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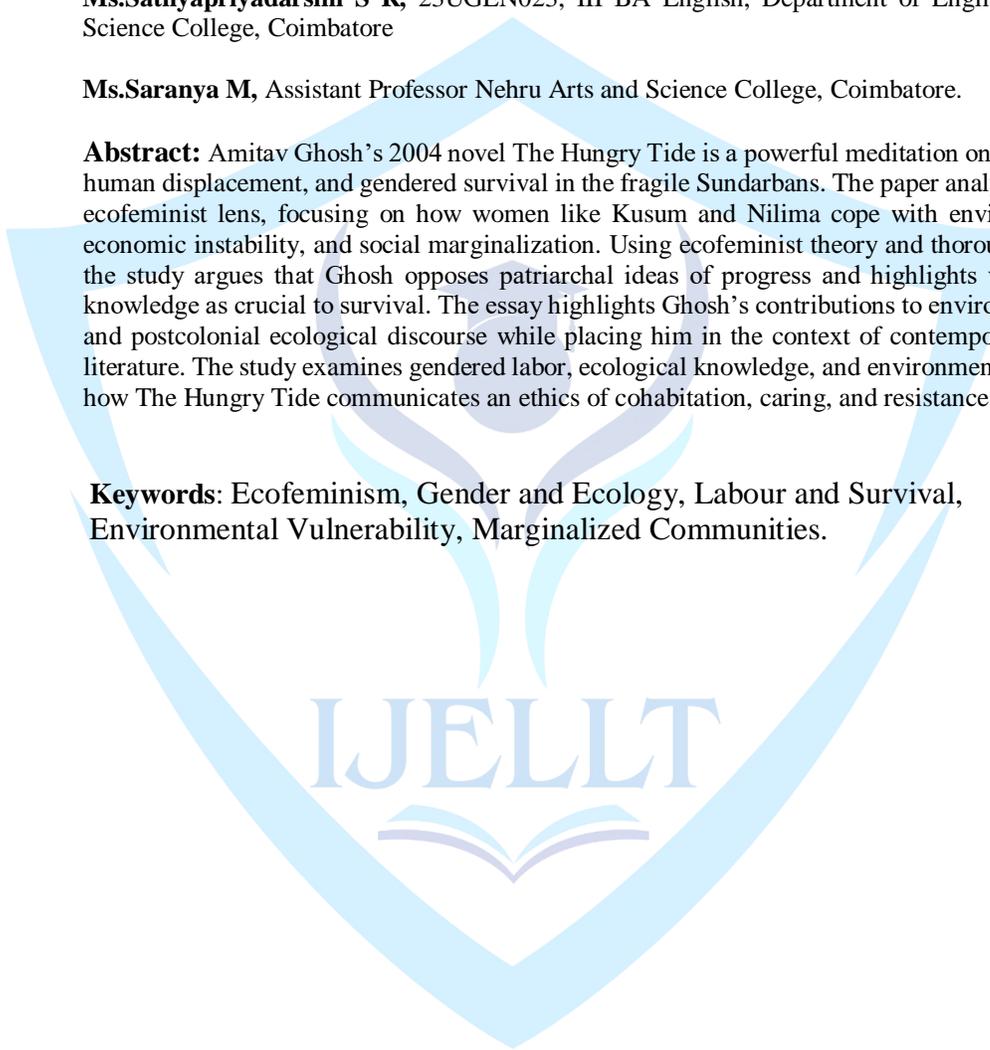
**Navigating Tides: Gender, Labour, and Survival in a Fragile Ecology — An Ecofeminist Reading of Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide**

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**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* is a powerful meditation on ecological fragility, human displacement, and gendered survival in the fragile Sundarbans. The paper analyzes the book via an ecofeminist lens, focusing on how women like Kusum and Nilima cope with environmental fragility, economic instability, and social marginalization. Using ecofeminist theory and thorough textual analysis, the study argues that Ghosh opposes patriarchal ideas of progress and highlights women's ecological knowledge as crucial to survival. The essay highlights Ghosh's contributions to environmental humanities and postcolonial ecological discourse while placing him in the context of contemporary Indian English literature. The study examines gendered labor, ecological knowledge, and environmental injustice to show how *The Hungry Tide* communicates an ethics of cohabitation, caring, and resistance.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Gender and Ecology, Labour and Survival, Environmental Vulnerability, Marginalized Communities.



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## Literature Review

Various researchers have explored and discussed the book *The Hungry Tide* on the backdrop of its handling of ecological fragility, displacement, and gendered labor. Aparajita De specifically mentions, “ecological vulnerability is inseparable from social marginalization, and women emerge as the primary sufferers of environmental instability” (De 170-183). Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee adds that nature is depicted “as a dynamic and often hostile presence that destabilizes anthropocentric assumptions of mastery” (Mukherjee). Eco-feminist thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood have discussed the patriarchal and hierarchical ways of dealing with ecological issues and the ways in which they have been harmful to women’s ecological knowledge.

Rob Nixon’s explanation of ‘slow violence’ can be regarded as a prime example of such invisible ecological disruptions and their harmful consequences on marginalized societies (Nixon 2). Although various researchers have attempted to explore and shed light on ecological fragility and displacement, no researcher has specifically tried to evaluate and discuss the value of women’s ecological knowledge as a means of resistance; this paper attempts to do so.

## Research Methodology

Using a qualitative approach, this study combines a close reading of *The Hungry Tide* with thematic and ecofeminist analysis. By examining important people (Kusum, Nilima) and occasions (Morichjhapi eviction, tidal navigation), the intersections of gender, labor, and ecological fragility are investigated. Secondary sources include postcolonial ecological criticism (Mukherjee, De), slow violence (Nixon), and ecofeminist theory (Shiva, Plumwood, Warren). Themes such as invisibility, survival, and resistance are identified using thematic coding and analyzed through ecofeminist and postcolonial frameworks to investigate how women’s labor and knowledge mediate survival in fragile ecologies.

## Introduction

Amitav Ghosh, one of the most significant contemporary Indian English writers, was born in 1956. History, migration, colonialism, displacement, and ecological disasters are all common topics in his body of work. Ghosh's cosmopolitan background he was educated in Delhi, Oxford, and Alexandria after being born in Calcutta had a big impact on his creative vision. Because of his exposure to a wide range of cultures, histories, and languages, his writing transcends national boundaries and offers a global perspective that combines the local and the global. This global experience is further enhanced by his academic expertise in social anthropology, which informs his topic concerns and narrative style. As a result, Ghosh's fiction often blends imaginative storytelling with meticulous historical research to produce narratives that are both academically and emotionally engaging.

Ghosh is a writer of more than three decades of widespread literary production that includes a range of literary genres, such as historical fiction, political fiction, travelogues, and environmental non-fiction, among others. His novels, including *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004), represent his relentless commitment to exploring the themes of identity, memory, colonialism, and global migration. His magnum opus—the Ibis Trilogy, which includes *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015)—solidifies Ghosh's position as the leading historical fiction writer, extolling a compelling and sweeping saga of colonialism, global migration, and the opium trade in the nineteenth century. In his latest batch of non-fiction writings, such as *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Ghosh focuses on the topics of climate change, colonialism, and the impact of modernity on the environment, positioning himself as a prominent figure in the domain of environmental humanities.

One of the notable features of Ghosh's contribution to literature is the way the writer links personal human experiences to wider historical and ecological processes. His stories often reveal the effects of colonialism and capitalism on both humans and ecosystems. Ghosh's writing style also stands out from the more conventional realist fiction genre because it does not take anthropocentric views but focuses on the role of nature instead. In his book *The Great Derangement*, the author critiques modern literature for not treating climate change well, claiming that climate disaster is a cultural and creative crisis rather than just a scientific or political crisis. He thus sees the inability of recent fiction to depict climate change as also arising from the limitations of modern literary form.

The Hungry Tide holds a particularly important position within this greater corpus of literature. The novel, which is set in the ecologically unstable Sundarbans, explores issues of displacement, survival, and ecological vulnerability by fusing human drama with environmental history. The Hungry Tide stands out for its persistent attention on underprivileged groups, particularly women, whose lives are influenced by unstable connections to power, water, and land. Ghosh highlights the gendered aspects of ecological struggle through characters like Kusum and Nilima, showing how women are disproportionately affected by economic instability, state violence, and environmental destruction. As a result, the book becomes not just an environmental story but also a profoundly moral and political work that explores the price of progress and the silence surrounding the lives of the underprivileged. In this way, Ghosh's literary contributions go beyond narrative to include a more comprehensive ethical analysis of the modern society. His writings compel readers to reevaluate prevailing narratives of development and to acknowledge the connections between nature, history, and human survival. His dedication to highlighting perspectives that are sometimes left out of public conversation while depicting the precarious balance between mankind and nature is particularly evident in *The Hungry Tide*.

### **Research gap and Research Problem**

Although existing research on *The Hungry Tide* has explored ecological vulnerability, displacement, and environmental neglect, there is still a notable lack of studies investigating how women's ecological knowledge and gendered labor serve as means of survival and resistance in the Sundarbans. Earlier analyses have underscored the weaknesses of marginalized groups and the idea of slow violence (Nixon 2; De 170–183), yet few have thoroughly examined the connections between gender, labor, and environmental power. This research aims to fill this void by examining: In what ways do ecological instability, social marginalization, and government policies influence women's experiences? How does Ghosh emphasize women's wisdom as a means of survival and defiance? In what ways does the novel challenge hierarchical structures that favor scientific expertise over local knowledge? In what ways do gendered labor and lack of visibility connect to environmental susceptibility? How does viewing through an ecofeminist perspective highlight the links among environmental justice, gender, and postcolonial governance? By exploring these inquiries, the study emphasizes the frequently ignored agency, knowledge, and strength of women in vulnerable ecosystems, placing Ghosh's novel within modern ecofeminist discussions.

## **Ecofeminism: A Theoretical Framework**

A critical perspective known as ecofeminism looks at the various ways that women and the natural world are subjugated. Ecofeminist theory, which first appeared in the late 20th century, contends that the same patriarchal ideas that support the exploitation of nature also support the subjugation of women. These ideas are based on hierarchical structures that devalue gender, emotion, and ecological interconnectedness while elevating masculine, reason, and control. Therefore, ecofeminism aims to demonstrate how shared power structures are the root cause of both gender discrimination and environmental degradation.

Vandana Shiva, one of the most important thinkers in ecofeminist thought, accuses modern progress of exploiting women and the environment. She argues that dominant economic ideologies view the natural environment as lifeless material that can be harvested, despite the fact that women's work and knowledge are overlooked or undervalued. According to Shiva, this worldview stems from a patriarchal understanding of progress that prioritizes financial gain and technological dominance over sustainability and compassion. In *Staying Alive*, she emphasizes how the marginalization of women's ecological knowledge has led to social injustice and environmental destruction as traditional, life-sustaining practices have been replaced by predatory organizations driven by power and profit.

In a similar vein, Val Plumwood emphasizes how inflexible dualisms like man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, and reason/emotion are central to Western philosophical traditions. These dichotomies create a hierarchy where the second phrase is subservient and the first is elevated. Plumwood contends that by portraying women as weak, submissive, or illogical, these conceptual boundaries justify the dominance of both nature and women. She demonstrates in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* that environmental exploitation is both a material and an ideological process, supported by cultural myths that normalize conquest and control. Ecofeminism challenges these hierarchical systems by emphasizing interconnection, relational thinking, and ethical responsibility. Instead of viewing humans as separate from or superior to nature, ecofeminist ideology emphasizes the interdependence of all living forms. It promotes values like sustainability, reciprocity, and compassion by acknowledging that cooperation rather than dominance is required for ecological existence. This perspective is based on the recognition of women's traditional ecological knowledge, which has historically been overlooked or ignored by patriarchal organizations. This knowledge comes from personal experience, means of subsistence, and close interaction with the natural world.

When examining Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, where women's lives are intricately linked to the cycles of the natural world, this theoretical framework is especially pertinent. The book illustrates how women's existence depends on their knowledge of tides, forests, and seasonal cycles, despite the fact that political and scientific authorities continue to devalue this information. Ecofeminism's primary concern that environmental crises cannot be understood or managed without addressing the gendered power systems that define human connections with nature is reflected in the text through its portrayal of female protagonists navigating ecological uncertainty. By emphasizing women's experiences in an ecologically sensitive area, *The Hungry Tide* shows the ecofeminist view that social justice and environmental sustainability are inexorably intertwined. The book concludes by endorsing the idea that compassion, harmony, and respect for ecological boundaries are essential to human existence and moral progress.

### **The Sundarbans: Ecology, Instability, and Gendered Space**

The Sundarbans, the primary setting of the novel, are among the most ecologically fragile regions on Earth. The landscape is resistant to both human control and permanence because of mangrove forests, cyclones, varying tides, and the ongoing threat of flooding. Amitav Ghosh claims that the location highlights the environment's instability and fluidity. Here, villages can be devastated by tidal floods, land may disappear overnight, and human habitation is constantly unexpected. In addition to being geographical, this ecological instability has deep symbolic significance. The unpredictability of the Sundarbans is a reflection of the precarious life of its inhabitants, particularly women, who must continuously contend with the elements to survive.

The unpredictability of the land embodies the existential predicament of those who live in the delta, where life is impacted by forces beyond human control. Instead of only using the Sundarbans as a setting, scholars have noted that Ghosh employed them as an active agent that alters social relationships and emphasizes the weakness of human dominance over the environment. As Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee observes, the novel presents nature as "a dynamic and often hostile presence that destabilizes anthropocentric assumptions of mastery and permanence" (Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments*).

### **Gendered Ecology and Women's Invisible Labour**

In this precarious landscape, however, women bear a disproportionate burden of the ecological and social vulnerability. Their daily lives are intimately linked to the rhythms of nature—collecting firewood, gathering water, preparing food, caring for the children, and supporting subsistence economies. This work is, however, mostly unseen and unaccounted for. Ghosh's narrative consistently points out the silencing of women's endurance in maintaining the circle of life amidst an environmental uncertainty.

Women in the Sundarbans live in an area confronted by cyclones, flooding, hunger, and wildlife, most especially tiger attacks. Yet their labors are rarely recognized as productive or skilled. Their lack of recognition speaks to what the eco-feminist scholar Carolyn Merchant labels as one of the most historical erasures regarding women's work with environmental labour. In *The Death of Nature*, Merchant elaborates on how women's labours have been conventionally naturalized and hence devalued as part of nature, rather than cultural labours worthy of recognition. This reality is demonstrated by Ghosh's portrayal of women gathering fuel, taking care of homes, and negotiating hazardous situations. Despite operating outside of official economic frameworks, their labor supports families and communities. Women are therefore still not included in decision-making processes concerning development, conservation, and land use.

### **Ecology, Power, and Gendered Vulnerability**

The *Hungry Tide* reveals the unequal allocation of ecological danger, according to academics. Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence" is especially pertinent in this context because it characterizes the slow, imperceptible devastation of the environment that disproportionately impacts underprivileged groups. This violence in the Sundarbans takes the form of famine, erosion, displacement, and state indifference, all of which disproportionately affect women. In Ghosh's fiction, "ecological vulnerability is inseparable from social marginalization, and women emerge as the primary sufferers of environmental instability," according to Aparajita De (De, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*). This realization sheds light on how gender exacerbates ecological precarity in the book.

Furthermore, the lived realities of local women are frequently disregarded by the state's conservation policies. Despite their good intentions, environmental protection policies often limit access to rivers and woods, depriving women of vital resources. This perpetuates what Vandana Shiva refers to as "environmental apartheid," in which underprivileged groups are denied access to natural resources in the name of conservation (Staying Alive).

### **The Sundarbans as a Gendered Space**

The Sundarbans therefore appear not just as a natural environment but also as a gendered area influenced by power dynamics. Although men frequently participate in wage labor or migrate, women stay connected to the land and water, experiencing the effects of ecological and economic instability. Their understanding of tides, seasons, and survival techniques showcases a deeply rooted ecological wisdom that is mostly overlooked by official accounts. By depicting women's daily challenges, *The Hungry Tide* critiques prevailing environmental narratives that favor scientific knowledge over personal experience. Ghosh proposes that genuine ecological insight comes from coexistence, adaptation, and honoring natural rhythms rather than from control or dominance. In this regard, the Sundarbans serves as a compelling symbol for ecofeminist ideology: a place where human fragility, environmental instability, and gendered existence overlap. The book ultimately demonstrates that environmental crises are intertwined with social injustice and that women's perspectives are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of sustainability.

### **Kusum: Ecological Knowledge and Marginalized Survival**

One of *The Hungry Tide*'s most moving examples of ecological marginalization is Kusum. Displacement, poverty, and environmental precarity have impacted her existence, placing her at the nexus of ecological vulnerability, class, and gender. Her intimate and embodied knowledge of the forest, tides, and seasonal cycles allows her to live despite being widowed and lacking institutional protection. This knowledge is gained via life experience, adversity, and ongoing exposure to danger rather than through conventional education. Ghosh underlines time and again how important it is to comprehend the harsh nature of the environment in order to survive in the Sundarbans. He points out that Kusum discovers early on that the forest follows its own logic and does not allow for human error.

Fear, perseverance, and adaptation shape Kusum's relationship with nature, which is not idealized. Her familiarity with animals, tides, and woodland routes is an example of what ecofeminist scholars refer to as contextual ecological knowledge, which is acquired from everyday interaction as opposed to scientific abstraction. However, Kusum's knowledge lacks institutional credibility despite her profound comprehension of the environment. She is not shielded from state violence or relocation by it. The Morichjhapi expulsion, when refugees are forcibly evacuated in the guise of environmental conservation, is when this marginalization is most noticeable. Ghosh's account demonstrates that this violence is institutional rather than incidental. He notes that both natural causes and political neglect ruined the eviction victims.

A key viewpoint for understanding Kusum's fate is provided by Rob Nixon's idea of incremental violence. Nixon defined slow violence as a kind of destruction that happens gradually, is often unnoticed, and disproportionately impacts the impoverished. Kusum's suffering grows over time through starvation, political defection, and relocation rather than being the product of a single dramatic event. As a result, her death becomes symbolic of a larger trend in which environmental restrictions hurt people in a planned and clandestine way.

Kusum's narrative also highlights the ethical contradictions of conservation programs that prioritize natural preservation over human existence. The forest is protected as a natural resource, but those who depend on it are seen as expendable. This exemplifies the marginalization of women and the disadvantaged in environmental decision-making, as defined by ecofeminist experts. According to Vandana Shiva, these conservation tactics uphold colonial power relations by severing the connection between the environment and human survival and robbing disadvantaged communities of their right to survive.

Through Kusum, Ghosh questions this growth paradigm and provides a powerful critique of environmentalism devoid of social justice. Her life and death serve as an example of how, when ecological preservation is divorced from equality and compassion, it becomes another form of violence. In *The Hungry Tide*, Kusum's suffering serves as a symbol of ecofeminist resistance, highlighting the immorality of systems that put land before life.

### **Nilima: Migration, Labour, and Gendered Invisibility**

The gendered effects of ecological displacement and socioeconomic precarity are best illustrated by Nilima's story in *The Hungry Tide*. She joins the urban informal economy after being driven from her Sundarbans home due to poverty and environmental instability. Her labor of preparing meals, maintaining homes, and negotiating limited resources that remains unappreciated and devalued, despite the fact that her life necessitates flexibility and ongoing alertness. Ghosh highlights Nilima's ability to remain invisible as a survival tactic. Her silent perseverance is a reflection of the larger reality of women navigating environments where their labor is vital but socially unseen while absorbing the shocks of ecological and economic catastrophes.

Karen Warren's ecofeminist perspective highlights this lack of visibility, noting that patriarchal structures undermine the worth of relational and care-oriented work ("The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism" 126). Nilima represents this devaluation: her labor supports her family, yet it remains largely unseen within economic, social, and policy frameworks. Ghosh's portrayal emphasizes this notion, illustrating how urban migration and environmental instability place an unequal strain on women. Although resilient, Nilima continues to be marginalized, reflecting ecofeminist critiques of development approaches that exploit women's labor and strip them of agency. Vandana Shiva also highlights that marginalized women frequently face the greatest susceptibility to environmental and economic crises, as their knowledge and work are consistently ignored (*Staying Alive*). In Nilima's situation, her adjustment to city living, her attentiveness, and her silent perseverance demonstrate both ingenuity and the obscurity enforced by patriarchal and economic systems.

Ghosh draws attention to the relationship between social invisibility, gendered labor, and environmental relocation through Nilima. Her narrative shows that women's lived experiences and embodied knowledge are essential to comprehending ecological and social resilience, and that survival is inextricably linked to socio-ecological environment. Her story thus supports the ecofeminist claim that social justice and ecological issues are inextricably linked, and that women's labor and expertise are essential to any effective response to environmental change.

## Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh offers a complex and powerful ecofeminist critique of contemporary growth, environmental plunder, and the gendered marginalization of marginalized populations in *The Hungry Tide*. By focusing on Kusum and Nilima's experiences, the book shows that ecological crises are never neutral; they disproportionately impact women, the impoverished, and displaced people, exposing the intricate relationships between social hierarchy and environmental vulnerability.

Ghosh challenges anthropocentric and patriarchal notions by highlighting women's wisdom, resiliency, and survival skills. Two examples of the kinds of ecological and social wisdom that are often excluded from official policy and scientific discourse are Nilima's adaptable strategies in the urban informal economy and Kusum's profound understanding of tides, woodlands, and animal behavior. The book illustrates how environmental knowledge is relational, embodied, and experienced rather than merely technical or institutional a perspective crucial to ecofeminist theory.

*The Hungry Tide* advocates for a new ecological ethic based on responsibility, coexistence, and caring by illustrating the precarious balance between humans and nature. It challenges the exploitative, dominance-driven concepts of conservation and development that disregard the actual conditions of underprivileged groups. By doing this, Ghosh's work emphasizes that respect for ecological interconnectedness, social fairness, and ethical obligation for all beings are more important for sustained survival than dominance over nature. As a result, the book acts as a literary manifesto for ecofeminist ideas, reminding readers of the close connection between social justice and the environment.

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