

An Ecocritical Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing my degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

The thesis titled “An Ecocritical Reading of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*” submitted by Ariana Nawar (22303048) of Spring, 2023 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English on April 10, 2023.

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Abstract

This thesis explores an ecocritical and ecofeminist reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. The study examines how the two novels intersect with feminist and ecological concerns, highlighting how gender and environmental issues are interconnected. By using an ecofeminist lens, this thesis aims to analyze how the authors represent gendered power structures in their narratives, and how those structures are connected to environmental exploitation. Atwood's novel portrays a dystopian world where women are subjugated and their reproductive rights are controlled by the powerful male elite. In contrast, Ghosh's novel depicts the lives of humans and non-humans in the ecologically fragile Sundarbans region. The thesis explores how the novels represent the struggles of women and marginalized communities to assert their agency and resist patriarchal and environmental oppression. The study examines how the characters' experiences and interactions with their environment reflect the interconnectedness between gender and ecology. Through an ecocritical lens, this thesis argues that both authors offer a critique of patriarchal capitalism, which exploits both women and nature for profit, and proposes alternative ways of thinking about the human-nature relationship that prioritizes ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Ecocritical; Ecofeminism; Environmental Degradation; Climate Crisis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

„Climate change“, „natural calamities“ and „global warming“ are amorphous terms that demonstrate the anthropogenic demolition. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is an organization in the United States that regularly publishes data on the concentration of carbon dioxide in the Earth’s atmosphere. NOAA’s Earth System Research Laboratory (ESRL) published that the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was approximately 280 ppm before the Industrial Revolution in the mid-to-late 1700s, and it reached an average of 412.5 ppm in 2020 (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "Trends in Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide"). This increase represents a rise of more than 40%, attesting to the fact that human activities have made a significant negative impact on the environment. However, it is also true that human effort is the only way to tackle the environmental crisis. Higher emphasis on environmental destruction in recent decades has led to a growing interest in literature that addresses and explores environmental concerns.

Margaret Atwood, a renowned Canadian author and literary scholar, is mainly known as a feminist writer. However, her works of several decades prove that she is also an environmental activist. Although she denies being a science fiction writer, many of Atwood’s writings such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), *MaddAddam* (2013), and *The Testaments* (2019) can be classified as dystopian fictions. Atwood is someone who writes about limitless possibilities. She offers a vision of the future by writing speculative fiction. Speculative fiction is a category of fiction that imagines what is possible. It tends to deal with worlds or events that could exist, but does not exist (yet). Unquestionably, climate change and the increase in global temperature are not prophecies. They are a reality and their consequences can be observed today in our planet today. Currently, there is a great concern for the environment all

over the world, and many writers such as Atwood have been emphasizing the importance of environmental consciousness and the necessity of shifting people's perspective from an anthropocentric one to an eco-centric one.

Atwood not only writes about her concerns related to climate change and its consequences in her novels, but she has also published some commendable poems that focus on nature and the environment. Some examples include "The Moment," "Dearly," "The Animals in that Country," and so on. Atwood tends to focus on environmental devastation and its impact on people and their lives. In 2017, she has published one of her prominent essays entitled "It's not climate change- it's everything change." In this essay, she tried to depict something which is not spoken about often. The essay begins with a vivid description of oil and its importance in the modern world. She talks about how oil is not just a fuel, but a substance that is used in the production of everything from plastic bags to pharmaceuticals. Atwood then proceeds to describe the potential consequences of a world without oil, including a lack of transportation, a loss of modern technology, and a shift back towards more primitive forms of energy. She also discusses how the authorities would take over and how rape, murder, and violence, in general, would increase due to societal collapse and civil unrest (Atwood, "It's Not Climate Change").

Atwood's dystopian fiction *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests that humans need to be more aware of the consequences of their actions that are damaging the environment and the planet's basic life support systems. The Canadian writer believes that the rise of the global temperature, melting of glaciers and sea ice, air and water pollution, industrial and chemicalized food, and failing harvest on land comprises all the negative effects of human actions on "the environment" (Atwood, "Margaret Atwood on Literature and the Environment"). She also states that anything written concerning these issues might be termed "Literature." She appreciates that many great

writers have already concentrated on these problems. Thus, Atwood emphasizes the importance of writing fictions based on “the environment.” According to her, the world is facing rising temperatures, and it is becoming an inhabitable place only because of human activities. It is the people who are destroying “the environment.” If humankind fails to preserve such an environment, then literature of any kind – whether related to the environment or not – would simply be irrelevant because there will be nobody left to read such literary works (Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on Literature and the Environment”).

According to the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh, the climate crisis can be recognized as a failure of imagination. Therefore, a new environmental literature must train human imagination to properly see and understand anthropogenic climate change. Ghosh is widely known for his historical fiction, but his contribution to science fiction and non-fictions are also laudable. Published in 2016, his non-fiction book, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and Unthinkable*, has helped millions of people understand the urgent issue of climate change and how it has „deranged“ peoples“ modes. Moreover, Ghosh also ponders deeply about the relationship between crisis and literature. According to him, crisis gives birth to great literature and literature represents a crisis. However, in the literary realm, climate has a contradictory existence. Ghosh believes that literature, especially modern fiction, has failed to address how climate crisis threatens nature and humans. He has said in his non-fictional book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and Unthinkable* that writers always prefer to write about this major issue outside of fiction.

It is a striking fact that when novelists do choose to write about climate change it is almost always outside fiction. A case in point is the work of Arundhati Roy: not only is she one of the finest prose stylists of our time, she is passionate and deeply informed

about climate change. Yet all her writings on these subjects are in various forms of nonfiction. (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 10)

Ironically, the book in which Ghosh has discussed the climate issue is also a non-fiction book, but Ghosh has also published some significant fictions concerning the environment, ecosystem, biodiversity, and so on. For instance, one of his recent fictions *Gun Island* (2019) focuses on climate change and its effects on the Sundarbans. It deals with how people are exceptionally connected to the ecosystem of the forest. *Gun Island* resembles Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) which is also concerned with the Sundarbans, its eco-system, and the uncanny relation between nature and human. Ghosh has published more fiction related to environmentalism. Some examples include *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *Jungle Nama* (2021), *Uncanny and Improbable Events* (2021), and *The Living Mountain* (2022).

1.1 Aims and Objectives

This paper will offer an ecocritical analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, both of which are suffused with environmental themes. It will examine how the environment and the physical settings are represented within these literary texts and what that means for human-nature relationships. In the age of the Anthropocene, environmental concern is a prevalent issue. Natural calamities and climate change are the result of the human activities. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, there was a mass movement of people from the rural countryside to the urban cities. This has resulted in a shift in the literary representation of the physical, natural world to that of urban development. It has also given rise to a growing concern about the reifying attitude of humanity towards nature, involving debates

about animal welfare, sustainable production and consumption, and protection and management of natural resources.

Moreover, feminist theory plays a significant role in expanding the scope of ecocriticism. This is because patriarchal society is normalizing the oppression of women in the same way that nature is being mistreated. The term ecofeminism refers to a blending of ecology and feminism. It focuses on how nature and women are both treated brutally by the patriarchal society. Ever since the Industrial Revolution began, writers noticed a big change in the environment. They noticed how human beings were slowly detaching themselves from nature and how people are mistreating nature in the same way they mistreat women in the society. Thus, they started to feel the need to spread their environmental concerns by depicting the power and beauty of nature as well as women's rights in society. In the age of the Anthropocene, human beings should constantly keep in mind that climate change and natural calamities are occurring because of them. Brilliant and prolific writers such as Margaret Atwood and Amitav Ghosh are still giving their best effort to create awareness and love for nature. As mentioned above, this paper will offer an ecocritical reading of the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh. It will also briefly explore the ecofeminist aspects of both novels.

1.2 Contextual Background of *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Handmaid's Tale was published in 1985. It is one of the most celebrated "anti-utopian" or "dystopian" novels of Margaret Atwood. It is a speculative fiction written in postmodern style. The major themes of the novel include politics, sex and gender, religion, class, and hierarchy. In the novel, the fictional state Gilead is portrayed as the future America. Atwood

wrote this novel immediately after the election of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain. It was the period in which the religious conservatives fought against sexual revolution and heightening feminist fears. The novel explores the rights of the women in a totalitarian state and how the state has become vulgar. Extreme misogyny becomes prevalent due to the devastated condition of the world by climate change. Even human reproduction has been affected and the ability to survive is at threat.

1.3 Contextual Background of *The Hungry Tide*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* was published in 2004. The novel is about the relationship between nature, humans, and animals. The setting of the story is in Sundarbans which lies on the delta of the Ganges. The Indian American cetologist Piya Roy is a major character of the novel who travels to the Sundarbans to study the rare endangered river dolphins known as *Orcaella Brevirostris*. She later discovers the unique beauty of Sundarbans and its inhabitants. Ghosh has written this novel not just to illustrate the ecology of the Sundarbans, but he has also written this novel because he was inspired by the Marichjhapi Massacre of 1979 in West Bengal. Ghosh has dedicated a substantial part of the novel to this true event. Furthermore, the novel is about environment and social injustice in the postcolonial era. The novel shows how humans are set against animals in many ways. It invites an appreciation of the complexity involved in human rights violations and ecological preservation. This novel is one of Ghosh's best achievements since it allows the readers to imagine what it is like to live in the heart of the Sundarbans.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will provide a look into the environmental issues discussed in journal articles and books that are related to the primary texts. It will also examine the incidents that inspired the authors to write their novels. Most importantly, it will discuss prominent writers' statements and opinions regarding the primary texts.

The book *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh describes the current condition of the environment, ecosystem, biodiversity, and climate change and its effects on human beings. In the book, Ghosh discusses some serious environmental issues in the world today. The author starts questioning why literature is unable to grapple the greatest crisis the planet is facing – the anthropogenic climate change. He states that literature has failed to portray the uncanny, the nonhuman and the improbable. He also mentions how the non-human voices of the earth have always spoken to human beings and will continue to do so in an age of „unthinkable“ climate change. Ghosh has argued in his book that contemporary culture has failed to confront climate change. According to him, climate change is not a crisis of nature but it is also a crisis of culture. He states that, “If certain literary forms are unable to negotiate these torrents, then they will have failed and their failures will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis” (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 10).

The book is generally divided into three parts and the first part is titled as “stories.” In the first part of the book, Ghosh addresses the role of literature in relation to climate change and discusses *The Hungry Tide*. He confesses that it was extraordinarily difficult for him to write a scene in which a cyclone sends a gigantic storm surge into the Sundarbans. He even states that a few months after the publication, he learned about a cataclysmic tsunami had been set off in the

Indian Ocean. The massive undersea earthquake measured 9.0 on the Richter scale. The news somehow deeply affected him. Therefore, he decided to write about the impact of the tsunami in a newspaper. He even visited the islands to observe the situation. One thing he noticed out there was that the natural elements like the coconut trees were unaffected by the tsunami, but all the manmade villas and resorts were badly affected. He blames the government that designed the base in a way that the inhabitants of the base could not survive. In the book, he says, "I thought to myself, for planners who build with such reckless disregard for their surroundings" (Ghosh 48). He also explores how India, specifically Mumbai, is particularly vulnerable to climate change.

Furthermore, in part two of the book, Ghosh discusses how Asia has an important role in the history of climate change because many countries in Asia are the most vulnerable to climate disasters. He has also explained the history behind this vulnerability. In the 19th and 20th centuries, several countries in Asia were affected by British imperialism. The British annexed an oil reserve located in Myanmar while India was also an economically paralyzed country due to British imperialism. Moreover, part three of the book is all about politics and how climate change is observed through the political lens in the world. Ghosh explains that there are two groups in the world. One group views climate change as a „moral issue“ while the other group does not believe in climate science. In the conclusion of the book, Ghosh suggests that concerted effort by leaders of major religions all over the world and environmental organizations could result in meaningful progress.

In their article "Human vs. Nonhuman: Environmental Issues and Concerns in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*," Aruna and Devabalane state that the novel examines several issues related to life and existence on this delta, the Sundarbans. According to them, Ghosh has

illustrated the diverse ecosystem in which both man and animal strive for their own eco-space. The authors of the article also add that Ghosh has shown the everyday problems of living from the inhabitants' point of view, and he has also depicted the conflict between humans and nonhuman creatures like the tiger. Despite these conflicts, the ecosystem is home to various animals like tigers, dolphins, deer, crocodiles, and many more. According to Aruna and Devabalane, Ghosh has depicted how the species of the ocean are economically valuable to human beings (Aruna and Devabalane 45). For example, Piya, one of the major characters in the novel, observes the Irrawaddy dolphins cooperate with the humans. The dolphins serve to increase the number of fish caught by the fishermen. However, this aquatic life and rich biosphere are in danger of "anthropogenic intervention in the form of globalization, economic development and eco-tourism" (Aruna and Devabalane 46). The authors of the article also point out that Sahara India Pariwar, a company in India, had to lay aside the multimillion project proposal of creating eco-villages and floating restaurants due to strong objections by environmentalists who believe that such project will ruin the river eco-system (Aruna and Devabalane 46).

Furthermore, they emphasize the man-animal conflict and how this conflict should be viewed seriously as the Sundarbans tiger is a confirmed man-eater. They also agree with Ghosh about how he pointed a case in his text that was a direct threat to the lands, forests and reserve areas. The people not only had to fight against environmental disasters like cyclones and then dangerous animals like tigers and crocodiles, but they also had to fight against powerful people from the government. However, they conclude their article by suggesting that there should be some special policies and measures to look after man-animal conflicts. People need to take

action just like Ghosh did. Ghosh wanted to portray the environmental issue and encourage the implementation of eco-friendly projects by writing the novel *The Hungry Tide*.

The Hungry Tide can also be read through an ecofeminist point of view. In the essay “Trans-Culture Communication in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,” the writers state that the term ecofeminism echoes beyond the lines of the text. Besides the human and non-human relationships with the nature, the text also represents the elimination of institutional oppression based on gender, class, and race. The authors of this essay talk about the character Kusum and how she represents nature as a woman although she reshapes the culture with her male counterparts (Kalaiarasan and Sowmiyalatha 324). They also discuss Piya, the main character who is a cetologist. Her job is to research marine mammals. The authors state that this is a rare profession for a woman. Piya has a tenacious spirit which impelled her to research the secrets of nature and extend her stay in the Sundarbans area.

To discuss more about *The Hungry Tide* as an ecofeminist text, the writers of the article “Ecofeminism in Indian Fiction” state that Ghosh’s ecofeminist activism raises the question of injustice faced by the non-human world and women. They discuss how the flora and fauna of the delta Ganges are unique and how it is a mysterious place. However, in analytical psychology, the forests of the Sundarbans area represent femininity. The writers believe that the forest has great connection with the symbolism of the mother. The term “Mother Nature” is often used in ecofeminism to refer to the idea of nature as a nurturing and life-giving force that is often associated with feminine qualities. Ecofeminists argue that patriarchal societies have historically viewed both women and nature as passive and inferior, leading to their subjugation and exploitation. The idea of Mother Nature is, therefore, seen as a way to challenge these patriarchal attitudes towards nature and to reclaim a sense of interconnectedness and respect for the natural

world. Some ecofeminists also argue that women are uniquely positioned to advocate for the environment, as they are often caregivers and nurturers in society. Ghosh also has disclosed that both Piya and the dolphins are susceptible to male domination and exploitation. In the text it is noticeable how Piya feels vulnerable in some part just like the animals. The authors of the article emphasize the rigid notion of “feminine” and “masculine” values by portraying the women as more empathetic than the men in the novel.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ghosh is a renowned environmental activist. His consciousness concerning the environment has helped him to write several fictional and non-fictional books relating to ecocriticism. *Dhaka Tribune*, a major daily newspaper in Bangladesh, covered the news of this celebrated novelist by focusing on his ideas related to environmental crisis, climate change, and Bengali literature. During a discussion session of the novel *The Hungry Tide* at Dhaka Lit Fest which was held in January 2023, Ghosh has said that people are weaker than nature. He thinks that even though nature is negatively affected by humans, nature will eventually revive itself. Therefore, he recommended that to have a healthy life, people must take good care of nature. He added that while writing this novel, he had to think about the crisis of nature, biodiversity and the horror of climate change. He said that the damage to the environment caused by humans have increased at an alarming rate. He suggested his readers to read the novel earnestly. According to him, this novel is no longer to be read as a storybook. People should read this novel to know the consequences of human activities on nature and biodiversity.

The Handmaid's Tale highlights the politics of the dystopian state. It shows how biodegradation has significantly damaged the human life. The degradation of nature also happens due to human activities. In the article “Crítica: Dynamics between Mankind and Nature in

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and John Feffer's *Splinter lands*," Jéssica Costa Bispo mentions that the issue of man vs. nature is a global debate in the world today. This is occurring due to the lack of self-awareness, and it is quite dangerous both for humankind and nature. She states that *The Handmaid's Tale* metaphorically denounced the awareness of environmental threats human beings are facing in the contemporary age (Bispo). She also expresses her opinion that it is important to analyze environmental issues through literature or science fiction. Later, she mentions that the novel certainly addressed the issue of climate change but in a different fashion. According to her, Atwood's portrayal of the settings and characters in her novel allows the readers to become aware and sincere about how nature is affected by human activities. In the novel, the lack of personal freedom and extreme repression is deeply connected to the environmental changes in the world. However, Bispo also referred to an important point which is religion. Even though the act of their process is entirely wrong, the religious people of Gilead are mentioned as an analogy for nature since this institution is purifying individuals by banning all the usage of chemicals and medicines, especially during the pregnancy of the Handmaids.

In her book, *Postcolonial English Literature*, Ragini Kapoor describes how ecofeminism serves as a linkage between the defamation of nature and oppression of women (Kapoor 58). Both nature and women have been devalued in the Western culture, and they can be elevated through political action. According to the author, ecofeminism is a biocentric environmental movement that includes social and traditional cultural concerns (Kapoor 58). Later, she states that Atwood has a profound respect for the natural world. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood has explored the human rights of women and the possibilities of combating patriarchal structures of power and domination that refuse women's rights. Additionally, Kapoor mentions that Atwood analyzed the sentiments of women's rights in all of her books. Atwood never hesitates to work

hard on political statements like unguided nationalism, the violence in the Americans, and anti-abortion. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the fictional state Gilead represents an outgrowth of a utopian attempt to purify American culture. The state Gilead views females as “mother earth” since the patriarchal society values women only for their reproductive abilities. The story generally focuses on a Handmaid named Offred. She explained how she had to be a part of these Handmaids after a failed attempt to escape Gilead with her daughter and husband. Offred then faces the terrible conditions of the totalitarian state. In Gilead, human sexuality is being measured by the notion that intercourse is the fundamental work for women. They perform their sexuality through a ceremony where Handmaids have lie down upon the wife during the sex act itself. It is both humiliating and offensive for the wives as the Handmaids perform the sexual act with the commanders. The women who could not breed are named as „unwomen“. Kapoor explains that ecological imbalance and environmental degradation are to blame for declining fertility (Kapoor 59). As a result, women are oppressed and expected to breed by sacrificing their freedom and rights. She concludes her essay by saying that Atwood created a feminine dystopian novel in which women who have the potential to bear a child in their womb are immediately transferred into a service as full-time breeders. However, women who are former abortionists and gender traitors (lesbians) are likely to be hung up from hooks on the wall. She has said that the sufferings of women in the novel can be seen as a result of prominent problems in nature.

Dr. Darsha Jani, in her article “Proclamation of Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” says that the deterioration of the current time is the central reason for the creation of the totalitarian state, Gilead. She claims that Atwood painted a picture of a world undone by infertility, pollution, the dangers of nuclear power, and environmental degradation. Gilead has turned into a biblically inflected nation that promotes taming and ruling of females.

The environmental degradation has resulted in a deformity of offspring and for this reason, women were snatched from all the freedoms they had and had to bear children for the childless commanders. Furthermore, she mentioned another significant point about how Atwood made an ample use of ecofeminist images in her novel in order to portray the close association of women and nature. Atwood successfully portrays the subjugation of women and nature in her novel. The images of flora and fauna are also depicted in Atwood's novel as she has linked several images of a body of a woman with flora, and the novel is also replete with images that are related to fauna of the environment (Jani 175).

When the readers read *The Handmaid's Tale*, they do not realize that the novel is inspired by true incidents. Atwood admitted in one of her interviews that she would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some place or time. It is more surprising that the majority of these true events took place in Atwood's lifetime. Among those events, one of them is "The Nuclear Gulag." In the Soviet Union, the prisoners were military and government officials. They were known as Gulag. They were forced to mine uranium for the Soviet's nuclear weapons. However, within two years, more than half of the prisoners died. There were no escapes to run from mining. If someone used to refuse, then the guards of the prison smashed their skulls with the hammers. The reports say that some of the prisoners committed suicide by blowing themselves up and estimated 5000 prisoners sacrificed their life for radiation poisoning ("4 Horrific, True Events"). Even though this incident is not directly linked to the novel, the consequences of the event match the condition of Gilead. The readers can see how people are made to clean the nuclear spills and toxic dumps resulting from the war. The incident of Nuclear Gulag and Atwood's depiction of the Gilead state is more than a coincidence.

Furthermore, a religious sector known as “The People of HOPE” was founded in New Jersey in 1975. The sector used to describe themselves as “Charismatic Catholics.” Their motivation was fighting the empire of evil. This religious sector has some distinguished groups where one group was formed by fourteen men who claimed to be the leader. They considered themselves to be anointed by God and used religious passages to justify their heinous actions (“4 Horrific, True Events”). For the women, they had strict rules. Women were subservient. They were not allowed to date and their marriages used to be arranged by the leaders. There were public prayer sessions where this group used to brainwash people’s minds and their religious point of view. Perhaps, Atwood read an article regarding this news of “The People of HOPE”.

Moreover, there was another event known as Romanian Decree 770-1966. In 1966, a communist group came to power. At that time, they observed that the Romanian birth rates had been constantly decreasing. Therefore, they imposed a rule that made abortions practically impossible for a majority of people. After a few years of observing the birth rate, the rate doubled. To increase the population of the place, they became even stricter with the dwellers of the city. For instance, the government made all the childless people pay extra monthly tax and banned contraception fully. Atwood was well aware of this event before writing her novel. However, Atwood had taken the Romanian rules to the extreme because in her novel, instead of merely increasing a tax for not giving birth, death is the ultimate consequence (“4 Horrific, True Events”).

Margaret Atwood published an article in *The New York Times* titled “What „The Handmaid’s Tale“ mean in the Age of Trump.” In the article, Atwood initially discusses her novel, how and when she started writing it, and then she tries to answer questions which are frequently asked by the readers regarding the text. She discusses if it is a feminist novel or if it is

an anti-religious novel. In her novel, she has explained how women have no individual rights but they have some significant roles in the society according to their position in the Gilead state. She explains those roles of the women in the Gilead state and how the state was controlled by a totalitarian and fanatic government. At the end of the article, Atwood makes a firm statement by addressing the issue of the Trump government. Basic civil rights of the people are in danger along with women's right in the United States just as it is in the Gilead state.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Frameworks

This paper is conducted through the implementation of ecocritical and ecofeminist frameworks since the primary texts of this research focus on environment and its relationship with humankind.

Ecocriticism, an environmentally-conscious field of literary studies, focuses on the observation and study of the relationship between literature and earth's environment. William Rueckert, in 1978, has introduced the term eco-criticism in his book *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism*. For a long time, this theory was not discussed among literary scholars. Major ecocritics like William Howarth, Harold Fromm, and Cheryll Glotfelty felt the necessity to reintroduce this literary term. Hence, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm officially published a book titled *Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. In this book, Glotfelty and Fromm encourage other literary critics to focus and develop this approach. Generally, this book is a collection of essays which explores the relationship between literature and the environment from a variety of critical perspectives. The book covers topics such as the representation of nature in literature, environmental justice, and the role of literature in shaping our understanding of the natural world. The essays are written by a range of scholars and literary critics including Lawrence Buell, Ursula Heise, and Jonathan Bate.

There were two consecutive waves in the history of eco-criticism. Literary critic Lawrence Buell has discussed the first wave in his book *The Environmental Imagination*. According to the book, the first wave is about nature and how the marginalization of the environment has increased in the American culture. Buell states that "The conception of represented nature as an ideological screen becomes unfruitful if it is used to portray the green

world as nothing more than projective fantasy or social allegory” (Buell 36). In contrast, unlike the first wave, the second wave points out human concern besides non-human. This wave led to eco-justice movement by examining the way that lower class people are the ones who suffer the most due to the adverse effects of climate change.

The term ecofeminism was first used by French feminist Francoise Eaubonne in 1947. This theory builds upon ecocriticism by positing that the oppression of nature is connected to the oppression of women in a patriarchal society. Women and nature are inextricably connected as there is no liberation for women in the patriarchal society and there are no solutions to the ecological crisis within a society. In the late 20th century, ecofeminism was identified as a movement. The movement not only spoke for women and environment but also for the marginalized and queer groups in society. There are significant sides of ecofeminism that define the connection between women and nature. Scholars like Hazel Henderson believe that this term was derived from the pre-historic era when people used to worship goddesses like Mother Earth, Goddess of trees, and other elements of nature (Garrad 10). Therefore, it is evident that nature and women are linked. Ecofeminism is classified into two sections, and they are radical ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism. Radical ecofeminism views the root cause of the ecological crisis and women’s oppression as being the same: the patriarchy. Radical ecofeminists believe that the oppression of women is linked to the exploitation of nature, as both are seen as objects to be controlled and dominated by men. They argue that the patriarchal system encourages domination and violence towards nature and women. Therefore, they advocate for a radical transformation of society, one that would end the subordination of women and the exploitation of nature. On the other hand, cultural ecofeminism emphasizes the cultural and social constructions of gender and nature (Merchant 165). Cultural ecofeminists argue that our

cultural attitudes towards gender and nature are socially constructed and that they perpetuate the oppression of women and nature. They advocate for a change in our cultural attitudes towards gender and nature in order to achieve gender equality and environmental justice. Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist, has also introduced some other branches of ecofeminism in her book titled *Ecofeminism*.

However, people can also analyze the primary texts of this thesis by using other literary theories. For example, *The Hungry Tide* can be read by using eco-Marxism, a theoretical framework that combines Marxist thought with ecological concerns. At its core, Eco-Marxism is concerned with the intersection of capitalism and the environment and how capitalism's drive for profit often comes at the expense of the natural world. It argues that capitalism is inherently destructive for the environment and that environmental problems are rooted in the exploitation of natural resources by capitalist systems. Eco-Marxists assert that the root of environmental problems is the unequal distribution of wealth and power and that the resolution of these problems requires a social and economic transformation. *The Hungry Tide* portrays the struggle of the poor and marginalized people of the Sundarbans. They are exploited by the wealthy and powerful in the name of development. The novel highlights the destructive impact of the capitalist economic system on the environment and the resulting displacement and suffering of the local people. Eco-Marxist ideology asserts that these issues are not just environmental problems, but also social and economic ones, rooted in the exploitation of the environment and people. The novel also emphasizes the role of social and economic power in shaping environmental policies and practices. For instance, the character of Piya is portrayed as a representative of the dominant Western scientific discourse, which is often ignorant of local knowledge and practices. The character of Fokir, on the other hand, represents the local people's

deep connection to the environment and their sustainable practices. The contrast between the two characters highlights the tension between scientific and local knowledge, and the need for a more equitable distribution of power in environmental decision-making.

Moreover, *The Handmaid's Tale* can also be interpreted through the lens of Eco-Marxism. In the novel, the totalitarian state of Gilead is characterized by a rigid class structure and a capitalist economy that exploits both human and natural resources for the benefit of the ruling class. The oppression of women is a key component of this system as they are treated as commodities for reproduction and forced to bear children for the ruling elite. This exploitation of women's bodies can be seen as an extension of the capitalist exploitation of labor, with both being used for profit. In addition, the environmental degradation present in the novel can also be seen through an Eco-Marxist lens. The toxic waste that is frequently mentioned throughout the story is the result of unregulated industrial activity, which prioritizes profit over the health and well-being of the natural world. This disregard for the environment is a hallmark of capitalist systems, where the need for constant growth and profit often leads to unsustainable practices.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This research will endeavor to examine the dynamics between mankind and nature as the relationship between man and nature are being showed in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hungry Tide*. The aim of this thesis is to portray how humankind mistreats nature and how the government mistreats people in the name of developing environment concern. Therefore, it will examine the ecological imperialism. The paper will provide an ecocritical and ecofeminist reading of the primary texts. The secondary sources in this paper are mostly obtained from different books and articles by scholars who have discussed the primary texts and the aforementioned theories.

This dissertation will follow a qualitative method. Initially, for thematic analysis, a system of data collection is being planned then for the relevant literary works and credible research articles regarding eco-criticism, man versus nature and ecofeminism. The articles that are collected to relate to this thesis are mostly journal articles. In fact, this research has relied on one of Amitav's most famous non-fiction books *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* to make my topic readable through the point of view of the author Amitav Ghosh as it strongly relates to the thesis topic.

This paper searched some news articles to find out the thoughts and opinions of the writers of the aforementioned novels. Overall, this thesis begins with an overview of the environmental issues in modern society and provides an overview of the primary texts. It then takes help from authentic sources and scholars' statements which are explained in the literature review. The chapter titled "Theoretical Frameworks," provides an overview on the major

theories that are applied in this research and even looks into other theories that can potentially be applied. Finally, in the analysis part of each primary text, this thesis examines the each text by with the help of relevant articles.

Chapter 5: Textual Analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's dystopian fiction *The Handmaid's Tale* was officially published in 1985. Atwood wrote this novel as a response to the political and social climate of the 1980s. Women's rights were losing ground at that time, and religious fanaticism was on the rise. According to Atwood, the novel was also influenced by historical events such as The Nuclear Gulag, The People of Hope, Salem witch trials, and so on. The story takes place in the future where environmental catastrophes have caused a drop in reproduction rates and a conservative Christian group has overtaken the government. The new government has established a rigid hierarchy based on gender, in which men control all positions of authority and women only have subordinate posts. Women are no longer permitted to read, work, or own property, and they have very limited access to contraception.

The story is narrated by Offred who is a Handmaid, a woman whose sole mission is to carry offspring for Gilead's affluent couples. In order to give birth to a child, Handmaids are allocated to families and forced into having intercourse with the man of the house. Offred is named "Offred" in order to conceal her previous identity and is sent to the home of a high-ranking commander called Fred. The fictional state of Gilead in the novel has very strict regulations that define the roles of men and women. All positions of authority are held by men, and women are only allowed to play subordinate roles. Men in Gilead are divided into different classes based on their status and occupation. The highest-ranking men are the Commanders, who hold positions of authority in the government and have Handmaids assigned to them for the purpose of bearing children. Other men may be soldiers, guardians, or low-ranking workers. Men are allowed to work, read, and have multiple wives (in the case of the Commanders), and they

have more freedom to move around and participate in society. Contrarily, there are no rights or liberties for women. In accordance with their fertility and value to the community, they are categorized into various groups. Women who are still fertile are called Handmaids and are entrusted with the responsibility of having offspring for their Commanders in affluent homes. The wives of the commanders are infertile women who are married to powerful men but are unable to have children. Although the Aunts are in charge of indoctrinating and educating the Handmaids, the Marthas are given the responsibility of performing domestic duties in homes.

In the novel, Offred struggles to adapt to her new life as a Handmaid, and she is haunted by memories of her former life with her husband and child, who were taken from her when the regime came to power. She forms a connection with the commander's wife, Serena Joy, who is also unhappy with her role in Gilead. As the story develops, Offred begins to rebel against the system and seek ways to escape. However, her attempts to resist and escape are fraught with danger, and she is constantly under surveillance by the government. Offred's destiny is ultimately left in question, and it is unknown if she will be able to flee Gilead and find freedom. Although Offred and the other Handmaids' final fate is unclear, the novel closes on a historical note that implies that the story's events were based on true stories and that Gilead was ultimately overthrown.

The Handmaid's Tale can be read as an ecocritical novel as it explores the relationship between humans and their environment. In the book, the fictional state has been devastated by natural catastrophes which are used as a justification for the extreme measures taken by the regime. In an essay titled "What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump," which was published in *The New York Times*, Atwood states that she was influenced by Rachel

Carson's book *Silent Spring*, an early work in the environmental movement, to write *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood).

5.1 Man versus Nature in *The Handmaid's Tale*

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, man and nature have a complicated and nuanced connection. On one hand, the novel depicts a world in which human activities have seriously harmed the ecosystem, resulting in ecological collapse and resource shortages. On the other hand, the characters' encounters with nature reflect their internal conflicts and their dealings with power. In her novel, Atwood wonderfully portrays how environmental pollution is caused by human beings. The way she has depicted environmental issues makes the readers rethink their way of treating the natural world.

The novel is set in Gilead, a totalitarian religious society that was once the United States. In the "Historical Notes" section of the novel, the horrific condition of the pre-Gilead state is mentioned. The pre-Gilead state's conditions were hard to imagine due to a great deal of chemical pollution, radioactive decay, abortion, and diseases including AIDS and R-strain syphilis. The result of everything was a decline in the birth rate. Rape and pornography were also extensively disseminated. There were "porn riots" and "abortion riots" because people were upset about the situation. According to the text, "This was the age of the R-strain syphilis and also the infamous AIDS epidemic, which once they spread to the population at large, eliminated many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool? Stillbirths, miscarriages and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 273). Besides this, the use of unwanted chemical insecticides and nuclear accidents has caused a serious damage to the society. There were various issues that were linked to "Nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period as well as to

leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites of which there were many thousands, both legal and illegal” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 273).

Eventually, the land became infertile, and so did the people that inhabit it. This caused the Gilead state to become so paranoid that it started to ban all forms of birth control. To improve the environmental condition and to increase the declining birth rate, the religious extremist government implemented some unthinkable rules and regulations where men and women were assigned significant roles according to their social status. Atwood shows that the sufferings of the people, especially the women, have happened only because of the environmental degradation caused by human actions.

The atmosphere of the novel is noticeably different from what readers often encounter in their daily lives. The narrative of Offred, the protagonist, is filled with moments of shock and suspense. Despite the story’s rapid pace and intensity, Atwood’s environmental concerns are there. For instance, Offred cannot help but recall the period before Gilead, when plastic bags were common and dangerous. She says that, “In Gilead, not many things are plastic, anymore. I remember those endless white plastic shopping bags, from the supermarket ... (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 34). Gilead may pride itself on avoiding plastic and preserving order, but trash and rubbish of different types nevertheless exist there, and this is seen when Offred is taken out by the commander for the evening to what appears to be a brothel where she witnesses “a bank of trash cans set out beside the door. And there is a smell of fried chicken, going bad” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 219). Moreover, in the second chapter of the book, Offred compares the nature of the garden with her own garden before she is assigned to the role of a Handmaid. According to her, the authority of Gilead does not care about the natural elements in a same way she does. Offred thinks that Commanders’ wives enjoy keeping their gardens in “order and

maintenance” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 14). However, before she became a handmaid, it was of a different kind from the desire to control nature. She thinks about how “Many of the wives have such gardens; it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for. I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, and the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers. Time could pass more swiftly the way” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 14). Offred is frustrated at how the authority of the state is gradually taking control of everything including the natural elements like trees and flowers. In addition, to its policies on reproduction, the Gilead state also mistreats nature by imposing strict controls on the use of natural resources. The government exercises near-total control over the food supply, with rationing and strict regulations on who can grow and harvest crops. This has led to widespread food shortages and hunger, as well as environmental degradation as the government prioritizes short-term gains over long-term sustainability.

5.2 Ecological Imperialism in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Ecological imperialism is a recurring issue in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The story takes place in a dystopian society where environmental catastrophes have caused fertility rates to drastically decrease. Because of this, the government enacts stringent reproductive laws that restrict women’s liberty and regard them as objects used only for reproduction. For the government, saving the environment can only be possible by controlling the people, especially women. Besides women, every class of humanity suffers under a the totalitarian regime as everyone must play their own role according to the rules. Gilead is run by the social hierarchy system. There is a different sort of hierarchy for men and women. For the women, the wives have the highest position, but they are mostly infertile and not do not seem happy in their respective roles as they cannot conceive a child. There are also Aunts (a class of

disciplinary women), Marthas (domestic servants), Handmaids (fertile women), Econowives (wives of lower-ranking men), and the outcasts who are known as Unwomen and Jezebels. Men also have hierarchy-based roles in the society like Commanders, Eyes (police), Angels (soldiers), doctors, and so on. The government led by religious fanatics might be concerned about the environment and its population, but the state's politics are outrageous as their main goal is to politicize and control women's body. One of the terrible aspects of Gilead is that it seems to invade everyone's mind. For example, the narrator hears that "The Republic of Gilead...knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 25). No matter where the people are and what condition they are in, the state will always observe them. In addition, those who tries to raise their voice or protest against the totalitarian government are branded as criminals and receive harsh punishments. This part is mentioned in chapter six when the narrator and her partner Ofglen are on their way home from shopping. They witness dead bodies put on public display. The narrator states that "Now we turn our backs on the church and there is the thing we've in truth come to see: the Wall" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 33). Thus, Gilead may be trying to stop climate change, but it is sacrificing any semblance of human rights in order to do so.

Furthermore, the totalitarian state can be strict to protect the people and environment, but the corruption among the hierarchy is also seen in the novel. To illustrate, in chapter three, the narrator confronts Serena Joy, the commander's wife, about how she has seen the latter smoking, and smoking is prohibited by the authority. This shows that Serena is taking advantage of her own privileged position in society for personal gain. Offred believes that "The cigarettes must have come from the black market, I thought and this gave me hope. Even now that there is no real money any more, there's still a black market. There's always a black market, there's always

something that can be exchanged” (16). The fact that people are willing to bend the rules shows that the government’s efforts to save the environment are flawed. Moreover, the doctors in Gilead who are supposed to check up on the Handmaids are also corrupt because in chapter eleven, when Offred goes to the doctor for her regular checkup, the doctor suggests her to have intercourse with him by blackmailing her. He says that the commanders are quite old now and if she wants to become pregnant in order to save herself, then she can have intercourse with him. If she refuses to sleep with him, the doctor could potentially report her for cancer or infertility. Offred imagines that “He could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility, and have me shipped off to the colonies, with the unwomen” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 60). This example also proves that Gilead’s rules can be doing more harm than good.

Overall, many critics have praised Atwood for highlighting the dangerous consequences of prioritizing environmental conservation over human rights. According to an article on *The New Yorker*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows that “environmentalism, when unmoored from human rights, can turn into a brutal ideology” (Fry). Additionally, Sophie Gilbert also argues in an article for the *Atlantic* that “*The Handmaid’s Tale* depicts environmental disaster as an event that exacerbates gender inequalities, particularly around reproduction.”

5.3 An Ecofeminist Reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale*

The Handmaid’s Tale can be interpreted through the ecofeminist lens. As mentioned before, ecofeminism is a feminist and environmental philosophy that highlights the connections between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature. Atwood’s novel also explores the relationship between patriarchal oppression and environmental destruction. In her article “The Ecology of Fear in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Amanda Boston notes that “the novel uses the environment as a signifier of human corruption” (Boston 175). According to

her, Atwood depicts the impact of human nature on the natural environment, showing the connection between the abuse of both women and nature to patriarchal ideologies. The novel portrays a world where women's bodies are commodified and controlled, just as the natural world is exploited and destroyed. In an ecofeminist reading of the novel, this control over women's bodies is seen as being linked to the exploitation of the natural world. As Karen Warren writes in her essay "Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters," "both women and nature are viewed as passive and subservient resources to be used for the benefit of a dominant group" (Warren 267).

With the use of symbolism and imagery, Atwood serves to reinforce the association between women and the natural environment in her novel. For instance, the Handmaids' names are derived from those of their Commanders, eliminating their unique identities and turning them into nothing more than reproductive vessels. Similarly, the natural world is depicted as a resource to be exploited and controlled by humans. Firstly, the Handmaids are outfitted in red robes and white bonnets that are meant to restrict their freedom of movement and visibility. The fact that the Handmaids are forced into a submissive, religious lifestyle is further supported by the bonnets' resemblance to a nun's habit. Since red connotes fertility and white connotes purity, the apparel also alludes to the belief that women are limited in their reproductive capacities. Furthermore, the ceremony, a monthly ritual where the Commander has sex with the Handmaid while his wife holds her down, is a symbol of patriarchal control over women's bodies. The ceremony is both a physical and emotional violation of the Handmaid, and the participation of the Commander's wife reinforces the idea of women being complicit in their own oppression.

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my

skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means that she is in control, of the process and thus the product. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 87)

Moreover, the oppression of women and their bodies are one of the main themes of the novel. If one of them raises their voice against the authority, then they would severely get punished by the commanders. For instance, in chapter fifteen, when Moira, a friend of the narrator, tries to be defiant, she is brutally punished. She has been hurt so badly that she could not walk for a week. This kind of oppression of women is quite normal for the authority since they do not care about women's bodies but what they cared most about was the Handmaid's ability to reproduce. The state did not care, "They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, and even it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purpose your feet and your hands are not essential" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 86). In addition, amidst all the restrictions, the Handmaids still face hypocrisy and unwanted behavior from the male members such as doctors, guardians, etc. The narrator explains that it is the Handmaids' duty to set the boundaries because Aunt Lydia has taught them that men are weak by nature. It is normal for them to make a move with the Handmaids. According to Aunt Lydia, "God made them that way but he did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 44). Offred criticizes the male-dominated society by stating this issue.

Chapter 6: Textual Analysis of *The Hungry Tide*

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* was published in 2004. It tells the story of an Indian American marine biologist named Piyali Roy, who in the interest of investigating the uncommon Irrawaddy dolphins, travels to the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest in the Bay of Bengal. Piyali, also known as Piya, runs into Kanai Dutt who is also traveling to the same place to unearth the mysteries related to a notebook left to him by his late uncle Nirmal. The novel mainly explores how these characters navigate the treacherous waters of the Sundarbans while visiting there and how they discover a complex network of human and non-human relationships that are generated by the ebb and flow of the tides. As they travel through the mangrove forest, they encounter a range of human and non-human characters, including a group of refugee settlers who have been forced to flee their homes due to the rising sea levels and a Royal Bengal tiger that is hunting nearby. In her journey, Piya is assisted by a local fisherman named Fokir who acts as her guide. Over time, Piya forms a bond with Fokir and starts to understand the ecosystem and the relationship between humans and non-humans through Fokir's perspective. She also learns about the region's complex history which has been affected by nationalism, colonialism, and environmental degradation. The novel ends with a dramatic confrontation between Fokir and the forces of nature which drives the characters, especially Piya, to confront the fragility and interconnectedness of all living things.

The Hungry Tide can be read as an ecocritical text as it examines how human actions affect the natural environment. The Sundarbans are depicted as a delicate ecosystem that is threatened by a number of environmental factors like pollution, deforestations, and rising sea levels. The novel also highlights the ways in which human societies are shaped by the natural world, as the characters struggle to adjust to the rhythms of the tides and the shifting landscape

of the mangrove forest. The novel poses significant queries regarding the interaction between humans and non-humans. It has been demonstrated, for instance, that the Irrawaddy dolphins are extremely intelligent and gregarious animals that have a close connection to the Sundarbans" environment. As Piya strives to comprehend the non-human creatures, she develops a more eco-centric viewpoint and comes to see how all living things are intertwined. Moreover, the novel can also be viewed as a powerful critique of the harm that human activities cause the environment as well as an investigation into how the forces of nature affect human communities.

6.1 Man versus Nature in *The Hungry Tide*

The delicate interaction between humans and the natural world is explored in *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, notably in the setting of the Sundarbans, an enormous and ecologically vulnerable delta region. The book emphasizes how human interference and exploitation can sabotage nature"s delicate equilibrium, with disastrous results for both the environment and those who depend on it. People"s lives and the Sundarbans" delta habitat are also significantly shaped by natural calamities. The novel illustrates the destructive effects that cyclones, floods, and other natural calamities have on the local ecology and the people who depend on it. In the book, nature is shown to be more powerful than human beings. Natural disasters render the human race defenseless. The citizens of the Sundarbans area must endure both its blessings and its hardships. The nature of Sundarbans is so powerful that the tides there change the shapes of the islands.

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, ricer from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear under water only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are as 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 sand banks where there were none before. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 7)

Due to the fact that life in the Sundarbans is unpredictable, the villagers have worshipped Bon Bibi, the goddess of the forest, since the ancient times to protect themselves from the region's hazards. The glory of Bon Bibi is highlighted by Ghosh in his book to show how the people of the Sundarbans believe in myths in order to live in safety from the unpredictable nature of the Sundarbans. The character Kanai had no knowledge regarding Bon Bibi as he is from Calcutta, and Kusum was perplexed as to why the former was unaware of Bon Bibi's fame. Kusum was so surprised that she asked him how he saves himself when he is afraid: „Then whom do you call on when you're afraid?“ unable to untangle the implications of this, Kanai changed this subject. But the question nagged at his mind, and later in the day, he asked Nirmal about the story of Bon Bibi” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 101). The myth of Bon Bibi is significant from the standpoint of environmental concern. The villagers revere Bon Bibi because they consider nature to be sacred but also because they consider nature to be dangerous.

The locals have great a regard for animals in the region and understand how crucial they are to the delta's delicate ecosystem. For example, when Piya watches Fokir crab-catching, she realizes how the crabs play a major role in the ecosystem of the area. Without them, the cleaning process would not be possible.

Their feet and their sides were lined with hairs that formed microscopic brushes and spoons. They used these to scrape off the diatoms and other edible matter attached to each grain of sand. They were a sanitation department and a janitorial team rolled into one: they kept the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the proportion of the system's biomass? (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 142)

It can be said that the crabs are keeping the forest alive. They do not get enough credit for being one of the major anchors of the ecosystem. It is evident that the connection between the locals and the environment is profound, but it is also essential to comprehend that people in the Sundarbans remain in constant terror of their surroundings. For example, upon her arrival at Lusibari in 1950, the character Nilima was surprised to discover that wives start behaving like widows whenever their husbands go out hunting or collecting honey because at least one woman is sure to be widowed after every excursion. The men who went on such excursions became easy prey to dangerous animals like tigers and crocodiles. Thus, although the locals understand how vital the animals are to the delta's ecosystem, they are at risk of being attacked by the animals as well. An ecocritical perspective helps evaluate this indissoluble connection between nature and humankind in the novel.

Sometimes, the locals even take more drastic measures to defend themselves from these animals. In the chapter titled "A Killing," when the locals were screaming late at night that they had witnessed tiger prints leading towards the village, they decided to kill the tiger: "All around them now people were howling, their faces lit by the dancing flames: Maar! Maar!" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 294). Piya was in shock to learn this and she overlooks the fact that this tiger has eaten two people and is likely responsible for the deaths of the water buffalo and her calf as well. On the other hand, to save Piya from the mob, Fokir drags her away as people begin to throw torches onto the thatch. Piya feels optimistic, but Fokir's outlook is different. Kanai translated Fokir's words to Piya by saying that "When a tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 295). According to the article "Human-Animal Relations in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*," Ghosh's novel presents the tiger as an animal of "immense power and enigma, which defies human attempts to understand it fully. However, this

does not stop the humans from viewing the tiger as a threat to their existence” (Yashaswini 105). Therefore, there is a strong connection between human beings and other environmental factors like animals.

6.2 Ecological Imperialism in *The Hungry Tide*

The complex relationship between humankind and the environment of the Sundarbans is uncanny. The human cost of environmental conservation in *The Hungry Tide* is one of the key themes. The villagers in Sundarbans are trapped between the necessity to save the Sundarbans’ delicate ecosystem and their own survival in a hostile environment. The hardships of the local fisherman, who rely on the waters of the Sundarbans for their living, are highlighted in the book. Fishing is sometimes restricted as a result of the government’s decision to establish a nature sanctuary in order to safeguard the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins in the area. Fokir, an impoverished fisherman, reflects on the difficulties he and his community face as a result of such restrictions. Thus, the novel raises the question of whether livelihoods should come into the focus of conservation efforts.

Ghosh has depicted one of the most crucial incidents caused by the government and that is the massacre in Morichjhapi. The Morichjhapi incident serves as a historical backdrop for *The Hungry Tide*. The Morichjhapi incident refers to a violent confrontation between the West Bengal government and a group of refugees who had settled in the Sundarbans in the 1970s. The majority of the refugees, Bengali Muslims, were looking for a place to live and work in the Sundarbans after fleeing East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after the 1971 war. However, the government saw them as a threat to the environment and attempted to evict them from the area. The eviction turned violent, resulting in the deaths of several refugees and hundreds more were forced to flee. In the Morichjhapi chapter of the book, Kanai discuss the notebook that Nirmal

had left for him with his aunt Nilima, and the latter states that the island of Morichjhapi was set aside for tiger conservation. The migrants believed the newly installed Left Front government in West Bengal would not create any issue for them, but they were mistaken. The authorities repeatedly confronted the refugees, and the final altercation took place in May 1979. Kanai's uncle Nirmal was a Marxist intellectual. According to Nilima, he was a man who was in love with the idea of revolution. She says that "Men like that, even when they turn their backs on their party and their comrades, can never let go of the idea: it's the secret god that rules their hearts" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 119). In the same year when the Morichjhapi massacre occurred, Nirmal was obsessed with Morichjhapi island, and he could not bear the pain of the refugees. Therefore, after the massacre, he was in great shock and was left traumatized.

Furthermore, Nilima also explains how Kusum was lost and killed in the Morichjhapi incident. Kusum, the mother of Fokir, was a strong widow. When Fokir was still a young child, Kusum came to Nilima to get medical help for the settlers, but Nilima could not help her as the government asked the villagers to not provide any kind of help to the settlers. Thus, Nilima could not help since "The government had made it known that they would stop at nothing to evict the settlers: anyone suspected of helping them was sure to get into trouble" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 122). Nilima states that she never saw Kusum again after that day because the latter was killed in the massacre. Hence, the novel depicts the conflict between conservationists and the refugees and how the refugees are seen as a threat to the environment. While protecting the environment is important, it is also necessary to take into account the needs and worries of the people who rely on and live in such areas. Nishi Pulungurtha's article "Refugees, Settlers and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" suggests that the Morichjhapi incident in the novel is a tragic reminder of the difficulties faced by refugees and settlers who are trying to find a place to belong

in a new land. The incident also highlights the complexities of environmental conservation and the ways in which conservation efforts can sometimes displace vulnerable communities.

The novel also portrays this issue in the scene when Kanai and Piya talk about their encounter with a village mob that was torturing and attempting to set a captured tiger on fire after it killed two people. He argues that tigers murder several people each week in the Sundarbans as a whole. If this number of deaths occurred anywhere else, it would be considered genocide. Since the majority of the villagers are poor, the number of the killing rates are never reported to the government. Kanai also adds that the government and environmental organizations care more about the tigers than they do about them, and this is because there is money and political benefit to be gained from advancing conservation efforts. Therefore, in the name of the government's conservation efforts, many people end up suffering. This shows that ecocriticism has a strong ethical aspect. In the novel, Ghosh tries to inspire political activism and real change, but he raises the question of whether conservation efforts should take precedence over the well-being of the region's inhabitants.

6.3 An Ecofeminist Reading of *The Hungry Tide*

Another striking feature of this novel is its dynamic portrayal of women. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* can be interpreted as an ecofeminist text that highlights the connection between women and nature. This novel emphasizes the importance of the environment to human life and the ways in which women are intimately connected to nature. Ecofeminism is concerned with the oppression of both women and nature by patriarchal structures. In the article "Ecology, Gender,

and Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*," R. Suneetha Rani argues that the novel is "deeply rooted in the ecofeminist perspective" (Rani 870). Rani notes that the novel critiques the exploitation of nature and women by patriarchal societies and highlights the ways in which the two are interconnected. The novel's female characters also face various kinds of challenges besides the environment. In this novel, women's activities and goals directly or indirectly challenge the existing patriarchal system. Major female characters in the novel include Piya, Kusum, Nilima, and Moyna.

As an American citizen of Indian origin, Piya does not speak or even understand the local language. However, she decides to go alone to an unfamiliar country. She is well aware of the fact that she might fall into danger, but she is courageous enough to go there. There are certain points in the novel where this brave and intellectual young woman has encountered men who represent the oppressive patriarchy. The male protagonist of the novel, Kanai, is a middle-aged man from Kolkata who has travelled to Lusibari in search of a notebook that his uncle had left him. Kanai meets Piya in the beginning of the novel, and he happens to accompany Piya as a translator. However, Kanai's intention is not always virtuous because "...if life had taught him any lesson, it was that opportunity often rose unexpectedly, Piya appeared to be a case in point....If Piya decided to avail herself of her invitation, then there was no reason not to savour whatever pleasure might be an offer" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 16). Throughout the novel, Kanai makes advances towards Piya. Other men in the novel such as Mejda and the forest guard doubt that Piya would finish her research project in the Sundarbans. According to the text, "From the start Piya had sensed a threat from the guard and his friend: she knew that to return to the launch in these circumstances would be an acknowledgement of helplessness" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 56). However, Fokir's relationship with Piya is different than others. He is a

fisherman with no academic knowledge, but he is really connected to the nature. Fokir is the only one who shows respect to Piya. In fact, at the end of the novel, he sacrifices his own life to save Piya's life. Here, Mejda and the wicked forest guard represent the repressive patriarchy that degrades women while Fokir assures Piya that there are still good people out there.

Furthermore, Nilima is also trapped in the patriarchal world as she falls in love with a man who is in love with the communist dream and idealism. Due to political reasons, Nilima moves with her husband Nirmal to an island called Lusibari from Kolkata. Nilima has no children, but she starts to look after many girls after creating a Women's Union which later turns into an organization called Badabon Trust. On the other hand, the Marxist intellectual Nirmal is totally devoted to Morichjhapi island's refugees. At one point, Nilima becomes a total stranger to Nirmal. Nirmal barely visits his house and goes missing for days. Nilima does not deserve this since despite being ignored by her husband, she still tries to take care of her husband. She mentions, "I could not see that he had developed some kind of obsession with Morichjhapi and I was very uneasy about it. I knew there was going to be trouble and I just wanted to keep him from harm" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 119). Unfortunately, Nilima could not keep him from harm. The massacre of Morichjhapi traumatizes Nirmal. He suffers a mental breakdown and eventually this leads him to his death.

Additionally, the Sundarbans is the land of unpredictable life. As mentioned before, women, especially those who are married to the fisherman or honey collectors, have to live an uncertain life. The majority of the women are widowed. They always have to remain ready to wear white saris, the garments of widowhood. Kusum is also another character in this novel who lost her husband at a very young age. In fact, her mother was a widowed woman who had fallen under a wicked man named Dilip. He was planning her to sell her to a gang that used to sell

women off. According to the text, “Dilip was linked to trafficked in women. What kind of job could this procurer have found for Kusum’s mother? She was probably trapped in a brothel somewhere in Sonargachi” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 100). Like her mother, Kusum could not live a happy life. When the government decided to evict the refugees to preserve the wildlife, Kusum refused to leave. It is implied in the novel that Kusum was killed in the Morichjhapi massacre. Like the non-human animals such as the tigers facing the consequences of human encroachment, the life of Kusum is also exploited by the patriarchal society. She is defeated by the male-dominated society and by the government’s efforts to protect the environment.

Another significant female character in the novel is Moyna, the wife of Fokir. Moyna is a well-qualified nurse in Badabon Trust. She is an ambitious lady, but because she is from a conservative family, she had to marry an illiterate fisherman. However, her dream of being a nurse never dies and she keeps working hard to achieve her dream despite being married to an illiterate man. It is evident that for Moyna, “The dream of becoming a nurse was no ordinary yearning; it was product of desire as richly and completely imagined as a novel or a poem” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 135). In addition, she is strong enough to raise her voice when she senses something wrong, and this is seen when she senses Kanai’s salacious purpose. She tells him, “Kanai babu, you’re just making fool of me...I may be a village girl, Kanai babu, but I’m not so foolish to answer a question like that. I can see that you play this game with every woman who crosses your path” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 258). Moyna understands that men are not just the exploiters of nature, but they are also the exploiters of women. Thus, Moyna is able to raise her voice against Kanai in order to protect herself from the male dominant society. In the novel, Ghosh seems to link gender activism with a care for the environment.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The primary goal of this paper was to analyze two different novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hungry Tide* written by two prolific writers and environmental activists Margaret Atwood and Amitav Ghosh, respectively. Using the literary theories of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, this thesis aimed to examine how both of these eco-centric novels deal with the environment, biodiversity, environmental degradations, and eco-systems. Atwood and Ghosh are concerned with the environment, its eco-system, and how the environment is degrading due to human actions. Thus, they decided to spread awareness among the readers by publishing these two eco-centric novels.

This paper aimed to examine the similar themes of the two primary texts in regard to discovering the dynamic relationship between the nature and humankind, the human cost of environmental conservation, and the ecofeminist reading of the texts. It can certainly be said that both novels can be considered eco-centric since they explore the complex relationship between humans and nature. *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays the complicated relationship between humankind and nature. The massive environmental degradation caused by people in the pre-Gilead era leads to the formation of a totalitarian regime. As a result, to improve the environmental condition, women lose their reproductive autonomy. On the other hand, *The Hungry Tide* depicts the Sundarbans as a place of constant danger, where the tides and storms can be deadly for those who are not careful. The characters are acutely aware of the dangers that surround them. However, the novel also shows how human activities can be just as dangerous for

the environment. It also portrays how humankind is dependent on nature and its elements. The biodiversity of Sundarbans also helps the dwellers in many ways.

Both novels highlight the destructive consequences of conservation efforts by the government. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the government's biopolitical intervention is depicted as having destructive consequences on the lives and autonomy of women. In *The Hungry Tide*, the government's biopolitical intervention in the Sundarbans is depicted as having negative consequences on the local population and the refugees in Morichjhapi.

Moreover, both novels can also be seen as ecofeminist novels that draw attention to the oppression of both women and nature by patriarchal structures. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the oppressed women are stripped of their autonomy, agency, and individuality. They are restricted from the opportunity to read, write, and pursue education, and their bodies are treated as objects to be controlled and manipulated by the state. At the same time, the novel depicts the exploitation and degradation of the natural environment in Gilead. The state's control over the reproduction of women is shown to have a negative impact on the environment, as resources are exploited and degraded to support the needs of the ruling class. In *The Hungry Tide*, besides the exploitation and degradation of the environment, the patriarchal society of the Sundarbans perpetuates the oppression of women.

Both novels challenge readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment and to strive for a more sustainable and just world. Ultimately, these works demonstrate the power of literature to raise awareness about ecological and social issues and to inspire action towards a better future for all.

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