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Rivers, Myths, and Climate: An Ecocritical Study of Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide and Gun Island

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's fiction has increasingly foregrounded the intersections between human life and the natural world, placing ecological concerns at the heart of his narratives. The Hungry Tide (2004) and Gun Island (2019), though separated by fifteen years, share a common thread in their engagement with the environment, myth, migration, and the destabilizing effects of ecological crises. The Hungry Tide situates its narrative in the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans, dramatizing the precarious balance between human survival and the tidal mangrove landscape, while Gun Island expands Ghosh's ecological canvas to a global scale, where climate change and forced migration emerge as dominant concerns. Read together, these novels trace Ghosh's evolution from localized explorations of ecological identity to broader meditations on global climate crisis and its human consequences. This paper undertakes a comparative ecocritical study of the two works, examining their treatment of landscape, myth, memory, and environmental degradation. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and recent scholarship in postcolonial ecocriticism, the study argues that Ghosh not only reimagines the novel as a form capable of articulating ecological anxieties but also situates literature as a crucial site for rethinking humanity's relationship with nature in an era of climate catastrophe.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Catastrophe, Anthropocentric, Bon Bibi, Climate Change, Postcolonial Ecology, Irrawaddy Dolphin, Global Migration, Ecological Imagination

Amitav Ghosh occupies a significant place in contemporary Indian English literature for the way he blends history, myth, and ecology into a seamless narrative texture. His fiction repeatedly interrogates the relationship between human life and the larger forces of nature, foregrounding ecological fragility, displacement, and the complex interdependence between culture and environment. In recent decades, as the global literary imagination has turned toward questions of climate change, Ghosh has emerged as a leading voice articulating what might be called "climate aesthetics." His novels resist the anthropocentric conventions of narrative and instead emphasize the agency of landscapes, animals, rivers, and weather systems, presenting them not as mere backdrops but as active participants in the unfolding of human history. Within this literary trajectory, The Hungry Tide (2004) and Gun Island (2019) stand out as emblematic works that capture both the local and global dimensions of ecological crisis. While The Hungry Tide situates its narrative in the delicate ecosystem of the Sundarbans, exploring how tides, mangroves, and myths shape human destiny, Gun Island expands the ecological imagination into a transnational framework, linking climate

change with forced migration, the reanimation of myth, and the breakdown of the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman.

The field of ecocriticism provides a useful lens to read these two novels. Emerging in the 1990s with the foundational work of scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, ecocriticism examines the representation of nature in literature and interrogates how texts construct and critique human-environment relationships. Its fundamental premise is that literature cannot be divorced from ecological realities and that cultural production must be studied in relation to the natural world. As Glotfelty defined it, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," while Buell's influential work extended this by insisting that environmental texts foreground nature as a presence with ethical and political consequences. In the Indian context, postcolonial ecocriticism has also underscored how environmental issues are entangled with histories of colonialism, economic exploitation, and social marginalization. Ghosh's fiction, which consistently explores the ecological dimensions of displacement, myth, and survival, provides fertile ground for such a study. His narratives foreground how climate, rivers, and landscapes are never neutral; they shape and are shaped by political and cultural histories.

In The Hungry Tide, Ghosh crafts a story set in the Sundarbans, a mangrove delta marked by its tidal rhythms, cyclones, and mythic traditions. The novel juxtaposes scientific and folkloric perspectives through characters such as Piyali Roy, a marine biologist researching the Irrawaddy dolphin, and Fokir, a fisherman deeply attuned to the lore of the land. The story dramatizes how ecological precarity shapes human existence and how myths such as that of Bon Bibi mediate the relationship between people and nature. At its core, the novel interrogates how fragile ecologies are often sites of contestation between development, conservation, and survival. The river tides, storms, and mangroves are not inert settings but factors that determine the fates of communities, suggesting a narrative mode deeply aligned with ecocritical concerns.

Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide is one of the most important ecological novels in contemporary Indian literature because it situates human existence within the precarious ecosystem of the Sundarbans. The novel dramatizes the constant negotiation between human survival and the unpredictable rhythms of nature, foregrounding the interdependence of environment, myth, and memory. The title itself suggests this precariousness: the "hungry tide" evokes both the literal tidal waves that engulf the delta and the metaphorical hunger of nature to reclaim territory from human encroachment. In this sense, the narrative pushes against anthropocentric notions of mastery over nature and instead highlights the vulnerability and fragility of human existence in the face of ecological forces.

One of the novel's central concerns is the Sundarbans as a landscape of constant flux and danger. The mangrove forests, tidal estuaries, and cyclonic storms remind readers that the natural environment is not a passive setting but an active participant in human history. Ghosh gives vivid descriptions of the landscape, portraying it as alive, threatening, and sacred at once. This resonates with Lawrence Buell's claim that in environmental literature, "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history." In The Hungry Tide,

every human act, from fishing to farming to conservation, is contingent upon the ecological rhythms of the tides. The environment cannot be controlled or domesticated but must be navigated with caution and respect.

The characters embody different relationships to this fragile ecosystem. Piyali Roy, the American-born Bengali marine biologist, represents scientific curiosity and the modern impulse to study and preserve endangered species. Her focus on the Irrawaddy dolphin illustrates the ecocritical emphasis on nonhuman agency and the importance of biodiversity. In contrast, Fokir, the illiterate fisherman, embodies indigenous ecological knowledge. His deep attunement to the rhythms of the tide, his reliance on oral lore, and his instinctive understanding of the environment underscore the novel's interest in forms of ecological wisdom beyond science. Fokir does not articulate ecological theories but lives them, suggesting that survival in the Sundarbans depends on experiential, embodied knowledge rather than abstract scientific rationality. The collaboration between Piya and Fokir, though fraught with communication barriers, illustrates the possibility of dialogue between scientific and indigenous ways of knowing, a central concern of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Another crucial dimension of the novel is the role of myth and folklore in mediating human-nature relations. The legend of Bon Bibi, the goddess who protects the people of the Sundarbans, recurs throughout the novel as a cultural framework for negotiating the dangers of the forest and the tiger. The story of Bon Bibi, passed down through generations, encodes an ethic of balance between humans and nature, warning against greed and exploitation. In the novel, Bon Bibi's myth is not relegated to the realm of superstition but is shown as integral to the community's survival strategies. By juxtaposing myth with science, Ghosh suggests that folklore contains ecological insights that modernity often overlooks. Ecocriticism, particularly in its postcolonial iteration, emphasizes how myths and oral traditions can preserve ecological wisdom, challenging the dominance of Western scientific paradigms. In this sense, the novel positions the Bon Bibi myth as both a spiritual and ecological narrative that resists human domination over nature.

The novel also foregrounds the tension between conservation and human livelihood. The Morichjhapi incident, an infamous episode in Bengal's history when refugees were evicted from the Sundarbans in the name of wildlife preservation, haunts the narrative. Through Nirmal's diary and Kanai's memories, Ghosh revisits this tragedy, exposing how environmental policies often displace the most vulnerable communities. The refugees who sought to settle in the Sundarbans were forcibly removed under the justification of protecting the tiger reserve, illustrating how ecological conservation can sometimes be complicit with state violence. Here, the novel raises critical questions about whose survival is prioritized in environmental discourse. It highlights the ethical dilemma at the heart of ecocriticism: how to balance the needs of human communities with the preservation of nonhuman species. Situating the plight of the refugees alongside the protection of the tigers, Ghosh underscores that ecological justice must account for both human and nonhuman survival.

The novel's narrative structure itself reinforces its ecological concerns. The alternating perspectives of Piya, Kanai, and Nirmal suggest that no single narrative can capture the complexity of the Sundarbans. Just as the tides are shifting and multiple, so too are the

perspectives through which the landscape is represented. This polyphonic structure embodies the ecocritical insight that nature cannot be reduced to one mode of representation; it is multifaceted, elusive, and resistant to singular interpretation. The novel's refusal to privilege one perspective—scientific, folkloric, or political—mirrors the ecocritical commitment to plurality in understanding ecological realities. Moreover, the novel insists on the vulnerability of human life in the face of ecological catastrophe. The climactic storm that claims Fokir's life dramatizes the overwhelming force of nature, reminding readers that human resilience has limits. The storm is not simply a narrative device but an assertion of ecological power, disrupting human plans and reshaping destinies. The death of Fokir, a character most attuned to the rhythms of nature, underscores that ecological knowledge does not guarantee protection against the sheer unpredictability of the environment. This tragic conclusion reflects the novel's broader ecological vision: survival in such fragile ecologies requires humility, adaptation, and an acknowledgment of human limitations.

Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island marks a significant shift in his ecological imagination, broadening the thematic scope of The Hungry Tide from a localized deltaic ecosystem to a planetary framework of climate crisis, migration, and myth. Published in 2019, the novel reflects the urgency of ecological anxieties in the twenty-first century, situating climate change as a force that destabilizes borders, displaces populations, and unsettles the boundaries between myth and reality. While The Hungry Tide remains rooted in the Sundarbans, Gun Island moves across continents—from Bengal to Venice to Los Angeles—illustrating the transnational character of ecological disaster. The narrative insists that the effects of climate change cannot be confined to specific regions but ripple across the globe, shaping human and nonhuman destinies alike. In this sense, the novel dramatizes what ecocriticism has increasingly emphasized; that environmental crises are not isolated events but interconnected phenomena requiring global consciousness.

At the center of the novel is Dinanath Datta, or Deen, a rare book dealer who is drawn in to the unraveling connections between myth, climate disaster, and human migration. Through Deen's journey, Ghosh foregrounds the entanglement of ecological crisis with cultural memory, showing how ancient myths resonate with contemporary realities. The story of Manasa Devi, the snake goddess associated with rivers and fertility, becomes a key interpretive framework through which Deen and others come to understand the uncanny events unfolding around them. Ghosh demonstrates that myth is not an outdated or irrelevant cultural residue but a narrative mode that encodes ecological wisdom. The reappearance of the snake goddess in a time of climate upheaval suggests that myths retain explanatory power in the Anthropocene, offering ways of imagining nonhuman agency that scientific rationality struggles to articulate.

The ecological dimensions of Gun Island are inseparable from the theme of migration. Rising sea, unstable weather patterns, and ecological degradation force communities to leave their home, echoing real world phenomena of climate refugees. The Sundarbans again appear in the novel, not as the sole setting but as a site where ecological crisis is particularly acute. The submergence of villages due to rising waters dramatizes how climate change disproportionately impacts vulnerable communities, compelling them to migrate in search of

survival. Ghosh links these local displacements to larger patterns of global migration, where climate and economic factors converge to reshape demographics. The refugees encountered in Italy mirror the displaced communities of Bengal, underscoring the global interconnectedness of ecological catastrophe. This theme aligns with Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," where the gradual destruction of ecosystems displaces populations in ways that are less spectacular than natural disasters but equally devastating.

Animals and nonhuman actors again assume significant roles in the novel, reinforcing the ecocritical emphasis on multi-species entanglements. The appearance of rare and displaced species—such as the sudden sighting of venomous snakes in unexpected places or dolphins navigating altered waterways—suggests that nonhuman life is also in migration, forced to adapt to changing climates. These instances highlight the permeability of ecological boundaries, where both humans and animals are uprooted by environmental instability. Ghosh underscores that migration is not solely a human phenomenon but one that encompasses the entire biosphere, complicating traditional distinctions between species.

The novel also confronts the failure of modern rationality to adequately explain or address ecological crisis. Deen, initially a skeptical and rationalist figure, finds himself confronted with uncanny events that defy explanation: snakes appearing in improbable contexts, myths reasserting themselves in material reality, and coincidences that suggest hidden patterns. These experiences destabilize his reliance on Enlightenment rationality and open him to other epistemologies. By weaving myth and superstition into the narrative of climate crisis, Ghosh critiques the limits of Western rationalist thought and gestures toward alternative ways of knowing. This reflects a key concern of postcolonial ecocriticism, which critiques the dominance of Eurocentric models of knowledge and advocates for the inclusion of indigenous, mythic, and non-Western epistemologies in ecological thought.

The Venetian setting further amplifies the novel's ecological vision. Venice, a city historically defined by its relationship with water, becomes emblematic of global climate precarity. Rising tides threaten its very survival, paralleling the submergence of the Sundarbans. By juxtaposing Venice with Bengal, Ghosh collapses the distance between the so-called developed and developing worlds, illustrating that climate catastrophe is a shared human predicament. The novel insists that ecological vulnerability is universal, even if its effects are unevenly distributed. This planetary perspective aligns with Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that climate change demands a rethinking of history itself, as human actions now shape geological and ecological processes.

At the heart of the novel is a critique of human hubris. The ecological disasters and displacements depicted in Gun Island are not presented as natural inevitabilities but as consequences of human exploitation of the environment. The overuse of resources, the disregard for ecological balance, and the persistence of anthropocentric thinking all contribute to the crises that the novel dramatizes. By embedding ecological catastrophe within narratives of myth, migration, and human greed, Ghosh underscores that climate change is not merely a scientific issue but a profoundly cultural and ethical one. Literature, therefore, becomes a crucial site for rethinking human responsibility in the face of ecological collapse.

Read together, The Hungry Tide and Gun Island illustrate the trajectory of Amitav Ghosh's ecological imagination, moving from the local to the global, from the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans to the planetary networks of climate migration. Both novels emphasize that ecological crisis is not merely a backdrop for human action but a force that actively shapes destinies, demanding humility and adaptation. Where The Hungry Tide portrays the tension between survival, conservation, and indigenous ecological wisdom within a specific deltaic landscape, Gun Island situates these concerns in a global context, underscoring the universality of ecological precarity. In both, myth functions as an interpretive framework that encodes ecological insights, challenging the dominance of modern rationality. The novels thus offer complementary perspectives: one rooted in local experience, the other expansive and transnational. Together, they affirm Ghosh's contribution to ecocriticism by positioning literature as a vital site for articulating climate anxieties and reimagining humanity's relationship with the natural world in an era of ecological crisis.

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