Novel Insights, *An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*
A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Research Journal
ISSN: 3048-6572 (Online) 3049-1991 (Print)
Impact Factor: 4.25 (IIFS), 8.2 (IJIN)
Volume-II, Issue-IV, May 2026, Page No. 232-240
Published by Uttarsuri, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711
Website: http://novelinsights.in/
DOI: 10.69655/novelinsights.vol.2.issue.04W.104

Eco Subalternity in the Tide Country: Environmental Justice and Marginal Voices in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

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Received: 22.05.2026; Accepted: 29.05.2026; Available online: 31.05.2026
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Abstract

This paper examines the novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) by Amitav Ghosh from the perspectives of eco-subalternity and environmental justice and posits that the novel brings to the foreground, marginal lives of human and nonhuman actors generated by overlapping regimes of conservation, development and climate risk at Sundarbans. The study demonstrates that Ghosh takes up the multiple discourses of postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies and environmental justice to reframe the history of Morichjhapi, the refugee resettlement and everyday precarious labour as examples of environmental injustice faced by the Dalit refugees, fisherfolk and the dwellers of tidal forests. It explores characters like Kusum, Fokir and other marginalised characters as exemplifications of "subaltern ecologies" that embody and represent knowledge and vulnerability that disrupt technocratic, statist and elitist environmental imaginaries. This research paper also examines the way in which other nonhuman entities – Irrawaddy dolphins, Royal Bengal tigers, and the tidal rivers – are caught up in the same risky, necropolitical, governmental, and spatial dispossessive structures. The analysis of the novel through a close reading and contextualisation with historical and sociological narration of the Sundarbans suggests that *The Hungry Tide* expresses an eco-subaltern standpoint as an appropriate counter epistemology of environmental justice in the South Asian coastal ecologies.

Keywords: subaltern, vulnerability, conservation, ecology, solidarity

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh writes about the estuarine mangrove forest forming the border between India and Bangladesh known as the Sundarbans, which is both a tiger reserve and a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a place where human lives are precarious (Dutta 35). Although the tide country is a complex environment of rivers, creeks, and islands, it is home to many endangered species including the Royal Bengal Tiger and Irrawaddy Dolphin, as well as refugees, landless labourers and forest-dependent communities, whose livelihoods are affected by cyclical cyclones, erosion, and salinity (Jindal et al. 318). Ghosh's capacity to portray ecological fragility and climate change alongside social marginalisation

has been, and continues to be, noted in the work of ecocritical scholars, especially in his so called "Sundarbans trilogy" and climate-themed non-fiction (G and Thenmozhi 448).

The Hungry Tide was well received but early criticism pointed out its focus on human-animal conflict, loss of biodiversity and community-based conservation, mostly centred on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), the Bon Bibi legend and the clash between Western science and local ecological knowledge (Biswas and Channarayapatna 171; Kharbe 112-13). Recent research work, however, has been focusing on integrating postcolonial ecocriticism with subaltern theory to explore how the novel brings together issues of environmental management, refugee politics and caste marginalisation (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539; Jindal et al. 325). Articles highlighting "ecocriticism meets subaltern studies" and environmental displacement in Ghosh's novel make it abundantly clear that the environmental displacement is borne by refugee communities, Dalit settlers, and the fisherfolk (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539; Jindal et al. 322).

Research on the Morichjhapi massacre and refugee resettlement in forest reserves in West Bengal has indicated that environmental arguments, including the need for protection of tiger habitats and forest conservation, have been used to justify the violent eviction of Dalit East Bengali refugees from reserved areas. These accounts show that conservation discourse can interact with the caste and class hierarchy to create what environmental justice scholars refer to as "sacrifice zones" (Scott 479-80; Biswas and Channarayapatna 172-73), wherein marginal communities bear disproportionate environmental costs in the name of a putative "universal good."

This research paper extends this type of thinking by engaging with *The Hungry Tide* in a way that foregrounds the concepts of eco-subalternity and environmental justice. Here, eco-subalternity refers to the situations of human and non-human subjects whose life and ecology are constituted by the overlapping process of political, economic, and ecological marginalisation and through whose voice the dominant discourses are narrated or whose voices are suppressed or interpolated (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539). Ghosh's novel has been read as an inquiry into the ways in which lives are made disposable by environmental governance and developmentalism: the lives of Kusum, Fokir, the Morichjhapi settlers, the dolphins, the tigers, and others (Jindal et al. 325; Maity 51).

It is a study which engages with not only ecocritical and postcolonial readings of the novel but also brings the discussion back to the issue of environmental justice, spatial dispossession and subaltern representation. It claims that *The Hungry Tide* expresses an eco-subaltern perspective that reveals the necropolitical aspect of conservation and development in the Sundarbans, and proposes alternative modes for inhabiting the tide country based on embodied knowledge and subaltern ecologies.

Research Objectives:

This study aims to investigate *The Hungry Tide* as an eco-subaltern story which brings the subaltern lives of humans and nonhumans that are made to overlap the regimes of conservation, development and climate risk in the Sundarbans to the fore. This broad aim can be broken down into the following specific aims:

- To analyse the history of Morichjhapi refugee resettlement and spatial marginalisation as examples of environmental injustice against Dalit refugees and forest-dependent communities, as narrated by Ghosh.

- To explore characters like Kusum, Fokir, Horen and other precarious characters as examples of "subaltern ecologies" whose lives, livelihoods, knowledge and vulnerabilities are closely intertwined with the tidal environment.
- To examine how nonhuman beings (Irrawaddy dolphins, tigers, mangroves and tidal rivers) are portrayed as nonhuman subalterns who are subject to similar processes of risk and governance as humans.
- To question the interaction between various knowledge systems and institutional actors (refugees, fisherfolk, local spiritual practice, state authorities, NGOs, scientists) in the construction of environmental governance and the new challenges to the technocratic and statistic environmental imaginaries from an eco-subaltern perspective.

Together these goals seek to show that *The Hungry Tide* represents the ecological fragility and, at the same time, is a sustained critique of environmental risk and protection in an unequal manner in a postcolonial context.

Research Methodology:

The method of research used in this study is a combination of the qualitative, the interpretative with a close reading, contextual analysis and theory synthesis. *The Hungry Tide* is the main literary work indicating historical and sociological sources at the Sundarbans, Morichjhapi refugee resettlement are important contextual materials. The analysis relies on the conceptual framework of 'eco-subalternity' developed from postcolonial ecocriticism, subaltern studies and environmental justice literature.

The methodology is carried out in three stages that are related to each other. Firstly, key episodes in the novel— such as Nirmal's diary of the Morichjhapi settlement and massacre, Kusum's memories, Fokir's life on the river, encounters with the dolphins and tigers, scenes of negotiations with state and NGO authorities— are read closely to find out how voice, agency, and vulnerability are constructed and distributed in the novel. Secondly, the fictional portrayals are juxtaposed with relevant historical and policy-informed research concerning Morichjhapi refugee resettlement in forest reserves, to draw attention to similarities and differences in literary as well as archival representations of environmental injustice. Thirdly, the theoretical frameworks of subaltern studies and environmental justice theory are used to read and analyse the positionality of human and nonhuman characters, the spatial logic of the tide country, and the novel's implicit critique of conservation and development discourses.

This is, therefore, a textual and contextual approach, seeing literature as a cultural and political discourse as well as a 'counter archive' to the dominant policy discourses. The study is not an attempt at any empirical reconstruction of the historical events but an attempt to understand how Ghosh's narrative problematizes and revoices eco-subaltern experiences in the context of the ongoing debates in South Asia on environmental justice.

Literature Review:

Ecocriticism and Environmental Narratives in *The Hungry Tide:*

The Hungry Tide's vivid description of the fragile ecology of the Sundarbans, human–animal conflict and climate-induced catastrophes has been the focus of ecocritical studies. Recurrent images of cyclones, storm surge, erosion, and rising sea levels are seen as representations of global climate change in a localised setting in articles that present the novel as an

environmental catastrophe narrative (Ray and Sengupta 99). These tend to envision the tide country as a "frontline of the Anthropocene", where "vulnerable human and nonhuman communities face the slow violence of environmental degradation" (Scott 480; Jindal et al. 323).

In other ecocritical readings, the focus is on Ghosh's employment of myth and Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the representation of the Sundarbans. For instance, the Bon Bibi legend's story is said to have its own local ecological ethics, one that is used to control the use of resources, boundaries of space, and relations with animals (Biswas and Channarayapatna 171). Rituals, oral narratives and everyday practices of honey collectors and fisherfolk have been demonstrated to encode sustainable patterns of coexistence, that in many cases are in tension with top-down conservation schemes (Biswas and Channarayapatna 172; Jindal et al. 319). These readings have a focus on knowledge pluralism and the potential of bringing together the IKS and science of ecology (Jindal et al. 324).

Subaltern Studies, Displacement, and Morichjhapi:

In addition to the ecocritical study, researchers who have borrowed from the study of subalterns have concentrated on the novel's depiction of histories of the refugee and the Morichjhapi massacre (Kharbe 114; Dutta 42; Jindal et al. 321). There are historical records of the resettlement of Dalit refugees from East Bengal in the forest reserves and the violent evictions on the pretext of tiger conservation and protecting the environment. According to these studies, the conservation and refugee policy in West Bengal was influenced by the 'caste and class hierarchy', and the responsibility for environmental governance was delegated to the marginalised groups.

The Hungry Tide also shows fictionalised accounts of Morichjhapi in the form of Nirmal's diary and Kusum's testimony, and hence, as has been noted by literary criticism, acts as a counter narrative to official silence surrounding the massacre (Biswas and Channarayapatna 170; Ray and Sengupta 102; Dutta 40). According to an article on "the disaster unconscious" in the novel, "…. The spatial and temporal separation of disaster is not sustainable in vulnerable ecologies and politics preconceived upon the ideas of the bodies that matter and those that do not." (Ray and Sengupta 102). This line of argument situates the novel at the intersection of trauma studies, environmental history, and subaltern historiography.

Eco-Subalternity and Environmental Justice:

Over the recent years there has been a noticeable shift in theorising the eco-subalternity, specifically in relation to Ghosh's work (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539; Maity 54). One of the studies entitled 'Ecocriticism Meets Subaltern Studies' suggests a theory of reading the Sundarbans as a place where ecological vulnerability and socio-political marginalisation converge— where the subaltern communities are an environmental frontline. It claims that *The Hungry Tide* demonstrates the political marginalisation as well as environmental vulnerability of refugees, fisherfolk, and forest reliant labourers, who are eco-subaltern subjects.

An article on environmental displacement and subaltern ecologies in Ghosh's novel focuses on how climate-induced disaster, erosion and salinity increases inequalities and makes marginalised population engage in a cycle of displacement and precarious work. These studies frequently rely on the language of environmental justice to articulate the

environmental injustices of unequal distribution of harms and benefits, and on subaltern theory to focus on the voices that are heard and those that are not in environmental debates.

In a related discussion on "ecoprecarity and necropolitical sovereignty", *The Hungry Tide* presents the concept of necropolitics as a way to consider how state power determines whose lives are of value for environmental or development concerns (Maity 54). This analysis reinforces the suggestion of continuity between colonial and postcolonial modes of governance, especially regarding border management, forest policing and the creation of some areas as zones of exception (Maity 52).

Gaps and Contributions:

These traditions of scholarship have yielded rich insights, but there are some gaps. In the first place, the myth and IKS based approach in the field of ecocriticism sometimes minimises the structural violence of conservation and development policies and highlights the potential for knowledge integration and sustainability. Secondly, there has not been a consistent coupling between subaltern or trauma-oriented approaches to Morichjhapi and environmental justice discourses about nonhuman life and conservation logics.

This research study aims at filling these gaps by combining ecocritical, subaltern and environmental justice perspectives, calling it Eco-Subalternity. It builds on the works of others by specifically bringing into focus the human subaltern and the nonhuman subaltern in the novel and by examining environment governance in the Sundarbans as a necropolitical regime, which distinguishes between lives considered protectable and lives put at risk. In so doing, the book helps to further the debates on climate justice and postcolonial ecologies in South Asian literature.

Results and Discussions:

The Tide Country as an Eco-Subaltern Space:

In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans is depicted as a space shaped by tides, cyclones, and erosion, where land literally appears and disappears with the rhythms of the river. This environmental volatility is not experienced equally by all characters; rather, it is the landless, the refugees, and the forest-dependent poor, who inhabit the most precarious islands and riverbanks. The novel repeatedly situates these communities at the literal and metaphorical margins, on embankments that are constantly threatened by storms and rising waters.

The tide country can be read from an eco-subaltern perspective as a space engendered in the interplay of nature and the socio-political decision. By analysing the history of refugee resettlement in forest reserves, it is clear that state policies were intentionally promoting Dalit refugees to be settled in the underutilised land, which was mostly described as "wasteland" or "unoccupied area" for colonisation and conservation. Through Nirmal's stories of Morichjhapi, the novel shows how on the island of Morichjhapi, an environmentally precarious and politically-charged place, settlers build a precarious but hopeful community and are then violently displaced when their presence conflicted with conservation agendas.

In this way, the Sundarbans can be seen as an eco-subaltern space, where environmental risk and political marginalisation find themselves mutually co-constitutive. Spatially, subaltern communities are in zones that are most vulnerable to tidal surge and cyclones; politically, they are invisible and are prone to discretionary violence from the government.

This is a double marginality which is at the heart of explaining environmental injustice in the tide country.

Morichjhapi, Environmental Governance, and Necropolitics:

The fictionalised portrayal of Morichjhapi in *The Hungry Tide* is based on historical facts, when police officers in 1979 evicted and killed refugee settlers on the grounds that they were in a protected forest area. The first-person account of the aspirations, the creation of a collective life and the eventual clampdown of the state, as described in Nirmal's diary entries emphasize the emotional and physical toll of displacement in Kusum's testimony.

In terms of environmental justice, the massacre shows one way of how conservation policy can be used to justify violence towards marginalised populations. His rhetoric of 'tigers and forests' is used to demonise the refugees as 'illegal encroachers' even as the state has historically been responsible for their displacement and resettlement. Such cases have been termed by the scholars as necropolitical sovereignty, meaning that the authorities make the decision on who should live and who should die, in the interest of the environment or the nation. The novel's choice of focusing on the tiger reserve rather than the refugee settlement makes their existence disposable, as compared to the endangered animals and the abstract importance of the ecology.

Ghosh's story is not, however, about the opposition between human refugees and wildlife. Rather, it exposes the conflicting logics of a regime which abysmally fails both. Tigers are not only under threat from refugees, but also from the general trends in development, resource extraction, and climate change that expose it to violence and ensure a lack of effective long-term protection in the same structures. The novel thus associates Morichjhapi with larger ecological degradation, and, in a sense, a necropolitical environmentalism ultimately leads to the undermining of human and nonhuman futures.

Human Eco-Subalterns: Refugees, Fisherfolk, and Precarious Labour:

The characters like Kusum, Fokir and Horen are examples of what can be called human eco-subalterns. Kusum's life story plots a path from a displacement of the partition to refugee camp precarity, to the tenuous hope of Morichjhapi, to her death in the massacre. In her testimony, documented in Nirmal's diary, the interplay of environmental determinants (landlessness, flood, and unsafe forests) and caste and gender issues contribute to her experiences of exploitation and resistance.

An illiterate fisherman, Fokir represents a life in tune with the changing tides and animal behaviour of the Sundarbans, whose expertise is continually undermined by formal structures. His job as a crab catcher, as well as a guide, is an uncertain one, depending on the weather, the market, the possibility of tiger attack, or storm. During her dolphin research, Piya finds that without his embodied knowledge of channels and currents, she would not have been able to carry out her research, but she is not recognised by the state or the scientific establishments.

Environmental justice discourse focuses on the fact that often the environment in which marginalised communities reside is far riskier than that of others and that there are few benefits for them in conservation or development initiatives. Fisher people and forest workers have no social security, land rights and no proper access to decision making, and are protected through regulations that restrict access to resources in the novel. They live in a "precarious ecology" as it may be called, in which they must try to survive the natural

disasters and bureaucratic limitations. Ghosh provides them with narrative space and affective depth and thus situates the eco-subaltern experiences which are usually peripheral in the mainstream environmental stories.

Nonhuman Subalterns: Dolphins, Tigers, and Tidal Rivers:

The nonhumans in *The Hungry Tide* are not just background; they act, suffer, and affect the course of human destiny; thus, warranting being thought of as nonhuman subalterns. Piya's research is on the Irrawaddy dolphins, who live in a precarious niche in the estuarine environment, under threat from industrial fishing, vessel traffic and altering salinity. Their movements and behaviours help to map out the storyline; Piya follows them to remote channels and learns to read the tides through them.

In the same way, tigers are portrayed as the sacred ones in Bon Bibi's mythology, and as the dangerous ones, who prey upon humans, who venture into the forest for living. Tigers are perceived locally to be expressions of divine justice, watching over the moral boundaries of the forest, but are also governed by conservation regimes which sometimes pave the way for tigers to be pitted against the human poor. When villagers shoot a tiger that has killed a human, they are given the image of desperate self-defence, which is also being criminalized by legislation which protects wildlife.

Tidal rivers, cyclones themselves have quasi-agencies in the narrative, changing landscapes, destroying embankments and determining the fate of characters. The storm which causes Fokir's death can be interpreted as the culmination of the vulnerability felt by humans and nonhumans; since Fokir's death is caused by wind and water, which do not respect human hierarchy, while saving the life of Piya, a symbol of global science. Ecocritical and more-than-human approaches imply that it is necessary to take these nonhuman agencies into account to truly embrace environmental justice, but with caution to not over-romanticise nonhuman life while neglecting the suffering of humans.

The novel thus asks the readers to reflect on the necropolitical environmental regimes that create zones of death and risk that are not only human, but include dolphins, tigers, and tides as well.

Knowledge, Power, and Counter-Epistemologies:

The relationship between knowledge systems and institutional power is one of the key aspects of eco-subalternity in *The Hungry Tide*. There are states, conservation bureaucracies and transnational scientists like Piya on one side, who have formalised, data-driven epistemes and laws. On the opposite side, there are refugees, fishermen, boatmen and local religious practitioners who embody their knowledge of the tide country, which is both experiential and often oral-narrative and ritualized.

Eco-subalternity is manifested when the latter forms of knowledge are systematically devalued or used as a means to an end. Although Fokir's tidal literacy is invaluable to Piya's research, he is not formally recognised or given power as a result of this collaboration. The Bon Bibi story, as an ethical system about how to use the forest is largely overlooked by scientific conservation discourses that focus on measurable data and plans.

But the subaltern epistemologies in Ghosh's story are given much weight. In terms of local knowledges, the novel illustrates through in-depth descriptions of boat travel, fishing and ritual activities how these knowledges are organized systems of managing the risks and sustaining life in a changing landscape. Meanwhile, it reveals their vulnerabilities in the face

of large-scale climatic changes, state and social violence, and points to the need for a critical eco-subaltern position that is uncomfortable with technocratic environmentalism.

The novel can then be read as a sort of counter-epistemology of environmental justice, one that starts with the experiences of those most vulnerable to environmental and political risk, and not from abstract models or global climate narratives. *The Hungry Tide* shifts the spotlight to eco-subaltern voices and knowledges, asking us to question who speaks for the environment, and whose lives are included in environmental decision-making.

Conclusion:

In this research paper we have successfully tried to present that *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh is a productive way to read an eco-subaltern narrative to reveal how issues of environmental governance, refugee politics, and more-than-human vulnerability are entangled in the Sundarbans. The novel reflects how conservation and development policies can act as tools of environmental injustice to Dalit refugees, fisherfolk and other marginalised communities through the Morichjhapi, refugee resettlement and precarious labour.

In foregrounding the lives of such human eco-subalterns as Kusum and Fokir, who are affected by tidal volatility, poverty, and little political representation, Ghosh illustrates the differential exposure of environment. Meanwhile, we also feel that the novel seeks to expand the field of environmental justice to relate to nonhuman life such as dolphins, tigers, and tidal rivers, whose lives are also precarious and have their own 'protection and neglect' regimes.

Our keen observation and analysis demonstrate that in *The Hungry Tide*, eco-subalternity is not only a question of representation; it is also a question of epistemology. Ghosh's storytelling exposes the technocratic environmental imaginaries that have marginalised subaltern ecologies as well as bringing back to some extent the embodied, place-based knowledges to light, revealing their vulnerabilities. The tide country's environmental future demands a new beginning from the perspective of those who live closest to the risk and who are marginalised in debates on environmental policies.

In this research article, the author demonstrates how *The Hungry Tide* reveals the concept of eco-subalternity in the Sundarbans, as the conservation and climate burden is shared by Dalit refugees, fisherfolk, and nonhuman life. It postulates that Ghosh challenges necropolitical environmental governance and proposes an environmental justice perspective that is based on the subaltern ecologies and the body of local knowledge. This research article also places *The Hungry Tide* in the larger context of the revealing discourses on climate change, postcolonial ecologies and environmental justice, thereby helping to develop a sense of how the present-day Indian English fiction can serve as a critical space to evaluate eco-subalternity.

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