

Green Narratives: Exploring Ecological Consciousness and Environmental Justice in Contemporary Indian Writings

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Abstract

The depiction of ecology and environmental issues in Indian English novels has become increasingly significant in recent decades, reflecting growing awareness of climate change, biodiversity loss, and the socio-political dimensions of environmental crises. Indian English fiction often explores these themes through the lens of history, mythology, displacement, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. In Indian writings, displacement and environmental degradation is shown to disproportionately affect tribal inhabitants, rural poor, and coastal communities. Amitav Ghosh novels speak about colonialism and ecological destruction where Ghosh connects the exploitation of nature with the violence of colonialism. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* powerfully portrays the conflict between environmental conservation and human livelihood by situating the narrative in the ecologically sensitive and politically contested region of the Sundarbans. It offers a nuanced portrayal of the conflict between environmental conservation and human livelihood. It critiques top-down conservation efforts that marginalize the poor, while also recognizing the need to protect fragile ecosystems. Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* moves beyond the scientific or technical narratives that dominate mainstream climate discourse, Ghosh repositions the environmental crisis as a crisis of empire, extractivism, and imagination. Through the story of the nutmeg, a spice once worth more than gold, he weaves a larger narrative about human domination of nature and its global consequences. Ghosh delivers a powerful, historically grounded, and politically charged examination of the environmental crisis facing the modern world.

Key words: climate change, environmental conservation, human livelihood, crisis

INTRODUCTION:

Indian English novels increasingly engage with ecological and environmental concerns by portraying the deep interconnection between nature and human society. Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Indra Sinha explore themes of climate change, displacement, ecological degradation, and the impact of industrialization. These narratives often blend mythology, history, and local knowledge to highlight the cultural and ethical dimensions of environmental crises. Rather than treating nature as mere setting, these works present it as a central, often endangered, character- emphasizing the urgent need for environmental justice and sustainability. The depiction of ecology and environmental issues in Indian English novels has become increasingly significant in recent decades, reflecting growing awareness of climate change, biodiversity loss, and the socio-political dimensions of environmental crises. Indian English fiction often explores these themes through the lens of history, mythology, displacement, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

Indian novels often portray nature as integral to human life, establish an interconnectedness of Humans and Nature, not separate from it. Writers such as Amitav Ghosh (*The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*) emphasize the symbiotic and spiritual relationship between humans and the environment. Nature is frequently depicted as an active force, capable of reshaping human destinies. Many Indian depict environmental degradation and climate change and highlight the consequences of deforestation, pollution, rising sea levels, and climate-induced disasters. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh presents climate change as a real, lived experience, using symbols and myths to bridge ancient fears with modern realities. Displacement and environmental degradation is shown to disproportionately affect tribal inhabitants, rural poor, and coastal communities. Mahasweta Devi's works like *The Aranyer Adhikar* and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* deal with toxic disasters and the struggles of environmental victims, such as those affected by the Bhopal Gas Tragedy.

Indian authors often integrate indigenous myths and folklore to depict ecological wisdom. These traditions serve as alternative worldviews that emphasize balance with nature, unlike exploitative modern development. Many novels critique rapid industrialization and its ecological cost. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* subtly critiques development-induced displacement, especially through the construction of dams and loss of native landscapes. Themes of eco-resistance appear in novels focusing on forest rights, anti-mining protests, or water

wars. Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* hint at environmental concerns through the lens of socio-political resistance.

Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh has inspired a new wave of "cli-fi" (climate fiction) in South Asian literature. His lectures and essays are widely read in environmental humanities, postcolonial studies, and literary studies. He is a vocal critic of Western technocratic approaches to climate change, advocating for indigenous knowledge systems and collective responsibility. Besides being one of India's most celebrated contemporary authors, he has significantly contributed to ecological and environmental discourse through his fiction and non-fiction. His writings often address the complex intersections of climate change, colonialism, capitalism, and human displacement. His themes relate to climate change as a narrative challenge. He conveys that "Climate change is not a far-off event: it is already a present reality for millions." He argues that the unpredictability of climate events defies conventional literary forms. His novels speak about colonialism and ecological destruction where Ghosh connects the exploitation of nature with the violence of colonialism, especially in *The Nutmeg's Curse*. He also stresses on Human-nonhuman relationships and often blurs the boundaries between humans and animals, and gives agency to nature. He highlights how environmental crises disproportionately affect marginalized and postcolonial societies.

Amitav Ghosh in his non-fiction *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) critique the literary world's failure to address climate change, calling it "the great derangement" of our times. He questions why climate change is underrepresented in literature, how colonialism and capitalism have shaped environmental crises and the limitations of modern narratives in dealing with non-human forces. He articulates that "Climate change is not just a crisis of the environment; it is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (46). In another Eco-fiction novel *Gun Island* (2019), he blends myth, migration, and climate change. The protagonist, a rare book dealer, unravels a Bengali legend while traveling through climate-threatened landscapes. He attempts to make climate change "thinkable" through storytelling. In his non-fiction *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), he explores the history of colonialism and environmental exploitation through the story of the nutmeg spice. He combines personal travelogue, historical narrative, and philosophical reflection.

The Hungry Tide (2004)

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is a critically acclaimed novel that combines environmental, cultural, and human themes set in the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest in the Bay of Bengal. It's one of his most important works where ecology plays a central role in the narrative. The setting of the novel is Sundarbans, a delta region in eastern India and Bangladesh known for its tigers, cyclones, tidal rivers, and unpredictable terrain. The pivotal character is Piya Roy, a marine biologist of Bengali origin raised in the U.S., studying river dolphins (Orcaella). Kanai Dutt is a Delhi-based translator who visits the Sundarbans to read a journal left by his late uncle. Fokir is an illiterate local fisherman with a deep, instinctive understanding of the natural world. The environmental and ecological themes speak about first Man vs. Nature: The Sundarbans is portrayed as a beautiful but dangerous land where nature is powerful and often deadly. Second, Ecological Fragility: The region is vulnerable to cyclones, floods, and rising sea levels, illustrating the effects of climate change. Third, Human-Nature Connection: Fokir represents a deep, intuitive bond with nature, contrasting with Piya's scientific approach. Next, Conservation vs. Livelihood: The novel questions how conservation (e.g., dolphin protection) can conflict with the survival needs of the local people. Last, Non-human agency: The landscape and animals especially the tiger and the tide are not just background but active forces in the story.

The Tide symbolizes unpredictability, impermanence, and nature's power. It also reflects the emotional and political tides in the characters' lives. Sundarbans is a symbol as it is a liminal space, not quite land or water, mirroring the blurred boundaries between cultures, species, and ideologies. The differences in language highlight cultural gaps and non-verbal understanding as Piya speaks English and Fokir doesn't. The novel references the Morichjhāpi Massacre (1979), a real-life incident where Bengali refugees were forcibly evicted and many were killed for settling in protected forest areas. This ties environmental conservation to violence, displacement, and state control, raising questions about who gets to 'own' nature. The novel is widely studied in environmental humanities, postcolonial literature, and ecocriticism. It blends science, mythology, politics, and environmental consciousness. It is one of the earliest examples of Indian eco-fiction with global relevance.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* powerfully portrays the conflict between environmental conservation and human livelihood by situating the narrative in the ecologically sensitive and politically contested region of the Sundarbans. Through rich storytelling and layered characters, Ghosh reveals the moral, practical, and political complexities that arise when efforts to protect nature clash with the survival needs of marginalized communities.

The novel offers a nuanced portrayal of the conflict between environmental conservation and human livelihood. It critiques top-down conservation efforts that marginalize the poor, while also recognizing the need to protect fragile ecosystems. Ghosh's narrative urges a more inclusive and ethical approach to environmentalism, one that balances ecological preservation with social justice. His setting the Sundarbans is itself a conflict zone. The Sundarbans is both a natural treasure as it is a home to endangered species like the Irrawaddy dolphin and the Royal Bengal tiger and mostly a place where impoverished communities struggle to survive through fishing, honey collection, and subsistence farming. "It is the tide country," Ghosh writes, "where everything is always changing, always moving."

This instability applies both to the ecology and to the human condition making survival a daily negotiation.

The Hungry Tide stands as a microcosm of the larger conflict. Piya Roy as a marine biologist represents Western-style conservation science. Her project to study and protect dolphins is noble but risks ignoring the economic realities of the locals who rely on the same waters for livelihood. Fokir is a poor fisherman who lives off the natural world with deep, intuitive knowledge but lacks the scientific language or legal rights to defend his practices. Their collaboration is both hopeful and ironic while they understand each other beyond words, the power imbalance remains stark. This dynamic reflects how scientific conservation can unintentionally marginalize local voices. The Morichjhāpi massacre of 1979 serves as the historical root of the conflict. Ghosh integrates the Morichjhāpi Incident when Bengali refugees who settled in the Sundarbans were forcibly evicted and killed for encroaching on protected forest land. This event highlights how environmental protection, when imposed without equity or justice, can criminalize survival, state-led conservation efforts, backed by environmental laws, were used to justify violence against the poor turning ecology into a tool of exclusion and oppression.

Ghosh raises important ethical questions like who decides which lives matter more -human or animal. He demands an answer to the question: will environmental protection be truly ethical if it ignores poverty, displacement, and history. The novel does not frame environmental conservation and human livelihood as binary opposites, but as entangled concerns. Ghosh shows that true sustainability must consider ecological, cultural, and economic realities together. By portraying both the urgency of conservation and the dignity of survival, the novel advocates for a more inclusive and empathetic approach to environmentalism.

Amitav Ghosh writings critically examine the human relationship with nature, the consequences of climate change, and the socio-political factors contributing to environmental degradation. In his non-fiction book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), he argues that mainstream literary fiction avoids the "uncanny" and "extraordinary" events like climate disasters, even though they define our times. In *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), he explores how imperialism shaped environmental exploitation and how Western powers commoditized nature. He traces how ecological destruction was enabled by the colonial belief that non-Western peoples and lands were exploitable.

The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis (2021)

Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) is a powerful blend of history, politics, and environmental thought. In this work, Ghosh expands his exploration of the climate crisis by uncovering its deep-rooted links to colonialism, militarism, and extractive capitalism. Through the story of the nutmeg, a spice once worth more than gold, he weaves a larger narrative about human domination of nature and its global consequences. Ghosh delivers a powerful, historically grounded, and politically charged examination of the environmental crisis facing the modern world. Moving beyond the scientific or technical narratives that dominate mainstream climate discourse, Ghosh repositions the environmental crisis as a crisis of empire, extractivism, and imagination. Through a compelling blend of history, ecology, and storytelling, Ghosh argues that the roots of today's planetary emergency lie in the violent legacy of colonialism and the ideological framework that allowed humans—especially Western imperial powers—to treat nature and indigenous peoples as objects of conquest and control.

At the heart of the book is the symbolic story of the nutmeg, a spice that was once so rare and valuable it sparked wars and massacres. Ghosh begins with the Dutch colonization of the Banda Islands in present-day Indonesia, where in the 17th century Dutch forces brutally exterminated much of the local population to monopolize the nutmeg trade. This event is not treated as an isolated historical atrocity but as a paradigmatic moment in the emergence of a global system built on violent extraction what Ghosh refers to as "extractivism." He argues that this mind set, which reduces nature to a lifeless resource to be exploited, continues to shape modern capitalism and global geopolitics. Ghosh contends that the environmental crisis is inseparable from this legacy of empire and domination. The same logic that justified colonialism also justifies deforestation, fossil fuel dependency, and the commodification of the Earth. The worldview underpinning these actions sees the planet as inert and

mechanical, a vision that contrasts sharply with indigenous cosmologies that recognize the Earth as living, sacred, and interconnected. By suppressing these alternative ways of knowing and relating to nature, colonial powers not only dispossessed indigenous peoples but also set the stage for the ecological collapse that is faced now.

One of the central themes of the book is environmental injustice. Ghosh highlights how the consequences of climate change are most acutely felt by those who contributed the least to it especially in the Global South. He connects modern climate disasters, such as floods, wildfires, and sea-level rise, to the political and economic inequalities that were born out of colonialism and continue to be sustained by global capitalism. The environmental crisis, for Ghosh, is therefore not just about rising temperatures, it is about power, history, and systemic violence. In addition to history and politics, Ghosh critiques the narrative failures of modern culture, particularly the inability of contemporary literature and media to adequately address the scale and urgency of climate change. He calls this a “crisis of imagination,” a theme he first explored in his earlier work, *The Great Derangement*. According to Ghosh, modern narratives often fail to incorporate the uncanny, the non-human, or the catastrophic, leaving societies intellectually and emotionally unprepared to deal with ecological realities. In response, Ghosh advocates for a reclamation of storytelling, especially indigenous myths, oral traditions, and spiritual worldviews, which can offer alternative pathways to understand and respect the Earth.

Perhaps most importantly, *The Nutmeg's Curse* offers a call to action—not just to reduce carbon emissions or adopt green technologies, but to fundamentally rethink humanity's place in the world. Ghosh envisions a future grounded in humility, reciprocity, and ecological justice, where the stories we tell help us live more ethically on a shared planet. It is not just a book about the environment; it is a profound meditation on history, power, culture, and survival. By linking the environmental crisis to the legacy of colonialism and the myths of Western modernity, Amitav Ghosh challenges readers to see the climate emergency not as an isolated scientific issue but as the product of centuries of systemic exploitation. His work urges a collective reimagining of how we live with the Earth and with one another, offering both a warning and a hopeful vision for a more just and sustainable world.

The book advocates for alternative narratives especially those rooted in indigenous knowledge, myth, and oral traditions. Ghosh argues that to survive the planetary crisis, we must reclaim suppressed stories and shift how we imagine our place in the world. He calls for a re-enchantment of the world, recognition of the Earth as alive and sacred. Spiritual traditions, especially those outside the West, are seen as sources of ecological wisdom and ethical resistance.

Language and silence as a Tool

Language and silence play a profound role in bridging both cultural and ecological divides, offering tools for connection, understanding, and respect. Language is a carrier of culture and environmental knowledge, especially in indigenous communities, where oral traditions preserve deep insights into ecosystems, biodiversity, and sustainable living. Through stories, songs, and rituals, language becomes a medium for expressing humanity's relationship with nature. However, where language reaches its limits, silence offers space for reflection and listening. In many cultures, silence is not emptiness but a sign of respect and attentiveness particularly toward non-human life. It enables humans to listen to the natural world, the rustling of trees, the calls of animals, or the stillness of sacred spaces.

In Amitav Ghosh's novels, silence and non-verbal communication bridge gaps between people of different languages and worldviews, showing that understanding is not always dependent on words. Together, language and silence foster empathy across differences, encouraging humility in the face of complex ecological and cultural realities. To truly address the environmental crisis, we must listen not only to scientific discourse but also to the languages of nature and indigenous wisdom, and sometimes, to the eloquence of silence itself.

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh in his novels, particularly *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, and *The Nutmeg's Curse*, reflect a deep engagement with climate change, ecological degradation, and environmental justice. In *The Hungry Tide*, set in the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans, Ghosh explores the conflict between wildlife conservation and the livelihoods of local communities. Through characters like Piya, a marine biologist, and Fokir, a local fisherman, he contrasts scientific knowledge with indigenous ecological wisdom, highlighting the complexity of human-nature relationships. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh brings climate change into global focus, connecting natural disasters, species migration, and human displacement through a blend of myth and modern science. He emphasizes that environmental crises are not only scientific but also cultural and moral dilemmas. His non-fiction work *The*

Nutmeg's Curse further deepens this argument by linking ecological collapse to colonialism and extractive capitalism.

Ghosh addresses ecological and environmental issues in his novels because he believes that climate change is not just a scientific crisis, but a cultural, political, and moral one. Through his fiction and non-fiction, Ghosh critiques how modern societies especially in the West have ignored the environmental consequences of colonialism, capitalism, and industrial expansion. He argues that literature has a responsibility to reflect the realities of the climate crisis, which are often overlooked in mainstream storytelling. He is particularly concerned with how the Western worldview, which treats nature as lifeless and separate from humans, has led to exploitation and ecological collapse. In contrast, many indigenous and non-Western traditions view the Earth as alive and interconnected with human life. By highlighting these contrasting worldviews, Ghosh calls for a reimagining of humanity's relationship with nature.

Moreover, his novels give voice to marginalized communities: fisher folk, refugees, tribal populations who are most affected by environmental change but least responsible for it. In works like *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, he uses storytelling to humanize the climate crisis, make it relatable, and challenge readers to think ethically and globally. For Ghosh, writing about the environment is both a literary and a moral imperative. His narratives resist simple binaries and emphasize interconnectedness—between humans, non-humans, history, and geography. Through powerful storytelling, he urges readers to rethink dominant worldviews and engage with alternative ways of understanding the planet, making his work vital to contemporary ecological thought.

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