



Environmental and Rural Consciousness in the Fiction of Mulk Raj Anand and Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the environmental and rural awareness in the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand and Amitav Ghosh. Both of them are significant personalities in the Indian English literature. Almost a century separates them, but they are united in their keen interest in ecology and country life. The theoretical framework of the paper is ecocriticism, postcolonial ecology and green studies. In his novels *Coolie* (1936) and *The Village* (1939) Anand demonstrates how the rural setting was destroyed by colonialism and capitalism. His fiction is a treatment of the land as a social and ecological space. Both novels *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019) by Ghosh discuss the possibility of climate change, loss of biodiversity, and displacement of species and people in the Sundarbans delta. The article contends that Anand puts ecological devastation in the context of a Marxist analysis of the issue of classes and colonialism. Ghosh, in his turn, embraces more ecocentric vision. His writings foresee the existing discussions on the Anthropocene and climate justice. Both authors introduce the Indian landscape as an object rather than a subject, which is the political arena. Its metamorphosis is a sign of more profound crises of modernity, sovereignty, and survival.

Keywords: ecocriticism, ecological awareness, rural India, Mulk Raj Anand, Amitav Ghosh, postcolonial ecology, Sundarbans, Anthropocene, colonial exploitation, green studies.

1. Introduction

Environment and literature have become two subjects which are closely interdependent in

postcolonial research. The collective and damaging effects of colonialism, industrial capitalism, and climate change are the

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destruction of vulnerable landscapes and communities. This conflict between the local ecology and the global modernity has been long discussed in the Indian English fiction. Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) and Amitav Ghosh (born 1956) are two writers who have best imagined the Indian environment. They are symbolic of various historical events yet they have a common problem: the natural world and its rural population. One of the earliest large Indian novelists writing in English whose work is marked by a long-term sympathetic feeling with the rural poor. He was inspired by Marxism, Gandhian economics and agrarian environment of Punjab. The devastation of the rural ecology in colonial capitalism is recorded in his novels. His main characters are not just socially disfavoured. They have been ecologically displaced. They are deprived of the land that makes them and they are in the logic of industrial production.

Amitav Ghosh is not only writing on a different time scale of post- Independence, globalisation, and the emergence of ecological crisis of a new key political issue. Where Anand is not so much environmentally minded as Ghosh is, his is explicit and informed in theory. His fiction, in particular *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019) put the Indian environment at the crossroads of the biodiversity, climate change, indigenous knowledge, and conservation politics. His non-fiction book, *The Great Derangement* (2016), continues his ecological thought even more. This paper will make a comparison between the environmental and rural awareness as presented by the fiction of both authors. It claims that they are two different yet related stages of Indian ecoliterary imagination. The paper is organised thematically. It touches upon: how landscape and ecology are represented; the politics of rural

dispossession; the relationship between human beings and nature; and the literary practices in the expression of environmental consciousness. The theoretical approach is based on the ecocriticism, postcolonial ecology, and studies of the Anthropocene.

2. Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism is also characterized by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) as the study of the relationship between the literature and the physical environment (p. xviii). It has expanded its initial orientation on American nature writing to a broad and theoretically enriching discipline. Now it covers environmental justice, postcolonial ecology and climate change. There are a number of theoretical strands, which are particularly pertinent to the present paper. The idea of slow violence was presented by Rob Nixon (2011) in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. He defines it as a kind of violence which is carried out slowly and behind the scenes, a violence of slow destruction that is diffused throughout time and space (p. 2). This concept can be directly applied to Anand and Ghosh. All the colonial land policies, industrial pollution, and climate changes are all channeled as a form of slow violence. They do the greatest injury to the rural poor those people the two writers represent. The study of the relationship between colonial history and ecological crisis is the focus of the postcolonial ecocriticism. In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, Huggan and Tiffin (2010) argue that colonialism was not necessarily a social and economic project. It was ecological as well. It transformed the geographic features, influenced the distribution of species and severed the connection between the people and their natural habitats. Such paradigm can be directly applied to the colonial-era fiction in works by Anand. In the case of the work of Ghosh, the Anthropocene

can be regarded as an important theoretical framework. This can be explained by the suggested geological epoch that was characterized by the anthropogenic interference with the Earth systems. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway (2016) suggests the idea of a so-called Chthulucene, to highlight the interwoven life of humans and non-humans. This thought rings so much with the fiction of Ghosh. In *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, Jason Moore (2015) believes that the problem of the environmental crisis cannot be separated from the logic of capital. This links the modern issues that Ghosh has raised to that of Anand who wrote about an earlier Marxist attack.

The environmental history of India, by Ramachandra Guha, (2000) offers the much-needed background. In *The Unquiet Woods*, Guha records the connection between the rural population/society and Indian forests during colonialism. His idea of eco system people; those whose lives are directly dependent on the local natural resources fits well in the main protagonists of both Anand and Ghosh.

3. Colonial Ecology and Rural

Dispossessions by Mulk Raj Anand

3.1 The Land: Social Text

The countryside in the fiction of Anand never just happens to be a setting. It is a social text in which the trace of caste, of class and of colonial power is to be found. In *The Village* (1939), the main character Lal Singh is said to take his roots down to the earth: "He had been born and brought up on the earth, and the smell of the earth was in his nostrils, and the feel of it in his bones (Anand, 1939, p. 7). This is an emotional and political association between peasant and land. The novel presents the process of how it is

systematically ruined by the colonial powers. As K.N. Singh (1985) points out in *Mulk Raj Anand: A Critical Study*, Anand employs landscape as a moral compass. A healthy society means that there is a healthy land. The community is affected when the land is depleted (p. 143). This metaphor has certain political undertones in the situation that Anand is in. The degradation of the soil and people who rely on it is brought about by the colonial revenue system, the moneylender, and the industrial market. Coolie (1936) elaborates this back to the village but now to the city. It is both an ecological and a social downfall when Munoo goes through the Kangra hills, to the cotton mills of Bombay. Kangra is richly endowed with sensory elements: pine forests, oak trees, deodars, and cold mountain streams (Anand, 1936, p. 12). The factory on the other hand is a place of noise, pollution and physical injuries. According to Cowasjee (1977), the mill in Coolie is the opposite of all natural values: the machine to transform human beings (along with other natural resources) into surplus value.

3.2 Agrarian Policy of Colonies and Ecological Destruction

Ecological critique by Anand needs to be understood in the context of land policies of the British colony. The total displacement of huge masses of Indian pauper in their traditional ecological relationships took place through the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the Ryotwari system and various forest acts (Guha, 2000). Anand made fictional the contents that the nationalist economists had recorded in the field of political economy. In *Across the Black Waters*

(1940) the effects of the First World War on the Indian peasant soldier take center stage. The destroyed backdrop of Flanders is juxtaposed with the memory that the protagonist has of his Punjabi village. Dhawan (1992) opines that Anand relies on the ecological mirror of what is being done to India under the guise of colonialism a slow destruction under the guise of bureaucracy (p. 201). This is a stinging parallel. The village trilogy-*The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) serves as an ecological epic of the colonial Punjab. All these novels record the disappearance of subsistence agriculture, enclosure of common lands, soil degradation through cash-crop monoculture and the ecological destruction of common lands by canal irrigation, such as soil salinisation and waterlogging (Whitcombe, 1972).

3.3 The Body as an Environment Site

Anand always approaches human body as an ecological space. In the work of Bakha, *Untouchable* (1935), the work of the latrine-sweeper places his body into the ecology of waste of the colonial town. Ecological dimension of the famous "flush it" ending of the novel where a sympathetic English character will propose that modern sanitation will end untouchability has a distinct ecological dimension. Anand envisions a new urban ecology, which would liberate the Dalit body out of its compulsory position as waste-absorber (Parry, 1994). In *Coolie* the tuberculosis in Munoo is directly due to the cotton dust in the Bombay mills. It is rooted in a more profound cause of the colonial economy which compels

rural migrants to the toxic labour of the colonial economy. Placing environmental harm unequally between the privileged and marginalised groups is the phenomenon Anand anticipates now call the exposure gap (Nixon, 2011). The body is the last place where environmental injustice is accrued in the fiction of Anand.

4. Amitav Ghosh: Ecocentric Vision and Non-Human World

4.1 Sundarbans as Narrative and Ecological Space

The Sundarbans the huge mangrove delta shared by India and Bangladesh is the focal point of the green imagination by Ghosh. In *The Hungry Tide* (2004) it is not an environment. It actively takes part in the story. Ghosh writes: "Transformation is the rule of life in the tide country: rivers stray week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days (Ghosh, 2004, p. 8). Here is a continuously changing landscape. It does not lend itself to comfortable nature and culture, wilderness and civilisation. The ecological vision that is presented by Ghosh is anti-pastoral. He is not a romantic of nature. Sundarbans is stunningly hazardous, wealthy and not. The journal of Nirmal in the novel is a record of the history of the 1979 Morichjhapi massacre. In the incident, Dalit refugees comprising thousands of refugees, were forcibly evicted by the West Bengal government in a reserved forest area. This history is recorded by Jalais (2010), in *Forest of Tigers*, where these violent contradictions of postcolonial conservation policy are documented. Ghosh employs fiction to bring this hidden past to the

fore. The novel is all about a conflict between Piya, a marine biologist who has set up her mission to protect the Irrawaddy dolphin and Fokir, a local fisherman whose livelihood depends on the same waters. Their struggle is an even greater debate between scientific conservation and community survival. Annu Jalais (2010) offers anthropological background of this tension. She demonstrates how the human rights of the human residents of Sundarbans have long been trampled in the name of conservation of the tigers.

4.2 Aboriginal Knowledge and scientific

Ecology

Among the most significant motifs in the environmental fiction, by Ghosh, is the clash between the native ecological and scientific paradigms. The *Hungry Tide* portrays a rich embodied knowledge of the Sundarbans by Fokir. He knows how the tides ebb and flow, the behaviour of animals, their seasons and so on. The marine biology by Piya, though, fails to absorb, or authenticate this knowledge wholly. It is not compatible with the information-based frameworks of conservation science. This conflict is indicative of a broader argument on environmental studies. Political ecology places an accent on the rights and knowledge of the local communities. Conservation biology has an inclination to tend towards techno-scientific management of the nature (Robbins, 2012). The sympathies of Ghosh are with local knowledge. He does not idealise Fokir, though. Fokir is a multi-dimensional person. His association with the environment entails activities that involve hunting, fishing that goes against the values of

conservationists. Amitava Kumar (2011) defines epistemological question of *The Hungry Tide*: "who is entitled to know the environment and whose knowledge is valuable? (p. 178). This brings Ghosh fiction to postcolonial denials of the authority of science. It also poses critical issues concerning environmental governance with respect to the Global South.

4.3 Climate Change and Gun Island

Should the *Hungry Tide* be about conservation politics and indigenous ecology, *Gun Island* (2019) squarely deals with the climate crisis. The displacement of species and peoples across a variety of geographies the Sundarbans, Los Angeles, and Venice are traced in the novel. Climate change throughout the world is attributed to local ecological disturbance. This can be seen as a reflection of the arguments made by Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* (2016). In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh (2016) says that the realistic novel is structurally inappropriate to the notion of climate change. He says: The climate crisis is also a cultural crisis, and therefore of the imagination, as well (p. 9). *Gun Island* is a fictional answer of Ghosh to this dilemma. These novel employs myth, coincidence and non-rational factors to form a narrative form sufficient to respond to the magnitude of ecological crisis. The illustrations of disoriented animals snakes and spiders that emerge in unfamiliar places are a means of both ecological observation and metaphor. This technique is referred to as ecological uncanny by Amitabh Roy (2020). He tries to make the point that

strangeness is used in the novel to make visible what has become normalised: When the familiar becomes strange, we are forced to see what we have ceased to notice (p. 234).

4.4 Migration, Ecology and Human Rights

Gun Island is a vivid analog of the ecological displacement to human displacement. Climate change leads to both species migration as well as human migration. Already increasing sea levels, desertification, and extreme weather events are already rendering millions of people homeless. Ghosh bases this parallel on material reality, as opposed to the mere rhetorical flourish. As Meghna Roy (2021) notes, the notion that the refugee crisis and the ecological crisis are unrelated phenomena is insistent in Gun Island (p. 67). This links Ghosh with his later fiction to the earlier work by Anand. Both authors are embodiments of the displacement of the rural community as one of the essential types of violence. Anand finds its reason in the colonial capitalism. Ghosh contextualizes it in the context of globalisation and anthropogenic climate change.

5. Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

5.1 Landscape as Political Space

Both Anand and Ghosh do not want to consider the natural landscape as a neutral one. Punjab villages, Himalayan hills as well as industrial cities are all places of class and colonial conflict in the fiction of Anand. Social relations are always involved in shaping the landscape. The Sundarbans is politicised in no less a way in the fiction of Ghosh. The location of state violence, competing conservation

claims, and the unequal distribution of climate change globally are all located there. But there is a great difference in their political ecologies. The anthropocentric perspective of Anand is mainly dominant. The environment is important since material basis of human life and dignity depends on the environment. The degradation of the environment is gauged in human terms. The is more truly ecocentric by Ghosh. He puts ethical value on the Irrawaddy dolphin, the tiger and the mangrove itself that is not dependent on their usefulness to humans. Such a transformation is indicative of the emergence of environmental ethics in the 1930s until nowadays.

5.2 Literary Form and Environmental Awareness

The official variations between the two authors are as great as their thematic ones. Anand is in the field of social realism. His environmental accounts are elaborate and with historical backgrounds. They shed light on the social circumstances which is his main interest. The scenic is abundantly present, although it is used in the social argument. It is a platform, where the colonial capitalism and human suffering meet and converse. Ghosh has tried out new ways of form that is directly connected to his environmental thought. The Hungry Tide is a story which has integrated several voices and time. Gun Island employs myth and coincidence to depict the non-linear reason behind the ecological crisis. According to Ghosh (2016), in order to face climate change, it is necessary to have a transformed and renewed conception of the human (p. 86). This change is implemented

in his fiction by the formal decisions that it makes.

5.3 Rural Community: Tradition and modernity

Both authors portray the rural communities as reservoirs of ecological knowledge which are under threat by modernity. The threat to the case of Anand is colonial capitalism. In Ghosh's, neoliberal globalisation and global climate change are neoliberal impact and climate change respectively. However, none of the authors glorify the pre-modern rural environment. Both recognize the unfairness of the caste in the traditional communities as well as the patriarchy in both. Such a similar dismissal of the rural past as romanticised by ecological romanticism marks both authors out of ecological romanticism. The peasants of Anand are no noble savages. As human beings they have had their ecological relations deformed by caste and colonial capitalism. The community in Sundarbans as described by Ghosh are not utopia. They are multifaceted communities which negotiate conflicts between tradition and modernity, survival and conservation, local knowledge and global science.

5.4 Women and Environment

According to feminist ecocriticism, the two forms of domination (nature and women) are structurally connected in cultures that are patriarchal (Plumwood, 1993; MacGregor, 2017). Both Anand and Ghosh are female characters that have great ecological aspects, though no one of them can be characterized as a feminist writer. The fiction of Anand has women

as frequent observers of the ecological degradation. The direct contact with nature is made with their domestic and agricultural labour. But they themselves are seldom given the story telling power to express this knowledge. Piya in *The Hungry Tide* in the fiction of Ghosh is an important female ecological main character. However, her ecological power, as Rao (2016) notes, is mediated somewhat by her relation to the male figure of Fokir. This weakness hinges on a domain that needs some more critical analysis.

6. Environmental Justice and Subaltern

Both Anand and Ghosh are authors of the subaltern--those who are not included in the mainstream accounts of the nation, modernity and development. According to environmental justice theory as well as postcolonial ecocriticism, it is always the most social marginalised who happen to be the most vulnerable as far as the environment is concerned (Adamson, Evans and Stein, 2002). In both authors this is the case. In Anand, colonial land dispossession has had the most adverse impact on the poorest peasants. Climate displacement in Ghosh affects the communities in the coastal region, Dalit settlers, as well as migrant workers, the worst hit. Here, once again, is enlightening by the concept of slow violence as brought out by Nixon (2011). The agrarian crisis as in *The Village* (1939) does not occur or manifest impromptu. It develops slowly with rent arrears, unsuccessful harvests, run-down soil, and debts with moneylenders. The society falls in gradual decay. Just as the effects of

climate on the Gun Island do not result because of some single dramatic incident. The refugees die as they drown in the Mediterranean. The species are observed as in new locations. Communities are swept away by cyclones. Every event is one-on-one. They are all indicative of the rationale of anthropogenic climate change. The two authors build up plans on how to render slow violence evident. Anand employs socioeconomic elaboration of the patient and the progressive intensification of the crisis of the peasant. Ghosh employs myth, coincidence and ecological strangeness to show unknown links between events which occurred many years ago. The two approaches are in response to the same challenge, which is the way to represent the harm that is gradual, dispersed, and often invisible until it is too late.

7. The Non-Human Indian English Fiction

Among the most significant shifts between the ecological writing by Anand and Ghosh are the altering of the status of the non-human. Animals, plants and landscapes are involved and significant in the fiction of Anand. Nevertheless, they operate on humanist ethical paradigm. The buffalo of *The Village* is important as it is the productive partner of the peasant. The pine wood of Kangra is important, since it is the world of senses of the childhood of Munoo. They are given their value based on their association to human life. Non-human in Ghosh fiction will gain a higher narrative and moral autonomy. The Hungry Tide Irrawaddy dolphins are not only subjects of scrutiny by scientists. With the varying views of the novel, they emerge subjects having their own kinds of agency and

vulnerability. Its tiger is not only overcomplicated to be romanticised by conservationists but also to be feared by people. According to Mukherjee (2010), such a presence of the non-human in the novel narrates fundamentally against the anthropocentric assumptions about who can tell the story of the novel, thus (p. 146). The increase of ethical scope of the novel to non-human is part of the broader trends in environmental philosophy. These are the land ethic of Aldo Leopold (1949), the arguments of legal rights of natural objects by Christopher Stone (1972) and the recent multispecies turn in anthropology and cultural studies (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010). Ghosh fiction is involved in this philosophical process. Meanwhile, it bases these concepts on the definite ecological and social situation at the Indian subcontinent.

8. Conclusion

This paper has proposed the two authors Mulk Raj Anand and Amitav Ghosh as one of the two different yet interconnected stages of Indian ecoliterary imagination. Anand writes back to the colonial capitalism and agrarian crisis or rural India. To him, the land is important since it is the material basis of the human dignity. It cannot be destroyed without the rural poor. His environmental literature is encompassed in a social realist project which was informed by Marxism, Gandhian economics and the progressive English literary tradition. Ghosh is writing in the framework of postcolonial India, and globalisation as well as the climate crisis. He stretches and alters this tradition towards an ecocentric and globally situated environmental

consciousness. The non-human world is given a narrative and ethical status in his fiction, which Anand lacks. He also has to grapple with the difficulty of putting ecological crisis into the literary form, which he theorises clearly in *The Great Derangement* (2016). He develops a literary geography, through the Sundarbans, that is sufficient to the intricacy of the environmental crisis of the present. In as much as there are great differences between the two writers, they have core commitments. Both champion rights and profundity of the undervalued communities. Both are unwilling to perceive nature as either a decorative or even a therapeutic tool. Both state that environmental and social justice cannot be separated. Both works of fiction render visible the slow violence that is colonial, capitalist and climatic and which degrades both human communities and natural world that they inhabit. The analysis of gender and environment in the two writers needs to be done more protractedly. It would also be useful to consider an alternative approach to the writing of non-fiction by Anand and his *The Great Derangement* by Ghosh in a broader context. The ecocritical tradition of post-colonialism might be extended to encompass other comparative traditions. The point that this paper makes is that both authors are a part of a long and rich tradition of environmental literary imaginations in South Asia. The ancient practice has never been so much more desperately pertinent than it is today.

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