

Posthumanist Critique of Anthropocentrism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and A. K. Ramanujan's "A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale"

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Abstract

Posthumanism has emerged as a crucial conceptual framework in the field of literature. While the future remains uncertain, humanity's innate curiosity about its relationship with nature, animals and non-living entities has always been a core topic of discussion. The ethical principles put forth by posthumanism are significant in today's rapidly evolving world, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings, whether or not people acknowledge this bond. *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh uses the theory of posthumanism to critique anthropocentrism and explores ecological criticism by giving power to the marginalized category of non-humans. "A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale" by A. K. Ramanuja is a short story that smoothly blends folktale with the concept of identity and anthropomorphic transformation. The story establishes the link between femininity and ecology. This paper aims to explore the concepts of posthumanism, anthropocentrism and ecological criticism, examining how these ideas manifest in contemporary works of Indian English Literature.

Keywords: Posthumanism, anthropocentrism, environment, feminism, ecology

INTRODUCTION

Indian English Literature has evolved consistently, adapting to the currents of future while voicing out the contemporary issues. The philosophy of Posthumanism has significantly permeated literary landscape to address the social, political, technological and environmental concerns. With the concept of interconnectedness at its heart, the theory challenges the position of man at the centre. Posthumanism explores the co-evolution of technology, human and non-humans to critique anthropocentric worldview. Indian English Literature, being dynamic in nature, has facilitated the creation of narratives that explore the reciprocal relationship amongst the nature and humans. The superior hierarchy of the man is dismantled to examine the ecological and feminine discourses. The cycle of nature, the embeddedness of the universe, the formation of identity, the question of belongingness of non-humans on the planet and the contribution of technology to both progress and destruction are few of the major concerns of the posthuman fiction.

There are a few writers who take delight in stretching human boundaries and exploring beyond the world

of man and Amitav Ghosh is one of the best of them. From rapid progress of man in the field of technology to unpredictability and autonomy of nature, he discusses it all. He explores the dimensions of nature that remain unconquered by human intelligence. In 2004, he published *The Hungry Tide* which is set in Sundarbans and seems to dismantle the hegemony of human over environmental forces. Plants have been considered to be at very margin and portraying them as capable of any sort of violence is no less than a rebellion, The novel is Posthumanist in its nature since it tackles the relationship between human-environment relationship and transforms the passive, delicate nature into its mighty form.

When one provides nature a heavenly description, it is indicative of its all-encompassing and powerful nature. The narrator further adds: “A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles” (Ghosh 14). Sundarbans are compared to a universe in itself that has the power to both nourish or destroy its inhabitants. The vanity and privilege of humans can be seen through the actions of government towards Morichjapi refugees. Deep Ecology urges the essential need to accept that humanity is interlocked with environment and involves shift from an anthropocentric to biocentric position. With Sundarbans of West Bengal as its location, the novel too forms an eco-critical approach. The story revolves around the two visitors to Sundarbans Community and other minor characters whose lives are intertwined together in the web of ecology. Piya Roy who is an Indian American researcher travelling to the Sundarbans on the quest of endangered marine species, could be considered the protagonist. Fokir, a resident, guides her and acts as her translator during her time in that place. There are plenty of people they meet during their travel and the major emphasis is on cultural synergy, concept of identity in relation to migration and environment. Since life is a circle, the novel also portrays its pattern through the mention of tides that rise and fall. The images, the symbols, the concerns build the Posthumanist theme of eco-criticism and harmony of the universe.

“No one – in the beginning. Remember, at that time there was nothing but forest here. There were no people, no embankments, no fields. Just kadaar bada, mud and mangrove. At high tide most of the land vanished under water. And everywhere you looked there were predators- tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards.” (Ghosh 49)

The writer presents the conflict between the invader kind of nature of man and the delicate flora and fauna who sustain the injuries until they can't. The exploitation of their lands, the invasion of their space, the constant struggle of aquatic life and the consequences faced by human- all form the tension of the novel. Kanai Dutt undertakes a journey; the physical one where he commutes from Delhi to Lusibari to his aunt to collect the package left by his late uncle and the metaphysical one when he learns about his uncle's last days of life and the eviction of Kusum and Fokir from Morichjapi island. Two perspectives are unraveled before the readers: one of Nirmal which took place twenty-eight years ago and one that is of present through Piya's lens. Sunderbans are placed at the center where characters come for self-revelation. Deterioration of nature to cater to the needs of humans has been a normal. In Lusibari, people make their habitats by cutting the trees. Lusibari like any other place is deprived of its rich beauty over a course of years. Kanai describes his second visit as “It was clear at a glance that the area around the compound was among the most heavily trafficked in the whole island. Clusters of huts, houses, stalls, sweetshops and the like had grown up around the compound” (38).

The novel weaves both side of the story- anthropocentrism and speciesism along with the savagery of animals. It is against the hegemonic attitude of humans. The use of diesel motorboats by the forest officials for tourism is one of the many acts that affect aquatic life. Ghosh tries to put light on the insignificance of lives of plants and animals, for they are lower in the man-made hierarchy. During Piya's journey, she

finds a dead calf of Irrawaddy dolphin which was accidentally killed by a motorboat which depicts the dishonour of environment. Once dolphins were revered as the messenger of Bon Bibi but the malpractices of humans have caused their extinction. Piya has to wonder about their rare sights.

“That these waters had once contained a large number of dolphins was known beyond a doubt. Several nineteenth-century zoologists had testified to it. The ‘discoverer’ of the Gangetic dolphin, William Roxburgh, had said explicitly that the freshwater dolphins of the Ganges delighted in the ‘labyrinth of rivers, and creeks to the South and South-East of Calcutta’. This was exactly where she was and yet, after hours of careful surveillance she had still to spot her first dolphin.” (Ghosh 42).

The Posthumanist nature of novel is brought to surface through depiction of commodification of non-humans. The novel by Ghosh is an account of 1979 incident of Morichjapi where refugees of Bangladesh were in constant conflict with the government. The strife affected the flora and fauna of the place so much that the government had to intervene to save the resources, endangered species i.e. Royal Bengal Tiger and the Gangetics Dolphins. The novel also mentions the incident with the newspapers read by Nirmal to Kanai. The geography of Sundarbans with its excellent beauty and mysteriousness itself becomes a metaphor- a metaphor that is destroyed by dislocations and unawareness. Critical Plant Studies investigates the relationship between plants and humans and the cultural significance of the plants. The cultural context of Bon Bibi also serves an important myth in the narrative. The dilemma that emerges in the novel is of preservation of humans or nature because exploitation by man leads to dangerous consequences that nature brings. The work promotes the idea of growing endlessly and living mutually with the environment instead of working against it.

‘Posthuman feminism’ has transcended the limitations and constraints of the term ‘feminism’. It has acted as a turning point in the discourses related to women. Rosi Braidotti puts it rightly, “The tension between these poles– extinction and evolutionary leap, marginalization and enhancement– frames the political economy of posthuman times” (Braidotti 105). “A Flowering Tree” is a short- story by Ramanujan that precisely yet prominently gives voice to the passive participants of the universe. It brings together Kannada mythical story to give voice and agency to both a woman and a tree. The transformation of a woman into a tree highlights the important relationship that ecology and feminine share. Both have been deprived and exploited in the name of progress and evolution.

Ramanujan with his blissful poetic tone takes two delicate themes of womanhood and environment to talk about their identity and vulnerability. Even his poems are a testament of his loyal reverence towards nature and femininity. Molly Daniels commented on the nature of Ramanujan’s poems, “A.K. Ramanujan prayed for double vision and found it in the interconnectedness of vegetable and mineral, man and animal.... above all, he found life in art...and art in life” (Daniels 1995). The anthropomorphic transformation of the young girl is not just for fantasy but it is to critique the superiority of man above all species. It is a metaphor for ever-changing, fluid identity of the self. The complex relationship that one shares with the environment invites both flourishing and destruction. The voluntary decision of turning oneself into a non-human is born out of necessity to feed her impoverished family. The act metaphorizes the selfless, sacrificial and devotional nature of nature and woman but is also indicative of the exploitation of woman’s body and consent. Commodification of body leads to benefit of others but at the cost of one’s dignity. The tree itself has life and is a symbol of sustenance and nurture. She owns her feminine aspect by nurturing others but it is not her true identity. This distinct identity is a sharp blow on anthropocentric worldview. The physical harm done by girl’s sister-in-law seems irreversible and she becomes half-human and half-tree. She turns into a “thing” and her in-betweenness is indicative of her Posthumanist identity.

The tree and the girl become “companion species” (Haraway 2003). The girl’s gradual restoration is a pivotal point to understand the resilience of the spirit that is one with the universe. The disfigurement was a result of crossing the boundaries but the restoration symbolizes return to the self.

A folktale is a repository of culture and fantasy but it has the power to raise profound questions about the existence of humans and their relationship with the surroundings. Manmade hierarchies are often dismantled in such a narrative. “The Flowering Tree” leads to disintegration of the ontological boundaries and exploration of harmonious co-evolution of man with non-human realm. The blurring of real and metaphorical instances is of paramount importance such as the girl turning into a tree, for it allows one to expand their thoughts and question the very nature of the self.

Since it is a posthuman world, humans are no longer at the apex of traditional hierarchical system. Posthumanism, a trailblazing field, has permeated Indian English Literature where the novelist, poets and playwrights have addressed the concept of “co-becoming” and o-evolution” by challenging Anthropocentrism and highlighting interconnectedness of all beings to discuss the potential for an unified world.

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