

**WOMEN AND NATURE: ACTIVE AGENTS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*
AND *SEA OF POPPIES*. AN ECOFEMINIST READING**

AINA MARIA DÍAZ-LLABRÉS
Universitat de Lleida
ainamaria.diaz@udl.cat

ESTHER JIMÉNEZ-RODRÍGUEZ
Universitat de Lleida
esther.jimenez@udl.cat

Received: 28-10-2024
Accepted: 26-01-2025



ABSTRACT

The novels *The Hungry Tide* (2005) and *Sea of Poppies* (2008) by Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, depict complex issues of voicelessness, ecofeminist concerns, and female resistance. This article examines the deep connections between women and nature within these novels, focusing specifically on the characters of Kusum and Deeti, who are deeply oppressed under patriarchy. Their struggles represent not only fictional but also historical events of Indian society, as Ghosh intertwines their oppression with occurrences such as the Morichjhāpi massacre and the Opium Trade. In our analysis, we explore how these characters are abused by the patriarchal structure that rules both their native land and their colonial experience. Later on, we aim to delve into how they seek to find a voice through their understanding of nature.

KEYWORDS: Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, *Sea of Poppies*, Agency, Nature, Women, Ecofeminism

RESUMEN *Mujeres y naturaleza: agentes activos en las novelas The Hungry Tide y Sea of Poppies de Amitav Ghosh*

Las novelas *The Hungry Tide* (2005) y *Sea of Poppies* (2008) del escritor indio Amitav Ghosh, abordan temas complejos como el silenciamiento, preocupaciones ecofeministas y la resistencia femenina. Nuestro artículo examina la profunda conexión entre las mujeres y la naturaleza en estas novelas, centrándose específicamente en los personajes de Kusum y Deeti, quienes son profundamente oprimidas bajo el patriarcado. Sus luchas representan no solo eventos ficticios, sino también históricos de la sociedad india, ya que Ghosh entrelaza su opresión con sucesos como la masacre de Morichjhāpi y el comercio del opio. En nuestro análisis, exploramos cómo estos personajes son abusados por la estructura patriarcal que gobierna tanto su tierra natal como su experiencia colonial. Más adelante, buscamos profundizar en cómo intentan encontrar una voz a través de su comprensión de la naturaleza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, *Sea of Poppies*, capacidad de acción, naturaleza, mujeres, ecofeminismo

Colonialism has been crucial in the shaping of India's intricate history. Its inhabitants have suffered from social as well as environmental repercussions caused by the exploitation of their land and Indian women, particularly, have been deeply affected by Western oppression. The aim of this article is to take an ecofeminist approach from the perspective and experience of the colonized. Ghosh's novels, *The Hungry Tide* (2005) and *Sea of Poppies* (2008), are worth examining as these works address pressing issues of colonialism, gender and class oppression, which are at issue both in this discussion and at the present time. As explained by Spivak, covering antisexist work among women of color or women who are oppressed by their class is due (1988: 90). We wish to discuss and inscribe feminist works within postcolonial discourse, which can be achieved through an analysis of these two novels.

Firstly, the Sundarbans, an aquatic area in eastern India, is the setting for *The Hungry Tide* (*THT*). Kusum and Piya, the two female protagonists, are depicted in two storylines that Ghosh deftly combines throughout the narrative. Through the story of Kusum, he delves into historical events like the Morichjhāpi massacre and the partition of India, as well as the subjects of colonialism, feminism and ecology. Secondly, the *Ibis* ship's oceanic journey from India to Mauritius in *Sea of Poppies* (*SP*) depicts the entwining of lives hailing from many social classes. The protagonist, Deeti, has a vision of the *Ibis*. From her husband's passing until her escape on the *Ibis*, a sequence of life-altering events captures a narrative that, among many other themes, comments on colonialism and identity formation.

In order to explore the relationship between women and nature as exemplified in Ghosh's novels, and in an attempt to avoid reductionist and essentialist viewpoints, we will resort to the work of the following critics: Val Plumwood and Gayatri Spivak. Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) radically critiques the Western conception of nature rooted in patriarchy and colonialism. Patriarchy is ingrained in the domination of women and nature. Certainly, she dismantles the association of women with nature and that of men with reason since, she argues, this dichotomy has contributed significantly to women's oppression in the West (Plumwood, 1993: 11). Plumwood asserts that being a woman does not guarantee that we "are provided with an ecological consciousness" (10). Nonetheless, we are interested in how Ghosh's non-Western female characters, specifically Kusum and Deeti, treat nature with empathy, love and care. Certainly, they do not abuse nature but maintain a relationship of interdependence in which one

benefits from the other without harming it. This aligns with Plumwood's proposal of an ecological self that recognizes our bond with nature and other species as a fraternal other. This is "a type of relational self, one which includes the goal of the flourishing of earth others and the earth community among its own primary ends and hence respects or cares for these others for their own sake" (154-155). Our article aims to explore this relationship.

Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) focuses on the figure of the subaltern woman and her voicelessness. She introduces notions of intersectionality that affect native women, "Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways" (90). Subaltern women, just as in the case of nature, have been regarded as the "Other" in the patriarchal context, as opposed to men. Continually, power has been asserted over them, only reinforced by imperialism. Hence, their voices have been systematically ignored. Spivak explores this through *sati*, she explains that we find no testimony of the women's voiced consciousness on the matter (93). Altogether, "one cannot put together a voice" (93). There is a lack of direct testimony on subaltern women's thoughts. Spivak introduces another key point, which is their double marginalization, the figure of the woman disappears under the weight of patriarchy and imperialism (102). Just as in the case of nature, women were in a subjugated position in such a context, therefore silenced. The emphasis of this article lies in voicing both nature and women while positioning them within the discourse of postcolonialism. Moreover, Spivak poses a relevant question, "Who speaks for whom?". We believe Ghosh's works amplify their voices and create an imaginary of what their experiences might have been like. We would like to contribute to Spivak's portrayal of voicelessness by capturing and analyzing gendered identity expressions in the postcolonial texts selected. Moreover, by using an ecofeminist lens we intend to analyze nature alongside women as exploited subjects.

Throughout this article, we will attempt to answer the following questions: "How are women affected in India by patriarchy?" and "How do they attempt to liberate themselves?". In relation to these questions, we contend that in Ghosh's works *THT* and *SP*, women are affected and marginalized by imperialism and its patriarchal essence but through an understanding of the power of nature, they are able to resist and find a voice.

1. Patriarchy, Empire and Power Structures

Focusing on *THT*, native women have been viewed and treated as the "Other" and as "colonized subjects" throughout the history of colonialism. In this way, they have endlessly suffered from inequality and oppression. This association has been perpetually constructed by patriarchal and colonial domination. According to Helen Tiffin's argument in the chapter "Feminism and Postcolonialism" within *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, native women "share with colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression" (Tiffin et al., 1995: 249). Ghosh's *THT* illustrates a variety of female characters who are marginalized, oppressed and excluded from and by hegemonic power in different ways. Two parallel stories—that of Kusum and the biologist Piya—are developed in the novel. As previously stated, our analysis focuses on Kusum, a widow and an orphan from the Sundarbans, who embodies what Spivak calls "the subaltern other". However, as she is affected by patriarchy, manifested in both her native and colonial settings, it is an even stronger marginalization.

Firstly, concentrating on Kusum's oppression due to patriarchy, we learn of her story through Nirmal's¹ diaries. That is to say, even though Nirmal transcribed a small account of her final moments in Marichjhapi, we have no direct record of her story. Therefore, Kusum serves as an illustration of how "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (Spivak, 1988: 9). Despite this, Nirmal admits that he is narrating her story: "This is not my story. It concerns, rather, the only friend you made when you were here in Lusibari: Kusum. If not for my sake, then for hers, read on" (Ghosh, 2005: 74). We could argue that this is a way for Ghosh to simultaneously criticize the voicelessness of native women and provide these women with a voice. As a result, Kusum's story can be heard and spread. Later in this section, Deeti will be examined as a subaltern woman. In addition, from the beginning, we can tell that Kusum's life is shattered. This happens when she witnesses the loss of her father to a man-eating tiger. Due to her father's lack of a permit, her mother is left without any compensation. Hence, both mother and daughter are condemned to extreme poverty. Owing to these circumstances, Kusum's mother is forced to work as a prostitute in Kolkata after being duped by Dilip Choudhury, a landowner, who promised her a job in the city.

¹ Nirmal appears in the story of Kusum. After joining the island's resistance, he dies at the Morichjhāpi massacre.

Later on, Horen Naskor, Kusum's distant relative, saves and protects her when Dilip returns to take her as a prostitute, to follow her mother's fate. In this way, we can observe how the patriarchal system in which she lives always requires her to have a paternal figure that gives her protection, first her father and second, Horen. This point is illustrated in the following passage of the text: "It wasn't safe for her on her own," Nilima had said. "All kinds of people tried to take advantage of her. Someone was even trying to sell her off. If Horen hadn't rescued her, who knows what might have happened?" (Ghosh, 2005: 31). Nonetheless, Kusum manages to resist this system by travelling to Kolkata and saving her mother from prostituting herself. During her time there, Kusum falls in love with Rajen, a food retailer who helps her find and save her mother. Later on, she gives birth to a son named Fokir.

In terms of Kusum's suffering from colonialism, as she becomes a widow after the death of her husband, she feels obliged to seek shelter and food in a safer location. At this point, she encounters the Bengali refugees making their way to Morichjhāpi. Ghosh's blending of this real episode in his fiction is essential to our comprehension of colonialism and empire. In fact, the Morichjhāpi massacre embodies one of the major conflicts within the novel: protecting wildlife without considering local people's lives. Specifically, after the partition of the Indian subcontinent into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan in 1947, people's lives were irremediably affected. As Stein contends in *A History of India* (1998): "The political frontiers failed to safeguard Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus from mutual slaughter. Millions of refugees were unable to find peace except in death as crowded trains moved to and from the Punjab or Bengal and arrived at their destinations laden with corpses" (362). An instance of the terrible consequences faced by citizens was the placement of Bengali refugees in the arid Dandakaranya camps, where neither food nor supplies for people to live on were provided. As a result, these refugees began to settle within protected forest lands on the island of Morichjhāpi in the Sundarbans.

When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash; we crossed the border, there was nowhere else to go. We were met by the police and taken away; in buses they drove us to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red it seemed to be stained with blood ... But no matter how we tried, we couldn't settle there: rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood. [...] We sent some people ahead, and they found the right place; it's a large empty island called Morichjhāpi. For months we prepared, we sold everything we owned. But the police fell on us the moment we moved. They swarmed on the trains, they put blocks on the road (Ghosh, 2005: 164-5).

Returning to Ghosh's fiction, Kusum joins the community of refugees and settles in Morichjhāpi with her son in order to return to her native Sundarbans. Through the writings of Nirmal, Ghosh chronicles the refugees' resistance to the police's attempt to evict the settlers from the island under the pretext of "protecting the wildlife"². Forced to leave the island by the relentless violence of the police, Kusum is literally killed by colonialism when she refuses to leave Morichjhāpi: "It was terrible to see Kusum: her bones protruded from her skin, like the ribs of a drum, and she was too weak to rise from her mat" (Ghosh, 2005: 283). Consequently, hegemonic imperialism erases the whole community and Kusum's existence so that an ecotourist site managed by Western powers can be placed within the area. To further extend this argument, we learn that this project, the Project Tiger, is managed by powers from abroad through Nirmal's record of Kusum's final words:

'The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust.' 'This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world.' (Ghosh, 2005: 283).

It is noteworthy that additional man-eating tigers appeared after this incident as the animals became accustomed to consuming humans after eating the dead remains of the slaughtered refugees. Before the tragedy, the local tigers had not behaved in this way. To further extend our argument, as Pilia contends in her "Dwelling, Dispossession, and 'Slow Violence' in the Time of Climate Change", Ghosh makes use of the story of the Morichjhāpi refugees to foreshadow "the climate migrations involving the lives of the subalterns in South Asia" (Pilia, 2020: 117). Moreover, as Pilia further argues, the fluid and constantly changing state of the Sundarbans provides the best place to merge the environmental and the postcolonial. In fact, we contend that a productive and hopeful response to climate change must also involve the protection and acknowledgment of local people. After examining Kusum's marginalization, we shall argue that Ghosh's text is an illustration of how, following Spivak's claim, instead of just vanishing into pure nothingness, the woman evaporates into a violent shuttling, representing the displaced figure of the "third-world woman" torn between tradition and modernization (Spivak, 1988: 19). Nevertheless, Kusum faces

² According to Burton, this "protection" was based on western dominance and colonization and "the general result was that the idea of 'protection' was often twisted to mean protection against the local inhabitants and their traditional rights to use the forests" (Burton, 1998: 13). Rather, "protection" was used as a pretext to take possession of the colonized country. Furthermore, even if India is independent from the British, this practice still exists.

hegemonic power through her connection with the land and her resistance. We will explore this in the second section of our analysis.

Concentrating on *SP*, it is set in the early 19th century, during the colonial period and the Opium Wars, a time marked by “perhaps the most exploitative regime of imperialist expansion, which was unleashed by imperial Britain on China and India” (Gupta, 2020: 1). This period severely disrupted and damaged local agrarian economies. The use of the opium trade—alongside the exploitation of nature and its resources—to fund and to push forward imperialist values and establish power dynamics exemplifies systemic violence, understood as “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems”, as explained by Žižek (2009: 1). The interests of the British Empire were prioritized at the expense of Indian agriculture, its workers, and natural resources, rendering the economy almost entirely dependent on opium production. The Indian population witnessed the alteration of both their landscape and way of life. Gupta explains that British imperialism oppressed India's peasantry, traders, and economy, while entangling it with the destructive opium trade. This reflects how imperial expansion shaped governance, public discourse, and historical memory in the 19th century (14). Opium became a Western tool for subjugation and control of the Indian population, functioning as a mechanism of exploitation. The production and consumption of opium was voracious, “[...] the factory’s appetite for opium seemed never to be sated” (Ghosh, 2008: 27). To be able to meet the Empire’s demand for opium, the Indian population had to be exploited. Moreover, nature, alongside men and women, were completely subjugated to the needs and profits of the British Empire. We believe this underscores the power structures that characterize the historical period under the British Empire.

In the case of Indian women, they were subjected to the power structures defined by the manifestations of patriarchy, which rendered them voiceless, as previously shown through Kusum. This is closely examined in Spivak’s essay, in which she argues that the subaltern woman is completely muted in the imperialistic, suffering from epistemic violence³ (1988, 90). As a result,

³ An epistemic side of colonialism is the devastating effect of the “disappearing” of knowledge, where local or provincial knowledge is dismissed due to privileging alternative, often Western, epistemic practices. [...] One method of executing epistemic violence is to damage a given group’s ability to speak and be heard (Dotson 2011, 236).

there is no direct access to women's experiences, their voices have been systemically silenced. Such is the case of Deeti's story in *SP*, not only does she inhabit a silenced existence, but she is also tied to very strict patriarchal values. For example, Deeti is often reprimanded by her brother-in-law for not having a son, "You need a son, to give you a helping hand. You're not barren, after all..." (6). His intentions are clearly malign as we will explore later on, but he feels the freedom to comment on Deeti's motherhood and reproduction, while at the same time undermining the value of her daughter, Kabutri. What is more, her brother-in-law insists on the presence of a male figure in the household, displaying the patriarchal nature of her reality.

Women suffered, not only from the same colonial burdens as men, but they were also oppressed by the power structures that ruled the patriarchal society. An example of this is the care of the family's poppy fields. Deeti "is left to manage the poppy crop, their primary source of income" (565), while also being expected to fulfill all her duties as a wife and mother. The pressure she is under is evident when she snaps at her daughter, "So late? [...] You think there's no work to be done?" (6). Deeti is subjected to both domestic and field labor, reflecting the broader exploitation of women who are practically slaves to the male figures in their families, an idea discussed by Burton Stein in his work. As Stein explains, patriarchal heads of households exercised nearly the same control over their wives and children as they did over their slaves (218). Another atrocious example of the control exerted over women is Deeti's rape. During her wedding night, she is drugged by her husband and raped by her brother-in-law in an attempt to ensure the continuation of their family line, hiding from her the husband's infertility or inability to perform. Deeti becomes unconscious, "Her head began to swim [...] she felt herself slipping away from this world" (32). Upon waking the next morning, she senses something might be wrong, "She would have liked to believe him [...] but was unable to retrieve any memory of the latter part of the night" (33). Opium enables Deeti's rape at the hands of her family. The drug "collaborates with her in-laws' malicious intentions to appropriate her fertility for their own purposes. [...] Opium collaborates with the patriarchal dynamics of Deeti's family that have already rendered her body disposable" (Hummel, 2018: 567). Here, the use of opium ensures the enactment of patriarchal power, to the detriment of the female figure.

Spivak pays particular attention to the practice of *sati*, or widow immolation. A rite in which "the woman's subject, legally displaced from herself, is being consumed" (96). This

immolation reinforces the notion that the woman's subject is essentially tied to her husband's body, Spivak defines it as a "legally programmed asymmetry" (98), a structural imbalance that serves to uphold the status of the male figure. Spivak states, "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (102). In Ghosh's *SP*, Deeti is subjected to these same imperialistic and patriarchal power structures after her husband's death and she is expected to perform the ritual of *sati* on her husband's pyre⁴, as a tool to maintain wealth within the hands of the male figures in her family. Deeti's subjugation highlights the pervasive influence of patriarchy. Just as the opium trade served as a tool to ensure Western interests, the practice of *sati* serves as a mechanism to secure the aforementioned legally programmed asymmetry that renders women voiceless and subject-less. In the following section, we shall explore how Kusum and Deeti resist these structures.

2. Nature as a vehicle of female resistance

Focusing on *THT*, it may be said that from the time of the arrival of the Europeans, the Indian environment has continuously been exploited by colonizers who have profited from the fertile land through the abuse of an unending supply of riches. This has impacted native women, as they are in charge of crops and the land. According to Plumwood's claim in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, high technology, environmentally insensitive agriculture and forestry in the "third world" serve to bolster social inequality and Western elite control. As an illustration of this, they increase men's control over the economy to the detriment of women (Plumwood, 1993: 13). Nonetheless, though both nature and women are victims of patriarchal and colonial exploitation, Ghosh's work portrays them as active agents of resistance. In the case of women, they achieve so via revolution and their spiritual bond with nature. On Indian women's spiritual relationship with nature, as their patriarchal social status has traditionally consisted in sustaining their households, Indian women manage crops: "Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their

⁴ Contrary to Kusum, whose origins are working class, and is not expected to perform such a ritual.

social role in providing sustenance” (Shiva, 1988: 59). They work in codependency with nature in order to provide for their families without exploiting the land: “Women in sustenance economies, producing and reproducing wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of a holistic and ecological knowledge of nature’s processes” (41). This has allowed them to develop a close bond with nature. In Ghosh’s novel, through her spiritual bonding with nature, Kusum achieves resistance.

Firstly, as mentioned above, the Sundarbans is the perfect place for Kusum to rebel against the status quo, colonialism and patriarchy. This is due to the aquatic nature of this area, with no constrained limits or rules, but a mutable essence. Its symbolical fluidity, drinking from the Indian Ocean, enables its natives to resist the social order and reverse their status. Hence, Ghosh

uses water as the agent that rewrites the social matrix of the Sundarbans in the novel. Water is both motif and agent, shaping not only the story but also the geography and history of the land. The unusual agency of water is highlighted here—its potential to act, as well as to move from object/other position to that of the subject and, in doing so, reverse the object/subject status of the characters (Anand, 2008: 3).

Later in our analysis, we will examine how the aquatic space shapes Deeti’s story in *SP*. Furthermore, even if nature⁵ negatively affects Kusum, as she loses her father through a tiger attack, she has a unique connection with it. We can observe it in the following fragment from the text:

‘Look.’ Lifting up her hand, Kusum put the insect in her mouth and closed her lips. This caught Kanai’s⁶ attention and he finally decided to lower his book. ‘Did you swallow it?’ Suddenly her lips sprang apart and the grasshopper jumped straight into Kanai’s face. He let out a shout and fell over backwards, while she watched, laughing. ‘It’s just an insect,’ she said. ‘Don’t be afraid’ (Ghosh, 2005: 97).

Developing this further, Kusum’s relationship to the landscape is fully spiritual. In fact, she is able to listen to nature and the spirits of the Sundarbans. Throughout the novel, we can see how dolphins are Kusum’s messengers and how Fokir communicates with his dead mother through the presence of these cetaceans:

⁵ The tigers in the Sundarbans serve as a metaphorical manifestation of nature. In this context, Kusum’s father confronts the sublime aspects of nature, suggesting that nature can also be harmful.

⁶ Kanai, Nirmal’s nephew, meets Kusum while temporarily living with his uncle and aunt, Nilima. After his uncle’s death, he is tasked with reading Nirmal’s diaries and translating Bengali into English for Piya.

‘So where are they, Kusum’ I said, ‘these messengers of yours?’ ‘Wait, Saar. You’ll see them.’ ... All the time our boat was at that spot, the creatures kept breaking the water around us. ... Now I saw why Kusum found it so easy to believe that these animals were something other than what they were. For where she had seen a sign of Bon Bibi, I saw instead, the gaze of the Poet (Ghosh 252-253).

Consequently, not only is nature a physical entity, but also an active agent that speaks through its creatures. To further extend this argument, it is through Kusum’s close relationship with the land that she asserts her right to establish herself and the refugee community within her native Sundarbans. Moreover, despite this social group being rooted in equal cooperation and symbiotic contribution, Kusum rises as a leading figure. This is due to her fearlessness in traveling around the Sundarbans to give a voice to the community. For instance, she visits Lusibari and speaks to Nilima (Nirmal’s wife) to request funds and assistance for the Morichjhāpi people. Furthermore, Kusum is an activist and a role model in the resistance against the police. She never surrenders and exhibits resilience: “We were amazed to find her still in good spirits. We spent the rest of the night trying to persuade her to leave, but she paid no heed. ‘Where will I go?’ she said simply. ‘There’s no other place I want to be.’ ... ‘There are still more than ten thousand of us here. It’s just a question of keeping faith’” (Ghosh, 2005: 300). Thus, as Vijayalakshmi contends, Kusum sacrifices her life to help the refugees in the Tide Country. She fights to the very end of her life for them and their communal project. Despite being a victim of the Morichjhāpi tragedy, her life demonstrates the active and revolutionary role that women play in society (Vijayalakshmi, 2015: 11). Consequently, Ghosh’s portrayal of women as resistance leaders and heroines is exemplified by Kusum.

In fact, Kusum’s spirit retains agency via nature after her demise. Particularly, by being constantly compared with storms in the narrative, she symbolically preserves her ability to act and speak for her people: “‘What was she like?’ ‘What I remember is her *tej*,’ Kanai said. ‘Even at that age she was very spirited.’ Moyna⁷ nodded. ‘I’ve heard people say she was like a storm, a *jhor*.’” (Ghosh, 2005: 137) / “she vanished as if into the eye of a storm” (151). As a matter of fact, storms can be viewed as metaphors for revolution, for rebellion. This is what Kusum attempted to achieve during her life. In this way, by the end of the novel, Kusum metaphorically becomes an active

⁷ Moyna is Fokir’s wife. She works as a nurse at the Babadon Trust.

character by speaking through the cyclone and the tidal wave that hits the Sundarbans. She uses her son Fokir to shield the biologist Piya when they are trapped by the natural catastrophe. In this manner, local, native and spiritual knowledge, as embodied by Fokir, fuses with the Western and scientific knowledge that Piya represents. Therefore, through the destructive act of the cyclone and the tidal wave, Kusum is symbolically securing Piya—the only person willing to listen to the local people while also protecting nature. Just as Fokir's mother did, he sacrifices his life to save others. As a result, Kusum's memory and resistance survive via the current generation of women. Through Piya, the new feminist rebel and leader, who establishes a foundation to protect the dolphins with the help of locals, Kusum successfully safeguards the environment and its people. The foundation is named Fokir, in recognition of the data he helped to gather. Therefore, Piya is willing to preserve the Sundarbans' ecosystem without forgetting the local people since they are part of the land.

Thus, we conclude that Piya continues to voice female resistance. In fact, there is an additional hint within the text that Kusum's project is passed into Piya's hands: Piya is tasked with maintaining the translated Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, which Kusum had kept in her head during her entire life. Ghosh thus offers an optimistic ecofeminist viewpoint on how to take care of the land. As Vandana Shiva argues, "feminism as ecology, and ecology as the revival of Prakriti, the source of all life, become the decentred powers of political and economic transformation and restructuring" (Shiva, 1988: 24). *THT* offers a tale of female resistance through the vehicle of nature. In the end, female action and resistance enable the safeguarding and renewal of the land and its people.

SP and its characters are structured around the presence and importance of nature. Sangita Patil (2023) addresses the role of nature in 19th century Indian literature, explaining that these narratives often glorify nature. Moreover, she refers to nature as "not just a desolate object for Indians, but it has a spiritual and divine connection with their lives" (107). This spiritual link is evident in Deeti's profound connection to water, it symbolizes change, and her relationship with it is transformative, just like Kusum. She sees the *Ibis* in a vision when looking into the river, "it was a ship like I've never seen before. It was like a great *bird*, with sails like *wings* and a long *beak*" (9; our emphasis). The ship is immediately connected to nature through a comparison with a bird and its wings, a metaphor for freedom and her eventual escape in it through the ocean.

Moreover, this vision exemplifies her spiritual connection, from the first moment Deeti has a deep and revelatory bond with the *Ibis*, her decision to include it in her shrine exemplifies their symbolic union.

Patil further discusses the destruction of nature, noting that it is often lamented by Hindi literary authors (81). These works narrate “the environmental crisis which is the outcome of industrialization and Western culture” (81). This theme is prevalent throughout *SP*, the past state of the land is remembered with nostalgia and grief, “When Deeti was her daughter’s age, things were different: poppies had been a luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops” (27). The devastating impact of Western industrialization is vividly portrayed, “lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples or sip the starchy water from a pot in which rice had been boiled” (177). Ghosh highlights the destruction of nature and its devastating effect on the Indian land and people.

Marlene Longenecker’s study of women and ecology is essential for an ecofeminist reading of the novel. She argues that, in Western ideologies, “women and nature *are* both equated and devalued in relation to men and culture” (1997: 3), rendering women voiceless while nature is exploited. It is common to read women and nature as passive literary elements, but Longenecker advocates a reading of nature as an active subject (5). She suggests that “*both* nature and women are freed from their status as passive objects” (5). In *SP*, nature actively communicates with Deeti, bringing her the vision of the *Ibis*, “it was accepted that it was the river itself that had granted Deeti the vision” (Ghosh, 2008: 10). Thus, neither of them are passive entities, but, instead, present a very active role in this literary work, challenging their subordinate position. Even though women are affected by both patriarchy and Empire, the role of nature in both *SP* and *THT* is to facilitate female resistance and help women find a voice.

In the novel, there is a clear opposition between land and sea and what each represents for the characters, particularly for Deeti. On land, Deeti was under her husband’s and brother-in-law’s rule, with no autonomy over her body or destiny. If she “remained on land, she would have either died or continued to be exploited by her brother-in-law, and she would have never found a voice for herself. But the *Ibis* changes that” (Gangopadhyay, 2017: 58). Land symbolizes destruction

and voicelessness for Deeti, whereas the sea introduces an alternative space, outside of the rigid rules dictated at *home*. Life on board the *Ibis* is understood by Gangopadhyay as a chance for re-birth as well as a place for self-construction (58). Sabine Lauret explains that crossing the Kala Pani—The Black Water—was a fearful experience for most—if not all—migrants, but the possibility of a fresh start outweighs fear (2011: 56). Deeti embarks on the *Ibis* on a hopeful note, and when she re-defines herself as Aditi, the need for a new beginning is successfully transmitted to the reader, “No sooner had she said it than it became real: this was who she was - Aditi, a woman who had been granted, by a whim of the gods, the boon of living her life again” (203). No longer defined by her past, her husband, her brother-in-law, or her caste, Deeti’s transformation is made possible by her sea journey. The ocean permits a re-construction of the self. Nature is used as a tool to grant Deeti the possibility of resisting and voicing her new identity.

During the journey, the characters are located in an aquatic space, which allows a slight bend away from the power structures and dynamics that dictated life on land. There is an inflection in traditional patriarchal structures, which become “no longer valid” (Lauret, 2011: 58). The *Ibis* offers the possibility of a new structure, no longer defined solely by empire and patriarchy, where notions of gender and caste can be reinterpreted. As stated by Paulette, a young and educated orphan girl escaping from her protectors, as she embarks on the *Ibis*: “On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same” (304). A new approach to caste is created and discussed among women on board the *Ibis*. The subaltern on the *Ibis* imagine a fairer reality and they reenact it for themselves, contesting hierarchical structures of power. Although these challenges arise from a position of subjugation and may not always be “successful”, the journey poses a challenge to systemic hierarchies. What is more, the women on the ship form a union that centralizes their experiences in the narrative, amplifying their voices and drawing attention to their lives.

Deeti becomes the leading figure among the passengers on the *Ibis*, especially the women (Lauret, 2011: 55). She “embodies the redefinition of the status of women on board” (58) and becomes the protector and advocate for the other women. Early on their journey, Paulette is insulted by a man on board, “How would you know? He demanded. You’re just a woman [...] How would a woman know what’s written in a book?” (333), to which Deeti immediately reacts: “This

stung Deeti, who retorted: Why shouldn't she be able to read a book? She's the daughter of a pandit - she's been taught her letters by her father" (333). Deeti is quickly established as a protective figure for the women, even at times when she would rather not intervene, "It passed through Deeti's mind to say no, this wasn't her burden, she wasn't really everyone's Bhauji and couldn't be expected to fight every battle. But then she thought of Munia⁸, all alone, amongst a roomful of silahdars and maistries, and her body rose as of itself" (401). This situates Deeti, not only as a figure of resistance and leadership, but also as a figure of solidarity and sisterhood. The setting of the ocean allows for the emergence of female figures of resistance, who react against their subjugated position, re-defining the women on board. Deeti becomes the protector and the voice of the women embarked on the *Ibis*.

The presence of poppies, understood as a natural resource and symbol of nature, serves as a driving force in the novel. Ghosh places "opium's agentic materiality at the center of the *Ibis* trilogy" (Hummel, 2018: 563). The characters' lives are entangled with the opium poppy, Hummel emphasizes "opium's ubiquitous, material agency as influencing the various relationships, probable or improbable, that emerge throughout the novels" (564). Opium exerts a powerful and defining influence on Deeti's life, with its effects ranging from her exploitation to her eventual liberation. This part of the analysis will explore the different exemplifications of opium as a symbol of female resistance.

There is an inflection in the role that poppies play in Deeti's life when they become an enabling source for her resistance, in opposition to the exploitative force the drug had enacted over her, when we first meet her. For instance, Deeti uses opium to gradually poison her mother-in-law, "from that day on she began to slip traces of the drug into everything she served her mother-in-law" (35), a step towards recuperating the control over her body and reproduction. Opium helps Deeti resist her family's malevolent plans by getting rid of the woman who orchestrated her rape. Another significant moment is during her attempted *sati*, where she consumes opium for the second time, "Opium here presents an opportunity to relieve Deeti of her ultimate choicelessness

⁸ A young woman and passenger of the *Ibis*, who after being involved and discovered alone with a man on board, is being dragged to the *kamra* of the silahdars.

in life” (Hummel, 2018: 567). In this instance, opium serves as a source of relief: “a few mouthfuls of opium, she knew, would render her insensible to the pain” (141). She is using nature to resist a ritual rooted in patriarchal values. Furthermore, had she been conscious, she may have never escaped with Kalua⁹ due to the constraints of caste. Therefore, it is through the use of opium that Deeti survives and creates a new future for herself.

In a similar vein, one of the outcomes of using opium and escaping with Kalua is Deeti's new-found sense of agency over her body, “it was as if her body was awake to the world as it had never been before, flowing like the river's waves, and as open and fecund as the reed-covered bank” (176). She is now able to experience pleasure and desire, something that women were often denied. She finds control over her body, “helping her recuperate her sexuality and fertility” (Hummel, 2018: 568), which is made possible through her past bodily intimacies with opium (568). Lastly, while Deeti takes care of the sick Sarju, another woman on board known as the midwife, the latter gives Deeti datura (poppy seeds), “In this, she whispered, there is wealth beyond imagining; guard it like your life - it contains seeds of the best Benares poppy. [...] they are worth more than any treasure [...] these seeds - these are for you alone” (385). Opium no longer controls Deeti or her body. Instead, Deeti is in control of these poppy seeds and she can use them for her own benefit and resistance. The power shifts from the plant to Deeti's hands, transforming it into a tool for her own resistance, in contrast to her past experiences with poppies. With this passage, nature becomes an enabling force towards female resistance.

A Tale of Resistance and Agency: A Conclusion

After having examined Ghosh's novels *THT* and *SP* through an ecofeminist perspective, with a focus on the characters of Kusum and Deeti, we could conclude that they are affected and marginalized by the previously examined manifestations of patriarchy, both native and colonial. Despite this, they resist and find their voices through their understanding of the power of nature.

As contended, they both embody the figure of the subaltern other. They are silenced through their existence in a multi-layered marginalizing structure. Nevertheless, Ghosh's texts

⁹ Kalua is an outcast and Deeti's former husband's ox-cart driver. Kalua saves Deeti from her husband's pyre. He eventually becomes her husband.

allow for a representation and voicing of Indian women and their resilience. Their resistance lies in the shift from powerless to becoming active, leading female characters, through their understanding of nature, which becomes an empowering tool. Kusum does so through her spiritual connection to the Sundarbans and eco disasters, while Deeti finds empowerment in the sea and the use of poppies. Hence, they resist and find strength in becoming active agents in their lives.

To further our claim, imperialism represents another contributing layer in their marginalization. In other words, the exploitation of Indian land at the hands of Western powers directly impacts Kusum and Deeti. What is more, the control and abuse of the land is a way to assert imperialist power over the natives. In the case of Kusum, despite the Sundarbans being her birthplace, she is not allowed to go back and settle there. Similarly, Deeti is forced to overwork, as she is responsible for both household duties and caring for the crops that supply her with a livelihood.

As stated in our analysis, despite their marginalization, Kusum and Deeti are able to resist due to their agency and spiritual connection with nature, as well as their ability to listen to it. Thus, they embody the ecological self as they envision a mutually beneficial and sustaining relationship with nature (Plumwood, 1993:136). Furthermore, the aquatic nature of the regions—the Sundarbans and the Indian Ocean—creates a less constraining and more fluid setting, prompting change and re-construction for our female protagonists and their resistance. In this way, Kusum and Deeti emerge as leading figures within their communities. Further to this notion, we would claim that the role of nature is to facilitate female resistance and help women find a voice: Kusum, by metaphorically becoming the storm at the novel's ending, and Deeti, through her transformation and epiphany in water bodies. Nature becomes an enabling force towards female resistance, granting Kusum and Deeti the possibility of finding their own voices.

WORKS CITED

ANAND, DIVYA (2008). "Words on Water: Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*", *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 34, N°1, March: 21-44.

- DOTSON, KRISTIE (2024). "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing", *Hypatia*, Vol. 26, N°2, Spring: 55-64. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23016544>
- GANGOPADHYAY, RUDRANI (2017). "Finding Oneself On Board the 'Ibis' in Amitav Ghosh's 'Sea of Poppies'", *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45, N°. 1/2, Spring/Summer: 55-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44474104>.
- GHOSH, AMITAV. (2005). *The Hungry Tide*, London: The Borough Press.
- GHOSH, AMITAV (2010). *Sea of Poppies*, London: John Murray.
- GUPTA, DEVYANI (2020). "'Black Mail': Networks of Opium and Postal Exchange in Nineteenth-Century India" *Literature and History*, Vol. 29, N° 1: 78-96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306197320907446>
- HUMMEL, KATHERINE E (2018). "Materializing the Improbable: Bodily Intimacies and the Agentic Materiality of Opium in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy" *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 50, N° 4, Winter: 563-82. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48559296>.
- LAURET, SABINE (2011). "Re-Mapping the Indian Ocean in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*" *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, Vol. 31, N°1: 55-65. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.7870>
- LONGENECKER, MARLENE (1997). "Women, Ecology, and the Environment: An Introduction" *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 9, N°3: 1-17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316527>.
- PATIL, SANGITA (2023). "Hindi Literature and Ecofeminism", In: Douglas A. Vakoch (ed). *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, New York: Routledge: 78-88.
- PILIA, NICOLA (2020). "Dwelling, Dispossession, and 'Slow Violence' in the Time of Climate Change. The Representation of Refugees in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*", *Il Tolomeo*, 22: 117-134. <https://doi.org/10.30687/Tol/2499-5975/2020/01/024>
- PLUMWOOD, VAL (1993). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, London; New York: Routledge.
- SHIVA, VANDANA (1988). *Staying Alive*, London: Zed Books Ltd.
- SPIVAK, GAYATRI (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?", In: C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke: Macmillan: 271-313.
- STEIN, BURTON (1998). *A History of India*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- TIFFIN, H., ASHCROFT, B. & G. GRIFFITHS. (1995). *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, London: Routledge.
- VIJAYALAKSHMI, M (2015). "Women as Revolutionaries in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*", *Language in India*, Vol. 15:11. ISSN 1930-2940.

ŽIŽEK, SLAVOJ (2009). *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, London: Profile Books.

AINA MARIA DÍAZ-LLABRÉS is a PhD student at the University of Lleida. Her research examines the representation of trauma and silence present in contemporary postcolonial historical fiction, focusing on works by V. V. Ganeshanathan, Abdulrazak Gurnah, and Lindsey Collen. She explores the articulation of silence and the dynamics of movement, tracing connections between Sri Lanka, Zanzibar to the Mauritius Islands. Her broader research interests include feminist and gender studies, trauma theory, silence studies, as well as postcolonial history, among other elements and perspectives that are interconnected in postcolonial historical fiction.

ESTHER JIMÉNEZ-RODRÍGUEZ is a PhD student at the University of Lleida and a research assistant in the research project Aquatic Imaginaries: Re-charting Indoceanic and Atlantic Literary Productions INDAOC. Her research explores representations of nature as a multifaceted living entity in the literature of the region of the Indian Ocean, particularly in some of the works of Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. She draws on ecocriticism, ecofeminism, postcolonial studies, and Indian Ocean studies, among other critical frameworks.