



## EXPLORING HUMAN-NATURE INTERDEPENDENCE: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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### Abstract

*Ecological critics question how literature represents nature and the complex relationships between human and non-human life. The Hungry Tide (2004) by Amitav Ghosh, a novel, also attempts to examine the interdependence between human life and the natural world within the ecological environment of the Sundarbans. Ghosh's narrative delves deep into the environmental and socio-political challenges faced by local communities living in this fragile delta region, where rich biodiversity and powerful tides are both important and dangerous. Through characters such as Pia, Fokir, and Kanai, the novel explores the tension between scientific research, traditional knowledge systems, and the marginalised's lived realities. Ghosh highlights indigenous practices, oral histories, and cultural beliefs that shape the inhabitants' interactions with their surroundings, thus providing a nuanced representation of ecological consciousness.*

*The Hungry Tide is a powerful recorder of our shared ecological responsibilities and the urgent need for sustainable and equitable practices in the face of global environmental crises. The novel also critiques environmental policies that exploit and highlight issues of displacement, resilience, and survival against ecological uncertainty. The novel also draws attention to the problems of environmental justice and the ethical implications of conservation efforts that ignore local voices. This research paper attempts to explore how literature like Ghosh's plays an important role in reimagining man's place in nature as climate change and environmental degradation increase.*

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism, Sundarbans, Interdependence, Environmental Ethics, Climate Change, Conservation, Anthropocentrism, Ecological Justice, Mangroves, Vulnerability, Ecosystem.*



## Introduction

The environmental crises of the 21st century, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and deforestation, have reshaped human interactions with nature. Literature has become a vital medium for reflecting on these challenges, offering insights into the ethical dimensions of environmental destruction and humanity's role within it. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) stands out as a significant literary response, exploring the delicate and complex relationship between humans and the natural world. Set in the ecologically rich yet volatile Sundarbans, Ghosh's novel examines themes of coexistence, exploitation, resilience, and justice.

The Sundarbans, a vast mangrove delta spanning India and Bangladesh, serves as more than just a backdrop in the novel; it is an active, dynamic force that shapes the narrative. This region, with its tidal rivers, endangered species, and natural disasters, represents ecological instability, urging readers to confront pressing environmental questions about conservation, justice, and survival. This paper analyses how *The Hungry Tide* challenges anthropocentrism and highlights the interdependence between human existence and ecological systems. According to Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), ecocriticism examines how literature represents the natural world and how human-environment interactions are shaped by cultural and political ideologies. Through a narrative that blends scientific, mythic, folkloric, and historical perspectives, Ghosh's novel becomes a critical text for addressing these concerns.

The story's three main characters—Piya Roy, a marine biologist; Fokir, a local fisherman; and Kanai Dutt, an urbane translator—offer diverse views on nature, ranging from empirical knowledge to intuitive understanding and bureaucratic perspectives. Through their interactions, Ghosh explores the limits and potentials of different ways of knowing and relating to the environment. The novel also critiques conservation practices, particularly through the reference to the Morichjhapi massacre in 1979, where hundreds of Bengali refugees were evicted from protected land in the name of environmental preservation. This real-life event illustrates the conflict between environmental policy and human rights, especially for marginalised communities.



Ghosh critiques conservation models that prioritise non-human life at the expense of human rights, advocating for a more inclusive and just ecological ethic. *The Hungry Tide* calls for a deeper understanding of humanity's place in the environment and the need for ethical stewardship in an era of growing environmental uncertainty.

### **Ecocriticism and Its Relevance**

Ecocriticism, as a literary theory, examines how literature engages with the natural world and reflects humanity's ecological consciousness. Cheryll Glotfelty defines it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xix). This approach urges readers to consider how literary texts portray environmental crises. Challenge anthropocentric worldviews and promote moral responsibility toward the non-human world. In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh uses fiction not just to depict nature but to challenge dominant ecological narratives and highlight the complexity of human-nature relationships.

Set in the Sundarbans, a region where land and water are in constant flux, Ghosh's narrative becomes a site of ecological inquiry. The novel resists portraying nature as a passive backdrop; instead, it becomes a force that shapes human lives and histories. As the narrator observes, the tide country is a place where land and water in this region shift so frequently that their boundaries can never be clearly defined (Ghosh, 2019, p. 7). This perpetual transformation underlines the volatility of the region and the fragility of human settlement within it. This portrayal reflects nature's agency and its resistance to human control, a key tenet of ecocritical thought. The terrain is described as hostile: *At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes, and crocodiles.* (Ghosh, 2019, p. 8)

Ghosh highlights human-environment interdependence through Fokir's intuitive knowledge of the tides, contrasting it with Piya's scientific approach, emphasising the value of indigenous understanding.

### **The Sundarbans: A Cradle of Ecological Complexity and Fragility**



The Sundarbans, one of the world's largest and most intricate deltaic regions, spans India and Bangladesh, rich in biodiversity and ecological significance. It is home to species such as the Royal Bengal tiger, Irrawaddy dolphin, and saltwater crocodile. Ghosh vividly captures the region as both awe-inspiring and perilous. He describes the dynamic landscape: *The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland, and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear under water only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily —some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before.* (Ghosh, 2019, p. 7)

In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans' constant flux—marked by cyclones, floods, and tiger attacks—reflects ecological instability and forces human adaptation. Ghosh portrays the region as a vital yet vulnerable ecosystem, where nature shapes human lives and resists control. Ecocritically, the novel highlights the interconnectedness of human and ecological systems, critiquing destructive human activities and urging sustainable, respectful coexistence.

### **Human-Nature Interdependence in *The Hungry Tide***

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* highlights the interdependence of human and non-human life in the fragile Sundarbans ecosystem. Blending science, folklore, and lived experience, the novel contrasts Piyali Roy's scientific perspective with Fokir's intuitive, traditional connection to nature, especially through their shared focus on the Irrawaddy dolphins. As Piya arrives in the Sundarbans to study its rich biodiversity, particularly the Irrawaddy dolphins. She observes that "there were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe. This proliferation of aquatic life was thought to be the result of the unusually varied composition of the water itself" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 131). She also recognises the uniqueness of the region's aquatic ecosystem, describing it as having "hundreds of different ecological niches" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 131) and noting that "These micro-environments were like balloons suspended in the water, and they had their own patterns of flow" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 131).



On the other hand, Fokir, an illiterate fisherman, represents an intuitive, traditional knowledge of nature. His connection to the river and the tides is spiritual and deeply rooted in daily life. This juxtaposition reveals the tension and potential harmony between scientific and indigenous approaches to ecological understanding. Ghosh reinforces the significance of local belief systems through the legend of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess. Her mythology underscores the moral imperative to coexist with nature and shapes the region's cultural and ecological identity: "Bon Bibi" is viewed as the protector of the forest, embodying the region's ethical code regarding human and animal interaction (Ghosh, 2019, p. 107).

The novel's vivid descriptions capture the uniqueness and fluidity of the Sundarbans. As Piya notes while observing the forest, "Looking into it now, she was struck by the way the greenery worked to confound the eye. [...] There was such a profusion of shapes, forms, hues, and textures that even things that were in plain view seemed to disappear, vanishing into the tangle of lines like the hidden objects in children's puzzles" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 159). Nirmal similarly observes the region's instability: "But here, in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 241).

However, life in this ecosystem is also marked by hardship and violence. Hunger is a recurring theme that reflects the vulnerability of both human and animal life: "Hunger drove them to hunting and fishing, and the results were often disastrous. Many died of drowning, and many more were picked off by crocodiles and estuarine sharks" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 85). The dependence on nature for survival often brings people into conflict with wildlife, as shown in a harrowing scene where villagers burn a tiger alive after it kills cattle. The mob's reaction is chilling: "screaming in a kind of maddened bloodlust, Maar! Maar!" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 318). Piya is horrified: "[t]hat's the most horrifying thing I've ever seen—a tiger set on fire" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 319). When she tries to intervene, Fokir stops her, revealing a side of him she hadn't expected. Kanai later explains, "He's not. He's a fisherman—he kills animals for a living" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 321), breaking her romanticised view of Fokir. Kanai's reflection is striking in its moral critique: "Aren't we part of



the horror as well?” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 325). He draws attention to the hypocrisy of feeling empathy for animals while ignoring human suffering.

### **Ghosh’s Ecocritical Engagement with the Region**

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh presents the Sundarbans not merely as a setting but as a living, breathing entity that shapes and resists human lives. His ecocritical engagement with the region reflects both its ecological richness and the deep socio-political tensions it holds. Drawing from extensive research and interaction with local communities, Ghosh paints a realistic picture of a fragile ecosystem under threat from both environmental degradation and flawed conservation policies. The novel centres on the ethical tensions between preserving nature and protecting human rights, particularly in the context of the Marichjhapi massacre, where refugees were violently evicted to protect wildlife reserves.

Ghosh critiques top-down environmental policies that disregard the plight of marginalised communities. This conflict is powerfully voiced through Kanai, who remarks,

*If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth, it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it but we choose not to see it. Isn’t that a horror too—that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?* (Ghosh, 2019, p. 325).

Kusum, a refugee on Morichjhapi and Fokir’s mother, provides a human perspective on the cost of conservation, speaking bitterly about the government’s priorities: “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid by people from all around the world” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 284). Her anguish is evident as she describes the inhumanity of the state’s actions: “The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 284).



Similarly Nilima's statement also reinforces the reality of unacknowledged human loss in the name of conservation: "Nobody knows exactly how many killings there are. None of the figures are reliable. But of this I'm sure: there are many more deaths than the authorities admit" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 258–259). Through these voices, Ghosh critiques the ethical shortcomings of conservation strategies that fail to consider the human cost. He invites readers to rethink ecological responsibility by recognising the interconnectedness of all life forms. The novel argues that true environmental justice must integrate ecological preservation and human dignity, showing how poorly conceived conservation efforts can deepen social inequalities rather than resolve them.

### **Conservation Myths and Human Vulnerability in *The Hungry Tide***

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* offers a compelling critique of human efforts to manage the non-human world, particularly within the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans. Through a combination of irony, satire, and poignant realism, Ghosh dismantles the illusion of human supremacy over nature and critiques conservation models that ignore the socio-political realities of vulnerable populations.

One of the primary targets of Ghosh's critique is the flawed and often absurd conservation strategies deployed to protect the Royal Bengal tiger. Through Nilima's commentary, Ghosh examines unscientific and anthropocentric theories, such as the idea that the aggression of tigers was due to the region's unique tidal geography: "The theory went that this raised the animals' threshold of aggression by washing away their scent markings and confusing their territorial instincts" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 260). Nilima's sarcastic reflection that it was "about as convincing a theory as Nilima had ever heard," followed by her remark that "even if it were true, there was nothing that could be done about it" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 260), exposes the futility of reductionist scientific explanations. Another misguided conservation effort involved creating freshwater pools for the tigers based on a theory that their attacks stemmed from thirst. (Ghosh, 2019, p. 260). Ghosh uses such examples to highlight the moral blindness of policies that prioritise wildlife over basic human needs.



Further emphasising this disconnection, the novel recounts pseudo-scientific attempts to alter animal behaviour through behavioural psychology. These included rigging up clay human models with electric shocks and encouraging people to wear masks on the backs of their heads, based on the belief that tigers never attacked from the front. However, as Ghosh describes, “the tigers just ignored the clay models and carried on as before,” and as for the masks, “evidently they had no difficulty in discriminating between masks and faces” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 261). These instances satirise the arrogance of believing that simplistic human inventions can manipulate or control wild animal instincts.

Through Nilima’s cautionary story about a tiger that swam across a vast tidal channel to attack a girl in Lusibari, Ghosh reinforces nature’s unpredictability and dominance: “Nine years ago, a tiger killed a young girl, right here in Lusibari... it had swum all the way across the Bidya’s mohona and back again”—a total distance of “six kilometres each way” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 261). This moment underscores the ecological vulnerability of the region and shatters illusions of safety or control. The Sundarbans, as portrayed by Ghosh, functions not merely as a setting but as a dynamic and uncontrollable force shaping the fate of its inhabitants. Its dense mangrove forests, tidal rivers, and biodiversity—including species like the Irrawaddy dolphin—are in constant tension with human survival. The region becomes a liminal space.

Ecocritically, *The Hungry Tide* interrogates the ethics of conservation and challenges anthropocentric worldviews. The Marichjhapi massacre, referenced in the novel, stands as a chilling reminder of how environmental policy can be weaponised to justify human displacement. Kusum bitterly reflects, adding, “Our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 284). Ghosh presents this not as an isolated tragedy but as part of a broader systemic failure that prioritises ecological ideals over human dignity. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh contrasts scientific inquiry, indigenous knowledge, and bureaucratic logic through characters like Piya, Fokir, and Kanai to explore the complex ties between humans and nature. The novel critiques exploitative



development and conservation models, urging an inclusive ecological justice that respects both people and the environment.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the killing of the tiger symbolises the ethical conflict between wildlife conservation and human survival. Ghosh portrays tigers as majestic and dangerous, highlighting the struggle between endangered species and marginalised humans. The tiger's death reflects the desperation of people forced to defend their lives, critiquing policies that prioritise wildlife over human dignity and advocating for a more equitable, inclusive approach to conservation.

### **Ecological Fragility and Ethical Dilemmas in The Hungry Tide**

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh presents the Sundarbans as a vital, living entity, both sustaining and threatening its inhabitants. This dynamic tidal landscape, with its rich biodiversity and looming dangers, is central to the novel's ecological vision. Ghosh observes, "The tide country is a place where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 7), capturing its ever-changing, fragile nature. The Sundarbans shape human destinies, where survival is dictated by tides, storms, and the presence of tigers.

Ghosh critiques misguided conservation strategies that fail to grasp the region's ecological and social complexity. Through Nilima's account, he exposes the absurdity of Forest Department efforts to prevent tiger attacks, like building freshwater pools for tigers while locals went thirsty. Nilima remarks, "They were providing water for tigers! In a place where nobody thinks twice about human beings going thirsty!" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 260), highlighting the irony of privileging animal welfare over human survival. Other futile tactics included masks and electric mannequins, which the tigers easily saw through: "Evidently they had no difficulty in discriminating between masks and faces" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 261).

Ghosh shows that nature resists control. Nilima warns, "Boats and bhotbhotis are attacked all the time—even out in midstream" (p. 261), emphasising the limits of technology and bureaucracy. Through an ecocritical lens, the novel critiques conservation policies that prioritise abstract goals



over local realities, urging a rethinking of environmental ethics that values both ecological balance and human dignity.

### **Human-Nature Relationships and Ethical Conservation in *The Hungry Tide***

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh explores the fragile relationship between humans and nature, emphasising vulnerability and interdependence. Natural disasters, like the cyclone that claims Fokir's life, and the constant threat of tiger attacks, highlight human fragility in the face of nature's power (Ravichandran). Ghosh contrasts two perspectives on nature through Piyali Roy, a marine biologist, and Fokir, a fisherman. Piyali's scientific approach conflicts with Fokir's traditional knowledge, illustrating the tension between modern methods and indigenous wisdom.

The legend of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess, provides an ethical framework for balancing human survival with ecological sustainability, urging respect for nature's limits. Ghosh integrates this folklore, emphasising that ethical stewardship is vital for preservation. The novel critiques the anthropocentric worldview, exploring the consequences of prioritising human needs over ecological health, seen in the destruction of mangroves and wildlife habitats. Piya's conflict with the villagers over the killing of a tiger exemplifies the ethical dilemmas in conservation, where human safety and wildlife preservation collide. Through these tensions, the novel advocates for a nuanced conservation approach that respects both human and ecological rights, recognising their interdependence.

### **Character Representations and Ecological Consciousness in *The Hungry Tide***

Piya Roy, a cetologist of Indian origin raised in the United States, embodies the principles of Western scientific rationality. Initially distanced from the local community, Piya is focused on researching the Irrawaddy dolphins, relying heavily on advanced technology. However, her encounters with Fokir—a local fisherman without formal education but with profound traditional ecological knowledge—challenge her conventional understanding of nature. Through Piya's journey, Ghosh juxtaposes scientific knowledge with indigenous wisdom. Piya gradually learns to respect the intuitive connection that Fokir has with the environment, as her reflections reveal a



significant shift in consciousness: This moment signifies the bridging of two epistemologies—one empirical and the other experiential—emphasising the need for integrating diverse knowledge systems in ecological discourse.

Fokir represents the subaltern voice often marginalised in both ecological and socio-political discourses. His intimate, almost spiritual relationship with the tidal landscape is guided by inherited knowledge passed down through generations. Fokir's silence is symbolic, representing a different mode of communication with nature. Fokir's character reinforces the idea that local communities are not passive victims of environmental change but active agents whose lives are intricately linked to natural rhythms. His tragic death in a storm underscores human vulnerability and the cost of environmental neglect. Kanai, a translator from Delhi, serves as a foil to both Piya and Fokir. Initially detached from the ecological and cultural complexities of the Sundarbans, Kanai becomes immersed in its turbulent history through the notebook of his late uncle, Nirmal. His intellectual journey reflects a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of politics, environment, and human suffering. Kanai realises the urgent need for introspection.

### **Myth, Memory, and Ecological Justice in *The Hungry Tide***

Ghosh seamlessly weaves mythology and oral traditions into the narrative, deepening ecological consciousness. The myth of Bon Bibi, the protector of the Sundarbans, represents a syncretic cultural belief system in which nature is revered and deified. Bon Bibi's story acts as a counter-narrative to anthropocentrism, reinforcing the idea that humans must live in harmony with the non-human world. "Bon Bibi is considered as 'the goddess of the forest... In these parts, people believe she rules over all the animals of the jungle'" (Ghosh, 2019, pp. 29-30). Such mythological interventions resist the binaries of nature/culture and science/faith, asserting that sustainable coexistence requires spiritual and cultural sensitivity.

*The Hungry Tide* presents a powerful ecocritical narrative that explores the intersection of environmental degradation, human vulnerability, and ethical conservation in the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans. The novel underscores how climate change, manifested through rising sea levels, cyclones, and erosion, disproportionately affects marginalised communities. Fokir's tragic



death in a storm symbolises the compounded risks faced by the poor, emphasising the need for climate policies that address both ecological and socio-economic dimensions. Ghosh critiques development and conservation narratives that prioritise ecological preservation at the cost of human rights. The Marichjhapi massacre serves as a central example, where state-led conservation efforts led to the forced displacement of refugees. This event challenges the morality of top-down conservation models that exclude the needs and voices of vulnerable populations. The novel reveals how such practices perpetuate injustice, calling for a more equitable approach that balances environmental sustainability with human dignity.

Through an ecocritical lens, Ghosh challenges the anthropocentric worldview that separates humans from nature. Instead, he advocates for an ecocentric perspective that acknowledges the interdependence of all life forms. The Sundarbans emerge as a living entity, where human and non-human lives are intricately connected. Piya's transformation—from a detached scientist to a collaborator with local communities—exemplifies the shift toward an inclusive, ethical model of environmental stewardship. *The Hungry Tide* calls for ecological justice that integrates conservation with empathy, inclusivity, and social equity. Ghosh's narrative urges a reimagining of environmental policies—moving away from exclusionary practices toward sustainable models rooted in mutual respect between humans and nature. In doing so, the novel offers a compelling vision of coexistence and ethical preservation in the face of global ecological crises.

## Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* stands as a powerful literary intervention that brings ecological consciousness to the forefront of contemporary discourse. Through its intricate narrative set in the ecologically sensitive Sundarbans, Ghosh not only depicts environmental fragility but also confronts the socio-political tensions that arise when ecological concerns collide with human survival. The novel challenges dominant anthropocentric ideologies that perceive nature as a resource to be managed or exploited. Ghosh presents the Sundarbans not merely as a setting but as a sentient, evolving ecosystem in constant dialogue with its human inhabitants. This portrayal fosters an ecocentric worldview—one that emphasises coexistence, mutual dependence, and the



need to view nature as a participant in the shared web of existence rather than a passive backdrop to human affairs.

The novel explores ethical dilemmas embedded in conservation efforts. The Marichjhapi episode, as a historical reference point, highlights the devastating human cost of exclusionary environmental policies. Through this, Ghosh questions the moral legitimacy of top-down conservation models that ignore the socio-economic realities of marginalised populations. Rather than presenting simplistic solutions, the narrative offers layered perspectives through its characters, who represent differing views on ecology, development, and justice. Piya's scientific dedication, Fokir's intuitive knowledge, and Kanai's reflective scepticism enrich the conversation around sustainable environmental ethics.

The research paper further uncovers how Ghosh integrates environmental precarity with larger issues such as displacement, class inequity, and political neglect. The constant threat of natural disasters, animal attacks, and bureaucratic indifference reveals a harsh reality for communities whose lives are intricately tied to the land and waters of the Sundarbans. These lived experiences serve as a microcosm of global environmental injustices, where vulnerable populations disproportionately bear the brunt of ecological collapse and climate change.

The novel also gestures toward hope and resilience. Piya's evolving understanding and eventual collaboration with the local community mark a turning point in the narrative, suggesting that inclusive, community-based conservation efforts are not only possible but essential. Ghosh thus offers a nuanced vision of ecological justice—one that calls for the integration of scientific research, indigenous knowledge, and ethical responsibility. *The Hungry Tide* transcends the boundaries of fiction to become a compelling reflection on contemporary ecological and humanitarian crises. It urges a shift in environmental discourse—from a purely conservationist agenda to one that is informed by empathy, equity, and cultural sensitivity. This paper reaffirms that Ghosh's work is not merely a story of a specific place but a universal plea for sustainable coexistence, reminding us that the health of our ecosystems is deeply entwined with the well-being of the most vulnerable among us.

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