

Friction between Humans and Natural World in Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

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Abstract:

In this study, an ecocritical examination of Indira Goswami's 2004 novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* will be attempted. The novel's central theme is the ever-increasing friction between humans and the natural world. The narrative serves as a primer for comprehending the presence and absence of ecology in our lives as existed in Assamese culture. Indranath, the future "Gossain" of the "sattra," exemplifies the modern society's issue over environmentalism, which is illustrated through a number of scenarios and personalities. The paper will also address additional pertinent ecological issues, such as illegal commerce and smuggling, development, "Othering," power politics, eco-ethics, land and labour, and nonhuman animals, to name just a few.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Postcolonialism, Environmentalism, Animal Studies, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

With the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have witnessed a rapidly transforming globalised and computerised world that is probing and expanding the Western notions of knowledge and interpretation. This period's new conditions have created more recent opportunities, challenges, and weaknesses. This inclination has facilitated the moulding and reshaping of the modern hypothetical world's 'comprehensive' attempts. As a result, the latter half of the 20th century saw a number of important changes, including feminism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and reader response theories, to name a few. All of these developments were fundamentally movements for resistance, equality, and democracy. Alongside this, there was a big shift away from the "human-centered" ideas of traditional western anthropocentrism and toward nature. According to the Encyclopaedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy only humans have inherent value; all the other natural creatures and things only have contributory value, and human comforts always come before the interests of non-humans and the environment (Callicott and Frodeman 58). This way of thinking made it possible for the Age of Anthropocene, or the Age of Humans, to happen. This is a time when humans have more power, inspiration, and accountability over not only other humans, but also the rest of the world. It also sees "humans" as something novel and important, and its central role as the most important thing in the world (Raffnsøe xii and xiv). Even with this new "human turn," the 1990s saw big steps toward a more eco-conscious generation. This was because people realised that the Earth was "dying," and the US President called the 1990s

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"the decade of the environment." This was after "The Endangered Earth" won the person of the year award from Times Magazine in 1989. (Glottfelty xvi) During this time, the formal approach of Ecocriticism gave the study of ecological issues a structure. Ecocriticism tries to study the dynamic and complicated relationship between humans and the natural world through the different literary stories (Glottfelty xviii). Ecocriticism is a broad term that includes a number of different concerns. This is because the importance and influence of ecology are not limited to local and global levels, but affect the whole planet. Because of this, ecocriticism can be found in most critical fields. The immediate generation produced a lot of academic work, which was a big reason why ecocriticism became popular so quickly. People became more aware of nature and how important it is. Through these kinds of efforts, people have tried to figure out what ecocriticism is all about and what its problems and concerns are. As a new approach that is still making a name for itself, one of its main goals has been to fill in gaps in ecocriticism by using ideas from different but related fields. This has not only helped the approach grow up, but it has also "greened" other important modern theories, such as eco-feminism, deep ecology, social ecology, postcolonial and ecocritical, eco-ethics, and green studies, to name a few.

The combination of postcolonial and ecocriticism is a product of the Second Wave of Ecocriticism, which was distinguished by the publication of Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005). This study effectively extended ecocriticism's concerns from natural compositions in American and British literature to include social, abstract, and hypothetical bounds. Both concepts are, in essence, a debate of protection from a single force, power, and authority, which has been made possible by the few social organisations and structures. In the later decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, counter-stories of the eroticized East were created to shatter and demolish the western figures of governmental issues and depictions. In addition, when the notion of the 'Other' is observed, the West is viewed as the centre of knowledge, history, supremacy, and civilization, and as the absolute Occident, while the East is viewed as uneducated, unpredictable, inferior, and barbaric, and as the relative Orient.

Central to both methods is the notion of "Othering." Nonetheless, the concept was popularised by the renowned postcolonial author Edward Said in his classic work *Orientalism* (1978). It has impacted a number of theories, such as Ecocriticism, which is a counter-narrative to anthropocentrism and can be viewed as a contrast to the concept of postcolonial Eurocentrism, in which people are centred as the absolute and the ecological world is continually 'Othered' (Garrad 23). As a result, these initiatives have paved the way for the "green turn" of postcolonial theory, as proposed by Graham Huggan and Rob Nixon, in which all colonial and imperial difficulties are also ecological and natural issues (Mukherjee 39). Nevertheless, a tight association between the two concepts can be seen throughout history, beginning with the emergence of the colonisation project, which was launched with the purpose of achieving profits through the management and utilization of nature and its finite natural resources. This was intended to satisfy the avid and self-centered desires of humans, which had increased over centuries without regard for the rest of existence. Nature, like the non-Western world, has been socially conditioned through repeated stereotyping, fixation, and complicated discriminatory treatment through a shared ambivalent relationship, wherein culture requires the

presence of nature in order to be acknowledged as superior, while at the same time sharing a hostile relationship with it, as described in both literary and critical texts. As a result, the reading of both postcolonial and ecocriticism as a reference point appears to be a natural progression, as both concepts address similar behaviours, policies, and concerns. It alerts us to the fact that the desire to conquer, dominate, and colonise has been an innate characteristic of our civilization, whether for the nonhuman ecological world or for another racial community through the power politics of the insignificant 'Other'. As a combined concept, it takes the "forms of imperialism and colonialism of both the material environment" (Mukherjee 51), which enables the creation of dialogue between postcolonial and ecocritical, as is visible in the vast majority of global literatures.

In this way, the writings from North East India can be seen as a collection of these kinds of books. Writings from the area still have a lot to do with nature because most of the people who live there are focused on nature. In this paper, I will try to look at how the famous novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (2004) by Indira Goswami, better known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, shows some ecological and postcolonial issues. She was not only a powerful voice that brought Assamese culture and literature to the rest of India, but she was also a social mediator between the militant group United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Government of India with the goal of social and political peace in the region.

The author first published the book in the local language, Assamese, in 1986 with the title *Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah*. In 2004, she translated the book into English so that it could be read by more people around the world. The novel is a typical regional story about the social structure of the "satras" in Assam. In the book, the ecological world is always there and is treated like a major character who not only helps the characters and events grow, but also helps the society as a whole. Even though the story shows how nature and culture are at odds with each other, there are still times when the two socially constructed ideals overlap and change. This shows that the locals have a relationship with nature that is based on respect, love, fear, and the need to protect it. This is because their spiritual beliefs and animism practises have always been linked to the natural world. But as the book goes on, we see how the immediate policies and practises of capitalism, colonialism, globalisation, and modernity change this relationship. By looking at how this relationship has changed, we can see that culture is not only different from nature, but also works against it. This relationship could be seen as the main source of conflict in our cultured world. The character Indranath shows this most clearly at the end of the book, when he goes through a period of extreme physical and emotional turmoil because of the changes in society that drastically change how people relate to nature. He feels sad and helpless, and he shuts up. Through him, we can see how the characters, the "Gossain" family, the "sattra" structure, and the natural world are slowly but steadily losing their balance. In this way, the title of the book is important because it shows how powerful and unstoppable nature is, even though people have tried to control, manipulate, and profit from the ecological world. In the book, we see that everyone is worried about the "howdah," which is a status symbol in a cultured society. But despite knowledge and progress, the "howdah," like the palanquin, is being eaten by moths and turning into "must," which the loved elephant Jagannath of the "Gossain" family of the "Amranga sattra" will destroy in the end. On a political level, the rise of communism, environmental policies, opium, and killing

animals in the name of conservation can be seen as a change of the tide. On the other hand, it could be seen as the end of a social era, since the "Gossains" are losing control of the land and the common labouring men are taking it over. Colonialism and modernization pose a threat to the old social structure, which makes people afraid. The story of the "ruined howdah" can be seen as a metaphor for how powerful and unstoppable nature is and how quickly it takes over humans and their creations. This shows that the idea that nature and culture are two separate things is ridiculous, since nature is everywhere and all parts of the ecological world are important and can't be separated.

In the novel, we also see the alarming worry about the excessive use of opium, which "has eaten up this sattrra, and theft has gone up since its arrival." "Elephant tusks have been taken even from our attic" (Goswami 181). Because of this, the people who live in the "sattrra" have become mostly capitalist because they smuggle opium and illegally trade elephant tusks for ivory. The "Gossain" gave land to the Opium Prohibition Committee Camp to help solve this problem, but it didn't make any positive changes in the community. This shows how deeply rooted corruption is, how bad the justice system is, and how bad the infrastructure is in India. In this new trend, we can see that the nature-loving, nature-fearing, nature-revering community that used to be the norm has turned into a community that treats nature like a machine and doesn't care about it. This is very clear in the relationship between Indranath and Jagannath, the elephant. The elephant was not only his best friend as a child, but also a member of his family. He was the pride of the "Gossain" family. He was a well-trained, smart, and beautiful elephant. This soon changed, though, when Jagannath went crazy and wild. Even though the "divine" Jagannath caused fear and terror in the "sattrra," his first act of destroying crop fields was forgotten. But because people were being killed, the Forest Department made the hunt for Jagannath official. Everyone, including Indranath, kept quiet and did what they were told. This way of thinking is a sign of speciesism, which has been a key part of understanding the complicated relationship between humans and animals that are not humans. It has also been a big part of the animal rights movement. Soon after Jagannath's hunt is announced, Indranath's emotions are shaken, and he loses all hope, happiness, and peace in his life. Many of the conversations between Indranath and the forest officials explain why it was necessary to kill Jagannath. However, we also see the dark truth that the officials want the elephant's tusks because they are a good way to make money. This situation raises a lot of important questions, such as: Are people or animals more important, and why? How do these kinds of decisions get made, and most importantly, is it morally right? Also, it is important to note that Jagannath, the god-honored and beautiful elephant, is now seen as nothing more than a source of utility and money, which has turned him into a thing. Humans and nonhuman animals have an emotional relationship, which is well described in the book. This is mostly because of anthropocentric beliefs and actions, such as increasing encroachment on the wild, environmentalism, unplanned development, and urbanism, which force nonhuman animals to come into the human world to find food, space, and ways to stay alive. This eventually leads to damage to human property, crops, livestock, and loss of human life. This makes people blind with vengeance and makes them kill nonhuman animals without mercy, even though they are unique, important, and necessary because they help keep the environment in balance and help humans live and eat.

Postcolonial-ecocritical studies pay a lot of attention to the idea of place and land, which has a lot of different meanings and stories attached to it. In their 2011 book *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley wrote in the "Introduction" that a place can be "defined geographically, in terms of the expansion of empire; environmentally, in terms of wilderness or urban settings; genealogically, in terms of linking communal ancestry to land; and phenomenologically, in terms of connecting body to space" (4). Few of these ideas about land can be found in the book, where land has become a place of identity, social status, and safety, as well as a source of money, conflict, work, and pride. In the story, we see how the "Gossains" are still fighting on several of their lands, especially in the case of "Marabhitha." This is because the Communists have used their political power to make the workers angry by showing them a brighter future with equal opportunities and development. The Communists then tell the "Gossain" to dig their own land. This voice of resistance, along with the government's plans to set a land ceiling, has caused a lot of trouble in the "sattra." This trouble will reach its peak when Indranath, the future "Gossain" of the "sattra," goes to his land, "Marabhitha," to meet the workers and make peace by giving the farmers their rightful shares.

The novel is a generic reading of a postcolonial-ecocritical point of view, with several realities that overlap and leave room for new ways to understand the story. The story is a social record of history that can be better understood by looking at the characters and the environment. The story shows right away that, like everything else in the world, humans and their cultured world are an important and inseparable part of the ecology. So, co-reading and co-living are important for an ecosystem to be in balance, since nothing can live alone. In fact, if people don't care about the environment for a long time, it can become dangerous, and self-destructive which can lead to the end of the world. In this way, eco-awareness and eco-sensitivity have become important because they can lead to productive and realistic conversations, actions, and policies that can help all living things on Earth live together and stay alive.

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