

ECOCRITICISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE: A STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH AND SELECTED ENVIRONMENTAL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

*Environmental crisis has become one of the defining intellectual and ethical concerns of contemporary literature. Indian English writing has responded to ecological change by representing landscapes not as passive backgrounds but as dynamic spaces shaped by human history, non-human life, migration, development, conservation, climate instability and political power. This paper examines ecocriticism and environmental consciousness in contemporary Indian English literature with particular emphasis on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island* and *The Great Derangement*. It also places Ghosh within a wider environmental-literary context in which questions of place, environmental justice, species, vulnerability and cultural memory have become increasingly important. Using qualitative textual analysis and concepts from ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental humanities, the paper argues that Ghosh challenges anthropocentric assumptions by showing the mutual dependence of human and non-human worlds. The Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* emerge as a particularly powerful ecological space where conservation, refugee history, poverty and animal life intersect. *Gun Island* extends these concerns into a transnational narrative of climate migration, while *The Great Derangement* explicitly questions the capacity of modern literary and political forms to imagine climate change. The study concludes that contemporary Indian English environmental writing makes ecology inseparable from questions of justice, history and narrative responsibility.*

KEYWORDS: *Ecocriticism; Environmental Consciousness; Amitav Ghosh; The Hungry Tide; Gun Island; Climate Change; Sundarbans; Environmental Justice; Indian English Literature.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between literature and the natural world has acquired new urgency in an age marked by climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation, sea-level rise and increasingly destructive weather events. Literary studies have responded through ecocriticism, a field concerned with the ways texts imagine nature, environmental change and relations between human and non-human life. Ecocriticism asks not only how landscapes are described but also what ethical, political and cultural assumptions govern those descriptions.

Indian English literature offers especially rich material for ecological analysis because the subcontinent contains extraordinary environmental diversity as well as intense conflicts over land, forests, rivers, wildlife, urbanization and development. Environmental problems in India are rarely separable from poverty, caste, migration, livelihood and histories of colonial resource extraction. For this reason, environmental literature often becomes simultaneously social and political literature.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most important contemporary Indian writers for such inquiry. His fiction and nonfiction repeatedly connect ecological change with imperial history, migration, trade, language and human vulnerability. *The Hungry Tide*, set in the Sundarbans, has become a major text for environmental critics because it brings scientific knowledge, endangered species, conservation policy, refugee history and local experience into a single narrative. Later works, particularly *Gun Island* and *The Great Derangement*, deepen his engagement with climate change and the difficulty of representing planetary crisis in conventional literary forms.

This paper studies Ghosh's environmental imagination while also considering the wider significance of ecocriticism for Indian English literature. It argues that environmental consciousness in such writing is strongest when nature is not romanticized as an untouched wilderness but understood as a living field of relationships, conflicts and histories.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has five principal objectives: to explain the relevance of ecocriticism to Indian English literary studies; to examine the representation of the Sundarbans and non-human life in *The Hungry Tide*; to analyze the relationship between ecology and social justice; to study climate change and migration in *Gun Island* and *The Great Derangement*; and to evaluate literature's capacity to create environmental consciousness without reducing fiction to a simple message.

The research also seeks to show how ecological criticism can be combined with postcolonial analysis. Colonialism transformed landscapes through mapping, extraction, plantation economies and administrative control. Postcolonial development has created additional pressures. Reading environmental literature historically therefore reveals that ecological crisis is not merely a scientific issue but also a question of power.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The paper asks the following questions: How does contemporary Indian English literature represent the relationship between human beings and the physical environment? In what ways does *The Hungry Tide* complicate the conflict between wildlife conservation and human survival? How are migration, displacement and

environmental vulnerability connected? How does Ghosh challenge anthropocentric assumptions? Finally, what role can literary imagination play in making climate change culturally and ethically comprehensible?

4. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research follows a qualitative and interpretative method based on close textual reading. Primary attention is given to narrative structure, characterization, landscape, metaphor, human-animal relations, memory and the representation of environmental risk. The main primary texts are Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island* and *The Great Derangement*. Relevant theoretical perspectives are drawn from Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Rob Nixon and postcolonial environmental criticism.

Ecocriticism is broadly concerned with the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Early ecocritical work often emphasized nature writing, wilderness and place, while later scholarship expanded toward environmental justice, urban ecologies, climate change, animal studies and the Anthropocene. This expansion is important for Indian literature because ecological problems frequently involve inhabited landscapes rather than supposedly empty wilderness.

Postcolonial ecocriticism further asks how empire, inequality and development affect environmental representation. It warns against models of conservation that erase local histories or treat vulnerable communities as obstacles to environmental protection. The framework is therefore well suited to Ghosh, whose fiction repeatedly places scientific and conservationist knowledge in conversation with local knowledge, memory and survival.

5. ECOCRITICISM AND INDIAN LITERARY CONTEXT

Indian literary traditions have long represented forests, rivers, seasons, animals and agricultural life, but contemporary ecocriticism introduces a specific critical vocabulary for examining environmental crisis. The modern environmental novel is concerned not merely with the beauty of nature but with damaged ecosystems, unequal exposure to risk and the ethical consequences of human intervention.

In Indian contexts, environmental debates frequently involve competing claims. A forest may be a protected habitat, a source of livelihood, a sacred space and a site of state regulation at the same time. A river may be a cultural symbol while also being a source of irrigation, electricity, industrial waste and displacement. Literature can hold these conflicting meanings together more effectively than simplified policy language.

This complexity is one reason environmental criticism has moved beyond a purely preservationist approach. Questions of justice matter: who benefits from conservation, who bears the costs of development, whose knowledge is recognized and whose suffering remains invisible? Indian English literature can make these questions emotionally and imaginatively accessible through characters and stories.

6. THE SUNDARBANS AS AN ECOLOGICAL AND LITERARY SPACE

The Sundarbans form the central ecological environment of *The Hungry Tide*. The region is shaped by rivers, tides, mud, mangroves, storms and shifting islands. It resists the human desire for permanent boundaries. Land

may appear and disappear; water rearranges routes; animals and humans occupy overlapping territories. The setting therefore becomes more than scenery. It actively shapes the possibilities of life and narrative.

Ghosh's representation undermines the assumption that nature is stable and external to human society. The tide country is unpredictable, and survival depends upon attention to ecological rhythms. Local knowledge becomes crucial because abstract maps or scientific categories cannot entirely capture a landscape that is constantly changing.

The Sundarbans also complicate romantic ideas of wilderness. People live, work, migrate and remember within this environment. The landscape contains histories of settlement and displacement. Ecological protection cannot therefore be imagined as the simple removal of human beings from nature. The novel insists that environmental ethics must consider both non-human vulnerability and human precarity.

7. HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONS IN THE HUNGRY TIDE

Piya's research on river dolphins brings scientific observation into the narrative. Her work reflects concern for endangered species and biodiversity, yet her scientific knowledge does not automatically make her the sole authority on the environment. Fokir, despite lacking formal scientific education, possesses intimate knowledge of water, animal movement and local conditions. Their collaboration challenges rigid divisions between expert and indigenous or experiential knowledge.

The novel's representation of tigers is even more ethically difficult. Tigers are endangered animals deserving protection, but they may also kill people whose livelihoods require them to enter dangerous environments. Conservation therefore appears differently from the perspective of an urban environmentalist and from that of a poor island community living beside a predator.

Ghosh refuses to resolve this conflict through a simplistic moral judgment. The ecological value of an animal does not erase human suffering, and human fear does not eliminate the species' right to exist. This unresolved tension is one of the novel's strongest ecocritical achievements because it shows that environmental ethics often involve competing forms of vulnerability.

8. CONSERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental justice examines how ecological benefits and harms are distributed across social groups. In *The Hungry Tide*, this question emerges through the relationship between conservation policy, poverty and the history of displaced people. The Marichjhapi episode is particularly significant because it connects environmental space with refugee history and state violence.

The conflict exposes a central problem: conservation can become unjust when environmental protection is pursued without recognizing the rights and histories of vulnerable communities. This does not mean that biodiversity conservation is unnecessary. Rather, it means that ecological policy must consider social justice as part of sustainability rather than as an unrelated concern.

Recent scholarship has accordingly read the Sundarbans in Ghosh as a site where environmental injustice, caste, displacement and conservation intersect. Such readings demonstrate the value of postcolonial ecocriticism:

the environment is understood not as an abstract green space but as a politically organized landscape in which different lives are valued differently.

9. LOCAL KNOWLEDGE, SCIENCE AND COMMUNICATION

The relationship between Piya and Fokir also raises questions about communication. They do not share a fluent spoken language, yet they develop forms of cooperation through gesture, observation and shared attention to the environment. Their relationship suggests that ecological knowledge is not confined to formal language or institutional expertise.

At the same time, the novel does not romanticize local knowledge as automatically pure or infallible. Instead, it places different knowledge systems into contact. Scientific research offers methods of systematic observation, while lived experience offers fine-grained understanding of place. Ecological understanding becomes stronger when neither form of knowledge is treated as complete by itself.

This model has broader significance for environmental humanities. Climate and biodiversity crises require scientific evidence, but public response also depends on stories, values and culturally meaningful forms of knowledge. Literature becomes a meeting place where these domains can interact.

10. CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE GREAT DERANGEMENT

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh turns directly to the cultural problem of climate change. He argues that modern societies face not only a scientific or political crisis but also a crisis of imagination. Extreme climatic events may appear improbable within the conventions of realist literary fiction even when they are becoming increasingly possible in lived reality.

This argument challenges literary institutions as well as individual writers. If serious fiction remains centered primarily on private, individualized experience, it may struggle to represent phenomena that operate across generations, continents, species and geological scales. Climate change forces literature to rethink agency because storms, oceans, heat and other non-human forces can no longer remain passive backgrounds.

Ghosh also connects the carbon economy to histories of empire and global inequality. Climate responsibility is uneven, and vulnerability is unevenly distributed. The environmental crisis therefore cannot be separated from historical questions about industrialization, colonial power and development.

The importance of *The Great Derangement* lies in its insistence that climate change is a cultural question. Scientific data can describe atmospheric change, but societies also require narratives capable of changing what people imagine to be normal, possible and urgent.

11. GUN ISLAND: CLIMATE MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONAL ECOLOGY

Gun Island transforms ecological concerns into a transnational narrative. The novel links the Sundarbans with other parts of the world through migration, trade, myth and climate disturbance. Environmental crisis appears as a

force that crosses national borders, revealing the inadequacy of treating climate change as a problem contained within individual states.

Migration in the novel is not presented solely as an economic choice. Environmental instability, livelihood pressure and political conditions interact. This reflects an important feature of climate migration: people rarely move for one isolated reason. Ecological change can intensify existing economic and social vulnerabilities.

The novel also reintroduces improbable events and non-human agency in ways that answer some of the concerns raised in *The Great Derangement*. Animals, weather and unusual ecological occurrences disrupt ordinary expectations. The narrative asks readers to reconsider what realism means in an era when previously exceptional environmental events are becoming more frequent.

By connecting different locations, *Gun Island* presents ecology as planetary without erasing local difference. The climate crisis is global, but it is experienced through particular coastlines, jobs, migration routes and communities.

12. NON-HUMAN AGENCY AND THE LIMITS OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Traditional human-centered narratives often treat nature as a resource, symbol or backdrop. Ecocriticism challenges this anthropocentrism by asking whether non-human beings and ecological systems possess forms of agency that matter to narrative. Ghosh's work repeatedly gives water, animals, storms and landscapes consequential roles.

Agency in this context does not mean that a river or cyclone acts like a human character with conscious intention. Rather, it means that the material world has effects that exceed human plans. Tides determine movement; storms destroy assumptions of control; animals alter human behavior; changing climates reshape migration and settlement.

Recognizing non-human agency has ethical consequences. It encourages readers to see humanity as embedded within ecological systems rather than standing above them. This perspective does not diminish human dignity. Instead, it places human flourishing within the conditions that make life possible.

13. ECOFEMINIST AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

Environmental criticism has also been enriched by ecofeminism, which examines connections between the domination of nature and social hierarchies involving gender. Care is necessary, however, to avoid suggesting that women are naturally closer to nature. A stronger ecofeminist approach analyzes how systems of power assign different forms of labor, vulnerability and authority.

In Indian environmental writing, gender can shape access to resources, exposure to disasters and responsibility for household survival. Literature is able to show these unequal experiences through individual lives. Ecological crisis is therefore never experienced by an abstract universal human being; it is mediated by class, gender, location and social status.

Ghosh's environmental fiction does not reduce ecological conflict to gender, but its broader attention to vulnerability supports an intersectional reading. The ethical force of ecocriticism increases when it recognizes that environmental damage and social inequality frequently reinforce one another.

14. LITERATURE AS ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

One of the central questions of ecocriticism is whether literature can change environmental behavior. A novel cannot substitute for scientific research, legislation or conservation practice. Its influence is less direct but still important. Literature can alter perception by making readers inhabit unfamiliar environments, encounter conflicting ethical positions and recognize connections between distant events.

The Hungry Tide does this by making the Sundarbans simultaneously beautiful, dangerous, inhabited and politically contested. The Great Derangement challenges readers to recognize climate change as a failure of cultural imagination. Gun Island connects ecological disturbance to migration and global interdependence. Together, these texts enlarge the range of what environmental consciousness can mean.

Consciousness-raising should not be confused with didactic preaching. Fiction is often most powerful when it preserves ambiguity. Ghosh's work does not offer easy solutions to conflicts between people and wildlife or between development and conservation. Instead, it teaches readers to recognize complexity and to question frameworks that treat ecological problems as isolated from history and justice.

15. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The analysis produces several major findings. First, contemporary Indian environmental writing treats nature as active rather than decorative. Landscape shapes history, livelihood and identity. Second, ecological questions are inseparable from social justice. Conservation policies become ethically incomplete when they disregard poverty, displacement or local rights.

Third, Ghosh repeatedly challenges the hierarchy between formal scientific knowledge and experiential knowledge. Ecological understanding emerges through conversation across disciplines and communities. Fourth, climate change destabilizes conventional literary realism by making extreme events part of ordinary possibility. This requires new narrative forms and renewed attention to non-human agency.

Fifth, migration is increasingly ecological as well as economic and political. Gun Island demonstrates that climate vulnerability travels through global networks. Finally, environmental literature can contribute to public understanding by creating imaginative connections that statistics alone cannot provide.

These findings support the broader claim that ecocriticism is not a narrow study of nature descriptions. It is a critical method for examining the relationships among environment, culture, history, power and ethics.

16. CONCLUSION

Ecocriticism has become an essential approach to contemporary Indian English literature because environmental crisis now shapes questions of livelihood, migration, justice and cultural imagination. Amitav

Ghosh's work is particularly important because it refuses to separate ecological concerns from history and politics.

The Hungry Tide presents the Sundarbans as a dynamic environment in which human beings, animals, tides, storms and memories coexist in unstable relationships. Its treatment of conservation reveals the ethical difficulty of protecting species while recognizing the vulnerability of marginalized communities. Gun Island expands the ecological field into transnational migration and planetary climate disturbance. The Great Derangement provides a theoretical challenge to literary culture itself by asking why climate change has been so difficult to imagine within conventional forms.

Taken together, these works suggest that environmental consciousness requires more than admiration for nature. It requires awareness of interdependence, historical responsibility, social inequality and the limits of human control. Literature contributes by making these relationships visible and emotionally intelligible.

The future of ecocritical study in Indian English literature is therefore likely to become increasingly interdisciplinary. Climate science, history, migration studies, animal studies, postcolonial theory and environmental justice can all enrich literary interpretation. Such work is valuable not because literature alone can solve ecological crisis, but because no durable environmental response can succeed without changes in imagination, values and the stories societies tell about their place in the living world.

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