territory where the wild and the civilised world interacted and coexisted peacefully. 'All was well until human greed was set to upset this order.' Bon Bibi appears to be the spiritual guardian of the environment. Donna had seven fleets, and Dukkhey was his newly recruited crew member. Donna set out to build a fortune by collecting honey and wax from the forest. Dukkhey belonged to a destitute family. He and his mother were living in abject poverty after his father died. Dukkhey's mother was reluctant to let him go on the voyage as he was her only son. However, Dukkhey was determined to end this misery of poverty. He decided to take this job. Therefore, before he embarks on the journey, his fearful mother advises him to call upon Bon Bibi whenever he finds himself in danger. After a long journey, they landed on the territory of Dakkhin Ray. The demon king created illusions to mislead them in the wrong direction. At night, he entered Donna's dream and offered him a deal, the boy Dukkhey, in exchange for the forest's treasures. Donna agreed to sacrifice the boy to secure his prosperous future. He sent Dukkhey ashore to fetch some firewood so that, in the meantime, they all could leave with the seven fleets full of wax and honey. When Dukkhey returned, he found that the ships were gone. A tiger was stalking him, and he was none other than the demon king Dakkin Ray. Being terrified, Dukkhey uttered a prayer, beseeching Bon Bibi's assistance. Bon Bibi protected the boy, nursed him back to health and returned him to his mother. She also gave them wax and honey so they no longer live in poverty. Through this story, the author makes the reader aware of Bon Bibi's law, which dictates that the rich and greedy will be punished while the poor and the righteous will be rewarded.

Conclusion:

Bon Bibi and Piyali Roy are female characters (one mythological, another human) in the novel who display certain similarities in their approach towards nature. Both of them are zealous when it comes to protecting and preserving wildlife. Similarly, they experience eco-grief after witnessing environmental degradation. The spirit of Gaia runs through the veins of the two characters who propound the moral lesson of maintaining balance and harmony in nature, being empathetic towards and understanding the ways of nature, to develop an indestructible bond with nature.

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