

Ecocriticism in the Works of Amitav Ghosh

Prof. Rajesh Kumar Goswami¹

¹Department of English, Government PG College, Khair, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

The growing ecological crisis in the 21st century has compelled literary scholars to engage with the relationship between literature and the environment. Ecocriticism has emerged as a powerful tool in literary studies to analyze how narratives reflect and respond to ecological challenges. Among contemporary Indian English writers, Amitav Ghosh stands out as a pioneering figure whose fiction profoundly interrogates the intersection of nature, culture, and colonial histories. This research paper explores ecocritical dimensions in Ghosh's key works, including *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, *The Great Derangement*, and *The Nutmeg's Curse*. The study delves into his depiction of climate change, environmental degradation, the agency of non-human entities, and indigenous ecological knowledge. By examining Ghosh's engagement with myth, migration, history, and the Anthropocene, this paper elucidates how his narratives challenge the Western epistemologies of nature and foreground the urgency of ecological consciousness in literature. The study concludes that Ghosh's ecological imagination offers a vital paradigm to understand global environmental crises and reimagine a sustainable human-nature relationship.

Keywords- Ecocriticism, Climate Change, Anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, Environmentalism, Nature, Postcolonial Ecology, Non-human Agency

Introduction

In the contemporary era, marked by accelerating climate change, ecological degradation, and widespread environmental crises, the relationship between literature and the natural world has acquired renewed urgency. Literature not only reflects human culture and consciousness but also shapes our understanding of nature, place, and planetary ethics. In this context, **ecocriticism**—a branch of literary studies that examines the representation of nature and ecological concerns in texts—has emerged as a vital and evolving field of inquiry. Ecocriticism explores how literary narratives interrogate and interpret human-nature interactions, critique anthropocentric ideologies, and engage with the ethical, political, and cultural implications of environmental degradation. As global warming, species extinction, and resource scarcity threaten the planet, writers and scholars alike are increasingly turning to literature to explore the ecological imagination and advocate for sustainable futures. Among the most prominent literary voices in this arena is **Amitav Ghosh**, whose works stand at the intersection of postcolonial critique, ecological awareness, and cultural history. Ghosh's narratives defy the conventional boundaries of genre and epistemology, blending myth, memory, history, and science to illuminate the environmental crises of our times. Whether through the tidal ecology of the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide*, the climate-induced migrations in *Gun Island*, or the philosophical reflections in *The Great Derangement* and *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh consistently foregrounds the interplay of environment, empire, and ethics.

This research paper aims to undertake a comprehensive ecocritical study of Amitav Ghosh's selected works. It seeks to explore how his writings respond to and represent the realities of ecological disruption, how they challenge dominant Western paradigms of nature, and how they envision alternative modes of coexistence between humans and the non-human world. Ghosh's literary corpus invites readers to move

beyond mere awareness of environmental issues to a deeper rethinking of history, justice, and the human condition in the age of the Anthropocene.

By situating Ghosh's fiction and nonfiction within the framework of ecocriticism, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how literature can play a transformative role in shaping ecological consciousness. His narratives are not only aesthetic artifacts but also ethical interventions, urging a reconceptualization of humanity's place in the natural world.

Hypothesis-

This research is based on the following central hypothesis:

“Amitav Ghosh's literary works, through their integration of ecological themes, myth, and postcolonial critique, constitute a powerful ecocritical narrative that not only reflects environmental crises but also challenges dominant anthropocentric and colonial paradigms, offering a transformative vision for ecological consciousness in literature.”

Sub-hypotheses:

1. Ghosh's novels actively portray non-human agency, disrupting human-centered narratives.
2. His use of myth and folklore reclaims indigenous ecological knowledge as a valid epistemology.
3. Ghosh's non-fiction critiques the failures of both literary fiction and modern political structures to address the scale of the ecological crisis.
4. The environmental issues depicted are deeply intertwined with colonial histories and contemporary geopolitics.

Research Methodology-

The research methodology adopted in this study is **qualitative, interpretative, and analytical** in nature, relying on literary analysis grounded in ecocritical theory.

1. Textual Analysis

A close reading of primary texts by Amitav Ghosh (*The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, *The Great Derangement*, *The Nutmeg's Curse*) is undertaken to examine ecological themes, narrative structures, and symbolic representations.

2. Ecocritical Framework

The study is framed using key theoretical texts in ecocriticism (e.g., Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Rob Nixon), postcolonial ecocriticism (e.g., Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin), and Anthropocene theory (e.g., Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ursula Heise).

3. Interdisciplinary Approach

The analysis incorporates insights from environmental history, postcolonial studies, anthropology, and cultural geography to contextualize Ghosh's work.

4. Comparative Analysis

Where appropriate, comparative references to other literary works and ecological discourses are drawn to highlight Ghosh's unique contribution.

5. Thematic Categorization

Themes such as climate change, migration, myth, non-human agency, and ecojustice are identified and examined across different texts.

Understanding Ecocriticism-

1 Introduction to Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach to literature that emerged prominently in the 1990s as a response to the growing global awareness of environmental crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. At its core, ecocriticism seeks to examine how literature and other cultural texts engage with the natural world and reflect or resist human attitudes toward nature.

The term “ecocriticism” was first popularized by Cheryll Glotfelty, who defined it as:

“The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.”
(Glotfelty, 1996)

Ecocriticism goes beyond the simple analysis of nature in literature. It interrogates how texts reflect environmental ethics, portray ecological relationships, and challenge or reinforce anthropocentric (human-centered) worldviews. It brings together literary theory, ecology, environmental philosophy, cultural studies, and sometimes activism to promote a more sustainable and ethically responsible engagement with the planet.

2 Origins and Evolution of Ecocriticism

While ecological themes can be traced throughout literary history—from ancient myths to Romantic poetry—ecocriticism as a critical discipline took shape in the United States in the late 20th century. Influenced by environmental movements like Earth Day (1970) and the rise of ecological science, scholars began to ask:

- How does literature shape our perception of nature?
- In what ways can literary texts help us confront ecological crises?
- What roles do non-human elements (animals, landscapes, weather) play in narrative structures?

Over time, the field expanded, giving rise to sub-fields such as:

- **Deep Ecology:** Advocating intrinsic value in all living beings
- **Ecofeminism:** Exploring the links between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature
- **Postcolonial Ecocriticism:** Focusing on how colonialism and globalization impact both human and ecological communities
- **Urban Ecocriticism:** Investigating ecological issues in urban settings
- **Anthropocene Studies:** Examining literature in the context of the epoch where human activity dominates Earth's systems

3 Key Concepts in Ecocriticism

Several key ideas form the foundation of ecocritical analysis:

1. Nature and Culture:

Ecocriticism rejects the strict separation between nature and culture, instead viewing them as interdependent. It examines how culture constructs "nature" and how such constructions influence environmental policies and perceptions.

2. Anthropocentrism vs. Ecocentrism:

Traditional literature often centers human experiences, marginalizing or objectifying nature. Ecocriticism challenges this anthropocentrism, promoting an ecocentric worldview that values all forms of life.

3. Non-Human Agency:

Recent developments in ecocriticism explore how non-human entities (animals, rivers, forests) exert influence in texts and in the real world—what is often referred to as **posthumanist** or **more-than-human** studies.

4. Environmental Justice:

Ecocriticism increasingly aligns with issues of environmental justice, recognizing that environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities.

5. Climate Change Narratives:

Climate fiction (or "cli-fi") has become a significant genre within ecocriticism. It focuses on how literature represents global warming, natural disasters, and planetary futures.

4 Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism integrates the environmental concerns of the Global South with a critique of imperialist exploitation of both people and land. It highlights the colonial histories behind modern ecological crises—especially the ways in which colonization displaced indigenous ecological systems and introduced exploitative practices.

Amitav Ghosh's works align strongly with this tradition, particularly in how he:

- Traces colonialism's role in initiating the carbon economy
- Elevates indigenous knowledge systems
- Links ecological degradation with migration, displacement, and violence

5 The Relevance of Ecocriticism Today

Ecocriticism is not only a theoretical tool but also a moral and ethical response to the urgent ecological challenges of our time. As ecological degradation intensifies, literature that deals with environmental themes becomes crucial in shaping public consciousness and motivating change.

Amitav Ghosh himself critiques the literary world in *The Great Derangement* for failing to grapple adequately with climate change, arguing that the realist novel is often ill-suited to represent ecological disaster due to its emphasis on the mundane and the probable.

In this light, ecocriticism pushes literature to evolve—stylistically, thematically, and ethically—to better reflect the world's environmental realities and crises.

Ecocriticism serves as an essential framework for analyzing literature in the age of ecological crisis. It bridges the gap between humanistic inquiry and environmental urgency, calling attention to how stories influence our interactions with the natural world. As a writer deeply invested in environmental ethics, Amitav Ghosh's work provides fertile ground for ecocritical analysis. His fiction and non-fiction challenge dominant narratives of progress, offer alternative ecological visions, and call for a transformation in how we write—and think—about the Earth.

The Hungry Tide – Tides of Memory, Ecology, and Survival- Published in 2004, *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, a mangrove delta in eastern India and Bangladesh known for its complex ecosystem and vulnerability to natural disasters. The novel follows the journey of Piyali Roy, an American-born cetologist of Indian descent, and Kanai Dutt, a Delhi-based translator, as they navigate the treacherous landscapes of the tide country.

Ecocritical elements in *The Hungry Tide*:

- **Human-Nature Conflict:** The novel presents a fragile ecosystem where the lives of the local people are constantly at risk due to cyclones, tiger attacks, and tidal floods.

- **Non-human Agency:** The Royal Bengal Tiger is portrayed not merely as a predator but as an integral part of the ecosystem, embodying the wilderness that resists domestication.
- **Myth and Ecology:** The legend of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess, blends folklore with ecological ethics, offering a non-anthropocentric perspective on survival and coexistence.
- **Displacement and Eco-justice:** The novel references the Morichjhāpi massacre (1979), where refugees were evicted from the island under the pretext of ecological preservation, revealing how environmental policies can be used to justify social injustice.

Ghosh's use of multilingualism, intertextuality, and ecological realism situates *The Hungry Tide* as a landmark work in postcolonial ecocriticism.

Gun Island – Climate Change, Migration, and Myth- *Gun Island* (2019) extends Ghosh's ecological concerns into a global framework. The novel explores the intertwined themes of climate change, forced migration, and myth through the journey of Deen Datta, a rare book dealer who encounters a Bengali legend that takes him from Kolkata to Los Angeles to Venice.

Ecocritical perspectives in *Gun Island*:

- **Climate-Induced Disasters:** Wildfires in California, floods in Venice, and cyclones in India are not isolated events but part of a global pattern of ecological disruption.
- **Migration and Ecology:** Ghosh links environmental degradation with human displacement, suggesting that climate change is a major driver of global migration.
- **Myth as Ecological Memory:** The story of Manasa Devi, the snake goddess, symbolizes ancient ecological wisdom that has been marginalized by modern rationality.
- **Agency of Animals:** Encounters with dolphins and venomous spiders challenge human exceptionalism and foreground the sentience of other life forms.

Ghosh's blend of realism and magical elements creates a narrative that challenges the limitations of modern fiction in addressing the climate crisis.

The Great Derangement – Climate Change and the Literary Imagination- In this non-fiction work (2016), Ghosh critiques the failure of contemporary literature and culture to grapple with the magnitude of the climate crisis. He argues that mainstream literary fiction is ill-equipped to represent events like hurricanes, floods, and ecological breakdowns because they fall outside the bounds of bourgeois realism.

Key arguments in *The Great Derangement*:

- **The Crisis of Imagination:** Ghosh laments that climate change is treated as a scientific or political issue, not a cultural or imaginative one.
- **Colonial Histories and Carbon Economy:** He links imperial expansion with the origins of the fossil fuel economy, highlighting how colonialism paved the way for environmental destruction.
- **The Role of Writers:** Ghosh calls for a reimagining of narrative forms that can accommodate the unpredictability and scale of climate events.

This text is crucial to understanding Ghosh's ecocritical worldview and his call for a new literary ethics in the face of environmental catastrophe.

The Nutmeg's Curse – Environmental Imperialism and the Politics of Extraction- Published in 2021, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* is an extended meditation on the ecological and historical dimensions of imperialism and environmental devastation. Ghosh traces the colonial history of the Banda

Islands and the extermination of the native population over control of nutmeg—an act symbolic of broader extractive logics that continue today.

Ecocritical insights:

- **Colonialism and Environmental Plunder:** Ghosh argues that the mindset of domination over nature is rooted in imperialism, where landscapes and people were treated as resources to be exploited.
- **Myth and Resistance:** Ghosh draws on indigenous mythologies and oral traditions as repositories of ecological resistance and knowledge, offering alternatives to Western capitalist paradigms.
- **War, Carbon, and the Planet:** The military-industrial complex, Ghosh argues, is a central contributor to climate change, making ecological justice inseparable from geopolitical reform.

This work enhances ecocriticism by grounding environmental crises in material histories of violence and exploitation, suggesting the need for a decolonial ecological consciousness.

Myth, Memory, and the Non-human-

1 - One of the most distinctive features of Amitav Ghosh's literary and intellectual engagement with ecological themes is his strategic use of **myth**, **cultural memory**, and **non-human agency**. Rather than relying solely on scientific or rationalist discourses to address environmental degradation, Ghosh often turns to **folklore**, **sacred traditions**, and **indigenous beliefs** to articulate more ethical and inclusive environmental imaginaries. These elements are not peripheral to his narratives—they are central to his ecocritical worldview.

In an age where modernity is defined by technological mastery and ecological amnesia, Ghosh restores ancient, often marginalized, ways of knowing the world that foreground respect, reciprocity, and relationality between human and non-human life.

2 Myth as Ecological Narrative

Myth in Ghosh's work serves a dual purpose: it offers a **symbolic understanding** of human-nature relations and functions as a **resistance discourse** against colonial and capitalist exploitation of the environment.

Bon Bibi in *The Hungry Tide*

In *The Hungry Tide*, the myth of **Bon Bibi**, the forest goddess of the Sundarbans, serves as a counter-narrative to modern conservationist ideologies. Bon Bibi is worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims in the region and is seen as a divine protector who mediates between humans and the tiger-infested forests. This myth articulates a worldview where:

- Nature is sacred and sentient.
- Balance, not domination, is the guiding ecological principle.
- Humans must coexist with and respect non-human forces.

Ghosh's narrative does not dismiss this myth as superstition but elevates it as a legitimate ecological philosophy—one that challenges the Western divide between nature and culture.

Manasa Devi in *Gun Island*

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh invokes the myth of **Manasa Devi**, the serpent goddess, whose story intersects with the modern narrative of climate refugees and ecological disruption. The goddess, often associated with rivers, fertility, and snakebites, becomes a symbol of **uncontainable nature**—dangerous yet divine.

Through Manasa's myth, Ghosh:

- Bridges ancient ecological warnings with present-day climate events.
- Suggests that nature communicates through mythic signs.

- Disrupts the Enlightenment dichotomy of rational vs. irrational knowledge.

3 Cultural Memory and the Loss of Ecological Knowledge

Ghosh's fiction is deeply invested in **memory**—**not only personal or historical memory but also ecological memory**, which refers to the cultural recollection of environmental change, species loss, and ecological harmony.

Examples include:

- **The forgotten Morichjhāpi massacre** in *The Hungry Tide*, where the displacement of marginalized people under the guise of environmental protection is presented as a case of **eco-injustice**.
- **Historical episodes of forced migration and environmental violence** in *The Nutmeg's Curse*, where Ghosh recalls how colonial empires reshaped ecosystems for extractive purposes.

By recalling these often-erased events, Ghosh connects memory to environmental ethics, urging readers to recognize that current ecological crises are not isolated incidents but part of a longer trajectory of exploitation, displacement, and forgetfulness.

4 The Non-human as Subject and Agent

A radical feature of Ghosh's ecocritical fiction is his emphasis on **non-human agency**—animals, weather patterns, ecosystems, and even mythological beings are granted subjectivity and influence within his narratives.

Animals and Creatures

- **Dolphins in *The Hungry Tide*** are portrayed not just as objects of scientific interest but as intelligent, communicative beings.
- **Spiders and snakes in *Gun Island*** appear at climactic moments, acting as omens or warnings. Their behavior signifies a larger ecological intelligence.

Forces of Nature

- Storms, cyclones, tides, and wildfires are not merely background events in Ghosh's novels—they are **active participants** that shape human destiny.
- For instance, the **storm in *The Hungry Tide*** functions as both a literal threat and a metaphor for uncontrollable ecological power.

Ghosh thereby subverts the traditional human-centered narrative by recognizing the **autonomy of natural forces**, thereby aligning his work with **posthumanist ecocriticism**.

5 Myth and the Anthropocene

The **Anthropocene**—the current geological epoch defined by human impact on the Earth—is marked by unpredictability and disruption. Ghosh argues that conventional realist fiction, tied to bourgeois life and linear narratives, is insufficient to represent such a volatile world.

Myth, by contrast:

- Offers a flexible narrative form that accommodates **the uncanny, the extraordinary, and the nonlinear**.
- Enables **cross-temporal linkages** between ancient ecological wisdom and present crises.
- Restores **non-human voices** to the center of human thought.

In this light, Ghosh's use of myth becomes a **literary strategy of resistance**, enabling readers to confront the climate crisis with a renewed ethical imagination.

In Amitav Ghosh's work, **myth, memory, and the non-human** converge to challenge the dominant ideologies of modernity, which often treat nature as inert, myth as primitive, and animals as voiceless. Through his rich and layered storytelling, Ghosh not only reclaims the power of indigenous and mythic narratives but also recasts non-human entities as active agents in shaping history and fate. This chapter reveals that ecocriticism in Ghosh's writing is not limited to ecological content—it is embedded in his very narrative structure, which privileges **relationality, interdependence, and reverence** over **control, hierarchy, and separation**. By weaving together mythic traditions and ecological realities, Ghosh offers a profound critique of modern environmental thinking and proposes an **ethics of care and cohabitation** in a time of planetary peril.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Ghosh's Global Vision- Ecocriticism in Ghosh's works cannot be separated from postcolonial critique. His novels show how climate change disproportionately affects marginalized communities, often those in the Global South.

Postcolonial dimensions:

- **Environmental Racism:** In *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, and *The Nutmeg's Curse*, the displacement of poor and indigenous people for environmental or economic reasons is a recurring theme.
- **Critique of Modernity:** Ghosh interrogates the European Enlightenment's idea of progress, which divorced nature from culture and led to unsustainable development.
- **Global Networks of Power:** From Indian peasants to European traders to American militarism, Ghosh's narratives expose how environmental devastation is embedded in global systems of inequality.

Ghosh's fiction thus bridges postcolonialism and ecocriticism, advocating for ecological justice alongside social justice.

Literary Form and Ecological Representation- Ghosh has repeatedly challenged the capacity of traditional literary forms to represent ecological realities.

Stylistic and formal innovations:

- **Blending Genres:** His narratives blend history, travel writing, myth, ethnography, and speculative fiction—expanding the boundaries of the novel.
- **Non-linear Time:** Ecological change does not follow human timelines. Ghosh's manipulation of time reflects the slow violence of environmental degradation.
- **Interdisciplinarity:** Ghosh incorporates science, anthropology, and folklore, creating a transdisciplinary mode of storytelling aligned with the complexity of ecological crises.

In this sense, his narrative technique itself becomes a form of ecological resistance.

Conclusion- Amitav Ghosh's literary corpus provides a powerful and urgent intervention in the evolving field of ecocriticism. His works—both fictional and non-fictional—explore the intricate interconnections between ecological systems, colonial histories, and contemporary socio-political realities. Ghosh's narratives transcend the limitations of conventional literary realism to accommodate the uncertainties, violence, and temporality of the ecological crisis. Through his nuanced portrayal of climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental displacement, and the symbolic role of non-human agents, Ghosh reorients the literary imagination toward planetary consciousness.

Novels like *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* embody a deep ecological awareness, not only documenting the visible impacts of environmental change but also critiquing the socio-political structures that perpetuate ecological injustice. His integration of myth and folklore—particularly figures like Bon Bibi and Manasa

Devi—invokes indigenous traditions and epistemologies that offer alternative ecological ethics rooted in coexistence, humility, and reverence for the non-human world.

In his non-fictional works such as *The Great Derangement* and *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh sharpens this critique by addressing the ideological and historical underpinnings of the current climate crisis. He argues that colonialism, capitalism, and militarism have profoundly shaped humanity's extractive relationship with nature. Ghosh's call for literary forms that embrace the unpredictable and the uncanny reflects his belief that cultural narratives are essential to confronting the climate emergency.

Ultimately, Amitav Ghosh's contribution to ecocriticism is not merely thematic but transformative. He compels readers, writers, and thinkers to question dominant paradigms of progress, development, and modernity, and to reimagine the role of literature as a medium of ecological resistance and planetary solidarity. His work urges us to not only bear witness to the great derangement of our times but also to write—and live—in a way that is more attuned to the rhythms of the Earth.

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