

Environment History and Culture in The Hungry Tide

Posted on October 30, 2018

View this essay online:

<https://academic-master.com/environment-history-and-culture-in-the-hungry-tide/>

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* turns the Sundarbans into more than a dramatic setting. Its shifting islands, mangrove forests, tidal channels, storms, animals, refugees, and multilingual communities create the conditions through which the novel asks what environmental protection means in a place already shaped by poverty and political displacement. Three elements are especially important: the [Bon Bibi tradition](#), Piya Roy's research on Irrawaddy dolphins, and the remembered violence at Morichjapi. Ghosh refuses to separate these strands into a simple conflict between modern science and local culture. The tide country contains several forms of knowledge and several kinds of vulnerability at once. Endangered species require protection, yet so do people whose livelihoods depend on entering dangerous forests and rivers. Refugees need land and security, yet conservation law can define settlement as illegal. The novel's environmental ethics therefore emerge from tension: protecting nature becomes credible only when history, livelihood, language, and unequal political power are included in the definition of the environment.

The Tide Country Refuses Stable Boundaries

The Sundarbans resist stable boundaries in both ecological and social terms. Tides repeatedly create and erode land, salt water enters freshwater spaces, storms destroy embankments, and channels shift in ways that frustrate fixed maps. Residents survive by reading currents, mud, weather, animal signs, and seasonal change as forms of practical knowledge. This instability also complicates the outsider's image of wilderness. The region may appear beautiful and exotic to tourists or researchers, but for people who fish, collect honey, maintain embankments, or move between fragile islands, the same landscape is a workplace and a source of recurring danger. Ghosh uses the setting to challenge any conservation model that imagines "nature" as a pristine sphere separate from human history. Colonial administration, border making, refugee policy, caste, labor, and modern protected-area rules have already shaped who can live and work in the delta. The tide country is therefore not an untouched backdrop waiting to be preserved. It is a dynamic social-ecological system in which every claim about protection also raises questions about access, risk, and authority.

Bon Bibi and an Ethics of Restraint

Bon Bibi provides a cultural vocabulary for those questions. In Sundarbans tradition, she is a revered protector associated with an ethical order governing entry into the forest, and her story is shared across Muslim and Hindu communities in forms that do not fit neatly within rigid religious categories. The narrative of Bon Bibi, Shah Jongoli, Dokkhin Rai, and Dukhey expresses limits on greed and recognizes the forest as a domain where human need must coexist with nonhuman power. Ghosh does not present this tradition as a scientific substitute for ecology. Its importance lies in the moral relationship it imagines: people enter a dangerous environment with obligations, not with unlimited entitlement to extract. Dokkhin Rai's association with tiger power and appetite turns greed into an ecological as well as social problem. This ethic also complicates outside assumptions that formally trained conservationists alone possess legitimate environmental knowledge. Stories, ritual, memory, and working experience can preserve practical understandings of risk and restraint even when they use a language different from the categories of wildlife biology or public administration.

Piya, Fokir, and Competing Ways of Knowing

Piya and Fokir embody the novel's most sustained encounter between formal science and local ecological knowledge. Piya is an American cetologist of Bengali ancestry who arrives to study Irrawaddy dolphins. Her professional methods allow her to identify species, record habitat patterns, and connect observations to wider conservation science, yet her Bengali is limited and her cultural connection to Bengal does not make her an insider in the tide country. Fokir, an illiterate fisherman, understands channels, tides, animal movement, and weather through long experience. Their collaboration works partly because neither can dominate the other through fluent speech; observation, gesture, and shared work become important forms of communication. Kanai, by contrast, possesses linguistic fluency but often mistakes translation for complete understanding. Through these relationships, Ghosh rejects the idea that expertise is singular. Piya's science and Fokir's embodied knowledge answer different questions and become stronger when brought into dialogue. The novel does not romanticize local knowledge as infallible, but it does expose the arrogance of conservation that ignores people who encounter the environment every day.

Morichjhapi: Conservation and Political Violence

The history of Morichjhapi reveals the political danger of separating environmental law from social justice. Bengali refugees, many from marginalized caste communities, settled on Morichjhapi in the late 1970s after displacement and difficult years in refugee camps. The government of West Bengal treated the settlement as illegal within a protected forest area, imposed restrictions and an economic blockade, and forcibly removed the residents in 1979. Accounts describe deaths, hunger, and violence, although exact casualty numbers remain disputed because documentation is incomplete. In

the novel, Nirmal's notebook preserves this memory and prevents the event from disappearing behind administrative language about forest protection. Ghosh does not argue that habitat conservation is unnecessary. Instead, he asks what kind of environmentalism becomes possible when a state that has already failed displaced people uses conservation law to justify further dispossession. Nilima's Badabon Trust offers a different model of institutional action through healthcare and community support, emphasizing practical assistance rather than romantic politics. The distinction between the Trust and the sacred Bon Bibi tradition is essential to understanding the novel's layered response.

Human-Animal Conflict and the Limits of Distant Conservation

Human-animal conflict brings the novel's ethical tension into immediate view. When villagers kill a tiger trapped near their settlement, Piya responds with horror because she sees an endangered animal subjected to brutal violence. For residents, however, tigers are not distant conservation symbols; they can kill people who enter forests for work and threaten communities already living with material insecurity. Fokir's participation in the crowd shocks Piya and exposes the limits of an ethic formed at a safer distance from danger. Ghosh does not ask readers to approve the killing. He asks whether conservation can demand sacrifice from people who receive little compensation, protection, or alternative livelihood. The later cyclone intensifies that question when Fokir protects Piya and dies. His death should not reduce him to a noble local figure sacrificed for an educated outsider. It makes Piya's future research morally dependent on the community whose knowledge and risks made that research possible. Her decision to work through local institutions points toward conservation based on partnership rather than extraction.

Conclusion

The Hungry Tide demonstrates that environmental ethics in the Sundarbans cannot be separated from refugee history, caste, livelihood, language, scientific knowledge, local culture, or state power. The unstable geography of the tide country undermines fantasies of fixed borders between land and water, just as the novel undermines easy divisions between expert and local, human and animal, or conservation and development. Bon Bibi offers an ethic of restraint embedded in regional tradition; Piya contributes scientific methods; Fokir contributes embodied knowledge; Morichjhapi exposes the violence that can occur when environmental law ignores displaced people; and the tiger episode shows why distant conservation values can conflict with daily survival. Ghosh does not resolve these tensions by choosing humans over wildlife or wildlife over humans. His more demanding argument is that both must be considered within the same political ecology. Protection becomes legitimate when the people bearing environmental costs participate in decisions, their history is remembered, and their livelihoods and safety are treated as part of the ecosystem rather than as obstacles to it.

References

Ghosh, A. (2005). *The Hungry Tide*. Houghton Mifflin.

Jalais, A. (2010). *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*. Routledge.

Mallick, R. (1999). Refugee resettlement in forest reserves: West Bengal policy reversal and the Marichjhapi massacre. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 58(1), 104-125.

Weik, A. (2006). The home, the tide, and the world: Eco-cosmopolitan encounters in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.