Tales of Resistance, Waters of Survival: Amitav Ghosh's Piya as a Postcolonial Ecofeminist

MA Dissertation

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"Do you think I wouldn't pay the price if I thought it necessary? […] If I thought giving up my life might make the rivers safe again for the Irrawaddy dolphin, the answer is yes, I would. But the trouble is that my life, your life, a thousand lives would make no difference." (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 302)

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Abstract

In Amitav Ghosh's novels *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, the character Piyali Roy exemplifies the principles of postcolonial ecofeminism. This dissertation examines how Piya, an American scientist of Indian descent, transitions from a detached researcher to an ecofeminist activist deeply engaged in environmental and social justice. Through her efforts to protect the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sundarbans, Piya directly challenges patriarchal and capitalist systems that exploit both women and nature. Her collaboration with local communities, particularly characters like Fokir, Moyna, and Nilima, illustrates a harmonious integration of modern scientific knowledge with traditional ecological wisdom. This partnership underscores the importance of inclusive approaches to environmental conservation. Through Piya, Ghosh critiques the environmental degradation driven by unchecked economic development and advocates for sustainable and equitable alternatives. By emphasizing the intersectionality of gender, class, and race, Ghosh's works call for a more holistic understanding of environmental issues in postcolonial contexts.

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's fifth novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and ninth novel *Gun Island* (2019) delve into themes of climate change and migration of both humans and non-humans in the Sundarbans, the mangrove forest in the Bay of Bengal that spreads across parts of India and Bangladesh. Set in the present day, these works reflect how postcolonialism and neocolonialism accelerate climate change and its effects on this vulnerable ecosystem. In this introductory section, I will explore Ghosh's background and analyze the content, significance, and lasting impact of both novels.

Amitav Ghosh (Calcutta, 1956) is widely recognized as a postcolonial and postmodern writer, with ecocritical concerns in his works. He is an environmentalist whose works comprise a wide range of topics spanning migration, climate change, gender, and displacement. His female characters, particularly in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, are characterized by their autonomy, courage, and intellect, emerging as more proactive, compelling, dominant, and resilient compared to their male counterparts (Mondal 64). It is the women who grapple, take action, organize, and strive to improve their lives, seeking significance in their existence and forging distinct identities for themselves. In both novels, Ghosh crafts exemplary women characters who exhibit a profound awareness of their socio-political and environmental contexts. These characters not only enrich their own lives but also serve as catalysts for enlightenment and empowerment within their communities. Eager to carve out their own identities and set precedents for others, these women defy societal gender norms through their remarkable determination, resilience, and endurance.

The Hungry Tide and *Gun Island* are mainly set in the vast archipelago of islands known as Sundarbans,[1] situated between the sea and the southern plains of Bengal, in the extreme northeast of India. Alongside their critical examination of the threatened mangrove ecosystem in the era of globalization, market forces, and forced migration due to the climate crisis, both novels vividly depict women embracing their own identities. This theme of female empowerment echoes in Ghosh's earlier work like *The Shadow Lines* (1988), where characters like Thamma embody a revolutionary spirit amidst India's partition. However, the challenges faced by educated, defiant women amid India's division and communal unrest differ from those endured by women inhabiting the dangerous Sundarbans, where predators and natural adversities constantly threaten human life. Although some characters, like Nilima,[2] migrate to the tide country later in life, and others, like Piya, are initially outsiders, they all ultimately find a connection to the Sundarbans' culture and establish it as their home. Piya's connection to the local is evident in her willingness to endure hostile conditions and settle in the Sundarbans. Ghosh's female characters are deeply concerned with nature and environmental issues. He subtly points to their shared vulnerability in a male-dominated society, which propels them to challenge entrenched gender norms, each woman striving for societal recognition and economic and political agency (Chowdhury 54). *Gun Island* is not a sequel to *The Hungry Tide*, although the female characters' presence, and mostly Piya's, is important in both.

Amitav Ghosh's award-winning 2004 novel, *The Hungry Tide*, can be seen as an early exploration of a theme he expands on in his later non-fiction work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable* (2016). Both grapple with the idea

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[1] Both novels' setting is not only restricted to this area, although the most part of *The Hungry Tide* is developed in the Sundarbans. These novels are also grounded in the cultural histories of places like Egypt, Myanmar, China, Venice, and the U.S.A. They reflect an increasingly interconnected world and, thus, the growing interest in other cultures, leading to widespread migration.
[2] Nilima is the founder of the Badabon Trust, a non-profit organization that aids impoverished women in Lusibari, an island in the Sundarbans.

that contemporary literature struggles to address climate change and the ecological crisis. The novel showcases Ghosh's remarkable ability to bring landscapes to life, incorporating history into the plot. This creates a powerful sense of place that serves as a scenery for his environmental concerns. Through a captivating narrative, Ghosh makes complex ecological issues accessible to a broad audience. He details the Sundarbans' ecosystem, functioning both as a scientific treatise and a vivid portrait of the environment.

The Hungry Tide unfolds through the converging journeys of two characters. Kanai Dutt, a Bengali businessman living in Delhi, travels to the Sundarbans to visit his aunt and uncover a mysterious package left by his deceased uncle. The package contains his uncle's final writings, which center around Kusum and Fokir, victims of a brutal eviction from Morichjhãpi island. Weaving between past and present, Ghosh introduces Piyali Roy, an Indian-American cetologist on a mission to study the endangered Gangetic Dolphin. Through Nirmal's journals, we relive the Morichjhãpi tragedy,[3] while Piya's experience reveals the contemporary struggles of the Sundarbans' inhabitants (both human and non-human) and the precarious state of its ecosystem. This juxtaposition exposes the novel's central conflict: the clash between conservation efforts and the devastating social costs borne by marginalized communities, a conflict that continues to echo from the past to the present.

Ghosh's characters are all ethnically Indian but navigate their identities in contrasting ways. Piya embodies a disconnection from her heritage. In contrast, Fokir, the illiterate fisherman, possesses an intimate, localized knowledge of the Sundarbans.

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[3] *The Hungry Tide* delves into a dark chapter of Indian history – the 1979 massacre of "illegal" settlers on Morichjhãpi island. This tragedy, rooted in the 1947 partition, was ostensibly justified by environmental concerns tied to Project Tiger, a renowned wildlife conservation effort. Fueled by national and international funding, the project's pursuit of environmental preservation tragically overshadowed the human cost (Weik 121). However, as Annu Jalais elaborates, the Morichjhãpi incident was not just about ecological conservation but also deeply intertwined with issues of caste, class, and identity politics in Bengal. During fieldwork, Jalais encountered narratives that blamed the government's actions for turning tigers into man-eaters. Islanders shared stories of pre-Morichjhãpi idyllic coexistence with tigers, which deteriorated post-eviction (1761).

Through these characters, Ghosh maps the complexities of postcolonial identity, highlighting the tension between global perspectives and the deeply-rooted connections local communities have with their land. Fokir serves as Piya's guide in the Sundarbans, sharing his deep knowledge of the ecosystem to aid her research on the dolphins. However, their journey takes a tragic turn when he sacrifices himself to protect Piya from a deadly tornado. Deeply affected, Piya vows to support Fokir's wife, Moyna, and their child Tutul. Through her time in the Sundarbans, Piya gains a profound understanding not only of the endangered dolphins but also of the parallel struggles faced by the vulnerable communities who call this place home.

Gun Island picks up years later, reuniting us with Piya, Nilima, Kanai, Moyna, and a now-teenage Tutul, who has decided to change his name to Tipu. Despite Piya's support, Tipu embodies a generation gap, separating himself from tradition and forging his own path. The narrative expands with Deen, a rare book dealer who commutes between Brooklyn and Calcutta. He becomes entangled in the legend of Bonduki Sadagar, initially mistranslated as "the Gun Merchant" and later found to mean "the Merchant who went to Venice," and Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes in the Sundarbans. As Deen unravels the truth of this legend, it becomes evident that his true search is for self-discovery, facilitated through the female characters of the novel: Piya, Nilima and Giacinta, a friend from Venice. Their successful careers, passionate environmentalism, and individualist spirit mirror Ghosh's own environmental concerns and ecofeminism. Reading both novels through a feminist lens reveals a powerful message: respect for humanity and the natural world are inextricably linked.

In this dissertation, I aim to first outline the theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism and ecofeminism and their convergence in order to recognize Amitav Ghosh's activism and how it is portrayed in the novels. Postcolonialism emerged from

the political liberation of former colonies and their subsequent cultural and literary expressions, aiming to challenge and subvert colonial narratives. Ecocriticism, paralleling postcolonialism, critiques the anthropocentric and exploitative tendencies of Western modernity. Ecofeminism, or ecological feminism,[4] which will be thoroughly defined later, merges ecological concerns with feminist perspectives, highlighting the interconnected oppressions of women and the environment, especially in postcolonial contexts.

Greta Gaard's work is instrumental in ecofeminism, particularly her critique of how cultural ecofeminism often reinforces gender stereotypes by universalizing women's connection to nature. Cultural ecofeminism "embraces intuition, an ethic of caring, and web-like human-nature relationships" (Merchant 2005: 202). This "cultural ecofeminism" comes from the "cultural feminist strategy of calling on women's 'unique' capacities of caring for family and for environment" (Gaard 24). Therefore, it completely omits "the feminist analyses of structural gender inequalities that compare the status of men, women, and GLBTQ" (24). Gaard emphasizes the need to recognize the diverse experiences of women, shaped by factors such as race, class, and historical context. Her views challenge the notion that all women inherently possess a natural connection to the environment, advocating instead for an understanding that includes the impact of various social and economic factors. This call for intersection that considers multiple forms of oppression and their impacts on both human and non-human life appears in Ghosh's novels. Ghosh's storytelling not only raises awareness about ecological crises but also highlights the vital role of marginalized groups, particularly women, in environmental activism, thus reinforcing the principles of postcolonial ecofeminism. Besides, he emphasizes the role of literature in addressing these issues. Ghosh argues that fiction can

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[4] The terms ecofeminism, ecological feminism, and environmental concerns will be used interchangeably in this dissertation.

effectively depict the complex relationships between humans and nature, fostering a deeper emotional connection and inspiring environmental consciousness.

In section 3, I will make a brief introduction to the importance of postcolonial ecofeminism in Indian fiction, crucial for a more complete understanding of environmental issues. While existing environmental critiques often focus only on Europe and North America, women in formerly colonized nations face unique struggles due to colonialism and their gender. Postcolonial ecofeminism bridges this gap by considering the complex interplay between environmental exploitation, the oppression of women, and factors like class, caste, and race. In Amitav Ghosh's literature, the movement is shown through the female characters, who fight to protect the environment and human and non-human rights. He portrays them as ecofeminists who endure hardship in their fight for environmental preservation. My focus will narrow down to Piyali Roy, who appears in both novels and exemplifies these themes.

Section 4 explains how Piya's professional achievements and environmental activism suggest ecofeminist ideals, mirroring Ghosh's own concerns. Analyzing both novels through an ecofeminist lens reveals Ghosh's message of valuing both human society and the natural world equally. I will analyze Piya's journey of self-discovery and forging of an identity throughout the years. Piya, in both *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, embodies the principles of postcolonial ecofeminism by advocating for the environment and challenging patriarchal and capitalist systems that exploit both women and nature in post-independent India.

2. Postcolonial Ecofeminism: an Overview

To explain the emergence of postcolonial ecofeminism, the theoretical framework of this work, it is necessary to briefly outline the origins of postcolonialism and feminism, and their interrelation with ecocriticism.

2.1. Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Both postcolonialism and ecocriticism share a common concern for the potential transformation of social reality through literary and cultural critique. Postcolonial studies arose after independence movements in former European colonies, notably British territories like the Caribbean, India, and West, East, and South Africa. Postcolonialism aimed to translate political liberation into cultural and literary expression (Banerjee 194). This led to a movement where once-colonized nations actively reshaped their narratives and started "writing back" to the former colonial empires, or "imperial center" (Ashcroft et al. 32). This concept was coined by Salman Rushdie in an article published in *The Times* in 1982: "The Empire Writes Back." Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin borrowed the term "writing back" from Rushdie, defining it as the act of postcolonial writers confronting the authority of imperial discourse. They challenge its assumptions and its presumed legitimacy and power. In their book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (1989), these authors advocate for the reclaiming of discourse and history through the reinterpretation of traditional English literary texts, encapsulating this process as "writing back." They see it as a field characterized by irony, satire, and subversion, aiming to challenge, revise, or imagine alternatives to the oversimplified representations found in colonial literature (Bartels et al. 18). Therefore, postcolonial literature and its accompanying critical discourse functioned as a means of cultural production intervening in political and social spheres.

According to Professor Mita Banerjee, this kind of intervention also characterizes the emergence of ecocriticism (195). While postcolonial studies arose as a response to the notion of European cultural superiority over the non-Western world, ecocriticism similarly arose as a corrective force that "views environmentalism as a form of resistance against the anthropocentrism of Western modernity, balancing immunity and community" (Bergthaller 162). Environmental scholar Hannes Bergthaller claims that:

> If there is something like a master narrative which has guided the ecocritical mainstream over the last three decades or so, it might be glossed as follows: Western modernity instituted a categorical separation between nature and culture, the animal and the human, which licensed the subjugation and exploitation of the former to the benefit of the latter. The task of ecocriticism, and of the environmental movements to which it is allied, is to dismantle this anthropocentric illusion of human separateness and to remind people that they, too, are a part of nature, thus putting an end to ecological destruction and repairing what modernity had put asunder. (162-3)

It is true, then, that when it comes to setting ourselves apart from animals, we tend to focus less on physical differences and more on mental ones. We often highlight traits we think are unique to humans, such as storytelling, and labeling animals as "lesser" because of this. In *Gun Island*, however, Professoressa Giacinta Schiavon challenges the traditional view of humans as the sole storytellers. Instead, she argues that stories are a shared ground, a territory that unites humans and animals:

> What if the faculty of storytelling were not specifically human but rather the last remnant of our animal selves? A vestige left from a time before language, when we communicated as other living beings do? Why else is it that only in stories do animals speak? Not to speak of demons, and gods, and indeed God himself? It is only through stories that the universe can speak to us, and if we don't learn to listen you may be sure that we will be punished for it. (*Gun Island* 141)[5]

Giacinta relates these confident distinctions to be tied to Western or Western-influenced societies. However, in many other cultures and not just Western ones, anthropocentrism has been widely accepted as the norm. Putting the interests of our species above all others is still seen as completely normal, even being a constant need to "show Mother Nature that we [humans] are not quitters" (*GI* 138). Ironically, this justification of human

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[5] Henceforth, page numbers from *Gun Island* will be cited *GI* plus page number.

superiority by appealing to nature often leads to the exclusion of animals and the environment from the privileged status of humanity, making them targets for exploitation.

According to the Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood, the Western concept of humanity has historically relied on the existence of the "other": the uncivilized, the animal-like. This perspective justified European invasion and colonization by viewing non-European territories and their inhabitants, both human and animal, as empty (2003: 53). Colonization, therefore, embodies an ideology where anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism are intertwined, with anthropocentrism serving as the foundation for Eurocentric justifications of European colonialism. This justification portrays "indigenous cultures as 'primitive,' less rational, and closer to children, animals, and nature" (53). Thus, a dualistic relationship is established between nature/reason. As a response to this "irrational rationality," Plumwood responds that the "dominant forms of reason (economic, political, scientific and ethical/prudential) are failing us because they are subject to a systematic pattern of distortions and illusions" (2002: 16). She says that these "illusions" impact our understanding of our relationship with nature, which is portrayed as passive and limitless, effectively inviting exploitation. Systems of power have distorted the concept of rationality to serve their own interests, creating hierarchies and reinforcing privilege by establishing false dichotomies, such as reason versus nature, which justify the dominance of certain groups over others (2002: 17). Plumwood criticizes this dualistic thinking for oversimplifying complex issues and neglecting the interconnectedness of human societies and the natural world. She suggests that by challenging these distorted forms of rationality, we can work towards a more equitable and sustainable future (17). Therefore, postcolonial ecocriticism arose due to the need to challenge these modes of thinking.

These debates coincide with Global South criticisms, which often view development as a continuation of neocolonialism, "a vast technocratic apparatus designed primarily to serve the economic and political interests of the West" (Huggan and Tiffin 27). Following Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's line of thought, this leads us to wonder what exactly development is and whose interests it serves. Development is often seen as a term with multiple interpretations, manipulated to suit the needs of those who employ it. It tends to be infused with a sense of superiority, rooted in the cultural assumptions of the Western world (28). According to Wolfgang Sachs, the international development discourse mirrors the political sentiments of affluent Northern countries, particularly the United States (16). This suggests that the meaning of development evolves based on the prevailing attitudes of wealthy nations. Sachs' critique resonates with Third World countries, whose development efforts serve the self-interests of the First World. Oswaldo de Rivero, former Peruvian ambassador in the U.S., goes as far as to argue that development is merely a myth perpetuated by the West (71), which aggravates the divide between affluent and impoverished nations under the guise of progress:

> The myth of development's origins lies in our Western civilization's ideology of progress. This ideology in turn was born during the Age of Enlightenment, and was fostered by the Industrial Revolution. To an extent never suspected in agrarian societies, the machine age demonstrated a capacity to create sufficient wealth and eliminate, for the first time, great masses of poverty. This ideology of progress was buttressed by the narcissism implicit in Darwin's theory of evolution, which suggested that the human species was the most apt of all the species on the planet, due to its capacity to adapt itself to any natural habitat and always to achieve progress. (72)

This myth encourages Southern countries to adopt a capitalist growth model, despite its inherent inequalities and environmental consequences, leading to the pollution of lands, rivers, seas, and lakes, while emitted gases would further affect the entire planet's climate situation (91).

This perspective on development highlights how it perpetuates neocolonialism, where certain groups and governments exploit others under the guise of progress. Instead

of ending traditional imperialism, modern development often reinforces it through collaborations between national governments and powerful multinational corporations, e.g. the Ogoni struggle in Nigeria. In 1990, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) was created in Nigeria to claim for the rights of the Ogoni people. Multinational oil companies such as the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and its partners, including the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, have earned huge profits from extracting oil from Ogoni land in the Nigel Delta. However, the Ogoni people have not benefited and have suffered environmental degradation and underdevelopment. This led to a national and international campaign against the Nigerian government and Shell. Despite being non-violent, the campaign faced brutal military repression, resulting in deaths, detentions, and the execution of key Ogoni leaders like Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP representative, writer, poet, and activist (Boele et al. 74).

These corporations, often larger than many "developing" countries, offer financial and technical aid that continues benefiting the West (Huggan and Tiffin 31). This modern global system aligns development with predatory capitalism, perpetuating inequality while promoting concepts like freedom, democracy, and human rights (de Rivero 96). These conditions highlight the historical link between colonial expansion and capitalist production, where the concentration of capital led to global territorial divisions. The modern global system also emphasizes how globalization and past empires inevitably result in uneven development, driven by the expansion of global capitalism, which historically justified the subjugation and displacement of local populations to facilitate international trade (Huggan and Tiffin 30).

Therefore, postcolonial ecocriticism emerges as a response to neocolonial globalization. Global capitalism's exploitative dominance originates from unequal power dynamics between developed and developing nations, leading to the exploitation of

marginalized countries and peoples in the pursuit of development. This systemic inequality, both locally and globally, perpetuates ecological crises and intensifies gender inequalities. Indian literary critic Gayatri Spivak emphasizes how patriarchal capitalism and global capitalism are intertwined, especially in the context of India (198). Similarly, Vandana Shiva aligns with de Rivero's critique, arguing that development, often presented as a Western ideal, actually reinforces patriarchal structures and leads to environmental destruction and the marginalization of women (Shiva 1988: xii). It can be stated, then, that postcolonial environmentalist and ecological feminist concerns are interrelated as I will elaborate on in the next section.

2.2. Ecological Feminism

To understand the true impact of development projects on marginalized women and oppressed groups in former colonies, we need to analyze postcolonial environmental issues through an ecofeminist lens.

Ecological feminism, widely referred to as ecofeminism, began to be present in several movements worldwide dedicated to preserving life on Earth: India's Chipko movement, the Anti-militarist movement in Europe and the US, campaigns against hazardous waste dumping in the US, and Kenya's Green Belt movement. The Chipko movement was born in 1973 in Garhwal, northern India, to protect forests from deforestation. It involved the peaceful protests of villagers, mainly women, hugging trees to prevent them from being felled by contractors for commercial gains. Chipko, which stands for "tree hugging movement" in Hindi, gained international attention and contributed to the development of environmental activism globally (Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 133). Unlike the spontaneous nature of Chipko, the Kenyan Green Belt Movement (GBM) was initiated in 1977 by Professor Wangari Maathai, who later received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. Inspired by her, thousands of women launched a

rural tree-planting program. The primary goal was to address the fuel scarcity in rural areas while combating desertification and soil erosion by encircling each village with a "green belt" of at least a thousand trees. This movement not only mitigates deforestation but also empowers women to emerge as resourceful and influential leaders (Salman and Iqbal 860).

These movements aim to exemplify "resistance politics working at the micro-levels of power" (Rao 125) and highlight the interconnections between women and nature. Ecofeminism emerged in the West as a fusion of peace, feminist, and ecological movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The term "ecofeminism" was coined by French feminist writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. The movement was further developed by Ynestra King around 1976, and gained momentum in 1980 with the inaugural ecofeminist conference titled "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s" held in Amherst, Massachusetts, US (Glazebrook 12).

In her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), d'Eaubonne connects the oppression and domination of marginalized groups—such as women, people of color, children, and the poor—with the exploitation and degradation of nature, including animals, land, water, and air. D'Eaubonne's line of thought, then, would be summarized as follows:

> Both capitalism and socialism were scenes of ecological disasters. The most immediate death threats to the planet were overpopulation (a glut of births) and the destruction of natural resources (a glut of products). Although many men attempted to label overpopulation a "Third World problem," the real cause of the sickness was patriarchal power. (Merchant 11-12)

In this passage, Carolyn Merchant shows d'Eaubonne's assertion that the Western patriarchal society's practices of oppression, domination, exploitation, and colonization have directly led to irreversible environmental harm. D'Eaubonne advocated for the elimination of all forms of social injustice, extending beyond just the issues affecting women and the environment (Zein and Setiawan 1).

However, the trajectories within ecofeminism have been diverse. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of ecofeminism as a global movement following the emergence of these initial movements. It even became a guiding principle for some decentralized leftist movements around the world, although it became unfashionable for a while as it was seen to be essentialist. Several early scholars found some criticism during the early stages of ecofeminism, arguing that "the claim that women are biologically closer to nature reinforces the patriarchal ideology of domination and limits ecofeminism's effectiveness" (Archambault 20). Therefore, "biology determines the social inequalities between men and women" (Archambault 21) leading to the conclusion that:

> If we believe that women are connected with nature and possess the character traits necessary for preserving the environment, then it follows that they are most qualified to save the Earth. Men cannot be expected to participate in this restoration project since they presumably lack the sensitivity to nature that women have. Women will therefore simply end up in charge of cleaning up the global mess, fulfilling their traditional role as nurturing mothers. In the end, the implications of ecofeminist ethics hardly appear to be emancipatory for women. (21)

In her text, Archambault calls for ecofeminists and environmental thinkers to clarify and expand upon the ethical foundations of the movement to foster global emancipation. She rejects a dualism between nature and women, culture and men, and vice-versa, as this value-dualistic thinking is a component of patriarchal oppressive conceptual frameworks (Kronlid 76).

Vegetarian ecofeminism emerged in the same decade, reflecting the growing concern for non-human life that stemmed from the 1970s counterculture movements (Zein and Setiawan 3). Some saw ecofeminism as a natural successor to earlier feminist waves. They viewed it as the "third wave" following the first wave's focus on voting rights and the second wave's exploration of sexuality and workplace equality. However, this third wave of feminism often critiqued ecofeminism, consequently its being marginalized by the early 1990s despite ecofeminism's concerns on important issues like science, capitalism, and war (Thompson 507). These third-wave feminists and post-

structuralist thinkers argued that ecofeminism's association of women with nature was too simplistic. They felt it limited women's identities and created an unhelpful divide between "nature" and "culture" (507).

Over the years, ecofeminism has become a powerful partner in various social movements. It works alongside groups like the peace movement, direct action activists, and Green parties. These movements share common goals: building a more peaceful and just society, and promoting sustainable economic models that do not exploit people or the environment. Ecofeminism is driven by a spirit of resistance against powerful institutions that perpetuate injustice. It fosters open and inclusive discussions among its thinkers and activists, putting these ideas into action through collaboration.

Feminism and ecocriticism as forms of literary criticism have undergone many changes in their definition. On the one hand, some scholars see literary feminism simply as any literary criticism written by a woman, no matter the text itself. Others say it requires a woman's perspective, analyzing the texts from a female viewpoint regardless of the author's gender (Kolodny 75). A broader view expands the definition to include any critic, male or female, who analyzes texts through a feminist lens. This lack of a single definition extends to methods and goals as well. Most scholars acknowledge a wide range of approaches, sometimes even contradictory ones. The diversity reflects the many ideologies that permeate the women's movement as a whole.

On the other hand, literary ecocriticism also gathers together a wide range of approaches, although all ecocritics share a central focus: keeping environmental issues at the heart of their literary analysis and critique. They think that human culture and the physical world are intricately linked, influencing each other (Glotfelty and Fromm xix). Ecocriticism thus functions as a theoretical framework that negotiates the relationship

between humans and the non-human, and as a critical approach that balances literature and the environment.

The openness and flexibility of both feminism and ecocriticism paved the way for a new field of study: ecofeminism, or feminist ecocriticism, a field that explores the links between the oppression of humans and the natural world. Although coined in the 1970s, as previously explained, ecofeminism gained importance and prestige in literary studies much later. While other humanities fields discussed these connections, literature departments were slow to embrace them (Rao 126). Only in the 1990s did literary critics delve deeper, examining the historical, cultural, and symbolic parallels between the domination of women and nature, when scholars like Greta Gaard with *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993), Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies with *Ecofeminism* (1993), Carolyn Merchant with *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1990), Val Plumwood with *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) and Karen Warren with *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (2000) published their works.

Because of the publication of their works, ecofeminism faced many criticisms, mainly from anti-essentialist feminists, who continued to view ecofeminism as purely essentialist, equating women with nature as mentioned above. In their view, this essentialist approach unintentionally strengthened the very patriarchal dominance that ecofeminism sought to dismantle (Zein and Setiawan 5-6). However, as ecofeminism entered the 21st century, it grappled with critiques, particularly those from anti-essentialist feminists. In response, some ecofeminists adopted a more materialist lens, leading to the formation of new branches of ecofeminism such as queer ecologies, global feminist environmental justice, or gender and the environment (Zein and Setiawan 6). In 2011, Susan A. Mann, ecofeminist and sociologist, argued that the seeds of ecofeminism

were sown by the activism of women from diverse racial and class backgrounds, proclaiming that ecofeminism is an intersectional movement, connecting issues of gender, race, class, and the environment:

> [Intersectionality theory and poststructuralism] recognize how different social locations by race, class, and gender result in different vantage points for viewing social reality; thus they acknowledge the existence of multiple social realities. Because no one can view the world from every location, each vantage point is partial and limited. For these reasons, they embrace polyvocality, or the inclusion of many voices and vantage points. Here, knowledge is built in a quilt-like or webbed fashion where the social realities from diverse vantage points are interwoven to form a more complete view of the whole. (2)

The view of this passage aligns with the principle of inclusivity, which emphasizes the importance of marginalized voices in both activism and theory, contrary to the early environmental and women's movement, that often kept issues of race and class separated.

In literature, ecofeminism's emphasis on inclusivity needs to sustain and revive social activism and participation by influencing literary criticism as a tool for cultural reform. This approach challenges the marginalization of ecofeminist fiction within the literary canon, often relegated to other genres such as science fiction or climate fiction (cli-fi). Amitav Ghosh reflects on this issue in his non-fiction work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), arguing that events like hundred-year storms or bizarre tornadoes are typically excluded from literary fiction and instead are assigned to genres like science fiction or fantasy:

> Is it the case that science fiction is better equipped to address the Anthropocene than mainstream literary fiction? This might appear obvious to many. After all, there is now a new genre of science fiction called "climate fiction" or cli-fi. But cli-fi is made up mostly of disaster stories set in the future, and that, to me, is exactly the rub. The future is but one aspect of the Anthropocene: this era also includes the recent past, and, most significantly, the present. (72)

As a result, "fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by literary journals" (7), despite the fact that the extraordinary weather events we are currently experiencing like "flash floods, persistent droughts, spells of unprecedented heat, sudden landslides, raging torrents pouring down from

breached glacier lakes, freakish tornadoes" (32) or the life-stopping coronavirus pandemic are profoundly and urgently real. Ghosh argues that treating these events as magical, metaphorical, or allegorical diminishes their impact and urgency. Ghosh's environmental concerns are evident throughout his literary works and, more importantly for this dissertation, in his fiction. In his essay "Wild Fictions," Ghosh writes that "only fiction can provide a canvas broad enough to address this relationship of human with nature in all its dimensions" (23) and that reimagining our connections with the nonhuman environment must begin with storytelling. Therefore, storytelling, by fostering an emotional connection to a particular place, could bridge the gap between humans and other life forms. This emotional investment in the local environment has the potential to transform our relationships with the non-human world. Amitav Ghosh believes that literature, especially novels, has the power to confront the climate crisis by fostering a deep connection with the natural world, inspiring a renewed respect for all living things. While literature provides a powerful tool to explore ecofeminism through storytelling, it is worth examining how these ideas are depicted in Indian English fiction.

In conclusion, ecofeminism asserts that all forms of oppression are interconnected. It represents intersectionality on all the socially constructed oppressions rooted in the power dynamics of the patriarchal system.

3. Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Indian Fiction

The concept of postcolonial ecofeminism, though not entirely new, remains underdeveloped. Existing environmental critiques through a postcolonial lens (postcolonial ecocriticism) and feminist ecological perspectives (ecofeminism) have largely focused on Euro-American experiences. This narrow scope overlooks the unique struggles faced by women in formerly colonized nations. These women are caught in a "double-bind" – oppressed by both their colonized status and their gender (Campbell xi). Postcolonial ecofeminism seeks to bridge this gap. It merges these two fields, recognizing the complex interplay between environmental exploitation, the oppression of women, and factors like "class, caste, race, and neo-colonialism" (Kaur 384).

As mentioned earlier, postcolonial countries like those in West, East, South Africa, and South Asia, particularly India, have a rich history of environmental activism and movements that predate the emergence of ecocriticism as an academic field in the Western world. This highlights a crucial point: environmental awareness and activism in the formerly colonized countries existed well before Western academia formalized the concept of ecocriticism (384). Due to this previous environmental consciousness, the Chipko movement started in India, specifically in the Garhwal region of Uttaranchal in Uttar Pradesh. It mobilized working-class women and gained global recognition. However, despite this activism and the rise of feminist and modernist literature by Indian women, their contributions are largely absent from the established body of environmental literature or ecocritical canon (Kaur 385). Ecocriticism often overlooks the works of Indian writers and activists, even though many explore female identity beyond patriarchal constraints and integrate social issues, including environmental concerns, into their novels.

It is important to point out that this dissertation challenges the criticism that cultural ecofeminism reinforces gender stereotypes by making generalizations about all women having a natural connection to nature and ignoring historical and cultural contexts. While cultural ecofeminism celebrates women's connection to nature, it shouldn't be seen as excluding men's potential for environmental care. Besides, cultural ecofeminism ignores the diversity of women's experiences, treating them as a single group with a universal connection to nature. This erases their unique identities and the impact of factors like race and class.

It is therefore important to pay attention to female characters' experiences in Indian writings regardless of the author's gender. In Amitav Ghosh's novels *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* the women characters are exemplary ecofeminists. They advocate for nature and oppose the capitalist ideology of greed. Ghosh criticizes patriarchal and imperialist systems that marginalize women and disregard nature, arguing that this will lead to environmental disaster. The texts highlight the struggles of women and legendary characters like Bon Bibi and Manasa Devi to restore balance and harmony in "the ecotopia of the Sundarbans" (Menon 142). Ghosh portrays these characters, including Nilima, Moyna, Kusum, Piya, and Cinta, as epic ecofeminist heroes who tirelessly fight to protect the environment, enduring immense hardships. However, this dissertation will focus on the difficulties and character development of one character who first appears in *The Hungry Tide* and whose adventures continue in *Gun Island*: Piyali Roy.

4. Piya as a Representation of Amitav Ghosh's Ecofeminism

Piyali Roy, an American citizen of Indian origin, is one of the major characters of both novels. She does not belong to the tide country but is a visitor to the place. Piya journeys to the Sundarbans to study the abundant population of Gangetic dolphins known to inhabit the region, as "several nineteenth-century zoologists had testified to it" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 42).[6] While conducting her research, however, she encounters a different dolphin species, the Irrawaddy (Orcaella brevirostris), similar to the killer whales (Orcinus orca) she observed in the Puget Sound during her childhood with her unhappily married parents. From the beginning, she faces the wild storms and tough conditions of the Sundarbans, ready to do whatever it takes to save the endangered dolphins. But as a woman, she also must deal with the creepy looks from the forest guards and the disrespectful attitude of Mejda, the boatman she hired, when "bursting into laughter, he gesticulated in the direction of his tongue and his crotch" (*HT* 34). Due to her blackness, she loses all protection in the town of Canning, as she knows that "if she had been, say, a white European, or a Japanese" this man wouldn't have "adopted the same attitude" (34). bell hooks in her book *Ain't I a Woman* explains that Black women must endure not only sexism but also racism:

> Since the black woman has been stereotyped by both white and black men as the "bad" woman, she has not been able to ally herself with men from either group to get protection from the other. Neither group feels that she deserves protection. […] Their perception of the black female as a degraded sexual object is similar to white male perceptions of black female. (149-150)

This myth of the black woman as the "bad" woman serves to employ a "systematic devaluation of black womanhood […] to maintain white supremacy" (hooks 87). Piya is conscious of this devaluation and, regardless, opts to stay in the Sundarbans and help protect the mangrove forests.

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[6] Henceforth, page numbers from *The Hungry Tide* will be cited *HT* plus page number.

Considering her independent trajectory, professional success, and dedication to environmental causes, it can be argued that Piya holds ecofeminist views, reflecting Ghosh's own environmental commitment. Furthermore, employing a critical feminist lens in interpreting both novels highlights Ghosh's underlying message of equal respect for both human society and the natural environment. This section aims to explore the pivotal role of Piya as she forges her own identity and becomes exemplary by her outstanding commitment to society, thus establishing her as a representation of ecofeminism.

According to Greta Gaard, feminism and ecofeminism go beyond solely addressing the oppression of women and nature; they encompass various forms of oppression, leading to a diverse range of perspectives and experiences within the movement. Ecofeminism extends its focus to include considerations of caste, race, and the rights of non-human beings. Ecofeminism encourages adaptation to recognize Earth's limitations and restore ecological balance. This interdisciplinary approach draws from disciplines such as history, mythology, social analysis, philosophy, and so forth (27). Ghosh emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence between humans and the natural world, adopting a bio-centric perspective that encompasses all living beings and their relationships with nature.

Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies in their collaborative work *Ecofeminism* (1993) argue that the construction and perpetuation of patriarchy are intertwined with the colonization of women, foreign peoples and their territories, and nature (120). Consequently, this global system appears largely responsible for the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment. Ecofeminist theory advocates for the deconstruction of all dualistic frameworks and binary oppositions. It argues that as long as these dualisms persist within societal structures, they will serve as rationalizations for patriarchal domination. Ecofeminism says that patriarchal hegemony is sustained through

hierarchical dualistic paradigms "such as heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature, and white/non-white" (Ahsan 255). Established social, economic, and cultural systems reinforce these binaries, often leveraging religious and scientific constructs for validation. Critics contend that these dichotomies engender psychological fragmentation and existential alienation, leading to a disconnection from intrinsic values and a detachment from the natural world (255). Val Plumwood further argues that:

> Western culture has treated the human/nature relation as a dualism and this explains many of the problematic features of the West's treatment of nature which underlie the environmental crisis, especially the western construction of human identity as 'outside' nature. (2)

By constructing human identity as outside and above nature, this perspective has led to environmental exploitation and degradation.

This notion of humans as 'outsiders' of nature and the fact that the West has exerted dominance over the Orient throughout centuries of colonization is symbolically mirrored in *The Hungry Tide* through the challenges the main characters face in communicating with each other. This establishes a communication dynamic where the indigenous character Fokir serves as a pivotal figure. Fokir experiences a dual form of linguistic marginalization: Piya, representing the colonial West, is unable to engage in verbal communication with him, while Kanai, acting as an intermediary between East and West, holds superiority over Fokir due to his class, education, and caste. As a result of his subordinate position, Fokir's verbal contributions are often limited to gestures or cries, or he is entirely silenced. Just as the Sundarbans are impenetrable for Westerners, Fokir's words are not accessible to readers. Instead, we only get his story through Piya and Kanai's thoughts and conversations, which further establishes a gap between the two perspectives. Fokir's first attempt at expression happens one day when he starts humming a song, suggesting a grief in his singing that unsettled Piya:

> She had thought that she had seen a […] likable kind of naïveté, but now, listening to this song, she began to ask herself whether it was she who was naïve. She would have liked to know what he was singing about and what the lyrics meant – but she knew too that a river of words would not be able to tell her exactly what made the song sound as it did right then, in that place. (*HT* 99)

This portrayal effectively underscores Ghosh's argument that the West has frequently disregarded the voice and history of the Orient. However, Piya, in the passage, starts detaching herself from her Western ideals.

Piya's role in the narrative is undeniably controversial: as a member of the Indian diaspora, she finds herself an outsider in the U.S.A., supposedly her homeland. However, despite being born and having spent her first two years in India (*HT* 94), she also feels like an outsider in the Sundarbans due to her inability to speak Bengali or Hindi because of her family situation. Piya's parents embody contrasting experiences of migration. Her father, determined to avoid the label of a Bengali who "doesn't travel well" (*HT* 250), throws himself into assimilation. He believes that dwelling on the past hinders integration and, instead, actively pursues language and cultural immersion. His assimilation accelerates Piya's absorption into American life. In contrast, Piya's mother never embraces their new home, Seattle. Lacking the support system she had back in India (family, friends, a fulfilling life), she feels like she "fell through the cracks" (*HT* 219). Her struggle to adapt leads to a sense of despair and detachment, even from her family. Their approaches to the new society create irreparable problems between them. Their arguments and resentments are in their mother tongue, and consequently, Piya associates Bengali with unhappiness (*HT* 94).

Language is not the only barrier Piya faces in connecting with her Indian heritage. Food and clothing also play a role in shaping her identity. The strong aromas of Bengali cuisine cause a sense of alienation in her, reminding her of a time "when those were the smells of home" (*HT* 96). After all those years, however, her response was to "fight back, with a quietly ferocious tenacity, against them and against her mother" (*HT* 97).

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Traditional garments like saris become another source of shame. Her mother's clothing style embarrasses Piya, who sees it as outdated (*HT* 72). With her mother's passing, she loses her strongest link to the East, so she embraces Western culture and solidifies her Western identity. Yet, she still remains "the little East Indian girl" for her friends (*HT* 74), constantly reminding her that she is neither Eastern nor Western, but an in-between. This struggle shapes her career choice. Field biology, with its independence and mobility, offers a solution.

> As with many of her peers, she had been drawn to field biology as much for the life it offered as for its intellectual content – because it allowed her to be on her own, to have no fixated address, to be far from the familiar, while still being a part of a loyal but loose-knit community. (*HT* 126)

The job becomes a refuge from her identity crisis. While a part of her Eastern heritage remains, Piya's negative perception of the East leads her to identify more strongly with the West.

However, Piya's negativity towards the East crumbles only after meeting Fokir, a simple fisherman. Rescued by him from the river, Piya feels an inexplicable connection. Fokir's deep understanding of the river and surprising wit captivate her. He becomes the first Bengali she truly trusts. Ironically, this trust grows despite a language barrier, but "wasn't it better in a way, more honest, that they could not speak? For if you compared it to the ways in which dolphins' echoes mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being," Piya thinks (*HT* 159).

As their bond deepens, Piya's rigid stance on her heritage softens. Bengali, a language she previously neglected despite her mother's pleas, starts to seem appealing to her: "My mother used to say that a day would come when I'd regret not knowing the language. And I guess she was right" (*HT* 249). This is the first hint of a shift in her cultural perspective. Years later, in *Gun Island*, we learn that Piya has learned Bengali

perfectly well, speaking the language fluently (*GI* 283). On principle, as the only character from a Western country, readers might naturally expect to adopt her perspective towards the tidal country and its traditions. Yet, paradoxically, she simultaneously embodies both the Western, colonizing world and a part of Indian culture, as Ghosh himself does to a certain extent. He was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, but now lives in New York.

The exploration of female identity and the journey of self-development and self-assertion are intricately linked to both colonial legacy and postcolonial theory and critique. Throughout the narrative, Piya undergoes significant transformations, facilitated by the unique ecological setting of the Sundarbans and her immersion in a different culture. Symbolically, her quest for self-discovery and personal growth mirrors her search for the Irrawaddy dolphin Moreover, Piya follows a circular trajectory: while initially viewing herself as American upon her arrival in India, by the end of *The Hungry Tide*, she chooses to remain in Lusibari, embracing the island as her home. This pivotal shift in her perception occurs during a research expedition, where her deepening connection to the environment and recognition of the interconnectedness between natural elements and living beings culminate in an epiphanic moment, leading her to discover her true calling:

> Now, as she sat in the boat, thinking about these connections and interrelations, Piya had to close her eyes, so dazzling was the universe of possibilities that opened in her mind. There was so much to do, so many queries to answer, so many leads to follow […] Whatever came of it in the end, it was a certainty that it was not going to create an upheaval in science. But at the same time, who would have thought that it would be so intensely satisfying to have your future resolved, to know what you were going to be doing next year and the year after that until who knew when? […] It would be enough; as an alibi for life, it would do; she would not need to apologize for how she had spent her time on this earth. (*HT* 125-7)

This passage marks a significant turning point in the narrative, as Piya's recognition leads to a deeper and more intimate connection with the environment. This connection transcends her scientific expertise and knowledge as a marine biologist and cetologist. She, then, starts her research on the species of Irrawaddy dolphin that frequented a river

pool situated near an abandoned settlement called Garjontola, from which the island takes

its name. This island becomes her personal paradise, a place where she thrives both

emotionally and intellectually, offering the perfect space for her to study and develop her

passion for the Orcaella. However, it is only after Fokir's sacrifice that she decides to turn

this idea into a tangible project. Piya gains access to Garjontola through Fokir, who

initially appears to be her opposite in the narrative but ultimately becomes a

complementary character. She represents Western knowledge and scientific progress,

using GPS and advanced gadgets for her research, while he embodies ancestral, non-

scientific wisdom. Their collaboration subverts the typical colonizer-colonized dynamic

of superiority and domination. Piya respects Fokir's deep understanding of the

Sundarbans and, by sharing his intimate knowledge of this idyllic space, the only place

where he can truly be himself, he fosters a deeper connection with her. The Sundarbans

ecosystem binds them, overshadowing their differences in class, origin, language, culture,

and education (Hanquart-Turner 76-7). This connection culminates during the tidal wave,

where Fokir sacrifices his life to shield Piya with his own body:

> She tried to break free from his grasp, tried to pull him around so that for once, she could
> be the one who was sheltering him. But his body was unyielding and she could not break
> free from it, especially now that it had the wind's weight behind it. Their bodies were so
> close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could
> sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if
> they had been superimposed on her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life
> could not; it had fused them together and made them one. (*HT* 390)

The unique environment of the Sundarbans brings Piya and Fokir together, leading to

their love and culminating in their desperate struggle for survival during the tidal wave,

which ultimately unites and then separates them forever. Through their relationship,

Ghosh illustrates the encounter between the West and the East and highlights the broader

connection between humans and nature. After surviving the tidal wave thanks to Fokir's

sacrifice, Piya decides to stay in Lusibari to continue her scientific work, integrating

Fokir's ancestral knowledge of the Sundarbans into modern technology (Hanquart-Turner 80).

> 'See, this is connected to the satellites of the Global Positioning System. On the day of the storm, it was in my pocket. It was the only piece of equipment that survived. […] All the routes that Fokir showed me are stored here. Look. […] That was the route we took on the day before the storm. Fokir took the boat into every little creek and gully where he'd ever seen a dolphin. That one map represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge. It's going to be the foundation of my own project. That's why I think it should be named after him.' (*HT* 398)

In this passage, it can be seen how Ghosh challenges the traditional view of the West imposing knowledge on the East. Instead, he shows through Piya the possibility of a combination of Western scientific methods with the traditional wisdom of the Sundarbans people. This cooperation represents a broader vision where different cultures can work together to create a more just and sustainable world. This new world would move away from the problems of current capitalism and towards a more egalitarian society.

Years later, however, her research project provides evidence that the Irrawaddy are fleeing the Sundarbans due to global warming. Pollution from farms and refineries, wastewater from agriculture, and careless disposal of chemicals have devastated the ecosystem. Countless fish have died, and dolphins have been driven away from their usual homes. This environmental crisis has caused immense confusion and disruption, mainly because the number of different species of fish in the Sundarbans was bigger than in the whole continent of Europe, a proliferation of aquatic life "thought to be the result of the unusually varied composition of the water itself" (*HT* 125). Both humans and animals feel lost and unsure of where they belong. Piya and Moyna recognize that, just like people, animals are also suffering from oppression, stress, and the constant pressure to find new homes (*GI* 106). Ocean creatures in the Sundarbans, like Rani the dolphin, are especially hurt by disruptions in their habitat. Piya's anger and despair capture the helplessness many environmentally aware people feel when faced with ecological problems they can't solve. In *Gun Island*, man-made noises from submarines and sonar equipment forced Rani and

her pod to tragically beach themselves. Piya explains that "marine mammals use echo location to navigate so if something messed with that they could become disoriented and run themselves aground" (*GI* 108). Their deaths provoke a deep emotional reaction in Piya who, despite not usually showing her emotions publicly, grieves them deeply. The novels portray this tragic displacement of both humans and wildlife.

Climate change is not a localized issue; it's a planetary crisis demanding environmental justice for all – humans and non-humans alike. National borders become meaningless when the entire planet faces the same threat. Ghosh cleverly highlights this by drawing parallels between human and animal migrations caused by climate change. This connection exposes the deep link between environmental and refugee crises (Khan 2). The combined weight of colonialism's lingering effects and the current neoliberal capitalist system has created a deeply unequal social structure in the Bengal Delta, as Tipu describes:

> But now the fish catch is down, the land's turning salty, and you can't go into the jungle without bribing the forest guards. On top of that every other year you get hit by a storm that blows everything to pieces. So what are people supposed to do? What would anyone do? If you're young you can't just sit on your butt till you starve to death. Even the animals are moving – just ask Piya. If you've got any sense you'll move. (*GI* 65)

This leaves marginalized communities particularly exposed to the dangers of the worsening climate crisis. Their struggle for survival often leads to mass migrations, both within the region and out of it. This adds significantly to the growing number of global ecological refugees (Khan 6). Bengalis are "among the largest groups of refugees crossing the Mediterranean to seek shelter in Italy" (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 154). However, after having risked their lives seeking better conditions of life, they still have to bear with suffering and struggles "as they frequently experience different forms of racial, cultural, and political persecution, and economic exploitation in their new lives" (Khan 5-6), which is ironic giving the fact that "Europe is largely responsible for the crisis because of its role in the four hundred years of colonization that has affected the entire planet" (6). At

the end of *Gun Island*, when Deen, Piya, Rafi, Cinta, and others are going to the rescue of a Blue Boat with refugees, many right-wing, anti-immigrant groups are also there to block their entrance to Europe. Following Khan's reflection on Europe's responsibility for the current migration crisis, Ghosh, narrated via Deen, understands "why the angry young men on the boats around us were so afraid of that derelict refugee boat" (*GI* 305):

> That tiny vessel represented the upending of a centuries-old project that had been essential to the shaping of Europe. Beginning with the early days of chattel slavery, the European imperial powers had launched upon the greatest and most cruel experiment in planetary remaking that history has ever known: in the service of commerce they had transported people between continents on an almost unimaginable scale, ultimately changing the demographic profile of the entire planet. But even as they were repopulating other continents they had always tried to preserve the whiteness of their own metropolitan territories in Europe. (305)

Deen's narrative and Ghosh's perspective in this passage are intertwined. Despite these xenophobic groups, the other international groups supporting the refugees remain resolute in helping those seeking asylum in Italy. This global support network reflects a potential shift in global attitudes.

Piya and Rafi's joy when they find Tipu on the Blue Boat highlights the human cost of this crisis. These refugees, a mix of Ethiopians, Eritreans, Somalis, Arabs, and Bengalis, come from El-Arish, Egypt, where they were held captive by traffickers (*GI* 285-6). Media narratives often portray refugees as solely from war-torn regions like Asia or sub-Saharan Africa. However, South Asians, particularly Bangladeshi men, are also undertaking these perilous journeys, often overlooked in news reports (*The Nutmeg's Curse* 154). Amitav Ghosh, himself partly Bengali, delves deeper. Bangladesh is not ravaged by war, nor is its economy in ruins. His investigations confirm his suspicions: these refugees are fleeing climate catastrophe. Bangladesh, and the Bengal Delta in particular, faces extreme vulnerability to rising sea levels due to its low elevation. Much land has already been swallowed by the sea (*The Nutmeg's Curse* 155). In *Gun Island*,

Ghosh portrays human migration primarily through Deen's experiences, while Piya's perspective sheds light on climate change and the movement of non-human species.

Already in her youth, Piya feels deeply moved by the ecological crisis facing the Sundarbans, a crisis the reader learns after Nirmal, Kanai's uncle, reflects on the gradual signs of environmental decline over time:

> I remembered how when I first came to Lusibari, the sky would be darkened by birds at sunset. Many years had passed since I'd seen such flights of birds. When I first noticed their absence, I thought they would soon come back but they had not. I remembered a time when at low tide the mudbanks would turn scarlet with millions of swarming crabs. That color began to fade long ago and now it is never seen any more. […] Age teaches you to recognize the signs of death. You do not see them suddenly; you become aware of them very slowly over a period of many, many years. […] The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take, to submerge the tide country? Not much – a minuscule change in the level of the sea would be enough. (*HT* 215)

Human interference and irresponsible activities have devastated the once-pure ecosystem of the Sundarbans, a mangrove forest that thrives due to a unique blend of saltwater and freshwater. The dolphin pools teem with crabs, vital to the forest's health. Piya recognizes crabs as a "keystone species" (*HT* 142) in the ecosystem, vital to keep the mangrove alive by clearing fallen leaves and preventing the trees from being drowned by their own waste. She understands the complexity of natural ecosystems and the importance of every species within them. Piya's concern extends to the suffering of the Mekong Orcaella due to human activities, such as the indiscriminate American carpet bombing in the 1970s (*HT* 305). Her dedication is further demonstrated in her defense of the tigers when a group of villagers set fire to a tiger that had killed several people. She stands in defense of the animal, refusing to justify harming animals for human revenge. She firmly believes that animals should not suffer from human conflicts.

Ghosh emphasizes the devaluation of human lives compared to tigers in the Sundarbans. Under the guise of preservation, environmental policies favor man-eating

tigers, leaving humans vulnerable to attacks and unable to defend themselves due to

governmental protections under Project Tiger (Vincent 7):

> 'That tiger had killed two people, Piya,' Kanai said. 'And that was just in one village. It
> happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there
> were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet
> here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in
> the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter.' (*HT* 300)

The novel illustrates this imbalance, depicting humans as defenseless prey to tigers while

the government's measures to protect the species lead to what Kanai describes as

"genocide." The story critiques how governments, in the name of the common good, have

made the Sundarbans "inhabitable" for humans but "hospitable" and "protected" for

tigers (Vincent 7). The Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, established in 1973 to protect the

endangered tigers, was declared a World Heritage Site in 1987 to preserve the essential

mangrove habitat ("Indian Sundarbans"). This initiative aims to safeguard beautiful

animals like the Bengal tiger but has had adverse effects on impoverished human

communities. Piya defends the Tiger Reserve and opposes the killing of tigers:

> 'There's a big difference between preserving a species in captivity and keeping it in its
> habitat. […] The difference, Kanai, […] is that it was what was *intended* – not by you or
> me, but by nature, by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive.' […]
> 'That's all very well for you to say, Piya – but it's not you who's paying the price in lost
> lives.' […]
> 'Do you think I wouldn't pay the price if I thought it necessary? […] If I thought giving
> up my life might make the rivers safe again for the Irrawaddy dolphin, the answer is yes,
> I would. But the trouble is that my life, your life, a thousand lives would make no
> difference.' (*HT* 301-2, italics in the original)

The tiger's death in the Sundarbans sparks a clash of perspectives. Villagers, like Kanai,

prioritize safety and see the tiger as a threat. Piya, however, is furious at the killing. Unlike

Kanai, she cares deeply about the environment and sees the tiger as a symbol of power,

beauty, and the delicate balance of nature, and finds Kanai's attitude insensitive. Fokir,

on the other hand, has a practical viewpoint and believes that a tiger entering a human

settlement seeks death. Kanai accuses Piya of ignoring the struggles of the villagers. The

tiger's death exposes the environmental crisis in the Sundarbans, and Piya believes humanity's future lies in wildlife preservation.

Through Piya's point of view, Ghosh emphasizes the importance of incorporating an ecological perspective when creating policies to protect the environment. He argues that both human survival and the existence of the non-human world depend on maintaining an ecological balance. An anthropocentric viewpoint fails to consider the perspectives of non-humans and marginalized communities. Humans often assume complete authority over all species and resources, leading to extensive exploitation and depriving non-humans of their right to exist (Menon 125). This flawed reasoning sometimes results in animals being protected at the cost of human lives, while at other times, nature is destroyed to make room for industrial development.

Ghosh notes that primitive lifestyles did not threaten the environment and allowed people to live in harmony with nature. The refugees in Morichjhãpi exemplified these traditional ways of living, as Kusum defends: "We were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil […]. This is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil" (*HT* 262). Politics and industrialization have disrupted the longstanding balance between humans and nature. Traditional ways of life have been swept away, replaced by resource exploitation and an imbalanced focus on conservation, as "the lack of a transitive connection between political mobilization, on the one hand, and global warming, on the other, is nowhere more evident than in the countries of South Asia, all of which are extraordinarily vulnerable to climate change" (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 126).

This focus can sometimes come at the expense of human settlements. Kusum in *The Hungry Tide* highlights that the island's value is seen primarily in its trees and 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" (*HT* 261). This prioritization leaves human existence "worth less than dirt or dust" (261). Kusum asks herself: "Who are these people […] who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us? Do they know what is being done in their names?" (*HT* 262).

Ghosh argues that environmental protection can be a mask for political agendas. The brutal eviction of refugees from Morichjhãpi Island in 1979, explained in the introduction, also reflected in *The Hungry Tide* and supposedly for ecological reasons, exposes the government's disregard for human life. Orders to remove the refugees, even by deadly force, prioritized clearing the island over any genuine concern for the environment. This incident reveals the limited perspective and lack of ecological understanding of those who make environmental policies. Ghosh emphasizes that many environmental movements lack a universal, integrated vision. They fail to consider the human element, which is crucial for achieving sustainable development for all living things on Earth.

Ghosh avoids simplistic solutions to the nature-human divide. His novels portray nature, animals, and the environment as interconnected and vital. In contrast to today's context, however, women do not play decisive roles regarding environmental issues despite bearing the burdens of environmental degradation (Menon 141). They ensure household survival by collecting water, fuel, and food, yet face the harshest consequences of climate change:

> As rural areas experience desertification, decreased food production, and other economic and ecological hardships, these factors prompt increased male out-migration to urban centers with the promise of economic gain and wages returned to the family; these promises are not always fulfilled. In the short-term, and possibly the long-term as well, male out-migration means more women are left behind with additional agricultural and household duties, such as caregiving. These women have even fewer resources to cope with seasonal and episodic weather and natural disasters. (Gaard 23)

Men may migrate, but women and children remain, becoming the "front lines" (23) of the crisis due to persistent gender inequality. These "gender inequalities mean that women

and children are 14 times more likely to die in ecological disasters than men" (23). Their deaths result in an "increased infant mortality, early marriage of girls, increased neglect of girls' education, sexual assaults, trafficking in women and child prostitution" (23).

Ghosh exposes the flaws of patriarchal and imperialist systems that push marginalized groups, particularly women, to the fringes of society. He warns that neglecting both nature and women will lead to environmental disaster. Through his characters, Ghosh weaves a narrative of resistance. Piya's character illustrates the scientific perspectives on climate change, but she represents only one social background. Other female characters, such as Nilima, Moyna, Kusum, Cinta, and even the deities Manasa Devi and Bon Bibi, also showcase their individual efforts to restore ecological balance in the Sundarbans, collectively creating a vision of utopian harmony with nature. Ghosh depicts them as epic heroes and powerful ecofeminists who courageously endure hardships to protect the environment, using their narratives to convey his own views on the climate crisis.

Though practical and emotionally controlled, Ghosh paints Nilima as a woman driven by empathy. Deeply affected by the hardships of the exploited settlers, she takes a bold step: establishing the Badabon Trust. This organization offers essential support like shelter, medicine, and education in Lusibari. She becomes a beacon of hope for the inhabitants of the tide country, as well as for Piya, who admires her work and probably finds in her the role model she needed as a child but lacked in the figure of her mother. Nilima acts as a mentor to Piya from the start, providing her with crucial insights into the local socio-economic and ecological landscape. Besides, Nilima's work with the Badabon Trust aligns with Piya's environmental goals, which underscores the importance of combining ecological and social efforts to achieve lasting change.

Moyna, Fokir's wife, is a nurse at Lusibari's hospital. She was raised in the tide country, with no access to school. However, she walked kilometers to go to school, determined to get an education. She is "ambitious and bright […]. Through her own efforts, with no encouragement from her family, she had managed to give herself an education" (*HT* 129). Moyna understands the value of an education and admires Piya for her scientific knowledge. Likewise, Piya admires Moyna for her resilience and her dedication to her duties. Fokir's death creates a bond between them as they share their sorrow. Years later, they still share an unbreakable sisterhood after raising Tipu together.

Kusum, unlike Nilima and Piya, was born in the Sundarbans, with firsthand experience of its hardships. As a child, she endured hunger, sickness, poverty, and the trauma of seeing her father killed by a tiger. This incident changed her deeply, leading her to resist her socio-economic conditions rather than accept them passively. She was abandoned by her mother and forced into prostitution by a landowner, finally finding refuge at Nilima's women's trust. Following her husband's death, she sought a fresh start in the Morichjhãpi settlement. Yet, as previously explained, this new community faced imminent displacement due to government eviction efforts. With a fierce determination to protect her community's rights, Kusum became a vocal advocate against the eviction, finally dying in the massacre. Her experiences represented the broader struggles of women in the Sundarbans. Her life, though marked by continued struggle, exemplifies unwavering resistance in the face of oppression.

In *Gun Island*, Piya's initial commitment to scientific objectivity is challenged by Cinta, an elderly Venetian scholar specializing in Venetian history. Cinta's narratives of the past offer a parallel and potential explanation for Piya's own environmentally focused narrative. She is a spiritual explorer constantly searching for life's meaning due to the grief of losing her family. Her academic pursuits intertwine with a personal and mystical

interpretation of history, mirroring her own experiences. As a mentor figure in the novel, she believes this act of dreaming unlocks a deeper understanding of how to improve the world. These beliefs and preoccupations make her a guide for Deen, who is also on a personal quest for meaning. By the novel's end, Cinta finds peace in death, reuniting with her deceased daughter and husband. Piya assumes the role of Deen's guide, solidifying a symbolic continuation of female mentorship in his life. On a broader scale, this represents the enduring presence of a feminine principle of order in the world (Draga Alexandru 82), potentially embodied in *Gun Island* by the snake goddess Manasa Devi.

Ghosh's novels explore the human-nature connection through female deities. In *The Hungry Tide*, Bon Bibi embodies the protector of forest-dependent communities, symbolizing harmony with nature through her care for all life forms. Manasa Devi in *Gun Island* represents the wild itself, highlighting the power of stories to fight "predatory capitalism" (Singh and Kim 194). Both characters are ecofeminist ideals. Bon Bibi transcends human divisions with her compassion, while Manasa Devi, present in the legend of Bonduki Sadagar, embodies Earth itself. In the legend, the Sadagar harms her and disrupts the ecosystem. From an ecofeminist viewpoint, the Sadagar represents patriarchal greed, while Manasa, with her snake allies, embodies the eco-feminine spirit (Menon 141). Unlike Bon Bibi's benevolence, Manasa negotiates and demands respect, challenging social norms as a "lone warrior" fighting for recognition in a male-dominated world (141). These protective goddesses highlight the interconnectedness of human actions and the natural world.

Each of these women faces unique struggles, but in their fight for resistance, they all contribute to an ecological balance and symbolize harmony with nature. Although Piya is one of the main characters and her story is inspiring, Ghosh mirrors his ideals by using all of these women's stories to emphasize the importance of empathy, education, and

resistance against socio-economic oppression, highlighting the important role of women

when addressing the climate crisis.

5. Conclusions and Further Research

The analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* in this dissertation illustrates how literary works can provide profound insights into the ecofeminist discourse, emphasizing the complex interplay between ecological degradation and the subjugation of women in a postcolonial setting. In Ghosh's novels, Piyali Roy (Piya) emerges as an ecofeminist hero. Her character is created to highlight the intersectionality of environmental, gender, and racial issues, and her journey symbolizes themes such as identity, connection, and resistance against oppressive systems.

Her identity as a diasporic Indian-American marine biologist underscores the intersectionality of race, gender, and environmental activism. Her position as an outsider of the Sundarbans allows her to approach the forest with scientific curiosity and a deep connection to her heritage. This dual perspective enriches her understanding of the local ecological and social dynamics, positioning her as a bridge between Western scientific knowledge and Indigenous ecological wisdom.

Besides, Piya's work in the Sundarbans is a direct challenge to the patriarchal and capitalist forces that exploit both women and the environment. Her efforts to study and protect the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins represent a broader resistance against the commodification of natural resources and the marginalization of local communities. Through Piya, Ghosh critiques the environmental degradation driven by unchecked economic development and advocates for a more sustainable and equitable approach to natural resource management.

Throughout the narrative, Piya's transformation from a detached researcher to a committed ecofeminist activist is evident. Initially, her engagement with the Sundarbans is primarily academic, but as she immerses herself in the local environment and interacts with its inhabitants, her perspective shifts. This evolution reflects Ghosh's belief in the

transformative power of ecofeminist activism, where personal growth and social responsibility intertwine. Piya's scientific background is complemented by her appreciation for traditional ecological knowledge possessed by local communities. Her collaboration with Fokir symbolizes the harmonious integration of modern science and Indigenous practices. This partnership highlights the value of inclusive and holistic approaches to environmental conservation, where multiple knowledge systems are respected and used.

Throughout the novels, as years pass by, Piya engages in significant relationships with Moyna and Nilima, which underscore themes of feminist solidarity and empowerment. Despite facing systemic barriers and personal challenges, Piya and the women around her demonstrate resilience and agency. These relationships are central to the ecofeminist narrative in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, which showcase the potential of the movement to foster women's resilience and leadership that leads to sustainable change in postcolonial contexts.

In conclusion, through these two novels, Ghosh emphasizes intersectionality, narrating the experiences of several women raised in different contexts, and criticizes capitalism and patriarchy, advocating for more equitable and sustainable alternatives through Piya's character. Piya's journey from a scientist to an activist highlights the critical role women play in environmental advocacy. The narratives emphasize that women's unique perspectives and experiences are vital in addressing environmental issues, particularly in postcolonial contexts. For all the abovementioned reasons, *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* are ecofeminist novels because of all the women characters appearing, and particularly, because of Piya.

For further research, I believe much more can be analyzed from *Gun Island* due to its recent publication and has therefore not generated much critical attention yet: a

psychological analysis of Deen's period of depression, its roots as well as his behavior towards it, or the blending of folklore, magical realism, and the supernatural present in the novel. Another possible topic is the ageing of the two characters, Deen and Cinta and perhaps, to a lesser degree, Piya herself.

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