



Investigating the Human–Nature Relationship in *Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract— *The intricate and often indefinable relationship between human beings and the natural world has received sustained critical attention under the theoretical framework of ecocriticism. This approach foregrounds not only human experiences but also the representation of the physical environment in literary texts, emphasizing their interdependence. In the twenty-first century, ecocritical discourse reflects an intensified global awareness of environmental crises, including climate change, global warming, and rising carbon emissions, all of which have accelerated ecological degradation. If such destructive trends remain unchecked, they pose a serious threat to the sustainability of modern civilization. Against this backdrop, Amitav Ghosh, recipient of the Jnanpith Award, presents in his novel The Hungry Tide a compelling narrative that interweaves human lives, ecological vulnerability, and climatic uncertainties in the fragile tidal landscape of the Sundarbans. The novel serves as a powerful literary exploration of environmental consciousness, portraying the complex dynamics between nature and marginalized communities inhabiting the deltaic region. This paper examines how human interventions, driven by ignorance, survival needs, and developmental pressures, contribute to ecological imbalance. It further analyzes whether nature and humanity are depicted as protectors or adversaries of one another, and reflects on the ethical responsibility of humankind in fostering ecological harmony, ensuring sustainable coexistence, and safeguarding the environment in the age of globalization.*



Keywords— *Ecocriticism, Human–Nature Relationship, Environmental Degradation, Climate Change, The Hungry Tide*

Introduction

Since the earliest stages of human civilization, the relationship between humanity and nature has been marked by interdependence, adaptation, and transformation. In primitive societies, human survival relied upon a harmonious coexistence with the natural environment. Gradually, however, the evolutionary and technological advancement of humankind shifted this balance. What initially emerged as a struggle for survival evolved into systematic intervention, control, and exploitation of natural resources.

In its earliest phase, human interaction with nature was governed by necessity. Over time, the development of

tools, organized societies, and economic systems enabled humans to reshape landscapes, redirect rivers, and exploit forests and minerals. This transition from adaptation to domination intensified the contradiction between human ambition and ecological equilibrium. The rise of industrialization and capitalist market forces further accelerated environmental exploitation. Technology, consumerism, and modern lifestyles have contributed to deforestation, biodiversity loss, global warming, and climate instability. Ironically, the modern world that relentlessly extracts from nature simultaneously raises slogans advocating environmental conservation.

In the twenty-first century, environmental degradation has become one of the most pressing global

crises. Climate change, rising sea levels, and ecological displacement are no longer distant possibilities but lived realities. This growing ecological consciousness has found expression in literature through the emergence of ecocriticism—a critical approach that studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ecocriticism, along with environmental humanities and environmental ethics, seeks to foreground nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active presence shaping human destiny. Literary texts, therefore, become powerful mediums for raising environmental awareness and interrogating the ethical responsibilities of humanity.

It is within this critical framework that Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* gains particular relevance. Set in the fragile and ecologically volatile landscape of the Sundarbans, the novel presents a complex interplay between human survival, ecological vulnerability, and political power. The Sundarbans, with its shifting tides, mangrove forests, and frequent cyclones, becomes more than a geographical setting—it emerges as a dynamic force that shapes human lives and destinies. Through the experiences of marginalized communities, environmental researchers, and local inhabitants, the narrative exposes the fragile balance between protection and destruction, coexistence and conflict.

By situating human struggles within the unpredictable rhythms of the tidal ecosystem, the novel questions anthropocentric assumptions and highlights the ethical dilemma of development versus conservation. Thus, *The Hungry Tide* serves as a compelling literary text for examining how nature and humanity function alternately as protectors and adversaries, and how sustainable harmony remains essential for the survival of both.

Ecocriticism

The term *ecocriticism* was first introduced by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*.” Since then, it has evolved into a significant interdisciplinary field within literary and cultural studies. Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, expanding critical inquiry beyond anthropocentric perspectives to include the non-human world as an active and meaningful presence in texts. It challenges the traditional privileging of human experience and instead situates humanity within the broader ecological system.

At its core, ecocriticism promotes an ethical reorientation toward nature. It underscores the responsibility of individuals and societies to engage in sustainable practices that ensure ecological balance and intergenerational justice. Rather than treating nature as a

passive backdrop for human drama, ecocritical theory interprets landscapes, rivers, forests, animals, and climatic forces as dynamic agents that shape narrative structure and thematic development. The approach also intersects with environmental ethics and environmental humanities, encouraging readers to reassess their moral accountability toward the natural world.

In the twenty-first century, ecocriticism has gained renewed urgency in response to escalating environmental crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and ecological displacement. The theory employs literary texts as interpretive sites through which environmental concerns can be articulated, questioned, and critically examined. It expands the concept of “the world” in literature to encompass the entire ecosphere, recognizing that all living organisms possess intrinsic value and the right to exist within their natural habitats.

Ecology itself concerns the intricate and often indefinable interrelationships between living organisms and their environments. Ecocritical literary works foreground this interdependence, exploring the tensions, harmonies, and contradictions between human ambition and ecological limits. Through narrative imagination, such texts cultivate environmental consciousness and advocate for a more balanced coexistence between humanity and nature.

In this regard, Amitav Ghosh stands out as a writer deeply engaged with ecological concerns. Many of his works reflect an acute awareness of environmental vulnerability, climate change, and the socio-political implications of ecological crisis. His fiction not only portrays the beauty and fragility of natural landscapes but also interrogates the ethical responsibilities of human communities toward sustaining the planet.

Human–Nonhuman Interdependence

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* offers a profound literary exploration of the interdependence between human and nonhuman life forms. The novel situates its narrative within the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans, where land and water continuously reshape each other, and survival becomes a shared yet contested condition. Here, nature is not a passive backdrop; it is an active, dynamic force that structures existence. Humans, animals, rivers, tides, and forests coexist within a complex ecological network in which no single entity can claim absolute dominance.

The Sundarbans, often described as “tide country,” is portrayed as a bioregion marked by instability and transformation. Islands emerge and vanish with the rhythms of the tides, emphasizing the impermanence of territorial claims and human settlements. The shifting landscape reveals a deltaic world where ecological vulnerability

defines both human habitation and nonhuman survival. Marginalized communities struggle to carve out livelihoods amid cyclones, saline intrusion, and political neglect, while wildlife faces habitat fragmentation and declining biodiversity.

The novel foregrounds the tension between anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives. Among the most striking nonhuman presences is the Royal Bengal tiger, a powerful symbol of wilderness and ecological authority. The tiger’s conflict with villagers reflects not merely a physical confrontation but a deeper ethical dilemma: whose survival takes precedence in a shared habitat? Similarly, the endangered Ganges river dolphin and Irrawaddy dolphin embody ecological fragility and the urgency of conservation. Alongside crocodiles, mangrove forests, and the resilient “sundari” trees, these nonhuman characters articulate a silent yet forceful presence that challenges human-centered assumptions.

Ghosh’s narrative reintegrates literature with environmental studies by presenting an ecosystem where each organism—human or otherwise—possesses intrinsic value. The relentless tides that inundate and retreat from the mangrove forests symbolize nature’s autonomy and cyclical power. Thousands of mangroves disappear beneath rising waters only to re-emerge hours later, suggesting resilience yet also vulnerability in the face of climate change and salinity intrusion.

The anthropocentric belief that humans are the supreme and most significant entities in the universe emerges as a root cause of ecological damage. Through the character of Piyali Roy, whose resistance to the killing of a tiger underscores an ethical commitment to wildlife preservation, the novel asserts that nonhuman beings have an inherent right to existence. The conflict between villagers and wildlife is therefore not framed as a simplistic opposition but as a tragic outcome of developmental pressures, poverty, and ecological imbalance.

Ultimately, *The Hungry Tide* advances a vision of coexistence grounded in ecological humility. It suggests that harmony can be achieved only when humans recognize themselves as integral components—rather than masters—of the broader biosphere. The survival of humanity, as the novel intimates, is inseparable from the survival of the nonhuman world.

Ecological Crisis and Sustainable Futures

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* powerfully demonstrates how the illusion of human supremacy collapses when confronted with the overwhelming force of nature. The fragile certainty of human control dissolves in moments of ecological crisis—whether in Kanai’s sudden encounter with the tiger or in the devastating cyclone that

engulfs Piya and Fokir. Such episodes reveal the precariousness of human existence within volatile ecosystems and expose the limits of anthropocentric confidence.

The episode of the tiger, described in the novel as an embodiment of “horror,” raises a profound ethical paradox. When a predator enters a human settlement, it is immediately condemned and marked for punishment; yet the systematic destruction of wildlife and habitats by humans is rarely regarded with equal moral urgency. This asymmetry reflects the imbalance between human survival strategies and ecological justice. The narrative thus interrogates the moral hierarchy that privileges human life while normalizing environmental exploitation.

Set in the ecologically sensitive delta of the Sundarbans, the novel portrays a fragile equilibrium between conservation and livelihood. The inhabitants of this “tide country” depend directly upon forests, rivers, and fisheries for survival, yet their very presence places pressure on the delicate ecoregion. Conversely, the relentless tides, cyclones, and salinity intrusion threaten human settlements, erasing boundaries and uprooting permanence. The tidal forces that shape and reshape the landscape symbolize both creation and destruction—bestowing sustenance while claiming lives.

The tragic death of Fokir during the cyclone underscores the intimate and often fatal bond between humanity and nature. Through Moyna’s loss, the narrative foregrounds the vulnerability of marginalized communities whose survival is inseparable from ecological risk. Poverty, displacement, and marginalization intensify environmental degradation, creating a cyclical relationship in which social injustice and ecological crisis reinforce one another. The plight of refugees ordered to vacate protected land further highlights the tension between conservation policies and human rights. Preservation of the environment, though essential, becomes ethically complex when it displaces already dispossessed populations.

The contrast between Piya, a marine biologist researching the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin, and Fokir, an uneducated fisherman with profound experiential knowledge of the tides and waterways, illustrates two complementary approaches to conservation—scientific inquiry and indigenous ecological wisdom. Although Piya initially relies on institutional authority for guidance and protection, she ultimately recognizes the value of local knowledge embodied by Fokir. His intuitive understanding of currents, safe passages, and dolphin habitats reveals that conservation cannot succeed without acknowledging community-based ecological practices.

The shifting tides of the Sundarbans mirror the oscillation between joy and tragedy in human life. Just as climatic conditions change abruptly, moments of happiness transform into agony, reminding readers of the unpredictable rhythms of nature. Through these interwoven narratives, the novel articulates a deeply rooted interconnectedness between humans and the environment. It suggests that environmental conservation cannot be separated from social justice, and that sustainable coexistence demands empathy, ethical responsibility, and recognition of nature’s autonomous power.

Ultimately, the text calls for a balanced vision in which ecological preservation and human dignity are not seen as opposing forces but as mutually dependent imperatives for collective survival.

Myth and Ecological Guardianship

In Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, myth functions as a cultural and ecological mediator between humans and the natural world. The lyrical description of the landscape—“late November... crisp and cool with a gentle breeze and honeyed sunlight”—reveals the aesthetic richness of the deltaic environment. Yet alongside this beauty lies human indifference; through Kanai’s perspective, the narrative suggests that modern individuals, absorbed in routine and ambition, often overlook the silent grandeur of nature.

The novel embeds within its ecological framework the powerful folk myth of Bonbibi, revered as the guardian of the forest in the Sundarbans. For the islanders, Bonbibi is not merely a symbolic figure but an ethical authority who regulates access to the forest and ensures protection from the tiger. Her presence establishes a moral geography within the biome, where survival depends upon reverence, restraint, and acknowledgment of nature’s sovereignty. The belief in an invisible boundary between the realms of Bonbibi and Dakkhin Rai—often associated with the tiger—creates a psychological and cultural discipline that governs human conduct in the wilderness.

Through Nirmal’s reflection on this “imaginary border,” the novel demonstrates how myth can function as an ecological code of ethics. What may appear as superstition to outsiders operates as a deeply internalized system of environmental regulation. The fear and reverence inspired by Bonbibi cultivate humility before the forest’s power, discouraging reckless exploitation. In this sense, myth becomes pro-naturalistic: it preserves ecological balance by embedding conservation within cultural consciousness.

The complex topography of the Sundarbans—its shifting islands, dense mangroves, and unpredictable tides—demands a delicate equilibrium between human and

nonhuman realms. Myth symbolically enforces this balance. It reminds islanders that they are guests within the domain of beasts and tides, not masters of it. Ecology, folklore, and belief systems intertwine to sustain collective responsibility toward the environment.

Furthermore, the narrative reflects broader Indian cultural traditions in which nature is venerated through spiritual symbolism. Rivers, trees, animals, and forests are often worshipped as embodiments of divine presence. Such practices reveal the deep interconnection between nature and culture, where environmental ethics are encoded within religious imagination.

By foregrounding the myth of Bonbibi, the novel suggests that sustainable coexistence may require not only scientific intervention but also cultural narratives that inspire reverence for the natural world. Myth, therefore, emerges as a protector—of both the forest and the fragile human communities that depend upon it.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh, through *The Hungry Tide*, presents a profound meditation on the inseparable bond between human existence and the natural world. The novel establishes that any disruption of ecological balance inevitably rebounds upon humanity itself. Human progress, survival, and development are fundamentally rooted in an intimate relationship with nature; when this relationship shifts from coexistence to domination, the consequences become destructive and irreversible.

The narrative underscores that every species—human and nonhuman alike—contributes to the wholeness of the biosphere and possesses an intrinsic right to exist. However, the anthropocentric worldview that places humans at the center of all value systems has led to excessive exploitation of forests, rivers, and wildlife. The text warns that the destruction of nature ultimately amounts to the destruction of human civilization. Ecological imbalance, climate instability, and biodiversity loss are not isolated crises but interconnected symptoms of this flawed ideology.

Set in the ecologically fragile and geographically dynamic delta of the Sundarbans, the novel sensitizes readers to one of the world’s most unique mangrove ecosystems. By weaving together personal histories, environmental realities, and cultural myths, Ghosh creates a nuanced form of climate fiction that avoids didacticism while powerfully evoking environmental consciousness. His narrative validates indigenous myths and traditional ecological knowledge as meaningful frameworks for understanding and negotiating environmental crisis. Such myths function not merely as cultural artifacts but as ethical instruments that foster reverence and restraint.

Ultimately, *The Hungry Tide* calls for a reorientation of human attitudes—from domination to humility, from exploitation to stewardship. The novel suggests that ecological harmony can be sustained only when humanity recognizes itself as an integral component of the larger ecosphere. Through its intricate portrayal of tides, forests, animals, and marginalized communities, the text affirms that the survival of humankind is inseparable from the preservation of nature.

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