

## Environmental Themes in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh

Prof. Rani Tiwari<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, S.S.V.(P.G.) College, Hapur, U.P. Affiliated to C.C.S. University, Meerut, U.P.

Received: 15 Feb 2025, Accepted & Reviewed: 25 Feb 2025, Published: 28 Feb 2025

### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novels weave together powerful narratives that explore the relationship between human societies and the natural world. His works, such as *The Hungry Tide* and *The Ibis Trilogy*, highlight how environmental degradation is intertwined with colonial histories, human exploitation, and the complex ecological challenges we face today. Ghosh presents nature not just as a backdrop, but as a character that shapes human lives, urging us to reconsider our responsibilities towards the environment. Through his vivid storytelling, he addresses the long-lasting effects of colonialism on both people and ecosystems, showing how past exploitation continues to influence modern environmental crises. Beyond his fiction, Ghosh advocates for a cultural shift in how we view climate change, calling for a new narrative that recognizes our interconnectedness with nature. His works serve as both a reflection on the present and a powerful call to action, urging us to rethink our relationship with the environment and work together for a sustainable future.

**Keywords:** Climate change, Colonialism, Cultural narrative, Ecological crisis, Environmentalism, Human-nature relationship, Sustainability,.

### Introduction

The environment has been one of the major themes in Indian English Literature. India has versatile culture and landscape. Humans are closely connected to their surroundings. Writers have taken up subjects like urbanization, colonial exploitation, degradation of ecology etc. These themes have been taken in various writings. Indian English poetry is full of symbols and images from nature. The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and A.K.Ramanujan show the close interaction of man and nature. Many novels deal with the issues of environmental challenges. Indian English Literature deals with the issue of close relationship of man and environment. Salman Rushdie in his novel *Midnight's Children* has critically presented the destruction of ecology which was the result of the political unrest of post-independence. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of the Loss* has taken up the issue of social inequality and degradation of environment. Many other novelists have captured issues of environmental challenges of contemporary time. "The celebrated environmental novelist Amitav Ghosh competently combines fascinating storytelling with ecological themes."<sup>1</sup> Amitav Ghosh's novels do more than just tell stories; they push us to think about the deep and often painful connections between human history, ecological destruction, and the environment itself. His works don't just touch on the impact of climate change or environmental harm, they help us understand how deeply these issues are tied to colonialism, economic systems, and cultural practices. Through his characters and settings, Ghosh explores how humans interact with the natural world, how we often exploit it for our own benefit, and the lasting consequences that come from these actions. Ultimately, his novels ask us to rethink our responsibility towards the planet, urging us to be more mindful of how our choices shape the world around us.

What really sets Ghosh's work apart is his approach to nature. Rather than treating it as just a passive backdrop, something for humans to use and interact with, Ghosh makes nature an active, almost living force in his stories. Take *The Hungry Tide*, for instance. The Sundarbans, a delicate and complex ecosystem in India, isn't just the setting where things happen. It's a driving force in the story. The natural world is deeply

intertwined with the lives of the characters. It shapes their decisions, influences their survival, and even becomes a metaphor for the personal and collective struggles they face. Ghosh's portrayal of nature in *The Hungry Tide* isn't simplistic. It isn't just a beautiful paradise or a dangerous wilderness. It's both of those things and more. The Sundarbans are vulnerable, threatened by rising sea levels, climate change, and human exploitation. Yet, it's also an environment that has the power to resist and regenerate. Ghosh doesn't portray nature as something that's either completely benevolent or fully destructive. Instead, it's constantly shifting, much like human society, and it's deeply affected by the choices people make. The habitat is continuously altered by tides. In the opinion of Amitav Ghosh: "The tide country's very existence is an illusion, constantly remade by the river's whims."<sup>2</sup> Through his characters, Ghosh shows us that humans need to rethink their relationship with nature. It's not enough to simply try to adapt to what's around us. We have to engage with the environment in ways that promote ecological balance and cultural sustainability. The natural world isn't just there for us to take from it's a living system that needs care and respect.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh paints a sobering picture of how human activity, especially practices like deforestation, industrialization, and resource extraction, can cause irreversible harm to delicate ecosystems. The Sundarbans, once pristine, are slowly being destroyed by economic exploitation. "They burned the mangroves and drained the land...each year the waters took back more of what the people had wrested from them"(122). Through characters like Piyali, a marine biologist, and Kanai, a businessman, Ghosh highlights the tension between short-term human profits and the long-term sustainability of the environment. Piyali is invested in understanding the ecological collapse and finding ways to protect it, while Kanai sees the land primarily as an economic opportunity. Their stories are interwoven with the environmental crisis around them, showing how human desires and decisions can either nurture or harm the environment. Piyali says, "In these waters, the dolphins were the key to understanding the health of the ecosystem"(203). This highlights the significance of protecting biodiversity.

The novel reveals how practices like building embankments to protect the land from flooding and overfishing have damaged the natural balance of the Sundarbans. For Ghosh, this is a metaphor for the larger global disregard for nature. We often treat environmental disasters as isolated incidents rather than as part of a bigger, more systemic problem. In *The Hungry Tide*, the environmental degradation in the Sundarbans serves as a mirror for the global neglect of ecological issues, where communities living closest to nature often suffer the most. But Ghosh doesn't stop there. He also looks at how climate change and the rising sea levels are displacing the people who rely on the land for their livelihoods. The Sundarbans people, whose lives depend on fishing and farming, are caught in a battle with forces beyond their control. Their displacement is a stark reminder that the environmental challenges we face today aren't just abstract scientific issues. They affect real people in profound and often devastating ways.

While *The Hungry Tide* focuses on modern environmental issues, Ghosh also takes us on a historical journey in his *Ibis Trilogy* (*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, *Flood of Fire*), where he explores how colonialism left a lasting impact on the environment. The trilogy looks at the British opium trade between India and China, and through it, Ghosh illustrates how colonial economic practices caused lasting damage to both the land and its people. In *Sea of Poppies*, for example, Ghosh delves into the creation of opium plantations in India. The British colonial powers encouraged the production of opium for trade, but the long-term environmental consequences were devastating. "The monkeys never chatter or stolen things or food but came down to eat the remains of the opium effluents and would climb back into the branches to resume their scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents."<sup>3</sup>

Massive areas of land were cleared to make way for poppy fields, which depleted the soil and disrupted local farming systems. While the British Empire profited from this monoculture, the land itself suffered. The soil became less fertile, and traditional ways of farming were replaced with new systems designed to serve colonial interests. This kind of environmental degradation wasn't a side effect. It was a direct result of the colonial agenda to extract as much profit as possible from the land, regardless of the ecological costs. "Every acre of fertile land in the region had been turned over to poppy cultivation"(89). The city's harbor were full of trade ships which gave dirt and garbage to the water. "The waters were thick with the refuge of countless ships and warehouses"(342). Through characters like Deeti, who is forced into the opium trade, and Bahram, a Chinese trader entangled with imperial forces, Ghosh shows us how colonialism redefined the relationship between humans and the environment. The land became something to be exploited, rather than something to be nurtured or respected. Ghosh uses this historical example to remind us that the environmental issues we face today often have deep historical roots. Colonial practices still affect the way resources are extracted and how ecosystems are treated, contributing to the environmental crises we struggle with now.

In his novel *River of Smoke*, Amitav Ghosh puts forth the exploitation of an island named Great Nicobar. Birds were a source of wealth for the islanders. They were sold at high rate to China for eating. Fitcher, a character was very dismayed to see the degrading state of Botanical Gardens and he comments, "Where once there had been orderly, well-spaced trees, and picturesque vistas, there seemed to be nothing beyond but a jungle."<sup>4</sup> The novel has also taken up the issue of great harm to climate caused by the war between British and China.

Ghosh doesn't just examine the colonial past, he also connects it to the present. In the *Ibis Trilogy*, he shows how the legacies of colonial environmental exploitation continue to shape the modern world. The people most affected by these legacies are often those who were marginalized during colonial rule. Even today, communities continue to suffer from the ecological and economic consequences of imperialism. Ghosh draws a clear line between the resource extraction practices of the past and the environmental degradation happening today. In the modern world, industrial and capitalist-driven environmental exploitation continues, and though the faces of the exploiters may have changed, the fundamental dynamics are the same. Resources are still being extracted at unsustainable rates, and the ecosystems and communities that are most vulnerable continue to bear the brunt of this harm.

In *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh takes readers on a journey through time and across borders, blending myth, history, and environmental concerns in a way that speaks directly to the pressing ecological issues of our era. The novel centers on Deen, a rare book dealer, who becomes entangled in a mysterious series of events tied to the environmental degradation of the Sundarbans, a vast delta in the Bay of Bengal. Deen is informed by Nilima before his visit that "the islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea"<sup>5</sup>, and Deen later learns about how climate change is affecting all the living beings of the forest. Through this deeply personal and adventure-driven narrative, Ghosh not only explores the challenges of climate change but also the human stories behind these environmental crises.

At its core, *Gun Island* is about how the environment is no longer something we can ignore or take for granted. The Sundarbans, a region once home to thriving biodiversity, are now under threat due to rising sea levels, deforestation, and human encroachment. These changes have profound effects not only on the land and wildlife but also on the lives of the people who depend on the region for their livelihoods. "...it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans"(53). Ghosh highlights how these environmental shifts are not isolated incidents but are part of a global pattern of ecological

disruption fueled by historical exploitation, colonial legacies, and modern-day negligence. The novel's title, *Gun Island*, is significant because it references an island in the Sundarbans that is now almost mythical, both a symbol of a disappearing world and a place where various forces of history, culture, and nature intersect. Through Deen's travels, we see how the fight for survival in these fragile ecosystems is linked to larger global struggles, such as the migration of people displaced by climate change, the political and economic forces that drive ecological destruction, and the deep connections humans have with their environments.

What makes *Gun Island* particularly poignant is how Ghosh intertwines personal stories with grand, global themes of climate crisis. The author has drawn a parallel between animal and human migration. The novel emphasizes climate justice for multi species. There is "the nexus between the climate and the refugee crises."<sup>6</sup> Deen, as a character, is grappling with his own place in the world. His family's history, his role in the world's cultural and environmental degradation, and his sense of responsibility toward the future. As Deen moves through the narrative, we witness his transformation from someone detached from the environmental crisis to someone who begins to understand the urgency of rethinking how humanity interacts with the planet.

At the heart of the novel is Ghosh's message that climate change and environmental destruction are not distant issues. They are already here, shaping the lives of people around the world. "The cyclone had left behind a trail of devastation...houses flattened, trees uprooted"(72). His characters face the immediate consequences of this crisis, making the reader reflect on how interconnected all our actions are, whether they're in the Sundarbans or in other parts of the globe. "...Ghosh reflects on the connection between today's climate crisis and the legend of the Gun Merchant to highlight the ties between the past and the present, while identifying a point of origin for the crisis."<sup>7</sup> The novel presents allegorically the legend which shows the conflict of modern world between nature and profit. The author writes:

The Gun Merchant was said to have been a rich trader who had angered Manasa Devi by refusing to become her devotee. Plagued by snakes and pursued by droughts, famines, storms, and other calamities, he had fled overseas to escape the goddess's wrath, finally taking refuge in a land where there were no serpents, a place called "Gun Island" – Bonduk-dwip (17).

Ghosh doesn't offer easy solutions, but rather paints a picture of how human history and nature are deeply entwined, urging us to reexamine our relationship with the environment before it's too late. In a world where environmental challenges can sometimes feel overwhelming and out of reach, *Gun Island* is a reminder that each of us is connected to this global issue in personal, meaningful ways. It is rightly remarked, "the ways in which the local and the global have become inseparable in the Anthropocene."<sup>8</sup> Ghosh's novel doesn't just speak about the environment—it calls us to engage with it, to understand it, and to take responsibility for the future we all share.

This version brings out the human-centered themes of environmental issues in *Gun Island*, presenting them in a relatable and engaging way. It focuses on the emotional and personal aspects of the novel's exploration of climate change and ecological destruction. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Ghosh observes that "climate change has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those on the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us."<sup>9</sup> In this book, he critiques the way literature and intellectual discourse have largely ignored the scale of climate change. He argues that modern literature has failed to engage with the environmental crisis in a meaningful way. Climate change,

Ghosh suggests, isn't just a scientific issue—it's a cultural and philosophical challenge, one that requires us to rethink humanity's place in the world. Through *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh calls for a new way of thinking about the environment, one that integrates social, cultural, and economic perspectives. He urges us to move beyond traditional narratives and recognize the urgent need to address the global forces that are driving ecological collapse.

In the end, Amitav Ghosh's novels are more than just literary reflections on the environment. They are urgent calls for action. Through his characters and plots, Ghosh brings to light the long-lasting consequences of human exploitation of the natural world. He doesn't just critique the environmental destruction of the past, he challenges us to think differently about the future. His writing encourages us to rethink our relationships with the planet and with each other, reminding us that ecological sustainability and human well-being are inseparable. We need to think of multi-species justice for multi-species survival. Multi-species justice is "the all-important need to create spaces and habitats where various species can thrive."<sup>10</sup> Ghosh's work offers a vision for a future where the environment is not something to be taken for granted or exploited, but something to be protected and respected. His novels and non-fiction works push us to confront the climate crisis head-on, asking us to change how we live, how we think, and how we relate to the world around us. According to Hubert Zapf, "In a most general sense, ecocriticism represents a response of the humanities to the environmental crisis which modern civilization has brought about in its uncontrolled economic and technological expansionism."<sup>11</sup> The works of Amitav Ghosh are great steps towards it.

## References-

1

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383340722\\_Environment\\_and\\_Indian\\_English\\_Novel\\_A\\_Critical\\_Study\\_with\\_Reference\\_to\\_Amitav\\_Ghosh's\\_Novels](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383340722_Environment_and_Indian_English_Novel_A_Critical_Study_with_Reference_to_Amitav_Ghosh's_Novels). Accessed on 28.02.2025.

<sup>2</sup> Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. India: Harper Collins, 2005. Print, p.41.

<sup>3</sup>—. *Sea of Poppies*. India: Penguin Books, 2008. Print, p.91.

<sup>4</sup>—. *River of Smoke*. India: Penguin Group, 2011. Print, p.37.

<sup>5</sup>—. *Gun Island*. London: John Murray, 2019. p.19.

<sup>6</sup> Kluwick, U. (2020). The global deluge: floods, diluvian imagery, and aquatic language in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*. *Green Letters*, 24(1), 64–78. p.64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2020.1752516>

<sup>7</sup> Khan, R. H. (2024). Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: The Climate Crisis and Planetary Environmentalism. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2314094>

<sup>8</sup> Gilson, Edwin. "Planetary Los Angeles: Climate Realism and Transnational Narrative in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019)." *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2–3, 2022, pp. 269–88. p.271. doi: 10.1080/14775700.2022.2114286.

<sup>9</sup> Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. India: Penguin Random House, 2016. p.84.

<sup>10</sup> Heise, Ursula K. *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*. University of Chicago Publication, 2016.p.15.

<sup>11</sup> Zapf, H. (2012). "Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology." In: Middeke, M., Müller, T., Wald, C., Zapf, H. (eds) *English and American Studies*. J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-00406-2\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-00406-2_18)