



# Ecological Migration: An Ecocritical Study of *Padma Nadir Majhi*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**— The study of climate change or environmental humanities have evolved as a new epoch in literature during the latter half of the twentieth century. Many researchers and critics argue that human activities have altered the geographical and environmental aspects of the earth and that it is now impossible to reverse the process. Consequently, cyclones, floods, and other natural disasters have become more frequent and they have contributed to human migration, displacement, and loss of biodiversity. For a few decades, researchers have been studying the consequences of ecological imbalance on the co-existence of humans and animals. Ironically, South Asian novelists and authors have seemingly overlooked this complex phenomenon of climate change in their writing as well. As the sense of climate refugees looms large in the backdrop, this multidisciplinary article explores Manik Bandyopadhyay<sup>2</sup>'s *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1936) from a postcolonial eco-critical perspective in order to understand how a Bangladeshi novel depicts the lives of marginalized people who are fighting for their lives and livelihoods while living on the banks of Padma, one of the largest rivers in the Ganges delta. This paper also delves into postcolonial literary theory to draw conclusions on the observations.



**Keywords**— Anthropocene, Climate Change, Ecological Migration, Ecocriticism, *Padma Nadir Majhi*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1936) by Manik Bandyopadhyay is one of the most acclaimed and accomplished novels in Bengali literature due to the multifaceted literary elements which it elegantly depicts, including the class conflict, hegemonic socio-political condition, Freudian psychoanalysis, and more importantly, environmental concerns. Although written in Bengali, this novel also maintains a wide English readership as a few translators interpreted this into English. For example, Ratan K. Chattopadhyay translated this as *The Boatman of the Padma* (2012) seemingly considering its wide readership and contemporary relevance. In addition, an eponymous Indo-Bangladesh feature film was also produced by

director Goutom Ghosh based on this novel in 1993 that earned many accolades, including the National Film Award for Second Best Feature Film in 1994 (Das, 2022).

Generally speaking, *Padma Nadir Majhi* portrays the struggles of a fishing community who are living in a fictional village called Ketupur on the bank of the river Padma, one of the largest rivers of the Ganges delta. Their boundless hurdles push them to the socio-political periphery where it seems even the gods and goddesses have left them to suffer. The protagonist Kuber, a lowly fisherman who works as a laborer in someone else's boat, resonates with the narrator saying, "God lives in those rich societies. He is never to be found here [Ketupur]". (Nure Saba Tahura, 2022, p. 56) [My Translation]. All these poor

<sup>1</sup> The English translation of *Padma Nadir Majhi* is *The Boatman of the Padma* by Ratan K. Chattopadhyay, published by Orient BlackSwan in January 1, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Both Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay are acceptable spellings for the author's surname. Md. Amir Hossain used the spelling Bandyopadhyay in Social Picture and Livelihood of the Boatmen in Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi: An Ecocritical Study*. Manik Bandyopadhyay is also known as Manik Banerjee.

and marginalized people, however, are awkwardly supported by a Hussein Miah, a *nouveau riche* who owns a mysterious island somewhere in the middle of Padma. As Miah plans to populate his barren island, he forces— not by physical force but a force which the villagers of Ketupur cannot ignore or accept— the inhabitants of Ketupur and nearby villages to be its citizen. Miah shows empathy towards people; he gives them employment and he brings them food. In return, he only wants them to live in his island, Moyna Dweep. Surprisingly, it is not their poverty, lack of decent employment, or lack of food in the mainland, nor it is that unprecedented love from Hussein Miah that encourages them to leave their motherland and settle in Moyna Dweep. As the readers read on, they come to realize that natural calamities also play a role in their migration and displacement. Flood, cyclones, and river erosions are some of the things they face frequently. These unparalleled natural disasters, as the novelist depicts, shape and redirects their lives. The authors of this article believe that it is mainly the ecological imbalance that leads to the migration and displacement of people. This study, unlike other researchers who mostly dealt with class conflict and psychoanalysis on this text, explores the representation of climate change and its effects on the lives of people of Ketupur, with a particular focus on the ecological migration. In doing to, the authors employ postcolonial theoretical and epistemological perspectives into the novel, especially ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism or ecological criticism investigates the global ecological crises as it looms large in the backdrop of our so-called development narratives. According to *Oxford Bibliographies of Ecocriticism: Literary and Critical Theory*, the term "Ecocriticism is a broad way for literary and cultural scholars to investigate the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature, culture, and the physical environment (Gladwin, 2019)". In 1978, William Rueckert first coined the term Ecocriticism in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Following Rueckert's adoption of the term, the first wave of ecocriticism began in the 1980s. Following that, in 1996, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm published *The Ecocriticism Readers: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, which helped to formally introduce the term "ecocriticism" as a recognized discipline of literary and cultural studies (Slovic et al., 2019). The study of ecocriticism is important to understand the natural changes and their consequences in human lives, especially displacement and human migration.

Migration is typically defined as a relocation from one place to another in search of better living conditions. Migration is often willing or sometimes forceful. Ecological migration is often a forceful migration. It is

considered as displacement caused by environmental factors. In an Anthropocene age, the study of ecological migration has attracted many researchers' attention, especially in the African and South Asian regions which are mostly victims of climate change. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) on their article, *Climate Change in South Asia: Strong Responses for Building a Sustainable Future* (2010), shows concern about climate change and its' impact on South Asia. The abrupt increases in urban-rural mobility brought on by climatic changes and other forces will exacerbate the region's infrastructure gaps, social service shortages, and urban management problems (Asian Development Bank, 2010). Besides, sea level rising is an outcome of climate change. According to the article, sea level is expected to increase 45 centimeters by 2050 in Bangladesh, affecting 10%- 15% of the land area and an estimated 35 million people (Asian Development Bank, 2010). The article also stated that "the grave risks posed by sea-level rise could trigger large-scale migration, with ripple effects across borders. (Asian Development Bank, 2010)." Overall, this paper investigates what impacts climate change has on the lives of the characters in the novel. The paper also tries to explore why the villagers went to Moyna Dweep. Is it because of their socio-economic condition in Ketupur or is it the climate change that is accountable for their migration.

## II. PADMA NADIR MAJHI AND CLIMATE CHANGE:

Climate change is now so imminent that it can no longer be ignored. This is also evident in contemporary literature, as an increasing number of authors express their concerns through their writings. Although Marxist philosophy has had a great impact on Manik Bandopadhyay' writing, he also shows his concerns about climate crisis, and *Padma Nadir Majhi* is a great example of this. In *Padma Nadir Majhi*, the author shows how the Padma riverbank residents are divided by class and socio-economic background. The author portrays how the climate crisis and peoples' lives are interlinked in a complicated way. Climate crisis will not just distress one particular individual, rather, it will have an impact on the entire humankind. Intense droughts, rising sea levels, flooding, water scarcity, catastrophic storms, destructive fires, melting polar icecaps, a decline in biodiversity, poverty, and displacement are just a few of the effects of climate change. United nation in a press conference regarding Climate Action defines climate change and stated that "Climate change refers to long term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. These shifts may be natural, such as through variations in the solar cycle. But since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change, primarily due to the burning

of fossil fuels like coal, oil, and gas. (United Nations, n.d.)" Climate change is mainly caused by two major entities; nature and humans. However, humans are damaging nature in such a way that the world is getting polluted every day. As a result, the climate is rapidly changing. Adam Trexler, in *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, commented that "the principal impact is the anthropogenic emission of greenhouse gases, increasing atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide by 30 percent and methane by 100 percent, triggering significant changes in global temperature and climate. (Trexler, 2015)" Nowadays, anthropogenic activities like the burning of fossil fuels and the conversion of land for agricultural purposes are the main contributors to climate change. Anthropogenic impacts have had a cumulative warming effect that is principally caused by the emission of carbon dioxide and increased by the release of other greenhouse gases. To build big infrastructures or industries, humans are cutting down trees. Besides, cars and factories produce poisonous gases for the environment. Unfortunately, humans do not show enough concern about climate change and label all these as 'development'. Similarly, in the novel, due to the background and lack of knowledge in climate change, the characters do not show their concern regarding sudden storm or river erosion. Additionally, the characters in the novel are more relying on God for the natural disasters than climate change. In the text, when the storm hits Ketupur, "women set up pindi<sup>3</sup> in the yards of each home to persuade the storm god to take a seat and ease up a little." (Nure Saba Tahura, 2022, p. 95-96) [My Translation]. The novel also illustrates that many characters suffered greatly due to the sudden storm in Ketupur. In that storm, Aminuddin has lost his entire family except his unnamed daughter and Gopi has severely injured her leg. To intensify the situation of that storm, the narrator described that, "several trees and plants were uprooted, and half of the houses in the village were destroyed." (Nure Saba Tahura, 2022, p. 95) [My Translation] These traumas left a scar on the characters' mind. Consequently, the characters in the novel also want to migrate, hoping for a better life. At the end of the novel, Kuber, the main character, also decides to move from Ketupur to Moyna Dweep. The novel focuses on climate change and its unparalleled impact on both the environment and the lives of characters. Kuber and his fellow fishermen struggle every day to survive and often get a hard time due to natural crises like floods, river erosion, and storms. Not only Kuber but also the entire village suffers the same fate. Many has lost their loved ones and homes. In order to leave behind this traumatic experience, some villagers want to leave the

village and migrate to Moyna Dweep. At first, Moyna Dweep is portrayed as a utopian place where everyone will be treated equally and no disaster can harm them. Eventually, this misconception is also broken when Rasu flew from Moyna Dweep. Rasu is a fisherman like Kuber, who left Ketupur to live a better life. However, Moyna Dweep took away his entire family. It seems like Rasu is shuffling between Moyna Dweep and Ketupur. Like Rasu, the ecological migrators also abandon their birthplace in the hope of a safer place. But the question arises if there is any safe place in this world. This in turn leads to some more questions. The author portrays the river Padma as a mysterious entity and shows how the villagers are adapting to its adversities. In the novel, natural disasters and the effects of climate change have been made worse by anomalous monsoon patterns and frequent but unannounced storms. The wrath of nature forces the characters into a life-or-death struggle. According to the narrator, "as time passes, the earth settles on the bank of the Padma, and new char<sup>4</sup>s may be seen there. However, the chars again submerge in the waters of the Padma." (Nure Saba Tahura, 2022, p. 55) [My Translation] Padma alternates between being the divinity of kindness and taking on a monster avatar that engulfs the lives and livelihoods of the residents. In the novel, the fictional village, Chordanga, Mala's father's village, is the victim of Padma's wrath. Chordanga's villagers have been uprooted as a result of the flooding. The most tragic incident occurs when a mother is sleeping with her one-month-old newborn during the flood, and the child falls and drowns in the water unexpectedly. The mother failed to realize that her child fell into the water and died that night. Both parents are in shock after that incident. When Kuber arrives at Chordanga, he discovers that he is unable to see any dry land. In all his years, Kuber has never before seen anything on this scale. Similarly, the narrator also describes the flood in Ketupur that happened in the rainy season. The harvests were damaged, and the water never rose high enough to reach Pritam Majhi's backyard, which is located on higher land in the village. The water suddenly surged to an extent that for a week, the tree in the backyard was about a foot underwater. In this context, Md. Amir Hossain, in his paper, "*Social Picture and Livelihood of the Boatmen in Manik Bandopadhyay's Padma Nadir Majhi: An Ecocritical Study*" comments that "all boatmen have to rely upon the mercy of the Padma; sometimes the mighty river grasps and devours the lives of the poor communities when the tidal waves blow during the rainy season. (Hossain, 2018)" The aftermath of climate crisis also plays a significant role in human lives. For example, in the novel, the villagers face miserable

<sup>3</sup> A pindi is typically a tiny, low wooden tool used for seating.

<sup>4</sup> lands surrounded by the waters of an ocean, sea, river, or stream;

generally, any extension in a river channel or estuary.

conditions after the flood. Without shelter, both people and animals contracted a variety of illnesses, while others suffered severe injuries. Moreover, most crops have been ruined by the flood, and the narrator fears that "the impending famine brought on by the destruction of Aush<sup>5</sup>'s crops are already beginning to show signs." (Nure Saba Tahura, 2022, p. 90) [My Translation] Moreover, the aftermath of the storm in Ketupur is a surprising turn in the novel. The storm brings out the vicious side of nature and creates a great shift in the characters' lives. Gopi's life turns upside down because of the storm. Kuber and Mala had planned to arrange her marriage with Jugal, but she is severely injured in her right leg during the storm, and Jugal later refuses to marry her. Besides, both Kuber's personal and work life has taken a new turn. Kuber has lost his previous job and began working for Hossain Miya. His entire family goes through mental and economic pressure. The climate crisis influences one's psychological aspect as well. For instance, because of the storm, within a span of two days, Aminuddin lost his entire family except for his daughter. This event leaves a scar on Aminuddin's mind. He wanted to leave the village to forget that traumatic night. Gopi's mental health has also been affected by her external injury and the distressing nights she spent in the hospital. Climate change have been a great impact on the villagers. All villagers lead complex lives through "living in the darkness of ecology" (Hossain, 2018). Throughout the novel, the author describes the catastrophe of climate change like floods, river erosion, or sudden storms that have become the parts and parcel of the characters life and how all living beings are suffering the consequences.

### III. ECOLOGICAL MIGRATION IN *PADMA NADIR MAJHI*:

In *Padma Nadir Majhi*, Manik Bandopadhyay writes about the fisherman community, who lives from hand to mouth and is in a constant struggle with nature. The village is located near the mighty Padma, which is infamous for erosion and the constant shifting of streams. The river dominates the lives of the characters. Padma is the primary source of income for the villagers, but it also takes a great deal from them. Throughout the novel, the author demonstrates the characters' unwillingly escape their birthplace to avoid financial difficulties and natural disasters. It appears that characters like Rasu, Aminuddin, and Kuber are migrating from one location to another as refugees because it is nearly impossible for them to make a decent livelihood in their current location. In the Anthropocene age, many people are migrating due to

climate crisis. Floods, cyclones, and river erosion all have a significant influence on human lives. People are moving, both voluntarily and involuntarily, to escape the environmental crisis. Unfortunately, climate change is a global problem. According to Adam Trexler, due to environmental crisis "over one billion people will face risks from reduced agricultural production" (Trexler, 2015). In near future, this will lead to famine and people will migrate from their motherland to ensure the basic human needs. Additionally, due to climate change, South Asia is in great danger. According to ADB's article, *Climate Change in South Asia: Strong Responses for Building a Sustainable Future*, "Climatic risks such as sea-level rise, rising temperatures, and extreme weather events will amplify the vulnerability of South Asian cities. About 14% of the region's urban population, totaling about 400 million, live in coastal and major river delta areas that are 10 meters or less above sea level. (Asian Development Bank, 2010)" United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines the term refugee and state that, "Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country. (UNHCR, n.d.)" Although in the novel, characters like Rasu and Aminuddin did not cross an international border, they did leave their birthplace for natural conflict and migrated to Moyna Dweep to lead a better life. They can be labeled as "climate refugees". The term "climate refugee" is not usually recognized by the politicians and other organization as they have to take responsibilities regarding that. However, many NGOs and civil society organizations have started to pay attention to this issue and acknowledged that people have been forcibly displaced due to environmental factors that result from climate change and natural disasters, such as earthquakes or floods. Climate change increases challenges, and its impacts continually make pre-existing social, economic, ecological, political, or demographic issues worse. As a result, displacement could rise, and it might become more difficult to find a sustainable solution. According to Adam Trexler "flooding, drought, and water shortages will lead to mass migration and regional conflicts. (Trexler, 2015)" Similarly, in the novel, the characters frequently face natural disasters that create unbearable difficulties in their lives. Climate crisis not only affects their economic lives but also has a huge impact on their mental health. The "Climate Refugees" also leave the place to forget the traumatized past. In the novel, Hossain Mian tries several times to pursue Aminuddin to move to Moyna Dweep. However, Aminuddin has always declined the proposal but the sudden storm in Ketupur changed the decision. The

<sup>5</sup> Aush is the name of a season of rice, which is mainly produced in Bangladesh. It is generally cultivated in July- August cropping

season.



storm takes his wife, son, and home away from him. Luckily, his daughter survives the horror. But Aminuddin's pain is greater than his daughter's life. He desperately wants to forget the traumatic event and finally decided to leave Ketupur, and move to Moyna Dweep. This event indicates that the "Climate Refugees" also migrate to leave their past behind. However, Aminuddin was not sure about settling in Moyna Dweep. Rasul, who is also a refugee like Aminuddin, unwillingly decides to move from his birthplace, Malur Char. Padma has taken away his home and now he is also migrating in Moyna Dweep in the hope of a better life. These incidents show that climate change generates a huge impact on migration. In the near future, it will be one of the major concerns for the world. According to National Geographic "over the last decade, nearly 700,000 Bangladeshis were displaced on average each year by natural disasters, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (McDonnell, 2019)" By realizing the gravity of this topic, Manik Bandyopadhyay intended to aware the readers through his writing. In *Padma Nadir Majhi*, the author mentioned Channar Char, which was heavily flooded a few years ago. Out of fear, a majority of the residents left the land. In the novel, the narrator comments that "the char Padma birthed a long time ago, who knows when she may consume it again." (Nure Saba Tahura, 2022, p. 86) [My Translation] The uncertainty of Padma makes it difficult for the inhabitants to survive there. Therefore, many people shuffle here and there to save their lives. Besides, the characters, Rasul and Aminuddin may have different reasons for their migration, but both of them are victims of the climate change crisis. After reaching there, Aminuddin and Rasul immediately want to return to their village. Unfortunately, they do not have the courage to speak up against Hossain Mian. Ironically, the idea and reality of Moyna Dweep are not the same. The place is nothing like Hossain Mian described. Moyna Dweep has no facilities, rather, the inhabitants of Moyna Dweep are barely surviving. Furthermore, the narrator also draws a parallel scenario between Rasul and Aminuddin. Rasul leaves Ketupur to free himself from poverty. But after reaching Moyna Dweep, his entire family lost the battle with malaria in Moyna Dweep. As a consequence, Rasul comes back to Ketupur to avoid his traumatic experience. On the contrary, Aminuddin has lost his family in Ketupur. The storm leaves nothing for him. Both of them move to places because of climate change, but it seems that none of the places can give any assurance of a secure life and the impact of climate crisis is unescapable. At the end of the novel, Kuber is also determined to move from Ketupur. In Kuber's case, his reasons for the migration might be seen as economic and political, but climate change plays a significant role in it. Hossain Mian tricks Kuber and lures

him with money to trap him. Out of greediness, Kuber also starts to work with Hossain Mian. Kuber helps Hossain Mian to supply drugs in Calcutta. When Kuber realizes that Hossain Mian deceives him, Kuber cannot find any room to escape. Moreover, Rasul also takes revenge on Kuber and blames him for a false accusation of stealing. Kuber knows if he goes back to Ketupur, the police will arrest him. Hossain Mian will also put him in jail to punish him. Therefore, when Kapila suggests moving Moyna Dweep, Kuber agrees with Kapila and decides to migrate there. However, these reasons are only the surface area of Kuber's migration. The climate crisis is a major cause of Kuber's migration. In that storm, Kuber also faces the same fate as the other villagers. He has lost his house, and his daughter was severely injured. Eventually, he had no job and money to feed his family. Jugal also declines to marry his daughter after the accident. In that dark time, Hossain Mian helps him financially. He gives Kuber a job as a boatman. Slowly, Kuber got involved in this darkness. It is quite noticeable that this catastrophe changes Kuber's life upside down. In short, all the characters' lives were changed after the storm. Some of them chose to stay and some decided to go.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* offers, among other things, an interesting insight into the coexistence of humans and Nature. Although the characters in the novel struggle due to their socio-economic and political status, their suffering intensifies due to the climate change crisis and environmental issues. As the significant characters move from their homeland to Moyna Dweep, the ecological migration becomes very prominent in the novel. Ahead of his time, Manik Bandyopadhyay portrays a contemporary vision on the effects of climate change which is to become more embedded into the lives of people of this region. The novelist subtly illustrates the horror of climate change for postcolonial readers. The novel also examines how the climate crisis is affecting society on a micro level, as well as why the characters have no choice but to leave their homeland. Gopi's injury, the migration of the characters, floods, and storms are the burning examples of climate change. The author also demonstrates how a sudden storm can drastically alter an entire community. All the villagers witness the wrath of nature and suffer its consequences. The psychological challenges faced by the characters in determining whether to leave or stay are also evident in the novel. It is quite evident that the characters do not wish to leave their home, but due to natural disasters, they are forced to migrate. However, no matter where they go, they cannot escape the grasp of climate change. It appears that no land is safe from natural disasters, and humans would obviously be displaced from their home.

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