

Blue Humanities and Climate Justice in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide: An Ecocritical Study

Dr. T. Shalini

Dr. S. Umamageswari

PG Department of English, St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Annamalai University), Cuddalore, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) constructs the Sundarbans as an aquatic world in which human survival, nonhuman life, scientific knowledge, and political power are inseparable. This article argues that water functions not as scenery but as a material and narrative force. Bringing Blue Humanities into dialogue with ecocriticism and climate justice, the study examines the tidal waterways, Piya Roy's research on Irrawaddy dolphins, Fokir's embodied knowledge, the figure of the tiger, and the history of Marichjhapi. It argues that Ghosh complicates both scientific conservation and romantic appeals to local knowledge: neither can adequately address ecological crisis when detached from livelihood, historical displacement, and political authority. The novel's aquatic world exposes the limits of fixed territorial categories and conservation policies that treat human inhabitants as obstacles to ecological protection. At the same time, its animals resist being reduced to resources or symbols. The article therefore proposes a relational environmental ethic in which ecological protection, situated knowledge, and social justice are mutually dependent. By placing water at the centre of interpretation, the study extends established ecocritical readings of *The Hungry Tide* and demonstrates the novel's continuing relevance to debates about coastal vulnerability, conservation, and climate justice.

Keywords: environmental ethics; climate justice; ecocriticism; uncertainty; The Sundarbans

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is set in an environment where land and water, livelihood and danger, and human and nonhuman life are never entirely stable. The Sundarbans is a tidal region whose rivers, creeks, mangroves, islands, and channels continually alter the conditions of habitation. Environmental uncertainty becomes part of the novel's social and ethical structure: people travel by water, derive livelihoods from the waterways, encounter animals whose habitats overlap with human settlements, and negotiate institutions that attempt to regulate a landscape resistant to permanent boundaries.

The central argument of this article is that water in *The Hungry Tide* should be read as an active ecological and narrative force rather than as passive setting. Steven Mentz's "blue cultural studies" and Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters's emphasis on fluid spaces provide a vocabulary for reading a deltaic world whose identity depends upon movement. Yet a water-centred reading must also address unequal vulnerability. The same ecosystem that sustains human and nonhuman life distributes danger and protection unevenly; climate justice is therefore essential to the novel's political implications.

Existing scholarship has established the novel's ecocritical significance. Tej N. Dhar examines environmental consciousness and human-animal relations; Adam Trexler places the novel within climate-change criticism; Camellia Biswas and Sharada Channarayapatna examine Marichjhapi through ecocriticism and environmental injustice; and S. Maharajan identifies its broader ecological dimensions. The present study makes a more specific intervention by treating water as the organizing medium through which aquatic agency, environmental knowledge, and justice become connected.

Blue Humanities shifts attention from terrestrial landscape to the cultural and material significance of oceans, rivers, deltas, and other waters. Mentz's "blue cultural studies" and Steinberg and Peters's emphasis on fluidity are particularly useful for *The Hungry Tide* because the Sundarbans cannot be represented as stable territory. Tides alter routes and shorelines; waterways connect settlements while also producing danger; and human movement depends on conditions that cannot be completely controlled. Water is therefore one of the conditions through which the narrative becomes possible.

The waterways carry different meanings for different forms of life. For Piya, water is the medium of scientific observation; for Fokir, it is a lived environment learned through repeated practice; for fishing communities, it is a source of livelihood; for the dolphins, it is habitat; and for the tiger, the wetland provides a territory that does not conform to human administrative boundaries. The same environment participates in several systems of value without being reducible to one.

The boat intensifies this aquatic imagination. It is a transitional space between settlement and environmental uncertainty and between scientific intention and ecological unpredictability. Piya's

research depends upon it, yet her movement also depends upon Fokir's practical knowledge. The novel consequently presents ecological knowledge as situated: what can be observed depends on where one stands, how one moves, and whose experience makes movement possible.

The relationship between Piya and Fokir is a study of epistemic authority. Piya arrives with specialized scientific knowledge and a defined research objective, while Fokir possesses an embodied competence that cannot be replaced by scientific terminology. His ability to read currents, routes, animals, and weather is developed through long participation in the tide country. Ghosh does not imply that local knowledge should replace science; rather, ecological understanding becomes more adequate when different forms of expertise are placed in relation.

This distinction matters because environmental governance often privileges knowledge that can be formalized and institutionalized. Fokir's competence is indispensable to Piya's research, yet it does not automatically give him political authority. The novel therefore asks who has the right to speak for a place and who has the power to decide its future. These are environmental questions as well as questions of recognition and participation.

Climate justice makes this epistemic problem visible. A community living within a fragile ecosystem experiences environmental decisions differently from institutions located outside it. Conservation restrictions may affect mobility and livelihood, while scientific knowledge may receive greater institutional legitimacy than experience acquired through daily life. The novel does not reject conservation; it asks how conservation can become compatible with justice.

The Irrawaddy dolphins provide the novel's clearest example of conservation centred on nonhuman vulnerability. Piya's research begins with scientific interest in the species, but the narrative expands that interest into an ecological network. The dolphins cannot be separated from the waterways in which they live, the currents through which they move, or the human activities that share their habitat. Their protection therefore requires attention to relationships rather than to an isolated species.

The tiger presents a different ethical problem. It represents immediate danger to human beings, yet Ghosh does not make it a morally uncomplicated villain. Its threat is real, but so is its ecological claim to habitat. The contrast between tiger and dolphin shows that nonhuman agency takes different forms and that environmental ethics cannot rely on a simple opposition between innocent nature and harmful humanity.

Taken together, the animals complicate anthropocentrism without denying human vulnerability. Human beings require safety, livelihood, mobility, and belonging, while other species require habitat and ecological continuity. Justice in such a world cannot mean that one category of life automatically overrides another; it must involve negotiation among interconnected forms of vulnerability.

The history of Marichjhapi intensifies the novel's environmental argument by demonstrating that landscapes are political as well as material spaces. The episode involves displacement, political authority, belonging, and regulation of access to land and resources. Biswas and Channarayapatna show how ecological governance can intersect with marginalization. The environment is not simply inhabited; it is administered, and administration can distribute vulnerability unequally.

Marichjhapi prevents an idealized distinction between vulnerable people and fragile nature. Displaced communities seek a place in which they can survive, while the Sundarbans remains an ecologically sensitive region. To dismiss human settlement as environmental destruction would erase the history of displacement; to treat settlement as an unrestricted entitlement would overlook ecological limits. Ghosh maintains this contradiction rather than resolving it through a single moral formula.

This tension can be understood as distributive and procedural justice. Environmental justice asks who bears ecological burdens, who receives environmental benefits, and who participates in decisions. The novel suggests that people who depend directly on an ecosystem should not be treated merely as obstacles to conservation. Their knowledge and material needs belong within environmental decision-making.

The climate relevance of *The Hungry Tide* should not be reduced to the claim that the novel predicts climate change. Its significance is conceptual and literary. Trexler places the novel within climate-change criticism because it mediates environmental processes through human experience. The Sundarbans is a low-lying tidal environment in which instability becomes tangible through movement, livelihood, danger, and settlement.

Environmental processes acquire ethical meaning at the local scale. A changing waterway affects mobility; restrictions affect livelihood; animals alter perceptions of safety; and storms or tidal events can transform settlement and survival. Climate justice begins from this uneven experience of environmental

risk. The question is not only whether a place is vulnerable, but who is made vulnerable and what resources and political capacities are available for responding to risk.

The Sundarbans also challenges developmental models based on stability and control. Administrative systems tend to assume that territory can be clearly bounded and resources permanently allocated, while tidal water crosses boundaries and continually reshapes land. Blue Humanities strengthens climate-justice analysis by showing the material basis of spatial instability. Fokir's environmental competence also demonstrates that vulnerability does not mean the absence of knowledge or agency.

The combined framework of Blue Humanities, ecocriticism, and climate justice makes the novel's conflicts mutually intelligible. Blue Humanities explains why water must be treated as an active medium of social and ecological life. Ecocriticism emphasizes the more-than-human relationships that constitute the Sundarbans. Climate justice exposes unequal exposure to risk and unequal access to environmental decision-making. Each framework corrects a limitation in the others.

Kanai Dutt and Nirmal's writings add historical depth. Kanai encounters the tide country through physical movement, language, and memory, while Nirmal's record makes the landscape legible as political history rather than timeless wilderness. Environmental memory therefore becomes part of environmental ethics: to understand a place responsibly is to understand the histories through which its present vulnerabilities were produced.

The resulting environmental ethic is relational rather than managerial. Ghosh does not reject science, conservation, or institutions. He reveals their ethical incompleteness when they operate without local knowledge and historical awareness. The novel calls instead for environmental politics that protects ecological systems while recognizing the rights and expertise of the people who inhabit them.

This relational vision explains the continuing significance of *The Hungry Tide*. Coastal instability, species vulnerability, displacement, contested resources, and unequal exposure to environmental risk are not confined to the Sundarbans. Ghosh makes these large questions concrete through individual lives and relationships. Environmental crisis becomes ethically intelligible when material processes, human histories, and nonhuman lives are considered together.

Conclusion

The Hungry Tide presents the Sundarbans as an ecological world in which water is simultaneously medium, force, habitat, livelihood, and source of risk. A Blue Humanities reading makes this aquatic agency visible: the tidal environment conditions movement, knowledge, settlement, scientific research, and encounters among species. Water destabilizes fixed boundaries and exposes the limitations of treating ecological space as fully controllable.

Joined to climate justice, this water-centred reading clarifies the novel's politics of conservation. Ecological protection is necessary, but it is not automatically just. Marichjhapi demonstrates how environmental governance can become entangled with displacement and unequal political power, while Piya and Fokir show that environmental knowledge is plural and situated. Scientific expertise and local experience need not be enemies, but environmental decision-making is incomplete when one form of knowledge erases the other.

Finally, the dolphins and tiger demonstrate that environmental ethics must recognize nonhuman agency without denying human vulnerability. Ghosh offers neither unrestricted human use nor absolute conservationism. Instead, the novel imagines coexistence as an ethical practice grounded in interdependence. By placing water at the centre of interpretation, this study extends ecocritical scholarship and demonstrates the value of connecting aquatic humanities with climate justice. The Sundarbans emerges not as a remote ecological backdrop but as a dynamic social-ecological world in which history, knowledge, conservation, livelihood, and nonhuman life are inseparable.

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