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The Portrayal of the Indian Ocean in Contemporary Indian Writing in English

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian Writing in English stages the Indian Ocean as more than setting: it is archive, infrastructure, ecology, mythic medium, and a climate actor that remaps history and ethics. From Amitav Ghosh's sustained maritime corpus to the oceanic resonances in M. G. Vassanji, Kunal Basu, and other writers, Anglophone fiction uses the sea to displace land-centered national frames, to recover marginalized maritime histories (lascars, indentured labor), and to dramatize multispecies ecologies and climate-driven mobility. This paper (1) maps five modes of oceanic portrayal—archive, ecology, migration/diaspora, form/myth, and climate actor; (2) expands close readings across a wider corpus; (3) synthesizes ethical and methodological implications for literary studies; and (4) suggests future interdisciplinary directions. The analysis draws on blue humanities scholarship and recent critical studies to argue that reading through the Indian Ocean compels transregional histories, multispecies ethics, and narrative innovation.

1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean—stretching from East Africa to the Malay Archipelago, from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal—has always been a zone of intense contact: trade, pilgrimage, migration, and empire. Contemporary Indian anglophone novelists are increasingly attentive to the sea's longstanding role in producing culture, economy, and memory. Where earlier literary scholarship often treated the sea metaphorically, recent work in the blue humanities argues that seas must be read as material-cultural agents with their own

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ecologies, infrastructures, and legal/political histories (Mentz; Lavery). This paper treats the Indian Ocean as **method**: a scale of analysis that privileges routes and circulations rather than territorial sovereignty. Reading "through" the ocean uncovers submerged archives (indenture lists, ship manifests), multispecies entanglements (mangroves, dolphins, tigers), and new narrative forms (polyvocal, episodic, vernacular registers) that better represent transregional history and climate contingency. The central claim: portrayals of the Indian Ocean in contemporary Indian writing in English both reconstruct erased histories and demand a new ethical stance—toward displaced peoples, nonhuman life, and the legacies of maritime capitalism.

2. Theoretical Stakes: Blue Humanities, Oceanic Methods, and Postcolonial Ecocriticism

2.1 Blue Humanities and the Sea's Agency

The blue humanities is an interdisciplinary intervention insisting that oceans are material actors shaping culture and history. Steve Mentz's work on shipwreck and oceanic modernity models how maritime events produce epistemic dislocation and narrative innovation; scholars argue that literary form must adapt to the sea's rhythms—drift, rupture, and polyphony—if it is to represent oceanic life honestly.

2.2 Oceanic Method: From Territory to Route

The "Indian Ocean as method" reframes historical narratives: instead of nation-bound teleologies, critics study flows—of commodities, labour, languages—and their infrastructures (ships, ports, legal regimes) that make migration intelligible. This approach foregrounds route-based solidarities and complicates the neat division between "home" and "diaspora" common in land-cantered histories. Scholars have argued this method specifically for Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy and related writings, showing how sea-routes produce subjectivities and social relations.

2.3 Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Multispecies Entanglement

Postcolonial ecocriticism places environmental degradation in histories of colonial extraction and neoliberal development. When applied to oceanic texts, it insists on multispecies justice: mangroves, dolphins, and tigers are not scenic backdrops but fellow stakeholders in socioecological systems. Recent readings of *The Hungry Tide* insist that tidal ecologies force human ethical reflection on nonhuman agency and on long-term forms of "slow violence."

3. Methodology and Corpus

This study uses close reading and comparative analysis of a targeted corpus chosen for its explicit Indian Ocean engagement.

Primary texts:
- Amitav Ghosh, Sea of Poppies (Ibis Trilogy I), The Hungry Tide, Gun Island, Jungle Nama.
- M. G. Vassanji, The Gunny Sack and The Book of Secrets (diasporic Indian Ocean memory).
- Kunal Basu, The Miniaturist and other work that references maritime histories.

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- Select comparative/related fiction and nonfiction.

Secondary sources: Blue humanities overviews, ecocritical articles, and recent scholarship treating Indian Ocean as method.

4. Mode I — The Ocean as Archive: Commodities, Indenture, and Imperial Circuits
4.1 Oceanic Archive: Theory and Literary Function

Treating the ocean as archive locates the past in maritime routes and shipping infrastructures. Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (the Ibis Trilogy opener) exemplifies this: the Ibis and its manifest constitute an archival practice that preserves indenture, commodity chains (opium to China), and subaltern mobility. Critics argue that Ghosh actively "re-maps" the Indian Ocean, showing how commodity flows made imperial modernity legible across borders (Lauret; Sawhney).

4.2 Close Reading: *Sea of Poppies* and the Ship-Archive

Sea of Poppies stages ships as repositories where languages, rituals, and identities cross and recombine. Ghosh's attention to the physicality of shipping—ropes, ballast, hold, and ledger—reorients the reader to infrastructure as historical evidence. Scholarship emphasizes that this archival strategy recuperates voices lost to colonial land archives and shows how indenture produced diasporic social forms.

4.3 Comparative Note: Vassanji and Maritime Memory

M. G. Vassanji's novels, particularly *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, treat the Indian Ocean as memory-space where diasporic archives (family trunks, letters, objects) track transoceanic movement between India and East Africa. Critics read Vassanji as reconstructing Indian Ocean circulation through domestic objects and memory as well as geographic mobility—complementary to Ghosh's ship-archive but more focused on household practices. Literary studies have demonstrated how Vassanji's material culture functions as a counter-archive to nation-centred memory.

Synthesis (Archive mode): The archive mode recovers the labour of movement—coolies, lascars, sailors—and highlights how imperial and capitalist circuits are materially inscribed on human bodies and shoreline economies. The sea archives commodities and people in equal measure; novels that foreground this archival logic demand accountability from modern nation-states and former empires.

5. Mode II — The Ocean as Ecology: Tides, Mangroves, and Multispecies Life
5.1 Tidal Ecologies and Narrative Ethics

The ocean-as-ecology mode foregrounds living seascapes- mangrove forests, tidal channels, estuarine species- demonstrating that human livelihoods are embedded in hydrological rhythms. *The Hungry Tide* is paradigmatic: the Sundarbans' tidal topography organizes the novel's temporality, economy, and ethics. Ecocritical studies argue that Ghosh's work insists on multispecies cohabitation, destabilizing anthropocentrism.

5.2 Close Reading: *The Hungry Tide* and the Amphibious World

Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans treats human actors as one set among many: fishers, crabbers, mangrove swamps, Irrawaddy dolphins, and tigers cohabit a shifting hydrosphere. The novel's ethical core is the necessity of understanding habitat processes (slippage,

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erosion, storm surge) and their political consequences—conservation projects, displacement, and the moral calculus of "protection" versus livelihoods.

5.3 Comparative Instance: *Jungle Nama* and Mangrove Ethics

Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*, a verse retelling of Bonbibi myths, fuses mythic ethics with ecological warning. The Sundarbans legend- Bonbibi as protector- is retooled into an allegory of greed, boundary transgression, and ecological rule. Critical commentary reads *Jungle Nama* as both literary reclamation of vernacular myth and as a contemporary ecological parable, warning against overreach into fragile coastal ecologies.

Synthesis (Ecology mode): The ocean-as-ecology mode forces literary ethics to acknowledge nonhuman agency and environmental contingency. Novels like *The Hungry Tide* and *Jungle Nama* convert tidal knowledge into political critique, arguing that conservation and climate response must include the knowledge and rights of local communities and nonhuman cohabitants.

6. Mode III — Ocean as Migration Route and Diasporic Archive
6.1 Migration as Oceanic Process

Migration is frequently narrated as an oceanic process: ships and ports create diasporic subjectivities (indentured labourers, lascars, traders). An oceanic lens reframes diaspora as circulation shaped by maritime infrastructures instead of a teleology of home-to-host settlement. Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy dramatizes indenture voyages as formative social spaces; Vassanji's novels show how memory and objects carry oceanic migration's afterlives. Critics argue that such narratives dismantle national teleologies and make visible transregional solidarities and displacements.

6.2 Close Reading: Shipboard Sociabilities in *Sea of Poppies*

On the Ibis, caste and status are remixed by shared confinement and precariousness. Shipboard sociability shapes new identities—shared food, language hybrids, and survival strategies—suggesting diaspora arises in transit as much as at destination. Studies show that Ghosh makes the ship a social lab where "Indian-ness" emerges as a mobile, composite identity.

6.3 Comparative: Vassanji and Indian Ocean Diaspora Memory

Vassanji's East African Indian narratives present diasporic memory through household objects (the gunny sack as repository) and through narratives that cross the Indian Ocean. Scholarship reads these as attempts to preserve Indian Ocean circulations in the face of nationalizing histories that often erase plural, prosaic lives.

Synthesis (Migration mode): Oceanic migration narratives complicate diasporic theory by centring transit, shipboard life, and port economies as primary sites of identity formation, not merely as corridors to new nations.

7. Mode IV — Ocean as Myth, Form, and Vernacular Marine Languages
7.1 Formal Effects of the Sea: Polyphony and Drift

Oceanic texts often deploy formal strategies that mimic maritime motion: episodic drift, collage, polyphony, and vernacular hybridization. Steve Mentz's "shipwreck modernity" suggests shipwreck and maritime trauma force experimental narrative forms that

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capture disorientation and temporal collapse; Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy and *Gun Island* use such techniques.

7.2 Close Reading: *Gun Island* — Myth and Modernity

Gun Island pairs a Bengali legend (the Gun Merchant) with contemporary episodes of climate migration and trafficking. The novel alternates mythic fragments with contemporary reportage, linking ancient narrative structures to modern movement and dispossession. Critics highlight how myth functions to map repetitive patterns—greed, movement, and ecological warning—across centuries. The formal blending of legend and reportage performs a sea-level epistemology: histories are layered and non-linear.

8. Mode V — The Ocean as Climate Actor: Hydro migration, Sea-Level Rise, and the Anthropocene

8.1 Oceans in the Anthropocene

The ocean's role in climate change—rising sea levels, intensified cyclones, altered currents—makes it an active agent in human futures. Contemporary fiction foregrounds hydro migration (movement induced by water-related environmental change) and reframes migration as climate-historically conditioned rather than simply economic. Scholarly readings of *Gun Island* locate the novel's climate sensibility in this context: the sea's behaviour has ethical and migratory consequences.

8.2 Close Reading: Hydro migration in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*

In *The Hungry Tide*, receding islands and storm dynamics make human attachment to place precarious; in *Gun Island*, tidal and meteorological changes intersect with myth and migratory routes, producing new diasporic flows. Critics have described these textual moves as attempts to fictionalize "slow violence"—ecological harms that are cumulative, dispersed, and often invisible in policy discourse.

8.3 Comparative: Literary Climate Witnessing and Responsibility

Recent climate scholarship emphasizes literature's role in witnessing and narrating human–nonhuman entanglement. Ghosh's climate novels undertake ethical witnessing: they narrate climate-driven precarity and insist on historical causes (colonial extraction, fossil capitalism) as co-responsible factors. Reviews and peer-reviewed articles show *Gun Island* interpreted as a climate-imagination novel demanding responsibility toward climate migrants.

Synthesis (Climate mode): The ocean-as-climate-actor demands rethinking migration, belonging, and justice at sea level: literature makes the slow motion of climate visible and insists on the historical chains that enable present vulnerability.

9. Additional Textual Analyses and Comparative Readings

To make the discussion more capacious, this section adds detailed engagements with other contemporary texts that register Indian Ocean themes or engage maritime imaginaries.

9.1 M. G. Vassanji — Memory across the Indian Ocean

Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* complicate oceanic archives by focusing on domestic memory and objects. The gunny sack itself is a metonym for transoceanic routes, family migration, and the fragile preservation of plural histories. Critics

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read Vassanji's work as focusing on the persistence of oceanic memory in household objects and rituals—the micro-archive as a counterpoint to the ship manifest. This helps broaden the archive mode: oceanic memory is stored not only in ports but in trunks and recipes, in languages and religious practices that travel with people.

9.2 Kunal Basu and Historical Maritime Reconstructions

While many of Basu's novels are inland historical imaginings (e.g., *The Miniaturist*), Basu has elsewhere engaged with maritime trade and the culture of the Mughal-era Indian Ocean. Basu's interest in material culture and global exchange offers a literary counterpoint: ports were not only colonial sites but part of longer precolonial exchange networks that shaped early modern South Asia. Such comparative readings complicate the periodization that limits oceanic interest to "colonial and postcolonial" periods.

9.3 Romesh Gunesekera, Ondaatje, and the Wider Indian Ocean Field

The Indian Ocean literary field includes authors writing from other littoral regions—Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunesekera, Abdulrazak Gurnah—whose works resonate with Indian Ocean themes: migration, memory, and the sea's role in history. Comparative scholarship (Lavery; Sawhney) places Ghosh within this world-literature context, arguing that the Indian Ocean provides a shared archive for diasporic storytelling.

10. Tables — Modes, Texts, and Functions

Table 1 — Modes of Indian Ocean Representation and Representative Texts

Sr. No.	Mode	Core aesthetic/political function	Representative texts
1.	Archive	Recuperates maritime labor, indenture, commodity flows	*Sea of Poppies* (Ghosh); *The Gunny Sack* (Vassanji).
2.	Ecology	Multispecies cohabitation; tidal knowledge; conservation politics	*The Hungry Tide*, *Jungle Nama* (Ghosh).
3.	Migration/Diaspora	Shipboard identity formation; transregional diasporas	*Sea of Poppies*, Vassanji's corpus.
4.	Myth/Form	Polyvocal form, mythic layering, vernacular creoles	*Gun Island*, *Jungle Nama* (Ghosh).
5.	Climate actor	Hydro migration, slow violence, anthropogenic change	*Gun Island*, *The Hungry Tide* (Ghosh).

Table 2 — Ethical and Methodological Implications

Sr. No.	Implication	Why it matters for literary studies
1.	Transregional method	Demands analysing routes and networks rather than nations.
2.	Multispecies justice	Demands attention to nonhuman actors and fisheries/mangrove rights.
3.	Archive ethics	Requires recovery of subaltern maritime labour and indenture records.

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4.	Formal innovation	Encourages episodic, polyvocal writing that model's oceanic complexity.
5.	Climate accountability	Links present hydro migration to historical causes (colonialism, extraction).

11. Discussion: Interlocking Modes and the Oceanic Ethical Turn
Three larger claims emerge:
1. **Scale change:** The oceanic lens forces historians and critics to operate at transnational, transoceanic scales; this reframes the meaning of nationhood and citizenship. The sea shows that many literary subjects are forged in movement rather than in bordered belonging.
2. **Multispecies entanglement:** The sea's life forms are partners in the narrative economy; literature that listens to nonhuman voices (dolphins, tigers, mangroves) advances an ethical reconsideration of human supremacy.
3. **Temporal responsibility:** Oceanic narratives emphasize long durée causality: climate migrants are connected to generations of extraction and dispossession. Fiction thus becomes a site of collective witnessing and of ethical demand.

12. Limitations and Prospects for Future Research
Limitations: The present study is Anglophone-centric and concentrated on high-profile authors, especially Amitav Ghosh. More work is needed on regional-language oceanic literatures (Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil, Kiswahili), on maritime legal history (admiralty law, port governance), and on comparative work with East African and Southeast Asian littoral literatures. Empirical coupling with oceanography (sea-level data, mangrove mapping) would strengthen claims about environmental change.

Future directions:
- Comparative interdisciplinary projects pairing literary scholars with marine scientists and historians.
- Expanded study of lascar literature and port community oral histories to deepen archive recovery.
- Classroom work: "blue humanities" modules that combine textual analysis with fieldwork in littoral communities.

13. Conclusion
Contemporary Indian Writing in English treats the Indian Ocean as a decisive cultural and historical agent. By foregrounding the sea—its archives, ecologies, migrations, myths, and climatic agency—novelists reimagine history and demand ethical accountability. Amitav Ghosh's corpus remains central in modelling how the sea functions as method: his novels show that to narrate modern India honestly, critics must read at sea-level, attend to maritime infrastructures, and recognize the entanglement of human and nonhuman destinies. Comparative authors (Vassanji, Basu, and others) broaden the field by showing how household archives, precolonial trade, and diasporic objects also preserve oceanic memory.

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The oceanic literary turn thus invites scholars to think transregionally, ethically, and multispecies-wise about the past and the planetary future.

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