



# Climate Change Adaptation And Human–Nature Negotiation In Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

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## Abstract

Climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges, reshaping ecosystems, livelihoods and patterns of human survival, particularly in vulnerable coastal regions. Literary representations of climate-affected spaces offer critical insights into how communities negotiate environmental uncertainty and adaptation. This paper examines Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) through the conceptual framework of climate change adaptation, arguing that the novel anticipates contemporary climate discourse by portraying adaptive survival strategies in a fragile, climate-sensitive ecosystem. Set in the Sundarbans, a deltaic region increasingly vulnerable to rising sea levels, cyclones and ecological instability, the novel presents adaptation not as a technological solution but as a lived, cultural and ethical practice. Drawing on ecocritical and postcolonial methodologies, this study explores how marginalized communities adapt to environmental uncertainty through indigenous knowledge, mobility and negotiated coexistence with non-human forces. The paper also critiques state-led conservation and development models that fail to account for climate vulnerability and social justice. By foregrounding human–animal conflict, displacement and ecological precarity, *The Hungry Tide* reveals how climate change disproportionately affects the poor while privileging institutional power. The paper argues that Ghosh’s narrative reframes adaptation as an ethical process rooted in humility, resilience and interdependence rather than control. In doing so, the novel emerges as an important literary intervention that deepens our understanding of climate adaptation in postcolonial contexts, where environmental change intersects with historical marginalization and political exclusion.

**Keywords** Climate Change Adaptation, Eco-literature, Sundarbans, Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Environmental Vulnerability.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* occupies a distinctive position in contemporary Indian English literature for its prescient engagement with issues that resonate strongly with present-day climate change debates. Although the novel predates the widespread literary turn to climate fiction, it vividly represents environmental instability, extreme weather patterns and human vulnerability that align closely with climate change realities. Mike Hulme's book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, "there is a real danger that a hyperventilating condition of despair and panic will lead society into making either hubristic and authoritarian responses to climate change." (Hulme 3) Eco-literature concerned with climate adaptation moves beyond representations of environmental degradation to focus on how communities respond, adjust and survive within changing ecosystems. Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans, a region shaped by tidal flux and ecological uncertainty, provides an ideal literary site for examining adaptive strategies in the face of climatic stress. "Thus, the resilience of social systems is related in some (still undefined) way to the resilience of the ecological systems on which social systems depend. This is most clearly exhibited within social systems that are dependent on a single ecosystem or single resource." (Adger 350)

The Sundarbans function in the novel as a climate-sensitive landscape where land and water exist in constant negotiation. The erosion of islands, the unpredictability of tides and the threat of cyclones mirror the effects of rising sea levels and intensified weather events associated with climate change. Human settlements in this region are temporary and mobile, reflecting an adaptive acceptance of impermanence. Rather than resisting environmental change through rigid infrastructure, local communities adjust their livelihoods, movement and expectations according to the rhythms of the tides. This adaptive relationship challenges dominant development models that assume environmental stability and control.

Climate change adaptation in *The Hungry Tide* is most powerfully represented through indigenous ecological knowledge embodied by characters such as Fokir. His intuitive understanding of rivers, currents and animal behaviour enables survival in an unpredictable environment. Unlike scientific models that seek to predict and manage nature, Fokir's knowledge is experiential and flexible, allowing for rapid adjustment to environmental shifts. This form of adaptation aligns with contemporary climate studies that emphasize local knowledge systems as crucial resources for resilience in vulnerable regions. Ghosh presents such knowledge not as primitive but as sophisticated responses to long-term environmental change. In contrast, institutional approaches to environmental management in the novel reveal the limitations of top-down adaptation strategies. Conservation policies in the Sundarbans prioritize ecological preservation without adequately addressing human vulnerability. The displacement of refugees during the Morichjhapi episode demonstrates how climate-sensitive zones become sites of exclusion, where survival strategies of the poor are criminalized. Although framed as environmental protection, such policies fail to recognize the adaptive needs of displaced populations who have already been rendered vulnerable by historical and political forces. This tension exposes the ethical shortcomings of adaptation strategies that ignore social equity.

Human-animal conflict in the novel further complicates the discourse of climate adaptation. As habitats shrink and ecological pressures intensify, encounters between humans and wildlife increase, particularly with the Royal Bengal tiger. These conflicts are not merely ecological but symptomatic of environmental stress exacerbated by climate variability. Ghosh refuses to present adaptation as a harmonious process; instead, it is fraught with risk, loss and moral ambiguity. Survival often requires difficult compromises, revealing that adaptation is as much an ethical negotiation as an ecological one. The character of Piya Roy represents a global, scientific engagement with climate-sensitive ecosystems. Her research on river dolphins reflects international conservation interests increasingly shaped by climate change concerns. Over the course of the novel, Piya's perspective evolves as she recognizes the limitations of detached scientific observation. Her growing reliance on local knowledge underscores the necessity of collaborative adaptation models that integrate science with community experience. Ghosh thus advocates a hybrid approach to climate adaptation that values inclusivity and mutual learning.

The narrative structure of *The Hungry Tide* reinforces the theme of adaptation by emphasizing movement, uncertainty and contingency. Characters are repeatedly forced to adjust their plans in response to

environmental forces beyond their control. This narrative instability mirrors the lived reality of climate-affected communities, for whom long-term certainty is increasingly unattainable. By embedding adaptation into the very form of the narrative, Ghosh transforms climate vulnerability into a central aesthetic and ethical concern. Ultimately, *The Hungry Tide* presents climate change adaptation as an ongoing process rather than a final solution. The novel rejects the fantasy of mastery over nature and instead promotes resilience grounded in respect for ecological limits. Adaptation, in Ghosh's vision, requires acknowledging interdependence between human and non-human worlds and accepting uncertainty as a condition of survival. "Climate change is used to reveal threats to ethnic, national and global security. Arguments revolve around the role of the state, the military and the UN in diffusing these threats." (Hulme 2) This perspective challenges technocratic climate narratives that prioritize large-scale interventions over localized resilience. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* offers a nuanced literary exploration of climate change adaptation rooted in postcolonial ecological realities. By foregrounding indigenous knowledge, exposing the inequities of conservation-driven displacement and portraying adaptation as ethical negotiation, the novel expands the scope of climate-focused eco-literature. Ghosh's work reminds readers that effective adaptation must address not only environmental change but also the social and political structures that shape vulnerability. In an era of escalating climate crises, *The Hungry Tide* remains a vital text for understanding how literature can illuminate adaptive possibilities grounded in justice, humility and coexistence.

### Works Cited

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