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Where the Tide Rules: The Sundarbans as Posthuman Space in Amitav Ghosh's Anthropocene Fiction

[1]Joshua Gabriel. D, [2]Dr. E. Prema

[1]PhD Scholar, Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College for Women(A), Madurai-625002.

[2]Associate Professor, Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College for Women(A), Madurai-625002

Abstract

This paper examines the Sundarbans as a posthuman space in Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide" and "Gun Island". It argues that Ghosh constructs the tide country not as a passive setting for human drama but as an active, agentic ecology that destabilizes anthropocentric narrative and politics. In "The Hungry Tide", the intertidal landscape governs human life through cyclones, tides, and tigers, revealing what Ghosh calls the limits of human exceptionalism. The novel's structure which interweaves cetology reports, colonial archives, and vernacular testimony, formally mirrors ecological entanglement and challenges the novel's traditional focus on individual human protagonists. Piya's research on river dolphins and Fokir's embodied knowledge of the mangroves position nonhuman life as a source of meaning and law, while the Morichjhãpi massacre exposes how conservation discourse renders climate refugees intruders not just on land but on nature itself. Gun Island extends this posthuman vision into a transnational Anthropocene. The Sundarbans appear as a node in a planetary web of displacement, where snakes, storms, and rising seas migrate alongside humans from Bengal to Venice. Ghosh revives the Bonduki Sadagar legend to suggest that premodern folklore already encodes multispecies ethics suppressed by modernity. By making weather, water and animals into narrative drivers, he critiques what he terms "the great derangement": literature's failure to represent nonhuman agency at scale. Drawing on posthumanism, blue humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism, this study reads Ghosh's deltas as sites where nature/culture and human/animal binaries collapse. It contends that the Sundarbans model a posthuman ethics of cohabitation, where survival depends on recognizing interdependence with tides, forests, and other species. The paper concludes that Ghosh reshapes the novel as a form capable of registering planetary crisis, offering a literary method for thinking beyond the human in the climate era.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, The Hungry Tide, Gun Island, Sundarbans, posthumanism, Anthropocene, ecocriticism, material ecocriticis, blue humanities

Introduction

The Sundarbans, a labyrinthine archipelago of mangrove islands straddling India and Bangladesh, occupies a paradoxical place in literary and ecological imagination. It is at once peripheral to the nation-state and central to planetary crisis, too mutable to map yet too material to ignore. In Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide" and "Gun Island", this intertidal region becomes more than setting or symbol. It emerges as a posthuman space, a site where nonhuman forces assert narrative, political, and ontological priority over human life. By configuring the Sundarbans

as a zone of irreducible entanglement between tides, cyclones, tigers, dolphins, humans, and myth, Ghosh challenges the anthropocentric foundations of the realist novel and of modern conservation alike. This study argues that Ghosh's two Sundarbans novels theorize the delta as a relational ecology in which human subjectivity is decentered, agency is distributed across species and elements, and survival depends on recognizing interdependence rather than asserting dominion.

This argument builds on Ghosh's own critique in "The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable", where he identifies a formal and imaginative failure at the heart of modern literature. The novel, he contends, was shaped by the rules of the bourgeois order that banish improbable events like cyclones or floods to the genres of fantasy and epic, thereby making climate crisis unrepresentable within serious fiction. The Sundarbans provide Ghosh with a concrete geography that exposes those rules as inadequate. Here, the improbable is quotidian. Land appears and vanishes with the tide, tigers enter villages as sovereigns, and storms remake social hierarchies overnight. To write the Sundarbans honestly is therefore to write against the grain of the novel's human scale. In "The Hungry Tide" and "Gun Island", Ghosh experiments with narrative form, temporal structure, and epistemological pluralism in order to register a world in which the weather was no longer content to stay in the background.

The theoretical framework for this reading draws from three intersecting fields. First, posthumanism as articulated by Rosi Braidotti provides a critique of human exceptionalism and a model of subjectivity constituted through relations with nonhuman others. For Braidotti, the posthuman subject is an embodied and embedded relational entity that emerges through multiple belongings to animals, technologies, and environments. Ghosh's Sundarbans dramatizes this condition. Characters like Fokir in "The Hungry Tide" do not simply live in the mangroves. Their knowledge, ethics, and survival are co-produced with tides, fish, and forest deities. Second, material ecocriticism, particularly Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's concept of storied matter helps illuminate how Ghosh treats the delta itself as a narrative agent. The mudbanks, river channels, and cyclonic debris of the Sundarbans function as material forms of narrativity that archive colonial violence, partition histories, and mythic pasts simultaneously. Third, the blue humanities, especially Stacy Alaimo's work on trans-corporeality, frames the Sundarbans as a space where human bodies are literally and figuratively continuous with water, sediment, and other species. Alaimo argues that thinking with water dissolves the outlines of the human and reveals our immersion in more-than-human flows. Ghosh's characters are repeatedly immersed, capsized, and reconstituted by the tide, a formal mirroring of the delta's ontology.

Within this framework, the Sundarbans function as posthuman space in three key ways. First, they operate as a zone of nonhuman law. In "The Hungry Tide", the tiger that kills villagers is not a villain but an enforcer of an ecological code that predates the state. Forest guards who protect tigers over humans are not merely corrupt; they embody a conservation ideology that renders certain humans intruders not just on land but on nature itself. The novel's central ethical crisis, the Morichjhãpi massacre of 1979, thus becomes legible as a conflict between competing sovereignties. The Indian state claims jurisdiction over the islands, but the tide claims them twice daily, and the tiger claims them perpetually. Ghosh thereby exposes what Rob Nixon terms slow violence the attritional, dispersed harm inflicted on the poor through environmental policies that separate people from the ecosystems on which they depend. The Sundarbans' refusal to respect human borders reveals the poverty of political categories that cannot account for intertidal life. Second, the Sundarbans function as an archive of entangled time. "The Hungry Tide" interweaves three temporal registers: Piya's present-day cetology, Nirmal's 1970s revolutionary diary, and colonial-era survey records. None is sufficient alone because the delta's temporality is tidal rather than linear. Islands vanish, reappear, and vanish

again, undermining the progressive time of nation and novel. "Gun Island" radicalizes this by linking the Sundarbans to the medieval legend of Bonduki Sadagar, the Gun Merchant. The legend, in which a merchant flees the snake goddess Manasa Devi across the Indian Ocean, is dismissed as folklore until it begins to repeat itself in the present through snakebites, migrations, and floods. Ghosh suggests that premodern narrative already encoded multispecies ethics and climate precarity that modernity suppressed. The Sundarbans thus preserve counter-histories that exceed the archive of the state and the novel of the nation. By making myth migrate alongside humans and animals, Ghosh presents the delta as a transtemporal space where past and future cohabit. Third, the Sundarbans function as a node in a planetary network of displacement. "Gun Island" traces how the ecological violence of the delta produces climate refugees who reappear in Venice, Los Angeles, and the Mediterranean. Tipu, a young Sundarbans native, moves from the mangroves to a detention camp in Italy, his trajectory mirroring that of the snakes and storms that also cross borders. The novel insists that the Anthropocene is not a future condition but a present one, experienced most acutely by those at the margins. The flooding of Venice by acqua alta becomes legible as an echo of the Sundarbans' daily inundation, collapsing the distinction between Global South and Global North. Ghosh thereby uses the Sundarbans to provincialize Europe, showing that the climate crisis dissolves the here and there of conventional geopolitics. The delta's water connects Bangladesh to Brooklyn, making the posthuman condition a shared one, even if unevenly distributed.

This introduction establishes the ground for reading Ghosh's Sundarbans as a literary and theoretical intervention. His novels do not simply add ecological content to postcolonial fiction. They reconfigure the novel's form, ethics, and epistemology to meet the demands of a planet in which human and nonhuman fates are bound together. The chapters that follow examine this reconfiguration across three axes: tidal epistemologies that challenge scientific objectivity, predatory ecologies that rewrite human-animal relations, and migratory narratives that link the Sundarbans to the globe. In each case, Ghosh's delta emerges as a posthuman space that compels us to rethink what counts as a subject, what constitutes a story, and what kind of world we must learn to inhabit. The Sundarbans, in Ghosh's hands, become a pedagogical site for the Anthropocene, teaching that survival requires staying with the trouble of entangled lives.

Literature Review

A Critical engagement with Amitav Ghosh's Sundarbans novels has evolved from early postcolonial and ecocritical interpretations toward a growing body of scholarship that reads "The Hungry Tide" and "Gun Island" through posthumanist, Anthropocene, and blue humanities frameworks. This literature review traces that trajectory, identifying how critics have progressively recognized the Sundarbans not as passive setting but as an active, agentic space that destabilizes anthropocentric narrative and politics. It also locates gaps in existing scholarship, particularly regarding sustained comparative analysis of both novels as a continuous project theorizing the delta as posthuman space.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Environmental Justice

The first wave of criticism on "The Hungry Tide" situated the novel within postcolonial ecocriticism, emphasizing the Sundarbans as a site of historical and environmental violence. Anshuman Mondal's foundational monograph on Ghosh reads the novel as an interrogation of epistemic violence enacted by both colonial science and postcolonial conservation regimes. Mondal argues that the Morichjhãpi massacre of 1979, in which the West Bengal government evicted thousands of Dalit refugees from a protected forest, exposes how the state's preservationist ecology criminalizes the poor in the name of protecting tigers. This reading aligns with Ramachandra Guha's earlier distinction between ecology of the affluent and ecology of the poor, a framework several critics applied to Ghosh's depiction of forest dwellers versus forest officials. Similarly, Pablo Mukherjee's Postcolonial Environments positions "The Hungry Tide" within a tradition of Indian novels that refuse to separate nature from culture, showing how the Sundarbans' tidal flux undermines colonial cartography and nationalist development alike.

Rob Nixon's "Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor" proved especially influential for reading Ghosh. Nixon uses "The Hungry Tide" to illustrate slow violence: environmental harm that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive". The novel's eroding islands, rising salinity, and cyclical cyclones exemplify this form of attritional destruction, which disproportionately affects subaltern communities. Nixon's framework enabled critics to link Ghosh's aesthetics to politics, arguing that the novel's fragmented form mirrors the dispersed temporalities of ecological crisis. Yet these early readings, while attentive to environmental injustice, still tended to treat the Sundarbans as a backdrop for human suffering rather than as an actant in its own right.

Anthropocene Studies and Narrative Form

Following the publication of Ghosh's "The Great Derangement", scholarship shifted toward questions of narrative and the Anthropocene. Ghosh's polemic argues that the modern realist novel is complicit in climate denial because it banishes improbable nonhuman events like storms and floods to the margins of genre fiction. Critics began to read "The Hungry Tide" and "Gun Island" as formal experiments designed to overcome this "great derangement." Divya Anand contends that "Gun Island" makes weather a character by structuring plot around cyclones, snake migrations, and acqua alta in Venice, thereby collapsing the novel's traditional dependence on human causality. For Anand, the Sundarbans' daily inundation provides Ghosh with a geography that already operates outside bourgeois realism, allowing him to model a narrative form adequate to planetary crisis.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's "Postcolonial Ecocriticism" situates Ghosh within a broader environmental turn in postcolonial studies, noting how "The Hungry Tide" challenges the humanist assumptions of both Western environmentalism and Indian nationalis. Their reading emphasizes the novel's epistemological pluralism: Piya's cetology, Fokir's embodied knowledge, and Nirmal's Marxist diary each prove insufficient alone, suggesting that the Sundarbans exceed any single framework. This insight laid groundwork for posthumanist approaches, though Huggan and Tiffin stop short of attributing agency to the nonhuman itself.

Posthumanism, Material Ecocriticism, and Blue Humanities

The most recent scholarship explicitly mobilizes posthumanist theory to read the Sundarbans as a space of distributed agency. Rosi Braidotti's concept of the posthuman subject has been applied to Ghosh's characters to show how identity in the tide country emerges through trans-species relations rather than autonomous individuality. In "The Hungry Tide, Piya's relationship with the Orcaella dolphins and Fokir's intimacy with the mangroves exemplify what Braidotti calls zoe-centered egalitarianism, a mode of being that recognizes human life as one strand within a larger web. Critics argue that Ghosh decenters the liberal humanist protagonist by making survival contingent on nonhuman cooperation: Fokir saves Piya not through heroism but through his ability to read water and animal behavior.

Material ecocriticism further deepens this analysis. Serenella Iovino's notion of storied matter frames the Sundarbans' mudbanks, cyclonic debris, and river channels as narrative agencies that co-author the text. Sreyashi Mukherjee applies this to "Gun Island", arguing that the mangroves function as ecological archives storing colonial, mythic, and climatic histories simultaneously. The novel's revival of the Bonduki Sadagar legend, in which the merchant is pursued by the snake goddess Manasa Devi, becomes legible as an example of matter's narrative power. The legend is not mere folklore but a sedimented account of human-animal conflict reactivated by contemporary climate change. The blue humanities offer another critical lens. Stacy Alaimo's theory of trans-corporeality describes how bodies are always already immersed in more-than-human flows of water, toxins, and species. Ghosh's characters are repeatedly submerged, capsized, and reconstituted by the tide, illustrating Alaimo's claim that thinking with water dissolves the outlines of the human. Teresa Shewry extends this to "The Hungry Tide", reading Piya's fieldwork as a practice of wet ethics that requires surrendering the terrestrial bias of scientific objectivity. The Sundarbans' twice-daily erasure of land thus becomes a methodological principle: knowledge must remain provisional, tidal, and entangled.

Gaps and Contributions

While existing scholarship has productively applied posthumanist and Anthropocene frameworks to Ghosh's individual novels, three gaps remain. First, few studies offer sustained comparative analysis of "The Hungry Tide" and "Gun Island" as a continuous project. Critics tend to treat _Gun Island_ as a thematic sequel without examining how its transnational structure extends the posthuman logic of the earlier novel. Second, while scholars note nonhuman agency, less attention has been paid to how Ghosh uses the Sundarbans to critique the novel form itself. The delta's resistance to mapping, plotting, and closure directly challenges realist conventions, a dimension this study foregrounds. Third, current criticism under-theorizes the role of myth and folklore as posthuman epistemology. Ghosh's use of Bonduki Sadagar suggests that premodern stories already encode multispecies ethics that modernity suppressed, a claim requiring further analysis.

This study addresses these gaps by reading the Sundarbans across both novels as a posthuman space that reconfigures subjectivity, narrative, and politics. It contends that Ghosh does not merely represent ecological crisis but models a literary method for inhabiting it. By synthesizing postcolonial ecocriticism, material ecocriticism, and blue humanities, the project contributes to Anthropocene literary studies and demonstrates how the Sundarbans compel a rethinking of what it means to be human in a world where the tide, not the nation, sets the terms of life.

Conclusion

In "The Hungry Tide" and "Gun Island", Amitav Ghosh constructs the Sundarbans as a posthuman space that fundamentally reorganizes the ethical, political, and formal coordinates of the contemporary novel. The mangrove delta does not function as inert setting or symbolic backdrop for human drama. Instead, it operates as a dynamic, agentic assemblage of tides, cyclones, tigers, dolphins, snakes, myths, and human migrants that collectively determines the conditions of life, narrative, and survival. By attending to the Sundarbans' refusal to conform to terrestrial, national, or anthropocentric logic, Ghosh's two novels articulate a vision of the Anthropocene in which human subjectivity is decentered, causality is distributed across species and elements, and the very conventions of literary realism prove inadequate to planetary crisis. This study has argued that Ghosh's Sundarbans offer not merely a critique of environmental injustice but a methodological proposition. They model a posthuman ethics and aesthetics grounded in interdependence, vulnerability, and epistemological pluralism.

The first implication of reading the Sundarbans as posthuman space is political. Across both novels, Ghosh demonstrates how modern regimes of conservation, development, and state sovereignty produce violence precisely because they imagine nature as external to human life. The Morichjhãpi massacre in "The Hungry Tide" emerges as the paradigmatic event of this logic. When the West Bengal government evicts Dalit refugees from a protected forest in 1979, it does so in the name of tiger conservation, rendering the refugees intruders not just on land but on nature itself . The massacre reveals what Rob Nixon terms slow violence: a form of harm that is attritional, dispersed, and often invisible because it unfolds across time rather than in spectacular moments. Yet Ghosh pushes beyond Nixon's framework by showing that the violence is not only slow but ontological. It derives from a categorical error that separates humans from the ecosystems that sustain them. The Sundarbans expose this error daily, as tides erase the very boundaries between land and water that property law requires. In this sense, the delta enacts a nonhuman jurisprudence. Tigers, cyclones, and floods enforce a law of entanglement that predates and exceeds the state.

"Gun Island" extends this political critique into a transnational register. The novel tracks how the Sundarbans' ecological precarity generates climate refugees like Tipu, whose migration from the mangroves to Venice to California mirrors the movement of snakes, storms, and disease vectors across the globe. Ghosh thereby collapses the spatial imaginary that distinguishes here from there or Global North from Global South. The acqua alta that floods Venice is not analogous to the Sundarbans' inundation; it is continuous with it. The Sundarbans thus function as what Donna Haraway calls a "Chthulucene" space: a zone where human and nonhuman lives are "stuck" together in relations of response-ability and co-survival. The political demand of Ghosh's posthuman Sundarbans is therefore not simply better conservation or more humane migration policy. It is a reconstitution of the polis itself to include tigers, rivers, and myths as constituents rather than resources. The second implication is formal and epistemological. Ghosh's "The Great Derangement" argues that the realist novel suffers from a derangement that banishes the improbable and the nonhuman to the margins of genre fiction. The Sundarbans provide him with a geography that makes such banishment impossible. In a region where islands vanish overnight, where tigers enter villages as sovereigns, and where cyclones remake social hierarchies, the improbable is the condition of daily life. To write the Sundarbans truthfully is to write against the novel's human scale and linear time. Ghosh responds with formal innovations that enact posthuman entanglement. "The Hungry Tide" braids together Piya's cetology reports, Nirmal's revolutionary diary, and colonial survey records, suggesting that no single epistemology can master the delta. "Gun Island" further destabilizes narrative by reviving the medieval Bonduki Sadagar legend and allowing it to structure contemporary plot. The legend, in which

the merchant Gun Merchant flees the snake goddess Manasa Devi across the Indian Ocean, is not deployed as local color. It is presented as a suppressed ecological knowledge system that already understood climate, migration, and multispecies conflict.

This use of myth illuminates a crucial dimension of Ghosh's posthumanism. The Sundarbans are not posthuman because they are postmodern or technological. They are posthuman because they preserve premodern epistemologies that never assumed human separation from nature in the first place. Serenella Iovino's concept of "storied matter" is instructive here. The mangroves, riverbeds, and cyclonic debris of the Sundarbans function as material forms of narrativity that archive colonial, mythic, and climatic histories simultaneously. When Bonduki Sadagar's story begins to repeat itself through contemporary snakebites and floods, Ghosh suggests that the delta itself is remembering. The past is not past in the Sundarbans; it is sedimented in mud and salt, ready to be reactivated by environmental change. The novel form must therefore learn to listen to what Iovino calls the "narrative agency of matter." Ghosh's fragmented, polyphonic, and intertextual structures are attempts to develop such listening. The third implication is ethical and pedagogical. Stacy Alaimo's theory of trans-corporeality describes how human bodies are always already immersed in more-than-human flows of water, toxins, and species. Ghosh's characters experience this condition with literal force. Piya is nearly drowned, Fokir is killed by a tiger while saving her, and Deen in "Gun Island" is repeatedly capsized by storms that seem to target him personally. These immersions are not metaphors. They dramatize Alaimo's claim that thinking with water dissolves the outlines of the human. The Sundarbans teach that vulnerability is not a condition to be overcome but the basis of relationality. Survival depends on what Rosi Braidotti terms zoe-centered egalitarianism: an ethics that recognizes human life as one manifestation of a broader, generative vitality. Fokir embodies this ethics not through ideology but through practice. His ability to read tides, track dolphins, and propitiate forest deities constitutes a mode of attention that the scientist Piya and the intellectual Nirmal must learn.

By staging these pedagogical encounters, Ghosh positions the Sundarbans as a site of learning for the Anthropocene. The delta instructs readers in what it means to inhabit a world where the weather was no longer content to stay in the background. This instruction is urgent because the Sundarbans are not exceptional. They are exemplary. As sea levels rise and extreme weather proliferates, more and more places are becoming tidal, unstable, and posthuman in Ghosh's sense. Venice, Los Angeles, and the Mekong Delta all appear in "Gun Island" as echoes of the Sundarbans, suggesting that the mangrove forest is not a periphery but a harbinger. To understand the Sundarbans is therefore to prepare for a planetary future in which human dominance is no longer assured and human stories are no longer sufficient. In sum, "The Hungry Tide" and "Gun Island" together accomplish what Ghosh demands of the novel in "The Great Derangement". They develop a literary form capable of registering the scale, complexity, and nonhuman agency of climate crisis. They do so by reconfiguring the Sundarbans as posthuman space: a zone where nature and culture, human and animal, myth and science, local and global are already entangled. This reconfiguration has consequences beyond literary criticism. It challenges the political categories that separate environmentalism from human rights, the disciplinary boundaries that divide science from folklore, and the narrative conventions that isolate individual fate from collective destiny. The Sundarbans, in Ghosh's hands, become a test case for living in the Anthropocene. They suggest that the task ahead is not to save nature, imagined as external, but to relearn how to inhabit a world where we were never separate. The tide country's daily lesson is that the hours of the tide seemed to be the only measure by which life was dispensed here. Ghosh's achievement is to make that tidal measure the basis

of a new novelistic time, a posthuman ethics, and a planetary politics. The future of the novel, like the future of the planet, depends on our ability to heed it.

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