

Exploring Amitav Ghosh's efforts to better human-nature relationship: Insights from Hungry Tide

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Cite this paper as: F. FEMINA, Dr. V. AMUTHA (2024). Exploring Amitav Ghosh's efforts to better human-nature relationship: Insights from Hungry Tide. *Frontiers in Health Informatics*, 13 (5) 845-851

Abstract

This study examines the intricate relationship between humans and nature as portrayed in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. It focuses on critical questions: the extent of human awareness about ecosystems, the dependency of humans on nature, the influence of human activities on environmental changes, and nature's reaction to human interference. By exploring these aspects, the paper seeks to uncover the true quality of the human-nature relationship as depicted in the novel.

Amitav Ghosh masterfully intertwines fictional narratives with real-time historical and ecological insights, creating a compelling commentary on the fragile yet profound bond between humanity and its environment. The novel vividly portrays the Sundarbans—a dynamic, tidal ecosystem—as both a nurturing force and an untamed adversary, highlighting the challenges faced by its inhabitants. Through the analysis of character interactions and their evolving perceptions of nature, the study investigates moments of ecological awareness and cultural reflections on the environment.

The insights derived from this exploration aim to bridge the gap between literary representation and environmental ethics, offering strategies to foster a more sustainable and empathetic relationship with the natural world. While grounded in fiction, the study underscores the real-world implications of Ghosh's work, making it a thought-provoking resource for understanding and improving the human-nature connection.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, human-nature relationship, ecological awareness, Sundarbans, environmental ethics, coexistence, ecological disruption.

No human being can be considered independent. Human life revolves around being reliant. This dependence is not limited to other humans. They are also very dependent on nature. If a person is capable by all means, he may not need others' help for survival but regardless of status, wealth, or skill, all living beings on this planet rely on nature for survival. Whether it's water or air, everything in nature is necessary for survival. Thus, human existence is not possible in the absence of nature.

Nature provides people everywhere with multiple benefits that help maintain their quality of life. These benefits include food provision, water purification, construction material, and recreation opportunities (Díaz et al., 270)

Right from the basic essential needs to the very extravagant wishes, nature can fulfil every human need. The way in which humans interact with nature determines the quality of existence. Everybody depends on nature to some level, although certain people or particular groups with nature-inclined lifestyles rely more heavily on it than others, as covered in the article "Nature-dependent people: Mapping human direct use of nature for basic needs across the tropics". Nature plays such a vital influence in human lives, whether it is recognized or not. Most people take this for granted. Only those

who are naturally inclined and live their lives in total harmony with nature understand the right of use. Others who believe that nature is simply a property for their use are unaware of the real-time pattern in which humans coexist with a wide range of other species in the same ecosystem.

Human cultures are strongly influenced by ecosystems, and ecosystem change can have a significant impact on cultural identity and social stability. Human cultures, knowledge systems, religions, heritage values, social interactions, and the linked amenity services (such as aesthetic enjoyment, recreation, artistic and spiritual fulfilment, and intellectual development) have always been influenced and shaped by the nature of the ecosystem and ecosystem conditions. (synthesis, 46)

Without recognizing this, humans, with their sense of superiority, do not appreciate this life-saving nature. Only a few eco-conscious people can look beyond the obvious to recognize this dynamic in which nature has the upper hand.

Apart from the real world, literature is one venue where such relationships are dealt with. It captures the minds of people and depicts different people with varying attitudes and mindsets about how they perceive nature. Thus, nature has become one of the inevitable elements of literature. Though all sects in the literature include nature, few authors prioritise it and make its presence obvious. They have varied motives for this and one among them is the aim to educate their readers on the importance and value of nature.

Amitav Ghosh is one such person who is environmentally sensitive and strives to develop a healthy and appropriate balance between humans and nature. As a literary person who has written both fiction and nonfiction, Amitav has done his best to address many challenges that arise from human-nature interaction and make it flawless. His publications have been praised in a variety of ways, with particular emphasis placed on the significance of ecology. He has authored many works in which his thoughts on the ecosystem, his knowledge of the varied species, the human-nature relationship bond and his attitude towards the concept of extinction are well established. The focus is not only on the idea or feeling of doing good for the environment; he also makes an effort to portray the historical standing of the topic under discussion as well and his descriptions of the sites in which the story is located give a real-time picture of the places discussed in the minds of the readers. His writing also sheds insight on how developmental pursuits, modernization and urbanization have made a great impact in the face of the existing environment. There are a lot of environmental changes that have resulted from these changes. As human life grows with sophistication, nature and its real self, start to deteriorate.

The destruction of nature is now a theme reflected in an abundant flow of literary works. The writers of such works are aware of the creative process based on the agenda of conveying phenomena in such a way as to criticize various human actions with negative impacts on nature while at the same time building human awareness. Nature has become an integral part of the birth of literary works. This is shown by the large number of writers who represent nature in their works in the form of diction, such as forests, seas, trees, mountains, animals, and so on. Literature is closely related to nature as a source of inspiration, while nature needs literature as a means of preservation. This is highlighted and validated by the concept of ecocriticism which endeavours to apply the concept of ecology to literary studies, making the earth (nature) the focus of study. (Nahdhiyah, et al..2)

With all of these aspects present, Amitav's writings have evolved into beautiful pieces of literature that stand out as an excellent means to comprehend ecocritical viewpoints. Amitav Ghosh's writing style elevates his books to the level of outstanding ecocritical reads with numerous takeaways for readers. A fictitious story set in an actual area directs our attention to the environment rather than the story itself. Also, nature is more than just a backdrop for writing. Amitav's stories have always been intertwined with nature, making it impossible to separate the story from the natural elements. Rather than focusing on a particular issue or a single cause of the issue, the whole status of the issue is captured with varied perspectives, as are the various methods for resolving the situational issue and the causes for its emergence.

Even though *Hungry Tide* has been the subject of numerous studies from various ecocritical perspectives, there is still a great deal of room for other kinds of inquiry in this text. Though Amitav's every work is an epic rendering from an ecocritical perspective, *Hungry Tide* is one flag bearer of his ideas and efficiently engages, entertains and educates the

readers from the ecocritical perspective.

The primary goal is to examine the interaction between humans and nature in the context of the story. The research examines the behavioural aspects of both the elements under consideration to expose the attitudes towards one other and the various ways in which they complement or oppose each other's natural course of living.

The below conversation between Piya and Kanai, when they get to meet on the train for the first time, gives an idea of the state of awareness possessed by these characters.

I'm hoping to wangle a permit to do a survey of the marine mammals of the Sundarbans."

For once he was silenced, although only briefly. "I'm amazed," he said presently. "I didn't even know there were any such."

"Oh yes, there are," she said. "Or there used to be, anyway. Very large numbers of them."

"Really? All we ever hear about is the tigers and the crocodiles."

"I know," she said. "The cetacean population has kind of disappeared from view. No one knows whether it's because they're gone or because they haven't been studied. There hasn't ever been a comprehensive survey." (Ghosh 9-10)

The talk between Piya and Kanai demonstrates people's lack of awareness of their surroundings and the creatures that inhabit them. It demonstrates how little humans value other living species in their environment. The excitement Kanai shows regarding the discussion shows how new the matter is to him. Also, his reply states that only tigers and crocodiles are part of the scene in the minds of people because their presence and absence create differences in human lives to a greater extent, unlike marine mammals.

While Kanai exposes the widespread mindset of the generic people who have moved towards modern city lives, the relationship between Piya and Fokir brings out the importance of nature in the lives of people. Both Piya and Fokir for different reasons stay closely connected with nature, it is established that the people who are connected with nature by profession or depend highly on it for their living, have much better knowledge and awareness of it.

In the scenario described, she just showed Fokir a photo of what she was looking for, and he was able to direct her to the location where she could locate it.

I showed him a picture, a flashcard, Piya said. And that was all it took. He led me straight to the dolphins. In a way, that fall was the luckiest thing that could have happened to me- I'd never have found the dolphins on my own. I need to see him again. (Ghosh 15)

This shows that, despite having minimal schooling, census, or research reports about diverse species, their value, and so on, he understood what was going on in real-time. Also, when the identical question was posed to forest department officials, they were unable to assist Piya in the same way that Fokir had. This is due to their lack of awareness of the ecosystem and the animals that live there, although it is part of their employment. This demonstrates that many individuals, regardless of their relationship with nature, are unaware of the true face of nature.

Moving from the individual character's bonding with nature, another incident in the novel gives an exact picture of how human minds contemplate their experiences with nature. The letter written by Kanai's uncle addresses Kanai and gives the idea that people tend to forget things, the past, the evolution and so on. As they move forward, the environment in which they live, the changes or the sufferings they have undergone make no way in the memories of people.

In the letter, he mentioned that if he does not make efforts to pen down the Morichjhapi, time will erase such a mentioned island from the minds of people. He wrote, "I'm writing these words in a place that you will probably never have heard of: an island on the southern edge of the tide country, a place called Morichjhapi..."(Ghosh 47) He also further puts it straight expressing his feeling of being a first-hand person to witness the disaster,

There is nothing I can do to stop what lies ahead. The bit I was once a writer; perhaps I can make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world. The thought of this, along with the fear that preceded it, has made it possible for me to do what I have not been able to for the last thirty years – to put my pen to paper again.(Ghosh 35)

The fact that it is not permanent, as well as the knowledge or lack of value among its occupants, demonstrates that people have not yet moved beyond the anthropocentric viewpoint that prioritises persons. Amitav emphasises this anthropocentric mentality, attempting to highlight the problems and misery associated with it, as well as how it plays a significant role in the lifestyle. After gaining a basic understanding of human awareness and attitudes, the attention changes to understanding how much humans rely on nature.

Different characters in the novel exhibit varying degrees of reliance. Piya earns a living from nature, whereas Kanai is unconcerned about nature or his surroundings except for fundamental necessities. Fokir and Horen rely heavily on nature in a variety of ways, and they are familiar with nature and its activities. So, as discussed earlier, the more reliant people have much concern towards the environment, making them stay away from anthropocentric attitudes.

To understand this, Fokir and Horen's characters can be considered. They live in harmony with nature and find the fullest form of satisfaction living such a lifestyle. They are willing to believe stories that keep them away from the prevalent anthropocentric viewpoint. The Bon Bibi myth that is found within the text plays a major role in shaping the attitude of these people and hence positively affects the human-nature relationship. Bon Bibi, in Nilima's words, is "The Goddess of the Forest... In these parts, they believe she rules over all the animals of the jungle." With this central myth, the attitude of the inhabitants is kept under control and exploiting nature will not be a part of the picture. Amitav characterised both Fokir and Horen as putting nature at the forefront. Fokir even in the most difficult situation believes that nature has saved him and that the only tree in which he hung remains a lifesaver. Similarly, Horen says "Bon Bibi granted me enough honey to fill two bottles. I came here to sell them." Although it is possible to blame or take advantage of nature, these individuals have the free will to accept the myth, which honours nature.

The main message that Amitav seeks to get over with the Bon Bibi Myth is that nature provides for human needs and that humans are inherently dependent on it. However, when people go too far and everything turns into a one-sided game without finding a middle ground, nature is abused, with unavoidable repercussions. Amitav Ghosh makes it clear through characters like Fokir and Horen that they value a high standard of living over a life of luxury.

While making it explicit that only very few characters are aligned with Fokir and Horen, the major work is to understand, how others who do not possess this kind of attitude can sketch the level of influence on nature and nature's reaction towards it. Hungry Tide gives a great picture of the same. The following section explores the behaviour of both humans and nature capturing the struggle for dominance.

An instance in the novel where Piya and Fokir witness the killing of tiger projects that the environment is equally shared by different species including humans who cannot be compatible with each other. In such cases, both sides try for survival which ultimately leads to the idea of the survival of the fittest. Be it the natural environment or the other species sharing the environment, only the stronger versions can survive in front of skillful anthropocentric people. The event captured by Amitav is as follows,

When they neared the crest of the embankment Horen pointed to a large mark in the dust and gestured to indicate that this was the place from which the animal had surveyed the village and picked its prey. ... Directly in front of them, a few hundred metres away, was a small mud-walled structure with a thatched roof. More than a hundred people had gathered around this little hut ... many were armed with sharpened bamboo poles: these they were plunging into the hut, over and again. Their faces were contorted in such a way that they seemed to be in the grip both of extreme fear and uncontrollable rage.

Many of the women and children in the crowd were shrieking Maar! Maar! Kill! Kill! (291- 292)

Though in this, the attack was straight and from the point of view of both humans and the tiger, the other remained a problem or threatened their quality of living, there is another instance where Piya witnessed a dead dolphin that was just born and remained happy.

Looking down on the carcass, she saw that there was a huge gash behind the blowhole where a large wedge of flesh and blubber had been torn out of the dolphin's body. The shape of the injury suggested that the dolphin had been hit by the

propeller of a fast-moving motorboat. This puzzled Piya because she had seen so few such boats in these waters. It was Fokir who suggested a solution to the mystery, by sketching a peaked cap with his hands. She understood that it was probably some kind of official boat used by uniformed personnel — maybe from the Coast Guard or the police or even the Forest Department. It had gone speeding down the channel earlier in the day, and the inexperienced calf had been slow to move out of its way.(Ghosh 167)

This incident captures, how humans knowingly or unknowingly try to get into a more comfortable and luxurious lifestyle, affecting the basic living or the habitat of the other species who share the environment. Tracing the picture of such a human relationship with nature, Amitav had exposed the consequences of human behaviour thus implicitly bringing out the do's and don'ts list for humans.

Amitav Ghosh's work extends beyond merely exposing the vulnerability of nature at the hands of humans. He equally highlights the formidable power of nature, illustrating the suffering it can inflict on humans. This dual portrayal is not solely intended to demonstrate that nature can make life difficult for humans. It underscores the reality that nature often becomes a significant consideration only when it exhibits its more ferocious aspects. Furthermore, Ghosh emphasizes the profound dependence of humans on nature, showcasing the intricate interconnections between human survival and the natural world.

In his discussion of mangrove forests, Amitav Ghosh highlights both their aesthetic beauty and their formidable, untamed aspects. By presenting these dual characteristics, Ghosh provides a comprehensive view of the mangrove ecosystem, emphasizing its ecological importance and the dynamic interplay between its serene and savage elements. This nuanced portrayal underscores the complex relationship between humans and nature, illustrating both the allure and the inherent dangers of these vital coastal environments.

At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.(Ghosh 165)

Amitav in the chapter, S' Daniel, showcases the drift between humans and nature and when both view for dominance. He explains how an inhabited island was tried to be occupied by humans, eventually letting them in and working for the modernization of living but later, after S' Daniel died, nature had taken over and the time when Nirmal visited with Kanai it had only ruins remained to prove that the history remains true.

The explanation given to Kanai by Nirmal brings out how nature views dominance over humans. The power of nature to drive away human settlements makes us wonder if humans are even safe.

Why does no one live here? Why are these islands empty of people? Why is this valuable soil allowed to lie fallow?' A crewman sees him peering into the forest and points out the ruins of an old temple and a mosque. See, he says, people lived here once, but they were driven away by tempests and tides, tigers and crocodiles.(Ghosh 212)

Talking about tides, tigers and crocodiles, stresses the ferocious face of nature. But on taking the whole picture, it is clearly understood that the place once was all in its nature and humans were trying to change its direction.

No one — in the beginning. Remember, at that time there was nothing but forest here. There were no people, no embankments, no fields. Just *kādā ār bādā*, mud and mangrove. At high tide most of the land vanished underwater. And everywhere you looked there were predators — tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards." So why did people come, then?"

"For the land, Kanai. What else? This was at a time when people were so desperate for land that they were willing to sell themselves in exchange for a bigha or two. And this land here was in their own country, not far from Calcutta: they didn't need to take a boat to Burma or Malaya or Fiji or Trinidad. And what was more, it was free.(Ghosh 235- 237)

Nirmal also highlights the fact that S' Daniel dreamt of creating a human settlement with his own set of rules and regulations and that turned into how people came to this settlement initially. He stresses the facts like, how in a capitalistic idea, he had rewarded anyone and everyone who had helped in any way to make the place human-friendly and ready to Live.

Think of what it was like: think of the tigers, crocodiles and snakes that lived in the creeks and nalas that covered the islands. This was a feast for them. They killed hundreds of people. So many were killed that S'Daniel began to give out rewards to anyone who killed a tiger or crocodile. (Ghosh 241)

The untold fight for dominance is well captured in this chapter. Thus, bringing out the coexistence and the lack of compatibility between humans and nature. Viewing it with glasses prioritizing ecology, it can be understood that these ideas exposed highly resemble the ideologies behind the concept of 'Deep Ecology'.

The brief ideas are stated below based on Naess's book *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*

1) The flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of nonhuman life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes. 2) Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves. 3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. 4) Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening. 5) The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease in the human population. 6) Significant change in life conditions for the better requires a change in economic and technological policies. 7) Life quality should be given more primacy than a high standard of living. 8) Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation to implement the necessary changes. (David Rothenberg, 1)

The dolphins, Piya focus on providing some advantages to humans. For example, it can aid in fishing and help us discover that their behaviour can even serve as indications anticipating nature, which is an unavoidable component of human nature. Similarly, tigers can benefit humans in a variety of ways. However, Fokir and Piya do not desire to explore, understand, or contribute to their preservation because of the benefits to humans. The intrinsic worth that exists has been considered. The belief is that different species can contribute to a rich diversity. A few examples of technology and modernisation, such as the usage of motor boats, the construction of a new civilization, and so on, have had an impact, and humanity has progressed beyond relying on nature to provide their basic requirements. During this process, it is also clear that human indifference is excessive and dangerous. Also, humans aspire to achieve a high standard of living rather than a high quality of life. This strongly suggests that governmental reforms are needed to improve living circumstances and the relationship between nature and humans.

The *Hungry Tide* is revealed to be more than just a story of human lives when viewed from an eco-critical angle. The story told by Ghosh serves as a reminder of the tenuous equilibrium that exists in our ecosystems and the inherent duty we have to preserve it. The book serves as a cautionary tale as well as a tribute to the exquisite beauty of nature in today's world, where environmental concerns are becoming more and more pressing. (Astha Khandelwal –pg.2)

Thus, the ideas projected by Amitav Ghosh towards the betterment are highly inclined to the basic tenets of Deep Ecology. It does not stop with just exposing. The overall reading experience of any reader also gets to terms with the deep ecological experience.

There are two ultimate norms of deep ecology, such as self-realization and bio-centric equality. Self-realization is a process through which people come to understand themselves as existing through interconnectedness with the rest of nature. Bio-centric equality is the recognition that all organisms and beings are equal members of an interrelated whole and therefore have equal intrinsic worth. (Karuna Kanta Barman 39)

The reader experiences self-realization and biocentric equality for the first time through this story. Any literary reading should provide readers with a positive psychological experience that guides them in the proper direction. When reading *Hungry Tide*, a reader is forced to consider their surroundings and realise how unaware they are due to the disparities in character traits, lives, and varied points of view. And underline the necessity of moving towards biocentric equality and acknowledging the existence of other animals sharing the same ecosystem.

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