



**Beyond Anthropocentrism: Human and Animal Interactions in Amitav Ghosh  
*Hungry Tide***

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**ABSTRACT**

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) offers a profound meditation on the relationship between humans and animals within the unique ecological setting of the Sundarbans. The novel intricately weaves the lives of its human characters with the region's non-human inhabitants, illustrating the blurred boundaries between civilisation and wilderness. Ghosh presents the Sundarbans not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic and often threatening space where human ambitions and animal instincts intersect. This paper explores how Ghosh negotiates the interconnectedness of human and animal life, problematising the anthropocentric worldview that typically renders animals invisible or inferior. By examining characters such as Piya Roy, Fokir, and the representation of species like the Irrawaddy dolphins and the Bengal tiger, this study sheds light on the complex ethical, ecological, and philosophical dimensions at play. Ghosh's portrayal invites readers to reimagine their relationship with the natural world and recognise the agency of non-human life forms.

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## Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* stands as a landmark text in contemporary eco-literature, notable for its exploration of the intricate, often fraught relationships between humans and the non-human world. Set in the Sundarbans, a sprawling archipelago of islands along the eastern coast of India and Bangladesh, the novel presents a world where the boundaries between land and water, human and animal, life and death, are perpetually shifting. In such an unstable environment, human survival is deeply intertwined with animal existence, prompting Ghosh to question traditional human-centred (anthropocentric) narratives and offer instead a vision of mutual dependency and ethical entanglement.

The Sundarbans, with their mangrove forests, shifting tides, and abundant animal life, emerge as a central character in the novel rather than a mere setting. The landscape's constant transformation shaped by tides, storms, and the rhythms of non-human life mirrors the thematic undercurrents of instability, survival, and coexistence. Within this milieu, Ghosh draws attention to how both human and animal lives are precariously balanced, subject to the merciless forces of nature and the often-violent encroachments of human ambition.

Central to the novel's human-animal dynamic is the character of Piyali Roy, a cetologist of Indian-American descent, whose research on the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins serves as an entry point into the wider ecological concerns of the novel. Piya's scientific quest leads her to an understanding of the complex, often adversarial relationship between local communities and the non-human inhabitants of the tide country. For the locals, survival often necessitates a pragmatic and sometimes hostile attitude towards animals, such as the revered yet deadly Bengal tiger, which regularly attacks villagers. Piya's own Western scientific perspective is challenged and enriched through her interactions with Fokir, an illiterate fisherman who possesses an intimate, intuitive knowledge of the tides and its creatures, despite lacking formal education.

Through these character interactions, Ghosh interrogates the tension between differing modes of knowledge—the empirical and the experiential—and how each engages with the animal world. Piya's research represents a scientific, categorising approach that seeks to protect animals through documentation and conservation. In contrast, Fokir's relationship with the non-human world is visceral, rooted in direct experience and survival. Ghosh resists privileging one perspective over the other; instead, he highlights the need for a more holistic understanding that accommodates both scientific inquiry and indigenous knowledge systems.



The novel's portrayal of the Bengal tiger further complicates the human-animal dichotomy. In the Sundarbans, tigers are both venerated and feared, representing a dual symbol of divine power and mortal danger. The tiger's presence is a reminder of the thin line separating human civilisation from untamed wilderness. When a tiger is trapped in a village and ultimately killed by the local people, the event is depicted not merely as an act of self-defence but as a tragic rupture in the moral fabric that binds humans to the larger ecological web. Ghosh's narrative does not condemn the villagers outright; instead, he reveals the socio-economic pressures that force humans into conflict with animals, thereby critiquing broader systems of inequality and environmental degradation.

Another significant dimension of the novel's human-animal exploration lies in its engagement with myth and folklore. Stories of Bon Bibi, the protector of the Sundarbans, and Dokkhin Rai, the demon tiger, blend Islamic and Hindu traditions, offering a syncretic vision of coexistence between humans and the forces of nature. These myths serve both as cultural coping mechanisms and as moral frameworks through which the local population interprets their precarious existence. By weaving these tales into the fabric of the novel, Ghosh acknowledges the role of storytelling in shaping human perceptions of the non-human world.

*The Hungry Tide* ultimately invites readers to rethink the assumed hierarchy between humans and animals. Ghosh's narrative resists simplistic moral judgments, instead offering a nuanced portrayal of the ethical complexities inherent in human-animal interactions. The novel suggests that to inhabit a world like the Sundarbans and, by extension, the Earth requires recognising the agency of non-human life forms and embracing a mode of living that respects the interdependencies between species.

Moreover, the novel's environmental concerns extend beyond immediate survival to broader issues of conservation and ecological justice. Piya's research, while well-intentioned, is not without its ethical ambiguities. Conservation efforts, often driven by international organisations, can sometimes marginalise local communities whose livelihoods depend on the very ecosystems that conservationists seek to protect. Ghosh carefully navigates these tensions, highlighting the need for an environmental ethic that is attentive to both human and non-human needs.

In a world increasingly marked by ecological crises, *The Hungry Tide* remains strikingly relevant. Ghosh's portrayal of the Sundarbans as a space where human and animal fates are inextricably linked offers a powerful counter-narrative to dominant anthropocentric paradigms. It calls for a reimagining of human identity not as separate from or superior to nature, but as part of a larger, interconnected whole.



In doing so, the novel opens up possibilities for a more inclusive and compassionate way of inhabiting the planet one that honours the myriad forms of life with which we share our fragile world.

### **Human-Animal Interactions: Between Coexistence and Conflict**

In *The Hungry Tide*, human-animal relationships are depicted as fraught with tension yet marked by deep interdependence. Ghosh intricately portrays how survival in the Sundarbans demands an uneasy coexistence with non-human life forms. For the local people, the forest and its animal inhabitants particularly the Bengal tiger represent both a source of spiritual meaning and a lethal threat. The narrative does not romanticise this coexistence; rather, it foregrounds the harsh realities faced by impoverished communities whose lives are continually endangered by animal attacks.

A key episode illustrating this dynamic is the villagers' killing of a tiger that had strayed into human habitation. Although an act of violence against nature, it is portrayed as an act of desperation rather than wanton cruelty. Ghosh depicts the villagers' rage as rooted in a long history of marginalisation and vulnerability. The tiger becomes a symbol not only of natural power but also of the socio-economic forces that keep the villagers trapped in cycles of poverty and danger. In contrast to conservationist discourses that position animals as beings in need of protection, the novel presents a more complex scenario where human survival is just as precarious.

Piya's encounters with the Irrawaddy dolphins, meanwhile, embody a different model of human-animal interaction one grounded in wonder, respect, and scientific inquiry. Piya's work reflects a non-exploitative relationship with non-human beings, as she seeks to study and preserve the dolphins rather than dominate or eliminate them. However, her position as an outsider complicates her perspective. Though she is empathetic towards the animals, her lack of deep engagement with the socio-economic struggles of the local fishermen initially limits her understanding. The novel suggests that true ecological sensitivity must consider both non-human and human suffering.

Through these intertwined stories, Ghosh critiques simplistic conservation models that ignore local realities. He underscores the necessity of an ethics that recognises the entangled fates of humans and animals, particularly in ecologically sensitive and economically marginalised areas like the Sundarbans.

### **Indigenous Knowledge and Animal Encounters: Beyond Western Science**



Ghosh's portrayal of Fokir and his relationship with the natural world introduces an important counterpoint to Western scientific models of understanding animals. Fokir, despite being illiterate, possesses an intimate, intuitive knowledge of the tides, river channels, and animal behaviour knowledge that proves indispensable to Piya's research. His non-verbal, experiential connection with the environment represents a form of ecological wisdom that cannot be fully captured by scientific methodologies.

Throughout their journey together, Piya comes to appreciate Fokir's silent expertise. Unlike her, Fokir does not seek to categorise or rationalise the natural world; instead, he engages with it through bodily experience and deep familiarity. This suggests that indigenous knowledge systems offer valuable insights into human-animal relations, often grounded in respect, attentiveness, and coexistence rather than domination.

Ghosh thus positions the tension between Western science and indigenous ways of knowing as a critical axis in the novel's exploration of human-animal relationships. While Piya's scientific research aims to protect endangered species, it risks marginalising local knowledge and needs. Fokir, by contrast, embodies a mode of being that is inextricably embedded within the natural world, unmediated by abstract systems of categorisation.

Furthermore, the myths and rituals surrounding Bon Bibi illustrate another dimension of indigenous engagement with non-human life. In local folklore, Bon Bibi is the protector of humans against the dangers of the forest, especially tigers, who are seen as manifestations of the demon Dokkhin Rai. These narratives perform a crucial cultural function: they acknowledge the power of the animal world while offering a framework for human survival. By integrating myth with ecological reality, the people of the Sundarbans craft a worldview in which human and animal lives are in constant negotiation rather than rigid opposition.

Ghosh's inclusion of these indigenous perspectives challenges readers to reconsider the epistemological dominance of Western science in environmental discourse. He advocates for a pluralistic understanding of ecological knowledge one that honours both empirical inquiry and the wisdom embedded in local traditions.



## Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* presents a nuanced and deeply compassionate exploration of the relationships between humans and animals in the ecologically fragile Sundarbans. Far from presenting a binary opposition between human civilisation and wild nature, Ghosh reveals the profound interconnectedness that binds human and non-human lives in the tide country. Through the juxtaposition of characters like Piya and Fokir, and through the evocation of both scientific and indigenous ways of knowing, the novel critiques anthropocentric worldviews and invites a more inclusive ecological ethic.

The conflicts between humans and animals in the Sundarbans — particularly the killing of the tiger — are depicted not as moral failures but as tragic necessities born of socio-economic inequality and ecological vulnerability. Ghosh does not offer easy solutions; instead, he illuminates the complex entanglements that must be navigated in any attempt at ethical living within a more-than-human world.

Moreover, *The Hungry Tide* encourages readers to question the structures of knowledge and power that shape human relationships with animals. It suggests that true ecological awareness must bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and indigenous wisdom, between conservation efforts and the lived realities of local communities.

In an era of accelerating environmental crises, Ghosh's vision is both timely and urgent. He reminds us that the fate of humans and animals is inseparable, and that any future worth striving for must be one in which all forms of life are granted their due recognition, respect, and care.

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