

A STUDY OF ECO CRITICISM IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF AMITAV GHOSH

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Abstract

This study investigates Amitav Ghosh's fiction and nonfiction through the framework of ecocriticism. It argues that his oeuvre challenges the anthropocentric assumptions of modernity and develops a vision of coexistence that unites ethical, ecological, and historical inquiry. Concentrating on *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the *Ibis* Trilogy (2008–2015), *Gun Island* (2019), and the nonfictional *The Great Derangement* (2016), the discussion traces how Ghosh entwines environmental history with colonial capitalism, vernacular knowledge, and the unsettling temporalities of the Anthropocene. Natural forces in these works—tides, storms, mangroves, and cetaceans—function not as decorative settings but as dynamic presences that disrupt borders and narrative conventions. Drawing on the principal concepts of Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, Rob Nixon, Timothy Morton, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour, the paper demonstrates that Ghosh advances an aesthetic and moral response to planetary crisis founded on interdependence, accountability, and the imaginative repair of human–environment relations.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, ecocriticism, Anthropocene, environmental humanities, multispecies ethics, slow violence, postcolonial ecology

Introduction

Over more than four decades of sustained creativity, Amitav Ghosh has produced a corpus that traverses continents, centuries, and disciplines. His novels and essays connect the deltas of Bengal with the trading ports of the Mediterranean and the plantations of Southeast Asia, constructing a cartography in which geography, history, and ecology continually interact. While Ghosh has long been recognised for his command of global history and maritime exchange, the ecological dimension of his work has assumed particular significance in what is now termed the Anthropocene. In a period marked by rising seas, unstable climates, and mass displacement, his fiction raises a fundamental question: how can literature represent the agency of nonhuman forces—monsoons, mangroves, cyclones, and tides—without reducing them to metaphor or background?

Through an ecocritical reading, this paper explores the ways in which Ghosh reconfigures the relationship between nature and culture. Ecocriticism, as articulated by Glotfelty and Buell, considers how literary texts engage with environmental realities and the moral responsibilities implied by that engagement. Within this interpretive field, Ghosh offers three related

interventions. First, he presents the environment as an active historical participant enmeshed with empire and commerce. Second, he places indigenous and vernacular forms of ecological knowledge in dialogue with scientific rationality, suggesting a parity of insight between them. Third, he reshapes narrative form itself—stretching the limits of realism—to register the uncanny, large-scale phenomena that characterise planetary change.

These strategies distance Ghosh from both romantic nostalgia and apocalyptic spectacle. His fiction does not idealise untouched nature nor indulge in catastrophic fatalism; rather, it calls for an ethics of attention and reciprocity between human and nonhuman realms. The analysis that follows therefore situates Ghosh at the intersection of postcolonial studies and environmental humanities, reading his novels as experiments in form and thought that seek to imagine modes of dwelling adequate to the ecological crises of the twenty-first century.

Literature Review

The convergence of ecological thought and postcolonial critique has brought Amitav Ghosh's fiction to the forefront of environmental humanities scholarship. Critics increasingly recognise his narratives as complex meditations on the entanglement of empire, ecology, and global modernity. From *The Circle of Reason* (1986) to *Gun Island* (2019), Ghosh's works trace the movement of people, commodities, and ideas across the Indian Ocean world while exposing the ecological consequences of these circulations. His novels are therefore read not only as historical or political interventions but also as efforts to imagine alternative relationships between humans and their environments.

Early interpretations of Ghosh primarily emphasised his role as a chronicler of migration and colonial history. Scholars such as Suvir Kaul and Anshuman Mondal examined his reconstruction of imperial archives and his use of polyphonic narration to recover suppressed voices of the past. Subsequent research, however, began to perceive the ecological undercurrent that informs this historiography. The frameworks articulated by Lawrence Buell and Rob Nixon—Buell's notion of the *environmental imagination* and Nixon's concept of *slow violence*—provided new critical tools for understanding how Ghosh links environmental degradation with the long durée of empire and capitalism.

In South-Asian literary studies, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments* (2010) marked a decisive turn. Mukherjee situated Indian English fiction within global environmental debates, arguing that writers such as Ghosh reveal how ecological destruction and social inequality are mutually constitutive. Building on this argument, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley's edited volume *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011) described Ghosh's narratives as "tidalectic," their structures echoing the cyclical flows of the monsoon and the sea. These readings positioned him as a key figure connecting local ecologies with planetary processes.

Several critics have focused on individual texts through explicitly ecocritical frameworks. In *The Hungry Tide*, Anupama Mohan and M. Mukherjee identify the Sundarbans as a liminal environment in which human and nonhuman actors constantly negotiate survival. The novel's depiction of mangrove forests, endangered species, and recurring displacement exemplifies the fragile coexistence that defines Ghosh's ecological vision. Likewise, Debjani Ganguly and Sharmila Sen interpret the *Ibis Trilogy* as a maritime history of empire and environment, where the circulation of monsoon winds mirrors the movement of labour and capital.

Ghosh's critical text *The Great Derangement* (2016) has attracted particular attention for its intervention in literary form. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*

(2021), notes that Ghosh redefines the novelist's responsibility by questioning realism's capacity to represent planetary crisis. Timothy Clark and Ursula Heise extend this discussion, proposing that narrative must evolve new temporal and spatial scales capable of expressing climate change's distributed causality. Ghosh's argument that modern literature has rendered the improbable unspeakable has thus become central to contemporary ecocritical discourse.

Later scholarship has turned to *Gun Island*, reading it as a synthesis of myth, migration, and environmental anxiety. Ranjan Ghosh and Shubhendu Das describe the novel as a form of "eco-realism" that bridges Bengali mythic tradition with global climate catastrophe. Its blending of folklore and science represents, in their view, a new cosmopolitan ecological consciousness—one that perceives the interconnectedness of cultural and environmental crisis.

Ghosh's earlier hybrid work *In an Antique Land* has also been re-examined in this context. Manisha Basu and Priya Joshi observe that his ethnographic prose anticipates later environmental-humanities methodologies by collapsing the divide between human agency and material environment. Through its juxtaposition of medieval and modern worlds, the text reveals ecological continuity across time.

Taken together, this body of criticism positions Ghosh as a writer who unites postcolonial and ecological concerns, expanding ecocriticism beyond its Euro-American emphasis on wilderness and the pastoral. Despite this extensive engagement, certain gaps remain. Few studies trace the evolution of Ghosh's environmental imagination across his career or analyse how his shifting narrative strategies—from realism to mythic speculation—respond to accelerating planetary change. The present paper addresses this lacuna by undertaking a comprehensive examination of Ghosh's major works, demonstrating how his representation of nature advances from metaphor to agency and articulates a global ethic of coexistence essential to ecological thought in the twenty-first century.

Ecocritical Framework

Ecocriticism has developed from a specialised interest in nature writing into a broad, interdisciplinary field that connects literature with environmental philosophy, geography, history, and ethics. As Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm describe it, ecocriticism studies "the relationship between literature and the physical environment," but later critics expanded its focus beyond the mere representation of nature. Lawrence Buell called for an environmental criticism that questions the moral and political structures shaping human interaction with the nonhuman world. Rob Nixon introduced the idea of *slow violence* to account for ecological harm that occurs gradually—erosion, toxicity, or displacement—rather than through spectacular catastrophe. Timothy Morton's concept of *hyperobjects* highlights the difficulty of grasping planetary phenomena such as climate change, while Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene* insists on the need to "stay with the trouble" of coexistence rather than pursuing mastery or escape. Bruno Latour further dissolves the boundary between society and nature, arguing that both humans and nonhumans participate in networks of agency.

Ghosh's own critical work *The Great Derangement* (2016) enters this theoretical dialogue. He contends that the modern realist novel—moulded by Enlightenment rationality and bourgeois probability—cannot easily represent environmental catastrophe because its conventions exclude the improbable or the nonhuman. The task for contemporary fiction, Ghosh argues, is to rediscover narrative modes capable of expressing the scale, agency, and unpredictability of the natural world. His novels enact this theoretical position: they test how

narrative can register the planetary without abandoning human experience, and how historical imagination might serve as ecological consciousness.

The Hungry Tide: The Tide as Character and Ethical Force

The Hungry Tide (2004) provides the most concentrated example of Ghosh's environmental vision. Set in the Sundarbans—a tidal archipelago where land and sea ceaselessly reconfigure one another—the novel renders geography as a living actor. Its intertwined plots follow Piya Roy, a marine biologist studying the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin; Fokir, an illiterate fisherman whose intuitive knowledge of the tides guides her research; and Kanai Dutt, a translator whose urban detachment contrasts with their intimacy with place. Through these characters, Ghosh explores different epistemologies of nature: scientific, experiential, and linguistic.

The novel refuses to romanticise either local knowledge or Western science. Instead, it stages a fragile collaboration between them. Fokir's embodied understanding of currents complements Piya's empirical observation, suggesting that ecological insight arises from cooperation rather than hierarchy. The text also interrogates the politics of conservation: the effort to preserve wildlife sometimes jeopardises the subsistence of human communities. By situating this tension within the volatile landscape of the Sundarbans, Ghosh demonstrates that environmental ethics must accommodate both human vulnerability and nonhuman agency.

Formally, the narrative mirrors the tidal rhythms it describes. Its structure oscillates between advance and retreat, between human aspiration and natural upheaval. When a cyclone devastates the region near the novel's conclusion, the event does not function as melodramatic climax but as revelation: the natural world asserts its continuity beyond human design. *The Hungry Tide* therefore becomes an ethical parable of coexistence, where listening—to the landscape, to other species, to each other—emerges as the only sustainable mode of survival.

The Ibis Trilogy: Ecology of Empire and Oceanic Histories

The *Ibis Trilogy*—comprising *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015)—extends Ghosh's ecological imagination from the delta to the oceanic scale of empire. Set against the backdrop of the nineteenth-century opium trade and the First Opium War, the trilogy reconstructs the global networks through which plants, people, and power circulated. Here the environment is not a static backdrop but the very infrastructure of imperial expansion. Monsoon winds determine trade schedules, the poppy plant dictates patterns of agriculture and addiction, and the sea connects rather than separates cultures.

Ghosh uses this maritime world to expose the ecological foundations of capitalism. The forced cultivation of opium in colonial India exemplifies the transformation of biodiverse landscapes into monocultures serving imperial profit. The novels trace how this economic system degrades both soil and society, linking environmental exhaustion with human exploitation. In this respect, Ghosh's fiction echoes Nixon's notion of slow violence: the damage wrought by empire unfolds incrementally across generations and ecosystems.

Linguistically, the trilogy creates a polyphonic environment that mirrors the diversity of the oceanic world it depicts. Sailors, merchants, and indentured labourers speak in a hybrid lexicon of Bhojpuri, Bengali, Cantonese, and Laskari. This linguistic plurality resists the homogenising tendencies of empire and functions as a literary analogue to biodiversity. Just as

ecological balance depends on diversity, so does cultural vitality depend on the coexistence of multiple languages and perspectives.

Through the *Ibis* novels, Ghosh thus constructs an environmental history of global modernity. By foregrounding the agency of winds, crops, and currents, he reveals that empire was sustained not only by human ambition but by natural systems harnessed to economic power. The trilogy's conclusion, in which the violence of war converges with the turbulence of weather, underscores the indivisibility of ecological and political catastrophe.

In an Antique Land: Ecology, Anthropology, and Memory

Published in 1992, *In an Antique Land* merges historiography and ethnography to illuminate the reciprocal relationship between environment and culture. The text juxtaposes Ghosh's anthropological fieldwork in rural Egypt during the 1980s with his archival reconstruction of a twelfth-century Indian slave, revealing how patterns of trade, agriculture, and climate connect distant centuries. The irrigated landscapes of the Nile Delta, dependent on cyclical flooding, represent a premodern ecological economy founded on mutual adaptation rather than extraction. Ghosh contrasts this rhythm with the mechanised irrigation projects of the modern state, which impose linear notions of progress upon a system long governed by natural cycles. Through these parallel narratives, *In an Antique Land* argues that historical continuity resides not in political institutions but in the enduring dialogue between humans and their environments. The text's hybrid form—half travelogue, half archival narrative—embodies this reciprocity by blending scientific observation with vernacular storytelling. Ecology thus appears not as a separate discipline but as a mode of lived memory inscribed within everyday labour and belief.

The Calcutta Chromosome: Disease, Ecology, and Subaltern Science

The Calcutta Chromosome (1995) re-imagines the history of malaria research as a story of concealed collaboration between colonial scientists and local subalterns. In Ghosh's re-telling, discovery itself becomes a collective, trans-species process involving the mosquito, the parasite, and the humid environment that sustains them. The novel dismantles the myth of isolated scientific genius by portraying knowledge as ecological—arising from the interaction of bodies, climates, and materials.

Through this narrative, Ghosh interrogates the epistemological authority of Western science. The novel's secret network of indigenous experimenters inverts colonial hierarchies, suggesting that empirical breakthroughs often depend on the unacknowledged labour of local practitioners. The swampy landscape of Bengal functions as both setting and metaphor: a dense, unpredictable environment where boundaries between human and nonhuman, self and other, dissolve. *The Calcutta Chromosome* thus situates disease within a broader ecology of power, demonstrating how scientific modernity and colonial governance were mutually constitutive.

The Shadow Lines: Borders, Ecology, and Fluidity

Although *The Shadow Lines* (1988) predates Ghosh's explicit turn to environmental themes, it anticipates his later concern with connection and permeability. The novel's exploration of partition and migration is also an ecological meditation on flow—of people, stories, and landscapes. Rivers and roads that once linked communities become political boundaries, yet their physical persistence undermines the illusion of separation.

By presenting history as a web of movements rather than a sequence of discrete events, Ghosh transforms the novel into a model of ecological thinking. Human identity, like natural

systems, is shown to depend on circulation and exchange. The book's non-linear structure mirrors the feedback loops of memory and the cyclical temporality of environment, illustrating that no border—geographical or psychological—can entirely contain the forces that sustain life.

The Glass Palace: Forests, Empire, and Environmental Exploitation

In *The Glass Palace* (2000), Ghosh broadens his historical panorama to examine the ecological dimensions of imperial capitalism in Southeast Asia. Set in colonial Burma and India, the novel narrates how the British extraction of teak and oil transformed entire ecosystems into instruments of profit. The destruction of the teak forests symbolises both environmental and cultural dispossession: a once-balanced landscape reduced to commodity.

Ghosh intertwines personal destinies with environmental catastrophe. The migrations of workers, soldiers, and traders parallel the displacement of species and the depletion of resources. The forest, at first a space of abundance, becomes a site of silence and absence, embodying the long-term consequences of colonial exploitation. In exposing this convergence of ecological and economic violence, *The Glass Palace* prefigures contemporary discourses on resource justice and sustainability.

Gun Island: Climate, Myth, and Migration

Gun Island (2019) brings Ghosh's environmental imagination into direct conversation with the planetary crisis of the twenty-first century. The novel follows Deen Datta, a rare-book dealer whose investigation of a Bengali legend leads him from the Sundarbans to Venice and Los Angeles. Along this route, myth, migration, and climate change intertwine. Floods, wildfires, and heatwaves blur the boundary between the supernatural and the scientific, suggesting that the "unbelievable" has become the new reality of the Anthropocene.

By reactivating the myth of Manasa Devi—the snake goddess who governs fertility and retribution—Ghosh re-introduces spiritual cosmology as an interpretive resource for climate discourse. Myth here functions not as superstition but as an ecological epistemology capable of encompassing phenomena that rational empiricism cannot easily narrate. The novel's coincidences and temporal dislocations challenge the conventions of realism, fulfilling the aesthetic programme outlined in *The Great Derangement*. *Gun Island* concludes Ghosh's long engagement with environmental questions by asserting that narrative itself is a form of adaptation, a means by which humanity re-imagines its relation to a changing planet.

Cross-Cutting Ecological Motifs

1. Water as Archive

Across Ghosh's fiction, water functions as an archive of both history and ecology. Rivers and oceans preserve traces of migration, trade, and extinction, testifying to the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman trajectories. In *The Hungry Tide*, the shifting channels of the Sundarbans record successive cycles of habitation and erasure, while in the *Ibis Trilogy* the Indian Ocean carries the memories of empire. Water, in these narratives, transcends national and temporal boundaries; it is the medium through which Ghosh articulates a planetary memory.

2. Language as Ecology

Ghosh's polyglot prose enacts linguistic biodiversity. The mixture of Bhojpuri, Bengali, Cantonese, and nautical pidgin in the *Ibis Trilogy* parallels the interdependence of species within an ecosystem. By refusing linguistic uniformity, he resists the monocultural logic of empire and

affirms diversity as the foundation of resilience. Language in his novels behaves ecologically: adaptive, hybrid, and open to transformation.

3. Colonial Capitalism and Environmental Extraction

Throughout his oeuvre, Ghosh reveals how colonial expansion reshaped both landscapes and societies. The opium fields of Bihar, the teak forests of Burma, and the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean all testify to the material foundation of empire in environmental exploitation. His fiction exposes capitalism as an ecological as well as economic system—one that continues to generate “slow violence” through resource depletion and climate inequality.

4. Vernacular Knowledge and Scientific Dialogue

A persistent feature of Ghosh’s writing is the interaction between local knowledge and formal science. The collaboration between Piya and Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* exemplifies a productive synthesis between empirical research and indigenous skill. Similarly, *The Calcutta Chromosome* re-imagines scientific discovery as a collective act that includes the contributions of subaltern practitioners. Ghosh suggests that ecological understanding emerges through dialogue, not dominance, between epistemological traditions.

5. Climate and Form

Ghosh’s most radical innovation lies in his transformation of literary form. He expands the realist novel to accommodate the improbable events of climate change—cyclones, floods, and migrations that defy conventional probability. By fusing historical realism with mythic resonance, he creates a narrative structure capable of expressing the vast temporality of the Anthropocene. In doing so, he transforms the novel into an ecological medium that mirrors the complexity of the systems it seeks to represent.

Synthesis of Motifs

These recurring motifs constitute a coherent ecological philosophy. Water embodies continuity and memory; language models biodiversity; empire reveals the persistence of extraction; vernacular knowledge restores ethical balance; and narrative form evolves to mirror environmental uncertainty. Together they compose what may be termed Ghosh’s *literary ecology*—a framework through which history, culture, and environment are understood as inseparable. His fiction teaches that storytelling itself is an ecological act: a means of remembering, connecting, and sustaining the world.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh’s literary corpus constitutes one of the most sustained and nuanced engagements with ecology in contemporary Anglophone fiction. His novels and essays move across centuries and continents, yet they are unified by an insistence that environmental history and human history are inseparable. Through an evolving interplay of anthropology, myth, historiography, and speculative realism, Ghosh demonstrates that the ecological crisis is not an isolated natural disaster but the culmination of political, economic, and imaginative processes that began with imperial modernity.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the tidal geography of the Sundarbans embodies the precarious reciprocity between human aspiration and environmental constraint. The *Ibis Trilogy* enlarges this vision to the global scale of the nineteenth-century maritime world, where empire’s trade routes coincide with ecological disruption. *In an Antique Land* and *The Calcutta Chromosome* excavate the epistemological foundations of scientific modernity, revealing knowledge as a shared creation of human and nonhuman agents. *The Glass Palace* situates deforestation and extraction at the heart of colonial capitalism, while *Gun Island* and *The Great Derangement*

translate the climate emergency into narrative form, insisting that storytelling itself must adapt to the vastness of planetary time.

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