

Aquatic Absence and the Biopolitics of Water in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

This article examines how aquatic absence, defined here as the gradual withdrawal, contamination, or politicization of freshwater, functions as a narrative, ecological, and political structure in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2015). While environmental literary scholarship has frequently emphasized spectacular ecological disasters, comparatively less attention has been paid to gradual hydrological deprivation and the political management of water scarcity in fragile coastal environments. To address this gap, the study draws on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, Michel Foucault's notions of biopolitics and heterotopia, and Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, and Elizabeth DeLoughre's postcolonial ecocriticism to conceptualize aquatic absence as a structurally produced condition that exposes the entanglement of environmental degradation with postcolonial governance in the Sundarbans. The analysis demonstrates how hydrological infrastructures such as embankments, conservation zones, and freshwater distribution systems function as mechanisms that differentially organize survival, vulnerability, and political visibility. The novel's representations of salinity intrusion, embankment decay, and freshwater scarcity reveal environmental harm as incremental, attritional, and often obscured, while the spatial organization of the delta produces heterotopic crisis zones where communities inhabit permanently unstable terrain. The study finds that water's simultaneous abundance and scarcity in the Sundarbans illuminates how hydrological regimes become tools of governance that regulate life by determining access to protection, habitability, and mobility. *The Hungry Tide* thus unmasks the otherwise obscured violence of water management in deltaic environments, and in so doing shows that aquatic absence is neither natural nor accidental but a politically produced condition that structures ecological precarity and postcolonial inequality.

Keywords: hydropolitics; slow violence; heterotopia; ecological precarity; postcolonial ecocriticism; Amitav Ghosh; *The Hungry Tide*

Introduction

The environmental transformations of the Anthropocene have prompted growing scholarly attention to ecological degradation and governance, yet literary studies, especially postcolonial ecocriticism, have largely centered on spectacular water-related disasters such as cyclones, floods, oil spills, and similar sudden events (Nayar 2024, 16; Poray-Wybranowska 2021, 1). This focus often obscures slower hydrological processes through which environmental deprivation becomes a governance condition. Recent environmental humanities research notes that ecological harm often unfolds incrementally in ways that are politically obscured (Naskar 2025, 213; Asl and Jaidka 2026, 7). Within this expanding scholarship, however, the phenomenon of aquatic absence, by which I refer to the gradual withdrawal, contamination, or uneven distribution of freshwater, remains under-theorized as both a hydrological and literary category.

This gap is particularly visible in studies of the Sundarbans, the natural mangrove forests of Bangladesh and one of the world's largest deltaic ecosystems, which also recur frequently as a setting in South Asian literature. Existing research has largely approached the region through climate vulnerability, conservation politics, and human–animal conflict (Paul and Nayak 2025; Rakshit and Gaur 2024; Sarkar 2017). As Majumdar notes, “one reason why the Sundarbans is biologically unique and fragile is because its ‘ecosystem is an interface between sea and the land,’” where “both land and water entities are ephemeral and constantly mutating” (2018, 182). Yet insufficient attention has been paid to how the politicization and uneven distribution of freshwater in the region function as narrative mechanisms that expose hydrological inequality in postcolonial governance. This absence is particularly notable in readings of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005), where scholarship has emphasized environmental ethics, conservation conflicts, and subaltern histories (Azim, Hoque, and Parvin 2026, 283; Lauret-Taft 2017, 196) while rarely examining the novel's hydrological dynamics as ecological condition, political technology, and spatial regime shaping precarious deltaic life.

The present study investigates how aquatic absence functions as a narrative and conceptual framework in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* by focusing on the Sundarbans as a site where environmental governance produces uneven geographies of survival and vulnerability. It argues that aquatic absence is not simply a natural phenomenon but a political and narrative structure that reveals the entanglement of environmental degradation with postcolonial state power. To pursue this argument, the study first examines how hydrological infrastructures such as embankments, conservation zones, and freshwater distribution systems become mechanisms of postcolonial governance; then, it traces how literary representations of water scarcity reveal the temporal dimension of environmental harm as slow and cumulative rather than sudden and spectacular; and finally, it explores how the spatial organization of the Sundarbans produces zones where populations are simultaneously governed, marginalized, and exposed to ecological uncertainty.

The Hungry Tide provides a particularly compelling literary site through which to investigate these dynamics as its leitmotif “is the diurnal phenomenon of the tides, where, land and sea create and inundate islands, inlets, and harbors” (Majumdar 2018, 183). Set in the labyrinthine waterways of the Sundarbans delta between India and Bangladesh, the novel narrates the intersecting journeys of a marine biologist, a local fisherman, and a translator while interweaving contemporary ecological struggles with the historical trauma of the Morichjhāpi refugee massacre. Scholars widely acknowledge the novel as “a touchstone for debates within postcolonial ecocriticism” (Bhardwaj and O'Key 2024, 51) and literature because of its complex representation of human–animal relations, conservation politics, and subaltern histories embedded within the fragile ecosystem of the tide country (Akillia 2024, 156; Dora and Islam 2025, 2; Prasad 2020, 274). However, while critics have examined the text's

environmental imagination and its critique of conservationist violence (Deb 2024, 22), fewer studies have interrogated the political significance of water itself as a material and symbolic medium of governing “the fate of both humans and animals” (Ağır 2025, 113).

To examine how aquatic absence is produced and governed in the Sundarbans, the study integrates Rob Nixon’s theory of slow violence, Michel Foucault’s concepts of biopolitics and heterotopia, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s concepts of green postcolonialism, ecological imperialism, and uneven resource governance and Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s ideas of tidalectics, archipelagic relationality, and oceanic memory. Nixon’s account of gradual, largely “unseen or imperceptible” harm (2011, 15) helps to clarify how salinity intrusion, failing embankments, and declining freshwater supply accumulate into slow forms of hydrological deprivation. To show how such conditions become politically managed, the study employs Foucault’s (2008) biopolitics. This will help to explain how states regulate populations through infrastructures that distribute water, and its absence, unevenly, effectively deciding who may “take life or let live” (Foucault 2004, 241). In addition, Foucault’s concept of heterotopia is borrowed to examine the Sundarbans as a watery, unstable space where shifting boundaries and contested water regimes intensify precarity (Foucault 1986, 23). These dynamics are linked by postcolonial ecocritics to colonial hydrological interventions and oceanic histories (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 53; DeLoughrey 2019, 8), which allows the study to conceptualize aquatic absence as a material condition shaped by long-term water governance.

Within the broader field of postcolonial environmental humanities, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the relationship between ecological crisis, spatial governance, and literary representation. Scholars such as DeLoughrey, Didur, and Carrigan (2015) and Heise (2017) have emphasized the importance of reading environmental literature as a site where ecological injustice and global inequality become narratively visible. Similarly, recent work in blue humanities and oceanic studies has foregrounded the “sociocultural, literary, historical, ethical, political, and aesthetic” significance of aquatic environments in shaping contemporary ecological thought (Oppermann 2023, 11). Yet much of this scholarship has concentrated on oceanic expanses or island ecologies with a particular focus on “how water functions in and across multiple scales” (Mentz 2024, xiv), and in so doing have left deltaic environments comparatively underexplored as literary spaces where freshwater scarcity, tidal instability, and infrastructural neglect intersect with political power. These debates are extended in this study, which examines aquatic absence in *The Hungry Tide* to show how the deltaic hydroscape operates as a biopolitical landscape where environmental governance produces uneven conditions of survival. Interpreting the Sundarbans through the intersecting frameworks of slow violence, biopolitics, and heterotopia demonstrates that aquatic absence operates as both a narrative motif and a governance strategy that produces enduring zones of ecological precarity. Before turning to the analysis, it is necessary to review this framework, which helps the study to unravel how hydrological vulnerability in the Sundarbans is not simply the result of natural forces but is shaped by political decisions about how water is managed, distributed, and withheld.

Theoretical Framework: Slow Violence, Biopolitics, and Heterotopic Space

In order to theorize how aquatic absence becomes a political, spatial, and ecological instrument of governance in the Sundarbans, this study converges Nixon’s theory of slow violence, Foucault’s notions of biopolitics and heterotopia, and the postcolonial ecocriticism developed by Huggan, Tiffin, and DeLoughrey. This framework helps the study to illuminate how aquatic absence, which is defined here as the withdrawal, scarcity, contamination, or politicization of

water, functions not merely as an environmental condition but as a technique of power that materializes uneven geographies of vulnerability in postcolonial deltas.

Nixon's concept of slow violence provides the study's primary lens for understanding the incremental degradation of hydrological environments. Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction dispersed across time and space" (2011, 2). Unlike spectacular catastrophes, slow violence operates through processes that are attritional and relentless, affecting communities who are rendered disposable through "attritional assaults on its ecological networks" and the slow wearing down of environmental resources such as "piped clean water, [and] a sewage system" (Nixon 2011, 42). In contexts of aquatic absence, this violence unfolds through sedimentation, salinity intrusion, infrastructural decay, and administrative neglect, processes whose effects accumulate over years but remain politically deniable. Nixon underscores that such forms of attritional harm disproportionately affect the poor, "who are the principal casualties of slow violence" (2011, 4). His emphasis on environmental injustice allows one to conceptualize water scarcity not as a natural deficit but as a socially orchestrated condition that produces "disposable people" and disposable landscapes (Nixon 2011, 4). Within postcolonial hydroscares, slow violence becomes a modality through which states and institutions administer life by modulating the availability, purity, and spatial distribution of water.

To better interpret how aquatic absence becomes a political instrument, the study turns to Foucault's concept of biopolitics, which delineates the modern state's management of life through regulatory controls over populations, environments, and bodily survival. Foucault identifies biopolitics as the power through which modern states regulate populations by establishing the "right to make live and to let die" (2004, 241). According to him, this form of power operates by managing collective biological processes, which includes "birth rates, longevity, public health, housing and migration" (Foucault 1978, 140). In deltaic environments, this management extends to water regimes that sustain or jeopardize life. In other words, Foucault's concept of biopolitics is a formulation that is particularly resonant in contexts where water infrastructures determine which communities remain habitable. Biopolitical governance materializes through what Foucault calls "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (Foucault 1978, 140). In deltaic ecologies, this administration occurs through embankment maintenance, freshwater allocation, zoning of protected areas, evacuation protocols, and selective infrastructural investment. Therefore, water's absence is not merely ecological but politically produced: certain populations are left to face salinization, erosion, or flooding, while others receive protective interventions that enhance their viability. Scholars of political ecology have extended Foucault's insights to hydrology to develop an understanding of "water governance as biopolitical as it takes shape in global governance, and on the biopolitics of water in a particular local context" (Hellberg 2018, 12). When the state selectively invests in, withholds, or withdraws hydrological support, aquatic absence becomes a biopolitical weapon that structures endurance and decay. Liminal communities, such as Sundarbans in Ghosh's novel, are thereby governed not only through law or discipline but through the very material conditions of their watery environment.

In this relation, Foucault's notion of heterotopia further helps to illuminate how aquatic absence produces liminal spatialities and crisis-bound forms of belonging. Foucault describes heterotopias as real places which "are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (1986, 24). Heterotopias are crisis spaces where incompatible temporalities, functions, and identities accumulate; they are zones of exception in which

normative spatial orders are suspended. Aquatic absence converts hydrosapes into heterotopias of crisis, spaces that are simultaneously inhabited and uninhabitable, governed yet abandoned. Water's withdrawal produces liminality: identities and communities exist in a suspended condition, tethered to shifting ground and perpetually vulnerable to erasure "as peripheral and unworthy of epistemic attention" (Yan and Asl 2023, 888). Hence, the heterotopic delta becomes a spatial expression of biopolitics that manifests the anxious and precarious play of differences (Asl 2026, 130; Pourya Asl 2026, 3). In this sense, aquatic absence generates heterotopic conditions in which identities are perpetually unsettled: livelihoods tied to freshwater flows, land tenure dependent on shifting sediment, and community futures shaped by unpredictable tidal regimes. In this context, the space becomes what could be called a topology of "ambivalence and uncertainty" (Hetherington 1997, 49), where belonging is continuously renegotiated at the edge of vanishing ground.

Postcolonial ecocriticism expands this analysis by drawing attention to the historical and geopolitical conditions under which environmental governance emerges. Huggan and Tiffin argue that the postcolonial environment is shaped by the "ongoing processes of colonial exploitation" and ecological imperialism" (2010, 57). Their insistence that postcolonial ecologies must be read through the dual lenses of environmental and cultural politics enables an understanding of aquatic absence as a continuation of extractive colonial hydrologies, where certain territories are systematically under-protected or rendered sacrificial. Their notion of "green postcolonialism" foregrounds the tension between ecological conservation and the dispossession of local communities (2010, 23). Through this frame, aquatic absence emerges as a material inscription of postcolonial environmental governance, whereby the management of tides, embankments, and freshwater reserves reflects what DeLoughrey, Didur, and Carrigan term the coloniality of "environmental management" (2015, 21). In what follows, I use this combined framework to examine how the delta becomes a site where life is governed through the politics of erasure, exposure, and endurance.

Hydropolitics and Slow Violence in *The Hungry Tide*

The novel's early descriptions of the delta establish the environmental instability that frames every human action within the narrative. The Sundarbans is introduced as a place where land and water exist in constant flux, resisting any attempt at permanent settlement or territorial certainty. The narrator explains that "the tides reach as far as two hundred miles inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to reemerge hours later" (Ghosh 2005, 7). Such imagery emphasizes the cyclical submergence and reappearance of land and portrays the landscape itself as provisional. Rather than presenting this volatility as a purely natural spectacle, Ghosh gradually reveals how such instability becomes socially and politically consequential. The narrator observes that "the currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily, some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before" (Ghosh 2005, 7). These transformations directly determine the viability of human habitation: villages, fields, and pathways may disappear overnight as the rivers alter their course. By depicting environmental change as an ongoing process rather than a series of isolated disasters, the novel aligns closely with Nixon's notion of slow violence, which describes harm that unfolds gradually and often escapes immediate recognition. Nixon emphasizes that such violence is "incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal

scales” (Nixon 2011, 2). The relentless movement of tides and sediment therefore creates a landscape where destruction occurs incrementally, eroding the foundations of human life without the dramatic visibility of a single catastrophic event.

Within this unstable geography, embankments emerge as the crucial infrastructure through which human communities attempt to negotiate their survival. Ghosh portrays these structures not as symbols of technological mastery but as fragile defenses that reveal the limits of human control over water. The novel underscores Lusibari’s dependence on embankments by emphasizing that the island settlement owes its very existence to this fragile infrastructure “life in Lusibari was lived at the sufferance of a single feature of its topography. This was its bād̄h, the tall embankment” (Ghosh 2005, 50). The phrase “at the sufferance” implies a precarious tolerance rather than secure protection. It suggests that the embankment merely postpones disaster rather than preventing it. The novel reinforces this fragility through a visual metaphor: “When the embankment, or bād̄h, was riding high on the water, Lusibari looked like some gigantic earthen ark” (Ghosh 2005, 31). The image evokes the biblical ark floating amid overwhelming waters and thus highlights the temporary nature of safety within the delta. While the ark suggests refuge, it also implies isolation and vulnerability, as those inside remain entirely dependent on forces beyond their control. This vulnerability recalls Huggan and Tiffin’s observation that modern systems of environmental management often rely on “a mechanism of discursive control” in which local communities are reduced to objects of administrative calculation (2010, 28). This infrastructural precarity reflects what Foucault identifies as the biopolitical management of populations, wherein “the mortality and morbidity of the population” become objects of governmental calculation and intervention (2007, 63). In this sense, the embankment functions as both a physical barrier and a political symbol and marks the boundary between spaces where the state provides protection and areas where communities are left exposed to the tides.

The precariousness of this infrastructural protection becomes more apparent when the narrative reveals how embankments deteriorate through gradual neglect and human conflict. Nirmal, “the headmaster of the local school” (Ghosh 2005, 12), describes the bād̄h as a living archive of the island’s history. He explains that every breach carries a story of social tension or institutional failure. At one point he recounts how “a man cut a hole in the dyke in the depths of the night, hoping to drown his neighbor’s fields,” while in another case the damage occurred because “the contractor had put in only half the materials he had been paid for” (Ghosh 2005, 169). These examples demonstrate that environmental vulnerability often results from everyday acts of corruption or rivalry rather than purely natural causes. Nixon observes that slow violence is often driven not by a singular actor or force but by a confluence of actions and forces that become entangled in ways that obscure accountability. According to him, slow violence includes “climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, ... acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes” (Nixon 2011, 2). Nirmal goes further by recalling a politically motivated act of sabotage in which “the people of that para had voted for the wrong party... so their way of [settling scores] was to make a hole in the bād̄h” (Ghosh 2005, 169). Here the embankment becomes an instrument of political punishment, and it illustrates how control over water can be weaponized against marginalized communities. Such acts exemplify Foucault’s assertion that biopolitics involves exposing “not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death,” wherein state power operates not through direct killing but through the calculated abandonment of certain populations to conditions of death (Foucault 2004, 254). Indeed, Huggan and Tiffin note that development

and environmental governance frequently operate through “the control and management of natural resources by the global urban-industrial system and its primary political ally, the nation-state” (2010, 32), a dynamic reflected in the political manipulation of the embankment system within the novel. Such moments reveal that the stability of the delta is inseparable from the integrity of the institutions responsible for maintaining its infrastructure. When those institutions fail, whether through corruption, indifference, or political retaliation, the protective barrier collapses, exposing entire populations to flooding and salinization.

Ghosh also illustrates how environmental degradation occurs through subtle processes that mirror Nixon’s concept of slow violence. One of the most revealing scenes occurs when Nirmal asks the young Fokir to listen closely to the embankment. Pressing his ear against the clay surface, the boy hears only “a scratching sound... very soft,” which Nirmal identifies as the noise of crabs burrowing through the dyke (Ghosh 2005, 172). He explains that “even as we stand here, untold multitudes of crabs are burrowing into our bādh” (Ghosh 2005, 172). This moment transforms an ordinary ecological detail into a powerful metaphor for gradual destruction. Nixon characterizes such processes as exemplifying how slow violence never attains the status of an emergency despite its devastating “cumulative” effects (2011, 140). The crabs’ invisible tunneling slowly weakens the structure, ensuring that “a storm will come, the waters will rise, and the bādh will succumb... it is only a matter of time” (Ghosh 2005, 171). Disaster, therefore, does not arrive suddenly but accumulates through countless small processes that remain largely unnoticed. This temporal dispersal of harm reflects what Nixon describes as violence that is “neither spectacular nor instantaneous but rather incremental,” whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries (2011, 2). The novel’s focus on these almost imperceptible changes thus highlights the temporal dimension of environmental harm and emphasizes that vulnerability in the Sundarbans develops over years and decades rather than through a single dramatic event. In this respect, Ghosh’s representation resonates with Huggan and Tiffin’s observation that colonial and postcolonial environmental transformations frequently unfold through “widespread ecosystem change under conspicuously unequal power regimes” (2010, 6), a process whose cumulative effects often remain obscured until catastrophe finally materializes.

Water itself embodies a paradox within the novel: although the Sundarbans is surrounded by rivers and tidal channels, fresh water remains scarce. The narrative highlights this contradiction when the Indian-American marine biologist Piya observes the contrast between “a half canister of fresh water and next to it a bucket filled with the brackish water of the river” (Ghosh 2005, 72). The juxtaposition underscores the irony of living amid vast expanses of water that cannot sustain human life without purification or storage. Salinity infiltrates wells and fields, gradually undermining agriculture and health. Even basic acts such as bathing require careful rationing, as Fokir must wash by “dipping sparsely into a fresh water canister to wash off the suds” (Ghosh 2005, 71). These moments illustrate how environmental conditions are inscribed on the body itself, shaping daily routines and limiting physical well-being. Water, which might normally symbolize abundance, becomes a marker of deprivation within the delta. Through these scenes, the novel is suggested to reveal how the management or mismanagement of freshwater resources produces a form of biopolitical control and thus determines the quality and longevity of human life. As Foucault states, biopolitics concerns “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy” (2007, 1). In other words, it renders the population’s health and survival subject to governmental calculation.

Through these intertwined narratives of ecology, infrastructure, and governance, *The Hungry Tide* reveals how water operates as a medium of political power. The tides that reshape islands each day symbolize the natural dynamism of the delta, yet the suffering experienced by its inhabitants arises largely from the institutional frameworks that manage or neglect this dynamism. Nixon contends that slow violence poses representational challenges because it is “an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2011, 2), making it difficult to mobilize political response. Throughout the novel, environmental harm accumulates gradually through eroded embankments, saline intrusion, and infrastructural scarcity, and in doing so, it forms a pattern of slow violence that remains largely invisible to distant centers of authority. Even moments of quiet despair capture this condition, as when Kusum, a refugee woman whose family is displaced to the Sundarbans after the Partition of India in 1947, calls upon the protective deity Bon Bibi and laments, “I called her again and again,” but she never came (Ghosh 2005, 89). Her words resonate beyond the spiritual realm and echo the absence of meaningful state protection for the people of the tide country. In fact, the novel’s mythic substratum, the tale of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai, codes the landscape’s hydrological conditions as a site of contestation between protection and predation. The myth’s partitioning of the tide country “with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance” is reproduced by the modern state through bureaucratic categories of “reserve,” protected forest, and illegal “settlement” (Ghosh 2005, 86). Nirmal’s observation that myths constitute “false consciousness” fails to apprehend how fully the state’s hydraulic administration replicates the myth’s logic of division: one half belongs to the protected realm (Ghosh 2005, 84); the other is exposed to risk. By controlling where embankments may be built, where firewood can be gathered, and where human habitation is permitted, the state inherits and instrumentalizes colonial hydraulic rationalities, and thereby converts ecological vulnerability into a mechanism of rule. This dynamic reflects Huggan and Tiffin’s argument that environmental questions must be understood through the historical nexus of colonialism and governance, since ecological management often becomes implicated in “the continuing imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance” (2010, 2). In this manner, the novel is suggested to show that control over water in the Sundarbans ultimately translates into control over life itself.

Tidal Heterotopias: Water, Crisis, and Postcolonial Displacement in *The Hungry Tide*

In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans function as a heterotopia of crisis in the Foucauldian sense, where the perpetual instability of water, namely its tidal rhythms, its erasure of boundaries between fresh and salt, river and sea, generates liminal identities and exposes the structural violence of postcolonial environmental governance. Foucault theorizes heterotopias as real places that exist outside all places, “counter-sites” that simultaneously represent, contest, and invert the spaces around them; he also identifies “crisis heterotopias” as sites reserved for individuals in states of transition or deviation from the norm (Foucault 1986, 24). The Sundarbans embody this condition not as an exception but as a permanent spatial logic: the tidal country is a zone where ecological uncertainty is manufactured and maintained through colonial and postcolonial hydrological management, conservation regimes, and the systematic displacement of marginalized populations. DeLoughrey’s concept of “tidalectics” and her theorization of archipelagic spaces as sites where ecological fluency and political vulnerability coexist are helpful here (2019, 133), as they help further illuminate how the Sundarbans operate as a hydro-heterotopia, a space where water’s presence and absence structure both survival and

exclusion. The novel reveals that the Sundarbans are not merely a natural landscape but a politically produced space of crisis, where the state's failure to provide stable infrastructure and its enforcement of conservation boundaries, converge to create a permanent condition of precarity. In what follows, I interpret the Sundarbans as a heterotopia of crisis by examining how water, through tides, floods, embankments, and the dissolution of territorial boundaries, spatializes inequality and manufactures zones of ecological and social uncertainty.

The novel presents the Sundarbans as a space where water fundamentally destabilizes the possibility of fixed habitation and territorial certainty, a condition that Foucault associates with heterotopic sites that exist in tension with normative spatial orders. Ghosh describes the region in an enduring present, as a place where "there are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea" (Ghosh 2005, 6), a hydrological reality that dissolves the cartographic and administrative logic of the nation-state. This absence of stable boundaries is not merely a natural phenomenon but a structural condition that shapes the lives of the Sundarbans' inhabitants, who must navigate a landscape where "thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater" with each tidal cycle (Ghosh 2005, 7). The tidal country thus operates as what DeLoughrey calls an "archipelagic framework" of ecology (2019, 175), where land and water exist in a state of perpetual negotiation, and where human settlement is always provisional, always subject to the rhythms of the tide. The novel's opening description of Canning, "this jungle of shacks and shanties, spanned by the tracks of a commuter train" (Ghosh 2005, 8), situates the Sundarbans at the threshold of the urban and the wild, the inhabited and the uninhabitable, a spatial liminality that Foucault identifies as characteristic of heterotopias. This threshold condition is reinforced by the novel's repeated emphasis on the Sundarbans as a space that resists representation and comprehension, a place where "there is a point at which the braid comes undone... washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle" (Ghosh 2005, 6). In this manner, the novel suggests that the region's hydrological complexity exceeds the capacity of colonial and postcolonial cartography to contain it.

The embankments that structure life in the Sundarbans exemplify how postcolonial environmental governance spatializes inequality through hydrological infrastructure, and thereby transforms water management into a mechanism of both protection and exclusion. The novel describes how the inhabitants of Lusibari live "at the sufferance of a single feature of its topography... its bād̄h" (Ghosh 2005, 50), the embankment that separates the island from the tidal waters that surround it. This infrastructure, inherited from colonial-era flood control projects, creates a precarious form of habitation in which survival depends on the integrity of a fragile barrier. This is a condition that Huggan and Tiffin identify as characteristic of postcolonial ecologies, where environmental management reproduces colonial modes of spatial control and "allocation and management of natural resources" (2010, 52). The embankment thus functions as a heterotopic boundary, a line that divides the protected from the unprotected, the inhabitable from the uninhabitable, but it is a boundary that is always under threat, always subject to erosion and collapse. At this point, the novel emphasizes the psychological and temporal effects of this precarity. It describes how "the hours are slow in passing... it is as though time itself has been slowed by the friction of fear" (Ghosh 2005, 58) during cyclones, when the embankment's failure would mean the island's submergence. This temporal suspension, this sense of living in a perpetual state of emergency, is central to the heterotopic condition of the Sundarbans, where crisis is not an exceptional event but the structural logic of everyday life. The embankment also reveals the uneven distribution of environmental protection, as the novel makes clear that not all islands in the Sundarbans are equally defended, and that the state's investment in flood control infrastructure is determined by political and economic calculations that privilege some communities over others. This selective protection, as Huggan and Tiffin argue, reflects the postcolonial state's reproduction of "social and cultural

colonial hierarchies” (2010, 84), where environmental governance becomes a tool for managing populations and enforcing spatial inequalities.

The hydrological dimensions of Morichjhapi massacre, as narrated through Kusum’s testimony and Nirmal’s diary, exposes how conservation policies in the Sundarbans function as a form of green imperialism, where the protection of nature is used to justify the violent displacement of marginalized populations, particularly refugees who have already been dispossessed by Partition and subsequent migrations. Kusum’s account of the government’s siege of Morichjhapi in 1978 reveals the brutal logic of postcolonial environmental governance, where the state’s commitment to preserving the Sundarbans supersedes the rights of human inhabitants. She recounts how the refugees were told that “our lives, our existence were worth less than dirt or dust” (Ghosh 2005, 216). The novel emphasizes the hydrological dimensions of this violence and describes how the government blockaded the island’s water supply and prevented boats from bringing food and medicine, using the tidal geography of the Sundarbans as a weapon to enforce the siege. This weaponization of water, as DeLoughrey’s work on oceanic ecologies suggests, reveals how hydrological systems are not neutral natural features but are deeply entangled with histories of state violence, displacement, and colonialism which “has ruptured cultural and ecological relations to the past” (2019, 9).

In addition, the novel shows that survival in the Sundarbans depends on the ability to navigate the tidal waters that both sustain and threaten human habitation. In this relation, the boat, as a recurring spatial figure in the novel, serves as a mobile heterotopia that embodies the precarious and liminal condition of life in the Sundarbans. Fokir’s boat, described as “a crab line... what is called a don in the tide country” (Ghosh 2005, 160-161), is not merely a vessel but a dwelling, a workspace, and a site of intimate encounter, a space that exists in constant motion and in constant negotiation with the water. The boat’s mobility reflects the broader condition of displacement that structures life in the Sundarbans, where communities are perpetually at risk of being washed away, and where the ability to move with the tide is a condition of survival. DeLoughrey’s concept of “tidalectic,” which emphasizes the rhythmic and relational nature of island and coastal ecologies and “how they mutually inform each other” (2019, 2), illuminates how the boat functions as a space that is attuned to the tidal rhythms of the Sundarbans, a space that does not resist the water but moves with it. The novel’s description of the boat as “our abacus and archive, our library of stories” (Ghosh 2005, 168) suggests that it is also a repository of knowledge and memory, a space where the histories of the tide country are preserved and transmitted. This archival function is particularly significant in a region where, as Nirmal observes, “no one knows better than I how skillful the tide country is in silting over its past” (Ghosh 2005, 59), where the water’s constant movement erases physical traces and makes historical memory difficult to sustain. The boat thus operates as a counter-site to the state’s attempts to impose a fixed spatial order on the Sundarbans, a mobile heterotopia that resists the logic of territorial control and embodies an alternative mode of inhabiting the tidal landscape.

Moreover, the cyclone that strikes at the novel’s climax reveals the catastrophic consequences of the Sundarbans’ hydrological instability and exposes the inadequacy of postcolonial infrastructure to protect its inhabitants. This is a failure that Huggan and Tiffin identify as characteristic of postcolonial environmental governance, where the state’s inability or unwillingness to provide adequate protection reflects deeper “structural inequalities ... that colonialism [had helped] to intensify” (2010, 91). The novel describes the cyclone’s approach with a sense of inevitability and terror, as Piya and Fokir watch “the weight of the ... water” and see “a wall, hurtling toward them” (Ghosh 2005, 315), a description that emphasizes the sheer force of the water and the helplessness of those in its path. The cyclone transforms the landscape, with “the island filling with water, like a saucer tipped on its side” (Ghosh 2005, 319), a submergence that erases the boundaries between land and water and renders the

inhabited space uninhabitable. The cyclone shelter, which Nilima has worked to establish on Lusibari, represents an attempt to provide some measure of protection, but the novel makes clear that such infrastructure is inadequate and unevenly distributed, and that many communities in the Sundarbans have no access to such shelters. The cyclone thus functions as a moment of revelation, which exposes the structural violence of a spatial order that produces zones of permanent crisis, where populations are left to survive in conditions of perpetual precarity. The novel's description of the aftermath, where "the river was like pavement" (Ghosh 2005, 315) also suggests a momentary inversion of the hydrological order, a brief suspension of the water's movement that only emphasizes its usual dominance and the fragility of human attempts to inhabit the tidal landscape.

The novel's representation of the Sundarbans as a space where water's presence and absence structure both survival and exclusion reveals how postcolonial environmental governance manufactures permanent zones of ecological uncertainty, where the state's failure to provide stable infrastructure and its enforcement of conservation boundaries converge to create a condition of perpetual crisis. The embankment, described as fragile and always under threat, the boat as a mobile dwelling that moves with the tide, the cyclone shelter as an inadequate refuge, and the Morichjhapi massacre as a violent enforcement of conservation boundaries all exemplify how the Sundarbans operate as a heterotopia of crisis, a space where the normal rules of habitation and territorial control are suspended, and where populations are forced to live in a state of permanent exception. Foucault's theorization of heterotopias as sites that exist outside all places, that simultaneously represent and contest the spaces around them, illuminates how the Sundarbans may be read as a counter-site to the postcolonial nation-state, a space that helps to expose the contradictions and violence within its spatial order.

Conclusion Pre-print version

This study has focused on the political and ecological dimensions of aquatic absence in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* with the aim of conceptualizing the Sundarbans as a site where hydrological deprivation operates simultaneously as an environmental condition, a biopolitical technology, and a heterotopic spatial regime. The study has posited that aquatic absence in the Sundarbans functions not as a natural deficit but as a politically created mechanism that spatializes inequality, produces zones of permanent precarity, and exposes the entanglement of environmental degradation with state power. It has examined how literary representations of water, i.e., its withdrawal, its contamination, its weaponization, reveal the temporal and spatial logics through which postcolonial governance manufactures vulnerability in fragile coastal environments.

The findings have revealed that hydrological infrastructures such as embankments, conservation zones, and freshwater distribution systems operate as biopolitical instruments that determine which populations receive protection and which remain exposed to tidal submergence, salinity intrusion, and ecological erasure. The examination of embankment fragility, infrastructural decay, and administrative neglect has revealed that environmental harm in the Sundarbans unfolds through incremental processes that align with the notion of slow violence, wherein destruction occurs gradually, remains politically obscured, and disproportionately affects marginalized communities whose suffering escapes immediate recognition. The study has further demonstrated that water's paradoxical status within the novel, its overwhelming presence as tidal flux coupled with its scarcity as potable resource, illuminates how aquatic absence structures daily survival, inscribes vulnerability onto bodies, and transforms hydrological management into a mode of governance that regulates life itself.

The historical narrative of the Morichjhapi massacre has similarly exposed how conservation policies function as mechanisms of green imperialism and enables the violent displacement of refugee populations through the weaponization of water blockades and spatial exclusion. Likewise, the analysis of tidal heterotopias has revealed that the Sundarbans operate as a permanent crisis zone where the dissolution of boundaries between fresh and salt water, land and sea, generates liminal identities and exposes the structural violence of postcolonial spatial orders that privilege certain communities while abandoning others to conditions of perpetual precarity.

The study concludes that Ghosh's novel unmasks the otherwise obscured violence of hydrological governance in postcolonial deltaic environments. By examining the novel's depictions of eroding embankments, saline intrusion, tidal submergence, and infrastructural neglect, the study shows that environmental precarity in the Sundarbans is not a purely natural condition but a politically produced one. This insight advances current understandings of the region by reframing water not as an uncontrollable force but as a medium through which state policies and governance decisions materialize uneven risks and vulnerabilities. The study further contributes an interpretive framework that views the Sundarbans as a hydro-heterotopia, a space in which communities are suspended between land and water, bound to unstable terrain, and continually exposed to forms of disappearance. This conceptualization has broader implications for analyses of postcolonial environmental governance, as it reveals how contradictions within state-led hydrological interventions generate conditions of chronic precarity. The study's focus on aquatic absence as a central analytical category has revealed how the withdrawal of water functions as a form of slow, accumulative harm. This perspective offers a novel way of understanding hydrological violence: not solely as dramatic events but as ongoing processes that shape spatial inequalities, restructure deltaic ecologies, and regulate life through exposure, abandonment, and endurance. In doing so, the study opens pathways for future inquiry into how water's presence and absence operate as instruments of governance in vulnerable coastal and deltaic regions.

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Conflict of Interest

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