The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-VIII, September 2026
Special Issue: World Literature
www.the-criterion.com

Between Symbol and Substance: Environment and Universal Human Emotions in Haruki Murakami and Amitav Ghosh

Neeta B. Kadam
Assistant Professor, South Indian's Welfare Society's N. R. Swamy College of Commerce and Economics and Smt. Thirumalai College of Science (Autonomous)
Sewree, Wadala, Mumbai
neetakadam@siwscollege.edu.in

https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n8.24

Abstract:

This study explores how environment mediates human emotion in the fiction of Haruki Murakami (*Kafka on the Shore*) and Amitav Ghosh (*The Hungry Tide*) emphasizing the universality of human experience through an ecocritical lens. While both authors depict human emotions such as alienation, love, loss, and ethical responsibility, they engage with the natural world in distinct ways. Murakami presents symbolic and metaphysical landscapes, where forests, rivers, wells, and non-human beings shape characters' psychological and spiritual journeys. Ghosh, in contrast, situates human experience within material and historically grounded ecologies, where rivers, deltas, oceans, and human-environment interactions determine survival, cultural memory, and social identity.

This study will implement ecocritical literary theory, drawing on Lawrence Buell, who emphasizes the ethical and relational dimensions of literature's engagement with environment, and Cheryll Glotfelty, who frames ecocriticism as a tool to explore human interconnectedness with the non-human world. By analyzing Murakami's metaphorical and surreal ecological imagination alongside Ghosh's historical and environmental realism, this research examines how literature illuminates universal human emotions across culturally and stylistically diverse contexts.

Framed within world literature theory, this study argues that engagement with environment—whether symbolic or material—is central to understanding the human condition. By juxtaposing symbolic and substantive ecologies, the research demonstrates that literature from geographically and culturally distinct contexts can articulate shared human experiences, revealing the ethical and emotional significance of human-nature relationships in global literary discourse. Recent ecocritical scholarship further strengthens this comparative study by emphasizing environmental justice, material ecocriticism, and the interconnected nature of ecological crisis across cultures. Through the lens of world literature, the study demonstrates how geographically distant texts engage with shared concerns such as ecological vulnerability, displacement, and the limits of human control over nature.

Keywords: Murakami, Amitav Ghosh, Ecocriticism, Environment, Universal Human Emotions, World Literature.

Article History: Submitted-29/04/2026, Revised-30/06/2026, Accepted-20/07/2026, Published-30/09/2026.

Copyright vests with the author. Licensing: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

As environmental concerns have become increasingly central to contemporary public discourse, literary studies have also witnessed a growing interest in examining the relationship between culture and the natural world. Ecocriticism has developed as an important critical framework for understanding how literary texts deal with ecological issues, environmental ethics, and the complex interdependence between human beings and nonhuman life. It does not limit its focus to representations of nature in literary texts. Rather, ecocritical inquiry explores the ways in which environmental conditions shape cultural imagination and human experience.

The foundational contributions of Lawrence Buell and Cheryll Glotfelty have played an important role in beginning the theoretical basis of ecocritical studies. Buell argues that environmental literature encourages readers to recognize that the human history cannot be separated from natural history. Thus, environmental literature reflects on humanity's ethical responsibilities toward the nonhuman world (Buell 7). Glotfelty similarly stated that ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty xviii). These perspectives challenge conventional literary approaches that treat nature simply as a background setting. Instead, ecocriticism invites readers to consider landscapes, ecosystems, and ecological processes as active forces that influence narrative development, shape human consciousness, and contribute to the construction of meaning within literary texts.

Contemporary ecocritical scholarship has further expanded the scope of the field by engaging with issues such as environmental degradation, ecological injustice, material agency, and the environmental consequences of colonial expansion. The concept of “slow violence,” developed by Rob Nixon, is useful for understanding environmental harm that occurs slowly and is often overlooked in public discussions. Nixon points out that environmental damage does not affect everyone equally. In many cases, marginalized and economically disadvantaged communities suffer the most from the long-term effects of ecological destruction (Nixon 2). His

work has encouraged ecocritics to look beyond idealized representations of nature and to pay greater attention to the social, political, and historical factors that contribute to environmental crises.

World Literature and Transnational Ecological Consciousness

Although *Kafka on the Shore* and *The Hungry Tide* belong to different cultural and literary traditions, reading them together through the idea of world literature helps reveal their shared ecological concerns. World literature provides a useful framework for examining how literary texts from different cultural contexts respond to similar concerns. Haruki Murakami's Kafka on the Shore belongs to contemporary Japanese fiction. Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide emerges from a postcolonial Indian context. Despite their differences, both novels examine the ways in which people's experiences are shaped by the natural and social environments around them.

The two writers approach ecological concerns in evidently different ways. In Murakami's novel, forests, animals, and unusual natural occurrences often function symbolically, creating spaces where questions of memory, identity, and uncertainty can be explored. Ghosh places his story in the Sundarbans, where environmental changes such as tidal shifts and erosion affect not only the landscape but also the livelihoods and daily lives of the people who inhabit the region. Yet, both texts repeatedly return to issues of vulnerability, displacement, belonging, and the consequences of human engagement with the natural world.

Contemporary ecocritical debates have drawn attention to the global dimensions of environmental change. These debates have highlighted that ecological crises frequently surpass political and cultural boundaries. From this perspective, Murakami's symbolic landscapes and Ghosh's historically grounded Sundarbans reveal different but related ways of imagining the connection between humans and ecosystems. Comparing the two novels allows us to see how

both engage with environmental concerns, even though they belong to different literary and cultural backgraounds.

In both works, landscape functions as more than a background. Natural environments shape perception and affect moral choices that the characters make. Thus, nature contributes to the development of individual consciousness. This approach resonates with Cheryll Glotfelty's understanding of ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty xviii).

In *Kafka on the Shore*, Haruki Murakami creates landscapes that blur the boundary between external reality and inner consciousness. When Kafka Tamura retreats to a mountain cabin and enters the surrounding forest, he encounters a space where time and memory behave differently (Murakami 138–48). The forest becomes more than a refuge; it reflects Kafka's fragmented identity and his desire to escape social expectations. As he moves through the woods, the environment mirrors his confusion and becomes part of his search for self-understanding.

Nakata's ability to communicate with cats also challenges conventional humanist hierarchies. When Otsuka remarks, "I must say, though, that for a human you have an odd way of talking," (Murakami 49), the statement questions the idea that rational language defines humanity. Nakata, who is illiterate and socially marginal, lacks formal education yet possesses a different form of understanding through his connection with animals. His character suggests that knowledge can emerge through coexistence with the nonhuman world rather than domination. In this way, the novel reflects what ecocriticism calls more-than-human relationality and illustrates Glotfelty's idea of an "earth-centered approach" (Glotfelty xviii).

In *The Hungry Tide*, questions of identity and responsibility arise through direct engagement with a changing environment. The Sundarbans is portrayed as a delta constantly

reshaped by tides and erosion, where land frequently appears and disappears (Ghosh 7). Stability is rare, and settlements remain uncertain. Under these conditions, identity becomes closely linked to ecological vulnerability.

Piya Roy's experience illustrates this process. As a marine biologist trained in Western scientific methods, she initially studies the Irrawaddy dolphins through instruments and classification. However, her research depends on Fokir's practical knowledge of tidal currents and hidden channels, which cannot easily be replaced by maps or technology. Through their collaboration, Piya gradually shifts from a detached researcher to a more engaged participant, and her later commitment to conservation grows from lived experience rather than external authority.

The memory of the Morichjhapi incident further connects environment with political history. Refugees who settled on the mangrove islands were later expelled after the region was declared a wildlife reserve. In this situation, conservation rhetoric became a means of exclusion, linking environmental policy with migration and state power (Ghosh 261–70). The islands thus become contested spaces where ecological preservation and human survival conflict.

These examples show that in the Sundarbans ethical responsibility emerges through direct exposure to environmental risk. Belonging develops within tidal instability, and obligation arises from the shared vulnerability of those living in the region. Lawrence Buell's observation that environmental texts present the nonhuman world "not merely as a framing device but as a presence that suggests that human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell 7) is clearly reflected here.

Environmental Change and the Limits of Human Control

In *Kafka on the Shore*, reality appears unstable from the beginning. Strange events—such as fish or leeches falling from the sky—suggest that the natural world does not always follow predictable laws. These incidents disturb ordinary expectations and imply that human understanding cannot fully explain reality.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh avoids surreal events but presents instability through environmental conditions. The Sundarbans is described as a landscape shaped by constant tidal movement, where water reaches far inland and areas of forest frequently disappear and reappear (Ghosh 7). Stability becomes an illusion. As Kanai observes, “nothing escapes the maw of the tides” (Ghosh 8). Human life unfolds within a shifting environment that continually redraws its boundaries. While Murakami uses surreal disruptions and Ghosh relies on ecological realism, both novels show that human existence remains exposed to forces beyond rational control. Lawrence Buell’s argument that human history unfolds within natural history is evident here: migration, settlement, and survival are inseparable from environmental change.

The Rice Bowl Hill incident in Murakami’s novel highlights this uncertainty. During a routine school outing under a clear sky (Murakami 83), the children suddenly collapse without visible cause. Medical explanations such as poisoning or hysteria fail to account for the event. The forest clearing becomes a place where established knowledge breaks down. Although the children show no physical injuries, their consciousness appears suspended, leaving them physically present but mentally absent. The teacher’s later confession deepens this ambiguity. She recalls being overwhelmed by fear and striking a student—an action she cannot fully explain (Murakami 102). Years later, she admits that some experiences resist clear understanding.

A similar tension appears in *The Hungry Tide*, though it emerges through historical and ecological realities. The Morichjhapi episode recounts how refugees were expelled after the island was declared a protected forest (Ghosh 261–70). In this context, conservation language justified displacement, while personal memories of the event continued to challenge official narratives.

In both novels, ecological spaces reveal the limits of human authority. The forest and the delta expose how fragile systems of knowledge, governance, and order become when confronted with forces beyond human control. The Sundarbans itself embodies instability: land forms and disappears under tidal pressure (Ghosh 7), making settlement uncertain. The tiger's intrusion shows how easily the boundary between human and nonhuman worlds collapses, while the memory of Morichjhapi links ecological space with displacement and political power.

Ecological Rupture and Environmental Governance: Rice Bowl Hill and Morichjhapi

A comparison of *Kafka on the Shore* and *The Hungry Tide* reveals two different literary engagements with ecological space. Murakami portrays the forest as a mysterious space that unsettles regular ways of seeing and understanding the world. Ghosh, on the other hand, depicts the Sundarbans as a real and fragile environment shaped by environmental challenges as well as social and political pressures. Despite these differences, both novels suggest that nature cannot be fully controlled or understood by human beings, though each explores this idea from a distinct perspective.

The Rice Bowl Hill episode in *Kafka on the Shore* occurs during wartime Japan, a period marked by intense social discipline and ideological conformity. During a school excursion, a group of children suddenly lose consciousness after entering a forested area. The incident leaves no clear physical evidences. The official attempts, that were made to interprete this event don't reach a definitive conclusion. The children eventually recover, but the event

leaves behind questions that neither experts nor authorities can fully answer. Within the forest, everyday assumptions about reality are challenged. This event that occurs in the forest is an experience that authorities struggle to make sense of.

Ghosh's treatment of ecological space is grounded in a specific historical context. The Morichjhapi episode recalls how refugee settlers from an island in the Sundarbans were forced to leave because the island was designated as protected land. As Ross Mallick notes, conservation policies played a significant role in legitimizing the eviction of communities that had already established lives in the region (Mallick 104–25). By integrating this history into the narrative, Ghosh determines that environmental discourse cannot be separated from questions of governance, citizenship, and access to land.

The Sundarbans itself occupies a central place in the novel. Its shifting geography, shaped by tides, cyclones, and erosion, creates conditions of continual uncertainty (Ghosh 7–8). People in this region adapt to these changing conditions rather than trying to control them. This tension becomes evident in the episode involving the Royal Bengal tiger. For conservationists, the animal represents an endangered species requiring protection. For villagers whose livelihoods remain precarious, this animal appear as an immediate threat (Ghosh 103–05). The conflict demonstrates how environmental priorities often acquire different meanings depending on one's social and material circumstances.

Rob Nixon's formulation of "slow violence" offers a useful framework for understanding these conditions. In *The Hungry Tide*, ecological damage does not emerge solely through disasters. Instead, gradual processes such as erosion, displacement, and environmental marginalization shape everyday existence of human beings (Nixon 2). The novel highlights forms of suffering that build up over time and are often overlooked.

Liminal Ecologies and Decentred Subjectivity

The changing landscapes in both novels can also be examined through the perspective of material ecocriticism, which views the physical environment as an active force rather than a passive background. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann suggest that matter itself participates in shaping stories, histories, and human experiences (Iovino and Oppermann 1–5). This idea is reflected in Murakami's portrayal of forests, rain, and shifting atmospheric conditions, which influence perception, memory, and emotional states. Similarly, in *The Hungry Tide*, rivers, tides, and mangrove ecosystems directly affect movement, relationships, and survival within the Sundarbans (Ghosh 7–8). In both texts, the natural world functions as a dynamic presence that shapes narrative development and human experience rather than serving merely as descriptive scenery.

In *Kafka on the Shore*, early travel scenes show how weather shapes the characters' perception of reality. Light after rain, damp air, and shifting skies influence mood and create uncertainty. The bus, moving steadily along fixed routes, represents order and routine. Yet this mechanical stability contrasts with the constantly changing weather outside. Rest stops appear artificial and disconnected from the surrounding landscape, reflecting how modern life often separates itself from nature. Still, the hills, moisture, and open air remind us that the natural world remains present. As a result, identity in these scenes appears unstable and fluid, much like the changing weather.

Ghosh presents a similar instability but focuses on land and water rather than atmosphere. In *The Hungry Tide*, travel through rivers and tidal channels reveals that maps cannot fully capture the region. Water changes direction, islands appear and disappear, and villages cannot remain permanent because the land itself keeps shifting. Movement through this landscape shows that the place is never fixed.

Ecological Spaces and Human Vulnerability:

In the forest sections of *Kafka on the Shore*, ordinary tools of direction—compasses, marked trees, and mapped paths—quickly become unreliable. Time seems to loosen and boundaries blur. The forest resists explanation and cannot be fully controlled or categorized. Murakami presents it as a space where attempts at mastery fail and where Kafka begins to confront a different understanding of himself.

A similar experience appears in the Sundarbans of *The Hungry Tide*. This delta landscape also disrupts orientation. Channels divide unexpectedly, islands appear and disappear, and familiar routes become dangerous as tides shift. Maps alone cannot guide movement through this terrain. Instead, navigation depends on practical awareness—reading currents, winds, and tidal rhythms. Like Murakami's forest, the Sundarbans reveals the limits of human control.

The delta also functions as a landscape marked by historical violence, much as Murakami's woods carry traces of wartime trauma. In *The Hungry Tide*, the memory of the Morichjhapi massacre survives less through official archives than through oral stories and the altered landscape. Damaged settlements, shifting landforms, and local narratives preserve fragments of the past. The environment does not speak directly, but it retains signs of conflict and displacement.

Both novels also question how memory is preserved. In *Kafka on the Shore*, the Komura Memorial Library symbolizes organized cultural memory through books and manuscripts. Although it appears stable, the burning of documents reveals how easily written records can disappear. In *The Hungry Tide*, official reports claim authority over historical truth, particularly regarding conservation policies, yet they often ignore the experiences of refugees and marginalized communities. As a result, memory survives mainly through personal stories and the changing landscape of the islands, though this form of remembrance is also fragile.

Forgetting occurs differently in the two novels. In Murakami's narrative, memory fades through psychological loss, as seen in Miss Saeki's weakening recollections. In Ghosh's work, forgetting happens through environmental processes. Cyclones, tides, and long periods of neglect gradually erase communities and their histories. While Murakami's forest-town creates a suspended atmosphere where time seems paused, the Sundarbans intensifies time through erosion and instability, producing ongoing uncertainty.

The authors also differ in their portrayal of human connection with nature. Murakami depicts merging with the landscape as a philosophical experience that unsettles individual identity. Ghosh, however, presents becoming part of the environment as a material condition of vulnerability. In *The Hungry Tide*, ecological instability leads not to reflection but to insecurity and historical fragility.

Symbolic elements reinforce this contrast. In *Kafka on the Shore*, the entrance stone acts as a mysterious link between human events and natural forces, influencing the movement of the narrative. In *The Hungry Tide*, there is no magical object; instead, the tides themselves play this role. Rising and falling waters determine when people can travel, fish, or meet one another, showing that human plans remain dependent on environmental rhythms.

The forest in Murakami's narrative and the Sundarbans in Ghosh's work shape the characters' actions and identities. Without these environments, the stories would become purely psychological narratives. Instead, both texts emphasize that human life remains closely connected to changing ecological systems shaped by geography, history, and natural forces.

Ecology and Structures of Violence:

Lawrence Buell argues that in environmental literature the nonhuman world appears not merely as background but as a presence that reveals how human history is intertwined with natural history (Buell 7). This idea clarifies the dynamics in both novels. In *Kafka on the Shore*,

the disturbing experiments on cats suggest that what appears as individual cruelty is linked to larger systems that treat nature as something to be controlled or used. In *The Hungry Tide*, conservation policies and the eviction of refugees show how political power operates within ecological spaces. Decisions about forests and wildlife inevitably affect human communities.

These examples demonstrate that institutions such as science, government, and environmental policy do not function separately from nature. Instead, they operate within ecological conditions and produce consequences for both human and nonhuman life. As a result, such systems cannot claim to be neutral or detached from the environment.

In Murakami’s novel, Nakata intervenes to stop cruelty toward animals. His action represents an ethical response, yet it does not change the larger system that permits such violence. Structures that treat animals as objects remain in place. A similar tension appears in *The Hungry Tide*. Readers may find themselves identifying both with displaced communities seeking security and with efforts to protect vulnerable ecosystems. Yet neither *Kafka on the Shore* nor The Hungry Tide offers a simple ethical resolution to these competing concerns. The tensions represented in the novels arise from conditions that extend beyond the intentions of any single individual. Acts of empathy, while significant, do not eliminate the social, political, and environmental pressures that shape human decisions.

Both texts draw attention to the ways ecological conflicts become rooted within larger institutional frameworks. Questions of land use, conservation, governance, and development are shown to affect human and non-human lives simultaneously. As a result, environmental damage is shown not as the result of a single mistake but as the outcome of policies, economic interests, and decisions that often treat complex ecosystems as things to be controlled.

Such representations resonate with Lawrence Buell's argument that environmental writing expands the reader's awareness of the connections between human activity and the

more-than-human world (Buell 2–3). The novels encourage readers to think about their attitudes toward nature and the impact of environmental decisions.

Conclusion

The comparative reading of *Kafka on the Shore* and *The Hungry Tide* proves that environment occupies a central position in the construction of human experience. In both novels, the landscape shapes emotions, memories, and moral understanding instead of serving merely as a background.

In *Kafka on the Shore*, forests, stones, animals, and unexplained natural phenomena complicate conventional distinctions between the human and the nonhuman. The novel repeatedly places its characters in spaces where ordinary systems of knowledge become uncertain. Experiences of loneliness, loss, and self-discovery are closely connected to these landscapes. These experiences resist stable interpretation and interrupt assumptions about human supremacy.

The environmental world of *The Hungry Tide* is grounded in the specific geography and history of the Sundarbans. Here, ecological instability directly shapes everyday existence. Tides, erosion, migration, and encounters with wildlife influence social relations as well as personal lives. The novel's emotional conflicts emerge from material conditions that continually expose the precarious nature of survival in the region. Questions of responsibility are therefore linked to encounters with a landscape that remains both sustaining and threatening.

Placing these novels in conversation also emphasizes the value of comparative and transnational approaches to environmental literature. Although they emerge from distinct literary traditions, each text engages with concerns that range beyond national boundaries.

Environmental uncertainty, ecological change, displacement, and vulnerability appear in different ways in both novels, but they remain important themes throughout the stories.

The significance of these novels lies in their attention to the limits of human control. Murakami's enigmatic forests and Ghosh's changing delta landscape offer contrasting representations of ecological experience, but both direct attention to the fragile conditions that sustain human life. Their works suggest that environmental change is not simply a background issue affecting society from the outside. It is woven into questions of identity, memory, belonging, and survival. The novels present human experiences as closely linked to nature, inviting readers to reconsider how people interact with the environments they live in. Ultimately, this comparison shows that environmental awareness extends across literary cultures.

Works Cited

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard UP, 1995.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197–222.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, and George B. Handley, editors. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. Oxford UP, 2011.

Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. U of Georgia P, 1996.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. HarperCollins, 2004.

Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana UP, 2014.

Mallick, Ross. "Refugee Resettlement in the Sundarbans: The Morichjhapi Incident." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 58, no. 1, 1999, pp. 104–25.

Murakami, Haruki. *Kafka on the Shore*. Translated by Philip Gabriel, Vintage International, 2005.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

Oppermann, Serpil. "From Ecological Postmodernism to *Material Ecocriticism*." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2012, pp. 459–76.