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LITERATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION, AND BELONGING IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE* AND *GUN ISLAND*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Amitav Ghosh connects environmental crisis with unequal access to habitation, mobility, and protection in The Hungry Tide and Gun Island. A comparative ecocritical reading brings the novels into dialogue with Rob Nixon's account of slow violence and Dipesh Chakrabarty's discussion of planetary interdependence and historical responsibility. It argues that ecological disruption becomes a crisis of belonging when institutions restrict people's ability to remain safely or move without coercion. The discussion considers embankments, conservation restrictions, migrant routes, scientific knowledge, and narrative mediation. Particular attention is given to the contrast between knowledge that survives and people who do not, and between spectacular rescue and sustained protection. The comparison distinguishes the political displacement represented in The Hungry Tide from the explicitly climatic pressures and multiple migration motives in Gun Island. Its principal finding is that environmental belonging requires material support and accountable relationships, rather than attachment to place alone.

KEYWORDS: *Ecocriticism; Amitav Ghosh; Environmental Justice; Climate Change; Migration; Belonging.*

INTRODUCTION

A person may know a landscape intimately and still have little authority over the conditions of living there. Conversely, someone with money, professional recognition, and useful connections may enter an unfamiliar place and acquire the means to remain. This discrepancy shapes the environmental politics of *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*. The former closes by bringing research, funding, residence, and local cooperation into the same conversation. The latter begins with a financially secure narrator whose seasonal movement between Brooklyn and Kolkata requires little explanation. Both openings for comparison make mobility and habitation questions of unequal resources, rather than geographical location alone (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*, "Home: An Epilogue"; Ghosh, "Gun Island").

The argument developed here concerns the relation between environmental exposure and social permission. Who is allowed to inhabit a threatened place? Whose departure becomes suspicious? What survives when a community loses its land or a worker loses his life? These questions connect climate, migration, and belonging without treating them as interchangeable. A storm, a police blockade, and a migrant's precarious journey require different accounts of causation and responsibility.

The two novels therefore invite a distinction between environmental change and the decisions that distribute its consequences. Their contemporary relevance lies in making protection visible as work: maintaining shelter, recognizing knowledge, supporting livelihoods, and answering claims made by people who lack institutional power. Such an approach also tests the adequacy of sympathetic representation. Being remembered, studied, or rescued need not provide the continuing security that belonging demands.

CRITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Ecocriticism is used here to examine relations among narrative form, material environments, and the distribution of vulnerability. The method is comparative textual analysis, with attention to settings, focalization, embedded accounts, and selected moments of conflict. The comparison does not treat fictional characters as a representative demographic sample. Its results are interpretive claims about how the novels organize environmental knowledge and responsibility.

Nixon's concept of slow violence directs attention towards injuries whose dispersed duration makes them difficult to recognize as events. His distinction between spectacular destruction and gradual damage clarifies why an environmental narrative must account for the conditions preceding an emergency, as well as the emergency itself (2–3). In this paper, that distinction is used to separate a visible disaster from the longer withdrawal of security that can make disaster devastating. The framework does not require every injury to be slow: abrupt violence can enforce arrangements whose effects endure.

Chakrabarty identifies a related difficulty of scale. Climate history demands attention to the conditions sustaining human life, while historical analysis must retain differences in industrial development and responsibility. His discussion does not make a common planetary predicament evidence of equal culpability (216–18). For comparative reading, the important distinction is between shared dependence on an environment and unequal power within it. A narrative can connect distant lives without making their advantages, obligations, or possibilities identical.

Existing criticism establishes substantial connections between Ghosh's ecological concerns and social inequality. Bose and Satapathy examine climatic, economic, and political dimensions of migration in *Gun Island* (475–82). Draga Alexandru emphasizes the environmental interventions of women and the challenge to exclusionary hierarchies across both novels (74–75). Khan develops a planetary account of multispecies and cross-cultural cooperation, while acknowledging that hopeful action leaves difficulties unresolved (423–24, 435). The present reading gives particular attention to the interval between recognizing vulnerability and securing protection. It asks whether knowledge, narrative visibility, and rescue produce conditions in which people can continue living with dignity.

Three distinctions guide the analysis. First, environmental degradation includes processes that should not automatically be classified as climate change. Second, movement can express aspiration while also taking place under coercive conditions. Third, nonhuman agency means that animals and material processes affect events; it does not mean that nature supplies an unambiguous moral judgment. These distinctions prevent ecological connectedness from becoming an explanation that obscures differences.

The primary evidence consists of the available digital text of *The Hungry Tide*, an authorized opening extract from *Gun Island*, and passages from the latter reproduced in the cited scholarship. Named sections identify unpaginated primary material. Quotations encountered through another author are identified as indirect quotations. This source boundary limits edition-specific claims, but permits a focused comparison of documented scenes and their narrative implications.

INHABITING A LANDSCAPE WITHOUT CONTROLLING IT

In the opening description of Lusibari, the embankment encloses ground lower than the water surrounding it at high tide. Dwelling is consequently dependent on a maintained separation, not on the apparent solidity of land (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*, pt. 1, "Lusibari"). The embankment can be read as the material form of a promise: the island will remain habitable if protective work continues. Belonging, from this perspective, involves a claim upon maintenance. Affection for the island cannot perform the work of keeping water out.

This reading shifts attention from the conventional image of a precarious landscape to the uneven capacity to withstand its changes. Environmental exposure and helplessness are not equivalent. A vulnerable settlement may possess practical knowledge and collective experience, yet lack the resources necessary to make that knowledge protective. Conversely, the presence of infrastructure does not eliminate risk. It changes the conditions under which people encounter it. The relevant contrast is between supported and unsupported habitation, rather than between an inherently safe city and an inherently dangerous delta.

The Morichjhapi episode introduces a different kind of boundary. In "Besieged," Nirmal records restrictions on movement and reports that the settlers are being prevented from obtaining essential supplies (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*, pt. 2, "Besieged"). The same waterways that enable communication become instruments of enclosure. Water does not cease to connect places; authorities interrupt the uses to which those connections may be put. Displacement here must be understood through political action. To classify the episode simply as an instance of climate migration would conceal the agents who make continued residence impossible.

Nirmal's notebook also complicates the authority of environmental history. It reaches the reader through another person's reading, while the events it records are already filtered through an observer's commitments. The notebook is a counter-record rather than an unrestricted view of the past. Its importance lies in preserving claims that official classification threatens to dismiss. Yet preservation does not restore the settlers' security. An archive can resist erasure while remaining unable to reverse dispossession.

The notebook's later loss, and Kanai's intention to reconstruct it, sharpen this problem. Memory becomes dependent on a surviving intermediary (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*, pt. 2). The reader must distinguish the continued circulation of an account from the recovery of the world it describes. This distinction matters to environmental remembrance: making a catastrophe narratable is a form of responsibility, but cannot substitute for responsibility towards living communities.

The novel thus places physical and political limits beside one another without collapsing them. An embankment mediates the relation between settlement and tide; a blockade mediates the relation between inhabitants and state power. Each determines whether a place remains livable, but each requires a different remedy. Their juxtaposition exposes the inadequacy of explanations that make the environment responsible for every form of insecurity experienced within it.

KNOWLEDGE, SHELTER, AND THE COST OF SURVIVAL

Fokir's assistance makes Piya's research possible, yet his competence does not secure his survival. In the storm, his body protects hers; the aftermath establishes the irreversible difference between their outcomes (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*, pt. 2, "The Day After"). His death unsettles the association of local knowledge with ecological security. Skill enables action under extreme conditions, but does not make a person inexhaustible. His death gives Piya a future that he cannot share, making the distribution of survival central to their collaboration.

The epilogue makes the problem more precise. Routes retained by Piya's GPS can support future research, although the person who supplied that knowledge is gone. Her proposed project acknowledges Fokir and includes financial support for his family (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*, "Home: An Epilogue"). Data preservation and bodily loss nevertheless remain different kinds of outcome. A recoverable route is not a recoverable life. The survival of knowledge places an obligation on those who can use it; it does not settle that obligation through commemoration alone.

Nilima's work offers a contrasting account of protection. The cyclone shelter saves people because planning has produced a structure available before the storm arrives. The narration also credits Nirmal's interest in geology and meteorology with helping to bring that shelter into existence (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*, pt. 2). Their difference is therefore not a simple opposition between ineffective thought and effective action. Knowledge becomes protective when translated into durable arrangements. Such arrangements depend on cooperation that the characters' disagreements can obscure.

Draga Alexandru's account of female environmental agency brings this institutional dimension into view (74–75). Nilima's significance need not rest on an assumed affinity between women and nature. It rests on institutional labour, practical judgment, and an insistence on what can be sustained. Her exchanges with Piya concern administration as well as compassion. The environmental value of this work lies partly in its lack of spectacle. A functioning shelter attracts less narrative fascination than a remarkable act of rescue, although its protective reach may be greater.

Piya's final description of home gives this institutional question an intimate form: "home is where the Orcaella are" (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*, "Home: An Epilogue"). The statement directs attachment towards a species and a field of work rather than a national origin. Yet it follows discussion of accommodation, funding, research permissions, and her eligibility to remain. Her newly expressed belonging is supported by arrangements that make it practicable. The novel's conclusion permits an ecological account of home while also revealing the resources on which that account depends.

The unresolved question is whether such resources become a shared entitlement or remain attached to fortunate personal relationships. Piya's willingness to return matters, but willingness alone is fragile. A just conservation practice would have to continue supporting people when a sympathetic researcher leaves, funding contracts, or private affection changes. The ending offers an approach to that responsibility, not evidence that it has been permanently secured.

UNEQUAL ROUTES IN GUN ISLAND

Deen's initial movement between Brooklyn and Kolkata is voluntary, repeatable, and supported by property and professional income. He describes it through the seasonal movements of expatriates returning to the city (Ghosh, "Gun Island"). The comparison with migration sounds easy because his movement is easy to undertake. This opening gives the later journeys of less secure travellers an important point of contrast. The novel does not introduce an immobile observer to a mobile world. It asks a privileged traveller to recognize that mobility has radically different conditions for others.

Tipu is particularly important to resisting a single-cause account. Bose and Satapathy note that his material circumstances differ from those of poorer migrants, while their discussion identifies ambition and social humiliation among the pressures informing his departure (481). His case cannot be adequately described as flight from immediate destitution. Environmental crisis forms part of the world in which he acts, but does not exhaust his desires. To recognize these desires is to treat the migrant as someone seeking a future, rather than as a passive indication of damage.

The distinction between aspiration and compulsion is also insufficient when treated as absolute. A person may choose to depart yet have little control over available routes, intermediaries, or dangers encountered afterwards. The accounts of Tipu and Rafi's passage, including separation and dependence on traffickers, make these successive losses of control visible (Bose and Satapathy 480–82). A decision to move does not imply agreement to exploitation. Responsibility must therefore be examined at different stages of a journey, rather than assigned once according to its initial motive.

Khan's discussion connects the migrants' difficulties with broader environmental and historical inequalities (428–29). The comparative consequence is that the Sundarbans cannot be positioned outside the world into which migrants travel. The region already participates in relationships of trade, labour, information, and ecological change. Migration makes some of these relationships visible to people who previously encountered only their distant effects. Arrival is not the beginning of connection; it can be the moment when an existing connection becomes politically inconvenient.

Piya's observation that "No one knows where they belong any more" condenses this instability (qtd. in Bose and Satapathy 477). The phrase invites a planetary reading, but its universal pronoun requires qualification. The loss of familiar environmental patterns may be widely felt, while the means of responding remain unequally distributed. Deen's uncertainty does not place him in the same position as a person negotiating a clandestine passage. Their lives can be connected without making their vulnerabilities equivalent.

The ecological mechanisms also require differentiation. Piya's account of polluted waters and oxygen-depleted zones links damaged aquatic habitats to threatened livelihoods (Bose and Satapathy 476–77). Pollution and climatic change can compound insecurity without becoming the same process. An account of warming alone would leave the responsibilities of polluters and those protecting them insufficiently examined. The novel's damaged waters connect species survival with human work, while preserving the need to identify particular sources of injury.

NARRATIVE CONNECTIONS AND THE LIMITS OF RESCUE

The opening of *Gun Island* makes an unfamiliar version of a familiar merchant legend disturb Deen's confidence in his expertise. His retrospective narration records how insufficient that confidence had been (Ghosh, "Gun Island"). The reader encounters environmental learning through an account that can admit earlier failures of attention. Unlike a narrative voice that already possesses a comprehensive explanation, Deen's voice allows knowledge to remain revisable. Expertise is tested by encounters that do not arrive in its preferred categories.

Ghosh's conversation with Nathaniel Rich similarly places the novel's environmental concerns in relation to long histories and the unsettling quality of the present (Ghosh, "Era"). The legend's function can therefore be understood without treating it as a substitute for climate science. It connects remembered journeys with experiences that the narrator has been inclined to regard separately. Myth provides an interpretive route through time, while its relevance depends on renewed acts of listening and translation.

This differs from the notebook's work in *The Hungry Tide*. The notebook attempts to preserve a threatened account of a particular political struggle; the merchant legend invites interpretation across places and generations. One emphasizes the vulnerability of a record, the other the persistence and transformation of a story. Neither offers a neutral explanation. Their authority must be examined through the people who transmit them, the silences they contain, and the uses made of them. Environmental reading thus requires scrutiny of mediation as well as appreciation of narrative connection.

Nonhuman movement further tests the desire for fixed categories. Khan's analysis of the novel's changing animal distributions shows how supposedly distant disturbances enter familiar settings (432–34). These movements unsettle the division between an endangered elsewhere and a protected here. They should not, however, become evidence that human borders have ceased to matter. An animal's movement and a migrant's passage involve different institutions and consequences. Ecological interdependence continues while political authorities distribute permission selectively.

The Blue Boat episode brings these tensions into a highly visible confrontation. The rescue occurs amid a striking convergence of marine life and birds, interpreted differently by witnesses (Khan 434–35). The scene makes indifference difficult to sustain, but it also exposes the dependence of recognition on an extraordinary event. People should not have to become the centre of a spectacle before their safety counts. The episode can be read as a challenge to that threshold, rather than as a reliable model of how protection is obtained.

Khan acknowledges the uncertainty remaining within the novel's hopeful ending (435). The present comparison locates that uncertainty between immediate rescue and continuing protection. *The Hungry Tide* brings attention back to administration and livelihood after disaster. *Gun Island* dramatizes a public interruption of exclusion. Read together, the endings distinguish necessary action from completed justice. Rescue keeps a future possible; institutions and relationships determine whether that future can become habitable.

FINDINGS, RESULTS, AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The analysis produces three connected findings. First, the novels represent environmental belonging as a materially supported relationship. Knowledge of place, emotional attachment, and physical presence remain important, but none independently supplies security. The contrast between the embankment, the blockade, and the shelter establishes that exposure acquires different consequences according to the arrangements surrounding it.

Second, movement and immobility cannot be assigned fixed ethical meanings. Remaining may express attachment or constrained opportunity; leaving may combine ambition with diminishing alternatives. The contrast between Deen's repeatable travel and the precarious routes followed by younger migrants shows why the freedom to move must be distinguished from the mere fact of movement. Environmental interpretation loses explanatory force when it converts these varied trajectories into one undifferentiated category.

Third, narrative recognition does not automatically produce protection. The notebook, the surviving GPS record, the travelling legend, and the rescue scene make people and relationships perceptible in different ways. Each also leaves a question of consequence: who gains authority from the record, who benefits from preserved knowledge, and what follows public sympathy?

Their contemporary relevance lies in the questions they make available for assessing environmental responses. A conservation initiative can be judged by who bears its costs, a relocation by whether people can meaningfully influence it, and an emergency response by what support remains after immediate danger. These are implications of the literary comparison, not claims that the novels validate a particular policy. They direct attention to people's continuing capacity to inhabit a place or establish a life elsewhere.

The comparison also has a classroom application. Reading a scene of spectacular danger alongside a quieter scene of planning or administration can reveal how narrative attention distributes importance. Students can distinguish what a passage makes emotionally urgent from what its characters require over time.

CONCLUSION

The Hungry Tide and *Gun Island* connect environmental crisis with the unequal conditions of making a home. Their shared concerns emerge through different narrative arrangements: threatened residence and mediated memory in the former, uneven journeys and transnational recognition in the latter. These differences prevent a universal account of displacement from erasing particular agents and histories.

The ethical implication of the comparison is that recognition must acquire a durable form. Remembering the displaced does not restore their place, preserving a worker's knowledge does not repair his loss, and rescuing travellers does not settle their future. Each act can begin a continuing obligation. Ghosh's fiction directs ecological attention towards that unfinished obligation. Belonging becomes credible when people can participate in the decisions affecting their lives and depend on protection that does not disappear with a benefactor, an exceptional event, or a moment of public concern.

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