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Beyond the Shoreline: Tidal Agency, Multispecies Ethics, and Environmental Justice in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

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ABSTRACT

The Blue Humanities explores the relationship between humans and aquatic environments, including oceans, and, rivers through literature, history, and cultural studies. It highlights how water shapes human experiences and influences relationships between humans and nonhuman life. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), set in the Sundarbans, portrays a landscape where the boundaries between land and water are constantly changing. Through the experiences of Piyali Roy, Kanai Dutt, and Fokir, the author explains the difficult relationship between scientific knowledge, wildlife conservation, and human survival. This article examines the novel through the perspectives of the Blue Humanities, ecocriticism, and environmental justice. It argues that the Sundarbans is more than a geographical setting; it is a living ecosystem that challenges human-centred views of nature and reveals the unequal ways in which environmental risks affect different communities. Particular attention is given to the representation of river dolphins and the historical violence associated with Morichjhapi in this paper. The article argues that Amitav Ghosh presents environmental responsibility as a shared concern that involves human communities, nonhuman life,

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and the ecological processes that connect them. By examining the relationship between water, power, knowledge, and vulnerability, the study highlights the relevance of the Blue Humanities to the interpretation of contemporary Indian English fiction.

Introduction

Water has always played an major role in shaping human life, culture, and history. Rivers have supported settlements and trade, oceans have connected distant communities, and wetlands have sustained a rich variety of plant and animal life. Yet, in many literary works, water is treated mainly as a setting against which human stories unfold. The Blue Humanities offers a different way of looking at aquatic environments. It draws attention to the ways in which rivers, oceans, tides, and wetlands influence human experiences, shape social relationships, and affect the lives of other species. From this perspective, water is not simply part of the landscape; it is a force that influences how people live, work, move, and understand their surroundings.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) provides a compelling literary context for exploring these ideas. Set in the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove region marked by tidal rivers, shifting channels, mudflats, and scattered islands, the novel presents an environment in which geographical change is part of everyday life. The movement of water determines routes of travel, affects livelihoods, and creates constant uncertainty for those who depend on the region. At the same time, the Sundarbans supports a remarkable range of nonhuman life, making the relationship between human survival and ecological preservation particularly complex.

Ghosh develops these concerns through three central characters whose experiences bring different understandings of the environment into contact. Piyali Roy, known as Piya, is a marine biologist who comes to the Sundarbans to study river dolphins. Kanai Dutt, an educated professional from the city, returns to the region and becomes involved in its personal and political histories. Fokir, a local fisherman, has an intimate understanding of the waterways gained through years of living and working in the region. Their encounters reveal the differences between scientific research, urban perspectives, and knowledge acquired through direct experience of the natural world.

Piya's work depends on scientific observation, but her research also requires the help of people who know the waterways far better than she does. Fokir understands the river through his everyday experiences of its currents, changing channels, weather, and wildlife. His knowledge may not be expressed in scientific

language, but it is essential to understanding the environment in which he lives. Their relationship raises an important question: can an ecosystem be fully understood through scientific investigation alone, or must that understanding also include the knowledge of people who have lived within it for generations? Ghosh explores this question without simply placing one form of knowledge above the other.

The novel also makes it difficult to view the Sundarbans as an untouched natural paradise. Although the region is rich in biodiversity, it is also marked by poverty, displacement, political conflict, and the struggle to secure a livelihood. People depend on the same environment that conservation policies seek to protect, and their immediate needs do not always align with the demands of wildlife preservation. This tension lies at the heart of the novel's environmental concerns. Protecting nature is necessary, but the question of how such protection affects vulnerable communities cannot be ignored.

This article examines *The Hungry Tide* through the Blue Humanities, with particular attention to tidal agency, ecological knowledge, multispecies relationships, and environmental justice. It argues that Ghosh's representation of the Sundarbans challenges the idea that humans can fully control their natural surroundings. At the same time, the novel reveals that environmental problems are inseparable from questions of livelihood, social inequality, and political power. By bringing these concerns together, Ghosh offers a way of thinking about ecological responsibility that recognizes both the importance of protecting nonhuman life and the need to respect the people who depend on the environment.

Tidal Agency and the Limits of Human Control

One of the most striking features of *The Hungry Tide* is the way the changing landscape influences the lives of its inhabitants. The Sundarbans cannot be understood as a fixed geographical space. Its waterways shift, tides alter the landscape, and the boundaries between land and water remain uncertain. For people who live in the region, these changes are not distant environmental processes; they are part of the conditions they must negotiate every day.

The idea of tidal agency helps explain this relationship between water and human experience. Here, agency does not suggest that water possesses human intentions or consciousness. Rather, it refers to the ability of natural processes to influence events, shape decisions, and determine what is possible within a particular environment. In Ghosh's novel, the tides affect where people can travel, how they carry out their work, and how they respond to danger. The river is not simply a route through the landscape. Its changing conditions influence the choices available to those who depend on it.

This understanding challenges the assumption that humans are always in control of their surroundings. People may attempt to measure, map, and understand the environment, but their knowledge does not remove its uncertainty. The Sundarbans repeatedly reminds its inhabitants that human plans must adapt to conditions that cannot always be predicted. The environment is therefore more than a passive setting for human activity. Its movements and transformations help shape the course of everyday life.

The experience of living in such a landscape also differs according to a person's circumstances. For a visitor like Piya, the river presents a difficult but fascinating environment for scientific research. For Fokir, however, it is closely connected to his livelihood and everyday survival. His familiarity with the waterways comes from a practical need to understand them. The same environmental conditions that make the Sundarbans scientifically interesting can also create serious difficulties for those whose lives depend on fishing and other resource-based activities.

These differences reveal that environmental uncertainty does not affect everyone in the same way. People with financial security and alternative sources of income may be better able to recover from environmental disruption. Those who depend directly on natural resources often have fewer choices when conditions become dangerous or unpredictable. The changing tides may be a shared feature of the landscape, but the risks associated with them are shaped by social and economic circumstances.

Tidal agency, therefore, has an important connection with environmental justice. Understanding the power of water requires more than examining its physical movements; it also requires attention to the people who experience its effects. Ghosh's novel makes this relationship visible by placing the natural instability of the Sundarbans alongside the everyday struggles of its inhabitants. The environment shapes human life, but social inequality influences how people respond to that influence.

Ecological Knowledge and Multispecies Relationships

The relationship between Piya and Fokir offers another important way of understanding the environmental concerns of *The Hungry Tide*. Although both are interested in the natural world, they approach it from different backgrounds. Piya relies on scientific training and systematic observation to study river dolphins. Fokir, by contrast, has developed his understanding of the ecosystem through years of experience on the river. His familiarity with the waterways and their inhabitants allows him to recognize details that may not be immediately apparent to an outside observer.

Their relationship suggests that ecological knowledge can emerge in different ways. Scientific research provides methods for studying animal behaviour, identifying patterns, and developing a broader

understanding of species and habitats. Local knowledge, on the other hand, often develops through close and repeated contact with a particular environment. It may include an understanding of seasonal changes, water conditions, animal movements, and the practical demands of survival. These forms of knowledge are different, but they need not be treated as opposing or incompatible.

Ghosh's portrayal of Piya and Fokir is valuable because it draws attention to the limitations of viewing environmental knowledge as the exclusive possession of experts. Piya has scientific knowledge that is essential to her research, yet her understanding of the river is strengthened by Fokir's experience. His knowledge does not replace her scientific methods, nor does her education make his experience less valuable. Their interaction shows how a closer understanding of an ecosystem can develop when different perspectives are allowed to inform one another.

This idea has wider implications for conservation. Environmental policies are often developed through scientific assessments and administrative decisions. Such approaches are important, but they may overlook the experiences of people who live within the environments being protected. When local communities are excluded from decision-making, conservation measures can fail to account for their needs and the knowledge they have acquired through long-term engagement with the landscape. Recognizing local experience alongside scientific research may lead to approaches that are better suited to the realities of a particular region.

The novel's interest in ecological knowledge is closely connected to its representation of nonhuman life. River dolphins, mangroves, fish, and other species form part of the environment through which the characters understand the Sundarbans. These are not merely decorative details added to make the setting more realistic. They are living participants in an ecosystem whose relationships extend beyond human concerns.

The river dolphins are particularly significant because they bring together scientific curiosity, local experience, and questions of conservation. Piya's research is directed towards understanding and protecting them, while Fokir's knowledge grows out of his everyday relationship with the river. Their shared interest in the dolphins creates a connection between two otherwise different ways of experiencing the natural world.

Such relationships invite consideration of multispecies ethics, which asks how human beings should respond to the needs and vulnerabilities of other forms of life. In *The Hungry Tide*, this question does not have an easy answer. Protecting wildlife may require restrictions on activities that local people depend on for their

livelihoods. At the same time, ignoring the needs of nonhuman species would overlook the ecological relationships that sustain the region as a whole.

Ghosh does not present this conflict as a simple choice between people and animals. Instead, the novel draws attention to the difficult circumstances in which their lives intersect. Human communities and nonhuman species share the same environment, although their needs, vulnerabilities, and access to resources differ. The challenge is to recognise these connections without ignoring the social inequalities that shape human life. In this sense, the novel encourages a broader understanding of ecological responsibility, one that considers the well-being of different forms of life while remaining attentive to the conditions under which people survive.

Environmental Justice, Displacement, and Conservation

The environmental concerns of *The Hungry Tide* become more politically complex when viewed through the idea of environmental justice. The novel presents the Sundarbans as a place where ecological vulnerability is closely connected to poverty, displacement, and unequal access to power. Its conflicts cannot be understood simply as disagreements about the protection of nature. They also involve questions about who has the right to inhabit a place, who can use its resources, and whose interests are considered when decisions are made about the environment.

For many people living in the Sundarbans, fishing and other resource-dependent activities are essential to survival. Their relationship with the environment is shaped by necessity as much as by familiarity or cultural attachment. When conservation policies restrict access to particular areas or resources, the consequences may fall most heavily on those who have few alternative means of earning a living. Although the protection of biodiversity serves an important ecological purpose, the burden of achieving it may be distributed unfairly.

This tension becomes particularly significant in the novel's treatment of Morichjhapi. The violent eviction of displaced settlers from the island in 1979 brings questions of environmental governance into direct contact with displacement, state authority, and human rights. The episode reveals that the management of natural spaces is never entirely separate from politics. Decisions about who may occupy land and access resources can determine whether communities are able to rebuild their lives or are pushed into further insecurity.

Morichjhapi also complicates the idea that conservation is always an uncomplicated moral good. The protection of an ecologically sensitive region may be presented as a necessary public objective, but the methods used to achieve that objective can raise serious ethical questions. When environmental concerns

become entangled with the exclusion of vulnerable communities, it becomes necessary to examine not only what is being protected but also how that protection is carried out and who bears its costs.

Postcolonial ecocriticism provides a useful perspective for examining these tensions. It explores the ways environmental relationships are shaped by historical inequalities, political authority, displacement, and unequal access to resources. From this viewpoint, environmental problems cannot be separated from the social and historical conditions in which they arise. Communities that have limited political influence may find themselves particularly vulnerable when decisions about land, water, and conservation are made without their meaningful participation.

Ghosh's treatment of Morichjhapi reveals the limitations of approaches that separate the preservation of nature from the rights of human communities. The episode encourages readers to question the assumption that protecting an ecosystem automatically produces a just outcome. Conservation may be necessary, but its ethical value also depends on the ways it affects the people who inhabit or depend on that environment.

At the same time, the injustice experienced by displaced communities should not be used to dismiss the ecological importance of the Sundarbans. The region's biodiversity and the livelihoods of its inhabitants are both part of the environmental question. Treating them as mutually exclusive concerns would overlook the complex relationships that connect people to the natural world.

A more inclusive approach to environmental justice would seek to protect vulnerable species while respecting the dignity, livelihoods, and rights of local communities. It would also recognize the importance of involving those communities in decisions that directly affect their lives. Such an approach does not remove the difficulties involved in conservation, but it acknowledges that environmental protection cannot be considered separately from the question of who is allowed to benefit from it and who is expected to make sacrifices.

Through its portrayal of ecological conflict and political exclusion, *The Hungry Tide* encourages readers to think beyond a narrow understanding of conservation. The novel asks us to consider whether environmental policies can truly be sustainable when they ignore the people whose lives are closely connected to the environments being protected. Its treatment of Morichjhapi makes clear that ecological responsibility must include an awareness of history, inequality, and the unequal distribution of power.

The Blue Humanities and Relational Environmental Responsibility

Read through the Blue Humanities, *The Hungry Tide* offers more than a vivid account of life in a tidal landscape. It explores the ways in which water connects ecological processes with human experience, local knowledge, political decisions, and the lives of nonhuman species. The novel's environmental significance emerges from these relationships rather than from the presence of water alone.

The changing tides of the Sundarbans challenge the idea that the natural world can be completely controlled or predicted. The landscape continually shapes the decisions of those who live and work within it, reminding them that survival often depends on adaptation. Through this unstable environment, Ghosh presents water as a material force that influences human possibilities without suggesting that it acts according to human intentions. Tidal agency thus offers a way to understand the limits of human control while recognizing the active role of environmental processes in everyday life.

The novel also draws attention to the importance of different forms of ecological knowledge. Piya's scientific research and Fokir's practical experience reveal distinct ways of understanding the river and its inhabitants. Their encounters suggest that neither formal expertise nor local experience should be dismissed when examining a complex ecosystem. A fuller understanding becomes possible when scientific investigation is informed by the experiences of those who have lived within the environment over time.

Equally important is the novel's refusal to separate ecological protection from social justice. The conflict surrounding Morichjhapi reveals how environmental policies can become entangled with displacement, political authority, and the exclusion of vulnerable communities. By bringing these issues into the same narrative, Ghosh challenges the assumption that conservation can be evaluated solely in terms of its ecological objectives. The social consequences of environmental decisions are also part of their ethical significance.

These concerns point towards a relational understanding of environmental responsibility. The Sundarbans cannot be understood by examining its rivers, mangroves, dolphins, and human inhabitants as separate elements. Their lives and experiences are connected through the conditions of the ecosystem. The movement of water affects livelihoods, local knowledge informs scientific research, and conservation decisions influence the relationship between people and other species. Each of these relationships contributes to the wider ecological reality of the region.

The Blue Humanities is particularly useful here because it encourages readers to look at water as something more than a geographical feature or a symbol of change. Water has a physical presence that shapes

movement, livelihood, and survival, but it also becomes part of the historical and political experiences of the communities living alongside it. In Ghosh's novel, the tides cannot be separated from the lives they influence, just as environmental protection cannot be separated from the people and species it is intended to safeguard.

By bringing together tidal agency, ecological knowledge, and environmental justice, *The Hungry Tide* presents a form of environmental thinking that recognizes interdependence without overlooking inequality. It shows that humans are part of ecological systems rather than independent observers standing outside them. It also reminds readers that the consequences of this interdependence are not experienced equally. Any meaningful account of environmental responsibility must therefore consider both the relationships that connect different forms of life and the inequalities that shape their ability to survive.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* explores the complex relationship between water, human communities, and nonhuman life through the changing landscape of the Sundarbans. The novel highlights how tidal movements influence human survival, while the relationship between Piya and Fokir reveals the importance of combining scientific knowledge with local experience. Through these representations, Ghosh challenges the idea that humans can fully control nature.

The novel also connects environmental conservation with questions of displacement, livelihood, and social justice, particularly through its portrayal of Morichjhapi. From a Blue Humanities perspective, *The Hungry Tide* emphasises the need to protect biodiversity while respecting the rights of vulnerable communities. Ultimately, the novel presents ecological responsibility as a shared concern that requires a deeper understanding of the connections between water, human life, and the natural world.

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