

## Eco-Critical Perspectives And Environmental Themes In The Hungry Tide By Amitav Ghosh

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### Abstract

The present paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* through the theoretical framework of eco-criticism, foregrounding the complex and dynamic relationship between human communities and the natural environment of the Sundarbans. Challenging anthropocentric paradigms, the novel represents nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active, volatile force that shapes history, culture, and survival. By emphasizing ecological instability, biodiversity, and environmental vulnerability, Ghosh exposes the limits of human control and highlights the interdependence of human and non-human life forms. The study analyzes the tension between Western scientific rationalism and indigenous ecological knowledge through the characters of Piya and Fokir, demonstrating the necessity of integrating scientific inquiry with lived environmental wisdom. It further explores ethical dilemmas surrounding wildlife conservation, environmental justice, and displacement, particularly through the representation of the Royal Bengal tiger and the historical account of the Morichjhapi massacre. These episodes reveal how environmental protection can be entangled with political power and social exclusion. By situating ecological concerns within postcolonial histories and ethical debates, *The Hungry Tide* emerges as an eco-political narrative that calls for a more inclusive and ethically grounded understanding of environmental responsibility. The paper argues that Ghosh's novel significantly contributes to contemporary eco-critical discourse by emphasizing coexistence, vulnerability, and shared ecological responsibility in an era of global environmental crisis.

### Key Words

*Eco-Criticism, Sundarbans, Environmental Ethics, Human Nature Relationship, Indigenous Knowledge, Environmental Justice*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* occupies a crucial place in contemporary environmental literature for its sustained engagement with ecology alongside history, displacement, and ethical responsibility. Read through the theoretical framework of eco-criticism, the novel critiques anthropocentric worldviews and foregrounds the complex interdependence between human and non-human life. Eco-criticism, which examines the relationship between literature and the environment, enables a reading of the Sundarbans not as a passive setting but as a living, dynamic ecosystem that actively shapes human experience. Through narrative structure, character interaction, and evocative landscape description, Ghosh challenges notions of human mastery and calls attention to the necessity of coexistence within a fragile ecological system.

Eco-criticism is a literary approach that examines the relationship between humans and the natural world. It seeks to understand how literature represents the environment and the impact of human activities on it. Eco-criticism emerged as a distinct field of study in the 1990s. It draws on various disciplines, including environmental studies, ecology, and conservation biology. Eco-critics analyze literary works to uncover the underlying attitudes towards nature. They explore how texts represent the natural world, often revealing cultural attitudes and biases. Eco-criticism also examines the ways in which literature can inspire environmental awareness and activism. By studying literature through an eco-critical lens, readers

can gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between humans and the environment. This approach encourages readers to think critically about the ways in which culture shapes our perceptions of nature. Eco-criticism is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to promote environmental awareness and sustainability.

Eco-criticism is particularly relevant in the context of climate change and environmental degradation. As the world grapples with the challenges of sustainability, eco-criticism offers a unique perspective on the role of literature in shaping environmental attitudes. By analyzing literary works, eco-critics can identify patterns and themes that reflect and shape cultural attitudes towards nature. Eco-criticism can also inform environmental policy and activism by highlighting the cultural and social factors that influence environmental decision-making. Eco-critics examine the representation of nature in literature, exploring how texts reflect and shape cultural attitudes towards the environment. This approach can reveal the complex and often contradictory relationships between humans and the natural world. Eco-criticism encourages readers to consider the ways in which literature can inspire environmental empathy and action. By studying literature through an eco-critical lens, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and social contexts that shape environmental attitudes. Eco-criticism is an important tool for understanding the complex relationships between humans and the environment. It offers a unique perspective on the role of literature in shaping environmental awareness and activism.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a prime example of eco-critical literature. The novel explores the complex relationships between humans and the natural world in the Sundarbans. Through its portrayal of the tidal country and its inhabitants, the novel highlights the intricate web of relationships between humans and the environment. Ghosh's writing emphasizes the importance of respecting and understanding the natural world. The novel encourages readers to think critically about the impact of human activities on the environment. It is a powerful example of eco-critical literature that inspires environmental awareness and empathy. The novel's exploration of the human-nature relationship offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics of environmental sustainability. Ghosh's writing is a testament to the power of literature to shape environmental attitudes and inspire action. By studying *The Hungry Ti* through an eco-critical lens, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between humans and the environment. Eco-criticism offers a unique perspective on the role of literature in shaping environmental awareness and sustainability.

The Sundarbans, a vast mangrove delta characterized by unstable landmasses and shifting tides, lies at the center of Ghosh's eco-critical vision. The region resists human attempts at permanence and control, a resistance captured in the description of the tide as "*a creature that had been tamed, but not quite domesticated,*" remaining both "familiar and yet unpredictable" (Ghosh 7). This metaphor exposes the illusion of human dominion over nature and underscores the agency of environmental forces. Subject to cyclones, floods, and erosion, the Sundarbans emerges as a space where human existence is provisional and contingent. The author writes:

The Sundarbans were a place where the elements were in constant flux, where the land and water were forever shifting, creating and destroying, in a cycle that was both beautiful and brutal. It was a place where nature's power was palpable, where the human presence was fragile and fleeting. (THT223)

Ghosh further reinforces the vitality of the non-human world by depicting the forest as a sentient presence: "The forest was alive, its rhythms and sounds like a heartbeat" (THT50). Such imagery destabilizes human-centered perspectives and aligns with eco-critical insistence on recognizing nature as an active participant rather than an inert backdrop. The forest also disrupts linear notions of time and history, existing as "a world of its own, governed by tides and seasons, where the very notion of time was

a stranger” (THT104). By merging past and present, life and death, Ghosh presents an ecological temporality that challenges modern ideas of progress and permanence.

The novel’s emphasis on interdependence is embodied in the character of Fokir, whose ecological knowledge emerges from lived experience rather than formal education. His intuitive understanding of tides, weather, and animal behavior highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge systems grounded in daily interaction with the environment. Eco-criticism values such knowledge for its emphasis on sustainability and coexistence, particularly in ecologically vulnerable regions like the Sundarbans. In contrast, Piya represents Western scientific rationalism and conservationist ideology. Initially approaching the region as an object of study, she relies on empirical data and institutional frameworks. However, the constantly shifting terrain—“where the land and water were forever shifting, creating and destroying” (THT 223)—reveals the limitations of detached scientific approaches. Piya’s gradual recognition of Fokir’s ecological expertise reflects eco-critical arguments advocating the integration of scientific inquiry with indigenous environmental wisdom in addressing ecological crises.

Ghosh also engages with ethical dilemmas surrounding wildlife conservation, particularly through the figure of the Royal Bengal tiger. The tiger, while posing a lethal threat to humans, is not depicted as a moral antagonist but as an integral component of the ecosystem. This representation resists simplistic binaries of nature as either benevolent or hostile and aligns with eco-critical efforts to decenter human-centered ethical frameworks. At the same time, *The Hungry Tide* foregrounds questions of environmental justice. The Morichjhapi massacre exposes how conservation policies can be deployed to legitimize the displacement of marginalized communities. By designating inhabited land as protected wilderness, the state erases human histories and claims to belonging. Ghosh thus demonstrates that ecological preservation cannot be separated from social justice, political power, and historical context. Ghosh Observes:

The tide had turned, and with it the forest's rhythms. The water was receding, revealing the hidden world of the Sundarbans, exposing the secrets and mysteries that lay hidden beneath the surface. It was a moment of transition, a fleeting glimpse into a world that was both familiar and yet, utterly alien. (THT204)

Natural phenomena such as tides and floods further emphasize human vulnerability and the limits of technological control. When the tide recedes, it briefly exposes “a world that was both familiar and yet, utterly alien” (THT 204), underscoring the transient nature of human knowledge and dominance. Survival in the Sundarbans depends not on control but on adaptability and respect for ecological rhythms. Through its eco-political narrative, *The Hungry Tide* resists singular interpretations of nature and advocates an ethical model of environmental engagement rooted in interdependence and shared vulnerability. Ghosh’s ecological vision resonates with Lawrence Buell’s insistence on recognizing the non-human world as an active presence and Ursula K. Heise’s concept of eco-cosmopolitanism, particularly in Piya’s negotiation between global conservation science and local realities. By situating ecological concerns within postcolonial histories and ethical debates, *The Hungry Tide* expands the scope of eco-criticism and affirms its relevance in an era of escalating environmental crisis.

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