© Volume 2, Issue 10, October 2026 | JATIR
e-ISSN: 2839-5786, p-ISSN: 3139-8464

Humanity, Nature, and Ecological Interdependence an Ecocritical Reading of Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide and Richard Powers's the Overstory

Vishnu Chandran
Assistant Professor, PG Department of English, Sree Narayana College for women, Kollam Kerala, India

***Abstract*—Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature, human beings, and the natural environment, questioning anthropocentric assumptions that position nature primarily as a resource for human use. Contemporary literature increasingly represents environmental crises through narratives that connect ecological destruction with questions of identity, displacement, capitalism, colonialism, and social justice. Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide (2004) and Richard Powers's the Overstory (2018) offer significant fictional representations of the complex relationship between human communities and the more-than-human world. Set primarily in the Sundarbans of Bengal, The Hungry Tide explores the fragile coexistence of humans, rivers, forests, animals, and tides, while The Overstory presents trees as interconnected living entities whose existence challenges conventional human-centred understandings of nature. Through an ecocritical reading of the two novels, this article examines human–nature relationships, anthropocentrism, ecological interdependence, environmental exploitation, displacement, conservation, and the agency of the non-human world. The study also considers how both authors challenge the assumption that nature exists merely for human benefit. While Ghosh focuses on the ecological and social complexities of the Sundarbans, Powers expands the ecological perspective through a global meditation on forests and trees. The comparison demonstrates that both novels advocate a more relational understanding of the environment in which human survival is inseparable from the health of the non-human world.**

***Index Terms*—Ecocriticism, Amitav Ghosh, Richard Powers, Environmental Literature.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The environmental crisis has become one of the defining concerns of contemporary literature. Climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, pollution, habitat destruction, and the exploitation

of natural resources have fundamentally altered the relationship between human societies and the environment. Literature provides an important cultural space for examining these problems because it can represent ecological issues through characters, landscapes, conflicts, memories, and narratives. Rather than treating nature as a passive background to human action, contemporary environmental literature increasingly presents the natural world as an active and interconnected presence.

Ecocriticism provides an appropriate theoretical framework for examining such representations. The term broadly refers to the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Ecocritical approaches therefore examine how literary texts represent nature, environmental degradation, human responsibility, and the relationship between human and non-human life.

Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide and Richard Powers's The Overstory are particularly significant texts for an ecocritical study. Ghosh's novel is situated within the Sundarbans, a geographically unstable landscape shaped by rivers, tides, islands, forests, storms, and wildlife. The novel brings together human communities, conservationists, researchers, refugees, fishermen, and animals within an ecosystem where survival depends upon understanding the rhythms of nature.

Powers's The Overstory, meanwhile, places trees at the centre of its narrative. The novel follows several characters whose lives gradually become connected through forests and trees. Instead of treating trees as objects existing for human consumption, Powers represents them as living organisms participating in complex ecological systems. The novel consequently challenges the human tendency to measure the value of the natural world according to its usefulness to human beings.

Although the novels emerge from different geographical and literary contexts, both question anthropocentric attitudes and demonstrate the interdependence of human and non-human life. This article therefore argues that The Hungry Tide and The Overstory develop an ecocritical vision in which environmental survival requires a transformation of humanity's relationship with the more-than-human world.

II. ECOCRITICISM AND THE LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF NATURE

Ecocriticism emerged as an interdisciplinary field concerned with the representation of nature and environmental concerns in literary and cultural texts. Early ecocritical scholarship challenged the tendency of literary studies to concentrate almost exclusively on human society, language, and culture while neglecting the physical environment.

Lawrence Buell argues that environmentally oriented literature often encourages readers to recognize the environment as more than a passive setting. His discussion of environmental imagination emphasizes the importance of texts in which the non-human environment is represented as a significant presence. Such an approach is particularly relevant to The Hungry Tide and The Overstory, where landscapes and living organisms influence human behaviour and narrative development.

An important concern of ecocriticism is anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism places human interests at the centre of ethical and philosophical consideration. From an ecocritical perspective, this position becomes problematic when it encourages humans to regard animals, forests, rivers, and other forms of life primarily as resources.

Another important concept is ecological interdependence. Ecosystems demonstrate that no organism exists entirely independently. Human beings depend upon soil, water, plants, animals, forests, and climatic systems for survival. Environmental literature can therefore challenge the artificial separation between humanity and nature.

Both Ghosh and Powers employ this principle extensively. Their novels demonstrate that ecological damage ultimately affects human communities because humans are embedded within the environments they attempt to control.

III. NATURE AS AN ACTIVE PRESENCE IN THE HUNGRY TIDE

Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide is set largely in the Sundarbans, a complex deltaic region characterized by rivers, tidal channels, mangrove forests, islands, and diverse wildlife. The geographical environment is not simply a setting for the novel; it actively determines the lives of its inhabitants.

The title itself establishes the importance of water and tides. The Sundarbans is a constantly changing environment in which land and water are difficult to separate permanently. Islands can disappear, rivers change their courses, and human settlements remain vulnerable to natural forces. This instability challenges the human desire to control geography.

Piya Roy, a marine biologist, initially approaches the Sundarbans through scientific research. Her interest in river dolphins reflects a scientific attempt to understand a non-human species. Yet her encounters with the region gradually transform her understanding of the relationship between humans and nature.

The novel's representation of the Irrawaddy dolphins is particularly significant. The animals are not merely objects of scientific observation. Their presence reveals the ecological complexity of the waterways and demonstrates the interconnectedness of aquatic life with the larger ecosystem.

Ghosh therefore moves beyond a simple opposition between humans and nature. The novel instead reveals competing human relationships with the environment. Conservationists may seek to protect wildlife, while local communities depend upon forests and waterways for their livelihood. This creates an important ethical conflict: environmental protection cannot always be separated from questions of poverty, displacement, and social justice.

IV. ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT IN THE HUNGRY TIDE

One of the most important ecocritical dimensions of The Hungry Tide is its examination of anthropocentrism. Human beings repeatedly attempt to impose boundaries upon a landscape that does not recognize those boundaries.

The Sundarbans challenges human assumptions about stability and ownership. The tides continuously reshape the environment, while animals move through spaces that humans attempt to divide into settlements, forests, and protected areas. The ecological world therefore resists complete human control.

The conflict surrounding conservation is particularly important. The protection of wildlife may appear environmentally necessary, yet the novel demonstrates that conservation policies can have serious consequences for marginalized communities. The history of human settlement in the Sundarbans is connected with displacement and political violence, making environmental questions inseparable from social questions.

This complexity prevents the novel from presenting environmentalism as a simple struggle between "good" conservationists and "bad" human exploiters. Instead, Ghosh exposes the difficult ethical choices that arise when human survival and wildlife conservation appear to compete for the same geographical space.

Such complexity is central to contemporary ecocriticism. Environmental justice requires consideration of both non-human life and vulnerable human communities. The novel consequently asks readers to reconsider simplistic definitions of environmental protection.

V. ECOLOGICAL INTERDEPENDENCE IN THE OVERSTORY

Richard Powers's the Overstory expands the ecocritical imagination by placing trees and forests at the centre of its narrative. The novel begins with individual human stories but gradually reveals their connection through trees.

The structure of the novel itself reflects ecological interconnectedness. Multiple characters with different histories and experiences eventually become connected through their relationship with trees and environmental activism. Their individual narratives resemble branches that originate separately but become part of a larger structure.

Trees are presented not merely as resources but as living organisms with complex relationships to other organisms. Powers draws attention to the long temporal scale of trees, thereby challenging the human tendency to understand time primarily through the length of a human life.

One of the central achievements of the novel is its attempt to shift the reader's perspective away from human exceptionalism. Trees appear to operate according to biological processes that existed long before individual human beings and will potentially continue long after them. The novel consequently encourages readers to consider a form of ecological consciousness in which human beings recognize themselves as participants within larger living systems.

VI. TREES, TIME, AND NON-HUMAN AGENCY

The representation of trees in The Overstory is particularly significant because it challenges conventional ideas about agency. Human beings frequently associate agency with movement,

speech, decision-making, and conscious action. Trees appear comparatively passive because they grow slowly and do not communicate through ordinary human language.

Powers challenges this assumption by representing forests as dynamic ecological systems. Trees interact with fungi, insects, animals, soil, water, and other plants. Their existence therefore demonstrates that biological agency does not have to resemble human agency. This perspective corresponds with the broader ecocritical movement away from anthropocentrism. Nature does not need to imitate human behaviour in order to possess ecological significance.

The novel also emphasizes the extraordinary timescale of trees. Human beings often understand history in decades or centuries, whereas trees may exist across much longer periods. This difference in temporal perspective encourages readers to reconsider the speed with which modern societies exploit natural resources.

VII. CAPITALISM, CONSUMPTION, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

Both novels examine the relationship between economic interests and environmental degradation. In The Hungry Tide, the natural environment is connected to livelihoods, settlements, conservation policies, and struggles over land and resources. The Sundarbans becomes a space where different understandings of environmental value collide.

In The Overstory, forests are similarly threatened by commercial exploitation. Trees are often valued according to their economic usefulness as timber, paper, land, or other commodities. Such valuation reduces complex ecological systems to resources available for human consumption.

An ecocritical reading reveals the limitations of this economic perspective. A forest cannot be adequately understood only through its commercial value because forests provide ecological functions that extend beyond immediate economic calculation.

The novels therefore expose a central contradiction of modern development: human societies depend upon ecological systems while simultaneously destroying the conditions necessary for those systems to survive.

VIII. HUMAN IDENTITY AND THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

Both Ghosh and Powers challenge the assumption that human identity can be understood independently of nature. Their characters become increasingly aware that their lives are shaped by ecological systems.

In The Hungry Tide, the characters' experiences are determined by tides, rivers, animals, storms, forests, and geographical instability. The environment shapes human relationships and decisions.

In The Overstory, characters experience transformations through their encounters with trees and forests. Their environmental consciousness changes their understanding of themselves and their responsibilities.

The two novels therefore present identity as relational. Human beings are not isolated individuals existing outside nature; they are biological and cultural beings embedded within ecological networks.

IX. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

An important difference between the novels is their treatment of environmental justice. Ghosh gives considerable attention to the relationship between ecological protection and marginalized communities. The history of the Sundarbans demonstrates that environmental policies can affect communities unevenly.

This dimension is important because environmental destruction and environmental protection can both have social consequences. Poor communities may depend directly upon natural resources for survival, while conservation policies may restrict their access to those resources.

The Hungry Tide therefore complicates the idea that environmental protection is automatically socially neutral. It demands attention to the people who inhabit vulnerable ecological regions. The Overstory focuses more strongly on the global ecological significance of forests and the struggle to change public consciousness regarding environmental destruction. Its characters increasingly recognize that individual human interests must be considered alongside the long-term survival of ecosystems. Together, the novels suggest that ecological responsibility requires both environmental awareness and social sensitivity.

X. HUMAN VIOLENCE AND THE VIOLENCE AGAINST NATURE

Both novels expose different forms of violence produced by human attempts to dominate the natural world. In The Hungry Tide, the destruction of habitats and conflicts over protected areas demonstrate the consequences of treating nature and human communities as objects to be managed.

In The Overstory, deforestation becomes an important symbol of a broader human tendency to transform living ecosystems into commodities.

The ecological crisis can therefore be understood as a crisis of relationships. Humans have developed systems of production and consumption that frequently ignore the needs and temporalities of non-human life. Both authors challenge this model by presenting environmental destruction not simply as the loss of scenery but as the destruction of interconnected living systems.

Comparative Ecocritical Reading

XI. A COMPARISON OF THE TWO NOVELS REVEALS SEVERAL SIGNIFICANT SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

First, both novels reject a purely anthropocentric understanding of nature. The Hungry Tide achieves this through its representation of the Sundarbans ecosystem, while The Overstory does so through its focus on trees and forests.

Second, both works emphasize ecological interdependence. Human life cannot be separated from rivers, animals, forests, plants, and other environmental systems.

Third, both novels question the commodification of nature. Forests, rivers, animals, and land cannot be adequately understood through economic value alone.

However, the geographical focus of the novels produces different emphases. Ghosh concentrates on the ecological and social complexities of a specific region, particularly the Sundarbans. His novel connects environmental issues with displacement, poverty, conservation, and political history.

Powers adopts a broader perspective. The Overstory connects multiple human stories with forests and presents ecological crisis on a larger scale. The novel particularly emphasizes trees, forests, scientific knowledge, activism, and the need to recognize non-human forms of life.

The difference is significant. Ghosh emphasizes the complicated coexistence of vulnerable human communities and fragile ecosystems, while Powers emphasizes the need to transform human consciousness regarding forests and non-human life.

XII. ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE ROLE OF LITERATURE

Both novels demonstrate the potential of literature to create ecological consciousness. Scientific information can provide knowledge about climate change, biodiversity, and environmental destruction, but literature can also create emotional and imaginative connections between readers and the non-human world.

The narrative form enables readers to experience environmental issues through characters and stories. Readers encounter landscapes not merely as geographical spaces but as living environments that shape human experience.

This is particularly important in the context of contemporary ecological crises. Environmental problems are often geographically distant or temporally abstract. Literature can make these issues more immediate by connecting them with human emotions, conflicts, memories, and relationships. The Hungry Tide enables readers to understand the Sundarbans as a complex ecological and social environment, while The Overstory encourages readers to imagine trees and forests beyond their conventional economic value.

XIII. CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide and Richard Powers’s The Overstory offer significant contributions to contemporary environmental literature. Through different geographical and narrative approaches, both novels challenge anthropocentric assumptions and foreground the complex relationships between humans and the non-human world.

Ghosh represents the Sundarbans as an unstable ecological environment in which humans, animals, rivers, tides, and forests exist within an intricate network of dependence. His treatment of

conservation also demonstrates that environmental questions cannot be separated from social justice, displacement, poverty, and human vulnerability.

Powers, on the other hand, places trees and forests at the centre of a wide-ranging narrative that challenges readers to reconsider the position of human beings within the larger ecological system. His representation of trees disrupts the conventional perception of nature as passive and demonstrates the complexity of non-human life.

An ecocritical reading of the two novels ultimately reveals that the environmental crisis is not simply a crisis of nature but a crisis in the relationship between human societies and the natural world. Both authors question the assumption that human beings stand outside or above nature. Instead, they present humanity as one component of a larger ecological network.

The novels consequently encourage a shift from domination to interdependence. Their ecological visions suggest that the survival of human communities is inseparable from the survival of the environments upon which they depend. Literature, by making this interdependence visible and emotionally meaningful, can contribute to a deeper ecological consciousness and a more responsible understanding of humanity's place within the living world.

REFERENCES

[1] Buell, Lawrence. The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture. Harvard UP, 1995.
[2] Ghosh, Amitav. The Hungry Tide. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
[3] Glotfelty, Cheryll. “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis.” The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. xv–xxxvii.
[4] Powers, Richard. The Overstory. W. W. Norton, 2018.
[5] Rueckert, William. “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 105–123.