

ECOLOGY, EMPIRE, AND CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT IN *THE HUNGRY TIDE* BY AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

The Hungry Tide is a landmark work in contemporary postcolonial eco-fiction that intertwines environmental precarity, imperial legacies, and the displacement of marginalized communities in the Sundarbans delta. This paper examines how Amitav Ghosh constructs a complex ecological narrative in which nature is neither a passive backdrop nor a romanticized wilderness but an active, unpredictable force shaped by colonial history, state power, and global capitalism. Through the intersecting journeys of Piyali Roy, Kanai Dutt, and Fokir, the novel foregrounds conflicts between conservation and livelihood, scientific rationality and indigenous knowledge, and bureaucratic governance and subaltern survival. Drawing on ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, and subaltern studies, this paper argues that *The Hungry Tide* exposes the ecological violence embedded in imperial and postcolonial environmental policies, particularly through the historical erasure of the Morichjhapi massacre. The study demonstrates that cultural displacement in the novel is inseparable from ecological instability and that Ghosh ultimately proposes an ethics of ecological humility grounded in relational coexistence rather than domination.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism; empire; Sundarbans; environmental displacement; subaltern communities; Morichjhapi; conservation politics; postcolonial ecology etc.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, literary studies have increasingly turned toward ecological questions, recognizing that environmental crises are inseparable from histories of empire, capitalism, and social inequality. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* occupies a central position within this discourse by situating its narrative in the Sundarbans one of the most ecologically fragile and politically contested landscapes in South Asia. The novel dramatizes the collision between natural forces and human ambitions, revealing how ecological spaces are shaped by imperial histories and contemporary state interventions.

Set in the tidal archipelago of the Sundarbans, where land and water constantly remake each other, *The Hungry Tide* challenges anthropocentric notions of control and permanence. The region's volatility cyclones, shifting islands, tiger attacks functions as a metaphor for the instability of political borders and cultural identities. Ghosh situates this ecological uncertainty within a broader historical framework that includes colonial forestry policies, postcolonial conservation regimes, and the displacement of refugee populations.

This paper argues that *The Hungry Tide* should be read as a critique of ecological imperialism—the use of environmental protection and scientific authority to legitimize the marginalization of vulnerable communities. Through its layered narrative structure, the novel exposes how imperial modes of knowledge persist in postcolonial governance, particularly in the management of forests, wildlife, and human populations. At the same time, Ghosh recuperates indigenous ecological knowledge and ethical modes of coexistence that resist extractive and exclusionary paradigms.

Summary of the Selected Novel

The Hungry Tide follows the journeys of three central characters: Piyali Roy, an American-trained cetologist of Indian origin; Kanai Dutt, a Delhi-based translator and businessman; and Fokir, an illiterate fisherman intimately attuned to the rhythms of the Sundarbans. Their paths intersect in Lusibari, where Kanai has come to read his late uncle Nirmal's journal, and Piya seeks to study the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins.

The narrative oscillates between the present and the past, particularly through Nirmal's writings, which recount his involvement with the Morichjhapi settlers East Pakistani refugees forcibly evicted from the island in the late 1970s. As Piya and Fokir navigate the treacherous waterways, their developing partnership highlights the tension between scientific knowledge and experiential, place-based understanding.

The novel culminates in a devastating cyclone that claims Fokir's life, underscoring the precariousness of human existence in the tidal landscape. This tragedy, however, is framed not as senseless loss but as a moment of ethical reckoning that compels Piya to reconsider her relationship to the land and its people.

Ecology as an Unstable and Agentive Force

One of the novel's most striking features is its portrayal of nature as dynamic and indifferent to human claims. The Sundarbans are described as a region where “the boundaries between land and water are forever shifting” (Ghosh 7). This instability undermines colonial and modern impulses to map, categorize, and control space.

The tides themselves function as narrative agents. They erase settlements, create new islands, and render human labor provisional. Ghosh repeatedly emphasizes that in the Sundarbans, survival depends not on mastery but on adaptability. This ecological vision resists the Enlightenment ideal of nature as a resource to be subdued, instead presenting an environment that demands humility.

Empire, Conservation, and Ecological Governance

Colonial forestry policies in India prioritized extraction and control, transforming diverse ecosystems into regulated “reserves.” In *The Hungry Tide*, these legacies persist in the bureaucratic management of the Sundarbans, where wildlife protection often supersedes human welfare. The tiger, revered and feared, becomes a symbol of state-sanctioned ecological hierarchy: “The tiger was protected, but the people were not” (Ghosh 248).

The Morichjhapi episode forms the novel's moral core. Refugees who attempted to settle on the island were violently evicted in the name of environmental preservation. Nirmal's journal records the devastating irony of this act: a postcolonial state, born of displacement, reproducing displacement in the name of ecological purity (Ghosh 213–215).

This episode exposes how conservation discourse can mask authoritarian practices. The refugees are rendered expendable, their lives deemed less valuable than the abstract ideal of a protected forest.

Cultural Displacement and Subaltern Lives

Displacement in *The Hungry Tide* operates on multiple levels—geographical, cultural, and epistemic. Refugees, fishermen, and forest dwellers exist in a state of perpetual precarity, their claims to land constantly challenged by environmental regulations and natural disasters.

Fokir embodies subaltern ecological knowledge. Though illiterate, he navigates the waterways with an intuitive understanding that surpasses scientific instruments. Piya comes to recognize that her data-driven approach is incomplete without Fokir's embodied wisdom: "What he knew could not be written down" (Ghosh 221).

Yet Fokir's death underscores the limits of romanticizing indigenous knowledge. The novel does not present a simple binary between modern science and traditional wisdom; instead, it calls for ethical collaboration grounded in respect and reciprocity.

Language, Silence, and Ethical Witness

Kanai's role as a translator highlights the politics of language and representation. His ability to mediate between worlds contrasts sharply with Fokir's voicelessness in official discourse. Nirmal's journal becomes a fragile archive of suppressed history, preserving voices that the state sought to erase.

Silence in the novel is not absence but testimony. The unspeakability of Morichjhapi reflects the broader silencing of subaltern suffering within national narratives.

FINDINGS

- *The Hungry Tide* presents ecology as historically and politically constituted, not merely natural.
- The novel exposes continuities between colonial and postcolonial environmental governance.
- Cultural displacement emerges as a direct consequence of ecological and political marginalization.
- Subaltern knowledge is central to ecological survival but remains institutionally undervalued.
- Ghosh critiques both scientific absolutism and romantic primitivism, advocating ethical coexistence.

The analysis demonstrates that *The Hungry Tide* expands the scope of postcolonial fiction by integrating ecological ethics with historical critique. It reveals how environmental narratives can legitimize exclusion while also offering possibilities for alternative, relational modes of belonging.

CONCLUSION

The Hungry Tide stands as a powerful indictment of ecological imperialism and a poignant meditation on the costs of environmental governance divorced from social justice. By situating human lives within an unstable tidal ecology, Amitav Ghosh dismantles narratives of control and progress that have long underpinned imperial and nationalist projects.

The novel insists that ecological preservation cannot be ethically sustained through displacement and violence. Instead, it calls for an ecological imagination attentive to history, vulnerability, and interdependence. In giving narrative space to marginalized lives and suppressed histories, *The Hungry Tide* affirms literature's role as an ethical witness in an age of environmental crisis.

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