



Original Research Paper

Ebb and Flow: Mapping the Shift from Land to Ocean in South Asian Ecocriticism

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving interaction between land and water bodies in South Asian narratives. This is done through the novels *The Hungry Tide* and *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh. The author explores issues of tidal ecologies, increase in sea levels, destruction of marine biodiversity, cyclone devastation and transformation of coastal areas. This paper will analyze the influence of climate change and the ecological crisis on the exposure of the differential impacts of the danger created by the destruction of the land and ecology. Oceanic space is understood in terms of ecocriticism as an environment of environmental justice and ecological interconnectedness.

Key words: South Asian ecocriticism, tidal ecologies, devastation, climate vulnerability, environmental justice

Introduction

The concept of peninsular imaginings has gained importance in the twenty-first century because of global changes such as climate change, rising sea levels, marine pollution, coastal erosion, as well as extreme weather events that cause damage around the world.

These environmental conditions are not reducible to the scientific or geographical; they also threaten communities' livelihoods, place-based knowledge systems, and various cultural ways of imagining relationships to land and water. In this context, imagining Indian eco-literature through the lens of peninsular imaginaries can be a productive way of studying the depiction of peninsular and coastal areas in literary works and ideas of their liminal spaces (the shifting boundaries between water and land), their dependence on marine ecosystems, and their susceptibility to climate change.

The geographical position of India in having a huge coastline bordering the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian Ocean makes it all the more important that its literature must be able to capture the environmental relationship with the ocean. Coastal regions of states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Goa, Karnataka, and islands suffer from environmental stresses caused by coastal erosion, rise in sea levels, salinity, cyclones, habitat destruction, and degradation of marine resources. All these are impacting

fishing communities, farmers in the coastal delta areas, coastal communities and indigenous people whose livelihood depends upon marine and terrestrial environment. The impacts are uneven, with economically marginalized communities having less capacity to prepare themselves for any extreme event, cope with disasters and move away from their habitats.

The ecology of India has generally been studied on themes such as agrarian distress, river management, deforestation, biodiversity, and displacement of people due to development activities. The importance of the ecological aspects of Himalayan forests, rivers, and countryside has been thoroughly studied, along with the literary portrayal of drought, agriculture-related problems, and industrialization. But a coastal perspective could further widen the scope of this discussion in terms of the changes in human-environment interactions due to rising sea levels, erosion of coastlines, pollution in the marine ecosystem, and cyclone risks. This does not imply that Indian literature has ignored the sea, but rather highlights the importance of connecting coastal literature with the existing discourse on Indian environmental literature.

The Hungry Tide (2004) by Amitav Ghosh is a significant beginning as it depicts the intricate connection between human survival, mangrove ecology, tides and conservation. The concern with climate change and environment in Amitav Ghosh's work *The Great*

Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (2016) further provides a challenge to the literary conventions unable to represent environmental changes of a new magnitude.

In maritime and coastal literature, the sea is no longer supposed to be perceived simply as a setting, as a source of income and freedom. It must be understood as an active agent which changes the nature of settlements, exposes social inequality and challenges the very notions of safety, property and belonging. In this case, it is important to explain the geographical aspects of typhoon vulnerability. It should be noted that typhoons are tropical cyclones which occur in the northwestern Pacific Ocean and influence mostly East and Southeast Asia.

In India, tropical cyclones are referred to as cyclones, especially cyclones which form in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Hence, in this paper, the broader term of tropical-cyclone vulnerability will be used, but it will be distinguished from typhoons in terms of its strict meteorological meaning. This paper suggests that peninsular imaginations may help to expand the scope of Indian eco-literature through considering the coast as an area where climate change, degradation of the marine environment, cultural memory and environmental justice meet. This paper will analyze coastal landscapes, vulnerability of marine-based communities, connection between environmental degradation and inequality, and the role of literature in reimagining the relations between land and sea.

Methodology

This research involves qualitative, interpretative, and comparative research design grounded in ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and environmental justice. The focus of the research is on particular literary works and criticism in India and the ways in which coast, marine spaces, and climate vulnerability can be depicted in literary works. The primary literary work used in the research is *The Hungry Tide* (2004) by Amitav Ghosh, which deals with the problems of ecology and society of the Sundarbans. The book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) by Amitav Ghosh is the source of theoretical perspective on the problems created by climate change for literature. Furthermore, the importance of Indian ecological literature on rivers, wetlands, forests, and agriculture in relation to the development of the concept of coastal ecocriticism is considered.

The theoretical framework draws on the concepts of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm from *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), Lawrence Buell from *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), and Rob Nixon from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). These sources offer knowledge about the way literature can demonstrate environmental change and reveal the slow violence of the ecological damage and its unequal

distribution. In my paper, three related concepts are discussed: coastal imaginaries, which can be described as the representation of the connection between land and sea in literature; marine environmental justice, which shows the unequal impact of the destruction of the oceans and coast; and climate vulnerability. The literary analysis will involve close reading of imagery of landscapes, descriptions of water, ecological change through literary texts, relations between the characters and environment, as well as conflicts associated with development or conservation. It is important to differentiate between literary interpretation and scientific evidence in this paper. Literary texts can reveal the cultural significance and experience of environmental change, but all the claims about sea-level rise, ocean warming, marine pollution and tropical cyclones should be substantiated by scientific literature. Therefore, climate change is viewed as a context for interpreting literary texts in this paper, not vice versa

Discussion

Peninsular imaginaries: Reimagining the Indian coast

Peninsular imaginaries mean that India's coastline should not be understood geographically anymore, but rather ecologically and culturally. A peninsula is an expanse of land that is bordered by water on many its border; the careers of the residents are heavily influenced by the land formation and contact of the land with the rivers, estuaries, and the sea. Coastal villages, fishing communities, mangroves, ports and tidal flats are different examples of people inhabiting and interpreting their environment.

In Indian Eco literature, environmental disasters are discussed in relation to the forests, rivers, agriculture and displacements. This is very important in the context of eco-literature, but the peninsular approach allows considering these issues in relation to the marine ecosystems. In literature, the coast is not the borderline between two environments, but an area of exchanges migrations trade memory livelihood, cultural exchange and environment uncertainty. Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* points that "There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea" (7). Yet, a river does not stop at the edge of the river as sediments, pollutants, and nutrients are being carried by the river course until they reach the seas and estuaries. Run-off from agriculture leads to water pollution, but the destruction of mangroves relates to the conservation of biological diversity and the ecosystem of the Likewise, industrialization, port development, tourism and urbanization can change the environment of the coastal region and increase the disputes for land and resources. In other words, coast bridges environmental processes that may be separated by traditional categorizations of terrestrial and marine ecologies. Moreover, the idea of coast can challenge the notion of ocean as an inexhaustible resource coasts.

Marine ecosystems have their own ecological constraints and the harm to them will affect fishing

communities, local economy of the areas and food security. Over-fishing, habitat destruction pollution plastics pollution and waste water could bring fragility in the ecological system leading to socio-ecological imbalance for the coastal population. Rise in sea level and coastal erosion will add further challenges to the relations of the people and the place mostly if places of significance like homes, places of worship, burial grounds, fishing spots have cultural implications. The interpretation of peninsular imaginations through literary analysis could help explain how ecological changes translate not only into geographical spaces but also into cultural spaces.

The Hungry Tide: Tidal ecologies and environmental justice

The Hungry Tide offers a compelling literary lens on water and human existence, and ecological fragility: The novel's setting is the Sundarbans, a watery, tidal realm of mangroves, shifting channels and dangerous creatures. It contradicts the idea that humans and nature are bounded, that human habitats can be isolated from the natural environment. Human life depends on a delicate and unresolvable relationship with land and water; we can never really extract ourselves from the ecological conditions of our existence. "This is a land half submerged at high tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest." (Ghosh 7)

The book's characters each have their own take on this setting. Fokir is immersed in the water and waterways of the local region, while Piya's scientific perspective helps her to navigate what they are discovering in the water and its creatures. The partnership between them shows how great it can be when scientific monitoring and a human history of a place and environment are combined. But it also illustrates how social position, access to resources and the motivation for studying or managing natural environments influence how environmental knowledge develops.

The novel more explicitly explores the complicated nexus of conservation with justice. Although conserving biological diversity is imperative, conservation could cause conflict through limiting access by local inhabitants to areas and resources that sustain them. This makes it an environmental concern in a political and moral context: who enacts the values of which actor to protect landscapes and whose sacrifices are deemed acceptable? Ghosh reveals the paradoxes of ecological and financial protection of local people, showing that conservation should be discussed within the lens of community involvement, economic viability and distribution of equity. While *The Hungry Tide* is not an entirely true story of sea level rise, with its story of tidal instability, fragile ecosystems, and spatially fragile human settlements, it does give us a small glimpse at the rise of the sea in this region.

With erosion, cyclone activity, as well as salinity and tidal hydrology changes occurring, as well as

continued poverty, displacement, and infrastructural inadequacy, the endangered ecosystems and human communities of the Sundarbans are at risk in the future. To supplement this human-interest story, a scientific discussion of the direct causes, development, and potential impacts of contemporary climate change is required.

Rising sea levels, marine degradation and the transformation of place

Sea level rise will threaten low-lying coastal zones, deltas, and islands across the globe. Costs include higher incidences of coastal inundation erosion intrusion of salt water and the destruction of habitable land. In India, low-lying areas of the Sundarbans, some of the eastern coastline and communities at risk of altered coastal dynamics are most exposed to the ramifications of sea level rise. This is evident in the work *The Great Derangement* where "Overnight a stretch of river bank will disappear, sometimes taking houses and people with it, but elsewhere a shallow mud bank will arise and within weeks the shore will have broadened by several feet." (7)

The expression of risk will vary, based on many factors like land characteristics, coastal assets, sediment flow subsidence ecosystem integrity and human developments. The literature may address the cultural and affective dimension of those processes in ways that technical evidence does not. The sense of place is often homely and well-known, conditioned by the childhood environment, family, and customary industry, relationships within a community and stored and passed-on learning. When the sea claims a village or costs a fishing ground, it is not just material loss, but threatened social relations, cultural pride and social stability that are lost, too. Displacement is a material and emotional experience of a place no longer real or available. Marine degradation can compound these problems.

Marine ecosystems become vulnerable due to plastic litter, toxic chemicals, sewerage, destructive fishing methods, and loss of coastal habitats. Mangroves, salt marshes, and other coastal ecosystems provide a habitat for biodiversity; thus, destruction (even complete removal) of such ecosystems results in greater susceptibility to wave action and storms. Degradation of protected ecosystems and construction of artificial infrastructure in inappropriate places result in increased risks to the community and economy.

The linkages between the loss of marine ecosystems and climate change are complex and dynamic, with climate change exacerbating the effects of pollution and habitat loss, and healthy ecosystems improving the ability of communities to adapt. In Indian ecocriticism, these kinds of questions for me might bring us back to consider the fishers, coastal farmers, islanders, and peoples whose cultural membership is tied to the sea. And by way of these stories, one might arrive at the questions on environmental justice: who has access to the port, to the real estate and tourism potential of the coast, and who

suffers the most from pollution, from erosion, or from being barred from their fishing waters? And by way of the peninsular ecocritical perspective, perhaps we could then focus on such asymmetric engagements, and stories of the conflict between pursuits of the commercial interests and the ecological integrity of the coast.

Cyclone and typhoon vulnerabilities: A comparative Asian perspective

The vulnerability of coastal populations to tropical cyclones is yet another significant aspect of peninsular imaginaries. Coastal regions of eastern India, especially those bordering the Bay of Bengal, are vulnerable to cyclones, which can cause strong winds, storm surges, heavy rains and floods. This would cause destruction to property, crops, fishing boats, infrastructure and communication systems. Beyond the immediate disaster, their impacts would persist in the form of disrupted livelihoods, displacement, debt and lack of access to basic facilities.

Typhoon refers to tropical cyclones that occur in the northwestern part of the Pacific Ocean, which includes those hitting Southeast and East Asia. Tropical cyclone vulnerability is high in the case of the Philippines, whereas Vietnam is threatened by storms, coastal and river-delta flooding. Making comparisons between this case and that of India will assist in coming up with some of the shared themes in literature such as vulnerability of coastal communities, differential population recovery abilities from disasters, relevance of local environmental knowledge, and relation of environmental dangers to economic disparity. The human loss suffered during typhoons is expressed by the portrayal of the loss of family, possessions, and security which demonstrates the precarity of island communities. This is nicely brought out by Criselda Yabes, a Phillipino writer in his work, *Broken Islands* "I cry sometimes thinking of my mother, how she died in the typhoon. We had nothing and then we lost everything. Yolanda gave us no mercy." (72)

While a hurricane might uncover existing inequalities in terms of building and transportation capabilities of rich or poor individuals, the aftermath can show whose pain gets recognized by the rest of society, and whose stays hidden from view. Reading in this light, coastal literature can be used for developing ethics of disaster representation that would highlight the experiences of marginalized people while avoiding the reduction of the community to victimhood. Vulnerability to cyclones is not just a consequence of climate change, but a combination of where people live, how well constructed buildings and infrastructure are, access to early warning and evacuation services, how prepared a community is, and how they are supported financially and socially. While some aspects of tropical cyclone vulnerability are affected by climate change (for example, increased precipitation and flooding caused by sea-level rise), the variability in the locations, frequency, and strength of cyclones should also be taken

into account. The literature could be used here to support the argument that disasters are social things.

From terrestrial ecocriticism to marine environmental justice

The extended scope of the imaginary of the peninsula as a critical concept is that it could help to link the Indian environmental literature with the problems of marine and coastal ecology. The problems of the agrarian crisis, management of the rivers and deforestation of the Himalaya are not discrete subjects. On the contrary, pollution and erosion could be enabled by the rivers carrying chemical compounds from agriculture, industry and cities to the sea; deforestation could influence the sediment flow to the coasts; economic pressure on the rural population could lead to migration to the coastal cities. In any case, environmental systems are interconnected, and literature may uncover cultural and social linkages within these linkages.

The concept of slow violence by Rob Nixon could also help in exploring marine and coastal environmental changes. In many cases, such changes take place progressively. Accumulation of plastic, depletion of fish, erosion of coasts, increasing salinity of agricultural lands cannot make such an impact on humans as a cyclone, for example. However, their cumulative effect may endanger their lives and cultural traditions. All these aspects could be represented by literary imagery of ruined landscapes, depleted natural resources, changed seasons and struggling societies.

Three key principles need to be considered when dealing with marine environmental justice. Firstly, distributional justice involves questions on how the gains and losses from coastal development are distributed. Secondly, procedural justice is about participation of fishers, coastal community and other interested parties in environmental decisions. Third, recognition justice, also relates to respect for traditional ecological knowledge, identities, and local connections. Indian coastal literature can in this way be read not only as an account of nature but also as an indictment of the economic and political orders, which dictate who is afforded protection and who is exposed to risk.

Finally, the concept of peninsular imagination, enables us to improve the range of Indian eco-literature through emphasizing the coast as the site of social, environmental, and cultural exchange. From a comparative perspective, the conceptual system is useful in addressing Southeast Asian texts, which are also concerned with coastal towns, deltaic interiors, island archipelagos and rainforests.

Findings

There is a need for more consideration of coastal landscapes in eco-literary studies within India. Although agrarian issues, river, and plantation systems and deforestation still remain core issues of ecology and justice, the ecology of the sea and related social histories emerge as an additional zone of ecological change and

environment justice. These peninsular imaginaries emphasize the web of earth and water systems. There is a web of rivers wetlands mangroves, agriculture, and marine systems; and literature envisions them. Further, climate vulnerability is also a matter of social injustice. For economically poor people who are under or un-housed and under or voiceless, climate calamity like rising sea levels erosion damage to marine environments and tropical cyclones can be detrimental. T These works help to relate anecdotes and stories of inequity to information provided through statistical data. It means that conservation should go hand in hand with the understanding of culture and community. Conservation in *The Hungry Tide* is related not only to preserving biological diversity, but also people's rights, awareness, and wellbeing.

An Asianist comparative perspective is helpful which preserves its geographical emphasis. Both the Indian and Southeast Asian cyclone hazards have much in common but differ in the range of destruction. Really in this context, institutions, and environmental impacts need to conduct comparative studies. Comparative research needs to deal with their differences and common hazards like vulnerability, environmental justice and resilience.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to develop a more comprehensive conception of the relation between literature and environmental transformations. In taking into account coastal zones, estuaries, mangrove forests, islands and marine-based societies, the idea of peninsular imaginaries expands the scope of Indian ecocriticism, which has traditionally centered on agrarian troubles, river management and forest degradation, by highlighting the dynamic character of the sea as an environmental influence.

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh is of particular importance to literary analysis because of the way it explores the relationship between ecological processes, indigenous knowledge, conservation, and the survival of people in the Sundarbans. Together with Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, this novel can help to stimulate reconsideration of the ways in which literature presents the destabilization of the environment and the degree to which it is challenging to envision a climate changed world. In *The Great Derangement*, he says, "In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York, and Bangkok uninhabitable..." (12). Amongst other issues, the effects of rising water levels, marine pollution, habitat destruction and tropical storms should not be isolated from considerations of economic development, governance, infrastructure, and social capital of the population in question.

Focusing attention on the Southeast Asian coastline as another site of comparison would also bring into focus the importance of dealing with common

environmental threats while recognizing regional differences. Hazards posed by Indian and Southeast Asian tropical cyclones would illustrate how hazards of this kind could be used to create inequalities, distort local culture's understanding of environment, and increase the danger for the people living along the coasts. Literature can illustrate all this, offering knowledge, adaptation strategies, and disasters experienced by coastal communities. Thus, a peninsular ecology of different works offers an opportunity to create an extended notion of environmental imagination, which would take into account the interdependence of our land-sea interface, ecologies, and cultures, as well as inequality of climate-related hardships and social justice issues.

Its importance is not just in securing the coastline as part of literary history but in questioning, what can and should literature do to challenge extractive development and foster just relationships between our communities and our environments? Beyond the science and policy, a sustainable future necessitates a cultural one, too: community engagement and ethical responsibility for the ecosystems integral to our own and other species' survival.

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