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Tidal Ecologies: A Critical Posthumanist Reading of *The Hungry Tide*

AISHWARYA PAULSON

Research Scholar

Department of English, KTHM College (Research Centre), Nashik, Maharashtra

DR. DHADE HEMKANT VIJAY

Research Guide and Assistant Professor

Kalvan Education Society Arts, Commerce, and Science College, Kalvan, Nashik

Abstract: In the Anthropocene, Critical Posthumanism challenges the Humanist assumptions, that humans occupy a central and privileged position in the ecological systems. Literary narratives, especially the climate fiction, engages with these concerns through foregrounding ecological interdependence by reimagining human-nature relationships. *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh is one such masterpiece, which portrays the Sundarbans as a volatile tidal landscape, where the constantly shifting terrain appears to destabilize assumptions of human mastery over nature. The novel set in this unstable ecological environment, explores the encounter between different ways of knowing and living in the tide country. The narrative shows the contrast between Piya's scientific knowledge as a marine biologist and Fokir's lived experience as a fisherman who is intimately familiar with the rhythms of the tide country. This contrast highlights the limitations of anthropocentric frameworks that assume human control over ecological systems. It also depicts the alternative ecological epistemologies rooted in embodied experience of the tidal landscape "where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable". This paper suggests that *The Hungry Tide* foregrounds a critical posthumanist perspective in which the unpredictable ecology of the Sundarbans destabilises anthropocentric assumptions. It also reveals relational modes of coexistence between human and nonhuman life, evident in the character of Fokir for whom the sea is just an extension of his body. The paper by redirecting agency from the humans instead seeks emphasising the agency of the tidal landscape and the ecological knowledge embedded within local ways of inhabiting it. It invites readers to reconsider human-nature relations and coexistence in the Anthropocene by examining the novel *The Hungry Tide* through the Critical Posthumanist lens.

Keywords: *Critical Posthumanism, Anthropocene, Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, The Hungry Tide, Coexistence*

Introduction

In the Anthropocene, the ecological crises have intensified critical debates about the position of human within the natural world. Climate change, global warming, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss, along with studies stating, the period as experiencing ‘sixth mass extinction’ (Pievani 1), have exposed the drawbacks of the humanist frameworks which positions humans as autonomous and dominant agents within ecological systems. Anthropocentrism, with its origins in Enlightenment Humanism, continues to shape our cultural and intellectual traditions that positions humans on a central and privileged level while marginalising the agency of the nonhuman world. As Dipesh Chakrabarty states, the epoch of Anthropocene calls for a reconsideration of the distinction between human history and natural history, revealing the extent to which human existence is entangled with planetary processes. (Chakrabarty 197). This shows the extent to which the human activities have altered the planet in the guise of human autonomy which has led to irreversible changes to the environment.

In this context, Posthumanism emerges as an important theoretical approach that challenges these anthropocentric assumptions by rethinking the human as an embedded being, within complex ecological networks. Neil Badmington’s statement that “the writing of the posthumanist condition should not seek to fashion ‘scriptural tombs’ for humanism, but must, rather, take the form of a critical practice that occurs inside humanism, consisting not of the wake but the working-through of humanist discourse” (Badmington 22). This is where critical posthumanism differentiates itself from other popular posthumanism, that lean towards the technological strands of posthumanism. As Stefan Herbrechter later goes to define critical posthumanism as an “ongoing deconstruction of humanism” and its premises: namely, humanism’s anthropocentrism, essentialism, exceptionalism, and speciesism” (Herbrechter et al. 4). Thus the focus is on decentralising the human agency and proposing a distributed agency for a more relational and embedded existence.

In this paper, Critical Posthumanism as a critical approach portrays the relationality and embeddedness practised in the Sundarbans where human control and mastery is beyond imagination. As Pramod Nayar differentiates in his book *Posthumanism* between the ontological origins which is the transhumanism and the critical strand as he adds , “Critical posthumanism, as we shall come to call this philosophical and political theme in literature, popular culture and theory, is the radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines” (Nayar 11). Thus, rather than observing nature as a passive resource for human utility, posthumanist thought foregrounds relationality, interdependence, and distributed agency of both

humans and nonhumans. As Rosi Braidotti defines, “the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject...” which showcases a subjectivity which is both “embodied and embedded” (Braidotti 49). This sets a context for the rethinking of the position of humans in the ecological system and also points at the need for recognising the agency of the nonhuman entities for a relational coexistence.

Literary works, especially those engaging with environmental issues, like the Climate fiction, play a crucial role in shaping how such relationships are imagined and perceived. *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh published in 2004, offers such a thought provoking narrative of human-nature relations set in the ecologically volatile landscape of the Sundarbans. The novel, primarily depicts a tidal landscape in which land and water are constantly shifting, making the terrain resistant to human control, “where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable” (Ghosh 7). The novel has generated substantial postcolonial and ecocritical scholarship that focuses on issues of displacement, subaltern histories, and environmental vulnerability in the Sundarbans. While these readings have highlighted the political and ecological dimensions of the text, they often are centered on human experience, thereby leaving relatively underexplored the novel’s engagement with nonhuman agency and relational ecological frameworks. It is within this gap that a critical posthumanist reading of the novel becomes particularly relevant. The narrative through its portrayal of the interactions between human beings and the nonhuman world, raises significant questions about knowledge, agency and coexistence.

This paper examines *The Hungry Tide* through the lens of Critical Posthumanism to argue that the novel destabilises anthropocentric assumptions, as it foregrounds the agency of the tidal landscape and the relational modes of inhabiting it. The Sundarbans with its volatile terrain offers a fertile ground for a complex and entangled multispecies existence and distributed agency. The survival in the tidal country is governed by multiple factors like the tidal currents, the tigers and the crocodiles and the adaptative ability of the humans in this hostile environment as “At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles” (8). Also by contrasting scientific and experiential forms of ecological knowledge represented by Piya and Fokir respectively, the text portrays alternative ways of understanding human-nature relations. It thus resonates with posthumanist perspectives on ecological interdependence in the Anthropocene.

Anthropocentrism and Critical Posthumanism

Anthropocentrism has since long shaped Western philosophical and cultural traditions by positioning the human as the central and privileged species in the hierarchy of the natural world. Tracing its origins in Enlightenment humanism, this perspective constructs the human subject as rational, autonomous and capable of mastering nature. This framework not only privileges human agency but also reduces the nonhuman world to a mere resource to be utilised by humans. As Cary Wolfe argues, humanist discourse has always reinforced hierarchical distinctions between human and nonhuman life, thereby legitimising practices of domination and exploitation (Wolfe xvi). However, the ecological disruptions of the Anthropocene exposes the drawbacks of this worldview by demonstrating the extent to which human activity is embedded with planetary processes. The extent to which humans have altered the earth is evident in the ever increasing temperatures, the extinction of multiple species, the unpredictability of the seasons, all point to the instability we have created through human activities. But the irony is, even though the humans have solely led to this massive alteration, the repercussions will have to be faced by both humans and nonhumans. This necessitates a rethinking of how agency, responsibility and coexistence are conceptualised.

Critical Posthumanism responds to this crisis by challenging the centrality of the human and reconfiguring the subject as relational and embedded within complex network of interactions. The focus on being relational and embedded suggest our continuity with other species and the interconnected nature of our existence against the prevalent notion of human autonomy. Rather than observing agency as an human attribute, posthumanism foregrounds the distributed and interconnected nature of agency across human and nonhuman entities. Rosi Braidotti conceptualises the posthuman subject as a relational being constructed through its interactions with multiple forms of life and material environments (Braidotti 49). It marks the transition from individual autonomy to relationality which is a major shift from traditional humanist frameworks. Likewise, Donna Haraway's call to "make kin" highlights the ethical need of recognising these interconnections and rethinking relationships between humans and other forms of life. These perspectives challenge the notion of human exceptionalism by foregrounding the continuity between human and nonhuman existence.

Literature plays a vital role in showcasing these conceptual shifts by offering imaginative spaces in which alternative human-nature relations can be explored. The narrative works can expose the limitations of the anthropocentric thinking and tries to present more relational modes of engagement with the environment. As Pramod Nayar states "Literary texts that have since the Renaissance always shown us how humans behave, react and interact – indeed it has been said that literature 'invented' the human – have now begun to show that the human is what it is because it

includes the non-human” (Nayar 11-12). In *The Hungry Tide*, it is evident in the portrayal of the Sundarbans as a terrain that defies human mastery and focuses on ecological interdependence. The novel seeks to challenge the belief that humans can fully understand or control ecological systems. It rather hopes to present a world in which human agency is dependent upon environmental conditions as implied by the lines written in Kanai’s uncle Nirmal’s diary “nothing escapes the maw of the tide country” (225) reflecting on the tragedies that struck the terrain. By trying to align the novel with the posthumanist approach, the readers are invited to rethink their assumptions about human-nature relations. The novel also exhibits how literature can contribute to broader debates on ecological thought in the Anthropocene by reimagining more sustainable and relational forms of existence.

The Tide Country as Ecological Assemblage

The Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide*, appears to be not merely a setting but also a dynamic ecological assemblage, which means coexistence of various species that interact with one another and their environment. In the tidal country this assemblage is characterised by instability, uncertainty, and constant change. The narrative repeatedly highlights the terrain as “where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable”(7). This fluidity seems to disrupt the conventional beliefs of landscape as stable and controllable, instead featuring an environment that resists human mastery. The ecological forces that shape the region could function beyond human control, rendering human habitation precarious. Ghosh thus seeks to represent the Sundarbans as a space where the illusion of human dominance is continuously being disrupted by the agency of nonhuman entities.

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily—some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. (7)

This shows how the terrain with its environmental conditions further proceeds to underline this decentralisation of the humans by foregrounding the vulnerability of human life within the tide country. The presence of nonhuman actors such as tigers, crocodiles and river currents construct a landscape in which survival is uncertain and contingent. The narrative can be seen to suggest that the environment itself possesses a form of agency that shapes human existence. It thereby seeks to challenge the assumption that humans are the primary agents within ecological networks. This representation from a posthumanist perspective can be comprehended in terms of distributed agency.

Here the agency is not restricted to the human but can emerge through multiple complex interactions among human and nonhuman elements. The Sundarbans thus is able to operate as an ecological assemblage in which human and nonhuman forces are closely interconnected.

As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues in her discourse of human and nonhuman world-making, landscapes emerge through processes that exceed intentional human design:

Landscapes more generally are products of unintentional design, that is, the overlapping world-making activities of many agents, human and not human. The design is clear in the landscape's ecosystem. But none of the agents planned this effect. Humans join others in making landscapes of unintentional design. As sites for more-than-human dramas, landscapes are radical tools for decentering human hubris. Landscapes are not backdrops for historical action: they are themselves active. Watching landscapes in formation shows humans joining other living beings in shaping worlds. (Tsing 152)

This conceptualisation explains the representation of the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide*, as a landscape that is not a passive setting but an active ecological assemblage repeatedly shaped by tides, animals and human activity. The constant unstability of the land and the water in this terrain, highlights this “unintentional design” of nature which can not be controlled by human intentions. In this way, Sundarbans exemplifies what Tsing describes as a “more-than-human” landscape, which destabilises anthropocentric assumptions by foregrounding distributed agency and ecological interdependence.

Significantly, the novel does not exhibit this instability as an exceptional condition but tries to show it as a defining aspect of life in the tide country. The natives of the Sundarbans do not attempt to enact control over the environment but instead tries to learn to navigate its uncertainties through adaptive practises. This shift from mastery to adaptation reflects a posthuman understanding of human-nature relations, in which survival relies on knowing the limits of human control. *The Hungry Tide* thus through the critical posthumanist approach, seeks to question the anthropocentric assumptions and repositions the human as one of the element within the broader network of ecological relations.

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Relational Subjectivity

The central aspect of *The Hungry Tide* lies in its opposing modes of ecological knowledge represented through the characters of Piya and Fokir. Piya as a cetologist (marine biologist), who had come to study about the marine mammals of the Sundarbans, presents a scientific perspective grounded in observation, classification and abstraction. Fokir, on the other hand, embodies knowledge that comes from lived experiences and continuous interactions with the environment. His understanding of the Sundarbans is not learnt through formal systems of education but is instead shaped by continuous

engagement with the rhythms of the landscape. In the unstable tidal landscape, Piya's scientific knowledge is seen as insufficient on its own, as she becomes increasingly dependent on Fokir for navigation and survival. This contrast can show the limitations of scientific epistemology when detached from the particular conditions of the environment.

Fokir's knowledge of the tide country, on the other hand, reflects a relational mode of subjectivity in which the self is constructed through its repeated entanglements with ecological processes. His being able to navigate the unpredictable landscape of the Sundarbans demonstrates a form of ecological attunement that cannot be completely captured through scientific frameworks as the novel states "it was almost a part of his body, like his hair or his nail clippings," (87). From a posthumanist approach, Fokir can be interpreted as a relational subject whose identity is embedded within a network of human and nonhuman interactions, aligning with Braidotti's conceptualisation of the posthuman subject. Even the belief of the natives in the myths of Bonbibibi, also adhered to by Fokir for which he was mocked by Kanai Dutt, shows how culture and myth play important roles in adapting to their unpredictable environments. At the same time, his knowledge resonates with the indigenous ecological epistemologies that seems to prioritise coexistence and adaptation over control and mastery.

The interaction between Piya and Fokir is further able to deepen this dynamic by creating a space of epistemological exchange. While Piya initially seeks to approach the environment through scientific methodologies, her dependence on Fokir exposes her to alternative ways of knowing the tide country. This encounter does not lead to the replacement of one form of knowledge with another but it rather is able to highlight the necessity for more integrated and relational approach to ecological understanding. As Christopher M. Raymond et al. argue, there is no singular optimal method for such knowledge integration; instead, emphasis must shift toward developing context-specific, problem-focused processes of knowledge interaction rather than fixed integration models (Raymond et al. 8). The novel thus seems to foreground the importance of recognising multiple ways of knowing in order to interact meaningfully with complex ecological networks.

Relational Ethics and Posthuman Coexistence

The destabilisation of the anthropocentric assumptions in *The Hungry Tide* can be extended to the realms of ethics. The volatile landscape of the tidal country and the adaptation and survival both of humans and nonhumans portray the shared vulnerability. The novel thus seeks to propose a reconfiguration of human-nature relations grounded in interdependence and vulnerability. The ecological conditions of the Sundarbans is able to craft a context in which human survival relies on recognising the limits of human agency, thereby requiring an ethical framework that goes beyond

domination and control. This shift forefronts coexistence as an ethical imperative rather than an optional ideal, very aptly portrayed by Ghosh in this novel.

Fokir's mode of inhabiting the tide country can illustrate this ethical reorientation through his attentiveness to the rhythms and constraints of the environment. His actions are guided, not by a desire to control the landscape but by the knowledge of its uncertainty and the need of adapting to its conditions. This is also reflected in the Kanai's description about his uncle Nirmal's ideology as, "For him it meant that everything which existed was inter-connected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature" (282). This reflects a posthuman ethical framework in which coexistence is rooted in relationality and interdependence. Both the humans and the nonhumans form an integral part of the ecosystem adapting and adopting to the terrain of the tidal country. At the same time, the novel avoids romanticising nature, presenting coexistence as a complex and often conflictual process constructed by varied forms of life.

The ethical reconfiguration further seems complicated by the novel's engagement with histories of displacement and environmental governance in the Sundarbans. Especially the Morichjhanpi incident and the law of protected forests such as the tiger reserves. This clearly portrays a conflictual positions, where conservation policies, while framed as ecological necessity, marginalises human communities who in this case are the Bangladesh refugees, who have sought refuge in this very unstable terrain for survival. The narrative thus seeks to foreground the entanglement of ecological and political forces, where questions of survival, habitation, and conservation intersect in complex ways. The novel thus rather than presenting nature as a separate entity from human history, situates these events within a broader ecological framework. This highlights the limits of human control and calls for the need for more relational forms of coexistence.

The refusal to separate ecological concerns from historical and political realities allies with a posthuman ethical framework that recognises the complexity of multispecies coexistence. This ethical perspective aligns with Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble," that emphasises the significance of engaging with the multiple complexities of multispecies relationships (Haraway 1). Instead of offering a simplified vision of ecological harmony, *The Hungry Tide* presents coexistence as a continuous negotiation within a dynamic and unstable ecological system. Therefore, the novel foregrounds the need for an ethical rethinking of human-nature relations in the Anthropocene.

Conclusion

In the epoch of Anthropocene, that has been characterised for massively impacting the planetary systems by the human activities, the necessity to rethink human-nature relations is the need of the hour.

The humanist notion has for long given a privileged position to the humans, marginalising all the other nonhuman entities. This has led to a period where we are witnessing drastic environmental changes and mass extinction of both known and unknown species. This is the context, where Posthumanism, especially the Critical Posthumanist strand which I have focused in this paper gains relevance. Critical Posthumanism calls for the reworking of the fundamental concepts of Humanism and proposes a relational and embedded form of living where both humans and nonhumans are coevolving together. This paper has argued that the novel *The Hungry Tide* offers a critical posthumanist reconfiguration of these relations by foregrounding the instability of the terrain of Sundarbans and the limits of anthropocentric approaches. Through its depiction of the tide country as a dynamic ecological assemblage, the novel challenges the notion of human control and emphasises the distributed agency of human and nonhuman entities.

The contrasting epistemologies represented by Piya and Fokir demonstrate how the novel questions dominant modes of knowledge creation. While Piya through her scientific methodology seeks to observe and categorise the environment, especially the marine mammals, Fokir's lived ecological knowledge reflects a relational mode of understanding rooted in experiences and repeated interactions. The repeated encounters of Piya and her later proceeding to employ Fokir for her observation of the dolphins, shows her reliance on the experiential understanding of Fokir to navigate the unstable terrain of the Sundarbans. This contrast between epistemologies emphasises the limitations of anthropocentric thinking and further foregrounds alternative ways of knowing that resonate with both critical posthumanism and indigenous ecological perspectives.

The novel, at the level of ethics, proceeds beyond extractive models of human-nature relations and instead proposes a form of coexistence rooted in relationality, vulnerability and interdependence. This ethical rethinking does not romanticise nature but instead seeks to acknowledge the complexities and conflicts inherent in ecological systems as evident in the natives of Sundarbans. The character of Fokir attuned to the rhythms of the tidal country with all its uncertainty, and Piya, though an outsider armed with her scientific perspectives, also starts integrating the lived experiences of Fokir. The novel thus emphasises the necessity of adapting to and coexisting with nonhuman forces. It offers a nuanced vision of ecological life in which survival depends on recognising the limits of human autonomy and leading a relational existence with the other species in nature.

The novel *The Hungry Tide* thus contributes to broader debates on ecological thought in the Anthropocene by challenging anthropocentric frameworks and recognising possibilities for more relational and situated knowledge of human existence. The Critical Posthumanist reading of the novel seeks to decentralize the human by situating it in the unstable ecological terrain of the Sundarbans.

Through its engagement with both posthumanist theory and embodied ecological knowledge, the novel invites a reconsideration of how humans inhabit and interact with the more-than-human world. It also seeks to offer pathways towards more sustainable and embedded modes of coexistence within ecological systems.

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