

Eco-Justice in the Hungry Tide and Gun Island by Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

Nowadays CF means climate fiction emerged as a new type of creative artifact. this fiction addresses the global environmental issues, unequal vulnerability, and the moral-political obligations, in the context of ecological damage. This paper attempted an extensive illustration on how artistically Ghosh has criticized the advances in the modern technology through imaginative literature. This form has created narratives that highlight non-human forces, colonial and commodity histories, and the human groups most at risk from ecological crises. It is argued that The Hungry Tide, Gun Island by Ghosh exemplify a form of cli-fi inseparable from eco-justice, linking storytelling with ecological awareness and the politics of vulnerability. Through this, Ghosh positions literary imagination as a crucial space for rethinking accountability.

Keywords: Climate Change, Eco-system, Ecological damage, Eco-Justice, cli-fi, embankment.

Introduction

The climate fiction explores planetary change through literature, uneven vulnerability and the moral-political relations that produce ecological harm. One of the prominent contemporary writers, Amitav Ghosh is among the most noteworthy figure who makes climate and environmental history central to both his essays and his fiction. In most of literary works, especially novels he seems to have been reluctant to imagine sudden, large-scale climatic upheavals, Ghosh in his essays calls this reluctance a symptom of an “imaginative failure” and in his novels he deliberately composes narratives that foreground non-human agents, colonial histories. Hungry Tide (2004) and Gun Island (2019) frame together are model a cli-fi that is inseparable from an ethics of eco-justice: they link narrative form, ecological knowledge, and the politics of vulnerability so that literary imagination becomes a site for rethinking responsibility, history, and redistribution.

Ghosh’s theoretical frame- climate as a crisis of culture:

Amitav Ghosh claims a significant position in contemporary Indian English literature. He maintained a type of sustained engagement with colonial history, migration, environmental degradation, climate change, and the unequal distribution of ecological suffering. His literary works like The Hungry Tide (2004) and Gun Island (2019) are significant creation from the perspective of eco-justice. Both the works demonstrate environmental destruction and related issues of poverty, displacement, political power, colonial history, economic inequality, and the rights of non-human life. His The Hungry Tide

focuses on ecosystem of the Sundarbans. The Gun Island expands this ecological vision across geographical borders, connecting the Sundarbans with Venice and California.

Eco-justice, in Ghosh's fiction, therefore means more than the protection of forests, rivers, animals, or biodiversity. It demands justice for vulnerable human communities as well as for non-human species. The two novels challenge the anthropocentric assumption that nature exists merely for human use and expose the unequal consequences of environmental policies. As one critical study observes, *The Hungry Tide* places human and animal suffering within the intertwined histories of colonialism, state violence, and conservation. Similarly, *Gun Island* connects climate change with migration, capitalism, colonial history, and social inequality.

The Hungry Tide is set primarily in the Sundarbans, the vast mangrove delta formed by the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers. Ghosh presents this landscape not as a passive background but as a powerful ecological presence. The very title, *The Hungry Tide*, suggests the restless and unpredictable movement of water. The inhabitants live according to the rhythms of tides, storms, rivers, forests, and animals.

Ghosh's description of the Sundarbans emphasizes its instability. He calls the islands “the trailing threads of India's fabric,” presenting them as a marginal geographical space that is nevertheless essential to the larger ecological system. The region is also described as a “watery labyrinth,” emphasizing that human beings cannot completely control or predict the environment. One of the most significant textual passages occurs when the narrator explains the meaning of the term “tide country.” The land is described as a place where “the water gives birth to the forest.” This image reverses conventional ideas of human mastery over nature. The forest is not simply cultivated or possessed by humans; rather, water, tides, moon, mud, trees, animals, and people participate in an interconnected ecological system.

The ecological vision of the novel becomes especially significant through Piya's study of the Irrawaddy dolphins. As a marine biologist, Piya represents scientific ecological knowledge. She recognizes that the survival of dolphins depends upon the preservation of their habitat. Her encounter with the dolphins gradually transforms her understanding of the relationship between scientific research and local communities.

The dolphins also embody the principle of multispecies justice. They possess value independent of their usefulness to human beings. Ghosh consequently challenges an exclusively human-centered conception of justice. One of the central ethical conflicts in *The Hungry Tide* concerns the relationship between conservation and human survival. The novel refuses to offer an easy opposition between “good environmentalists” and “bad local people.” Instead, it asks an uncomfortable question: Can conservation be called just if it destroys the lives of economically vulnerable people?

The conflict surrounding the Morichjhāpi episode is crucial in this regard. Refugees and impoverished settlers attempt to establish a life in the Sundarbans, but the state regards their settlement as an ecological and administrative problem. The violence associated with their displacement demonstrates that environmental policy can become a mechanism of political oppression.

The character of Kusum is particularly important. Her experience reveals the vulnerability of poor women and displaced communities whose relationship with the environment is based on survival rather than commercial exploitation. For Kusum and the settlers, the forest is simultaneously a source of livelihood, danger, shelter, and identity. This creates a difficult ethical dilemma. Wildlife protection is necessary, but so is human dignity. Ghosh refuses to sacrifice one completely for the other. Recent criticism similarly argues that the novel deliberately places “justice for humans” and “justice for tigers”

in tension, ultimately seeking a broader conception of justice that encompasses humans, animals, and ecological systems.

The Royal Bengal tiger occupies an important symbolic and ecological position in *The Hungry Tide*. For the villagers, the tiger is a terrifying predator; for conservationists, it is an endangered species requiring protection. Ghosh deliberately places these two perspectives against each other. The tiger's presence demonstrates that the boundaries between human space and animal space are artificial. The Sundarbans belongs neither exclusively to humans nor exclusively to animals. Both are inhabitants of the same ecological system.

This becomes particularly significant because the destruction of animal habitat eventually produces conflict between humans and animals. Thus, the novel suggests that environmental violence is often reciprocal: when human beings alter ecosystems, animals are forced into closer contact with human settlements, producing further violence. The ethical problem is therefore not simply “saving the tiger.” It is about creating conditions in which both humans and non-humans can survive. Ghosh's ecological imagination anticipates contemporary discussions of multispecies justice, which emphasize the need to protect habitats in which different species can flourish.

Ghosh also incorporates the legend of Bon Bibi, the protective deity of the Sundarbans. The myth is significant because it provides an alternative way of understanding the relationship between human beings and nature. Bon Bibi's world does not divide reality rigidly into human culture and wilderness. Humans enter the forest with awareness of its power and limitations. The mythology therefore represents a form of indigenous ecological consciousness.

The story of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai establishes an ethical principle: humans may enter the forest for survival, but they cannot assume unlimited ownership over it. This cultural understanding contrasts with modern forms of exploitation based on absolute possession and economic calculation.

Consequently, Ghosh combines modern science with local ecological knowledge. Piya's scientific understanding of dolphins and the traditional knowledge of the inhabitants need not be mutually exclusive. Eco-justice requires dialogue between different systems of knowledge. Fifteen years after *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh published *Gun Island*. Although the two novels are not direct sequels, *Gun Island* revisits several characters and ecological concerns associated with the Sundarbans. More importantly, it transforms the local ecological crisis of *The Hungry Tide* into a planetary crisis.

The protagonist, Dinanath Datta (Deen), begins with an interest in the legend of the Gun Merchant and Manasa Devi. His journey takes him from Bengal to Venice and Los Angeles. These geographical movements demonstrate that ecological problems cannot be confined within national borders. The relationship between the two novels is therefore significant. *The Hungry Tide* presents the Sundarbans as a fragile ecological world, whereas *Gun Island* shows that the forces affecting that world are connected to global systems of migration, capitalism, climate change, and historical inequality. Scholars have described the two novels as a kind of ecological diptych in which water and porous borders expose the vulnerability of humans and animals alike. One of the strongest expressions of eco-justice in *Gun Island* is Ghosh's portrayal of climate-induced migration. Characters such as Tipu and Rafi represent young people whose lives are shaped by environmental and economic insecurity.

The novel demonstrates that migration is rarely caused by a single factor. Environmental degradation combines with poverty, unemployment, political insecurity, and historical inequality. The vulnerable therefore become the first victims of climate change.

The image of the Blue Boat becomes a powerful symbol of this crisis. Palash explains that the boat has become a symbol of “inequality, climate change, capitalism, corruption, the arms trade, the oil industry.” This brief but powerful statement establishes Ghosh's central argument: climate change is not an isolated environmental problem but the consequence of interconnected political and economic systems. The refugees travelling towards Europe consequently represent more than individual migrants. They represent populations displaced by an ecological crisis for which they have disproportionately little responsibility.

The movement from the Sundarbans to Venice is central to the novel's eco-justice argument. Venice, traditionally represented as a beautiful European cultural centre, is itself threatened by water, storms, flooding, and ecological instability. The juxtaposition is significant. The environmental vulnerability of the Global South is not geographically isolated. The same forces of climate change eventually affect wealthy regions of the world.

The novel thereby questions the distinction between “their” environmental problems and “our” environmental problems. Rising seas, extreme weather, fires, droughts, and ecological migration are planetary phenomena. Ghosh's portrayal of Venice also complicates the conventional image of Europe as a secure destination for migrants. The migrants arrive in a region that is itself ecologically unstable. The novel consequently reveals that climate change destabilizes both the places people leave and the places to which they migrate.

The ecological vision of Gun Island expands further through Los Angeles. The city's fires symbolize the global nature of climate catastrophe. The ecological disasters in Bengal, Venice, and California are not unrelated events. They are manifestations of a planetary environmental crisis.

Criticism of the novel has noted that the fire-plagued Los Angeles functions as a means of revealing the planetary processes of climate change and the Anthropocene. The geographical structure of Gun Island therefore becomes an ecological map. Bengal, Venice, and California are connected through climate change. The movement of humans, animals, water, fire, and weather crosses political borders.

This is why the novel's environmentalism can be described as planetary environmentalism. Its ecological ethics cannot be restricted to one nation, one species, or one community. Recent scholarship argues that Ghosh uses human and animal migration to develop an idea of multispecies climate justice extending beyond conventional geographical borders. Another important feature of Gun Island is the combination of mythology and contemporary science. The legend of Manasa Devi, the goddess associated with snakes, initially appears to be an old Bengali myth. Gradually, however, the myth becomes connected with ecological changes and unusual animal behaviour.

Ghosh thus challenges the assumption that mythology belongs exclusively to the past while science belongs exclusively to the modern world. Both provide different ways of interpreting ecological change. The supernatural elements of the novel also make the natural world appear active rather than passive. Animals migrate, storms intensify, fires spread, and landscapes transform. Nature appears to possess its own agency. In this respect, Gun Island moves beyond conventional climate fiction. It does not simply provide scientific information about global warming; it attempts to change the reader's imaginative relationship with the planet.

Conclusion

A comparative reading of *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* demonstrates the development of Amitav Ghosh's ecological imagination from a regional environmental conflict to a planetary vision of eco-

justice. The Hungry Tide explores the fragile ecological balance of the Sundarbans and the complicated relationship between human survival and wildlife conservation. Through Piya, Kanai, Kusum, Fokir, the dolphins, and the tiger, Ghosh demonstrates that environmental justice must include both human and non-human life.

Gun Island broadens this vision. The Sundarbans becomes connected to Venice and Los Angeles, while local ecological vulnerability becomes part of a global crisis involving climate change, migration, capitalism, colonial history, and inequality. The Blue Boat becomes a symbol of the interconnected crises of climate change and forced migration. The central lesson of both novels is that there can be no genuine environmental justice without social justice, and no lasting human justice without justice for the non-human world. Ghosh's fiction challenges national boundaries, species boundaries, and disciplinary boundaries. It asks readers to recognize that humans, animals, rivers, forests, oceans, cities, and atmospheric systems constitute a shared ecological network.

The Hungry Tide and Gun Island can be read as powerful literary interventions in contemporary debates on climate justice. Their ultimate message is not merely that nature needs to be protected, but that humanity must fundamentally rethink its relationship with the planet. Eco-justice, in Ghosh's fictional world, means learning to inhabit the Earth through coexistence rather than domination.

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