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**ECO-FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE AND MYTH IN AMITABH GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE***

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**Abstract**

*Amitav Ghosh's novel 'The Hungry Tide' intricately weaves together themes of ecology, feminism, and myth, offering a rich tapestry of narrative that underscores the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. This paper examines the novel from an eco-feminist lens, exploring how Ghosh's portrayal of female protagonists and mythological elements engage with environmental issues and how does it reflect gender dynamics in the society. The novel depicts the journey of a biologist and a translator who navigate a vast mangrove forest in the Bay of Bengal, encountering the complexities of human-nature interactions. Through Protagonist's perspective, the narrative centers on the ecological significance of the forest and the threats it*

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*faces from climate change and human exploitation. Ghosh subtly interweaves mythological narratives with ecological relations highlighting the indigenous beliefs and cultural heritage. From an eco-feminist perspective, "The Hungry Tide" portrays women as agents of environmental representation, deeply attuned to the rhythms of nature and the impacts of human activities on their ecosystems. Ghosh's incorporation of myth serves to emphasize the interdependent relationship between humans and nature, offering a narrative framework. This paper will analyze 'The Hungry Tide' as an eco-feminist discourse, advocating for environmental justice and gender equality through nuanced narratives that blend ecological realism with mythological imagination. Ghosh's novel invites readers to re-evaluate their relationship with nature and recognize the role and importance of a marginalized gender (Women) in preserving nature, ultimately inspiring a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of all life forms on Earth.*

**Key Words:** Amitav Ghosh, The Hungry Tide, Eco-Feminism, Myth, Human, Nature, Gender dynamics

**Introduction:**

We often refer nature as Mother Nature and so is woman. Nature and woman are identical in so many aspects that it would be no exaggeration to name woman as nature own feminine counterparts. Both are inevitable for the sustenance of life and if once existence is threatened, then the other raises the alarm for the protection of other. This mutual understanding of coexistence has given an extra edge of speculation and observation in woman to think for the preservation of nature. Unlike man, she does not believe in plundering and depleting nature because she too has been witnessing her own exploitation in the patriarchal social framework since ages. Being productive woman always needs protection and so is required by nature. This chord of relationship creates in women the prudence and sensitivity to protect, preserve and

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promote nature. Around the globe this consciousness of women to save nature forest and greenery demonstrated in the history through environmental protection movements where female took the lead role and became vocal for protecting the Mother Nature. Susan Griffin's work 'Woman and nature the roaring Inside Her' explores the perceived connection between women and nature, suggesting that women have an intrinsic relationship with the natural world. In contrast, the man described in the text sees himself as separate from this world, "He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That the dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are clear to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature." (1).

#### **Eco-Feminist Perspective and Myth in Hungry Tide:**

For the sustenance of life, the role played by nature cannot be overlooked. She not only provides and preserves our existence but at times alarms us by becoming furious and creating calamities. Again, like a mother she heals our wounds and produces many possibilities in order to flourish us. This concern of nature for human beings seems to echo with the female consciousness, who is likewise considerate for her family, society and surroundings. This concern and consciousness of female for her environment and its entities has been termed as Eco-Feminism by the theorists. This term was coined and used in 1974 by the French writer Francoise d' Eaubonne as a call to women to save the planet. The concept has been further developed by Ynestra King at the Institute for social Ecology in Vermont and it becomes a full-fledged movement in 1980 with the Amherst Conference 'Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the Eighties':

Ecofeminism analyses the relationship between the patriarchal oppression of women and the human domination of non- human nature. In this respect, Ecofeminism draws upon theoretical ideas developed by cultural feminists who use a mode of analysis based upon the identification of binary thought systems

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that is indebted to poststructuralist methodology. These systems privilege one side of the binaries they construct; for instance, writing over speech, mind over body, civilization over nature, human over animal, masculine over feminine. Consequently, Ecofeminism focuses upon all the practices of domination within culture: racism, sexism, class oppression, and the exploitation of nature. (Madsen 122-23)

Therefore, the role of gender in preserving and protecting our environment becomes the main focus of the Eco feminist criticism, as they feel that there has been a bond of kinship between nature and woman. Like nature, woman also thinks and works hard to maintain a balance between her family, society and surroundings. That is why she is more aware of her responsibilities towards the conservation of nature and natural resources as Rashmi Gaur says, “Eco- feminism is also a relatively fresh approach to develop a holistic perspective towards the relationship between gender and ecology, also viewing the role of gender in the context of environmental concerns and economic development” (85).

The male domination in the society and his hold over both the woman and nature eventually established a bond between the two as both have been exploited and plundered under such domination. That is why according to the Eastern as well as the Western thought both are linked together and the mutual understanding between the two has been reinforced due to the process of inferiorization initiated by the man. Richard Twine explains, “Given women’s status this both aided and eroticized the domination of nature for ‘men of science’. Interwoven with this discourse has been the inferiorisation of women via the discourse of ‘women as closer to nature’ and thus ‘further away’ from a dualistically opposed and politically deployed concept of ‘reason’ (Twine net).

Eco feminists, with the belief that woman being a sufferer under the patriarchal hold is in a position to see the dire consequences of the depletion of nature, consider her significant for

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nature's conservation and preservation. In this way with their prime concern for environment, they also emphasize the role of gender in this regard. Amitav Ghosh, one of the leading writers of the present times, talks about such issues in his novel *The Hungry Tide*. Nature has been manifested in the rough terrains of Sunderbans, surrounded by the omnipotent sea, acting both as a life-giver and a life-taker. Therefore, it is also known by the name 'the tide country'. After tolerating a lot nature too retaliates in the same manner. Patriarchy always tries to use and control the woman and nature for its own sake, "The philosophical legitimization of masculine dominance over the feminine with the economic and cultural exploitation of the natural world and the categories of being associated with nature: non-white peoples, women and non-human entities." (Madsen 129) Moreover, there has been a constant threat to life and existence as the sea or the tide at time becomes hungry, wild and rough ready to swallow every bit. "In the South-Asian geography, and in the Indian Subcontinent Sunderban has its peculiar topography and extraordinary ecological feature. The novel presents the story of the people of this tide country, bhatir desh, the archipelago, the mostly forgotten land in the heart of Bengal surrounded by hungry tides..." (Nayak 89).

The novel deals with Piyali Roy, an Indian-American marine biologist and a cytologist, who is in search for rare Gangetic dolphins *Orcaella brevirostris*, has come to Sunderbans with this mission. Piya meets Fokir, who despite being an illiterate act as her guide and provides her ample information about the topography of the Sunderbans, the life of its inhabitants and the significant information regarding Gangetic dolphins and the Irrawaddy dolphins, "the true inhabitants of Asia's rivers" (THT 231). Piya gathers important information about these hospitable creatures and their "spitting behaviour" (136), that results in the creation of fountains in the air and that helps them in defending their newly born one's from their enemies. The sound that is created by the dolphins while they are migrating into the "subterranean currents of life" (114) is enjoyed by Piya. She gets fascinated by the fact that during the bhata (ebb), *Orcaella* in

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their mud caked body swim like pigs and make themselves busy in “picking the fish from the river bed” (167). In this way Piya enjoys watching the flora and fauna, ecology of both land and aquatic life and understanding of the human life of the tide country with the unique “symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals” (169). Apart from her study, she is also concerned about the exploitation and depletion of nature. When Kanai asks her, “Do you think there are fewer dolphins than used to be?” (226) Piya’s serious reply is “when marine mammals begin to disappear from an established habitat it means something has gone very very wrong” (266-67). This is the result of men’s interference with the nature. The natural habitat of Mekong Orcaella is destroyed due to men’s cruelty and selfish attitude as “Mekong Orcaella had shared Cambodia’s misfortune in 1970s during America’s indiscriminate carpet bombing and massacre by Khemer Rouge Cadres in order to use dolphin oil to supplement their dwindling supply of petroleum” (Nayak 95). Hence, the character of Piya has been used by Ghosh to propagate the canon of Ecofeminism. Man’s too much interference with nature and her ways, his irrational and insensitive exploitation of her natural resources is destroying our ecological balance and due to this sooner or later we have to face its dire consequences. Ecofeminism also emphasizes “to balance the use of Earth’s resources and a respect for the Earth’s needs” (Gaur 89). Piya’s decision of starting a dolphin project at the Sunderbans that deals with the establishment of a data bank for the study of dolphins is a token of her gratitude for Fokir, who laid down his life to save her during a diabolical cyclone; when they were caught in the forest of Gorjontola and gesture of belief in Nilima Bose’s efforts for the conservation of nature. The relationship between women and nature is intact in many ways and it is reflected the way both act and react in their surroundings. This shows how women and nature are associated in almost every society. Val Plumwood, an ecofeminist philosopher in her *‘Feminism and Mastery of Nature’* presents the interconnectedness between women and nature, “Nature, as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the

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primitive or uncivilized, the nonhuman world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness. In other words, nature includes everything that reason excludes” (19-20).

Nilima Bose is another ecofeminist voice of the novel, who is famous as Mashi ma. She and her husband Nirmal are the social activists. After completing his tenure as a teacher, Nirmal works as social worker and Nilima organizes women’s union that works for women’s cause. She is the prominent figure, who not only preaches but also practically works for the conservation and preservation of the natural resources of the Sunderbans. The Badeban Trust has been managed by her keeping in view the proper development of land and its people. Her selfless dedication for the betterment of the people of this area and especially her concern for women in the form of the support system for them are worth noticing. She truly stands for the ecofeminist-principles and practically propagates them. She understands the importance of balanced utilization and rational use of natural resources. Like nature she too has to bear brutal treatment at the hands of patriarchy, “Patriarchy society is based on structuring unequal relations between man and woman, overlooking that subjugation necessarily causes fear and unease. Hegemonic muscular norms have defined relations of power in which women are not given any agentic role, - rather they are always primarily considered as sex objects” (Gaur 88).

Nelima left Kolkata and settled down in Lusibari for Nirmal’s sake as in Kolkata he had been in police detention for his ideological inclinations and this has made him restless. For Nirmal’s sake Nilima decided to give up her home, family, relatives and near and dear ones. She had opted for a totally strange and unknown place Lusibari to settle down and to start a new life here with Nirmal. As the time went by Lusibari and her inhabitants become her own family, kith and kin, Nirmal has always been neutral regarding her efforts. Moreover, on her stand at the Morichjhapi incident, she has been loathed at by him and he calls her an opportunist. Hearing this she loses her temper, “You live in a dream world – a haze of poetry and fuzzy ideas about revolution. To

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build something is not the same as dreaming of it: building is always a matter of well- chosen compromises....” (214). Kusum is another absent/silent but important character of the novel, who becomes the victim of male’s lust. Her father’s death turned the direction of her life as her mother has been forcibly thrown into prostitution and she too has become the trafficker’s target. Though she has been lucky enough to be saved by Horen, who being her well-wisher, send her to Lusibari. Her brief association with Mashima gives her a new insight regarding her life and her surroundings. Meanwhile flesh traffickers are waiting for the opportunity as they still have an eye on her. Again with the help of Horen she flees and settles down at Dhanbad. But she always longs for her home and her tide country, and after her husband’s death her restlessness grows more. Her meeting with the Bangladeshi refugees motivates her, and she along with her son Fokir joins them in their march towards the Morichjhapi Island. The feeling of belonging to the same fraternity makes her realize, “These were my people, how could I stand apart? We shared the same tongue, we were joined in our bones; the dreams they had dreamt were no different from my own. They too had hankered for our tide country mud; they too had longed to watch the tide rise to full flood” (THD 165). Moreover, when the government does not support and favour their settlement at Morichjhapi and is against them, Kusum joins the Morichjhapi rising. This Morichjhapi incident can be taken as a protest of nature and its entities against man-made and government system. Above all Kusum’s exploitation bears a close connection with the exploitation of the nature. Like nature, her life too has been dictated by the patriarchy. Ecofeminism does urgently put into question the relation of women and nature; on the one hand contesting the identification that makes women as passive and powerless as the exploited natural world, but on the other hand, promoting a positive identification of nature with the reproductive capacity of women who share a material commitment to the survival of the planet through the children they bear (Madsen 125). Kusum’s son Fokir Mondol, is a true child of nature, who like her mother shares a bond of kinship with sea and its creatures. Despite being an illiterate, his



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understanding of the topography proves instrumental in Piya's study of Marine mammals. She feels, "I've worked with many experienced fishermen before but I've never met anyone with such an incredible instinct: it's as if he can see right into the river's heart" (THD 267).

Fokir's educated wife Moyna is another character of the novel who is aware of nature's significance for their existence. She wants her son to be educated so that he would be able to create a harmonious existence with the nature rather than exploiting it. Advancement and technology are also posing threat for our ecology as technically advanced equipments for catching fish and mammals are destroying sea creatures. Moyna tells Kanai, "Mashima says that in fifteen years the fish will all be gone.... These new nylon nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well. Mashima wanted to get the nets banned, but it was impossible" (134). Technology has thus raised men's capacity and desire to control women and nature and make them dance according to their tune. "The desire to control and to appropriate nature – both the human female reproductive capacity and the reproductive power of non-human nature-through technology is a powerful instance of the connection between the oppression of women and of nature" (Madsen 125). In the patriarchal set up emphasis has been made on taming nature and women rather than on creating a harmonious co-ordination with them. In order to satisfy their lust, they are being frequently used and misused. Kanai, who is representative of this typical patriarchal structuring, shows this trait, when he is trying to seduce Piya and Moyna. Piya has to even bear the lecherous behaviour and crude attitude of her guide Mej-da and the guard. In this way men treat both women and nature as objects meant for their satisfaction.

Even the myth of Bon Bibi has been based on the ideology of feminine concern for nature and its manifestations. This myth treats nature as something divine and incorporates her healing powers for assisting human life that eventually helps in creating reverence for her and her bounties. In this way living amidst the harsh topography and hardships of life, the popular beliefs, myths, and folk tales of this region play a crucial role in the life of the inhabitants of this place as they

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charge them with the inner strength to fight against the odds. The myth of Bon Bibi has been of great importance in the life of the people of this country. The myth says, “Bon Bibi...decided that one half of the tide country would remain a wilderness; this part of the forest she left to Dokkhin Rai and his demon hordes. The rest she claimed for herself and her rule this once-forested domain was soon made safe for human settlement...the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order” (103)

In *The Hungry Tide*, nature and myth are the two powerful motives used by Amitabh Ghosh to describe women’s inner conflict, their compatibility, compassion reactions, and revolt in their personal as well as social space. It is his way of exploring of depicting feminism with regard to nature. The myth of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongali talks about the age-old concepts of coordination between human and natural entities. Bon Bibi is like ‘Van Devi’, the protector and defender of indigenous flora and fauna. Like mother- nature she thinks for their wellbeing and prosperity. She stands for goodness and virtue and being the dispenser of divine justice, she also punishes the guilty. “The settlers in their proximity to the forest believe in the presiding deities like Bon Bibi and Shah Jongali to save them from mishaps” (Nayak 96). There is another key figure in this myth, that is, Dokkhin Roy, who being an autocrat exploits and plunders the local inhabitants and in this way is the representation of bad aspect of life; and above all male hegemony. There has been a distribution of the territories between Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Roy and they are the whole sole authority of their territories. In this way the eternal struggle between good and bad has been balanced. For them, “Bon Bibi rules the jungle, that the tiger, crocodiles and other animals do, her bidding (102). Thus, Bon Bibi is their saviour, who protects them when they by mistake enter in Dokkhin Rai’s territory. “This myth negotiates wilderness and civilization....and creates their own slogan parallel to the governmental hue and cry of forest preservation or reservation. Here the myth created by them, becomes a script of responsibility for the inhabitants” (Konar 136).

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**Conclusion:**

Hence, it seems that for the preservation and conservation of our nature, the awareness and inner zeal in the heart and soul of the masses can only be achieved by putting faith in the women folks as they are the custodians of both the culture and nature. This paper has analyzed how nature and women have similarities, and how the concept of equilibrium has been established by them naturally to face the challenges and survive. Whether it is human cruelty over nature and patriarchal domination of women, they both retained their identities and preserved each other. The women and myth in and patriarchy have to give up their conventional role and assist their female counterparts by making them more vocal and empowered for preaching and practicing the canon, “Conservation should be a way of life, and not a burden” (397). This is the most remarkable line of the novel suggesting that ecofeminism stands for the wider approach of looking at nature and its entities.

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