International Journal of English Research
www.englishjournals.com
ISSN: 2455-2186
Received: 12-05-2026, Accepted: 12-06-2026, Published: 27-06-2026
Volume 12, Issue 2, 2026, Page No. 82-86

Tides of survival: An ecocritical reading of nature, displacement, and Eco-Ethics in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

C Thirumal[1], A Ganesan[2]

[1] Research Scholar, Department of English, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College, Mylapore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

[2] Associate Professor, Department of English, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College, Mylapore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

DOI: https://doi.org/10.66856/english.2026.12.2.12077

Abstract

This paper offers an ecocritical reading of Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide through the theoretical framework articulated by Greg Garrard. It argues that the novel represents nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active, shaping force that governs human life, ethics, and narrative form. Set in the ecologically volatile Sundarbans, the novel foregrounds the instability of land and water, the agency of nonhuman life, and the vulnerability of marginalized communities dependent on fragile ecosystems. By examining human–nature conflict, environmental injustice, indigenous eco-spirituality, and narrative strategies shaped by tidal rhythms, the study demonstrates how Ghosh challenges anthropocentric ideologies embedded in modernity, development, and conservation discourse. The analysis further situates The Hungry Tide within contemporary debates in environmental humanities, particularly those concerning climate precarity, postcolonial ecology, and environmental ethics. Through its integration of ecological processes with political history and cultural memory, the novel advances an ethical vision grounded in humility, coexistence, and respect for nonhuman agency. Ultimately, this paper contends that The Hungry Tide exemplifies the capacity of literary narrative to reshape ecological consciousness and to question dominant human-centered modes of understanding the natural world.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Sundarbans, environmental ethics, postcolonial ecology, human–nature relations

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh occupies a distinctive position in Indian English literature as a novelist whose work persistently interrogates the intersections of ecology, history, displacement, and power. Trained as a social anthropologist, Ghosh brings an interdisciplinary sensitivity to his fiction, combining narrative art with ethnographic attention and environmental awareness. Critics have increasingly recognized him as a key figure in environmentally engaged writing, particularly for his ability to situate ecological crises within broader political and cultural histories (Mukherjee, 2010) [11]. His novels anticipate what Rob Nixon (2011) [12] describes as "slow violence," where environmental degradation unfolds gradually and invisibly, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. This ethical concern is central to Ghosh's ecological imagination.

Published in 2004, The Hungry Tide is set in the Sundarbans, a vast tidal archipelago formed by the confluence of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers. The region is characterized by shifting islands, unpredictable tides, mangrove forests, and frequent cyclones, creating a landscape where the boundary between land and water is perpetually unstable (Ghosh, 2004) [6]. Through characters such as Piya, a marine biologist; Kanai, a translator; and Fokir, a local fisherman, the novel stages encounters between scientific knowledge, bureaucratic power, and indigenous ecological understanding. The Sundarbans emerge not as a passive setting but as a dynamic ecological force that shapes human movement, labor, and survival.

The growing relevance of ecocriticism in contemporary literary studies is closely tied to global environmental crises and the recognition of the Anthropocene as a historical condition. Ecocriticism examines how literary texts represent nature and interrogate the ideological assumptions—particularly anthropocentrism—that underpin environmental exploitation (Garrard, 2012). Lawrence Buell (1995) [1, 5] argues that environmentally conscious literature reconfigures nature from a scenic backdrop into an active presence that shapes narrative and ethical meaning. This approach is especially significant in postcolonial contexts, where ecological vulnerability is inseparable from histories of displacement and uneven development (Mukherjee, 2010) [11].

The central research problem addressed in this study is how The Hungry Tide challenges anthropocentric worldviews by portraying nature as an agentive force rather than an inert environment. Although the novel does not explicitly name climate change, its depiction of erosion, rising waters, and ecological instability resonates with what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) [3] identifies as the collapse of the divide between natural history and human history. This paper argues that The Hungry Tide constructs an ecocritical vision in which nature actively shapes human ethics, politics, and narrative form, thereby questioning modern assumptions of control, progress, and ecological mastery.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism is a critical approach that examines the representation of nature, environmental crises, and human–nonhuman relationships in literary and cultural texts. As a

field, it responds to the growing recognition that environmental degradation is not merely a scientific or political issue but also a cultural and ethical one. Greg Garrard (2012) [5] defines ecocriticism as the study of how literature and culture imagine the relationship between humans and the natural world, particularly by interrogating the ideological assumptions that place humans at the center of ecological systems. This framework enables critics to question anthropocentrism and to analyze how narratives construct environmental values, responsibilities, and forms of dwelling.

Within Garrard's ecocritical model, recurring thematic categories such as wilderness, animals, pollution, apocalypse, dwelling, and the Earth serve as analytical tools for examining environmental representation (Garrard, 2012) [5]. These categories expose persistent nature–culture binaries that separate humans from the nonhuman world and legitimize exploitation. Lawrence Buell (1995) [1] similarly argues that environmentally oriented literature challenges such binaries by presenting nature as an active presence that shapes narrative meaning rather than functioning as a decorative backdrop. Together, Garrard and Buell provide a framework for understanding how literary texts can reconfigure ethical relationships between humans and their environments.

Ecocriticism also places strong emphasis on environmental ethics and justice. Garrard (2012) [5] highlights how ecological harm is unevenly distributed, with marginalized communities often bearing the brunt of environmental risk. This concern aligns closely with Rob Nixon's (2011) [12] concept of "slow violence," which describes environmental destruction as gradual, invisible, and politically underrepresented. In literary texts, such violence often emerges through narratives of displacement, poverty, and ecological vulnerability rather than spectacular catastrophe. Ecocriticism thus becomes a tool for exposing the social and political dimensions of environmental crises.

The relevance of ecocriticism is particularly pronounced in postcolonial and Indian contexts, where environmental issues are deeply entangled with histories of colonial extraction and post-independence development. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010) [11] argues that postcolonial ecocriticism must address how landscapes are shaped by imperial and national projects that prioritize control, productivity, and conservation over indigenous modes of coexistence. Similarly, Huggan and Tiffin (2010) [8] emphasize that postcolonial ecocriticism foregrounds animals, displaced humans, and degraded environments as central ethical concerns rather than peripheral themes. In The Hungry Tide, these insights are crucial for understanding how conservation policies, state power, and ecological instability intersect.

Methodologically, this study employs close textual analysis informed by Garrard's ecocritical framework. As Scott Slovic (2012) [13] notes, ecocriticism is inherently plural and interdisciplinary, allowing critics to move between textual analysis, ethical reflection, and environmental politics. Accordingly, this paper analyzes imagery, narrative structure, and character–environment interactions in The Hungry Tide to demonstrate how Ghosh challenges anthropocentric worldviews and articulates an ecocritical vision rooted in vulnerability, coexistence, and ecological humility.

The Sundarbans as a Living Ecological Entity

In The Hungry Tide, the Sundarbans are represented as a dynamic and unstable ecological system that resists human attempts at fixation and control. Rather than functioning as a static backdrop, the landscape emerges as a living entity shaped by tides, sedimentation, erosion, and seasonal transformations. Ghosh repeatedly emphasizes that islands appear and disappear, rivers alter their courses, and boundaries between land and water remain perpetually uncertain (Ghosh, 2004) [6]. This portrayal challenges conventional literary representations of place as stable and inhabitable, aligning with Greg Garrard's (2012) [5] argument that ecocritical texts unsettle the illusion of environmental permanence sustained by anthropocentric thought.

The Sundarbans' tidal rhythms function as agents of narrative power, structuring movement, labor, and social interaction. Human journeys depend on the ebb and flow of water rather than intention or planning, underscoring the subordination of human agency to ecological processes (Ghosh, 2004) [6]. Mangrove forests, described as dense, hostile, and impenetrable, further reinforce nature's autonomy. These forests do not invite habitation but instead assert ecological boundaries that repel human intrusion. Lawrence Buell (2001) [2] argues that such representations exemplify an "endangered world" narrative, in which environmental systems operate beyond predictability and refuse accommodation to human desires. In The Hungry Tide, nature thus shapes both narrative progression and ethical tension.

The instability of land and water in the Sundarbans fundamentally challenges human claims to ownership, settlement, and permanence. Embankments collapse, villages are washed away, and cultivated land is reclaimed by tides, exposing the fragility of development projects rooted in linear notions of progress (Ghosh, 2004). Garrard's (2012) [5, 6] concept of "dwelling" is particularly relevant here, as it foregrounds the question of how humans inhabit environments that cannot be mastered or secured. The novel suggests that dwelling in the Sundarbans is necessarily provisional, demanding adaptability rather than domination.

Moreover, the Sundarbans are portrayed not merely as a local ecosystem but as part of a broader planetary ecology. Ursula Heise's (2008) [7] concept of a "sense of planet" helps illuminate this dimension of the novel, as the tidal forces shaping the region are connected to global climatic systems and oceanic currents. While Ghosh does not explicitly frame these dynamics in scientific terms, the narrative implicitly situates the Sundarbans within larger environmental processes that transcend national and human boundaries. This planetary perspective destabilizes human-centered scales of time and space, reinforcing nature's narrative agency.

Through its depiction of the Sundarbans as autonomous, volatile, and resistant to control, The Hungry Tide advances an ecocritical vision that redefines nature as an active participant in human history. The environment does not merely respond to human action but initiates change, disrupts plans, and reshapes lives. In doing so, the novel exemplifies ecocriticism's core challenge to anthropocentrism by foregrounding ecological forces that exceed human comprehension and authority (Garrard, 2012) [5].

Human–Nature Conflict and Environmental Vulnerability

The Hungry Tide foregrounds the precarious lives of fishermen, settlers, and refugees whose survival depends on constant negotiation with an unpredictable environment. In the Sundarbans, livelihoods such as fishing, honey collection, and forest foraging expose individuals to tides, storms, and animal attacks, rendering everyday existence ecologically fragile (Ghosh, 2004). Greg Garrard (2012) [5, 6] identifies such contexts as central to ecocritical inquiry, where environmental vulnerability is unevenly distributed and borne most heavily by marginalized populations. Ghosh's narrative reveals how ecological risk is inseparable from social inequality, transforming nature into a site of both sustenance and threat.

The Morichjhãpi episode stands as the novel's most explicit representation of environmental injustice. Refugees who settle on the island in search of land and dignity are violently evicted by the state under the justification of forest conservation (Ghosh, 2004) [6]. This episode exemplifies what Rob Nixon (2011) [12] terms "slow violence," a form of environmental harm that is incremental, bureaucratically sanctioned, and largely invisible within dominant political narratives. The refugees' suffering is not the result of a natural disaster but of policies that privilege abstract conservation goals over human survival. Garrard's (2012) [5] emphasis on environmental justice clarifies how ecological discourse can be mobilized to legitimize state violence against the poor.

Ghosh further exposes the tension between state power and ecological realities by portraying the Sundarbans as resistant to administrative control. Conservation laws, embankments, and settlement boundaries are repeatedly undermined by shifting tides and eroding landforms (Ghosh, 2004). Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2009) [3, 6] argument that climate change collapses the distinction between natural history and political history is particularly relevant here: environmental processes directly disrupt governance, rendering political authority ecologically fragile. The novel suggests that modernity's faith in rational planning and development is ill-suited to landscapes defined by instability and uncertainty.

Survival ethics in The Hungry Tide emerge from this ecological hostility. Characters such as Fokir exemplify an ethic rooted in attentiveness, restraint, and adaptation rather than mastery. His knowledge of currents, tides, and animal behavior is experiential and embodied, shaped by continuous exposure to ecological risk (Ghosh, 2004). Garrard (2012) [5, 6] argues that such modes of dwelling challenge anthropocentric ethics by foregrounding humility and coexistence. In contrast to bureaucratic conservation models, survival in the Sundarbans depends on recognizing nature's autonomy and adjusting human behavior accordingly.

Non-Human Life and Ecological Ethics

A defining ecocritical feature of The Hungry Tide is its representation of non-human life—tigers, dolphins, and mangroves—as co-inhabitants of a shared ecological space rather than symbolic figures. Ghosh resists allegorical reduction, presenting animals as autonomous agents whose presence shapes human fear, labor, and moral dilemmas. Tigers, for instance, are portrayed neither as villains nor as romantic icons but as predators acting within their ecological domain (Ghosh, 2004). Garrard's (2012) [5, 6] discussion of animals in ecocritical literature emphasizes the importance of recognizing non-human agency without sentimentalization, a balance the novel consistently maintains.

Dolphins acquire particular ethical significance through Piya's scientific research. As a marine biologist, Piya initially approaches the Sundarbans through empirical observation and conservation discourse. However, her collaboration with Fokir gradually transforms her perspective, integrating scientific knowledge with indigenous ecological understanding (Ghosh, 2004) [6]. This interaction exemplifies what DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) [4] describe as relational ecologies, where environmental ethics emerge through cross-cultural and multispecies encounters. Garrard's (2012) [5] concept of eco-ethics is evident here, as ethical responsibility arises from attentiveness and shared vulnerability rather than abstract environmental principles.

The novel also highlights conflicts between conservation policies and human survival. Protective regulations aimed at preserving wildlife criminalize traditional livelihoods, positioning fishermen and forest dwellers as trespassers in their own habitat (Ghosh, 2004) [6]. Armed forest guards and restrictive permits symbolize how conservation replicates structures of surveillance and exclusion. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) [8] argue that postcolonial ecocriticism must interrogate such conservation practices, which often privilege animals and landscapes while erasing human histories of coexistence. In The Hungry Tide, this tension underscores the ethical limitations of anthropocentric conservation models.

By questioning these models, the novel challenges the assumption that ecological preservation requires human exclusion. Lawrence Buell (2001) [2] cautions that environmentalism can become ethically compromised when it ignores the lived realities of those embedded within ecosystems. Ghosh's narrative proposes an alternative ecological ethic grounded in coexistence rather than separation. The Sundarbans emerge as a multispecies habitat where survival depends on negotiated relationships among humans, animals, and environmental forces. In doing so, The Hungry Tide advances an ecocritical vision that destabilizes anthropocentric hierarchies and calls for ethical frameworks attentive to both human vulnerability and non-human life.

Indigenous Belief Systems and Eco-Spirituality

In The Hungry Tide, indigenous belief systems function as crucial ecological frameworks that enable survival in an environment marked by uncertainty and danger. Central to this worldview is the mythology of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess revered as the moral guardian of the Sundarbans. Bon Bibi's legend does not position humans as masters of nature but as participants within a fragile ecological order governed by balance, restraint, and reciprocity (Ghosh, 2004) [6]. From an ecocritical perspective, this belief system embodies what Greg Garrard (2012) [5] identifies as eco-ethics—an ethical orientation that recognizes nonhuman agency and demands moral accountability in human–nature relations.

The ecological significance of Bon Bibi lies in her role as a mediator between humans and the nonhuman world, particularly predators such as tigers. Her mythology

establishes limits on human exploitation of forest resources, warning against greed and overreach. Rather than eliminating fear, Bon Bibi institutionalizes it as a necessary survival mechanism. Garrard (2012) [5] argues that emotions such as fear and awe are central to ecological awareness because they acknowledge the autonomy and power of the nonhuman world. In the Sundarbans, fear becomes an ecological discipline, teaching humans to recognize environmental limits.

Folk cosmology in the novel operates as an alternative ecological knowledge system that challenges modern scientific rationalism. Characters such as Fokir possess an embodied understanding of tides, winds, animal behavior, and seasonal rhythms—knowledge acquired through lived experience rather than formal education (Ghosh, 2004). Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010) [6, 11] emphasizes that postcolonial ecological knowledge often integrates spirituality, ethics, and survival, resisting Western epistemologies that separate nature from culture. In The Hungry Tide, folk beliefs are not irrational remnants of the past but adaptive strategies developed in response to ecological precarity.

This indigenous eco-spiritual worldview stands in sharp contrast to modern rationalist approaches that seek to manage the Sundarbans through mapping, conservation laws, and bureaucratic regulation. While scientific and administrative systems emphasize control and predictability, Bon Bibi's ethic foregrounds coexistence and humility. Timothy Morton's (2007) [9] critique of "nature" as a conceptual abstraction is relevant here: indigenous belief systems dissolve rigid human–nature hierarchies by emphasizing entanglement rather than separation. Ghosh's narrative thus legitimizes eco-spiritual knowledge as an essential mode of ecological understanding, particularly in environments where rational control repeatedly fails.

Language, Narrative, and Ecological Imagination

Ghosh's ecological vision in The Hungry Tide is inseparable from his narrative form and linguistic strategies. His prose is richly lyrical, emphasizing movement, uncertainty, and flux. Descriptions of rivers that shift course, islands that vanish overnight, and forests that emerge and disappear with the tides foreground ecological instability as a defining condition of the Sundarbans (Ghosh, 2004). Lawrence Buell (1995) [1, 6] argues that environmentally engaged literature resists static landscape representation, instead portraying nature as an active narrative presence. Ghosh's language consistently enacts this principle.

The novel's structure itself mirrors ecological rhythms. Divided into sections named after tidal movements—*Bhata* (ebb) and *Jowar* (flood)—the narrative aligns human experience with natural cycles rather than linear chronological progression. Silence, pauses, and moments of uncertainty punctuate the narrative, reflecting what Garrard (2012) [5] identifies as ecological temporality, where natural processes operate beyond human schedules and expectations. Such narrative techniques disrupt anthropocentric storytelling conventions that privilege intention, causality, and mastery.

Nature in The Hungry Tide actively shapes narrative direction and character movement. Journeys are dictated by tides rather than human will, and chance encounters emerge through ecological convergence rather than deliberate planning. The death of Fokir during the cyclone exemplifies how ecological events override narrative anticipation, asserting nonhuman agency within the plot (Ghosh, 2004). Ursula Heise's (2008) [6, 7] concept of a "sense of planet" is instructive here, as the novel situates local events within broader environmental systems that exceed human comprehension and control.

Ecological storytelling in The Hungry Tide thus functions as a form of resistance to linear, progress-oriented, human-centered narratives. Timothy Morton's (2013) [10] concept of hyperobjects—phenomena such as climate systems that are vast, nonlocal, and temporally dispersed—helps illuminate how the novel's ecological forces evade narrative containment. By foregrounding uncertainty, multispecies entanglement, and disrupted causality, Ghosh crafts an ecological imagination that challenges anthropocentric assumptions about agency, time, and meaning. In doing so, The Hungry Tide exemplifies the capacity of literature to reshape environmental consciousness through narrative form as much as thematic content.

Conclusion

This study has examined The Hungry Tide through the lens of ecocriticism, with Greg Garrard's framework providing the central theoretical grounding. The analysis has demonstrated that Ghosh represents nature not as a passive background but as an active, shaping force that governs human life, ethics, and narrative form. The Sundarbans emerge as a living ecological entity whose tides, rivers, animals, and storms continually destabilize anthropocentric assumptions of permanence, mastery, and progress.

A key ecocritical insight of this reading is that environmental crises in the novel are inseparable from social and political structures. Human–nature conflict, environmental vulnerability, and displacement intersect with state power, conservation policy, and development ideology. Through episodes such as Morichjhãpi and through the everyday precarity of fishermen and forest dwellers, The Hungry Tide exposes the ethical limitations of modern, exclusionary environmental governance. At the same time, the novel foregrounds alternative ecological ethics rooted in indigenous belief systems, embodied knowledge, and coexistence.

Ghosh's contribution to the environmental humanities lies in his ability to integrate ecology with history, politics, spirituality, and narrative innovation. By aligning narrative structure with tidal rhythms and granting agency to nonhuman life, the novel challenges linear, human-centered modes of storytelling. It calls for ecological humility—an acknowledgment of human vulnerability within complex ecosystems—and for ethical coexistence based on restraint, attentiveness, and respect for nonhuman agency.

The scope for further research is substantial. The Hungry Tide invites comparative study within climate fiction and Anthropocene discourse, particularly in relation to Dipesh Chakrabarty's rethinking of history and Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects. Future work may also examine Ghosh's later novels to trace the evolution of his ecological imagination. In an era of escalating climate uncertainty, The Hungry Tide remains a vital literary intervention that urges readers to reconsider how stories shape ecological consciousness and ethical responsibility

References

1. Buell L. The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture. Harvard University Press, 1995.

2. Buell L. Writing for an endangered world: Literature, culture, and environment in the U.S. and beyond. Harvard University Press, 2001.
3. Chakrabarty D. The climate of history: Four theses. Critical Inquiry,2009:35(2):197–222. https://doi.org/10.1086/596640
4. DeLoughrey E, Handley GB, editors. Postcolonial ecologies: Literatures of the environment. Oxford University Press, 2011.
5. Garrard G. Ecocriticism (2nd ed.). Routledge, 2012.
6. Ghosh A. The Hungry Tide. HarperCollins, 2004.
7. Heise UK. Sense of place and sense of planet: The environmental imagination of the global. Oxford University Press, 2008.
8. Huggan G, Tiffin H. Postcolonial ecocriticism: Literature, animals, environment. Routledge, 2010.
9. Morton T. Ecology without nature: Rethinking environmental aesthetics. Harvard University Press, 2007.
10. Morton T. Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
11. Mukherjee UP. Postcolonial environments: Nature, culture and the contemporary Indian novel in English. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
12. Nixon R. Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor. Harvard University Press, 2011.
13. Slovic S. Ecocriticism: Containing multitudes, practicing doctrine. ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment,2012:19(2):160–162. https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/iss053