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**A STUDY ON AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL THE  
HUNGRY TIDE**

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# A Study on Amitav Ghosh's Novel the Hungry Tide

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**Abstract – The Hungry Tide is the sixth novel by Indian-born author, Amitav Ghosh. It tells a very contemporary story of adventure and unlikely love, identity and history, set one of the most fascinating regions on the earth. Off the easternmost coast of India, in the Bay of Bengal, lies the immense labyrinth of tiny islands known as the Sundarbans. For settlers here, life is extremely precarious. Attacks by deadly tigers are common. Unrest and eviction are constant threats. Without warning, at any time, tidal floods rise and surge over the land, leaving devastation in their wake. In this place of vengeful beauty, the lives of three people from different worlds collide.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh has discovered another new territory, summoning a singular, fascinating place, another world, from its history and myth, and bringing it to life. Yet *The Hungry Tide* also explores another and far more unknowable jungle: the human spirit. It is a novel that asks at every turn: what man can take the true measure of another?

It is an amazing story of the land and the people of Sundarban. Their struggle against nature, the tide, the storm, the tiger, the fearful surroundings. Still some people like Sundarbans. They die for a piece of land in this God forbidden land.

Sundarban, the largest delta is hardly one hundred kilometer away from Kolkata. The Kolkatans never took much interest in these muddy islands, infested with snakes and crocodiles. The danger of man eater, the Royal Tiger, always looms in some parts. Some poor people live there. But who cares for them? There are so many interesting things for us. Some times a great writer makes us look beyond what we don't see. Now after reading this book, the vast stretches of the rivers and its mohona, the confluence of the rivers with the sea, innumerable small islands linked special trees and mangroves are dancing before my eyes. My horizon has definitely got extended.

The story has two lines running parallel, Piyali Roy, (called Piya) is a scientist, brought up by her ambitious father in U.S.A. She does know a single word of Bengali language. She has come to Sundarban to do her research on Gangetic dolphins. On the way of Canning (gate way of Surdarban) by a local train, she meets a man named Kanai Dutta, who was going to Lusibari, the further most islands, where her aunt Nilima, a social worker has been living for last five decades. Kanai invites Piya to Lusibari. Piya obtains

all the Government permits for work and hires a streamer escorted by a Govt. guard. She feels a small boat would be much useful for her study of the behaviour of the dolphins and approaches near a boat on the river. While she was negotiating with boatman named Fokir, she suddenly fell off the streamer and gets drifted away by the strong current of the river. Fokir, risking his own life jumped into the river and saves her from drowning. From a flashcard of Piya, Fokir could identify what she is looking for. Fokir takes her to places where these dolphins are in abundance. After two/ three days search, they come back to Lusibari, where Fokir also lived with her life Mayna and son Tutul. Now Piya readies for journey to the confluence for her study with a bigger boar driven by a diesel motor, locally called bhotbhoti, Kanai also accompanies her as a translator. Fokir follows them with his small boat. At some point, Piya and Fokir sail by the boat in search of dolphins. That day they do not find any dolphin and Fokir goes on searching through the narrow canals. Actually a very strong storm was approaching Sundarban while Kanai and other got aware of it and left for Lusibari, Piya and Fokir could take shelter in a tree to face the storm. They tied themselves with a sari to the trunk of a tree. The gale lambasted Sundarban. The fury was extreme in the island. Some very heavy uprooted trunk of a tree hit Fokir and he dies. Piya is rescued and she plans to stayback at Lusibari to carry out a bigger research project.

The other line revolves round Nirmal, the husband of Nilima. He was a lecturer of a college in south Kolkata. Under some circumstances, the husband and wife took shelter in Sundarban. He becomes a headmaster and Nilima a social worker. Nirmal had a poetic bend of mind. He used to write a diary, where he wrote about the people of Sundarban. During late seventies, lots of refugees from East Pakistan who were given land at Dandyakaranya for rehabilitation

started coming back to Sundarban. As these people are from the land of rivers and mud, they could not adjust in the dry place of Madhya Pradesh. They came to Marichjhapi, a muddy island owned by Government of West Bengal and set up a beautiful a colony. But Government of Bengal was not happy with encroachment by these refugees. They forcefully, evicted the people from the island. There was stiff resistance from the people who had nothing to lose but life. Lot of people died. Nirmal was associated with them. He also mysteriously vanished since then. He left the dairy for Kanai, which was retrieved after many years. Nilima called Kanai to hand over the dairy so that reads it and gets it printed. Thought Kanai could finish reading it, but he lost it in the river.

The author gives very beautiful description Lusibari: an island surrounded by sever rivers, its evolution over the years, the hope and aspiration of its residents. The dairy narrates mostly about the Morichjhapi. Those hapless displaced persons could never find a house of their choice. They liked the island Marichjhapi, a vacant place, set up the colony. It shows the longing of some uprooted people to set up a new home at a place of their chose. But how brutally they were treated. No one came to their help. The island was surrounded by all sides by Police boats, no supply of provision, all tube wells were damaged, their housed were demolished, they were forcefully evicted from their houses they built with so much zeal. The brutal treatment to these helpless people rocked Bengal at that time. Here arises the question, are the animals more important from human being? Are we not more concerned for the habitat of tigers rather than our fellow brethren?

Mr. Ghosh has made tremendous research work. He imparts so many information about gangetic dolphin, about flora and fauna of the locality. He also shows Sundarban is not only the confluence of rivers and the sea; the place is an amazing meeting point of different cultures, which seems impossible at other places.

It is also a strange love story, where the lovers (Piya and Fokir) could never exchange words. They spent days and night in the vast stretches of the rivers, on the tree. Finally Fokir died saving life of Piya. It may seem very strange, but Piya, the scientists from U.S.A greatly values the feelings of Fokir, an illiterate person for her. She plans to name her project after Fokir.

The description of the rivers at different times, in the misty morning, in the brigh sunlight, during sunset or the fool moon night are superb. The stormy night on the trees is so vivid; the reader would feel he is on the spot. Even after finishing the book. I feel the rocking of the boat; those beautiful sights are still my eyes. My vision has stretched far upto those islands of Sundarbans.

Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide is set in the mangrove islands of Sundarbans, West Bengal. The Hungry Tide explores refugee resettlement in the

forest reserves of *Marichjhapi*, Sundarbans and the complex Man-Animal relationship in the archipelagos ecosystem. The book makes for a fast reading because the characters do not throw any new light on the two issues.

The central characters are Mr. Kanai Dutt, Ms. Piyali Roy, and Mr. Fokir. Mr. Dutt is in his early 40s, single, and runs a profitable translation services in New Delhi. He employs his polyglot skills to modify his ego and charm women. His life is sexless and preys on unsuspecting, yet intelligent women. His aunt, Nilima Bose compares his preying instincts to the "Tigers in the Sundarbans". He is called by Ms. Bose to Lusibari Island. Sundarbans to read his deceased uncle's unopened notebooks.

Ms. Piyali Roy, a cetologist from Seattle is in Sundarbans to do a research study on the last surviving group of fresh water dolphins – the Irrawady Dolphins, Mr. Ghosh's describing of her research sounds dubious. She spots and then stalks dolphins, makes some disparate entry in her data sheets and notes the GPS reading. God forbid, the journal, which takes her manuscript. Mr. Dutt flirts and calls her a "brave woman" for her often lonesome work. Ms. Roy is mostly self-pitying throughout the story.

*"Kanai, tell me, do you see anything easy about what I do? Look at me: I have no home, no money and no prospects. My friends are thousands of kilometers away and I get to see them may be once in year, if I'm lucky. And that's the least of it. On top of that is the knowledge that what I'm doing is more and less futile".*

Mr. Fokir is the boatman who has a preternatural understanding of the Sundarban waters. He rescues Ms. Roy, when she drowns herself, while going out in a forest department's launch. Despite hampered by language and experiences, Ms. Roy and Mr. Fokir communicate seamlessly with each other.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands. Some of these islands are vast and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others have just washed into being. these are the Sundarbans – the beautiful lands. Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. The tides reach more than two hundred forest inland, and every day thousands of acres of mangrove forest disappear only to re-emerge hours later. For hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed and the hopeless dreamers of the world have braved the man eaters and the crocodiles who rule there, to eke a precarious existence from the unyielding mud.

The settlers of the Sundarbans believe that anyone who dares venture into the vast watery labyrinth without a pure heart, will never return. It is the arrival of

Piyali Roy, of Indian parentage but stubbornly American, and Kanai Dutt, a sophisticated Delhi businessman, that disturbs the delicate balance of settlement life and sets in motion a fateful cataclysm. Kanai has come to visit his widowed aunt and to review some writings left behind by her husband, a political radical who died mysteriously in the Calcutta and learns she has come to the Sundarbans in search of a rare species of river dolphin. When she hires Fokir, an illiterate, yet proud local fisherman to guide her through the mazelike backwaters, Kanai becomes her translator. From this moment, the tide begins to turn.

Amitav Ghosh has discovered yet another new territory, summoning a singular place its history, language and myth and bringing it to life. Yet the achievement of *The Hungry Tide* is in its exploration of a far darker and more unknowable jungle, the human heart. It is a novel that asks at every turn: what danger resides there, and what delusion? What man can take the true measure of another?

*The Hungry Tide* is a whirlwind work of the imagination, every bit as epic in scope and ambition as his beloved and bestselling work, *The Glass Palace*, internationally best-selling author Amitav Ghosh, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and numerous other prestigious accolades, pens a sweeping novel full of romantic adventure. Favorably compared to the masterworks of Joseph Conrad and V.S. Naipaul, *The Hungry Tide* is an atmospheric tale set in a world of wondrous sights....and terrible danger.

Off the eastern coast of India lies an extraordinary cluster of islands known as the Sundarbans. It is a raw but beautiful area, a place of man-eating tigers, river dolphins, huge crocodiles, and devastating tides that sweep across the terrain without remorse. In this exotic land, marine biologist Piya, fisherman Fokir, and translator Kanai meet. As they travel deep into the remote archipelago, they experience a territory at risk not only from natural disaster, but also from human foolishness and volatile politics.

"*The Hungry Tide*," is an interesting book set in the swampy regions of Sundarbans, near the India-Bangladesh border. The book makes for an interesting reading, and in the process you also learn about the rich marine life in this part of the world, where once river dolphins thrived in large numbers. But, over the years these marine mammals have rapidly dwindled, and become a rare species.

Ghosh has a keen eye for details, and when this is combined with his love for history and research, the final product can make for an absorbing read.

Ghosh weaves a fascinating story involving the three primary characters in the book: Piyali Roy, Kanai Dutt and Fokir.

Piyali is a cetologist, who is on a quest to study the habit of the rare river dolphins in the Sundarbans region. Of Indian heritage, Piyali grew up in the US, and as part of her graduate studies has made an arduous trip to this remote region of India.

Fokir is the illiterate fisherman who knows this part of the river like the back of his hands, and assists Piyali in her quest to discover and study the animals. He knows exactly where you can find these rare river dolphins.

Kanai Dutt, is a Delhi-based entrepreneur, who happens to meet Piyali on her train journey to the Sundarbans. They cross paths when they meet once again at Kanai's aunt's place. Kanai is visiting his aunt to retrieve a package that his uncle had left for him in his will.

During the course of the story you discover how each of one these primary character's story is intertwined.

## **CONSERVATION OF ENVIRONMENTS**

To third land discovered by the ebb-tide, *bhatir desh*, as Ghosh calls it in a remarkable and poetic application of the term used in Mughal land-records, come a young cetologist from the United States on the trail of a breed of freshwater dolphin, the *Orcaella brevirostris*, and a middle-aged linguist who runs a translation bureau in Delhi. The two are thrown together by chance, and for a time the male translator, Kanai Dutt, accompanies the female scientist, Piya Roy, as an unofficial interpreter. But the novel is not really about their developing acquaintance. Much more centrally and in a far more extended way, it is about the many histories of the region they have come to. Kanai's aunt Nilima has lived in one of the islands for years; she sends for him after the discover of a diary belonging to her long-dead husband Nirmal, a Marxist school teacher whose withdrawal from political activism had brought them to settle in a Sundarbans village. As Kanai reads the diary, its narrative of past events, hopes and disappointments Nirmal's constant evocation of lines from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*), is interwoven with other stories. These include Kanai's own memories of a visit he paid his uncle and aunt as a child, his present experiences as a guest at Nilima's hospital, and Piya's search, aided by the fisherman Fokir, for the *Orcaella*.

At the heart of Nirmal's diary is an historical event: the eviction of refugee settlers from the island of Morichjhapi in the Sundarbans by the Left Front government of West Bengal in 1979. For the old Communist in the novel, like many others at the time,

this act of state violence was a betrayal of everything life-wing politics in the post-Partition era had stood for. It was these very leftists who had declared, in the face of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy's attempts to find land in neighbouring states for the successive waves of refugees who crossed over from East Pakistan in the forties and fifties, that they would not consent to a single one being resettled outside West Bengal. And indeed the conditions of such resettlement were harsh and alien.

In 1978 a group of refugees fled from the Dandakaranya camp in Madhya Pradesh and came to the island of Morichjhapi in the Sundarbans with the intention of settling there. They cleared the land for agriculture, and began to fish and farm. But their presence there alarmed the Left Front ministry, who saw it as the first of a possibly endless series of encroachments on protected forest land, and the settlers were evicted in a brutal display of state power in May, 1979. Many, like the girl Kusum in Ghosh's novel, Kanai's childhood playmate who becomes the repository of Nirmal's idealist hopes, were killed. Nirmal, who stays with the settlers during those final hours, is later discovered wandering in the port town of Canning; he is shattered by the event and never recovers. At the last significant expression of the trauma of Bengal's Partition, the story of Morichjhapi occupies a central place in the novel.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

Every writer should ask before beginning: what do I know that my reader doesn't? There are different ways of answering this question. One is to offer the fruits of practical research. Even for a novelist, such a starting point has obvious advantages: whatever else, the reader will take away certain interesting facts.

Amitav Ghosh's new novel, *The Hungry Tide*, is rich in worldly lore. The book is set in the Sundarbans, "an immense archipelago of islands...interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal". The setting suggested vivid possibilities. Floods continually submerge the scattered bodies of land. Whole forests life their heads above the tides and then disappear. Fresh and salty channels cut into each other, creating a diverse natural habitat. The only permanent thing is the water. Whatever is human has to pick its spots among the inconstant islands.

Ghosh's novel alternates between the points of view of Piya, an Indian-American cetologist from Seattle on a research trip, and Kanai, the prosperous owner of a translation business in New Delhi, who is traveling to visit his widowed aunt.

Piya and Kanai meet on the train. Kanai has his eye on the pretty, young American and tells her to look him up in Lusibari. His aunt, Mashima, runs a women's hospital, which supports the rights of the poor who make their uncertain homes on the flood terrain. Kanai's uncle (known with mispronounced respect as

Saar and dead before the story begins) ran the local school house. Mashima discovers a manuscript he left behind that is addressed to their nephew, and invites Kanai to look it over.

Both stories eventually tangle their feet in the history of one of the local peasant families. Kusum was Kanai's childhood sweetheart; later, Saar fell in love with her, too. Saar died trying to lend a hand (and his almost dried-up ideals) to the people's co-operative set up on the island of Morichjhapi, where Kusum settled. Eventually, the police evacuated the "squatters" – but Kusum's son, Fokir, survived. It is he who later rescues Piya when corrupt and officious forest guides knock her into the waters. His knowledge of the river proves invaluable to the cetologist, and together Piya and Fokir discover important facts about Irrawaddy dolphins and fall in love.

In fact, everybody falls in love, everybody discovers important fact. Kanai – smug, intelligent and a snop – learns to appreciate the deeper, unspoken sex appeal of a man like Fokir. Piya stumbles upon her life's work and acquires a taste both for high ambition and for the company for the unambitious – for men like Fokir. She is torn between the poetry of his unspoiled life and the attraction of Kanai's prosaic routines. The novel quotes liberally from Rilke. Local legends fare frequently retold. The water wins out in the end.

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- As seen in the numerous acknowledgements that are appended to the majority of his books. In the case of *The Hungry Tide*, see 'The Author's Note', *The Hungry Tide*, London: Harper Collins, 2004, 401-3. Subsequent references to the novel are to this edition and are included in the text.
- See *The Hungry Tide*, 125: 'Piya remembered a study that had shown there were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe. [...] [The] proliferation of environments was responsible for creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms – from gargantuan crocodiles to microscopic fish.'
- See particularly, *The Hungry Tide*, 261.
- Two of the novel's chapters are entitled 'Words', *The Hungry Tide*, 93-9 and 256-9