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Reimagining Space through Fluid Boundaries: Water as a Dynamic Force in *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

This paper explores Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide *as a literary intervention that reorients spatial imagination by foregrounding water as a dynamic and destabilizing force. Ghosh's novel challenges traditional land-based narratives that rely on fixed borders and linear histories and thus situates the fluid geographies of the Sundarbans as central to its thematic and narrative structure. In conversation with the theoretical ideas of Steve Mentz and John R. Gillis, the analysis draws upon concepts from the blue humanities to examine how water disrupts binary divisions between land and sea, human and non-human, settled and nomadic life. Through characters such as Piyali Roy and Fokir Mondol, Ghosh constructs a fluid epistemology that resists the certainties of cartographic, colonial, and nationalist logics. Finally, the paper argues that* The Hungry Tide *not only dramatizes the ecological and cultural precarity of coastal life but also proposes a reimagined understanding of space, identity, and history in the Anthropocene.*

Keywords: anthropocene, blue humanities, boundaries, space, water narrative

Introduction

In a human-centered discourse, land has been a primary site of meaning making, setting boundaries, and forcing dichotomies between those who live on land and those who do not. Such imaginaries have presented land as an enduring reflection of space conceptualized in cultural, geopolitical, and even historical terms: from colonial mappings to postcolonial reclamations, land has served as the anchor for identity, sovereignty, and stability. Land offered social position, recognition, and cultural validity. Geography has served as a standpoint and locus for human beings for a long time. However, in recent years, scholars in the emerging fields of the blue humanities have begun to question this terrestrial bias, urging a turn toward the oceanic, the fluid, and the unstable water mass as crucial frameworks for understanding life in general, and human-nature relations in particular. Technically, in the discourse of Anthropocene, water has emerged as a subject of serious study. As a fitting literary response, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (*THT* hereafter) offers a countering response to the land-based narrative by situating characters in the shifting tidal landscapes of the Sundarbans and making them act in response to the tide, rather than vice versa. The subject matter is still human-nature relation, but Ghosh's narrative approach to the theme is entirely different—"as bodies of water we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation" (Astrida 2) in approaching waterspaces for we are made up of water itself.

Set in a region where land and sea endlessly intertwine, *THT* challenges traditional spatial binaries and invites a reimagining of space as inherently fluid and dependent. The novel's depiction of water goes beyond being just a backdrop; it serves as an active, dynamic force that opposes the Cartesian tendency to fix, chart, and dominate nature. Instead, Ghosh highlights the tide country as a place of ongoing change—one that resists human attempts at mastery and makes rigid boundaries untenable. In this way, the novel echoes the ideas of Steve Mentz, who advocates for "wet narratives" (*Shipwreck* 11) and ways of thinking that embrace chaos, uncertainty, and porous subjectivity; and John R. Gillis, who criticizes the emphasis on solid ground in histories of human development and argues that "coasts were . . . the locus of a sense of belonging, [and] the center of a world rather than a periphery" (4) in his book, *The Human Shore.*

In this paper, my position is that *THT* disrupts dominant land-based paradigms by embracing water as both a literal and metaphorical agent of instability, chaos to disrupt land-based narratives, and reimagines space. Through its characters, myth, and ecological vision, the novel offers an alternative spatial imagination—one that privileges motion over fixity, interdependence over separation, and fluidity over permanence. The research argues along the lines that Astride argues that "Watery embodiment thus presents a challenge to three related humanist understandings of corporeality: discrete individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism" (3).

The novel has been extensively analyzed from various angles—ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, identity and migration, and climate change discourse. To bring a fresh perspective to the novel, here are some innovative approaches you could explore.

Scholarship on Ghosh and his themes and trends is sustained and wide. An annotated bibliography on Gosh includes 800 scholarly articles and book-length studies. In this context, the article "Seeing the Sundarbans through Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*," Laura A. White evaluates that his "project as one part of his wider agenda of environmental activism" (528). As part of this activism, Ghosh's novels, according to White, have a theme that "presents a way of knowing the Sundarbans and its human and non-human inhabitants that displaces the colonial and neo-colonial visions of empty land to be developed" (528). White critiques of the colonial agenda of civilizing the rest of the world placed them in superior authority, where the open land and other people needed white men's attention. Similarly, from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, the novel is "a wonderful sketch of genesis, love and the interconnectedness between human beings and the existing nature" (Panta 132) because, as Panta concludes, "social inequality and injustice in nature must be eradicated to liberate both" (126). Ranjan Chakrabarti charts out the environmental history of the Sunderbans as a "unique natural zone" which has an equally "unique history" (75) of sheltering people and plants, rulers and settlers.

In "Tracing the Strong Green Streaks in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh", Nazia Hasan sums Ghosh's philosophy as one who "extends the role of nature beyond that of 'moral barometer' [and] . . . alerts us to think about what is means to live *with* rather than simply on the earth" (193). The meaning of living in his novels becomes a sharing principle among the inhabitants of nature. The sharing and complicity in nature bring "the blessings of environmental beauty and the nourishing power of species, fruits, herbs, and blossoms" (190) that underscores the symbiosis among the species in nature.

Pramod Nayar interprets the novel as a story of "postcolonial uncanny," which means the narrative reflects "the politics of dispossession and the question of home/land" (116). The exploration of familiar and unfamiliar space makes the novel "an ethical postcolonial"—the proper way to critique colonial discourse. Lastly, in "Aesthetics and Environmentalism," Shakti Jaising states that THT embodies "Ghosh's vision of radical politics that require a change in perspective and, ultimately, [serve as a] collaboration across class and cultural divides" (67) imposed upon the natives by the empire. Now the question comes, how does Ghosh critique the discrete individualism, and what alternative does he proposes, if does so. Similarly, in what ways do tides and floods challenge the notion of location, belonging, and the meaning of ownership?

Methodology

The research employs a critical analysis as an interpretative strategy. In discussion with the concept of Blue Humanities, the paper reexamines the spatial and ecological framework that challenges the longstanding dominance of land-based perspectives in literary and cultural studies. Blue Humanities originates from ideas articulated by two scholars—Steve Mentz and John R. Gillis. They have led this interdisciplinary shift, promoting an oceanic and fluid-centered approach to understanding human history, identity, and environmental interactions. The blue humanities advocates for an epistemological and aesthetic shift—from terra firma to fluid space—emphasizing the

importance of maritime environments, coastal ecologies, and the transformative influence of water in shaping both narrative and experience.

Mentz's *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* argues that traditional narratives, particularly within Western literary and historical traditions, have been rooted in the qualities associated with land in a desire for order, stability, and control. In contrast, water introduces chaos, instability, and flux. In works such as *Shipwreck Modernity* (2015) and *Oceanic New York* (2015), Mentz proposes a wet ontology that embraces contingency and porousness, both materially and metaphorically. For Mentz, oceans and tides do not merely serve as settings but as forces that demand new forms of thinking and storytelling—ones that can accommodate dissolution, transformation, and precarity. Literature, from this perspective, becomes a means of engaging with uncertainty, multitude, and the amorphous rather than resolving them by forcing an order and tranquility. Similarly, Gillis's work, *The Human Shore* (2015), critiques the terrestrial bias that underpins much of human history and spatial imagination. He argues that the coast, rather than the interior, has been central to the development of human civilization, yet it remains marginalized in historical narratives. Gillis calls attention to how the shore is inherently liminal—a zone of exchange, hybridity, and vulnerability—space. By tracing how humans have historically inhabited and conceptualized coastal regions, Gillis highlights the need for narratives that reflect the dynamism and fragility of such spaces in the context of climate change and sea-level rise.

Cultural concept of water "embraces [s] not only each bay and basin but also smaller bodies of fresh water, as well as solid ice and water vapor" (Menz 2). The approach known as "A poetics of planetary water does not so much turn its back on the sea as follow ocean-logic to its logical conclusion" (2). Thus, the approach becomes the one clarifying "the relationships between human and water in all its forms and phases" (2). Together, the insights of Mentz and Gillis provide a rich theoretical lens through which to read *THT*. Their emphasis on fluidity, instability, and coastal entanglement resonates powerfully with Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans—a landscape defined by impermanence, transformation, and the erosion of fixed boundaries. This paper draws on their work not only to frame water as a narrative force in the novel but also to situate *THT* within a broader intellectual movement that seeks to reimagine how we relate to space, ecology, and storytelling in an age of environmental crisis.

Discussion and Findings

Ghosh challenges the land-based narrative through a contrast between Fokir Mondol's deep, embodied knowledge of fish and dolphins and Piyali Roya's scientific and instrumental knowledge. The contrast comes as a powerful narrative tool to challenge traditional, institutionalized forms of knowledge that "are undergirded by anthropocentric logics of efficiency, profit, and progress" (Che, MacLeod, and Neimanis, "Introduction" 3), rooted in Western scientific rationality. Though illiterate and often silent, Fokir possesses an intuitive understanding of the tidal landscape and its non-human inhabitants—an understanding cultivated through years of lived experience in the Sundarbans; he knows exactly what is needed to be done and what is needed to be avoided: "That's how I know,"

he said. It's the fear that tells me" (Ghosh 322). His ability to locate and track the elusive Irrawaddy dolphins without the aid of scientific instruments sharply contrasts with Piya's formal training as a marine biologist. Forkir takes his boat, and when Piya "opened her eyes to find dense fog had resulted" (112). In such thick fog, she could hear a sound that "only the Irrawaddy dolphin, *Orcaella brevirostris,* produced this particular kind of sound" (113). And, there were these dolphins: "a group of traveling Orcaella had decided to make a brief halt near the boat" (113). But, this has baffled Piya: "how could he [Fokir] have known that they would run into a group of Orcaella, right then and right in that place?"(113). It was entirely possible that the dolphins came to the place frequently, but "how could he have known that they would be there on that day, at that time? (113). Given that the migrating Orcaella are too unpredictable in their travel route and halting positions, Piya knows this better than anyone. However, it appears that Fokir has the exact information about these migrating dolphins.

Piya is a contrast to Fokir: she relies on technological tools and empirical methodology to understand Orcaella with "GPS monitor . . . [and] a rangefinder and a depth sounder, which could provide an exact reading of the water's depth" (73). A fantastic tool of science and technology, the binocular was an investment per se; as was Forkir's investment in time spent in the waters. Moreover, these two are too attuned to their practices:

> Her binoculars' gaze seemed to fall on the landscape like a shower of rain, mellowing its edges, diminishing her sense of disorientation and unpreparedness. The boat's rolling did nothing to interrupt the metronomic precision of her movements; her binoculars held to their course, turning from right to left and back again, as steady as the beam of a light house. Over the years of practice, her musculature had become attuned to the water, and she had learned to keep her balance almost without effect, flexing her knees instinctively to counteract the rolling. (Ghosh 72)

The meticulous congruence of body to the machine is a rare professional skill Piya has developed and she has devoted to the study of the dolphins. The similar, and even much more precise attunement comes from Fokir's non-verbal, indigenous expertise and awareness of the waterspace that his mother told him about "a place where you had to learn not to be afraid. And if you did, then you might find the answer to your troubles" (Ghosh 323). This knowledge becomes critically essential to her research, which is equal to her scientific tools. Through this dynamic, Ghosh disrupts the authority of conventional science and re-centers indigenous ecological knowledge, emphasizing its legitimacy and indispensability. Thus, Fokir's silent, adaptive way of knowing is particularly suited to the fluid, unstable environment of the tide country compared to Piya's fixed maps and rigid categories. His approach models what Steve Mentz describes as a "wet ontology" (43) — an epistemology that embraces uncertainty, relationality, and transformation.

Both Piyali Roy and Kanai Dutt employ a Western scientific rational approach to water and landscape. However, Kanai Dutt embodies a land-bound, textually mediated

spatial awareness that stands in stark contrast to the fluid, intuitive orientation of Piyali Roy. As an educated, urban professional from Delhi with roots in Calcutta, Kanai's relationship to the Sundarbans is framed by privilege, language, and distance. But this sense of distance collapses and his "instrument of language" (Ghosh 327) fails him. In other words, both Piya's scientific tools and Kanai's ability to translate—use language to his benefit—fail here. In a climactic moment, Kanai becomes a subject "to be judged" (327). Since his approach to the tide country was that of an outsider, it was a narrative necessity for him to encounter the true nature of tideland:

> Kanai's head filled with visions of the ways in which the tide country dealt out death. . . . Every other thought vanished from his mind. Rising to a crouch, he began to push himself backwards, higher up in the bank, unmindful of the rooted spear-points raking his skin. As he retreated up the bank, the mud thinned and the mangrove's shoots grew taller and more numerous. He could no longer see the ripple in the water, but it did not matter: all we wanted to do was to get as far from the river as possible. (328).

This was Kanai's ephiphany or his punishment for not trusting Fokir's knowledge of the waterspace and the ways it operates. In other words, he was not heeding the words of Kusum, his childhood crush and Fokir's mother. Putting it differently, in a panic situation—when he chased Fokir away with a boat—"his mind has emptied itself of language" (329) that he was so proud of. The terror slowly gnawed him, and as "he opened his eyes, he was on his back, in the boat" thinking that he had been deserted "so long on that island" but in reality "you were there just [for] ten minutes" (330). For Kanai, space is something to be interpreted, categorized, and ultimately possessed, which mirrors the dominant land-based rationality. His attempt to decode Nirmal's notebook illustrates his textual fixation. He tries to understand the tidelands and people through this text—Nirmal's notebook. His desire to reconstruct the past through written language, maps, and memories, rather than through embodied experience, fails him. Despite both being outsiders to the tideland, Kanai never truly engages with the water as a lived space where Piya does. His spatial understanding, shaped by power and distance, reinforces a rigid, anthropocentric worldview in which nature is something to be navigated from above, not within. For Ghosh, Kanai serves the site to critique intellectualized, detached approaches to space. This brings him to critique the policies—on conservation, forestry, and human-animal coexistence—that rely on documented, official language and bureaucratic authority rather than experience and relationality.

Ghosh brings a failed revolutionary and retired school headteacher, Nirmal Ghosh, to inject a distinctive spatial consciousness. Nirmal's spatiality is deeply ideological and excruciatingly historical. His vision of the Sundarbans is shaped by a utopian imagination that blends Marxist ideals with a romanticized vision of the land and its people—particularly the refugees of Morichjhãpi. Nirmal sees the tide country as a potential space of liberation, a place where oppressed people might escape state violence and reconstitute a more just society. Nirmal has written this in his diary, *"suddenly it dawned on me that I*

was watching the birth of something new; something hitherto unseen" (171). His excitement to see the revolution in making is apparent in "*how astonishing it was I, an aging bookish schoolmaster, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined no by those with learning and power, but by those without!"* (171 italics original). However, his spatial imagination is largely symbolic and aesthetic, rooted in poetic abstraction out of unfulfilled desire to cause a revolution in his youth. His is a distant approach to the country despite living his entire life there. Nirmal is a failure; a utopian devoid of any practical sense of the world. Unlike Fokir, who lives the dangers and rhythms of the tide every day, Nirmal contemplates it from the margins—often from the safety of his veranda or through the filter of literature and revolutionary theory. His failure to act decisively during the Morichjhãpi crisis underscores the limits of his spatial awareness: while he sees the Sundarbans as a site of possibility, he cannot fully grasp its material precarity or the complex entanglements of its human and non-human inhabitants. Ghosh presents Nirmal's relationship to space as one of distance and disillusionment, exposing the gap between idealized spatial projects and lived geographies. Through Nirmal, the novel critiques the romantic intellectualism and aesthetic engagement with the waterspace, ultimately projecting anthropocentrism's ideologies onto land and waters.

Through the contrasting spatial sensibilities of Piya, Kanai, and Nirmal, *THT* constructs a rich cartography of opposing worldviews, each reflecting different and contrasting relations to space—waterspace. Piya's relation to the ecospace is informed by her scientific rationality, where Kanai's relation is textual, and further, Nirmal's is romantic and idealistic. The only embodied relation to the ecospace comes from Fokir Mondol and his mother, Kusum. Gradually, Piya learns to trust Fokir's indigenous knowledge of the space and, in return, gets her life saved in the devastating storm, where Nirmal could not. Her ability to cross boundaries—linguistic, national, and ecological—aligns her with the tide country's intrinsic instability, allowing her to inhabit the Sundarbans not as a conquest or curiosity, but as a living, shifting world. In contrast, Kanai's spatial imagination is defined by textuality, control, and land-based certainty. His detachment from the material realities of the landscape renders him largely incapable of grasping the tide's unruly logic. In short, Ghosh uses these differing perspectives to critique hierarchical, anthropocentric understandings of space and to foreground the necessity of more fluid, inclusive, and situated modes of spatial engagement. The novel illustrates that in a world shaped by environmental crisis and displacement, it is the Fokir's and Piya's approach that sustains. It is those who move with the tides rather than against them who best embody the forms of knowledge and belonging in the tidelands.

Conclusion

THT challenges traditional land-based narratives by using tideland and waterspace as a dynamic and destabilizing force that reconfigures spatial, cultural, and ecological boundaries set by land-based narratives. In conversation with the works of Steve Mentz and John R. Gillis, Astrida Neminis, this paper has explored how important indigenous knowledge about land, water, and species is in order to understand human existence. Thus,

the focus shifts from land to water, resulting in a rethinking of land-based and instrumental approaches to nature.

Thus, the novel reconfigures spatial imagination through the contrasting worldviews of Piya, Fokir, Kanai, and Nirmal. In the process, the novel dismantles hierarchical and anthropocentric approaches to space and brings fluid, embodied, and interdependent modes of knowing on board. Finally, Ghosh's tidal landscapes challenge rigid boundaries and invite an ethic of adaptability that will be crucial for the Anthropocene to exist. In doing so, the novel affirms that survival and belonging in an unstable world demand moving with the tides rather than against them.

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