

NARRATING AGAINST NUMBERS: MEMORY AND MEASUREMENT IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between environmental quantification and gendered invisibility in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004). It argues that the novel offers a sustained critique of conservation regimes structured through numerical measurement and statistical visibility. In the Sundarbans delta, endangered species such as tigers and river dolphins become objects of enumeration, scientific tracking, and institutional protection, while the gendered ecological labour of subaltern women remains structurally unrecorded. Drawing on ecofeminism, feminist economics, biopolitics, and postcolonial ecocriticism, this study demonstrates that quantification functions not merely as a scientific method but as a political technology that produces hierarchies of value. Through its polyphonic narrative form and its reconstruction of the suppressed history of Morichjhapi, the novel exposes the ethical consequences of privileging measurable biodiversity over uncounted human survival. By contrasting statistical abstraction with embodied memory and lived experience, Ghosh challenges the assumption that environmental governance is neutral or purely technical. Instead, *The Hungry Tide* positions literary narrative as an alternative mode of accounting that restores visibility to marginalized lives and redefines ecological value beyond enumeration.

Key Words: *Environmental governance, ecofeminism, biopolitics, gendered labour, postcolonial ecocriticism.*

The Politics of Enumeration

Environmental governance in the twenty-first century increasingly relies on numbers. Species survival is tracked through population data, ecosystems are mapped through satellite imaging, and vulnerability is predicted through statistical modelling. Quantification is often associated with clarity, efficiency, and objectivity. However, numbers do more than describe reality; they shape it. To count is to prioritize, and to measure is to assign value. Forms of life that fall outside measurable frameworks frequently remain marginal within institutional systems. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* situates this logic of counting within the shifting ecology of the Sundarbans, a delta defined by tides, storms, and fragile coexistence between human communities and wildlife. The novel places scientific research on endangered river dolphins and official tiger conservation policies alongside the uncertain lives of displaced refugees and subsistence communities. This juxtaposition reveals a significant ethical tension. Animal populations are carefully enumerated and protected through legal frameworks, while the labour that sustains everyday human survival, particularly the work carried out by women, remains largely unrecorded.

This paper argues that *The Hungry Tide* presents environmental quantification as a form of political power that shapes visibility and value. Drawing on ecofeminist thought, feminist economic critique, biopolitical theory, and postcolonial ecocriticism, the analysis demonstrates how conservation practices may protect biodiversity while overlooking forms of social inequality. Through its layered narrative structure and attention to memory and lived experience, the novel offers a different way of understanding ecological value, one grounded in relational ties, embodied knowledge, and historical consciousness rather than numerical

abstraction.

Ecofeminism and the Gendered Ecology of Survival

Ecofeminist scholarship has long drawn attention to the interconnected forms of exploitation that link environmental degradation with the marginalization of women. Thinkers such as Vandana Shiva argue that dominant models of development frequently displace subsistence economies while overlooking the ecological knowledge and labour carried out by women. In a similar vein, Maria Mies shows how unpaid domestic and subsistence work forms an unseen foundation of modern economic systems. In *The Hungry Tide*, this form of invisibility appears through the life of Kusum. As a refugee in Morichjhapi she participates in the everyday work that sustains both family and community. Her labour includes cultivating land, gathering resources, and maintaining fragile relationships with the surrounding environment. Such work is immediate and material, rooted in the rhythms of the delta. However, it does not enter official records. It remains absent from the forms of knowledge through which institutions measure value and productivity.

The observations of Marilyn Waring offer a useful framework for understanding this absence. Waring demonstrates that national economic systems exclude unpaid domestic labour from formal accounting practices. A comparable pattern appears in conservation discourse. Tigers are counted and therefore become visible within global environmental frameworks. The subsistence labour performed by women, however, remains outside measurable categories. By foregrounding these neglected experiences, *The Hungry Tide* challenges dominant assumptions regarding environmental value. The novel suggests that ecological systems cannot be understood solely through scientific observation or satirical measurement. Equally important are the everyday practices through which individuals negotiate their relationship with the natural world. Through Kusum's story, Ghosh draws attention to forms of ecological knowledge embedded in lived experience and community life. The novel's engagement with ecofeminist concerns ultimately extends beyond a critique of gender inequality. It raises broader questions about the criteria through which societies assign value and recognition. By juxtaposing visible forms of conversation with invisible forms of human labour, Ghosh reveals how systems of measurement often fail to account for the relationships that sustain both communities and ecosystems. In doing so, he invites readers to reconsider the boundaries of environmental responsibility and to acknowledge the contributions of those whose labour remains hidden beneath the surface of official narratives.

Biopolitics and the Governance of Life

The relationship between knowledge and power occupies a central position in contemporary discussions of environmental governance. Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics provides a useful framework for understanding how modern institutions regulate populations through systems of observation, classification, and management. For Foucault, political authority increasingly operates not merely through laws or coercion but through the administration of life itself. Within *The Hungry Tide*, this dynamic emerges through the conservation policies governing the Sundarbans. The region is represented as a space where environmental protection and state authority intersect in complex and often contradictory ways. Wildlife populations, particularly tigers, occupy a privileged position within official conservation discourse. Their endangered status justifies extensive monitoring programmes, legal protections, and territorial regulations designed to preserve biodiversity. The significance of Morichjhapi lies not only in the violence of displacement but also in the manner in which that violence is represented. Official narratives often frame the episode as a necessary administrative response to ecological concerns. Such representations transform political decisions into seemingly objective technical requirements.

Timothy Mitchell's analysis of modern governance is relevant here. Mitchell argues that bureaucratic systems frequently present historically contingent political choices as matters of scientific necessity.

Slow Violence and the Work of Memory

Environmental harm does not always appear through dramatic events. The scholar Rob Nixon describes the concept of slow violence as the gradual and often unnoticed destruction experienced by vulnerable communities. The history of Morichjhapi reflects this pattern. The violence surrounding the settlement unfolds through administrative decisions, forced evictions, and political silence rather than sudden catastrophe. Because such violence unfolds slowly, it rarely receives sustained attention. Official documents record environmental protection, while the suffering of displaced communities fades from public memory. Within the novel, narrative becomes a way of resisting this erasure. Kusum's story, preserved through Nirmal's journal, allows personal memory to challenge institutional silence. Postcolonial ecocritical scholarship has frequently noted that conservation initiatives can reproduce earlier colonial ideas about wilderness. Land becomes defined primarily as protected nature rather than as a space of human habitation. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans is presented as ecological habitat first and human homeland second. This shift in perspective enables the removal of communities whose histories remain deeply tied to the landscape.

By placing suppressed memories within its narrative structure, the novel questions the authority of bureaucratic records. Storytelling becomes a means of restoring voice to those excluded from official accounts where institutional systems simplify reality through numerical data, narrative perspectives, complexity and human experience.

Narrative Form and the Ethics of Relationality

The Sundarbans functions as more than a geographical setting within the novel. It becomes a dynamic space characterized by uncertainty, transformation, and interdependence. The constant movement of tides, the shifting boundaries between land and water, and the unpredictable behaviour of both humans and animals resist efforts at fixed categorization. Such instability stands in contrast to the logic of scientific management, which often depends upon classification, measurement, and predictability. As a marine biologist studying the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin, Piya initially approaches the Sundarbans through the methodologies of scientific observation. Her work depends upon documentation, data collection, and empirical analysis. Scientific research undoubtedly provides valuable insights into ecological processes, and the novel does not dismiss its importance. Nevertheless, Piya's experiences gradually reveal that scientific knowledge alone is insufficient for understanding the complexities of the region.

Fokir emerges as an alternative source of ecological understanding. Unlike Piya, he possesses no formal education and no access to scientific institutions. His knowledge derives from lived experience and continuous interaction with the environment. Through years of navigating the rivers and waterways of the Sundarbans, he has developed an intimate understanding of tides, currents, weather patterns, and animal behaviour. Ultimately, the novel suggests that meaningful ecological understanding cannot emerge from detached observation alone. It requires attentiveness to the relationships that connect people, landscapes, histories, and non-human life. By privileging narrative complexity over numerical reduction, Ghosh offers a vision of environmental responsibility that acknowledges both scientific knowledge and the lived experiences that exceed the boundaries of measurement.

Climate Governance and Contemporary Relevance

Although *The Hungry Tide* was published in 2004, the questions it raises have become increasingly significant in the context of contemporary climate governance. Across the world, environmental policy is now shaped by an expanding reliance on numerical indicators. Carbon emissions are measured through complex accounting systems, biodiversity is assessed through statistical indices, and climate adaptation strategies are evaluated through quantifiable targets. One of the central concerns of contemporary environmental humanities is the relationship between measurement and justice. Quantitative indicators often provide valuable information regarding ecological change, yet they cannot fully capture the social realities experienced by communities living at the frontlines of environmental vulnerability. Climate change is not merely a scientific phenomenon; it is also a social, cultural, and political condition that affects different populations in unequal ways. The Sundarbans itself has become one of the regions most frequently discussed in relation to climate vulnerability. Rising sea levels, intensified cyclonic activity, coastal erosion, and ecological instability continue to reshape the lives of those inhabiting the delta. Against this backdrop, *The Hungry Tide* acquires renewed relevance. The novel encourages readers to consider how environmental crises are experienced through everyday acts of survival rather than through abstract data alone. It directs attention toward the lived realities that frequently disappear behind statistical representations of climate risk.

Furthermore, Ghosh's narrative challenges the tendency to separate environmental concerns from questions of history and memory. Contemporary climate debates often focus on future projections and predictive models. While such approaches are necessary, the novel reminds readers that environmental futures are shaped by historical experiences of displacement, exclusion, and inequality. The memory of Morichjhapi demonstrates how past injustices continue to influence present relationships between communities, states, and ecological landscapes.

Counting Differently

The Hungry Tide offers a powerful exploration of the limits of numerical ways of knowing the environment. Set within the complex ecological landscape of the Sundarbans, the novel reveals how systems of measurement shape perceptions of value, visibility, and responsibility. Through its engagement with conservation practices, refugee histories, and everyday struggles for survival, Ghosh demonstrates that what is counted often acquires legitimacy, while what remains uncounted risks exclusion from public recognition. The novel's critique extends beyond environmental policy to broader questions concerning knowledge and power. Conservation programmes, statistical models, and administrative frameworks may provide important tools for ecological management, yet they cannot fully represent the complexities of human experience. The history of Morichjhapi, the labour of women such as Kusum, and the experiential knowledge embodied by figures like Fokir all reveal dimensions of ecological life that exceed the boundaries of quantification.

Drawing upon ecofeminist perspectives, biopolitical theory, and postcolonial ecocriticism, this study has argued that Ghosh exposes the unequal distribution of visibility within environmental governance. Certain forms of life become recognizable because they fit within institutional categories of measurement, while others remain marginalized despite their significance. The novel therefore challenges readers to reconsider the assumptions underlying dominant systems of environmental knowledge. In an age increasingly governed by data, metrics, and predictive models, *The Hungry Tide* reminds us that ecological understanding must remain attentive to those dimensions of life that cannot be fully measured. The pursuit of environmental justice, the novel suggests, requires not only counting carefully but also listening

closely to the stories that numbers leave behind.

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