

From Dominance to Dialogue: Reframing Human-Nature Interdependence in the Hungry Tide and the Overstory

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Abstract This paper explores the significance of coexistence for leading a peaceful and harmonious life in this natural world. Through a comparative analysis of *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh and *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, the paper explains the need for sustaining a balanced relationship between humans and Nature and advocates for an urgent shift in human actions which ended up in the disruption of ecosystem. The paper also observes how Nature adapts, responds and reacts in the face of human encroachment into the habitats of other creatures. The central aim of the analysis is to raise the need for awareness regarding the interconnectedness of all living creatures within the great chain of beings. It underscores the notion that humans have limited access to Nature and other creatures possess equal rights to live, explore and celebrate Nature just like humans. It stresses the crucial need for humans to understand and respect the rights of other creatures and brings attention to the voices of natural world.

Keywords: Coexistence, Sustainability, Ecosystem, Interconnectedness, Rights.

Coexistence is a frequently used term, yet the world is largely blind to its meaning and significance. It feels like we are looking at it with sightless eyes. Had we the vision, and insight, the world would have never degraded like this. Nature would never have been suffering from environmental degradation. And the shocking aspect is that *Homo sapiens* are aware of environmental degradation, it is not something that happened unknowingly, instead, humans are fully aware of it and continue to disrupt the ecological equilibrium. It is a little bit of relief knowing that there are some of them who deeply wanted to save earth, save Nature like scholars, environmentalists continuously warning us, but humans just don't care or listen. In addition, human race is not willing to put some effort in it, like they take care of each other. Nature needs our care, our love and our protection. Just because few people running behind this won't make a change, how does it result in a change, when the rest of the world is deaf and dumb to it. Despite widespread indifference, there exist individuals who deeply care for Nature, who are committed to the growth and protection of Nature. All the species living in a region can be collectively termed Biodiversity. "The term is inclusive to all the living things namely plants, animals, microorganisms as well as humans. There are a huge number of species inhabiting our planet and many of them are still unidentified" (Pandey p.131). There are still individuals who long to witness and restore the lifeblood flowing through the arteries and veins of Nature. Nature's arteries and veins are none other than us humans, animals, birds, insects and all those identified and unidentified species which are part of the great chain of being. What happens when there is a blockage in these blood vessels, lifeblood ceases to flow, marking the end of life. Just like that when the natural flow of ecosystem is disrupted, Nature begins to wither. Hence, we should listen to the people who care about Nature's wellbeing.

The novels *The Hungry Tide* and *The Overstory* find people who consider the wellbeing of Nature. Piya in *The Hungry Tide* and Patricia Westerfold in *The Overstory* are such notable characters. While many forget Nature, glad that some continued to remember and care for Nature without any prompting.

"Piya Roy, an Indian American marine biologist who visits Sundarbans to research the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins that live there, serves as the novel's major protagonist" (Verma p.154). Sundarbans is that vulnerable ecosystem portrayed in *The Hungry Tide*. "Ecologists have examined how the Sundarbans are portrayed in "The Hungry Tide" where they are portrayed as a special and delicate ecosystem that is in danger from logging and



development” (Verma p.154). “I am hoping to wangle a permit to do a survey of the marine mammals of the Sundarbans” (Ghosh 11). Fokir was surprised to hear that because all he ever heard was about the tiger and the crocodiles. “I know, she said, the cetacean population has kind of disappeared. No one knows whether it’s because they’re gone or because they haven’t studied. There hasn’t ever been a proper survey” (Ghosh 12). So, Piya is an environmentalist, no doubt in that. But, since this paper focuses more on coexistence, Piya’s role remains incomplete, her approach can be seen as only partially successful. Because “Nothing can exist on its own and everything is depended on other things. All elements, all entities, all phenomena are thus related” (Babu and Gaur p. 24). Human beings are one element in the great chain of beings. But in Piya’s approach we can see a lack of balance between environment and human survival. Somewhere her perspectives overlooked the realities of local community. Despite all this she is successful in bringing attention to the rare and largely unrecognized species. However, towards the end of the novel, Piya recognizes that what is needed is not a domination of anything, but a balance, which doesn’t disrupt the ecological balance.

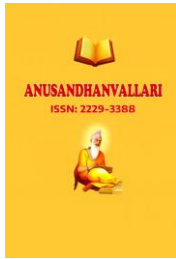
Unlike Piya, Patricia is supposed to have an inclusive approach to the idea of coexistence. One of the major similarities is that both are keen on donating more and more to Nature. Even from her childhood, Patricia was deeply curious and had the habit of observing Nature along with her father. “In time she gets almost as curious as her father at telling what is wilting or gnawing on a farmer’s crops. He stops quizzing her and starts consulting, not in front of the farmers, of course, but later, back in the car, when they have the luxury of thinking through the infestations as a team” (Powers p.123). This proves that she was not doing all these for the sake of passing academics, rather she was serious about the protection of environment, and this interest and curiosity has its roots deep inside her heart.

“Her dorm room overflows with potted plants. She is not the only one on her floor to fit a botanical Garden between the student desk and bunk bed. But her plants are the only ones with strips of data taped to their terra-cotta pots. Where her friends grow baby’s breath and blue-eyed violets, she grows tickseed and partridge pea and other experiments” (Power 125).

This proves her interest in Nature and natural organisms. The seeds of interest that sprouted inside her soul led her to the creation of seed vaults. “I want to start a seed bank. There are half as many trees in the world as there were before we came down out of them” (Power p. 295). “It has been an observation that human consumption and activities have disturbed and destroyed too many ecosystems causing jeopardy to the earth’s biodiversity” (Pandey 132). Patricia was so worried that half of the existing species may go extinct anytime from now. So, she needs to do something, she finds seed bank as a little relief. “All winter she has struggled to describe the joy of her life’s work and the discoveries that have solidified in a few short years: how trees talk to one another, over the air and underground. How they care and feed each other, orchestrating shared behaviors through the networked soil. How they build immune system as wide as a forest. She spends a chapter detailing how a dead log gives life to countless other species” (Power p.215).

She was trying to say that Trees do communicate with each other, they do communicate to humans and other organisms as well. “Forest mend and shape themselves through subterranean synapses. And in shaping themselves, they shape, too, the tens of thousands of other, linked creatures that form it from within” (Power 216). A lot of organisms find shelter within a tree, and they do send chemical signals to each other. Except humans, all other species understand each other and grow accordingly respecting each other’s boundaries. In *The Hungry Tide*, we can see dolphins adapting to the tidal rhythms. They adapt and adjust their behavior according to the ecosystem’s seasonal changes.

“In times of heavy rainfall, when the rivers rose, they would range far afield, chasing their prey into minor tributaries and even into flooded rice fields. But in dry periods, when the rivers began to drop, they would make



their way back to certain spots. These were usually deep – water pools, created by quirks of geology in the riverbed, or by the water’s patterns of flow” (Ghosh p. 130).

All these prove Patricia’s statement trees send chemical signals to each other, each and every organisms are interlinked, they know each other, they can sense small changes, they can sense climate, they can sense their prey, they can sense their predator, they can even sense the ecological imbalance. “The wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell. Her maples are signaling. They’re linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other”

(Power p. 131). She continues “outsiders discovered that trees sense the presence of other nearby life. That a tree learns to save water. That trees feed their young and synchronize their masts and bank resources and warn kin and send out signals to wasps to come out and save them from attacks” (Power p.430).

She tried to make people aware of this. But as mentioned earlier, the world didn’t care. They rejected her idea. “Four months later, the journal that ran the piece prints a letter signed by three leading dendrologists. The men say her methods are flawed and her statistics problematic. The defenses of the intact trees could have been activated by other mechanisms. Or these trees might already have been compromised by insects in ways she didn’t notice. The letter mocks the idea that trees send each other chemical warnings” (Powers p.132).

This is how the world treats the people who take an effort to care for Nature. Patricia was ridiculed for the discovery that trees communicate with each other through chemical signals. This had badly affected her, this somehow dragged her to depression, but still she spent her days inside the forest, experimenting with trees which later took her to a somewhat brighter day. People started believing her findings.

“Wester ford discovers how trees communicate with each other and react to their environment. Her findings were initially rejected by the scientific community as an embarrassing misunderstanding of natural selection. Later her work is reinstated and becomes generally accepted through her bestselling book “*The Secret Forest*” (Herforth et.al 44).

Set in the enigmatic backdrop of the Sundarbans, where the boundaries between land and water, humans and other beings, become indistinct, *The Hungry Tide* delves into the profound consequences of our relationship with Nature. Sundarbans serve as a powerful symbol of this symbiotic Nature of things. This breathtaking setting is brought to life as a landscape that mirrors the traits of its inhabitants, showcasing the inseparable relationship between humans and natural world. Asha Kandelwal notes that “the Bengal tigers that sneak through the mangroves, the tides that can come in and go out, and the cyclones that can abruptly alter one’s route in life are all depicted by Ghosh in detailed detail” (Kandelwal p.337) Ghosh describes Sundarbans as a resilient ecosystem that defiantly adapts, responds and withstands the onslaught of human-induced activities. There is an incident involving the killing of a Bengal tiger.

“...directly in front of them, a few hundred meters away, was a small mud walled structure with a thatched roof. More than a hundred people had gathered around this little hut, most of them were men and many were armed with sharpened bamboo poles: these they were plunging into the hut, over and again. Their faces were contorted in such a way that they seemed to be in the grip of both extreme fear and uncontrollable rage. Many of the women and children in the crowd were shrieking, Maar! Maar! Kill! kill!” (Ghosh p.315).

In such a situation, anyone encountering this predicament might act similarly to locals. However, it is crucial to question why such situations are being created. The villagers attacked animals with spears and other rudimentary weapons. Although killing of the tiger was deemed necessary at that moment for human survival, it serves as a poignant reminder of the consequences of human encroachment into the forest’s space. This parallels the reaction of the refugees to the government policies that forced them to flee their homeland. Similarly, non- human entities like tiger and crocodiles are compelled to react against human activities encroaching upon their habitats and



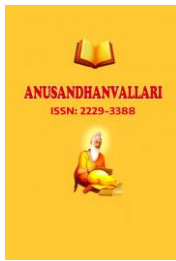
threatening their survival. In both cases their reactions, responses, resistance can be viewed as desperate attempts to reclaim their space, resources and agencies in the face of oppressive forces. The tiger's attack akin to the refugee's resistance is a powerful reminder of the need to recognize, protect and respect the rights and boundaries of all creatures. Similar incident can be cited in *The Overstory*, Mimi and her family went camping near Slough Creek, while they were busy with their own chores a bear approaches and everyone ran and got into the car except her father. And the bear came close to him, and he started speaking to the bear and it soon left him. Mimi was astonished by seeing this and she asked him what he was saying to the bear. "Apologize! I tell him, people very stupid. They forget everything- where they come from, where they go. I say, don't worry. Human beings leaving this world, very soon" (Powers p. 44). We are supposed to ask forgiveness to other species for encroaching onto their land and complaining when they try to get into our habitat. We wanted the animals, birds and all other species to be silent witnesses of our encroachment and settlement in their habitat. We have set proper boundaries to all other species. They are not supposed to cross their boundaries; we can't even imagine a wild animal encroaching into our fences. There is nothing wrong in that. But the same goes with them also, and when their turn comes and they invade our space, we can't suffer their invasion. This is what happened in Morichjhapi.

"Morichjhapi, said Nilima, was a tide country island, a couple of hours from Lusibari by boat. It fell within a part of the Sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation but unlike many such islands it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland" (Ghosh p. 124).

Everything turned topsy turvy when a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi. Morichjhapi was a protected forest reserve. But in this place, where there had been no inhabitants before, there were now thousands, almost overnight. Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built badhs and put up huts" (Ghosh p. 124). On this case, we can't fully blame the people who settled in this reserved area, because the officials promised them. And the sad part is the officials no longer remember those promises. "Earlier that year a left front ministry had taken power in West Bengal and the refugees may have assumed that they would not face much opposition from the state government. But this was a miscalculation: the authorities had declared that Morichjhapi was a protected forest reserve, and they had proved unbending in their determination to evict the settlers" (Ghosh p. 125).

This is purely injustice, what they could have done is that, integrating local communities into the management of ecosystem. They should have given them the awareness and guidelines to protect, regenerate and manage forest resources in a better way. And if it is a critical wildlife habitat, and settlement is in no way possible, we should try to understand that there is no point in protesting, and it is better to leave that place for other species and not only that the Government must make arrangement for their resettlement. But here everything went wrong. Nature mirrors the traits of people living there. "Hungry drove them to fishing and hunting and the results were often disastrous. Many died of drowning and many more were picked off by crocodiles and estuarine sharks. Nor did the mangroves offer much of immediate value to human beings...no day passed without the news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile" (Ghosh p. 85)

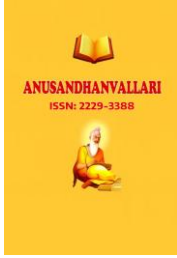
This also shows "... the native people who are considered as a direct threat to the lands and were evicted from their homes to make more space for the tigers" (Ahmad and Rehana p. 342). As this paper focuses on coexistence, this is not actually a symbol of peaceful cohabitation. "Power, hegemony and knowledge, on the other hand, play a key role in conservation discourses, like how the state used 'power' in Marichjhapi to declare the region a reserve forest and prohibit human inhabitation" (Biswas and Channarayapatna p. 171). After all this so-called conservation practices by the Government officials, still, Sundarbans rich in biodiversity, is in the verge of extinction. "One of the key reasons for its failure is the exclusion of natives and their knowledge from conservation efforts...people in power, such as governments and profit - seeking absentee capitalists, have enabled the worst forms of environmental destruction" (Biswas and Channarayapatna p. 171). Coming to *The Overstory*, in order to protect the redwood trees, people joined their hands and created a ring-like structure, meaning, any harm on tress



would only happen after killing them. Even here, we can see people in power, behaving in the most inhuman ways just like in *The Hungry Tide*. “Release your hands from whatever restraints...from inside your tubes. If you do not release yourselves within five minutes, we intend to use pepper spray to compel you to comply” (Powers 290). And yes, they did turn that most merciless and heartless words into actions. “The officer with the swab brings it down into the woman’s right eye. He struggles to get a little more into her left. Chemicals pool under the lid and stream down the side of the woman’s tipped – back face. The woman’s moans are pure animal” (Powers 292). Conservation is not about creating a people-free zone, it is all about finding a balance where humans coexist with Nature. If we are ready to mend our ways and look forward to making sustainable choices, Nature would provide for us and we can reap the benefits of a surviving planet. Piya observing and learning the ways in which organisms support each other, when no one crosses the boundaries of others. “She also finds that these dolphins and human beings are helpful to each other in catching fishes” (Ahmad and Rehana p.341). we cannot fully support Morichjhapi people because, “Men has been thinking since long time that Nature exists to fulfill their desire, so they exploit Nature at broad level. As people of Morichjhapi are doing in the novel. They are destroying natural resources to fill their stomach and build houses for living. Overuse of environment resulted of climate change and depletion of natural resources in Morichjhapi” (Bhushan, 2021) Human activities such as deforestation, overfishing, exploitation of natural resources and unchecked urbanisation disrupt the delicate balance of environment, compelling Nature to react to the harm caused. This response can take various forms including landslides, tidal waves and cyclones posing significant threat to human survival. Amitav Ghosh as well as Richard Powers masterfully emphasizes the significance of human and environmental concerns, underscoring the imperative need for sustainable coexistence. Environment conservation means creating a people free ecosystem. That can never be a solution, and it would never result in anything being better, because humans are not outsiders, but part of the great chain of beings and Nature need them. From the humble plankton to the apex predator results in a great chain of being. When a single species vanishes, it threatens the survival of other creatures as everything within this is dependent and interconnected. Hence, mankind should cooperate with other species for a better planet. Humans are important just like all other creatures and Nature does care for every species equally. For this, Nature requires the care and protection of every species living within it. In short, Homo sapiens survival is not a solo act, therefore, mend ways for a better future before it is too late.

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