Nature as Monster: Ecological Gothic and Biopolitical Uncanny in Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide

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Abstract
The Paper entitled, “Nature as a Monster: Ecological Gothic and in Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide” attempts to read the text The Hungry Tide with the perception of Ecological Gothic. The paper also attempts to uncover the underlying problems the people of Sundarbans face with the notion of ‘Nature as Monster’. The attitude of the people towards nature, such as Bon Bibi myth is analyzed with the tool of ‘Cultural Geography’. Every peril: such as Tiger, Storm, Cyclone, and Tide are seen not as threats but as habitual lifestyle. The paper deviates itself from the traditional Eco critical view and steps into Ecological Gothic. The paper also deals with Uncanniness of nature and how the homely nature becomes unhomely when it becomes ravaging force. Biopolitical Uncanny denotes the sovereignty of nature over man and how familiar nature becomes strangely familiar in the guise of monster.

Keywords: Ecological Gothic, Monster, Nature, Biopolitics, Uncanny, etc.

The Phrase “Nature as Monster” (11) alludes to Margaret Atwood’s essay in the book, Survival (1972). In the book, Atwood talks about Hazardous Canadian landscape and the people’s survival. She portrays nature as “a destructive and hideous monster”(62). The subject of the novel also closely corresponds with Atwood’s essay. The similarities can be analogized based on the manner how nature is perilous in both the texts. The perception of nature as monstrous evil may be different from the stereotypical Ecocriticism, where either the relationship of man with nature is elevated or the man’s attitude towards nature is criticized based on the victimization of nature. Nature is seen as manifestation of Supreme Being in many cultures; at the same time, it should be noted when the Mother Nature kills her own children with famine and disasters. The transformation of Mother figure to Monster is clearly delineated by Atwood thus: “Nature the Monster, though it can still kill you, is more likely to be seen as Nature the mother, as predicted in the original Survival”(17). Jeffrey Jerome defines Characteristic of Monster in his book Monster Theory in the following manner: “the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (7). Therefore, nature can be considered as a Monster.

The theoretical conception of Ecological Gothic is derived from Dr. Pramod K. Nayar’s recent work, Bhopal’s Ecological Gothic(2017). Though EcoGothic is an innovative area of research, researched by Andrew Smith, William Hughes and many others, the idea is prevalent in literature long ago. Monika Eibert has also written many essays dealing with EcoGothic. Thus, the notion is not a strange one but seems to be unfamiliar. The idea can be elucidated through the words of Andrew Smith, thus: “Ecology has been hitherto overlooked in accounts of Romantic Gothic is strange given the critical synergies that exist between accounts of romanticism and Gothic” (1). Shoshannah Ganz also defined EcoGothic as “World damaged by Climate change” (67). M.H.Abrams defines ‘Gothic’ as, “atmosphere of gloom and terror, represents events that are uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent.” (152). Therefore, it is appropriate to call devastating nature as ‘Ecological Gothic’.

Pramod K. Nayar explains the theoretical framework in the following manner: “I use the Gothic as a frame to read Bhopal – as event, as place, as effect – and argue for the Gothicization of the disaster, continued disaster that haunts Bhopal. The Gothicization of nature, therefore, is not simply about discursive ghosts or narrative uncanny . . . Gothicization of urban space is done by monstrous industries” (Bhopal 18). Thus, Monster like traits of nature is represented as Ecological Gothic. Fear of nature is also embodied by the notion of EcoGothic. Natalie Rose Cox’ in his blog article “EcoGothic” articulates, “[EcoGothic] explores how nature in the sense of flora is gothic: how it constructs fear and monstrosity, and how nature and place as a whole can be haunting. Gothic tropes – monstrosity, imprisonment, the uncanny, oppression and repression, boundaries – are manifest not only in animal bodies, but
also in the body of nature, through land, water, air, and plants”. David Del Principe’s definition “An EcoGothic approach poses a challenge to a familiar Gothic subject – nature – taking a nonanthropocentric position to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear” (1), can also be taken into consideration when defining Ecological Gothic. Thus the paper concentrates on how nature acts as monster and gothicizes the environment. The cruelty of nature on human beings are seen as gothic. The representation of nature as monster is elucidated as, “The ghosts of literary fiction are not human either, of course, but they are certainly represented as projections of humans who were once alive. But animals like the Sundarbans tiger, and freakish weather events like the Delhi tornado, have no human referents at all.” (Nayar, The Climate 34). Another Comparison of Nature with Monster can be seen in Timoty Norton’s Book, Dark Ecology, in which he says, “Ecological awareness is disorienting precisely because of these multiple scales. We sense that there are monsters even if we can’t see them directly” (40).

The first instance of the Monster figure of nature is witnessed through the myth of Bon Bibi, where Ghosh discusses about Dokkhin Rai, a cruel tiger demon who desires for human flesh. The myth is purely symbolic and reveals dichotomy between cruel nature and Supreme Being. Here, Nature is epitomized as an evil and Goddesses Bon Bibi as a Savior. Thus, the image of Monster vs Supreme Being is created. Amitav Ghosh defines Dokkhin Rai as thus: “Dokkhin Rai, a powerful demon-king who held sway over every being that lived there — every animal as well as every ghoul, ghost and malevolent spirit. Toward mankind he harbored a hatred coupled with insatiable desire: for the pleasures afforded by human flesh he had a craving that knew no limit” (Hungry 96). In this manner, Nature is Gothicized and seen as a Monster.

Another Monstrous Gothic spectacle occurs when Piya and Fokir are on the boat. When Piya researches the water she is nibbled by a crocodile. Here, Ghosh’s description of the crocodile is Gothic. Crocodile is seen as another embodiment of nature which is cruel. The incident is described in the following manner: “huge jaws came shooting out of the river, breaking the surface . . . Piya saw two sets of interlocking teeth make a snatching, twisting movement as they lunged at her still extended arm: they passed so close that the hard tip of the snout grazed her elbow and the spray from the nostrils wetted her forearm.” (Hungry 157); the description proves the crocodile to be monstrous and invokes Gothic atmosphere in the novel.

Snakes also make Gothic atmosphere in Sundarbans. Apart from monstrous creatures, slimy creature such as snakes and other insects also make the situation weird. The nature is always hostile to the characters in the novel. Kanai and Nilima tries to sleep in the night but their sleep is disturbed by a snake. Amitav Ghosh describes the snake in a Gothic manner as follows: “Suddenly one of the strings had come alive; to the accompaniment of a sharp hiss, it had snapped a whip-like tail across the palm of her hand. She had caught a glimpse of it before it wriggled under the door. It was an extremely venomous arboreal snake that inhabited the upper branches of some of the more slender mangroves” (Hungry 83). Ghosh also mentions: “From time to time there would be loud plops as creatures of various kinds fell to the floor (Ibid 84). Thus the appearance of snake, though part of nature is Gothicized.

Another important aspect of the monstrous nature is Shipwreck. Amitav Ghosh describes the story of a shipwreck which happened because the ship struck sandbank. The event is described thus: “I remembered the story of the Royal James and Mary, an English ship making its passage through the shoals of the tide country in the year 1694. It capsized after striking a sandbank. I imagined the thick crust of underwater life that would cling to the vessel and preserve it for centuries” (Hungry 202); he also mentions the Monstrous habit of nature by describing, “The tide country digested the great galleon within a few years. Its remains vanished without trace.” (Hungry 202). Here, nature is compared with Ghost/Monster which swallows human beings.

Nilima also warns Kanai to be careful with nature/tiger, because there may be dangers. Here, Nilima denotes tigers as dangerous species, she also has report of people killed by the predator. Milima informs Kanai thus: “I’ve been keeping unofficial records for years, based on word-of-mouthreports. My belief is that over a hundred people are killed by tigers here each year. a human being is killed by a tiger every other day in the Sundarbans — at the very least.” (Hungry 217). Amitav Ghosh’s non-fictional prose also provides further details of Sundarbans. In his book The Great Derangement Ghosh mentions: “Think of what it was like: think of the tigers, crocodiles and snakes that lived in the creeks and nala’s that covered the islands. This was a feast for them. They killed hundreds of people.” (52). Thus Ecological gothic is represented by Amitav Ghosh.
The idea ‘Ecological Uncanny’ has been derived from Pramod K. Nayar’s Article “The Climate of Change”. The idea of Uncanny belongs to Freud, who talks about it in the essay with the same name. Julian Wolfrey elaborates uncanny as “feeling of the sensation comes about in places where one should feel most secure, or with which one is most familiar that is to say how the sense of being ‘not-at-home’ or ‘unhomely’ occurs within the idea of the home.” (100). C.A.Cuddon explains ‘uncanny’ as “strangely familiar, a sensation” (568). But Pramod K. Nayar’s use of the phrase ‘Ecological Uncanny’ is different from Freudian notion of the term. According to Nayar, the “sites of disaster may generate ecological uncanny with a certain experience of the ghostly, the mythic and the contemporary, the local and the alien, the familiar and the strange, all within the space of disaster.” (The Climate 27).

Amitav Ghosh in The Great Derangement elaborates ‘Uncanny’ in the following manner:

In the tiger stories of the Sundarbans, as in my experience of the tornado, there is, as I noted earlier, an irreducible element of mystery. Better expressed by a different word, one that recurs frequently in translations of Freud and Heidegger. That word is uncanny—It is surely no coincidence that the word uncanny has begun to be used, with ever greater frequency, in relation to climate change. Writing of the freakish events and objects of our era . . . Climate change is inherently uncanny: Weather conditions, and the high-carbon lifestyles that are changing them, are extremely familiar and yet have now been given a new menace and uncertainty (33).

The first Ecological Uncanny happens when Horen and Kanai returns home on Megha. Horen finds that something is strange. Horen comes to know that there would be storm today, through the other fishermen. The climatic change is delineated by Amitav Ghosh, thus: “the There was a storm on its way, Horen explained. A jhor. The weather office in New Delhi had put out warnings since the day before that it might even be a cyclone.” (The Hungry 308). The climate change can be taken as an example of uncanny. Here, the daily life is familiar to the fishermen but the storm is strange to Horen and Kanai. Thus, combining familiar and strange leads to ‘Uncanny of Ecology’. Another strangely familiar thing chanced was the disappearance of dolphins. Due to the sudden climatic change, the dolphins cannot be found in the place where they would be usually. Amitav Ghosh mentions: “One thing puzzled Kanai: the boat was anchored well within sight of the Garjontola pool, yet, although it was low tide, there were no dolphins in the water. He recalled that the dolphins usually gathered there when the tide ebbed, and it was clear even to his unpracticed eye that the water was running low.” (The Hungry 309). Freud defines uncanny as, “The subject of the ‘uncanny’ ... is undoubtedly related to what is frightening, to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly” (17).

Another instance of Uncanny can be found in the chapter ‘Causality’, where Fokir senses something bad and goes to the unhomely state. The event is described by Amitav Ghosh thus: “Fokir’s face was enough to indicate that something was not quite right — there was a cautionary look in his eyes that put her on guard.” (The Hungry 311). Another monstrous act of nature (storm) had happened in 1970 when Kanai first visited Lusibari. The Gothic made by the disaster and its aftermath is described by Kanai in the following manner: “it was as if they were in the vicinity of some terrible battlefield massacre. There were corpses everywhere, and the land was carpeted with dead fish and livestock. They found out that three hundred thousand people had died.” (Hungry 315). Horen does not “want to have it repeated.” (Ibid 315). Kanai’s translation of “The Glory of Bon Bibi” also can be taken as an example of the fact that one should not trust nature. The belief on Bon Bibi gives the people of the island to have a homely feel but when Bon Bibi fails to save the devotees it makes them feel ‘not-at-home’, an Uncanny is created. Another Strangely Familiar thing occurred was the abnormal behavior of Dolphins. Amitav Ghosh mentions: “It was the data sheets that made her suspect something was amiss. Logging the dolphins’ appearances, she saw that they were surfacing with unusual frequency, with barely a minute or two separating their exhalations. And more than once, along with the breathing, she heard a sound not unlike a squeal. There was something odd here, she decided; this was not the way these” (Hungry 328). Piya is happy that the wind is behind their back. But soon senses “there was no foam on their crests” (Ibid 329). Soon after they experience the storm at its full swing. Amitav Ghosh reports: “Every time they turned, the wind came at them from a different angle, sometimes hitting them in such a way as to make the boat list. As the speed of the wind mounted, the waves grew taller and flecks of white appeared along their crests. (Ibid 331). The incident creates uncanny by making known nature in a defamilialised form of storm. As usual, the uncanny provokes fear as monster. The cruelest part of the monstrous act of nature is, the storm and cyclone. It devastated the area and killed many, including Fokir
moreover, “again the air was full of hurtling projectiles” (Hungry 350).

Thus, nature becomes monster and destroys the peace of the people of Sundarbans. Through tiger, snake, cyclone, and crocodile the monster takes the life of the innocent and makes the surrounding a Gothic one. The feeling of Biopolitical Uncanny is made when we realize the characters are completely out of their own control and primarily controlled by monstrous nature. Both the Gothic and Uncanny creates fear in the hearts of the people of Sundarbans. Though “Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles” (Hungry 13), the people sustain to live there because of the feel-at-home attitude. When the home becomes unhomely (unheimlich), it is shown as a monster, therefore, creates atmosphere of Gothic. As Atwood says, “Nature is a monster, perhaps, only if you come to it with unreal expectations or fight its conditions rather than accepting them and learning to live with them. Snow isn’t necessarily something you die in or hate. You can also make houses in it” (69). The nature can be accepted as ‘Uncanny’ though it is a monstrous. Though the nature destroys their lives the people of Sundarbans still go for fishing and live there, this parallels with what Pramod K Nayar says, “Ecological Gothic depends on the repeated return of the dark side” (From Text 245).

Works Cited


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