



VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: NONHUMAN AGENCY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE HUNGRY TIDE AND GUN ISLAND

Brunda.R,

Head, Assistant Professor,
Department of English

MMK &SDM Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Mysuru

ABSTRACT

*In the era of the Anthropocene, literature increasingly interrogates the entanglement of ecological degradation and social injustice. Amitav Ghosh, through his novels *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, reconfigures climate fiction by granting agency to marginalized nonhuman entities such as tigers, tides, snakes, storms, and mythic forces. These works move beyond anthropocentric paradigms to present the Sundarbans as a multispecies contact zone shaped by colonial histories, neoliberal exploitation, and climate vulnerability. Drawing upon postcolonial ecocriticism, deep ecology, and posthumanist theory, this paper argues that Ghosh's narrative ecologies expose the intersection between ecological violence and social marginalization. By amplifying nonhuman voices alongside displaced refugees, fishers, and migrants, the novels advocate an ethics of interspecies solidarity. The paper further examines the pedagogical relevance of such narratives in fostering inclusive and socially responsive higher education in India. Through mythic realism and transnational climate imaginaries, Ghosh positions literature as a transformative tool for ecological consciousness and social justice.*

Key Words

Anthropocene; Nonhuman Agency; Postcolonial Ecocriticism; Climate Fiction; Social Justice.

INTRODUCTION

The Anthropocene has compelled literary scholars to reconsider the boundaries between human and nonhuman life. Climate fiction (cli-fi) increasingly portrays ecological crisis not merely as environmental catastrophe but as a deeply political and ethical issue. Within this context, Amitav Ghosh emerges as one of the most significant literary voices interrogating climate change, colonial modernity, and social inequity.

Set largely in the ecologically fragile Sundarbans delta, *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* decenter human dominance by foregrounding nonhuman forces as historical agents. The tides, mangroves, Royal Bengal tigers, serpents, and cyclones are not passive backdrops; they actively shape destinies, disrupt hierarchies, and demand ethical accountability.

Ghosh's narrative strategy challenges anthropocentrism while simultaneously critiquing state violence, refugee displacement, and neoliberal environmental policies. In doing so, he reframes climate change as a multispecies crisis where ecological and social injustices are inseparable.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper seeks:

1. To examine representations of nonhuman agency in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*.
2. To analyze the intersection of ecological violence and social marginalization in the Sundarbans.
3. To explore myth and indigenous epistemologies as counter-discourses to colonial modernity.
4. To situate Ghosh's fiction within postcolonial ecocriticism and posthumanist theory.
5. To evaluate the implications of these narratives for inclusive higher education in India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ecocriticism has evolved significantly from its early focus on nature writing to broader engagements with environmental justice and posthuman ethics. Arne Naess's deep ecology emphasizes biocentric equality, arguing that all living beings possess intrinsic value. Similarly, Paul Taylor advocates respect for nature as a moral obligation.

However, postcolonial ecocriticism expands this framework by examining how environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities in formerly colonized regions. Scholars argue that ecological destruction is intertwined with colonial extraction and capitalist exploitation.

Amitav Ghosh's critical work, especially *The Great Derangement*, critiques the failure of contemporary literature to adequately address climate change. His fiction responds to this lacuna by integrating myth, migration, and ecological catastrophe within compelling narrative frameworks.

Scholarly readings of *The Hungry Tide* focus on its depiction of the Morichjhapi massacre and its critique of conservation politics that prioritize wildlife over displaced refugees. Studies of *Gun Island* highlight its transnational scope, connecting climate migration across Venice, Los Angeles, and the Sundarbans. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" becomes particularly relevant in understanding the gradual yet devastating impacts of climate change depicted in the novel. Posthumanist theorists like Val Plumwood challenge human exceptionalism and advocate relational ontologies. Ghosh's fiction resonates with these perspectives by granting narrative agency to nonhuman actors and destabilizing hierarchical binaries between human and nature.

While existing scholarship addresses ecological themes in Ghosh's works, fewer studies explicitly connect nonhuman agency to questions of inclusive pedagogy and social justice in Indian higher education. This paper contributes to that emerging discourse.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Postcolonial Ecocriticism – Drawing on Amitav Ghosh's ideas in *The Great Derangement*, the study links ecological crisis with colonial history, capitalism, and social inequality in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*.

1. **Posthumanism** – Inspired by Donna Haraway, the framework recognizes nonhuman agency (tigers, tides, storms) and challenges anthropocentric perspectives.
2. **Deep Ecology** – Based on Arne Naess, it emphasizes interspecies ethics and connects environmental justice with social justice.

To Explain the Voices from the Margins: Nonhuman Agency and Social Justice in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*:

NONHUMAN AGENCY IN *THE HUNGRY TIDE*:

In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans delta emerges as a living, dynamic entity. The unpredictable tides, shifting islands, and dense mangroves render human settlement precarious. Nature resists domestication and exposes the fragility of human control.

The Royal Bengal tiger occupies a contested space within the novel. For conservationists, it symbolizes biodiversity and national pride. For local villagers, it represents imminent danger and economic threat. This tension reveals the contradictions within environmental policies that marginalize impoverished communities in the name of ecological preservation.

The Morichjhapi episode illustrates how the state violently evicted Bengali refugees under the guise of conservation. Here, ecological rhetoric masks political exclusion. Human and nonhuman lives are entangled within systems of biopolitical governance.

Fokir, the local fisherman, embodies indigenous ecological knowledge. His intuitive understanding of tides and dolphins contrasts sharply with Piya's scientific methodology. This epistemic conflict highlights the marginalization of subaltern knowledge systems. Yet the narrative privileges relational intimacy over detached observation.

The myth of Bon Bibi further destabilizes anthropocentric frameworks. It proposes a moral economy of coexistence where humans and nonhumans share ethical space. Through mythic realism, Ghosh elevates nonhuman agency as a moral force guiding communal survival.

MYTH, MIGRATION, AND MULTISPECIES JUSTICE IN *GUN ISLAND*:

Gun Island expands the ecological concerns of *The Hungry Tide* into a global climate narrative. The legend of Bonduki Sadagar resurfaces as a mythic structure connecting past trade routes to present-day migration crises.

Snakes, spiders, cyclones, and even gunwings function symbolically and materially as agents of disruption. The serpent becomes a transhistorical figure linking colonial mercantile greed with contemporary climate displacement. The novel's transnational settings, Venice, Los Angeles, and the Sundarbans, emphasize planetary interconnectedness. Wildfires in California, floods in Italy, and storms in Bengal are not isolated events but manifestations of global ecological imbalance.

Drawing on Rob Nixon's "slow violence," the narrative demonstrates how climate change silently devastates marginalized communities. Migrant workers become climate refugees, their journeys shaped by forces beyond human governance. Ghosh thus critiques capitalist ecocide and challenges human exceptionalism. Nonhumans are not metaphors alone; they actively shape narrative outcomes and ethical realizations.

ECOLOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:

Ghosh's novels reveal that ecological injustice mirrors social inequity. Refugees in the Sundarbans, migrant laborers in Europe, and marginalized fishers all inhabit precarious spaces shaped by climate vulnerability. Conservation policies often privilege charismatic megafauna over impoverished humans, exposing contradictions within environmental governance. The tiger becomes emblematic of selective compassion. Through shifting focalization and polyphonic narration, Ghosh constructs a democratic narrative form that accommodates multiple species and voices. This literary strategy resists hierarchical binaries and imagines justice as relational rather than exclusionary.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION:

Ghosh's climate fiction offers significant pedagogical value. Teaching these novels within Environmental Humanities curricula fosters ecological literacy and ethical awareness.

Such texts encourage students to:

- Recognize intersections between environment and social justice.
- Appreciate indigenous knowledge systems.
- Develop empathy for climate migrants.
- Question anthropocentric worldviews.

In the Indian context, particularly in climate-vulnerable regions, these narratives resonate deeply with lived realities. Integrating cli-fi into higher education aligns with interdisciplinary approaches advocated in contemporary educational reforms. Digital tools, interactive mapping, climate simulations, and multimedia storytelling can further enhance inclusive engagement, especially for diverse and marginalized learners.

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh reimagines the Anthropocene as a multispecies crisis demanding ethical reorientation. In *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, nonhuman entities emerge as active participants in historical and moral processes. By intertwining ecological degradation with refugee displacement, colonial legacies, and capitalist exploitation, Ghosh exposes the structural roots of climate injustice.

His narrative ecologies destabilize anthropocentric hierarchies and advocate interspecies solidarity. Myth and realism converge to produce a literary mode that is both aesthetically compelling and politically urgent.

For higher education, these novels provide a framework for cultivating ecological consciousness, empathy, and inclusive justice. In foregrounding marginalized human and nonhuman voices, Ghosh's fiction calls for a redefinition of community, one that transcends species boundaries and envisions sustainable futures grounded in ethical interdependence.

REFERENCES

- Amitav Ghosh. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- *The Hungry Tide*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.
- *Gun Island*. Penguin Random House India, 2019.
- Naess, Arne. "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement." *Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 1–4, 1973, pp. 95–100.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
- Taylor, Paul W. *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. Princeton University Press, 1986.
- Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2015.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.