
Ecologies of Silence: Subaltern Memory, Environmental Crisis, and Postcolonial Resistance in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

The accelerating climate crisis has generated renewed scholarly interest in the relationship between environmental degradation, social inequality, and cultural representation. Within contemporary Indian English literature, Amitav Ghosh occupies a distinctive position for his sustained engagement with climate change, displacement, ecological memory, and environmental justice. This article explores the intersection of subaltern studies and environmental humanities through *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019), and *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). It introduces the concept of “ecologies of silence” to describe narrative spaces where marginalized communities negotiate environmental trauma, historical erasure, and epistemic exclusion. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Rob Nixon, alongside recent developments in climate-fiction studies, the article argues that Ghosh transforms silence into a repository of ecological memory and resistance. Through representations of indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, migration, and environmental precarity, Ghosh foregrounds subaltern epistemologies that challenge dominant climate discourses. Ultimately, the article contends that Ghosh advocates a decolonial environmental imagination in which marginalized communities emerge as custodians of ecological wisdom and agents of environmental resistance. By foregrounding the experiences of those at the margins, Ghosh redefines literary engagement with climate change and contributes significantly to contemporary environmental humanities.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Climate Fiction, Subaltern Studies, Environmental Humanities, Ecocriticism, Climate Migration, Ecological Memory, Postcolonial Resistance

Introduction

Climate change has emerged as one of the most prominent challenges of the twenty-first century. Rising sea levels, ecological degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate-induced migration have transformed environmental concerns into matters of global political, economic, and cultural significance. Yet the consequences of climate change are not distributed equally. Communities already marginalized by geography, class, ethnicity, and colonial histories often experience the most severe effects of environmental destruction while remaining excluded from dominant climate narratives.

Recent developments in environmental humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism have emphasized that environmental crises cannot be understood independently of histories of empire, extraction, and uneven development. Colonialism fundamentally altered landscapes, transformed ecosystems into resources, and marginalized indigenous systems of knowledge. Consequently, contemporary environmental crises frequently reproduce older structures of inequality, rendering vulnerable communities doubly marginalized—first by historical processes of colonization and later by climate change itself.

Within this context, Amitav Ghosh has emerged as one of the most influential literary voices engaging with ecological crisis. Ghosh, across fiction and nonfiction, explores the interconnected realities of environmental degradation, migration, cultural memory, and historical injustice. His works challenge anthropocentric perspectives by foregrounding ecological interdependence and alternative forms of knowledge rooted in local cultures and lived experiences.

This article introduces the concept of “ecologies of silence” as a framework for understanding the relationship between environmental crisis and subaltern resistance in Ghosh's writings. Silence in this context does not imply absence or passivity. Rather, it functions as a repository of memory, knowledge, and resilience. Through oral traditions, myths, embodied practices, and everyday interactions with nature, marginalized communities preserve forms of ecological understanding that remain largely invisible within dominant institutional frameworks.

Drawing upon *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, and *The Great Derangement*, this article argues that Ghosh reimagines silence as a mode of ecological resistance. By foregrounding voices historically excluded from environmental discourse, he challenges conventional understandings of climate change and advocates a more inclusive environmental ethics grounded in subaltern experience.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative textual analysis as its primary research method. Through close reading of *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019), and *The Great Derangement* (2016), it examines how ecological crises intersect with subaltern memory, displacement, and resistance.

The analysis is informed by the complementary frameworks of subaltern studies and postcolonial ecocriticism. Subaltern studies provide a critical lens for examining the silencing of marginalized communities, while postcolonial ecocriticism facilitates an understanding of how environmental degradation is linked to colonial histories and contemporary structures of inequality.

The study also draws upon recent scholarship in climate fiction, which recognizes literature as a powerful medium for shaping ecological consciousness and environmental imagination. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the article investigates how Ghosh's narratives challenge dominant climate discourses and foreground alternative ecological epistemologies rooted in local experience and collective memory.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The emergence of climate fiction has significantly expanded literary engagement with environmental crises. Contemporary scholars increasingly recognize climate fiction as a form of cultural intervention capable of shaping public understanding of ecological change. Malecki argues that climate narratives influence environmental awareness by mobilizing emotions such as hope and fear. Similarly, Bartosch and Hoydis conceptualize climate fiction as a process of “future-making,” enabling societies to imagine alternative ecological futures.

Postcolonial ecocriticism has further emphasized the relationship between environmental degradation and colonial histories. Paswan observes that Indian English literature frequently exposes the ecological consequences of imperial expansion and developmental modernity. Environmental destruction is therefore not merely a contemporary phenomenon but a continuation of historical processes rooted in extraction and exploitation.

The theoretical foundation of this article derives primarily from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential intervention in subaltern studies. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak argues that marginalized groups are systematically excluded from dominant structures of representation. Their voices are often mediated through institutions that distort or appropriate their experiences. This critique remains particularly relevant in environmental discourse, where local ecological knowledge is frequently subordinated to technocratic approaches.

Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" further illuminates the relationship between environmental degradation and social inequality. Environmental destruction often unfolds gradually and invisibly, making it difficult to represent within conventional narratives. Communities living on ecological frontiers experience these forms of violence long before they become visible within global discourse.

The concept of "ecologies of silence" emerges from the intersection of these theoretical perspectives. It refers to spaces where suppressed forms of ecological knowledge survive despite historical processes of exclusion and erasure. Through myths, oral traditions, embodied practices, and collective memory, marginalized communities preserve alternative ways of understanding environmental relationships.

Ecologies of Silence in The Hungry Tide

Published in 2004, *The Hungry Tide* remains one of Ghosh's most significant explorations of ecological vulnerability and subaltern experience. Set in the Sundarbans, a fragile ecosystem of tidal rivers and mangrove forests, the novel presents a landscape characterized by constant transformation and uncertainty. As Ghosh observes, "The tide country is a place of ceaseless motion, where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating" (*The Hungry Tide* 7). The instability of the environment mirrors the precarious existence of the communities who inhabit it.

At the center of the novel stands Fokir, an illiterate fisherman whose intimate understanding of the Sundarbans challenges conventional assumptions about knowledge and expertise. Unlike Piya, a marine biologist trained in Western scientific methodologies, Fokir acquires his knowledge through direct engagement with the environment. His understanding of tides, river currents, and animal behavior emerges from lived experience rather than institutional education.

The relationship between Fokir and Piya symbolizes a confrontation between two systems of knowledge. While scientific discourse privileges objectivity and empirical observation, Fokir's ecological wisdom is embedded within local practices and collective memory. Ghosh does not dismiss scientific inquiry; instead, he reveals its limitations when detached from local experience. Piya's growing dependence on Fokir demonstrates that ecological understanding requires collaboration between different epistemological traditions.

Significantly, Fokir communicates much of his knowledge through action rather than speech. His silence reflects the broader condition of subalternity. Yet this silence should not be interpreted as voicelessness. Rather, it functions as an alternative mode of communication

rooted in embodied knowledge. Through Fokir, Ghosh suggests that ecological wisdom often exists beyond the boundaries of dominant language systems.

The novel also foregrounds the historical trauma of Morichjhapi, where refugee settlers were violently evicted by state authorities. This episode exposes the contradictions inherent in environmental conservation. While conservation policies are often justified in ecological terms, they frequently impose disproportionate burdens upon vulnerable populations. As the novel suggests, “It is the poor who are always the first to pay the price of conservation” (The Hungry Tide 173).

The Sundarbans thus become a site where environmental vulnerability intersects with political marginalization. The landscape functions as a living archive of migration, displacement, and survival. Through its shifting geography, it preserves histories that remain absent from official narratives. In this sense, the environment itself becomes a repository of subaltern memory.

By foregrounding local ecological knowledge and historical trauma, The Hungry Tide demonstrates that environmental justice requires recognition of marginalized forms of understanding. The novel challenges hierarchical distinctions between scientific expertise and indigenous knowledge, advocating a more inclusive approach to environmental stewardship.

Climate Migration and Mythic Resistance in Gun Island

In Gun Island, Ghosh expands his exploration of ecological vulnerability by connecting local environmental crises to global patterns of migration. The novel follows Dinanath Datta's investigation of the legend of the Gun Merchant, a narrative that gradually reveals connections between colonial trade routes, climate change, and contemporary refugee movements.

At the heart of the novel lies the recognition that environmental crisis transcends national boundaries. Rising sea levels, cyclones, and ecological instability compel individuals to migrate in search of survival. As the novel observes, “Migration is the defining narrative of our era” (Gun Island 112). This statement captures the growing reality of climate displacement across the world.

The migrants depicted in the novel challenge conventional distinctions between political refugees and environmental refugees. Their journeys reveal how climate change intersects with economic inequality, historical injustice, and geopolitical instability.

Migration emerges not as an isolated phenomenon but as a consequence of broader environmental transformations.

Myth plays a crucial role in preserving ecological memory throughout the narrative. The legend of the Gun Merchant functions as a cultural archive that encodes histories of displacement and adaptation. Far from representing a primitive worldview, myth becomes a sophisticated mechanism for preserving collective experience across generations.

Through the intertwining of myth and migration, Ghosh challenges linear conceptions of history. Past and present continually overlap, revealing the persistence of environmental and colonial legacies. The novel suggests that ecological crises are never entirely new; rather, they emerge from historical processes that continue to shape contemporary realities.

By connecting local experiences in Bengal with transnational migration networks, Gun Island demonstrates the global dimensions of environmental injustice. The novel reveals how subaltern experiences travel across borders, challenging dominant narratives that seek to contain environmental crises within national frameworks.

Climate Discourse and Ecological Imagination in The Great Derangement

While Ghosh's novels dramatize ecological crisis through narrative, *The Great Derangement* offers a direct critique of contemporary climate discourse. The text argues that modern culture has largely failed to confront climate change despite overwhelming scientific evidence.

According to Ghosh, climate change represents not only an environmental crisis but also a crisis of imagination. As he writes, "Climate change is not just a crisis of the environment; it is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (*The Great Derangement* 9). Contemporary literary realism often struggles to represent environmental catastrophe because it privileges ordinary human experiences while marginalizing nonhuman agency.

Ghosh further argues that climate change cannot be separated from histories of colonialism and industrial capitalism. The Anthropocene emerges from centuries of imperial expansion and resource extraction. Consequently, environmental crises must be understood within broader historical frameworks that account for colonial violence and economic inequality.

The text also critiques the exclusion of indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge from mainstream climate discussions. Communities often dismissed as backward or irrational possess valuable insights into environmental adaptation and sustainability. Oral traditions, myths, and collective memories contain ecological understandings overlooked by technocratic approaches.

By advocating new forms of storytelling, Ghosh challenges the limitations of conventional literary realism. He calls for narrative frameworks capable of representing planetary transformation and ecological interconnectedness. In doing so, he expands the possibilities of climate fiction and environmental humanities.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's writings offer a profound exploration of the relationship between environmental crisis and subaltern experience. Through *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, and *The Great Derangement*, he demonstrates that ecological destruction cannot be separated from histories of colonialism, displacement, and epistemic exclusion.

The concept of “ecologies of silence” provides a useful framework for understanding how marginalized communities preserve ecological knowledge through memory, myth, and embodied practice. Silence, in Ghosh's works, is not a sign of absence but a mode of resistance that challenges dominant structures of representation.

By foregrounding indigenous knowledge, migratory experiences, and environmental vulnerability, Ghosh repositions subaltern communities as active custodians of ecological wisdom. Their experiences challenge dominant assumptions about development, expertise, and environmental management. Ultimately, Ghosh's work suggests that meaningful responses to climate change require not only technological solutions but also a transformation in how societies understand knowledge, history, and responsibility.

Listening to the silences of the margins may therefore be essential for imagining sustainable futures in an increasingly uncertain world.

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