



# Dilemma in Environmental and Social Justice: Ecocritical Exhibition in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *The Hungry Tide*

**Name: Bansi Sing**

Designation: Ph. D. research Scholar, Department of English,  
Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University,  
Purulia, West Bengal.

## Abstract

In the current scenario of the environment, our sacred mother earth is being infected by various global and ecological crises as the nuanced nexus between nature and human beings has loosed. The attitude of domination is growing in the minds of people towards animate and inanimate objects that exist in the world to maintain an ecological balance. The hostile thought between humans and nature concerning environmental degradation transports a phobia to the future generation. With social and environmental justice, integrity may transform our egocentric attitude into an ecocentric manner towards nature. Environmental justice desires three categorical perspectives to build up a loyal ecological harmony between humans and nature such as conservation, right, and improvement. Our society is differentiated into vulnerable hierarchical discrimination and the environment does not get a remedy for this curse. Social and environmental inequity among people is the root cause of environmental deprivation. The problem of environmental humiliation can be solved by conveying the humanity and morality of humans towards living and nonliving beings because both are dependent on each other. The conflict between social and environmental justice in humans and nature is highly interpreted in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*. The writer represents the areas of Sunderbans majestically and scares the predicament of the people who have suffered much for their inconsistencies. This paper is an attempt to analyze how Amitav Ghosh has portrayed the image of social and environmental conflict in light of ecocritical concerns.

*Key Words: Conflict, Justice, Humanity, Conservation, Hierarchy, Morality*

## Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is one of the famous Indian fiction writers and his novel *The Hungry Tide* covers the theme of natural beauty, humanity, and interdependence between humans and nature. He narrates the problem of conservation and discards military power to regain harmony. He thinks that environmental problems are solved through the humanity and morality of people towards animals and other nonliving objects. He has focused on environmental and social justice through which each and everyone can understand that all have an equal right to protect nature. In the period of the Romantic Age, nature was considered a source of aesthetic beauty; but, after the 1980s, this concept was twisted into natural consciousness by writers and poets. Eco-criticism talks about a natural relationship between humans and nature while racism and casteism bring the thought of environmental justice. The term 'justice' forms an association among various social problems such as race, religion, gender, caste, and environmental troubles. Environmental justice not

only concerns humans and humanity but also explains environmental equality, rights, morality, landscape change, climate justice, etc. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identifies “Environmental justice as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income concerning the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (Sahu 547).

Environmental justice recognizes that poor people or indigenous peoples are most affected by environmental pollution, climate change, and depletion of natural resources. It acknowledges that every individual has a responsibility to ensure a clean and healthy environment, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Another important aspect of environmental justice is climate justice which recognizes that the impacts of climate change, such as weather events, sea-level rise, and water scarcity, are not evenly distributed among different social groups. The communities most affected by the impacts of climate change, such as small island states, indigenous peoples, and low-income communities, are often the least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions. It is a critical issue that highlights the unequal distribution of environmental damages and benefits among different social groups. It is a movement that is essential for achieving social and environmental justice and creating a more equitable and sustainable world for all people.

The novelist has interpreted the issue of social injustice in the name of the conservation of nature. The poor people who came from Bangladesh and other areas of West Bengal are exiled from the island of Morichjhapi due to the protection of nature and its resources. Social justice is a concept that aims to achieve equality, fairness, and justice for all members of society. It emphasizes the importance of human rights, social welfare, and the protection of vulnerable groups. The root cause of social injustice is discrimination, such as poverty, racism, sexism, and homophobia. It is necessary to dismantle the systems of oppression, and discrimination and create new structures that promote equality and justice. An important aspect of social justice is recognizing the importance of diversity and inclusion. It is about creating a society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential. To achieve social justice, systems of oppression and discrimination must be dismantled and new structures be created that promote equality and justice. D. Madhanagopal remarks on these inequalities:

Because of these inequalities, the human social, environmental, economic, and environmental effects of climate change are not only disproportionately impacting the poor and marginalized communities of the world, but they also affect lower-income, less resilient developing countries and regions to a far greater extent than their more affluent counterparts in industrialized countries. (1)

## Ecocritical Analysis

The setting of the novel *The Hungry Tide* is an area of Sundarbans which is comprised of West Bengal in India and Bangladesh. The natural area is always fruitful for people, plants, animals, and aquatic animals who survive together in the place. Concurrently, both are attacked and influenced by each other and they struggle to maintain their existence. The conflict arises from the hostility of humans towards wild beasts and other natural phenomena; similarly, nature thinks of them as an enemy. In the novel, tigers, crocodiles, snakes, and cyclones are regarded as the hostile forces of nature. The writer scrutinizes two inconsistencies – human settlement of mangroves destroying natural resources and the eradication of refugees, a social injustice (Umakiran 30–32). Interconnectedness and interdependence between each other make a healthy and fruitful environment. The ecocritical writers try to find a perfect solution to the conflict which changes the mentality and conscience of humankind. They try to grow morality and humanity in the minds of people towards other living and non-living beings so that our ecosystem continues in a neat equilibrium. Environmental justice always speaks about the equal rights of all people to distribute natural production and care for environmental pollution. Schlosberg articulates environmental justice, “It is comprised of four notions: fair distribution of environmental goods and harm; gaining individual and community recognition thereby asserting self-respect and autonomy; the existence of deliberative and democratic participation; and the construction of capabilities among individuals, groups, and non-human parts of nature” (qtd. in Gill 11–12).

Two narratives are well interpreted by discussing two central protagonists of the novel, Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy who are going to the Sundarbans for the sake of their private works. The plot of the novel is bifurcated into two parts, one is based on Piyali's journey which shows the requirement for nature preservation and another is the Morichjhapi incident which tells about social injustice. Piyali Roy, an aquatic animal researcher comes from the USA to discover a rare species Irrawaddy dolphin which is revealed in the water of Sunderbans. She receives assistance at first from the local forest department and with Mejda starts her journey to gather knowledge about dolphins. The area of Sunderbans is an ecological habitat for humans and animals as well as a competitive ground of life and death. Sometimes humans get victory over animals and vice versa. This conflict comes from the psyche of superior and inferior deliberation. The writer delineates the mangrove forest and its habitation in such a way that it is not unproblematic to bring a bond between humans and wild creatures. In the novel, the dilemma of conserving endangered species and the livelihood of local people is presented well which shows that the area is a preserver and destroyer of life. To portray the challenge of humans and animals on the island the novelist writes, "Think of what it was like: think of tigers, crocodiles, and snakes that lived in the creeks and *alas* that covered the islands. This was a feast for them. They killed hundreds of people. So humans were killed that S'Daniel began to give out rewards to anyone who killed a tiger or crocodile" (55).

Kanai Dutt, a translator arrives from Delhi to Lusibari to congregate with his aunt, Nilima to collect an essential document left for him by his uncle, Nirmal. The pathetic incidents of Morichjhapi including the death of Kusum and Fokir's predicament are mentioned in the significant notebook. The refugees of Bangladesh in 1979 took shelter on the island of Morichjhapi in an illegal way and wished to settle permanently there. However, the government thinks they are using natural resources enormously to replete their stomach and cutting mangrove trees to build up their houses. Due to fear of eco-imbalance, the government takes the step of expatriating them from the island (Bagwan 19–20). Nilima describes Kanai about the incident of Morichjhapi, "Some refugees had occupied one of the islands in the forest...There was a confrontation with the authorities that resulted in a lot of violence. The government wanted to force the refugees to return to their resettlement camps in central India. They were being put into trucks and buses and taken away" (Ghosh 27–28). Every tiniest thing indeed plays its part in the environment which helps nature to retain balance, but the plight of the refugees is interpreted to show the social injustice to them. Ecocriticism deals with the harmony of nature and humans but it does not speak about the expatriation of people for the conservation of wildlife.

Environmental justice is associated with social movement because it is allied with social issues like – class, economics, politics, and conservation. Marry Bookchin in "Remarking Societies" argues that "nearly all ecological problems are social problems" (qtd. in Mukhtar 87). It depicts the consciousness and awareness of people about environmental degradation, though it is approved that environmental problems have an impact on a social hierarchical structure. In our society, people are separated for various kinds of reasons and the concept of domination always exists in the mind of the individual. To bring equal rights through environmental justice, it is always necessary to prevent social differentiation among people. In the novel two islands Lusibari and Morichjhapi around Sundarbans are measured as two distinct areas for social discrimination. Lusibari is considered a place of civilized people and it is thought that the residents of the place cannot harm the conservation process but when the refugees remain at Morichjhapi, it becomes a banned area for the conservation of natural resources. In the book, *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism*, Sandler, and Pezzullo claim that "Overall, the principles emphasize that the environmental justice movement is not only an effort for racial justice; it is a movement for justice for all peoples" (5).

Piyali Roy, an ecologist, transfers her boat and takes the boat of Fokir believing his words that he can lead her to the place of the Irrawaddy dolphin. Despite linguistic barriers, they communicate with each other through gestures and Piya shows him the picture of the Irrawaddy dolphin so that he can recognize it easily. Sometimes, nature behaves like a benevolent mother as well as it becomes violent occasionally. In the time of their journey, Piya falls into the river, but Fokir rescues her securely. The local people frequently confront cyclones and floods for ecological degradation, because the mangrove forest is being cut down by wood smugglers; as a result, nature is losing its balance. But it should be stopped to bring back ecological harmony. Every small and big thing has its value and right

to remain on the beautiful earth. But excessive use of natural resources can harm the atmosphere and the food chain may be destabilized. Natural resource distribution should be equal for all people, but the problem is that there is no one to distribute these kinds of resources in an equal way. Effectively, these resources are being distributed differently in several places. Wissenburg aptly conveys distributive justice as “it makes sense to talk about distributive justice when there is only one party involved...[I]f nature is the distributor, then it cannot distribute itself justly or unjustly to itself...[I]f nature is a recipient, it cannot be distributed...if nature is a resource, there is no one to distribute it to” (qtd. in Dobson 221). The writer uses crabs as food sometimes and presents it as the director of Fokir to lead Piya’s destiny, “But it was not her intention that had brought her here today; it was crabs- because they were Fokir’s livelihood and without them, he would not have known to lead her to this pool where the Oracella came...Perhaps it was the crab that ruled the tide of her destiny” (Ghosh 150).

Sundarban is a landscape where each living being struggles to sustain their existence against natural disasters. This fruitful area is transformed into a tempting place for money-minded people as they think that natural resources are available only for the utilization of human beings. In the novel, we see many endangered species like the Royal Bengal Tiger and Irrawaddy Dolphins being extinct due to the unconsciousness of people. Extinction of a species is always harmful to a healthy atmosphere because it always collapses biological harmony. To prevent the situation of eco-imbalance, conservation is necessary and it will be possible when people will show their moral sense towards other living and nonliving things. Animals should have a moral right to have existed in nature in their way and a sustainable environmental policy is required to preserve the natural value. The concept of natural worth in terms of a sustainable environment is hostile to the language of resources because whatever carries natural resources is an integral part of nature and can produce and reproduce in everyday life. But Arne Naess argues “Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs” (qtd. in Dobson 220).

The wave in the novel plays a great role in expressing the inconsistencies of the inhabitants of the island. The people of the area are extremely dependent on the river for their survival because fish and crabs are their quotidian subsistence. The writer manifests ennu in the conflict between people and nature and expresses an urge to create a moral sense in the human mind. Due to overpopulation, the forest is being destroyed for building habitats and these actions are affecting the emotions of animals. People of Lusibari believe that ‘Bon Bibi’ is ‘the goddess of their forest’ who rules over the animals of Sunderbans. They consider that the merciful ‘Bon Bibi’ will save their life from natural calamities. The writer here transports the mythical example to present the innocent attitude of villagers. But the water in the mangrove forest becomes a way of living animals such as tigers, crocodiles, snakes, etc. It always protects the area from deforestation, cyclones, or natural calamities. The writer raises the argument between the human and natural inhabitants of the island on preserving the Sunderbans’ marine animals and tiger population in terms of exiling the residents. He was surprised to see the suffering of tribal people who were compelled by colonial powers to go outside the periphery of their island. The postcolonial political clash generates social injustice between the necessity of wildlife conservation and the requirement of inhabitants. The new law of conserving wildlife and natural resources is drawn by many countries, but it will be only possible after developing the conscience of people. Environmental justice always opposes repression and the exploitation of land, humans, cultures, and other life forms.

The plight of local people and their struggle to survive in an endangered ecosystem makes them constrained to kill wild animals. People can create harmony between human and nature because Kusum declares that human has always lived their life by interacting with land, clearing it as well as planting it. In the tiger killing circumstances, the writer states three different kinds of voices of three characters faced the situation. Piya, a deep ecologist wants to protect the tiger in any way without thinking about the predicament of the villagers. Being one of the villagers, Fokir joins his community to kill the tiger because he realizes that if it gets released now, one of them may be victimized. Kanai becomes benevolent to the victims who are killed by tigers. Ghosh depicts the multiple thoughts of the world about the conflict of environmental justice through three points of view in his novel. Even the victims are not paid compensation by the government because they are considered environmental justice victims. Ghosh writes to portray the pathetic condition of their lives:

It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too – that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings? (325)

The writer tells the readers about the consciousness of the preservation of animals but it should not be done at the expense of human life. Environmentalists keep up their effort for an integral and mutual biocentric state which will lead to the establishment of environmental justice. Both humanity and morality come together to develop our conscience so that our minds can acquire an ecocentric decision to conserve natural resources. Environmentalists emphasize the preservation of endangered species and humanists try to keep up humanity by discarding any kind of discrimination among people. At the end of the novel, we see that Piya goes with Fokir to Garjontola to gather information about the Irrawaddy dolphins and there they confront a horrible cyclone that takes away the life of Fokir. Deforestation is the reason for natural disasters because smugglers are chopping down trees enormously in the forest and smuggling wood to earn money. Unknowingly humans are destroying themselves by chopping trees and nature is taking its revenge for humankind. It is said that: "If you want to taste the real meaning of life for hundreds and thousands of years, then enjoy afforestation" (Bhushan 133). Equality or justice is used as a framework to defend the inequality of the environment, but ecologists always want to maintain harmony between humans and nature. Environmental justice cannot only bring ethics or morality in human beings rather it makes a way for environmental integrity.

## Conclusion

The novelist finally represents the picture of Sundarbans regarding social and environmental injustice, delineating the characters of the novel. He has realized that the whole world is suffering from environmental pollution, but most of the blame is imposed on the poor or hungry people. This kind of blame should be stopped and every person should acquire responsibility to be alert for environmental pollution. He wants to mean that both humans and wildlife should have an equal right to remain on the beautiful earth. Social discrimination and oppression should not be kept in the minds of people to develop a vigorous atmosphere. Military power or any kind of expulsion is not necessary to protect nature. Ecologists try to raise ethics and humanity in the people so that they do not damage natural resources without any reason. The moral sense will help them to make the right decision concerning environmental conservation and destruction. The novel remains open-ended and the novelist throws a question to the readers to come forward to protect the extinct lives without harming or killing people.

## Works Cited

- Bagwan, Prof. Nafisa. "Eco-Criticism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*." *International Inventive Multidisciplinary Journal*, vol. VI, no. V, May 2018, pp. 17–21.
- Bhushan, Vishwa. "An Ecology and Eco-Criticism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 05, 2021, pp. 133–41, <https://doi.org/10.53032/TCL.2021.5.6.18>.
- Dobson, Andrew. *Justice and the Environment: Conceptions of Environmental Sustainability and Theories of Distributive Justice*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, 2004, [www.penguin.co.in](http://www.penguin.co.in).
- Gill, Gitanjali Nain. *Environmental Justice in India: The National Green Tribunal*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.
- Madhanagopal, Devendraraj, et al., editors. *Environment, Climate, and Social Justice: Perspectives and Practices from the Global South*. Springer, 2022.
- Mukhtar, Rabia. *An Eco-Critical Appraisal of the Selected Novels of Amitav Ghosh*. University of Jammu, 2016.

Sahu, Smita. "The Emergence of Environmental Justice in Literature." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 5, no. 2, Apr. 2014, pp. 547–51.

Sandler, Ronald, and Phaedra C. Pezzullo, editors. *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement*. The MIT Press, 2007.

Umakiran, Mrs. K. "An Eco-Critical Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's Novel 'The Hungry Tide.'" *International Journal of Research*, vol. 07, no. 03, Mar. 2020, pp. 29–33.

