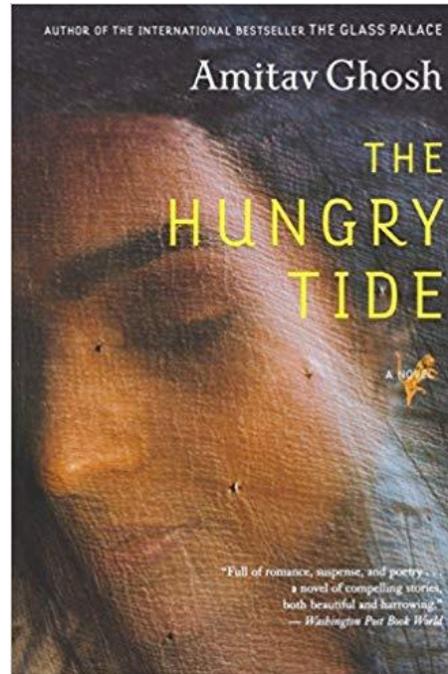


## Portrayal of Sundarban in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh can be seen as the flag bearer of the fearlessness and freedom that the contemporary Indian writer in English embodies. He has become one of the central figures to emerge after the success of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. His 'The Hungry Tide' takes a step further to talk the subaltern experience and raises the national and global awareness about the history of violence inscribed on the Sundarban, throwing into relief the continuing exploitation of the place.

**Key Words:** Sundarbans, Tide, Ebb, Morichjhapi, Bhatirdesh

### Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh may have become the first Indian writer to strongly engage with ecological issues in Indian English fiction with the publication of his novel *The Hungry Tide* in 2004. When Ghosh worked as a journalist and has written extensively on various topical issues including terrorism, religious fundamentalism, displacement, and the many postcolonial realities of the Third World. His fictional compositions like *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *Shadow Lines*

(1990), *In an Antique Land* (1994), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) are permeated by an underlying consciousness of the subaltern and a narrativization of the subaltern experience. *The Hungry Tide* takes a step further to voice the subaltern experience, in that the novel's publication had the force of a political pamphlet which made the world take stock of efforts to corporatize parts of the Sundarbans National Park.

### **The Hungry Tide**

The pretext of the novel also serves to buttress Ghosh's political ends in writing the novel. As Lawrence Buell argues, ecocritics explore literary texts as "refractions of physical environments and human interactions with those environments, notwithstanding the artifactual properties of textual representation and their mediation by ideological and other socio-historical factors". In this vein, Ghosh's novel reveals the interactions between the state, the poor, the flora, and the physical environment, and in doing so this work highlights both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that were inherent in the conservation efforts in the Sundarbans. More precisely, it is the discursive construction of the Sundarbans' waterscape in Ghosh's novel that helps achieve this purpose.

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity. Ghosh sets his novel in the Sundarbans, the tide country where the contours of land constantly change with the ebb and flow of water. But Ghosh presses this point further: He uses water as the agent that rewrites the social matrix of the Sundarbans in the novel. Water is both motif and agent, shaping not only the story but also the geography and history of the land. The unusual agency of water is highlighted here its potential to act, as well as to move from object/other position to that of the subject and, in doing so, reverse the object/subject status of the characters.

It is also significant that Ghosh uses water as the agent to resolve the chief conflict fictionalized in the novel. First, water, as the agent of change, provides Ghosh a way to steer clear of taking a moral or ideological stand while addressing the complex struggle between humans and animals for survival. Second, the motif of water makes it possible to objectively and dispassionately highlight the plight of both the dispossessed people and the threatened wildlife. Third, by using water as an element to undermine the hegemonic social order, Ghosh is able to keep the focus on the conflict, rather than on the resolution, making the novel itself and indeed its primary trope, water, the agents of political and social change. In this context, my paper explores the ways in which water moves beyond being a recurring literary motif to become an active participant that dynamically engages and exerts an impact on the human drama. Water, as both a symbolic and a literal phenomenon in the novel, serves heuristically to expose the ecosocial and ecopolitical issues that the novel addresses as it dramatizes the competing claims of human and non-human species for existence.

*The Hungry Tide* unfolds through the eyes of two upwardly mobile, educated individuals who undertake a journey to the tide country. Kanai Dutt, the Bengali born, Delhi-settled businessman, arrives in Lusibari to visit his Aunt Nilima and claim the package left for him by his late uncle, Nirmal. The package, he discovers, is an account of his uncle's last days, which

revolved around Kusum and her son Fokir, who are portrayed as the victims of eviction from the island of Morichjhapi. The second voice of the novel is that of Piyali Roy, an American-born cytologist of Indian background who chooses to journey into the Sundarbans to study the threatened Gangetic River dolphins. Ghosh weaves together two temporal narratives: one unfolding through Nirmal's journals recounting the Morichjhapi episode that happened twenty-eight years earlier, and the second through Piya's expedition, revealing the contemporary situation of the people and the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans. The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights the chief conflict in the novel—the problems and issues of wilderness conservation and its related social costs in areas populated by the socially and economically disprivileged both in the past and the present.

The sub-narrative foreground in the character of Fokir represents the third voice of this ecological drama. William W. Hunter mentions forest guides called “fakirs” who accompanied woodcutters and hunters on their expeditions to the forest. Hunter points out that these woodcutters were so superstitious that they would not venture into the forest unaccompanied by a fakir, “who is supposed to receive power from the presiding deity—whom he propitiates with offerings over the tigers and other animals. Occasionally a large number of boats proceed together in a party, taking a fakir with them” (The Hungry Tide, p: 312). Fakir is the anglicised form of Fokir, the name of Ghosh's character who guides Piya and Kanai through the waterways. Fokir also worships Bon Bibi, the forest goddess, and loses his life in the process of steering the outsiders safely through the forests. He fits the archetype of the hapless and illiterate native, exposed to the man-eating tigers, sharks, crocodiles, and snakes inhabiting the tide country and also vulnerable to bribe-taking officials of the state, who are constant threats to his survival. But Ghosh empowers him on another level, in his familiarity with the tide country and its creatures, and the legacy of centuries-old oral tradition he inherits, qualities that distinguish him from Piya and Kanai. Despite their high-tech GPS equipment and educational background, the outsiders are dependent on Fokir to navigate the waters. Ghosh's portrayal of Fokir thus resists the stereotypical patronization of him as the noble savage or the innocent villager or even the epitome of an ecological pioneer.

### **Uniqueness of the Sundarbans**

Added to these three characters is the uniqueness of the Sundarbans, the waterscape that alternates between being subject and object, victim and victimizer. Water in the Sundarbans, more than being a passive recipient of both social and physical changes, exercises its potential to transform the physical space and in turn alter the social order. For both Piya and Kanai the expedition and the storm at the end of the novel that remaps the landscape facilitate a renewed and more specific understanding of the Sundarbans, the place and the people. Situated in the face of the threatening topography of the Sundarbans, social differences between both the urban and rural sets of characters are gradually elided, resulting in an increasing tension between their cultural and social identities. The novel in this sense is suffused with multiple social transitions, between the First World and the Third World, local and global, rural and urban, traditional and modern, and among linguistic, religious, and class barriers, all played out in the context of the waterscape. Only in the face of a hostile environment are the social barriers broken down and overcome, and nature serves as the agent to level all social and cultural hierarchies.

In locating the novel in an environment such as the Sundarbans, place emerges as a larger-than-life character, where the water engages with every minor and major change in the lives of the people and the environment. The Sundarbans is the world's largest mangrove forest area, situated on the delta where three rivers the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna—meet the sea. It covers an area of 10,000 square kilometres, sprawling across India and Bangladesh. The Indian part of the Sundarbans was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1973 and a national park in 1984. Due to its unique and rich biodiversity, the area was declared a Biosphere Reserve in 1989 and a World Heritage Site in 1985 (United Nations Environment Programme and International Union for the Conservation of Nature). It is home to the largest remaining contiguous population of tigers in the world—245 in Indian Sundarbans in 2001-02 according to the Project Tiger census, plus 200 in the Bangladesh Sundarbans (Khan3)—living side by side with seven million people. The Sundarbans also has a perpetually mutating topography: there are no constant borders between river and sea, fresh water and salt water; and while some islands have existed intact over centuries, many others have their life expectancy measured in hours. Islands here appear and disappear in the course of a single day with the ebb and flow of the tide. If the tide leaves new land without flooding for a while, the mangroves spawning dense undergrowth invade the area within a few short years.

Predominantly through the voices of Nirmal, Fokir, and Piya, Ghosh conveys the unique natural history of the Sundarbans. Nirmal, the dreamer revolutionary in the novel, traces the etymology of the “Sundarbans” to its literal translation as the “beautiful forest,” to the presence of the Sundari tree and to Mughal records which named the region after a tide the bhati tide, giving the region the name “bhatirdesh or tide country except that bhati is not just the ‘tide’ but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the bhata. Apart from this distinctive feature, the very quality of the water in the Sundarbans sustains a vast profusion of aquatic life.

Water as an image and a presence is of special significance in Hindu mythology, and the waterscape of the Sundarbans has a distinctive mythological connotation. A natural symbol, water is chiefly associated with fertility, immortality, place, creation, and the feminine. Water, especially running water, is deemed sacred, an attitude expressed in the reverence shown toward almost every river that flows across the Indian subcontinent. The river is a continuation of the divine waters that flow from heaven to earth, which ensures that the world is habitable, making possible creation. And no river is considered more holy or powerful than the Ganges in Hindu tradition. Mythology has it that when the Ganges descended from the heavens, so mighty were its currents that it threatened to drown the earth itself. Shiva, anticipating the deluge, captured the river in his dreadlocks. It is only when the river nears the sea that it untangles into a thousand strands forming the vast archipelago of the Sundarbans. The Ganges is the purifier of all sins, and a ritual bath in the river is recommended to wash away all kinds of impurities, which are diverse, given the purity-conscious to Hindu social system.

Water, in its traditional role of purifier that helps maintain social hierarchies, also functions as a social leveller, breaking down hierarchies in the novel. If the silt is identified as dirt accumulated by the river on its course to the sea, the islands of the Sundarbans are believed to be the river's restitution, that offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it. The river in the novel is also projected as a potent and formidable entity, charting

its own course, gathering all that comes its way, creating and decimating land in its journey to the sea.

### **Sundarbans in Indian epics**

The Sundarbans is also mentioned in Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, but it has been a relatively forsaken area with regard to human inhabitation and colonial historiography, precisely due to the hostile terrain. Most colonial historiography, prominent among them being an essay by Sir William W. Hunter, first published in *The Statistical Account of Bengal* in 1876, represents the Sundarbans as wanting in the Victorian ideals of a sublime landscape. According to Hunter, the densely forested Sundarbans region was far from endemic. It was sparsely populated although teeming with abundant flora and fauna. He asserts that the area was “entirely uninhabited with a few wandering gangs of woodcutters and fishermen. The whole population is insignificant” (317). In the colonial-era Sundarbans were portrayed as a place where there were “no indigenes: the humans were all immigrants and the tigers and crocodiles were the only aboriginals” (247). Colonial initiatives for settlement were more or less failures, including Sir Daniel Hamilton’s venture to establish a cooperative society in the cyclone-prone region, a historical curiosity that Ghosh also alludes to in the novel. The water that shelters tigers, crocodiles, and snakes and nurtures the mangrove trees also protects the area from large-scale deforestation and even frequent natural calamities like storms and typhoons.

By contrast, the postcolonial Sundarbans witnessed increasing human activity, declining biodiversity and recognition and marketing of the uniqueness of the Sundarbans. As Greenough affirms, “until recently the Sundarbans have been thought of, when thought of at all, as forbidding and obscure. Yet, during the late 1980s a reversal of values occurred, and the Sundarbans’ obvious hazards, inaccessibility and desolation began to be read by cosmopolitan naturalists in positive terms” (237). Neo-imperialism, in the form of homogenous conservation policies and increasing commodification of the natural world, resulting in loss of territory for indigenous peoples, loss of biodiversity and conservationist limitations, is an increasingly common postcolonial condition of most ecosystems, including the Sundarbans.

At present, the bionetwork of the Sundarbans has witnessed the shift from a threatening ecosystem to a threatened ecosystem. Ghosh published the novel in 2004, at a crucial point in the future of the Sundarbans when the corporate house Sahara India Parivar was poised to take over large areas of the Sundarbans to convert into an ecotourism village. Sahara’s five-star ecotourism project was floated with the complicity of the ruling Left Front Government of West Bengal, and a Memorandum of Understanding was also signed to the effect (*The Hindu Business Line* and Sahara India Pariwar). There were no comprehensive environmental impact assessments done by an independent body prior to sanctioning the takeover. The project involved constructing, restaurants, shops, business centres, cinemas and theatres, setting up activities such as excursions to the interiors on motorboats, which would disturb the fragile ecosystem and further threaten the already endangered biodiversity of the region (Sylvester). Several environmental agencies and individuals opposed the move, and after extensive protests the central government intervened and annulled the proposal. At the time, Ghosh was one of the prominent intellectuals

campaigning against the move. The aborted Sahara takeover can be located against the historical backdrop of the Morichjhapi incident in the Sundarbans, which is fictionalized in the novel.

The story of the Sundarbans, including its human and wildlife populations, is intrinsically linked to the history of Partition, and the events that followed in its aftermath. India's independence in 1947 resulted in the division of the Sundarbans, with 40 percent of the mangrove forests falling in East Pakistan territory (Sylvester). The Partition of India in 1947 geographically bifurcated Pakistan into Eastern and Western fragments with India in the middle. East Pakistan was created for the Bangla-speaking Muslim majority, which led to the influx of Hindus from East Pakistan into India's West Bengal region. The refugees fleeing the civil war included both Hindus and Muslims fighting for Bangladeshi sovereignty and numbered between 9 million and 12 million. Unlike the Partition of Punjab in northwest India, the Partition of Bengal had an enduring effect.

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