



Tidal Ecologies: Blue Humanities and Human–Nonhuman Entanglements in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) demands a marine-centered ecocritical analysis. While traditional ecocriticism privileges land, the *Blue Humanities* urge us to “reimagine human life in relation to the watery planet”. This novel unfolds in the Sundarbans estuary, where land and sea “endlessly intertwine”. We argue that tidal movement is the novel’s organizing principle. The two parts, Ebb and Flood, alternate focalization and pacing to mimic currents, making narrative time cyclical. The rivers serve as contact zones for humans, dolphins, tigers, etc.: Ghosh even “places the Irrawaddy dolphins at the centre” of the plot to highlight aquatic life. Knowledge itself is polarized: Piyali Roy’s scientific gadgets are contrasted with Fokir’s intuitive tidal lore. Ultimately the novel dramatizes an ecological ethic of humility. Disasters (cyclones, tiger attacks) and human conflicts show that the tide defies human control. A villager asks, who would “kill... [refugees] for” animals? Such moments highlight the novel’s situational ethics. In conclusion, reading *The Hungry Tide* ‘with the tide’ reveals water and flux as active agents that reorder human and nonhuman relations. This study contributes to Blue Humanities by treating estuarine literature as a locus of meaning.

Keywords:

Blue Humanities; *The Hungry Tide*; tidal ecologies; estuarine literature; human–nonhuman relations; ecological ethics.

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) explicitly foregrounds the dynamic interplay of land and water in the Sundarbans. The novel refuses to treat nature as a passive backdrop; instead, water itself drives the drama. As Janak Paudyal notes, Ghosh's depiction of water "serves as an active, dynamic force that opposes the Cartesian tendency to fix, chart, and dominate nature". In this tide country, the distinction between earth and ocean blurs: the constant ebb and flow "intricately redefines both the physical landscape and human existence". We therefore argue that the tide – the cyclic rise and fall of the sea – is *the* organizing principle of the novel. It mediates how characters move, how time is structured, and how knowledge is produced.

This focus on tidal dynamics fills a gap in existing criticism of *The Hungry Tide*. Most scholars have examined the novel's politics (the Morichjhapi refugee crisis) or its ecology (mangroves, tigers, dolphins) within a terrestrial framework, but few have treated the tide itself as the primary subject. By contrast, this paper reads *The Hungry Tide* "with the tide," framing the text in terms of hydrology, estuarine movement, and multispecies encounter. In doing so we align with the emerging *Blue Humanities*, which urge scholars to shift attention from land to the watery planet. The Sundarbans, a vast estuary where land and sea "endlessly intertwine", become an ideal laboratory for this analysis.

2. From Land to Estuary: Reframing Ecocriticism

Traditional ecocritical approaches tend to center forests, deserts, or rural landscapes on stable ground. *The Hungry Tide*, however, is set in the Sundarbans – "the vast delta at the estuary of the rivers Ganges and Brahmaputra" – a mutable archipelago of mangrove islands. Here "the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable". As Jens Martin Gurr observes, Ghosh's novel "is literally based on the dichotomy of land and water, ebb and flood": tides surge up to 300 kilometers inland each day, submerging thousands of acres and reshaping the islands overnight. This fundamentally hybrid geography undermines any land-centric reading. For example, the settlers on these islands must navigate continually shifting channels, not fixed territories.

Our method draws on *Blue Humanities* to engage this aquatic space as more than backdrop. Whereas a forest-based ecocriticism might look for a stable "nature," a hydro-centric reading attends to flow, permeability, and interconnection. In the Sundarbans the coast is literally the center of a world, and land itself is defined by water. Thus, we treat estuarine life as inherently unstable and relational. This reframing is necessary because conventional ecocritical binaries (land vs. water, culture vs. nature) dissolve in Ghosh's tide country. By focusing on currents, cycles, and wet place-making, we open interpretive space for questions that a terrestrial lens would obscure.

3. Tidal Temporality and Narrative Rhythm

The tides influence not only setting but the novel's temporality and form. Ghosh structures the narrative itself around ebb and flow. The book is divided into two parts entitled "Ebb" and "Flood," and the action follows these rhythms. Chapters alternate focalization between characters (Kanai on land, Piya by the river) and wind down or swell like the sea. As Gurr notes, the alternating plot-strands are treated in chapters that "alternate between the sub-plots, with focalization changing back and forth" between Piya and Kanai. A vivid example occurs in Part Two: a five-page passage written as a mixed prose-and-verse "legend" about Kanai's ancestors. In that sequence "prose and verse, land and water, ebb and flood, landscape and language all flow into each other". The ambiguous syntax – readers can interpret the "flow" either as rivers or as multilingual languages – highlights how narrative form is shaped by the watery landscape.

Time in *The Hungry Tide* thus feels circular and tidal rather than linear and teleological. Historical events (the Morichjhapi uprising) and personal journeys recur in patterns of arrival and departure. Characters often note local adages that time is counted in tides rather than years. The novel even pauses at high and low "water marks": Piya's dolphin survey happens when the flood tide is right, and each phase of the plot correlates with tidal cycles. In short, tides become the structuring logic of the narrative, governing pauses, surges, and silences in the story.

4. Human–Nonhuman Contact Zones

In Ghosh's tide country, humans and other species literally share habitat. The Sundarbans rivers are communal space: villagers and tigers and dolphins coexist in the same channels. Ghosh depicts animals as active agents in the ecology, not mere symbols. For example, the Irrawaddy dolphins are presented almost as co-protagonists. Papri Mitra observes that Ghosh "places the Irrawaddy dolphins at the centre" of the narrative in order to stress 'Life below water'. In practice, Piya and Fokir spend hours tracking and hearing the dolphins; their presence shapes the human plot. The novel goes further by showing mutual aid: these dolphins "mirror nature's harmonious coexistence and collaboration with human beings" – they "help fishermen by driving fish into fishing nets," and the fishermen gratefully leave them part of the catch. Such scenes illustrate a lived intimacy: animals and people are entwined in the daily workings of the tidal world.

Equally, *The Hungry Tide* does not shy away from real danger. The mangroves teem with predators. Ghosh vividly portrays "bloodcurdling" Royal Bengal tigers and crocodiles that hunt in the forests and mudflats. Local culture reflects this fraught coexistence. The novel repeatedly invokes the myth of Bon Bibi – the forest goddess – who, as Mitra notes, is "the epitome of the harmonious co-existence of human [and] nature". In the story, Bon Bibi spares the mangrove half to Dokkhin Rai (the tiger-demon), teaching that humans must share the wild space instead of eliminating it. Through these contact zones, Ghosh collapses human exceptionalism: people in the Sundarbans are vulnerable and deeply enmeshed in a more-than-human community, where survival depends on respecting and understanding nonhuman others.

5. Embodied Knowledge and Tidal Literacy

Knowledge itself is shaped by the tides. Ghosh contrasts Piya Roy's technologically mediated science with Fokir Mondol's indigenous expertise. Piya arrives with sophisticated instruments: binoculars, GPS, depth sounders, even sonar devices. By contrast, illiterate Fokir has grown up on the water and learned through experience and oral tradition. As Paudyal explains, "Fokir possesses an intuitive understanding of the tidal landscape and its non-human inhabitants," cultivated by years of fishing in the Sundarbans. He knows subtle clues (the feel of currents, a dolphin's click in the distance, the scent of mugwort) that Piya's gadgets cannot capture. In one episode, Fokir hears a dolphin noise under dense fog that Piya's instruments miss entirely – a tacit recognition she cannot explain except by admitting "fear" of the unknown.

Ghosh dramatizes the complementary natures of these knowledge systems. Piya's "metronomic" use of binoculars is likened to a lighthouse beam – precise but narrow. Fokir's style is silent, adaptive, attuned. Indeed, Paudyal shows how the text repeatedly praises Fokir's way of knowing as ideal for the environment: "Fokir's silent, adaptive way of knowing is particularly suited to the fluid, unstable environment of the tide country". Piya gradually learns from Fokir that knowledge here cannot be fully abstract; it must be embodied and fluid. Their partnership thus embodies a *wet ontology*: an epistemology of uncertainty, relationality, and embodied skill (as Steve Mentz terms it). In this embodied literacy, tides become a language: one learns to read the world by the movement of water, by attuning the body and senses to the rhythms of the estuary.

6. Violence in a Fluid Ecology

The very fluidity of the Sundarbans undermines human claims of mastery, and the novel graphically shows the costs of that hubris. The shifting terrain makes any stable claim to land futile, and with it comes danger. Natural calamity is ever-present: recurring storms, floods, and tiger attacks routinely threaten the characters. One reviewer notes that "dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes, and crocodiles". The story's climax is a hurricane: Piya and Kanai must shelter on a remote island while a full storm surge approaches. They survive, but Fokir does not – in the bitter final scene, he "sacrifices himself" to keep Piya alive while the tide finally claims him. The reader is left with the indelible sense that the ocean is indifferent to individual tragedy.

Human violence intertwines with nature's. The novel explicitly references the Morichjhapi massacre, where army troops massacred refugees for "wildlife conservation." It also depicts villagers exacting revenge on a man-eating tiger. In one scene, distraught islanders kill and burn a tiger that has preyed on them. Piya bursts in to stop them: "This is an animal, Kanai," she cries. "You can't take revenge on an animal". Ghosh thus reveals the ethical collision between animal protection and human survival. Even basic moral categories blur: one character bluntly asks, who are "the people... who love animals so much that they are willing to kill [the refugees] for them?". Through the tide country's violence – storm or bullet or tooth – the novel suggests that both humans and beasts share one perilous fate. The waters witness all these deaths without judgement; the tide simply rises and falls, annihilating one life and preserving another.

7. Ethics without Mastery

In the *Hungry Tide*, survival depends on respect and responsibility rather than domination. Characters must navigate uncertainty with care. Ghosh's narrative repeatedly calls for a situational, relational ethic. As Lalita Sharma observes, *The Hungry Tide* serves as “a powerful recorder of our shared ecological responsibilities and the urgent need for sustainable and equitable practices”. This means recognizing humans as part of nature's web, not above it. Indeed, local customs embody this ethos: fishermen ritually share their catch with the resident dolphins, acknowledging mutual dependence. As Mitra notes, the mutualism is literal – the dolphins “help fishermen by driving fish into fishing nets” and in turn receive a share of the haul. People leave offerings to Bon Bibi and accept that half the forest must belong to the wild, not to humans.

Thus, Ghosh sketches a “Blue ethic” that values coexistence over conquest. By situating humans in an unstable ecosystem beyond control, the novel suggests our responsibility is to adapt and care. Power dynamics are inverted: it is humanity that is vulnerable and in need of guidance from the nonhuman world. In this context, violence (whether against animals or ecosystems) becomes morally fraught. The universe of *The Hungry Tide* demands humility: in the words of the saga translated in the novel, excess and greed “will be punished while the poor and righteous are rewarded”. Ethics here is impersonal – enforced by tides and fates – and so human stewardship must be modest and empathetic, not acquisitive or utilitarian.

8. Conclusion: Reading with the Tide

In summary, *The Hungry Tide* reconceives the environmental novel by making tidal ecologies central to meaning. The analysis above has shown that tides in the narrative are more than setting: they structure time, shape identities, and define relations. By tracing flood and ebb through the novel's rhythm, characters' worldviews, and moral dilemmas, we see that Ghosh deliberately “reads with the tide.” The Sundarbans here is not a passive locale but a co-author of the story: as Papri Mitra remarks, the text “marvelously reflects the beautiful and friendly bonding between human beings and nature through the interconnectedness among the Irrawaddy dolphins, rivers, Fokir, and Piya”.

This tide-centered reading contributes to both *The Hungry Tide* scholarship and to the Blue Humanities more broadly. For Ghosh studies, it fills a critical gap by highlighting aquatic flow and multispecies intimacy as core themes. For environmental literary studies, it offers a blueprint for how to analyze coastal and marine fiction: attention to hydrography, flux, and bodily attunement. Ultimately, *The Hungry Tide* asks us to learn from water—to embrace contingency, reciprocity, and care in an age of climate chaos. As the country is known locally, Bhātir Desh, the “Land of Eight Tides,” it reminds us that the world is built not on solid ground but on the rhythm of tides.

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