
Navigating the Tide of Eco-Criticism: A Study on Human-Nature Dynamics and Social Justice in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

This paper explores ecocriticism by examining the relationship between human and non-human voices in literature, particularly how humans interact and interpret nature. It highlights the growing disconnect between mankind and the environment, stressing that no institution or policy alone can bridge this gap unless humans learn to appreciate and bond with nature beyond mere control. The study of ecocriticism in literature helps in understanding how environmental issues are portrayed, contributing to a more harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. Focusing on the Sundarbans, this article delves deep into a narrative where nature plays a dominant role, interwoven with human stories. The novel explores the ecological concerns of the region through the characters of Piyali, a scientist, Fokir, an unlettered fisherman, and Kanai, a translator, while reflecting on the Sundarbans' history, mythology, and environment. Nature, depicted as both nurturing and hostile, emerges as a powerful force, particularly through storms and tigers. The novel emphasizes the need for ecological balance, blending cultural, linguistic, and environmental elements to foster a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between humans and the natural world.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Sundarbans, human-nature relationship, fragile ecosystem, materialism and pride, natural disasters

Introduction:

Amitav Ghosh, a prominent postcolonial writer of contemporary times, has been widely recognized for his postmodern and postcolonial narratives. However, a closer examination of his novels reveals a strong focus on environmental concerns, showcasing his eco-centric vision that perceives the world as a deeply interconnected and composite whole. Ghosh stands out among Indian writers in English for his

ability to construct nature as a vital character in his works, blending legends, myths, history, and personal experiences. His methodical and philosophical approach to writing brings forth a profound meditation on the human condition, where human emotions are intimately intertwined with environmental and ecological issues.

In a country like India, where ecosystems are as diverse as the Himalayas in the north and the Indian Ocean in the south, and where human cultures are closely linked with their surrounding environments, the relationship between nature and society plays a very critical role. Ghosh's novels explore this deep interconnection between the human, natural, and animal worlds, illustrating that nature and culture are inseparable. His fiction often shows how nature both nurtures and challenges human life, especially in the context of vulnerable communities that must accept the blessings and adversities of their natural surroundings.

This dynamic is particularly evident in *The Hungry Tide*, a novel set in the Sundarbans, an intricate and perilous ecosystem where freshwater and saltwater converge and where life and survival are dictated by the rhythms of nature. Ghosh takes readers deep into this tidal country, vividly portraying how the lives of the inhabitants are shaped by the powerful forces of nature, which can be both a protector and a destroyer. Storms, tigers, and crocodiles emerge as manifestations of nature's hostility, while the human residents of the Sundarbans must adapt to survive within this precarious balance.

At the heart of *The Hungry Tide* lies a rich exploration of historical and social themes that extend beyond ecological concerns. Ghosh reinterpreted historical events, such as the mass migration of Hindus from East Bengal to West Bengal during the partition of India in 1947. He sheds light on the plight of upper-class Hindus who fled persecution by Muslim tenants, seeking refuge with wealthy friends and family in Calcutta, while lower-class Hindus "squatted" on public and private lands. Ghosh masterfully interweaves this disturbing history with present-day exploitation, showing how past events continue to shape contemporary social and economic realities.

The novel also touches on the tragic events surrounding the Morichjhapi massacre, where Bangladesh refugees, having fled from the Dandakaranya refugee camps, sought a better life in the Sundarbans. Their dreams were met with brutal repression, an almost forgotten episode of history that Ghosh resurrects to highlight the social injustices faced by these marginalized groups. Through the experiences of characters like Piyali, a cetologist studying dolphins, and Kanai, a translator, the novel transcends a simple environmental narrative, delving into themes of social disparity, migration, and transnational struggles.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh presents a metaphorical erasure of boundaries—between land and water, between past and present, between the familiar and the uncanny. The novel's eco-centric themes, combined with its focus on human

suffering and social injustice, create a powerful commentary on the interconnectedness of ecological, historical, and social forces. Ghosh's vision of a secular world free from divisions and boundaries resonates with a Marxist critique of capitalist exploitation, as he brings to the forefront the unsolved suffering of rural poor and marginalized populations. This novel, through its nuanced portrayal of the relationship between humans and their environment, compels readers to reconsider the traditional boundaries that separate nature, society, and history.

Objectives:

- **To Explore the Relationship Between Humans and Nature:** Analyze how *The Hungry Tide* portrays the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and the environment, emphasizing nature's dual role as both nurturer and destroyer.
- **To Examine the Tension Between Conservation and Social Justice:** Discuss how Ghosh critiques environmental policies that prioritize wildlife protection over the well-being of marginalized communities, particularly in the context of the Morichjhapi refugees.
- **To Compare Scientific and Indigenous Knowledge:** Explore the contrast between Piya's scientific approach to conservation and Fokir's intuitive understanding of the Sundarbans, highlighting the importance of blending these perspectives for effective environmental protection.

Hypothesis:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* argues that a sustainable and equitable approach to environmental conservation must recognize the deep interconnectedness between human communities, particularly marginalized groups, and the natural world. The novel critiques traditional conservation practices that prioritize wildlife protection at the expense of vulnerable populations, advocating for a more inclusive, ethically grounded form of environmentalism that balances scientific knowledge with indigenous wisdom. This hypothesis reflects the novel's focus on eco-criticism, social justice, and the blending of different forms of knowledge in navigating environmental challenges.

Methodology:

The methodology for this article involves a detailed close reading and textual analysis of *The Hungry Tide*, focusing on how Amitav Ghosh portrays the intricate relationship between humans, nature, and animals within the Sundarbans. The analysis will be organized around core themes, including the human-nature relationship, the tension between environmental conservation and social justice, and the contrast between scientific and indigenous knowledge. Historical and political contextualization will provide background on real events like the Morichjhapi massacre, highlighting their impact on the novel's ecocritical narrative. An interdisciplinary approach will draw on eco-criticism, environmental humanities, and postcolonial studies to examine Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans as a microcosm

of global environmental crises. Comparative analysis with other environmental literature will further situate Ghosh's contributions to ecocritical discourse. The methodology will also involve critical engagement with existing secondary sources to support or challenge the article's interpretations. Finally, the conclusion will synthesize findings to propose a nuanced understanding of Ghosh's eco-criticism and its broader implications for contemporary environmental and socio-political thought.

Discussion and Analysis:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* offers a profound exploration of eco-criticism, addressing the complex relationship between humans, nature, and animals within the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans. The novel vividly captures the natural world as an active force, both nurturing and destructive, and portrays human existence as inextricably linked to the surrounding environment. Set in an archipelago of islands stretching from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the Meghna River in Bangladesh, Ghosh uses this precarious region to illustrate the continuous struggle for survival that the local inhabitants face.

The novel's central characters—Piyali Roy, a cetologist visiting the Sundarbans to study marine mammals; Kanai Dutt, a Delhi-based translator; and Fokir, a local fisherman—provide varying perspectives on the intricate dynamics of the natural world and the human condition. Piya's scientific curiosity, Kanai's urban skepticism, and Fokir's deep, instinctual connection to the environment are skillfully juxtaposed, demonstrating the various ways individuals interact with nature based on their knowledge, background, and circumstances.

One of the novel's core themes is the helplessness of humans before natural disasters. Life in the Sundarbans is depicted as being shaped by the forces of nature, with the residents forced to adapt to the unpredictable and often hostile environment. The tidewaters, mangrove forests, and wildlife, including the Bengal tigers, create a setting where survival is a daily challenge. Ghosh emphasizes that nature is both a protector and destroyer, providing sustenance through fishing and farming but also claiming lives through storms, floods, and animal attacks.

The novel's environmental focus is highlighted through Piya's research on the endangered Gangetic dolphins. Her interactions with Fokir, who possesses an intuitive understanding of the tides and the sea, further illustrate the profound connection between humans and nature. Despite their cultural and linguistic differences, Piya and Fokir form a deep bond rooted in their shared love and respect for the natural world. This relationship underscores the novel's ecocritical message, showing that humans, regardless of their background, must cooperate with nature to survive.

Fokir's tragic death in a violent storm while saving Piya is a poignant reminder of nature's dual role as both life-giver and destroyer. His death serves as a symbolic representation of the constant threat that nature poses to those who live in

close proximity to it. The novel's ending, however, is not entirely pessimistic. Piya, motivated by Fokir's sacrifice, establishes a conservation project in his name, focusing on the dolphins and the delicate ecosystem of the Sundarbans. She also pledges to support Fokir's wife and son, showing that even in the face of tragedy, there is room for hope and positive action.

The environmental issues Ghosh raises are closely intertwined with the novel's political and social dimensions. The history of the Sundarbans is marked by the displacement of marginalized communities, particularly during the partition of India in 1947, when Hindu refugees from East Bengal sought safety in West Bengal. The novel delves into the history of the Morichjhapi massacre, where refugees from Bangladesh, having fled the Dandakaranya refugee camps, settled in the Sundarbans only to be brutally evicted by the Left Front government of West Bengal in 1979.

This historical context is crucial to understanding the social and economic struggles faced by the rural poor in the region. Ghosh's depiction of the refugees' plight is a powerful commentary on the failure of government policies to protect the most vulnerable members of society. The government's decision to prioritize the conservation of the Sundarbans' wildlife, particularly the Bengal tigers, over the well-being of human inhabitants, creates a moral dilemma that resonates throughout the novel. Ghosh critiques the way environmental policies are often enforced at the expense of marginalized communities, forcing them to bear the burden of conservation while their own livelihoods are destroyed.

Nilima Bose, Kanai's aunt and a key character in the novel, embodies this conflict. As a social worker running a hospital in Lusibari, she is deeply committed to helping the local people, yet she is also complicit in the government's eviction of the Morichjhapi settlers. Her ambivalence reflects the broader ethical challenges of balancing environmental conservation with social justice. Nilima's refusal to help the settlers, whom she dismisses as "squatters," highlights the hypocrisy in the government's approach to environmental protection, where the needs of the wealthy and powerful take precedence over the rights of the poor.

Through the experiences of characters like Kusum, a rebellious woman who joins the resistance against the forced evacuation, and Moyna, Fokir's wife who fears for her family's future, Ghosh illustrates the deep-rooted social inequalities that persist in the Sundarbans. The novel portrays the region as a "disputed terrain," where the struggle for survival extends beyond the natural world to encompass political and economic oppression. The local people's dependence on the land and sea for their livelihoods is constantly threatened by government policies that prioritize wildlife conservation over human welfare.

The novel also explores the impact of environmental degradation on the Sundarbans' ecosystem. The overfishing of prawns using fine nylon nets, which capture even the eggs of other fish, is a prime example of how economic exploitation

leads to ecological collapse. The depletion of the keystone species, such as the crabs that maintain the health of the mangrove forests, threatens to destabilize the entire ecosystem. Ghosh's detailed descriptions of the changing landscape—the shrinking rivers, vanishing birds, and dying forests—serve as a stark warning about the consequences of unchecked environmental exploitation.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh presents the Sundarbans as a microcosm of the global environmental crisis. The novel raises important questions about the ethics of conservation and the responsibility of governments and international organizations to protect both human and non-human life. Ghosh challenges the conventional view of nature as a romanticized, pristine wilderness, instead portraying it as a site of conflict and struggle where the needs of different species and communities often clash.

The novel also highlights the limitations of scientific knowledge in addressing complex environmental issues. Piya's scientific expertise is valuable, but it is Fokir's local knowledge and deep connection to the environment that ultimately prove more effective in navigating the dangers of the Sundarbans. This tension between scientific and indigenous knowledge reflects a broader theme in the novel: the need for a more holistic approach to environmental conservation that takes into account the voices and experiences of marginalized communities.

Ghosh's eco-criticism is not limited to the portrayal of environmental degradation and social injustice; it also extends to the exploration of broader philosophical questions about humanity's place in the natural world. The novel blurs the boundaries between humans, animals, and the environment, suggesting that all forms of life are interconnected and interdependent. The Sundarbans, with their fluid borders between land and sea, freshwater and saltwater, serve as a metaphor for the collapse of traditional distinctions between nature and culture.

The novel's ending, with Kanai's newfound awareness of his own complicity in the exploitation of the natural world and the suffering of the poor, reflects Ghosh's call for a more ethical and compassionate relationship with the environment. Kanai's transformation from a detached observer to a more empathetic and engaged individual mirrors the broader journey that Ghosh encourages his readers to undertake. By confronting the harsh realities of environmental destruction and social inequality, *The Hungry Tide* urges readers to reconsider their own relationship with the natural world and to take action in defense of both human and non-human life.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh delves deeply into eco-criticism, presenting a nuanced exploration of the often contradictory relationship between humans and nature. The novel's vivid portrayal of the Sundarbans underscores the urgent need for a more equitable and sustainable approach to environmental conservation—one that recognizes the intricate interconnections among all forms of life and highlights the necessity of social justice in safeguarding vulnerable communities.

However, Ghosh vividly depicts how human materialism and pride lead to attempts to dominate both land and sea, frequently underestimating nature's formidable power. The novel illustrates the tragic outcomes of humanity's efforts to overpower nature, portraying the Sundarbans as a place where residents are perpetually balanced between nature's blessings and adversities. This portrayal of nature as both protector and destroyer mirrors broader global concerns about the exploitation of natural resources. The narrative also critiques how politicians and policymakers, through deliberate neglect, exacerbate environmental crises, emphasizing the need to address the long-term impacts on both human and non-human life. Ghosh's work ultimately calls for a reconceptualization of our relationship with the natural world—one rooted in mutual respect, understanding, and sustainable practices.

Findings:

The findings of the study based on the analysis of *The Hungry Tide* highlight Amitav Ghosh's intricate portrayal of the interrelationship between humans, nature, and animals within the Sundarbans' fragile ecosystem. The novel emphasizes the dual role of nature as both a protector and destroyer, portraying humans as helpless against natural forces. Through characters like Piya, Fokir, and Kanai, Ghosh explores the tension between scientific and indigenous knowledge, the environmental crisis, and the socio-political implications of conservation policies that prioritize wildlife over marginalized communities. The text underscores the necessity for humans to live in harmony with nature, as the exploitation of natural resources and neglect by political powers contribute to global environmental degradation. Applying an ecocritical lens, the article reveals how Ghosh urges a rethinking of humanity's relationship with the natural world and calls for more ethical and sustainable environmental practices.

Conclusion:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* delves deeply into the complex and often contradictory relationship between humans and nature in the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans. The novel vividly illustrates nature's dual role as both nurturing and destructive, emphasizing the critical need for a more equitable and sustainable approach to environmental conservation. Ghosh critiques human materialism and the consequent attempts to dominate natural forces, highlighting the tragic consequences of such endeavors. The portrayal of the Sundarbans' unpredictable and hostile environment underscores the precarious balance residents must maintain between nature's blessings and adversities.

Through its rich depiction of the region and its people, the novel reveals the profound interconnectedness among all forms of life, underscoring the importance of integrating social justice into environmental policies. Ghosh critiques how political and economic decisions often exacerbate environmental crises and disproportionately affect marginalized communities. His narrative calls for a reevaluation of humanity's

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relationship with the natural world, advocating for mutual respect, understanding, and sustainable practices. By presenting the Sundarbans as a microcosm of broader global issues, *The Hungry Tide* urges readers to reconsider their role in environmental conservation and to foster a more compassionate and responsible approach to both ecological and social challenges.

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