

ORIGINAL

Margins of Conservation: Indigenous Resistance and Ecological Politics in *The Hungry Tide*

Márgenes de la Conservación: Resistencia Indígena y Política Ecológica en *The Hungry Tide*

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the paper explores the representation of Indigenous tribal communities in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, focusing on how their lived experiences and sentiments often stand in stark contrast to state laws and policies.

Method: through *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh narrates the struggles of the displaced settlers and indigenous groups in the Sundarbans, highlighting the friction between environmental conservation policies and the rights of marginalized communities. Roy's *Walking with the Comrades* offers a journalistic account of the Naxalite movement in India, portraying the deep-seated grievances of tribal communities against state oppression, displacement, and militarization.

Results: the novel reveals how the state's legal and developmental frameworks often disregard indigenous perspectives, treating them as obstacles rather than rightful stakeholders of their land. The paper examines the portrayal of forced evictions, ecological conflicts, and insurgency as resistance, arguing that these literary works serve as counter-narratives to the state's dominant discourse. By juxtaposing fiction with non-fiction, the study sheds light on the intersection of literature, politics, and human rights, questioning the legitimacy of laws that prioritize economic and environmental interests over the survival of indigenous communities.

Conclusion: this paper uncovers how Ghosh and Roy challenge hegemonic narratives, giving voice to the indigenous communities marginalised by history and policy.

Keywords: Tribal; Indigenous; Representation; Amitav Ghosh; Arundhati Roy.

RESUMEN

Introducción: este artículo explora la representación de las comunidades tribales indígenas en *The Hungry Tide* de Amitav Ghosh, centrándose en cómo sus experiencias y sentimientos contrastan profundamente con las leyes y políticas estatales.

Método: a través de *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh narra las luchas de los colonos desplazados y los grupos indígenas en los Sundarbans, destacando la fricción entre las políticas de conservación ambiental y los derechos de las comunidades marginadas. *Walking with the Comrades* de Arundhati Roy ofrece un relato periodístico sobre el movimiento naxalita en la India, mostrando los profundos agravios de las comunidades tribales frente a la opresión estatal, el desplazamiento y la militarización.

Resultados: la novela revela cómo los marcos legales y de desarrollo del Estado a menudo ignoran las perspectivas indígenas, tratándolas como obstáculos en lugar de reconocerlas como partes legítimas de

su territorio. Este estudio examina la representación de los desalojos forzados, los conflictos ecológicos y la insurgencia como formas de resistencia, argumentando que estas obras literarias funcionan como contra-narrativas al discurso dominante del Estado. Al yuxtaponer ficción y no ficción, el estudio ilumina la intersección entre literatura, política y derechos humanos, cuestionando la legitimidad de las leyes que priorizan los intereses económicos y ambientales sobre la supervivencia de las comunidades indígenas.

Conclusión: este artículo revela cómo Ghosh y Roy desafían las narrativas hegemónicas, dando voz a las comunidades indígenas marginadas por la historia y las políticas estatales.

Palabras clave: Tribal; Indígena; Representación; Amitav Ghosh; Arundhati Roy.

INTRODUCTION

Marginalized communities often find their needs and interests overlooked or actively undermined by political and economic agendas. In regions like the Sundarbans, where indigenous and fishing communities depend on fragile ecosystems for their survival, government policies, and development projects frequently prioritize economic gains over environmental sustainability and social equity. For example, the conversion of forest areas for agriculture and timber production has a long history in the Sundarbans. While there have been shifts towards integrated management and co-management approaches, the tension between economic development and ecological preservation continues, as evidenced by the expansion of protected areas, which negatively impacts the livelihoods of those dependent on forest resources. Overfishing and exploitation of resources,⁽¹⁾ driven by economic demands, further threaten the delicate balance of this ecosystem. Even well-intentioned initiatives, such as those focused on augmenting freshwater supply and reducing bank erosion,⁽²⁾ must carefully consider their potential impact on the interconnected ecological and socioeconomic systems within the Sundarbans. Ultimately, sustainable development in the Sundarbans requires a delicate balancing act between economic needs and the preservation of both environmental and social equity.⁽³⁾

In the Sundarbans, large-scale projects, while economically beneficial, often lead to habitat destruction and displacement of communities. Clearing mangrove forests for commercial ventures threatens biodiversity and undermines traditional, sustainable livelihoods.^(4,5) Similarly, conservation policies, while intended to protect nature, can restrict access to resources and displace communities, causing economic hardship and cultural loss.⁽⁶⁾ This tension necessitates a more equitable approach to development that respects both human needs and environmental integrity.⁽³⁾

A key factor marginalizing vulnerable communities is their exclusion from decision-making processes.⁽⁷⁾ Governments often create conservation and development plans without consulting affected populations.⁽³⁾ This lack of representation, particularly for those with limited land rights,⁽⁸⁾ increases their vulnerability to displacement.⁽⁹⁾ Without a voice, their perspectives and knowledge remain unheard, perpetuating cycles of exploitation and neglect. In the Sundarbans, ignoring local knowledge in favor of economic gains has contributed to mangrove degradation.⁽¹⁰⁾

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative analysis approach to examine the representation of marginalized tribal communities in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades*. Through close reading and thematic analysis, the paper explores how these texts depict the struggles of indigenous groups in the face of state-driven development, conservation policies, and political exclusion. By interpreting the textual evidence within historical and political contexts, this study highlights the contradictions between state policies and indigenous realities. This study uses Postcolonial Ecocriticism⁽¹¹⁾ to analyze the representation of marginalized tribal communities in *The Hungry Tide* (Ghosh, 2005) and *Walking with the Comrades* (Roy, 2011). It examines how indigenous voices are silenced or misrepresented in dominant state narratives and how environmental policies often prioritize state power over local sustainability and indigenous rights. Angela Davis, Malcom Ferdinand, Anthony Paul Smith. A decolonial ecology: thinking from the Caribbean World. 2021. Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities Postcolonial Approaches, edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur, Anthony Carrigan Subaltern studies⁽¹²⁾ further illuminate the socio-political exclusion and resistance of these groups. By integrating these theoretical lenses, the paper will demonstrate how literature can challenge hegemonic structures and amplify marginalized voices.

RESULTS

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* offers a critical examination of the challenges confronted by indigenous and marginalized communities, particularly through the character of Fokir, a traditional fisherman whose livelihood is deeply embedded in generational knowledge and an intimate understanding of his environment. His struggles

reflect broader systemic issues faced by indigenous communities, whose traditional ways of life are increasingly imperiled by conservation laws and resource restrictions. Fokir's dependence on inherited fishing practices is in direct opposition to state-imposed regulations, such as the Wildlife Protection Act and the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) laws, which aim to preserve marine ecosystems yet frequently conflate large-scale commercial exploitation with sustainable, small-scale subsistence fishing (Ghosh 56). While these policies ostensibly serve ecological interests, they disproportionately affect communities such as Fokir's, who are reliant on these waters for survival but find themselves marginalized by legal frameworks that privilege conservation over indigenous rights. His silent endurance in the face of these structural constraints underscores the broader marginalization of indigenous populations, whose traditional knowledge and ecological stewardship are frequently overlooked in favor of state-controlled conservation efforts.

In addition to the constraints on fishing practices, the novel foregrounds the pervasive threat of human-wildlife conflict, particularly in the Sundarbans, where the inhabitants of Lusibari, including Fokir's family, are subjected to the constant danger of tiger attacks. The establishment of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) has contributed to an increase in tiger populations, exacerbating human-tiger encounters (Ghosh 42).

One of the most harrowing representations of the displacement of marginalized communities in the name of conservation is the Marichjhapi massacre, referenced in the novel through Kusum's narrative. The forced eviction of thousands of Bengali refugees, predominantly from lower-caste backgrounds, from the island of Marichjhapi under the pretext of environmental protection resulted in state-sanctioned violence, starvation, and death (Ghosh 31). The massacre epitomizes the instrumentalization of conservation policies to legitimize the dispossession of vulnerable communities, reflecting a broader historical pattern of state-sanctioned displacement. Arundhati Roy, in *Walking with the Comrades*, similarly critiques state-driven conservation efforts, which frequently result in the displacement, criminalization, and marginalization of indigenous populations under the guise of ecological preservation. Roy's analysis of tribal displacement in India's forests resonates with the experiences of Ghosh's characters, illustrating how environmental laws disproportionately impact communities that have historically lived in symbiosis with nature. The prioritization of conservation over human rights, as manifest in the implementation of forest protection laws and land-use restrictions, perpetuates conditions of insecurity and disenfranchisement among tribal and indigenous populations, effectively silencing their claims to land and livelihood.

DISCUSSION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* presents a compelling critique of conservation policies in the Sundarbans, illustrating the inherent tensions between state-driven environmental governance and the rights of indigenous and marginalized communities. While these policies aim to protect fragile ecosystems and endangered species, they frequently disregard the voices, needs, and traditional knowledge of local populations, leading to displacement, economic precarity, and cultural erosion. The novel foregrounds the ongoing conflict between state authority and subaltern groups, highlighting how environmental regulations disproportionately burden those who have historically coexisted with nature (Ghosh 32). This phenomenon aligns with broader global patterns of conservation-related displacement, as seen in India's Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, which have often curtailed indigenous land rights while favoring exclusionary conservation approaches.

The Sundarban Tiger Reserve Vs Human Conflict

The establishment of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve exemplifies the fraught relationship between conservation efforts and indigenous survival. Designed to protect the endangered Bengal tiger, the reserve imposes strict restrictions on human activity within its core zones, effectively barring local communities from accessing traditional fishing grounds and honey collection sites (Ghosh 42). As depicted in *The Hungry Tide*, Fokir's subsistence lifestyle is severely threatened by these policies, mirroring real-life instances in which indigenous honey collectors and fishers are penalized for accessing their own lands. The ethical dilemma within such policies is stark: while protecting endangered species is essential, it frequently comes at the cost of marginalizing human communities whose livelihoods depend on the same ecosystems. As scholars have noted, similar patterns emerge in other conservation zones, such as Kaziranga National Park in Assam, where indigenous communities face evictions and punitive measures for residing in protected areas. Additionally, conservation efforts in the Sundarbans have inadvertently intensified human-wildlife conflict. The proliferation of tigers within protected areas has led to frequent attacks on livestock and people, with limited state intervention to compensate affected communities (Ghosh 53).

Conservation as a Tool of Oppression

One of the most harrowing episodes in *The Hungry Tide* is its reference to the Marichjhapi massacre, an event emblematic of the violent dispossession of marginalized communities in the name of environmental

preservation. The forced eviction of thousands of lower-caste Bengali refugees from the island of Marichjhapi in 1979, under the pretext of ecological protection, led to state-sanctioned violence, starvation, and death (Ghosh 31). The parallels between this historical event and contemporary conservation-induced displacement are striking. Scholars like Arundhati Roy have extensively documented how state-driven conservation efforts frequently serve as instruments of oppression, legitimizing land dispossession under the guise of environmental stewardship (Roy 2011). In *Broken Republic*, Roy critiques the state's use of conservation rhetoric to justify the displacement of Adivasi communities, drawing parallels with forced evictions in the Narmada Valley and the militarized takeover of resource-rich indigenous lands (Roy 91). Much like the fictionalized account in Ghosh's novel, these real-world examples demonstrate how conservation policies can exacerbate structural inequalities rather than resolve ecological challenges.

Legal Frameworks and Indigenous Exclusion

The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 have further compounded these issues by restricting indigenous access to traditional lands and resources. While these laws are instrumental in preventing deforestation and biodiversity loss, they often fail to distinguish between large-scale commercial exploitation and sustainable indigenous practices (Ghosh 48). The Act mandates governmental approval for the use of forest land for non-forest purposes, a measure that has impeded infrastructure development in indigenous areas, depriving communities of schools, hospitals, and essential services. Studies indicate that while conservation funds are allocated for community welfare, their actual implementation remains inadequate, echoing the grievances voiced in *The Hungry Tide* about the government's neglect of marginalized populations.

The novel encapsulates this tension through the contrast between Fokir and Piya, whose differing worldviews reflect broader debates on conservation ethics. While Piya, a marine biologist, prioritizes scientific conservation efforts, Fokir embodies indigenous ecological knowledge, relying on an intuitive understanding of the tides and marine life for survival (Ghosh 193). This dynamic underscores the importance of integrating indigenous perspectives into conservation policies, an approach that has gained increasing recognition in global environmental governance.

Indigenous Displacement

The Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) regulations, intended to prevent unregulated coastal development, further exemplify the exclusionary nature of conservation policies. While these regulations seek to curb industrial exploitation, they often fail to account for the needs of fishing and coastal communities, who are restricted from constructing homes or engaging in small-scale aquaculture. The resulting economic instability exacerbates the precarity of marginalized populations, reinforcing the notion that conservation policies are frequently designed without input from the communities they affect most (Ghosh 249). Kusum, Fokir's mother, serves as a poignant voice of resistance, articulating the ways in which conservationist narratives mask the state's neglect of the poor. Her speech underscores the need for policies that incorporate traditional ecological knowledge rather than imposing top-down regulatory frameworks that alienate indigenous groups.

CONCLUSION

The ideological tensions between modern scientific conservation and indigenous ecological knowledge, as depicted in *The Hungry Tide*, underscore the need for a more inclusive and ethical approach to conservation policies. The novel critiques the exclusionary frameworks that prioritize ecological preservation while disregarding the lived realities of communities that have coexisted with these landscapes for generations. Rather than perceiving indigenous populations as obstacles to conservation, a more just and sustainable model would recognize them as key stakeholders with valuable ecological expertise. This necessitates a shift from top-down conservation strategies to participatory models that integrate indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems. Recent approaches, such as community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), emphasize collaborative governance and the inclusion of traditional ecological knowledge in conservation efforts. These models present viable alternatives to state-imposed policies, offering frameworks that balance biodiversity preservation with indigenous rights and local livelihoods.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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