



Ecology, Displacement And Environmental Ethics In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) as a significant work of eco-literature that foregrounds the intricate relationship between human life, non-human species and fragile ecosystems. Set in the Sundarbans, one of the most ecologically sensitive regions in the world, the novel portrays nature not as a passive backdrop but as a dynamic, unpredictable force that shapes human existence. Drawing on ecocritical theory, this study explores how Ghosh interrogates anthropocentrism, environmental ethics and the politics of conservation. The novel highlights the tensions between scientific conservation, indigenous ecological knowledge and the survival needs of marginalized communities. By weaving together narratives of displacement, human-animal conflict and environmental vulnerability, *The Hungry Tide* challenges dominant environmental discourses that often exclude subaltern voices. The paper argues that Ghosh expands the scope of eco-literature by situating ecological concerns within postcolonial realities, revealing how environmental preservation can become a tool of power and exclusion. Through its emphasis on coexistence rather than domination, the novel calls for an inclusive ecological consciousness that recognizes both human and non-human agency. In the context of

contemporary climate crises and ecological displacement, *The Hungry Tide* emerges as a vital literary intervention that redefines environmental responsibility and ethical engagement with nature.

Keywords

Eco-literature, Ecocriticism, Environmental Ethics, Sundarbans and Postcolonial Ecology.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* occupies a crucial position in contemporary Indian English literature for its sustained engagement with ecological concerns and marginalized human experiences. Eco-literature, broadly defined, explores the relationship between literature and the physical environment while questioning human-centered perspectives that dominate cultural narratives. Ghosh's novel exemplifies this approach by situating its story in the Sundarbans, a region characterized by tidal volatility, mangrove forests and endangered species. The unstable geography of the Sundarbans disrupts conventional notions of human control over nature and exposes the vulnerability of communities that inhabit this liminal space. By foregrounding ecological instability alongside social and political conflict, the novel demonstrates how environmental crises are inseparable from questions of power, survival and identity.

The Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* function as a living presence rather than a static setting. The constant movement of tides erases boundaries between land and water, undermining the illusion of permanence that human settlements rely upon. Ghosh presents nature as indifferent to human aspirations, capable of sudden destruction through floods, storms and animal attacks. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell examines the environmental imagination in literature and explores what some of the consequences might be for literary studies "of attempting to imagine a more 'ecocentric' way of being" in the world. (*The Environmental Imagination* 1) Before "we can address today's environmental problems," Buell suggests, we need to find "better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it." (*The Environmental Imagination* 2) The river, the forest and the tides actively shape the lives and deaths of the characters, reminding readers of the limits of human dominance. Such representation challenges romanticized visions of nature and instead emphasizes ecological realism grounded in unpredictability and risk.

One of the central ecological tensions in the novel emerges through the conflict between wildlife conservation and human survival. The Sundarbans are home to the endangered Royal Bengal tiger, an animal revered symbolically yet feared by local inhabitants. Ghosh refuses to idealize conservation practices that prioritize animal life while neglecting human suffering. The frequent tiger attacks on villagers expose the ethical contradictions within state-sponsored conservation policies. While the tiger is protected as a national symbol, the lives of impoverished fishermen and settlers are treated as expendable. "the environmental movement in India, a country with an ecological diversity comparable to the U.S., but with a radically dissimilar cultural and social history." (Guha 1)

Through the character of Piya Roy, a marine biologist, Ghosh introduces scientific ecological knowledge grounded in global conservation discourse. Piya's concern for the preservation of river dolphins reflects a Western scientific approach that values data, classification and institutional protection. In contrast, Fokir embodies indigenous ecological knowledge acquired through lived experience and intimate interaction with the environment. Fokir's understanding of tides, rivers and animal behavior is intuitive and non-verbal, challenging the dominance of formal scientific epistemologies. The novel does not privilege one form of knowledge over the other; instead, it suggests that sustainable ecological practice must emerge from dialogue between scientific expertise and indigenous wisdom. This synthesis aligns with ecocritical arguments that call for plural ecological perspectives rather than universalized environmental solutions.

The political dimension of eco-literature becomes particularly evident in the novel's representation of the Morichjhapi massacre. The violent eviction of refugees from Morichjhapi Island in the name of forest conservation reveals how environmental policies can be used to justify state violence. These refugees, displaced by historical and political forces, seek survival in an ecologically protected zone, only to be declared illegal occupants. Ghosh exposes the irony of conservation efforts that prioritize forests over human lives, thereby transforming environmental protection into an instrument of exclusion. As Rob Nixon argues, "discounted as political agents, discounted as long-term casualties of what..." (Nixon 2) In *The Hungry Tide*, this slow violence manifests through displacement, starvation and erasure from official histories.

By integrating subaltern voices into an eco-literary framework, Ghosh challenges dominant narratives that separate environmental issues from social justice. The novel foregrounds characters who exist at the margins of both ecological and political systems, revealing how environmental vulnerability is intensified by poverty and statelessness. This intersection of ecology and subalternity situates *The Hungry Tide* within postcolonial ecocriticism, a field that interrogates how colonial histories and global inequalities shape environmental discourse. Ghosh's narrative suggests that true ecological responsibility cannot ignore human suffering or cultural context. The ethical vision of *The Hungry Tide* ultimately rests on the principle of coexistence rather than mastery. The novel resists solutions based on absolute control over nature, emphasizing instead adaptability, humility and respect for ecological limits. Human survival in the Sundarbans depends on recognizing the agency of the natural world and learning to live within its rhythms. This perspective resonates strongly in an era marked by climate change, rising sea levels and ecological displacement. By portraying nature as both nurturing and destructive, Ghosh compels readers to reconsider simplistic environmental narratives and confront the moral complexities of conservation.

In conclusion, *The Hungry Tide* stands as a powerful work of eco-literature that expands the scope of environmental writing in the Indian English literary tradition. Through its vivid depiction of the Sundarbans, its nuanced exploration of human-animal conflict and its critique of exclusionary conservation practices, the novel demonstrates that ecological issues are deeply entwined with social and political realities. Ghosh's eco-literary vision calls for an inclusive environmental ethics that recognizes

the interconnectedness of humans, non-human species and ecosystems. As ecological crises continue to shape the contemporary world, *The Hungry Tide* remains an essential text for understanding the ethical and cultural dimensions of human engagement with nature.

Works Cited

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