

2. The Ecology of Diaspora: Amitav Ghosh's Literary Reflections on Postcolonial Experience

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the intricate interplay of postcolonial diaspora and ecological themes in three prominent novels by Amitav Ghosh: *The Hungry Tide*, *The Shadow Lines*, and *The Glass Palace*. Through these narratives, the characters' diasporic experiences are closely intertwined with their profound connections to the natural world. *The Hungry Tide*, set in the Sundarbans mangrove ecosystem, reflects the challenges of human-environment interactions in a postcolonial context. *The Shadow Lines* explores how memories and identities are shaped by geographical locations, while *The Glass Palace* delves into the lasting impacts of colonialism on landscapes and cultures. Employing a multidisciplinary approach merging postcolonial studies and ecocriticism, this study elucidates how the characters navigate questions of identity, belonging, and memory amidst ecological transformations. By analysing these novels, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of how postcolonial literature can shed light on the complex connections between diaspora experiences, ecological awareness, and colonial legacies in today's world.

Key Words: Diaspora, Ecology, Postcolonialism, Identity, Displacement.

Introduction

At first glance, diasporic literature and ecology seem unrelated, but upon closer examination, they intersect intriguingly. Diasporic literature explores the experiences of displaced communities, while ecology studies the relationship between organisms and their environment. The paper examines the interdisciplinary relationship between environmental issues and diasporic literature and how it can increase public awareness of these concerns. The Greek word 'diasperien', which means 'across' and 'sperien,' which means to sow or scatter

seeds, is the source of the English word 'diaspora', which refers to the dispersal of people from one geographic area and their subsequent migration to another. It is a well-known fact that individuals who are uprooted from their comfortable socio-cultural surroundings frequently experience a sense of loss and attempt to migrate. "The Diaspora is a process of people migrating frequently from one place to another for various reasons. Migrations have resulted in building up a diasporic community which shares a commonsense of rootlessness, pain and agony of homelessness in a new land. (Laxmiprasad, 99) Diasporic literature offers a distinct perspective on ecological challenges because it is fundamentally based in the investigation of themes such as identity, belonging, and displacement. Authors from diasporic backgrounds often incorporate their personal or community experiences into narratives that blend culture, history, and geography. These narratives provide a lens for exploring ecological issues in a vivid manner.

Some eco-critics believe that William Rueckert is mostly recognized for developing the word 'ecocriticism', which he did in his 1978 article *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. He explored potential advantages of ecocriticism –the practice of reading literature from an ecological perspective. In the book *The Environmental Imagination* eco-criticism has been defined as "a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist's praxis" (Buell, 430). In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, published in 1996, Cheryll Glotfelty points up the dearth of environmental criticism existing at that time that "if your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but" (xvi) ignored the pressing issues of the earth's ecosystems. Diasporic literature challenges environmental narratives by amplifying marginalised voices and critiquing power structures. This intersection enriches understanding by humanising ecological issues and broadening discussions on displacement and identity, fostering a nuanced view of the relationship between humanity and the environment.

About the Author

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta on July 11, 1956. "In the contemporary Indian Literary scenario Amitav Ghosh is the only writer who reflects the truth of Indian reality. He bears numerous responsibilities in the world of literature. He executes with admirable aplomb as an anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer, teacher and slips into global

responsibility for establishing peace as an ambassador... attention across the globe and it has invited and produced a great amount of literary criticism." (Yesapogu,1) As a travel writer, Ghosh has dealt with issues like emigration, cultural displacement, and the history of exile both personally and professionally. As a result, it is believed that the most important topics covered in his works are travel and displacement. His story concentrates on the diasporic experiences of the people and the history of exodus and ecocritical themes such as environmental degradation, cultural displacement, and the interconnectedness of human and natural worlds. His works highlight the impact of ecological changes on societies and individuals. Ghosh blends diasporic storytelling with deep ecological insight, creating narratives that defy boundaries between humans and nature. His work prompts reflection on our relationship with the environment and diverse communities, establishing him as a major voice in contemporary literature and ecocriticism.

Intertwining themes between Diasporic Literature and Ecocriticism

Exploring novels like *The Hungry Tide*, *The Shadow Lines*, and *The Glass Palace* reveals intriguing intersections between diasporic literature and ecology. Themes of displacement, identity, human-nature relationships, and environmental justice intertwine, offering insight into the intricate relationship between human migration and ecological dynamics.

Displacement and Loss

"Ours is indeed the age of the refugees, the displaced persons, and mass migration." (Edward Said, 440) Diasporic literature addresses the ways in which communities are disrupted by forced migration or voluntary dispersal, emphasising the loss of homeland, culture, and ecosystems. It highlights the effects of the environment, such as the loss of traditional knowledge, the vulnerability of ecosystems, and ecological adaptation. Srivastava discusses the displacement that "the phenomenon of displacement refers to the corporeal movement that may be the consequence of transference from one's own dwelling or terra firma to the new alien land. The whys and wherefores of displacement may be servitude or captivity, incursion and settlement or a consequence of willing or unwilling movement." (1) Diasporic literature, within an ecocritical lens, highlights the intricate relationship between human mobility, environmental changes, and the need for sustainable solutions to mitigate the ecological impacts of displacement. The concept of home, homelessness is very much prominent in displaced people.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh vividly portrays characters facing displacement in the fragile Sundarbans ecosystem. Piya, an Indian-American researcher, grapples with her dual identity while studying dolphins. Fokir, an indigenous fisherman, symbolises broader ecological displacement due to environmental degradation. Kanai's return prompts reflection on ancestral home loss and human transience. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh explores themes of home, displacement, and trauma post-partition. Characters like Tridib and Ila endure communal violence and displacement. The Calcutta-based narrator's family navigates separation's legacy. The novel also delves into cultural identity displacement across India, England, and Bangladesh, seeking rootedness in a fragmented world. Ghosh's work illustrates historical factors like colonialism, partition, and war as catalysts for displacement. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh portrays the impact of colonialism and war on characters like Rajkumar and Dolly, who grapple with displacement and loss. Ghosh vividly captures the loneliness, disconnection, and yearning for home experienced by immigrants. Rajkumar, a Bengali in Burma, feels alienated despite residing there. His journey to India symbolises loss of home and identity under colonial rule, while Dolly's move underscores geopolitical disruptions. The novel also delves into the displacement of indigenous communities in Southeast Asia, revealing the human toll of imperialism and exploitation.

Identity and Belonging

Diasporic writings intertwine environment, identity, and belonging, portraying individuals navigating foreign lands amidst cultural roots. Ecocriticism highlights a disconnect from ancestral landscapes, emphasising displacement's impact on personal and ecological levels, bridging human identity and environment in tales of yearning. Laxmiprasad notes that "the diasporic people often find themselves managing across cultural identities. They have to create various cultural, ethnic and political identities to meet the challenges from their native lands and their adopted homelands. The way in which the diasporic people manage their identities is determined by political, social, professional and class factors. The diasporic communities might choose adoption, accommodation, acculturation, and assimilation. Identity crisis arises if one migrates from one territory to another place." (99)

In *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, the theme of identity and belonging is intricately tied to an ecocritical perspective, particularly through the characters of Piya and Fokir. Piya, a diasporic Indian marine biologist, finds a profound connection to the Sundarbans while studying

Irrawaddy dolphins, reconciling her personal identity with her passion for the unique ecosystem. Fokir, a local fisherman, embodies the deep connection between identity and the environment, as his livelihood and sense of belonging are intertwined with the rhythms of the mangroves. Ghosh highlights how the natural world transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, offering a sense of belonging that shapes the characters' identities. Sudhandra Devi argues in her paper "Quest for Identity in Amitav Ghosh's Novel the Glass Palace" that "as a writer, Amitav Ghosh has been immensely influenced by the political and social elements of the country." (2555) *The Glass Palace* delves into the intertwined fates of Rajkumar and Dolly, whose identities are deeply entwined with the natural world amidst colonial Southeast Asia. Rajkumar's bond with Burma's teak forests mirrors his Burmese-Indian heritage, while the narrative exposes the environmental toll of colonial exploitation. Deforestation symbolises cultural erosion and displacement, echoing characters' struggles for belonging amidst diasporic migrations. Through lush descriptions and character arcs, the novel illustrates the profound connection between human identity and ecological harmony, portraying a world in flux where individuals navigate shifting landscapes, both physical and cultural. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator grapples with his identity amidst historical events like Bengal's independence movement and India's partition, reflecting on the shifting landscapes of Calcutta, London, and Dhaka. Environmental degradation parallels the erosion of cultural identity, notably seen in Dhaka's transformation from a lush city to a concrete jungle. Dhiman, P. in her study mentions that "*The Shadow Lines* maps the suffocating deliberations humans have regarding their identity, how abstract ideas and concepts shape crucial aspects of life and how mere lines enchant us into believing there is order in a chaotic universe." (316) the novel addresses the effects of identity struggles on the environment, including the Dhaka riots of 1964. The Partition of India also serves as a prime example of how political boundaries upend both human existence and natural equilibrium. Ghosh creates a complex relationship between environmental shifts and physical locations and human identity.

Human-Nature Relationships

According to Callicott, Nature has been a major element of love, veneration and adoration playing a vital role in art and life. However, nature, the saviour of the planet Earth, lost its virginity and wilderness due to the unregulated and unlawful encroachment of human beings to its pristine realm. Humans manipulated the plants and animals to their use and existence. Directly and indirectly, they have been accountable for causing damage and destruction to

nature. (58) Throughout history, humans have shared a deep and vital connection with nature, acknowledged by ancient wisdom, religious scriptures, and modern science. This bond is evident in our reliance on the natural world for sustenance and survival, as seen through the significance of agriculture.

Against the backdrop of the Sundarbans mangrove forest, *The Hungry Tide* explores the complex relationship between humanity and environment. In Ghosh's portrayal, nature is seen as both a mother and a blessing, necessary for human survival. The book uses successful fishing expeditions to highlight this dependence, but it also exposes humanity's terrible inability to make adjustments. The challenging Sundarbans environment shapes characters' lives and sparks conflicts over resource exploitation, notably seen in debates over dam construction. Conservation efforts, symbolised by endangered species like the Irrawaddy dolphins, underscore the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh explores human-nature dynamics through Burma's teak forests, depicting British colonial exploitation and environmental degradation. Rajkumar, a teak worker, symbolises the deep connection individuals can have with their environment, highlighting the harsh effects of deforestation on indigenous communities. The novel also delves into the impact of war on landscapes, illustrating the destructive consequences of human actions on nature, particularly during World War II and subsequent conflicts in Burma. *The Shadow Lines* examines the complex relationship between humans and nature through an ecocritical lens, emphasising both harmony and conflict. It portrays nature as a source of solace and nostalgia, particularly through the protagonist's memories of Dhaka and his grandmother's garden. However, Ghosh also explores the negative impacts of human actions on ecological balance, exemplified by the destruction caused during partition and communal riots. The narrative critically addresses the concept of borders, illustrating how these human-imposed divisions disrupt ecosystems and communities, leading to environmental degradation and the displacement of both humans and non-human species.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of Amitav Ghosh's books, *The Glass Palace*, *The Shadow Lines*, and *The Hungry Tide*, the paper reveals a complex representation of ecological concerns and the postcolonial diaspora. The study analyses the complex effects of cultural dislocation and displacement, highlighting the ways in which these themes interact with difficulties in adapting to changing ecological circumstances. In addition, the study of identity and belonging emphasises the relationship that exists between environmental processes, landscapes, and cultural legacy. The discussion surrounding cultural hybridity and its connection to the natural

world clarifies the nuances involved in cultural exchange and environmental conservation within a globalised system. In the end, investigating the interactions between humans and nature highlights how critical it is to conserve and live sustainably in fragile ecosystems. In today's globalised culture, this research deepens understanding of the complex interactions that exist between cultural identities, human experiences, and the natural environment.

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