

Migration, Displacement, and Ecological Crisis in Amitav Ghosh’s Novel: ‘The Hungry Tide’

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) offers a profound exploration of migration, displacement, and ecological crisis within the unstable landscape of the Sundarbans. The novel examines the intersection of human history and environmental change, portraying how geography, climate, and socio-political forces shape human existence. Through the experiences of Piya, Kanai, and Fokir, Ghosh foregrounds the tensions between progress and preservation, science and tradition, and belonging and loss. The recurring displacements—caused by both natural calamities and state interventions—mirror the global condition of ecological precarity and forced migration. By interweaving environmental and human narratives, Ghosh highlights the inseparability of ecological and cultural survival.

The novel thus becomes an ecocritical reflection on how environmental degradation, colonial legacies, and globalization collectively contribute to human suffering and displacement. *The Hungry Tide* ultimately appeals to readers to rethink the relationship between humanity and nature, emphasizing the need for ecological empathy and sustainable coexistence in an era of climate uncertainty.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, migration, displacement, environmental crisis, post-colonialism.

Introduction:

Literature's universality makes it wonderful. It addresses all of humanity rather than just one society or group of people. While bridging social and cultural divides, it provides amusement and enjoyment. Literature provides a platform for the working class and common people to communicate their ideas and feelings, giving voice to experiences that might not otherwise be heard (Patil, 20-25).

The term "Oekologie" was first used by Haeckel over 150 years ago (Watts 681-83). The term "ecology," created by Ernst Haeckel in 1869, stems from the Greek words "oikos" (meaning "home") and "logos" (meaning "study"). Ecology is the scientific study of living things in their natural environments, looking at how they interact with their surroundings and with each other. Studies that examine individual organisms generally focus on their physiology, reproduction, growth, development, and behavior. In contrast, population studies look at the habitat and resource requirements of a species, the behavior of groups, patterns of population growth, and the factors that restrict their numbers or lead to extinction.

Literature, ecology, and nature share a long and profound relationship because literature has always reflected how humans perceive, value, and interact with the natural world. Ecology, as the scientific study of organisms and their environments, provides the framework for understanding the interdependence between life forms and ecosystems. Humans, nonhuman entities, and the landscape together form indispensable elements of the natural environment.

The work of Indian writers is a great contribution to Indian English fiction. The men writers like Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, and Amitav Ghosh have a significant role to play on the stage of literature. Amitav Ghosh is an Indian novelist. His fictions are 'The Circle of Reason,' 'The Shadow Lines,' 'In An Antique Land,' 'Dancing in Cambodia,' 'The Calcutta Chromosome,' 'The Glass Palace,' 'The Hungry Tide,' and 'The Ibis Trilogy,' consisting of 'Sea of Poppies,' 'River of Smoke,' and 'Flood of Fire.' All this work has given popularity to Amitav Ghosh not only in India but also abroad. In 'The Hungry Tide' he tries to show how does people become the victim of ecological crisis.

Literature interprets and expresses these ecological realities through imagination, language, and storytelling. Nature appears in literature not merely as scenery but as a powerful force that shapes human identity, emotions, culture, and history. Many writers use nature to symbolize beauty, renewal, danger, or moral truth, while others explore environmental destruction, climate change, and the consequences of human exploitation of natural resources. This relationship between literature and ecology has given rise to ecocriticism, which studies how texts portray environmental issues and human-nature relationships. Scholars like Cheryll Glotfelty argue that literature helps us understand the environment not only scientifically but also ethically and emotionally, while Lawrence Buell emphasizes that environmental imagination in literature can reshape how societies respond to ecological crisis (Glotfelty, 15-34). Through literary works—from Romantic poetry that celebrates natural beauty to contemporary ecological narratives that warn against

environmental degradation—readers gain insight into humanity’s dependence on nature and the urgent need to protect it. Thus, literature becomes a bridge connecting scientific ecological knowledge with cultural understanding, reminding us that human survival is inseparable from the well-being of the natural world.

The term “ecocriticism” was first introduced by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.*” (Ghosh, A.1) Ecocriticism reveals that environmental destruction is not merely a biological or geological issue but also a cultural crisis rooted in human values, politics, and economies. The rise of ecocriticism is closely linked to the worsening environmental problems faced by the world because society began to realize that literature, culture, and human thinking play a major role in shaping our attitudes toward nature. Ecocriticism is a branch of literary criticism that studies the relationship between literature and the environment. It examines how nature, ecology, animals, climate, and environmental issues are represented in poems, novels, dramas, essays, and other texts. It also explores how literature shapes our understanding of environmental responsibility and human–nature relationships. Ecocriticism assumes that literature does not only reflect society but also influences how people think about the natural world. Postcolonial ecological crisis refers to environmental problems that emerge in formerly colonized regions due to exploitation of natural resources, displacement of people, and development policies inherited from colonial rule. Colonial powers extracted forests, minerals, and land for profit without caring for ecological balance. Even after independence, the same patterns continue, causing ecological degradation, habitat loss, and climate vulnerability (Ashcraft, 99-106).

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is a novel that intricately explores the complex relationship between humans, history, and nature within the delicate ecology of the Sundarbans. The novel’s setting—an immense archipelago in the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers—represents a landscape defined by instability, vulnerability, and constant movement. The tides that continuously reshape the land symbolize a life shaped by uncertainty. In this environment, Ghosh examines the intersecting themes of migration, displacement, and ecological crisis, revealing how human existence in the Sundarbans is inseparable from the forces of environmental change and political power. The novel portrays the Sundarbans as more than a backdrop; it functions as a living force that determines the rhythms of life, labor, identity, and survival. (Mukherjee, 43)

Migration is one of the central themes of *The Hungry Tide*, and Ghosh presents it as a multifaceted phenomenon that includes personal journeys, historical upheavals, and forced movements shaped by political oppression. The migration of characters like *Piyali Roy* and

Kanai Dutt reflects personal quests for identity, knowledge, and reconnection with the past. *Piya*, a Bengali-American marine biologist studying Irrawaddy dolphins, arrives in the Sundarbans as an outsider despite her ethnic roots. Her migration is both scientific and emotional, driven by her desire to understand the region's biodiversity and her complex relationship with her own heritage. Her entry into the tide country symbolizes a transnational form of migration where boundaries between homeland and foreign land become blurred (Gupta, 234). *Kanai Dutt*, on the other hand, migrates from urban Delhi to rural Lusibari after receiving a notebook from his late uncle *Nirmal*. *Kanai's* return is marked by curiosity and a yearning to understand the unspoken histories buried within his family. His migration is deeply connected to memory, self-exploration, and the rediscovery of personal and cultural roots. Through these characters, Ghosh portrays migration as a transformative experience that extends beyond physical movement.

Historical migration plays an equally important role in the narrative. The Sundarbans became a refuge for thousands of people who fled East Pakistan during the Partition of India in 1947 and again during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. These refugees, primarily from marginalized castes and impoverished communities, migrated to the islands seeking land, food security, and the possibility of rebuilding their lives. Their migration was not voluntary but a consequence of political violence, communal tension, and economic desperation. In the novel, the memory of this historical migration is preserved through *Nirmal's* writings, which recount the struggles of those who settled in Morichjhāpi. Their attempt to build a homeland in the hostile environment of the Sundarbans reflects the aspirations of displaced people searching for dignity and belonging (Chakrabarty, 201). However, their migration also exposes the precariousness of their existence, as their position in the Indian nation-state remained unstable. Ghosh uses these histories to demonstrate that migration is often an outcome of deep-rooted social and political inequalities.

The novel also emphasizes forced migration driven by government policies and state intervention. The refugees who settled in Morichjhāpi were promised rehabilitation, only to be forcibly evicted later by the West Bengal government. Their lives are marked by continuous movement from one place to another, dictated by policies that prioritize political interests over human welfare. Ghosh exposes the vulnerabilities of these communities who, despite being citizens, are treated as illegal encroachers on their own lands. The state's exercise of power determines their right to settle, migrate, and survive. In portraying these forced migrations, Ghosh critiques the failures of postcolonial governance, revealing how the state's decisions are often justified in the name of conservation or development but ultimately serve to marginalize the powerless.

Displacement becomes a significant theme in *The Hungry Tide*, emerging from both political oppression and environmental instability. The most powerful representation of political displacement in the novel is the Morichjhāpi massacre of 1979, a tragic episode in Bengal's history. Through Nirmal's journals, Ghosh reconstructs the events that led to the violent eviction of thousands of Dalit refugees who had attempted to settle on the island of Morichjhāpi. The state justified its actions on ecological grounds, claiming that the settlers threatened the protected forest area and the tiger reserve (Ghosh, 155). However, the narrative reveals that these justifications masked deeper political motivations rooted in caste discrimination, ideological opposition, and the desire to maintain control. The refugees were denied water, food, and medical aid, and their homes were destroyed. Many were killed or died from starvation and disease. In revisiting Morichjhāpi through fiction, Ghosh not only memorializes a suppressed historical event but also highlights the ethical dilemmas that arise when environmental concerns are used to justify human rights violations. The displacement of the Morichjhāpi settlers epitomizes how political power can shape ecological narratives to rationalize state violence.

Environmental displacement forms another crucial layer in the novel. Life in the Sundarbans is constantly disrupted by natural forces such as cyclones, floods, tiger attacks, and the gradual erosion of islands. The tides that define the geography of the region also determine the fate of its inhabitants. Villagers live with the knowledge that their homes can be destroyed overnight, pushing them into cycles of relocation and reconstruction. *Fokir*, the illiterate fisherman who becomes Piya's guide, embodies the intimate relationship between humans and the tides. His life is shaped by the ever-changing river channels, shifting fish populations, and dangerous encounters with wildlife (Slemon, 12). His tragic death during a cyclone underscores the vulnerability of those who depend directly on the natural environment for survival. Environmental displacement in the novel is not a rare occurrence but a recurring feature of life, where resilience becomes a necessity.

Ghosh also critiques conservation policies, revealing how ecological protection can paradoxically cause displacement. Ecology cannot be separated from human impacts. The conflict between humans and wildlife—especially tigers—illustrates the complexities of conservation. When villagers kill a tiger, *Piya* sees tragedy, while locals defend survival. The killing of a tiger by the villagers, who are enraged by repeated attacks, symbolizes their frustration with laws that prioritize wildlife over human life (Ghosh, 316). Conservation policies restrict their access to the forests, limit their livelihood options, and expose them to danger without offering adequate compensation or protection. While environmentalists like *Piya* view the Sundarbans as a space of rich biodiversity deserving protection, local communities experience conservation laws as forms of policing and deprivation. The novel

thus raises critical questions: Can conservation be justified when it undermines the survival of human communities? Who has the authority to define ecological priorities, and whose voices are silenced in the process? These questions reveal that displacement is not merely physical but also ideological, rooted in competing visions of environment and development.

The ecological crisis in *The Hungry Tide* forms the backdrop against which all human activities unfold. The Sundarbans is depicted as an ecological hotspot vulnerable to climate change, rising sea levels, and the degradation of mangrove forests. (Chakrabarty, 217) Ghosh describes how cyclones, unpredictable tides, and soil erosion threaten both human settlements and biodiversity. The destruction of the mangroves exacerbates flooding, increases salinity, and reduces the availability of arable land, contributing to the economic distress of local communities. The novel anticipates many contemporary environmental concerns, highlighting how climate change disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized. The people of the Sundarbans, despite their minimal contribution to global carbon emissions, are among the most exposed to ecological catastrophe. In showcasing these vulnerabilities, Ghosh implicitly critiques global environmental inequalities and calls for a more just and sustainable approach to conservation.

Human–animal conflict further illustrates the ecological crisis in the region. The Royal Bengal tiger, revered yet feared, becomes a powerful symbol of both ecological beauty and danger. Villagers risk their lives to collect honey, gather wood, or fish in tiger-inhabited areas, often resulting in violent encounters (Ghosh, 97-100). Ghosh highlights the ethical dilemma inherent in protecting an endangered species while also respecting the rights and lives of human communities. *Piya's* scientific perspective, grounded in ecological preservation, contrasts with the villagers' pragmatic approach to survival. Through these differing viewpoints, Ghosh demonstrates that ecological debates cannot be separated from social conditions. Effective conservation must integrate local knowledge, respect human suffering, and acknowledge the interdependence of human and non-human life.

The ecological crisis also affects endangered species like the Irrawaddy dolphin. *Piya's* research highlights the threats posed by changing water salinity, overfishing, and habitat destruction. The dolphin becomes a symbol of ecological fragility, representing the beauty and vulnerability of the Tide Country. *Fokir's* natural intuition and *Piya's* scientific expertise together illustrate two distinct but complementary ways of understanding the environment. Ghosh suggests that ecological knowledge must bridge the gap between indigenous experience and scientific inquiry to truly address environmental challenges.

Livelihood erosion is another consequence of ecological crisis. Fishermen, honey collectors, and farmers face increasing uncertainty as the environment becomes less predictable and more hostile. The erosion of islands forces families to abandon their lands, often leading to urban migration or dependence on government relief. The ecological crisis thus intersects with economic and social inequalities, revealing that environmental degradation is never merely ecological but deeply political. Those who are most affected often have the least power to make decisions about land, resources, or environmental policies.

Migration, displacement, and ecological crisis in *The Hungry Tide* are not isolated themes but deeply interconnected. Migration is frequently driven by environmental or political pressures, while displacement weakens communities' ability to withstand ecological threats. Environmental degradation intensifies human conflict, economic instability, and political vulnerability, creating interdependent cycles of suffering and adaptation. The novel demonstrates that any attempt to address ecological issues must also consider human rights, social justice, and historical trauma. The Sundarbans thus emerge as a space of continuous negotiation, where humans, animals, and the environment struggle to coexist.

The novel offers hope. Piya's decision to remain in the Sundarbans and collaborate with Moyna signals a sustainable vision for ecological conservation and empowerment. Her transformation—from detached scientist to committed collaborator—reflects the novel's call for ethical futures rooted in empathy and cooperation (Gupta, 243).

Ghosh employs innovative narrative techniques to explore these interconnected themes. The use of Nirmal's diary allows him to blend historical fact with fiction, reviving the forgotten tragedy of Morichjhāpi while grounding it in personal memory. The tide country itself becomes a character—unpredictable, powerful, and dynamic. Ghosh's descriptive language captures the sensory experience of the Sundarbans, making readers feel the force of the tides, the intensity of the storms, and the fragility of human dwellings. His narrative approach reflects ecological thinking, which emphasizes interconnectedness, interdependence, and the agency of non-human forces. By intertwining human stories with environmental processes, Ghosh invites readers to view the world through an ecological lens.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, *The Hungry Tide* offers a profound exploration of migration, displacement, and ecological crisis within one of the world's most vulnerable landscapes. Through the interwoven narratives of characters like *Piya*, *Kanai*, *Fokir*, and *Nirmal*, Ghosh reveals how history, politics, and nature shape human existence in the Sundarbans. The novel

challenges simplistic notions of development, environmental protection, and national identity, arguing instead for an ecological ethic rooted in empathy, justice, and respect for both human and non-human life. Ghosh's work underscores the need to rethink conservation and development policies in ways that acknowledge historical trauma, empower local communities, and protect fragile ecosystems. *The Hungry Tide* thus continues to be a significant text for understanding the intersections of climate change, migration, and social inequality in the contemporary world.

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