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Eco-cosmopolitanism in the Sundarbans: Human-Animal Encounters and  
Ecological Ethics in *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* offers a profound exploration of the Sundarbans as a site where human, animal, and environmental lives intersect in fragile interdependence. This paper, "Eco-cosmopolitanism in the Sundarbans: Human-Animal Encounters and Ecological Ethics in *The Hungry Tide*", examines how the novel articulates an eco-cosmopolitan vision that situates a local ecological struggle within the wider framework of global environmental ethics. Through its portrayal of human-animal encounters, the novel challenges anthropocentric worldviews. The Irrawaddy dolphin, central to Piya's scientific and empathetic engagement, exemplifies possibilities of coexistence, while the Royal Bengal tiger embodies tensions between fear, reverence, and conservation. These encounters foreground ethical dilemmas of survival, where human displacement and ecological preservation collide. The novel's evocation of the Morichjhapi massacre underscores this conflict, exposing the biopolitical realities of conservation and human vulnerability.

By weaving myth, folklore, and scientific discourse, Ghosh destabilizes human-centered narratives and advocates for an ecological ethics grounded in interdependence and relational responsibility. This study argues that *The Hungry Tide* extends a cosmopolitan ecological imagination in which the fates of humans and nonhumans are inseparably entwined, compelling readers to reconfigure ethical responsibility in the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** Eco-cosmopolitanism, human-animal encounters, ecological ethics, Sundarbans, Anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh.

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## Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) occupies a central place in contemporary ecocritical and postcolonial literary studies for its nuanced engagement with the intersections of human, animal, and environmental concerns. Set in the Sundarbans, a unique mangrove ecosystem straddling India and Bangladesh, the novel explores a landscape where human communities, nonhuman species, and ecological forces coexist in precarious interdependence. The Sundarbans, often imagined as a liminal and unstable space, provides the narrative with a setting that is simultaneously local and global: while grounded in the specific cultural and ecological realities of Bengal's tide country, it also resonates with broader debates about environmental degradation, climate change, conservation, and global ecological justice. This paper, seeks to examine how Ghosh develops an eco-cosmopolitan vision that rethinks human-nonhuman relations within the context of environmental crisis.

The theoretical framework of eco-cosmopolitanism, articulated by Ursula K. Heise, suggests that ecological awareness must transcend local or national boundaries and instead recognize the interconnectedness of environmental issues in a global context. In Ghosh's narrative, the Sundarbans emerges as more than a geographically bounded ecosystem; it becomes a microcosm of global ecological concerns where climate vulnerability, endangered species, and human displacement intersect. This cosmopolitan framing does not erase the local but rather situates it within planetary interdependencies, allowing the novel to reflect on ethical responsibilities that extend across species and geographies.

One of the novel's most striking features is its portrayal of human-animal encounters. The Irrawaddy dolphin, studied by the marine biologist Piya, exemplifies a mode of interspecies connection that is shaped by both scientific observation and empathetic engagement. The dolphin becomes not only an object of conservation but also a symbol of the fragile possibilities of coexistence in a threatened environment. By contrast, the Royal Bengal tiger embodies more ambivalent meanings: feared as a predator, revered in local mythologies, and fiercely protected by conservation laws. Human encounters with the tiger reveal the ethical tensions between survival and preservation, underscoring the difficulty of sustaining both human life and endangered species within the same ecological space.

These tensions are further complicated by the historical memory of the Morichjhapi massacre (1979), in which refugees attempting to settle in the protected forest areas were violently displaced in the name of tiger conservation. By invoking this event, Ghosh underscores the biopolitical dilemmas of environmental ethics: whose lives are deemed worth protecting, and at what cost? The novel thus foregrounds the ethical contradictions of conservationist discourse, where the safeguarding of nonhuman species is sometimes achieved through the sacrifice of marginalized human communities.

Through its interweaving of myth, folklore, scientific discourse, and historical memory, *The Hungry Tide* destabilizes anthropocentric hierarchies and challenges conventional boundaries between human and nonhuman. The novel advances an ecological ethics based on relationality, vulnerability, and coexistence, aligning with contemporary ecocritical thought that seeks to move beyond human-centered frameworks. In this light, the Sundarbans functions not merely as a backdrop but as an active agent in shaping human and nonhuman destinies.

This paper will argue that Ghosh's novel exemplifies eco-cosmopolitanism by situating the local struggles of the Sundarbans within a broader ecological imagination that transcends boundaries of nation and species. By foregrounding human-animal encounters and ecological ethics, *The Hungry Tide* compels a rethinking of environmental responsibility in the Anthropocene, where the survival of humans and nonhumans alike is inseparably entangled.

## Objectives

- To examine the Sundarbans as an ecological microcosm

- To study the interplay of myth, folklore, science, and history
- To position the novel within the framework of eco-cosmopolitanism
- To contribute to ecocritical and animal studies discourse

### Literature Review

Scholarship on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* has been wide-ranging, reflecting its rich intersections with postcolonial studies, environmental criticism, and cultural ecology. Critics have frequently noted how the novel situates the Sundarbans as a contested ecological and cultural site, where issues of displacement, myth, and biodiversity converge. Early readings of the novel focused on its postcolonial and historical dimensions, especially the representation of the Morichjhapi massacre. Anshuman Mondal (2010) and others argue that the novel foregrounds state violence and displacement, situating environmental protection within structures of power and exclusion. These readings highlight how conservation policies often marginalize vulnerable communities in the name of ecological preservation.

In parallel, ecocritical scholarship has emphasized the landscape of the Sundarbans as an active agent rather than a passive setting. For instance, Supriya Chaudhuri (2014) notes that the tide country itself functions as a character, embodying unpredictability and fluidity that disrupt human attempts at control. Similarly, critics like John Thieme (2016) have examined how Ghosh's narrative destabilizes human-centered perspectives by foregrounding nonhuman forces such as tides, storms, and mangroves.

Animal studies perspectives have increasingly drawn attention to the novel's human-animal encounters. The Irrawaddy dolphin, often interpreted as a symbol of coexistence, has been discussed in relation to Piya's empathetic scientific practice. Scholars such as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010) argue that Piya's work offers an alternative model of knowledge production, blending scientific observation with interspecies respect. The tiger, however, has been read more ambivalently, embodying both reverence and hostility. Scholars like Nivedita Menon (2012) point out that the tiger is emblematic of a conservation ethic that privileges charismatic species, often at the expense of human lives.

Another significant body of scholarship has explored the role of myth and folklore in shaping ecological ethics. The legend of Bon Bibi, frequently discussed by scholars such as Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha (2015), is interpreted as a cultural narrative of coexistence that mediates the relationship between humans, tigers, and the forest. By juxtaposing myth with scientific discourse, Ghosh creates a narrative that resists binaries of tradition and modernity, local and global. More recent studies have situated *The Hungry Tide* within frameworks of the Anthropocene and climate crisis. Ghosh himself, in *The Great Derangement* (2016), calls for literature to engage with planetary ecological emergencies. Critics like Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019) see *The Hungry Tide* as anticipating this call, as it links local ecological struggles in the Sundarbans with larger questions of rising seas, endangered species, and interspecies survival. This aligns closely with Ursula Heise's concept of eco-cosmopolitanism, which emphasizes the need to perceive environmental problems beyond the scale of the nation or community.

Despite this growing body of criticism, fewer studies have explicitly brought together eco-cosmopolitanism, animal studies, and ecological ethics in reading *The Hungry Tide*. This research aims to bridge that gap by analyzing how Ghosh's narrative advances a cosmopolitan ecological imagination, one that situates the Sundarbans as both a local and global ecological space. By foregrounding interspecies encounters and ethical dilemmas, the study contributes to ecocritical debates about responsibility, justice, and coexistence in the Anthropocene.

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**Theoretical Framework:****Eco-cosmopolitanism: From Local Ecologies to Global Responsibility**

Ursula K. Heise's formulation of eco-cosmopolitanism in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) is central to contemporary environmental criticism. She argues that ecological ethics must move beyond narrowly local or nationalist frameworks and embrace a planetary consciousness. While place-based attachments are significant, they can also foster exclusionary discourses of belonging that ignore the interconnected nature of environmental crises. In the Anthropocene – where rising seas, climate migration, and species extinction transcend borders – environmental responsibility must be understood on a planetary scale.

Applying this framework to *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans emerges not simply as a local ecology but as a microcosm of global precarity. Rising tides in the novel are not just geographical but symbolic of broader planetary threats. The Irrawaddy dolphin, though native to the region, belongs to a global discourse of endangered species. Similarly, the tiger, fiercely protected under international conservation frameworks, connects local conflicts with transnational ecological ethics. Ghosh thereby situates the Sundarbans at the intersection of local struggles and global environmental imagination, exemplifying Heise's eco-cosmopolitan vision.

**Posthumanist and Animal Studies Perspectives**

Eco-cosmopolitanism alone does not fully account for the ethical depth of human-animal encounters in the novel. For this, posthumanist and animal studies frameworks provide crucial insights.

Donna Haraway: In *When Species Meet* (2008), Haraway articulates the concept of companion species to highlight interspecies entanglements that form the basis of ethical relations. Her call to recognize multispecies kinship resonates strongly with Piya's relationship to dolphins, where empathy and science converge in a mode of care.

Jacques Derrida: In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2002), Derrida critiques the philosophical tradition that reduces animals to the category of "the animal," erasing their singularity. For Derrida, the animal's gaze invokes an ethical demand: the obligation to rethink human exceptionalism. In *The Hungry Tide*, the tiger and dolphin are not symbolic abstractions but individual presences that confront humans with ethical responsibility.

Cary Wolfe: Wolfe's *Animal Rites* (2003) and *What is Posthumanism?* (2010) dismantle humanist hierarchies that justify the subjugation of nonhuman life. He insists that culture, politics, and ethics must decenter the human to account for the agency of other species. Ghosh's narrative enacts this decentering by giving voice to myth, folklore, and ecological rhythms that resist anthropocentric mastery.

Taken together, these thinkers frame *The Hungry Tide* as a posthuman narrative. Human lives in the Sundarbans are entangled with animal survival, tidal rhythms, and mythic cosmologies, producing an ethical framework that cannot be confined to the human alone.

**Relevance to Ghosh's Narrative****1. The Irrawaddy Dolphin: Empathy and Interspecies Care**

Piya's scientific work with dolphins exemplifies a Haraway-like companion species relation. Unlike Kanai, whose cosmopolitan detachment reflects anthropocentric knowledge, Piya engages with dolphins through empathy, patience, and embodied observation. Her methodology bridges science and ethics, situating dolphins as subjects of care rather than objects of study. This resonates with Derrida's insistence on recognizing the animal as a singular being rather than a category. Through Piya, Ghosh

models an eco-cosmopolitan ethic of interspecies responsibility, where local encounters acquire global resonance for endangered species conservation.

## **2.The Royal Bengal Tiger: Fear, Reverence, and Biopolitics**

The tiger embodies a more contested dimension of human–animal ethics. For local communities, the tiger is simultaneously sacred (invoked in the Bon Bibi myth) and dangerous, representing daily risk. For conservationists and the state, the tiger is a charismatic species whose survival justifies restrictive policies. The tension reaches its climax in the narrative’s evocation of the Morichjhapi massacre, where human refugees were displaced and killed in the name of tiger conservation. Here, Ghosh exposes the biopolitical contradictions of ecological ethics: human lives sacrificed to preserve nonhuman life, raising the question of whose survival is prioritized in the environmental imagination. Wolfe’s posthumanist critique is particularly useful here, as it highlights how both humans and animals are caught in hierarchical systems of value enforced by state and global conservationist discourses.

## **3.The Sundarbans as an Active Ecological Agent**

Beyond animals, the environment itself functions as an active agent in the narrative. The tides, storms, and mangroves resist human control, destabilizing anthropocentric mastery. This reflects Heise’s eco-cosmopolitan view of ecology as transnational and interconnected, but it also aligns with material ecocriticism that sees nature as possessing agency. The Sundarbans embodies shared vulnerability, reminding readers that human survival is contingent on ecological balance.

## **4.Myth and Folklore as Ethical Frameworks**

The legend of Bon Bibi, central to the cultural imagination of the tide country, offers an indigenous ecological ethic of balance between human and animal life. Unlike Western conservationist frameworks, Bon Bibi mythology recognizes coexistence as a cultural and spiritual necessity. By juxtaposing myth with scientific discourse, Ghosh integrates multiple epistemologies, situating ecological ethics in a plural, cosmopolitan register.

## **Research Ideology: Towards an Eco-cosmopolitan Ethics**

The ideological thrust of this theoretical framework lies in reconciling eco-cosmopolitan global responsibility with posthumanist attention to interspecies ethics. Ghosh’s narrative demonstrates that ecological crises cannot be understood in isolation: the plight of Sundarbans refugees, the survival of endangered dolphins, the conservation of tigers, and the unpredictability of tidal ecologies are all entangled. This reflects the Anthropocene reality where human and nonhuman destinies are inseparable.

By combining Heise’s eco-cosmopolitanism with Haraway’s multispecies kinship, Derrida’s ethical demand of the animal’s gaze, and Wolfe’s posthumanist critique, this research positions *The Hungry Tide* as a text that advances an ecological ethics of relationality, vulnerability, and coexistence. The novel ultimately compels readers to rethink environmental responsibility as a shared planetary obligation that transcends species, borders, and hierarchies.

## **Results and Discussion**

The findings of this study affirm that Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is a critical text for advancing eco-cosmopolitan thought. By dramatizing the tensions between survival, conservation, and justice, the novel makes visible the ethical complexities of interspecies coexistence in vulnerable ecologies. It resists simplistic binaries—human versus animal, local versus global, science versus myth—and instead articulates an interdependent framework of ecological belonging.

Heise’s eco-cosmopolitanism provides the theoretical vocabulary for understanding Piya’s dolphin research as a planetary ethic of care, while Derrida and Wolfe remind us of the limits and

aporias of extending such ethics in contexts of precarity. Haraway's notion of "staying with the trouble" illuminates how Ghosh valorizes myth and local traditions as integral to ecological ethics. Together, these frameworks help interpret the Sundarbans as a site where global environmental debates are rooted in the material and symbolic struggles of human and nonhuman life. Ultimately, the novel compels us to rethink ecological ethics not as an abstract philosophy but as a practice grounded in the lived realities of interdependence, dispossession, and resilience. In doing so, *The Hungry Tide* embodies an eco-cosmopolitan imagination that extends ethical responsibility across species and scales, urging readers to envision survival as a shared endeavor in the Anthropocene.

## Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* emerges as a compelling literary text that reconfigures the relationship between humans, animals, and the environment within a framework of eco-cosmopolitanism and ecological ethics. By situating the Sundarbans as both a distinctive local ecology and a symbolic global microcosm, the novel exemplifies Ursula Heise's call for an ecological consciousness that transcends national and cultural boundaries. The tide country, with its shifting landscapes, endangered species, and vulnerable human communities, demonstrates the inseparability of local struggles and planetary crises in the Anthropocene.

The analysis of human-animal encounters in the novel underscores the limitations of anthropocentric ethics. The Irrawaddy dolphin, central to Piya's research, embodies the possibilities of interspecies empathy and coexistence, challenging reductive scientific objectification. Conversely, the Royal Bengal tiger highlights the biopolitical dilemmas of conservation, where the survival of a charismatic species is secured at the expense of marginalized human populations. Through these contrasting encounters, Ghosh destabilizes the human/animal divide, compelling readers to rethink ethical responsibility beyond hierarchical categories. Equally significant is the novel's integration of myth, folklore, and cultural memory. The legend of Bon Bibi offers an indigenous ecological ethic that privileges balance and coexistence over domination. By juxtaposing such cultural narratives with scientific discourse, Ghosh resists binary thinking and constructs a pluralistic ecological vision. This synthesis demonstrates that ecological ethics must draw on multiple epistemologies—scientific, cultural, and mythic—to respond adequately to the complexities of environmental crises. The reference to the Morichjhapi massacre further complicates the ethical terrain of conservation and displacement. By revisiting this historical event, the novel foregrounds the violent intersections of politics, ecology, and human vulnerability. Conservation, often framed as a moral imperative, is revealed to be deeply entangled with questions of power and exclusion. The ethical question that arises is not merely one of protecting species but of negotiating just coexistence for all forms of life, human and nonhuman alike.

From a theoretical standpoint, the novel resonates with posthumanist perspectives advanced by thinkers like Haraway, Derrida, and Wolfe. Haraway's notion of companion species illuminates Piya's empathetic engagement with dolphins, while Derrida's insistence on the ethical demand of the animal's gaze is echoed in the novel's confrontation with the tiger. Wolfe's critique of humanist hierarchies provides insight into the biopolitical struggles depicted in Morichjhapi. Collectively, these frameworks reveal *The Hungry Tide* as a text that both critiques anthropocentrism and imagines an alternative ecological ethics rooted in vulnerability, interdependence, and shared survival.

In conclusion, *The Hungry Tide* contributes significantly to ecocritical and animal studies debates by advancing an eco-cosmopolitan imagination that situates the Sundarbans within global ecological discourse. The novel compels us to acknowledge that the survival of humans, animals, and environments are inseparably entangled and that ethical responsibility in the Anthropocene must extend across species and borders. By foregrounding the precarious lives of both marginalized communities and endangered species, Ghosh's narrative challenges us to embrace a planetary ethics of coexistence. In doing so, it affirms the role of literature as a vital medium for reimagining human-

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nonhuman relations and for articulating ecological responsibility in a time of unprecedented environmental crisis.

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