

Emplotting an Ecosystem



Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and the Question of Form in Ecocriticism

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The novel as a form has been vigorously international from the start [...] And yet, the paradox of the novel as a form is that it is founded upon a myth of parochiality, in the sense of a parish – a place named and charted, a definite location. A novel, in other words, must always be set somewhere: it must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves.¹

We cannot essentialize wetlands, because they are hybrid and multivalent: neither land nor water alone, they are waterland; a continuum between terra and aqua. In rhetorical terms they are not syntax but *parataxis*, phrases placed side by side without apparent connection [...]. In their wildness, wetlands dispossess readers of old codes and lead toward new syntax, where phrases may begin to reassemble.²

Introduction

AMITAV GHOSH'S 2004 NOVEL *The Hungry Tide* is set in the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans, a delta of thousands of mangrove-covered islands in the Gulf of Bengal. This essay will attempt

¹ Amitav Ghosh, "The March of the Novel Through History: The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase," *Kunapipi* 19.3 (1997): 7. I am grateful to Nishi Pulugurtha for directing my attention to this essay.

² William Howarth, "Imagined Territory: The Writing of Wetlands," *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 520.

to show how closely the text's narrative and ecological concerns are interwoven, how the entire plot literally grows out of the fundamental characteristics of the landscape. The underlying 'deep structure' of ebb and flood, land and water, not only structures the text in terms of form, but is closely mirrored and echoed in the constellation of characters and also directly propels the plot. In a number of unobtrusive metanarrative passages, the novel subtly reflects on its own emplotment of this underlying deep structure, on how language shapes a landscape and vice versa, and on how a landscape can and must be read as a text. These metanarrative passages also lend themselves to a number of theoretical considerations on fictionalized ecology and the role of fiction as a form of ecological consciousness.

My essay will attempt to combine a reading of *The Hungry Tide* with a number of theoretical thoughts on the definition of what constitutes 'environmental literature' or 'nature writing' and on what ecocriticism might want to study in a given text.³ My basic contention is that structural criteria may be at least as interesting or important as criteria of content or ethical orientation when we look at a text as 'nature writing'. In studying how texts represent ecosystems, we would do well to heed Joseph Meeker's advice not to lose sight of literary form: "Literary form must be reconciled if possible with the forms and structures of nature as they are defined by scientific ecologists, for both are related to human perceptions of beauty and balance."⁴ In this vein, my essay will seek to correlate structural features of the novel with key features of the ecosystem in order to point out how narrative form can be seen as central to a text's environmental concerns.

As literary scholars, we would tap into literary texts at a level considerably below their potential if we studied them merely for content and ethical orientation, vital as these are. We might, rather, and more consistently than we often do, want to study how texts 'emplot' an ecosystem: i.e. how key geological, climatic, and environmental characteristics of a given ecosystem appear as a structuring principle of the text. This would imply an analysis of how these characteristics quite literally come to drive the plot and how they

³ In this combination of theory and application, my approach is comparable to that outlined by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in her chapter "Towards: Afterthoughts, almost twenty years later" in *Narrative Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2002): 134–49. Here, in keeping with much post-classical narratology, she argues for an approach geared towards application, towards the reading of specific texts, but with general theoretical notions in mind. I sympathize with her "attempt to theorize *through* literature, to use novels as, in some sense, the source of theory" (143).

⁴ Joseph W. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1997): 7.

structure the constellation of characters, ultimately, how the text both in its surface and its deep structure can literally be seen to replicate key features of the ecosystem. It seems to me that the extent to which a text can also be seen as structurally emplotting an ecosystem might be a telling criterion by which to assess a text's engagement with environmental concerns. Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*, I maintain, lends itself to a demonstration of this approach.

Eco-narratives: A question of content?

Where critics have attempted to define the task of ecocriticism, they have – with notable exceptions⁵ – frequently argued in terms of content and ethical orientation at the expense of literary form. In his introduction to an important anthology, Richard Kerridge stated some ten years ago:

The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis.⁶

Although somewhat reductive even then, this still appears to be essentially true of ecocriticism today. Obversely, definitions of what constitutes 'nature writing', 'environmental writing', 'environmental texts' or 'eco-texts' have – with similar exceptions – generally proceeded in terms of subject-matter and content.⁷ As an example, one might cite Lawrence Buell's still fundamental

⁵ See, for instance, Joseph Meeker and recently Hubert Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie: Zur kulturellen Funktion imaginativer Texte an Beispielen des amerikanischen Romans* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002). Zapf speaks about "analogies between ecological processes and the specific structures as well as cultural strategies and effects of the literary imagination" (3; my translation) and rightly criticizes a tendency among ecocritics to neglect the specifically literary characteristics of texts as aesthetic and cultural artefacts (6); for Meeker, see above.

⁶ Richard Kerridge, "Introduction" to *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. Richard Kerridge & Neil Sammells (London & New York: Zed, 1998): 5.

⁷ Broadly speaking, this is true of many of the classic monographs and programmatic collections in the field. See, for instance, Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge MA: Belknap P/Harvard UP, 1995); *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (Athens & London: U of Georgia P, 1996); *Writing the Environment*, ed. Kerridge & Sammells; Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2000); *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000); *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*, ed. John Tallmadge & Henry Harrington (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2000); *Beyond Nature Writ-*

1995 study *The Environmental Imagination*. It seems to me that, despite a lot of discussions on what constitutes an ‘eco-text’, a look at a number of influential monographs and anthologies in the field confirms that the criteria Buell set up over ten years ago still largely define the kinds of text we usually mean when we speak of ‘nature writing’ or ‘environmental literature’.

Buell suggested the following ‘checklist’ of four criteria that characterize an “environmentally oriented work”:

- 1 The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. [...]
- 2 The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. [...]
- 3 Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation. [...]
- 4 Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.⁸

As I will discuss selected passages from the novel, it will quickly become clear that Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* fulfils all of these criteria. That it also has much to say on broader concerns such as environmental justice, which Buell deals with in his later books,⁹ is another matter.¹⁰ But, rather than go through the checklist, I would like to supplement our concern with questions of content or ethical orientation in environmental texts with questions of form or, more precisely, with questions of textuality and emplotment. The space of this essay does not allow me fully to conceptualize my approach, but a few remarks may indicate my theoretical point of departure.

The structuralists – mainly Greimas, Lotman, and Todorov – long ago showed that narrative proceeds from a set of binary oppositions underlying a

ing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism, ed. Karla Armbruster & Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2001); Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004); see also the special issues on “Ecocriticism” of *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999) and on “Literature and Ecology” of *Anglia* 124.1 (2006).

⁸ Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 7–8.

⁹ See Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2005), esp. ch. 4 “The Ethics and Politics of Environmental Criticism,” 97–127, and Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the US and Beyond* (Cambridge MA: Belknap P/Harvard UP, 2001), esp. ch. 2 and 7; 30–54 and 224–42.

¹⁰ For readings of the novel with an entirely different emphasis, see the other essays on *The Hungry Tide* in this volume. I do not, for instance, discuss Ghosh’s treatment of the Morichjhāpi incident and its implications for environmental justice and the question of human rights as set off against environmental concerns.

text. They also revealed the grammar of narrative, the operations by means of which the deep structure of a binary opposition is translated into the surface structure of a text. It is at the interface of literary theory and historiography, however, especially in the work of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur, that the idea of emplotment in the sense in which I would want to use it has been developed. I would here like to use Ricoeur's understanding of narrative as an anthropological necessity: We need narrative as a form of making sense of the world; we create meaning by 'emplotting', by turning into text, our experience. According to Ricoeur, it is the telling of stories that allows the expression of human experience, of history, and of human identity. Literature, specifically narrative, thus becomes a vital form of appropriating and refiguring the world in order to make sense of lived experience: "I see in the plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience."¹¹ This plot-making, the turning into narrative of concepts, events, oppositions – ultimately, of human experience – is what Ricoeur calls 'emplotment' ("*mise en intrigue*").

In trying to understand the way in which experience is turned into narrative, I use Hayden White's notion of 'emplotment' and his attempt to come to terms with the way in which narrative is used to structure and order the representation of experience. In producing such narrative, White argues, there are only four basic plots available: comedy, tragedy, romance, and satire. Furthermore, the choice of a plot structure also implies the choice of a corresponding figure of speech and of thought and carries an implicit ideology, a way of seeing the world. White thus comes up with a fairly elaborate and sometimes quite schematic combination of these basic plots, of key figures of speech, and of ideological implications. This idea of a correlation between forms of emplotment, ideological preconceptions, and hypotheses about the world, if not taken too schematically, is very compelling.

What I take from this is the notion of 'emplotment' as the turning into narrative of underlying patterns and deep structures and the thought that there are "elective affinities"¹² between different forms of emplotment and underlying forms of conceptualizing the world. When we relate this to the narrativizing of an ecosystem, what it means is this: A close narrative engagement with an ecosystem may structure the text in such a way that fundamental topographical features of an ecosystem are structurally replicated in the surface structure

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, tr. Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer (*Temps et récit*, 1983; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984): xi.

¹² See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973): 29.

of the text. This also applies vice versa, of course: There is also a semanticization of the form, in the sense that patterns of emplotment have repercussions on the representation of an ecosystem.

The Hungry Tide

The entire novel is literally based on the dichotomy of land and water, ebb and flood, and consistently emplots this dichotomy. Ghosh's novel is set in the Sundarbans, the vast delta at the estuary of the rivers Ganges and Brahmaputra in the coastal region between India and Bangladesh:

interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands. [...] The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. [...] The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily [...]. And to the inhabitants of these islands this land is known as *bhatir desh* – the tide country.¹³

This landscape, so fundamentally both land and water, is in many ways really the key protagonist of the novel. It would be misleading to argue that the human-interest story around the characters is merely a Trojan horse to slip in an essay on the ecology of the Sundarban region in the guise of a novel.¹⁴ In many ways, however, even the protagonists are subordinated to the structuring principle of ebb and flood, land and water. And while nature in many texts functions as little more than a sort of objective correlative, an illustration of moods and character-traits, or as a mere location, human beings here to a considerable extent function as an illustration of features of the ecosystem rather than the other way around.

The central protagonist, Piya, a marine biologist out to do research on dolphins in these waters, is there for the landscape; it is the landscape that brings her there. Throughout the novel, she is caught between two men: Kanai, a worldly translator from the city, and an illiterate local fisherman

¹³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (London: HarperCollins, 2004): 6–7; see also 125. Further page references are in the main text.

¹⁴ Ghosh has shown himself to be deeply concerned about the Sundarbans and has criticized plans for a tourism complex in the region. See his essay “Folly in the Sundarbans” (November 2004), www.amitavghosh.com/essays/essayfull.php?essayNo=57

named Fokir. In a key passage which illustrates this constellation, Fokir chants a local legend, of which Piya has just read Kanai's English translation:

suddenly the language and the music were all around her, flowing like a river, and all of it made sense. [...] Although the sound of the voice was Fokir's, the meaning was Kanai's, and in the depths of her heart she knew she would always be torn between the one and the other. (360).

Thus, even in the protagonists, the novel echoes the dichotomy of land and water – and Piya is not doing research on fish or on land animals, but on dolphins, a mammal living in water but breathing air, an animal also embodying the being caught between both.¹⁵

In a very literal sense, the dualism of land and water is precisely what motivates the entire narrative, even in the disastrous storm which occurs as the climax of the novel. This storm directly grows out of the unique climate developing in this area which is so fundamentally both land and water. This opposition is also reflected in the two men, the urbane Kanai representing the land and fisherman Fokir the water. But even the structure of the narrative replicates the dichotomy: the book has two parts entitled “Ebb” and “Flood,” and the two strands of the action are treated in chapters alternating between the sub-plots, with focalization changing back and forth between Piya and Kanai.¹⁶ This novel thus exemplifies all of my central notions: it shows how narrative springs from a central opposition; it shows how narrative necessarily emplots one of the few concepts available to deal with binary opposites – here the figure of ‘both/and’; it shows how cultural models and concepts shape realities and the perception of the world.

A number of reviewers of the novel have remarked on the somewhat too slick and happy ending. I would here even venture the suggestion that this awkward ending may indeed be explained by means of the underlying figure of ‘both/and’ the text consistently emplots: at a crucial moment in the text, with the death of one of the characters, the central ‘both/and’ figure and the central structural principle of alternation between sub-plots no longer pull in the same direction and the text literally falls apart in a very suggestive way.

¹⁵ For an enlightening discussion of the symbolic role of cetaceans in ecological discourse, see Buell's chapter “Global Commons as Resource and Icon: Imagining Oceans and Whales” in his *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the US and Beyond* (Cambridge MA: Belknap P/Harvard UP, 2001): 196–223.

¹⁶ This alternate focalization is carried so far that the chapter in which Piya and Kanai part before the storm is split into two parts with different focalization: see *Hungry Tide*, 337–44.

That this structural aporia may also be read as a self-conscious showing of the strings and hinges of the narrative in an elegantly meta-narrative novel is another matter, which does not, I believe, invalidate my reading.

The text consistently plays with the idea that narrative springs from the tension between land and water. The following passage makes it quite clear that the dike, the dividing line between the two, is the origin of narrative:

the *bādh* [dike] is not just the guarantor of human life on our island; it is also our abacus and archive, our library of stories. [...] Let's see if you can pick out the spots where the embankment has been repaired. For each such repair I'll give you a story. (202)¹⁷

The text thus literalizes the idea that narrative originates in the tension between binary opposites, and the dike as a physical object and a feature of the landscape is actually read like a text when old Nirmal has a story to tell for each visible notch and repaired damage in the dike.

The related notion of a close analogy between language and landscape is suggested in the following reflection of one of the characters:

Badabon [mangrove forest] was a word Nirmal loved. [...] “[O]ur Bangla word joins Arabic to Sanskrit – ‘*bada*’ to ‘*bon*’, or ‘forest’. It is as though the word itself were an island, born of the meeting of two great rivers of language – just as the tide country is begotten of the Ganga’s union with the Brahma-putra.” (82)

In a wonderfully suggestive passage, this consistent analogy between landscape and language is combined with the notion that a landscape can be read as a text, that landscape indeed *is* a text. The notion that the cultural concepts embedded in language bring about a specific way of perceiving the world is, of course, a well-worn one, but I have rarely seen it exemplified more elegantly:

with her binoculars fixed to her eyes, [Piya was] watching the water with a closeness of attention that reminded Kanai of a textual scholar poring over a

¹⁷ For the relationship of language and perception, see also: “To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way” (6) and “The two of them, Fokir and [Piya], they could have been boulders or trees for all they knew of each other: and wasn’t it better in a way, more honest, that they could not speak? For if you compared it to the ways in which dolphins’ echoes mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being” (159). See also “‘words are just air, Kanai-babu,’ Moina said. ‘When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard’” (258), and 335, where this saying is quoted again by Kanai.

yet-undeciphered manuscript: it was as though she were puzzling over a codex that had been authored by the earth itself. [...] he too had peered into the unknown as if through an eyeglass – but the vistas he had been looking at lay deep within the interior of other languages. Those horizons had filled him with the desire to learn of the ways in which other realities were conjugated. And he remembered too the obstacles, the frustration, the sense that he would never be able to bend his mouth around those words, produce those sounds, put sentences together in the required way, a way that seemed to call for a recasting of the usual order of things. (269)

Realities are ‘conjugated’ through language; a different use of language brings about a different view of what is significantly called “The Order of Things.” This passage exemplifies a number of my key concerns: it literalizes the idea that landscape can and must be read like a text; it shows the intricate connection between linguistic representation and perception in the sense that the shape of a text and its form of representation shape the perception of an ecosystem; finally, it metaphorically highlights my notion of ‘text’ as an unfolding of physical features of a landscape. A passage in Nirmal’s notebook once again makes explicit the idea of landscape as text:

I had a book in my hands to while away the time, and it occurred to me that in a way a landscape too is not unlike a book – a compilation of pages that overlap without any two ever being the same. People open the book according to their taste and training, their memories and desires: for a geologist the compilation opens at one page, for a boatman at another, and still another for a ship’s pilot, a painter and so on. (224)

Less than a page later, the notion of a text as being uttered by the landscape, of landscape itself as producing the text, is again literalized: “here, in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days. [...] It was as if the whole tide country were speaking in the voice of the Poet: ‘life is lived in transformation’” (224–25).¹⁸

Another implicitly self-reflexive passage – a kind of *mise-en-abyme* that exemplifies and recapitulates *en miniature* a number of key concerns of the novel – cites the written version of a local legend, “the story that gave this land its life.” This text is also referred to as “the epic of the tide country” (354) – a title also appropriate for Ghosh’s book itself.

¹⁸ The reference is to Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, a strong intertextual presence throughout the novel.

The booklet was written by a Muslim, whose name was given simply as Abdur-Rahim. [...] Although the lines rhymed, in a kind of doggerel fashion, they did not appear to be verse; they flowed into each other, being broken only by slashes and asterisks. In other words, they looked like prose and read like verse, a strange hybrid [...]. It struck me that this legend had perhaps taken shape in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, just as new waves of settlers were moving into the tide country. And was it possible that this accounted for the way it was formed, from elements of legend and scripture, from the near and the far, Bangla and Arabic? How could it be otherwise? For this I have seen confirmed many times, that the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else? Flowing into one another they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. (247)¹⁹

Prose and verse, land and water, ebb and flood, landscape and language here all flow into each other, landscape shaping language and vice versa. At the end of the passage, syntactic ambiguity even leaves open whether the last sentence is concerned with flowing rivers and islands in the flow, or with languages flowing into one another and little worlds of linguistic representation. This passage, like many others, again highlights the analogy between the flow of language and the flow of the river. Narrative is again and more closely related to the landscape itself. Here as elsewhere, the text suggests that landscape and language are not only analogous but that language shapes landscape just as landscape shapes language. In a sense, landscape appears as sedimented language and language as liquefied landscape.

A further meta-narrative glimpse again establishes a connection between nature and narrative when Kanai reflects about his uncle Nirmal's ethical convictions:

For him it meant that everything which existed was interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature. He hunted down facts in the way a magpie collects shiny things. Yet when he strung them all together, somehow they did become stories – of a kind. (282–83)

Storytelling is here again referred to in terms of nature, marking writing as a natural, organic process subject to arbitrariness and chance. This recalls the passage discussed above in which the landscape appeared as “a codex

¹⁹ Ghosh creates a good five pages of this “strange hybrid of prose and verse,” presented as a translation Kanai prepares as a gift for Piya, see 354–60.

authored by the earth itself” (269). In a text so profoundly imprinted with the characteristics of the landscape it unfolds from, this naturalization of the process of writing in the frequent metanarrative passages, together with the clearly self-reflexive insertion of the local legend, “the story that gave this land its life” (354), suggests that Ghosh’s novel can itself be seen as the “epic of the tide country”; it even appears to cast itself as the epic “by” the tide country, as “a codex authored by the earth itself.”

We would considerably underestimate the consistency and complexity of the novel’s textual engagement with the ecosystem of the Sundarbans if we were merely to take them as a congenial but ultimately incidental symbolic location for Ghosh’s narrative concerns. Rather, it seems to me that Ghosh’s novel can, in a very precise sense, be seen as the emplotment of an ecosystem and that studying the formal and structural engagement of a text with an ecosystem should complement discussions of eco-narratives in terms of content and ethical concerns.²⁰

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²⁰ I am grateful for the stimulating discussions at the ASNEL conference resulting from the fact that there were several papers on *The Hungry Tide*. Thanks to Ursula Kluwick, Alexa Weik, Nishi Pulgurtha and to the audience for thought-provoking papers and discussions.

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