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Lives at the Edge: Culture, Body, and Ecology in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

The paper is an endeavour to explore an integral relation between culture, body and ecology with special reference to a novel called *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, showing how human and non-human reciprocate with each other in a tidal landscape—Sundarban. Taking the 'dwelling perspective', an idea propounded by Tim Ingold, into consideration, the article will examine how the bodies of the forest dwellers—woodcutters, boatbuilders, honeygatherers and fishermen—serve as a repository of ecological knowledge through their encounter with various natural forces of the delta: river, tidal currents, flora and fauna. Incorporating Michel Faucault's idea of 'biopolitics', the paper will have an in-depth analysis of the control of 'bodies' by the state intervention in the name of progress and development, highlighting the Morichjhapi incident that cost the lives or 'bodies' to be more specific, of the refugees at the expense of conservation policies. The essay will deploy Rob Nixon's notion of 'slow violence' to show how the vulnerable bodies are prone to the gradual accumulation of systematic invisible harms – be it climate change, pollution, exclusion, displacement and so on. The paper will also discuss how the novel posits an ethics of shared existence rather than promoting armchair policies that often ignore the firsthand experiences and sideline the voices from the margin, challenging the notion of human exceptionalism. In a nutshell, the article foregrounds the idea of ecology that is lived and culturally oriented, dismantling the boundaries between human and non-human.

Keywords: Embodied Ecology; Dwelling Perspective; Biopolitics; Slow Violence; Sundarbans.

Introduction

The intricate entanglement of culture, body, and ecology finds a compelling literary articulation in The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh, where the Sundarbans emerges not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic, living entity that shapes and is shaped by human and non-human interactions. Situated within the volatile tidal ecology of the delta, the novel foregrounds a world in which survival is contingent upon an intimate, embodied engagement with shifting landscapes, unpredictable waters, and multispecies encounters. This paper seeks to explore this integral relationship between culture, corporeality, and environment by drawing on Tim Ingold's concept of the "dwelling perspective," which reconceptualizes human existence as embedded within, rather than detached from, ecological processes. In this sense, the bodies of forest dwellers—woodcutters, honey gatherers, fishermen, and boat builders—become living archives of ecological knowledge, inscribed through everyday negotiations with tides, rivers, flora, and fauna.At the same time, the paper interrogates how such embodied knowledge systems are often undermined by regimes of power and governance. Using Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics, the essay examines how state mechanisms regulate and discipline bodies in the name of development and conservation. The Morichjhapi massacre becomes a crucial historical lens through which the violence of such interventions is exposed, revealing how marginalized populations are rendered expendable within larger ecological and political agendas. This systemic marginalization is further illuminated through Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," which captures the gradual, often invisible forms of harm inflicted upon vulnerable communities through displacement, environmental degradation, and climate precarity.By weaving together these theoretical frameworks, the paper argues that *The Hungry Tide* advances an ethics of coexistence that challenges anthropocentric hierarchies and technocratic environmentalism. Instead of privileging detached, "armchair" policy perspectives, the novel foregrounds lived experience, emphasizing the voices and knowledge systems of those inhabiting the margins. Ultimately, this study posits an understanding of ecology that is not abstract or external, but deeply lived, culturally mediated, and corporeally inscribed—where the boundaries between human and non-human are continuously negotiated and reimagined.

The Sundarbans as a Lived Tidal Ecology: Embodied Knowledge and Dwelling

In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans function not merely as a geographical setting but as an active ecological force that profoundly shapes human life, culture, and corporeality. Ghosh repeatedly foregrounds the instability of this tidal landscape, where land and water resist fixity and permanence. Early in the novel, the tide country is described as a place where "rivers have no banks and the land itself is fluid" (7), underscoring the impossibility of territorial certainty and human mastery. Islands emerge and disappear with the tides, rendering cartographic and administrative boundaries fragile and provisional. This ecological volatility demands a mode of living that is adaptive, sensory, and deeply embodied.The inhabitants of the Sundarbans do not seek to dominate nature; instead, they negotiate with it on a daily basis. Survival depends upon an acute attentiveness to water currents, shifting tides, animal behaviour, and forest rhythms. Such ecological engagement resonates strongly with Tim Ingold's "dwelling perspective," which rejects the nature–culture binary and views humans as beings who live *within* ecological processes rather than outside them. In *The Perception of the Environment* (2000), Ingold states that knowledge is generated through "practical engagement with the environment" rather than detached observation (142). In the novel, this principle is embodied in characters like Fokir, whose understanding of the river emerges from

lived familiarity rather than institutional expertise.This contrast becomes especially visible in the relationship between Piya, the trained cetologist, and Fokir, the illiterate fisherman. While Piya relies on charts, instruments, and scientific protocols to study river dolphins, Fokir navigates the waterways through bodily memory and sensory attunement. Ghosh emphasizes that Fokir's knowledge "came not from books or charts, but from years of living with the water, reading its moods as one reads a familiar face" (55). His body functions as a repository of ecological knowledge, shaped by repeated encounters with tides, storms, and river life. For Fokir, the river is not an object of study but a lived presence. Piya gradually realizes that "for Fokir the river was not something he observed from a distance; it was the element in which his life had been shaped" (126). This recognition destabilizes the hierarchy between scientific and indigenous knowledge, foregrounding an epistemology grounded in dwelling and bodily exposure. However, Ghosh's narrative does not romanticize embodied ecological knowledge. Fokir's death during the cyclone marks the limits of corporeal expertise in the face of ecological extremity. In the climactic scene, Fokir shields Piya's body with his own as the storm intensifies, a moment where ecological knowledge culminates in bodily sacrifice. His death exposes the vulnerability that underlies all forms of dwelling in the tide country, where knowledge does not guarantee survival. The body here becomes an ethical site, compelling Piya—and the reader—to confront the insufficiency of detached scientific objectivity when faced with lived ecological risk. Through this representation, *The Hungry Tide* articulates the Sundarbans as a lived ecology, where culture is shaped by environmental uncertainty and bodies remain perpetually exposed to danger—from cyclones, crocodiles, and tigers to hunger and disease. Ghosh insists that ecology cannot be understood apart from the corporeal experiences of those who inhabit it, thereby reimagining environmental knowledge as embodied, relational, and ethically charged.

Culture, Ritual, and Bodily Negotiation with Nature

Cultural practices reveal how the body mediates the relationship between humans and ecology. Rituals associated with forest entry, fishing, and honey collection reflect an acute awareness of ecological danger. The worship of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess, exemplifies a cultural system that recognizes the agency of non-human forces. As the novel notes, Bon Bibi rules a moral order in which "no one could take more than their share, and no one could enter the forest without acknowledging its power" (27). These rituals discipline the body, regulating movement, speech, and desire within the forest. Silence, caution, and collective responsibility are culturally inscribed bodily practices that ensure survival. Ghosh describes how forest-goers believe that a careless word or gesture can invite disaster, suggesting that the body must remain constantly alert to ecological signs. Such practices resonate with anthropological understandings of ritual as ecological adaptation. By foregrounding these cultural forms, the novel challenges modern developmental narratives that dismiss indigenous beliefs as superstition. Instead, Ghosh suggests that these rituals encode environmental wisdom accumulated through generations of living with risk. The erosion of such cultural systems under state intervention signals not progress, but ecological and ethical loss.

Biopolitics and the Regulation of Vulnerable Bodies: Morichjhapi Revisited

While the novel affirms the value of embodied ecological knowledge, it simultaneously exposes the brutal mechanisms through which vulnerable bodies are regulated, displaced, and ultimately destroyed under state power. The Morichjhapi episode remains the novel's most searing political moment, laying bare the violence embedded in conservation-

driven governance. Recounted through Kusum's memory, the episode refuses historical distance and insists on bodily suffering as its central truth. She recalls how the settlers were told that "this land was not meant for people like us" (262), a declaration that marks the moment when citizenship is withdrawn and certain lives are rendered disposable. The violence inflicted on the Morichjhapi refugees is not immediate extermination but calculated deprivation. The state cuts off food, drinking water, and medical access, slowly converting ecological protection into a machinery of death. Ghosh's narrative lingers on corporeal detail: "People began to die of hunger and cholera… their bodies were left floating in the river" (270). By foregrounding starvation, illness, and exposed corpses, the novel resists reducing Morichjhapi to a policy failure or administrative error. Instead, it insists that conservation, when severed from human ethics, can function as a lethal biopolitical instrument. This logic aligns closely with Michel Foucault's formulation of biopower as the authority to "make live and let die" (Faucault 241). In Morichjhapi, the state does not simply kill; it withdraws the conditions necessary for life. The refugees are abandoned in the name of ecological purity, their deaths framed as unfortunate but necessary collateral damage. Kusum's testimony cuts through this abstraction when she insists that the island was never empty: "Who decided that this place had no people?" she asks bitterly (264). Her question exposes the fiction of uninhabited wilderness that legitimizes violent conservation practices. Ghosh further emphasizes that those targeted were already socially precarious—lower-caste, landless refugees whose bodies carried the marks of historical displacement. The novel thus situates Morichjhapi within a broader postcolonial condition in which marginalized lives are repeatedly sacrificed to sustain elite visions of development and environmental order. As Kusum reflects, "They were killing us for the sake of animals" (271), a line that starkly reveals the ethical perversion of a conservation model that values abstract nature over living human bodies. Morichjhapi, then, becomes more than a historical episode; it stands as a critique of environmental governance that refuses to acknowledge embodied human presence. By anchoring political violence in hunger, illness, and death, *The Hungry Tide* demands that ecology be rethought not as an exclusionary ideal but as a shared, lived condition—one that must account for the bodies it governs, abandons, or erases.

Slow Violence and the Accumulation of Ecological Harm

Rob Nixon's notion of "slow violence" is particularly relevant to *The Hungry Tide*, where environmental harm unfolds incrementally rather than through spectacular catastrophe.In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor(2011),* Nixon defines slow violence as "attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). In the Sundarbans, this violence manifests through erosion, salinization, hunger, displacement, and recurring natural disasters. Ghosh captures this condition when he describes the tide country as a place where "nothing is fixed except the water and the mud" (7), emphasizing the persistent instability that erodes both land and life over time. These gradual processes leave enduring marks on human bodies. Chronic malnutrition, illness, and exhaustion testify to how ecological degradation becomes corporeally internalized. The novel repeatedly emphasizes that such violence disproportionately affects refugees, women, and children, whose bodies bear the cumulative burden of environmental neglect. Kusum's account of Morichjhapi makes this painfully clear as she recalls how people "began to die, not all at once, but one by one, from hunger and sickness" (270). The Morichjhapi massacre thus represents not an isolated event but an acute rupture within a longer continuum of ecological injustice. By foregrounding these embodied experiences, Ghosh challenges developmental narratives that prioritize economic growth over human and ecological

well-being. The novel insists that environmental justice must reckon with the lived, bodily consequences of ecological exploitation.

Non-Human Agency and the Critique of Human Exceptionalism

A defining feature of *The Hungry Tide* is its sustained attention to non-human agency. Tides, dolphins, tigers, and storms emerge as active forces rather than passive backdrops. Early in the novel, the tide country is described as a place where "the land is reclaimed by the sea twice a day,"(26) emphasizing the transience of human presence. Such descriptions destabilize assumptions of human control over nature. The tiger attacks in the novel further challenge anthropocentric ethics. Ghosh refuses to frame the tiger as a moral antagonist; instead, it is portrayed as acting within its ecological domain. Kanai's reflection that the tiger "kills because it must" foregrounds a logic of survival rather than cruelty. Similarly, the river dolphins elude scientific mastery, reminding Piya that non-human life resists total comprehension. By granting narrative agency to non-human forces, Ghosh dismantles human exceptionalism and calls for an ethics of humility. The vulnerability of human bodies before tides and storms underscores the novel's central claim: ecology is not a system humans manage from above, but a relational field in which all bodies—human and non-human—are mutually exposed to risk.

Conclusion: Toward a Lived and Embodied Ecology

The Hungry Tide offers a profound rethinking of ecology as a lived, embodied, and culturally grounded experience. Through its portrayal of forest dwellers, refugees, and non-human agents, the novel reveals how bodies function as sites of ecological knowledge, cultural memory, and political struggle. Drawing upon Ingold's dwelling perspective, Foucault's biopolitics, and Nixon's slow violence, this paper has argued that Ghosh dismantles rigid binaries between nature and culture, human and non-human. By foregrounding bodily vulnerability and ecological reciprocity, *The Hungry Tide* challenges technocratic environmentalism and human exceptionalism. It calls for an ethics of shared existence that acknowledges the voices and experiences of those living at the margins of ecological crisis. In doing so, the novel emerges as a vital intervention in contemporary debates on culture, body, and ecology, particularly within postcolonial and environmental humanities discourse.

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