
Imagined Communities in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.

Dr.G.Bhaskar BasmiVice principal & Assistant professor of English ,A.G. Arts and Science College
Avinashipalayam,Tiruppur.

Article Received: 09/09/2026**Article Accepted:**10/10/2026**Published Online:**11/10/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.10.140

Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* serves as a prophetic exploration of the intricate relationship between humanity and the environment. Set in the world's largest mangrove ecosystem—the Sundarbans—the novel delves into the intersection of landscape, water, and human culture. Through an eco-critical lens, this paper analyzes Ghosh's work, shedding light on ecological concerns and their impact on both nature and society. The novel weaves together historical events, current realities, and the relentless reshaping of land by the ever-hungry tides.

Amidst the danger of the Sunderbans—where tigers roam the jungle and seemingly harmless crocodiles lurk in the water—the core of the narrative lies in the ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistan refugees. These refugees sought refuge in Morichjhampi, hoping for a better life, but faced the relentless forces of nature and human conflict. Ghosh's novel prompts us to reflect on our place within imagined communities, the fragile balance between humanity and the environment, and the urgent need for ecological consciousness.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is a well-known Indian writer who studied at The Doon School, and he earned his doctorate in social anthropology at the University of Oxford. Ghosh is known for his historical fiction and non-fiction works as well. He has extensively written about colonialism and climate change. *The Hungry Tide* is the fourth novel by Amitav Ghosh, and the novel is set in the Sundarbans and follows an unlikely trio who travel upriver together to find the rare Irrawaddy dolphin. The story intertwines the journeys of Piya, a Bengali-born, American-raised scientist studying the river dolphin, and Kanai, a successful, overworked entrepreneur. The novel explores the lives of people living in, or passing through, the Sundarbans. The other idea that is explored, the Morichihanpi massacre of 1978–79, when the government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island, forms the background for some parts of the novel.

As Piya and Kanai embark on their journey through the Sundarbans, they are both drawn to the mysteries and complexities of the region. Piya, with her scientific background,

is eager to study and protect the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin, while Kanai, burdened by the demands of his fast-paced life, finds solace in the tranquilly of the river and its surrounding mangrove forests. Together, they navigate the intricate web of human and natural interactions that shape the lives of those who call the Sundarbans home.

The novel presents the Sundarbans as a mythic laboratory, re-enacting the essential tensions between man and nature to expose other conflicts that oppressed communities endure to become legitimate. The Sundarbans not only serve as a backdrop for Piya and Kanai's personal journeys but also as a symbol of the larger struggles faced by marginalised communities. Through their experiences, the novel sheds light on the complex dynamics of power, exploitation, and resilience that are inherent in these communities' fight for recognition and justice.

The novel also talks about the legend of Bon Bibi, which certainly brings to the fore the role of folktales in creating space and communities. This lies at the heart of the novel. The other idea is that the novel explores the intersection of the postcolonial and ecocriticism aspects as well. It is written with a focus on the conservation challenges that explore the megafauna, specifically royal tigers and Irrawaddy dolphins. The novel highlights how a North/South dichotomy colours environmental practises and draws attention to the southern environmentalism of the poor. Additionally, the novel delves into the themes of power dynamics and exploitation, shedding light on how the global North often exploits the resources and labour of the global South. It emphasises the importance of recognising and addressing these inequalities in environmental practices. Furthermore, the novel portrays the resilience and agency of marginalised communities in their fight against environmental degradation, showcasing their unique perspectives and contributions to Southern environmentalism

Definition and Explanation of Imagined Communities

Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* talks about the concept of imagined community which in turn is an examination of nationalism. He means to depict a nation as a socially constructed community, and that imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. For example, in the novel, a group of indigenous people form an imagined community to protect their ancestral lands from being destroyed by a multinational mining corporation. They come together, despite their diverse backgrounds and languages, to fight for their shared vision of a sustainable and thriving environment. This example highlights how marginalized communities can unite and create powerful movements when faced with environmental challenges.

The fellow members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion... Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but in the style in which they are imagined. (Anderson 28)

This quote emphasises the idea that communities are not defined by physical

proximity or direct interactions but rather by the way they are imagined and perceived by their members. It suggests that even within the smallest nation, individuals may never personally know or meet most of their fellow members, yet they still hold an image of unity and connection in their minds. This concept is relevant to the example provided, as it shows how marginalised communities can come together and form a collective identity based on a shared vision, despite their diverse backgrounds and languages.

Anderson emphasised the role of media, especially print media, in creating imagined communities. He also seems to argue that the creation of the imagined communities has become possible due to "print capitalism," which in turn has led to the formation of the first European nation-states around their "national print languages."

Anderson's goal, however, was far different. He tries to offer a more satisfactory interpretation of nationalism, and he views "nation-ness" and nationalism as cultural artefacts with a specific history rooted in the late 18th century.

Anderson's argument is that nationalism is not a natural or inherent trait, but rather a constructed concept that has evolved over time. He believes that the development of print capitalism played a crucial role in shaping the idea of nationhood, as it allowed for the dissemination of information and the creation of shared cultural identities. By examining the historical context of the late 18th century, Anderson aims to provide a deeper understanding of nationalism as a cultural phenomenon.

Amitav Ghosh's Representation of Imagined Communities in "The Hungry Tide"

Communities are places in which people live, and the people's narratives all help the stories. There are no narrative communities that cannot exist. Personal stories blend into it and surely become chapters within community stories. And each person has their own story, and this surely adds to the community story. For example, a person who is suffering from poverty can be the story of the entire community.

In Amitav Ghosh's novel "The Hungry Tide," the representation of imagined communities delves into the intricate relationship between personal narratives and the collective story of a community. Ghosh explores the idea that communities are not just physical spaces, but also the stories and experiences that bind individuals together. Each person's story contributes to the larger narrative of the community, shaping its identity and reflecting the diverse range of voices within it. This is exemplified through the portrayal of characters who are grappling with poverty, as their individual struggles become emblematic of the challenges faced by the entire community. Through this exploration, Ghosh highlights the interconnectedness of personal and communal narratives, and the power of storytelling in shaping the concept of imagined communities.

There are shared experiences in which there are values and goals that certainly foster a connection among community members. When a threat emerges, they will become more concerned, by all means. Nationalism is, in fact, one of the reasons communities grow without fail. The changes occur in the community without fail, and the residents adjust their

stories and definitions without fail. rewriting the community's story along with their own as well. There are many stories that illuminate the community; on the other hand, communities influence them as well. These changing stories are shaped and indicated by the reconstruction of residents narratives about their community as well.

The narratives of residents about their community play a crucial role in shaping the changing stories. As individuals experience the ups and downs of community life, their perspectives and perceptions evolve, leading to a continuous reconstruction of the community's narrative. This dynamic process reflects the interplay between individuals and their surroundings, as well as the collective identity that emerges from these interactions. In this way, the community's story becomes intertwined with the stories of its residents, creating a complex web of interconnected narratives that contribute to the growth and evolution of the community.

It should be noted that communities often provide individuals with a platform to express themselves and affirm their identity as well. Within these social groups, people can relate to shared values and cultural norms, which in turn reinforce their self-esteem and personal identity.

Imagined Communities In Hungry Tide

Ghosh does not particularly believe in the validity of the contemporary nation-state's institution that persists at containing languages, stories, cultures, and social groups within definite but sometimes arbitrary borders. Instead, Ghosh argues that communities are not bound by physical borders, but rather by shared experiences and cultural connections. In his novel, *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh explores the concept of imagined communities, where individuals form connections and create a sense of belonging despite their geographical separation. Through the characters in the novel, Ghosh portrays how these imagined communities can transcend the limitations imposed by the nation-state, allowing individuals to express themselves and affirm their identity beyond arbitrary borders.

By exploring cosmopolitan routes, Ghosh expands the scope of his storytelling and delves into the interconnectedness of different cultures and histories. This approach not only allows for a richer understanding of diverse experiences but also challenges the notion of fixed national identities, emphasizing the fluidity and complexity of human existence. Through his narratives, Ghosh highlights the power of transcending arbitrary borders to uncover hidden truths and foster a sense of global community.

For example, in his novel *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh explores the impact of political borders on relationships and identity. Through the characters' experiences, he delves into the complexities of nationalism and how it can both unite and divide people. Similarly, in *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh examines the consequences of colonialism and the interconnectedness of individuals across different countries and time periods. These previous works serve as a foundation for Ghosh's exploration of transcending borders in *The Hungry Tide*.

The protagonist's quest to uncover the forgotten story highlights the power of the press in shaping narratives and giving voice to marginalized communities. However, Ghosh also emphasizes the potential for the press to be used as a tool of suppression, silencing certain voices and perpetuating inequality. Through this exploration, Ghosh delves into the complex dynamics of power and representation within societies and how they can both unite and divide people.

Hamilton bought the land of the Sundarbans and invited all those who were emigrating to the Caribbean, Malaysia, Burma, or Fiji in search of new land, to go to the tide country and take possession of the land free. "Everyone who was willing to work was welcome, S'Daniel said, but on one condition. They could not bring all their petty little divisions and differences. Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together" (51). Kanai, who had already been in this place twenty years before, thinks again of Sir Hamilton's incredible idea and tries to understand the reason why the Scottish benefactor had devoted his life to the project. Uncle Nirmal and his wife Nilima had come to the Sundarbans in 1950 "in search of a safe haven" (51) and when Kanai had asked Nirmal about Sir Hamilton, "But what was the purpose of all this? . . . Was it Money?" (51).

Nirmal had simply replied, "No, it was not about money." Kanai could not fathom why someone would invest so much time and effort into this project without any financial gain. He wondered if Sir Hamilton had some deeper, altruistic motive, perhaps a desire to bring about social harmony and equality in a region plagued by divisions. Kanai's curiosity grew, and he resolved to uncover the true purpose behind Sir Hamilton's grand endeavor.

Ghosh delves into the complexities of Sir Hamilton's ambition, highlighting how it reflects a larger pattern of European imperialism and colonization. By renaming the land with European names, Sir Hamilton seeks to assert dominance and erase the linguistic culture of the region. Additionally, Ghosh explores how the "utopian" community's existence is constantly influenced by the social and political events unfolding in the Indian subcontinent. These islands, despite their isolation, are not shielded from the impact of external realities that shape their lives over time.

Ghosh presents these characteristics as significant variables that contribute to the formation of the seemingly secure and tranquil conditions that we perceive to exist in the Sundarbans. Furthermore, as the writer introduces a nearly unfamiliar and intriguing location, he also directs our focus towards significant and current issues that exist within the Sundarbans. The unique geographical positioning of the islands is susceptible to disruptions and disturbances caused by unforeseen guests and conflicts. The presence of Kanai, a translator hailing from a metropolitan area, and Piya, a youthful American cetologist with Indian ancestry who seeks to conduct study on the river dolphins, initiates a perilous and unexpected web of connections.

The issue of environment and its inhabitation, as well as the issue of language and its comprehension, pose numerous challenges for the two youthful "strangers": Kanai possesses proficiency in seven or eight languages, nevertheless, he lacks the ability to comprehend the intricate communication system of the Sundarbans. Additionally, he struggles to establish a connection with Fokir, the uneducated fisherman who assists Piya in her studies. The American girl, without any knowledge of Bengali imparted by her parents, relies on Kanai as an interpreter and Fokir as a guide to navigate the waters of the Sundarbans. The local man embodies the culture of the area, and his connection with the tides, animals, and mangroves is deep, complex, and difficult to fully comprehend. Kanai and Fokir form a distinctive connection as they negotiate the intricacies of the Sundarbans, despite the obstacle of their language barrier. Kanai develops a newfound awareness for the profound extent of Fokir's expertise and profound bond with the landscape, acknowledging that comprehending a location encompasses more than just language. Different ghosts emerge from the islands' past and they are the product of those passages of peoples and cultures in the course of time.

In conclusion, the connection between Kanai, Fokir, and the Sundarbans is multifaceted and goes beyond words. Kanai's realization of Fokir's deep understanding of the landscape highlights the importance of experiential knowledge. Additionally, the presence of various ghosts from the past further emphasizes the rich history and cultural significance of the Sundarbans. Overall, this novel showcases the complex relationships between humans, nature, and history in a thought-provoking manner.

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