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Marginalization of Sundarbans' Marichjhapi: Ecocriticism Approaches in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Deep Halder's *Blood Island*

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Abstract: The article identifies the Sundarbans landscape as a 'marginal scape' in the context of the Marichjhapi Massacre of 1979. It applies the conservationist vs. environmental (in)justice approach of ecocriticism to Amitava Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Deep Halder's *Blood Island: An Oral History of Marichjhapi Massacre*. It relates the idea of environmental discrimination and injustice based on caste to the misallocation of the 'Commons'. For the Marichjhapi Dalit Refugees, the Sundarbans landscape and its ecological attributes become an essential medium in reconstructing their layered identity after migrating from Bangladesh to Sundarbans, which becomes marginalized. The paper argues that the management of environmental resources/landscapes has always been in the hands of the rich, entwined with Brahminical hegemony, who try to impose political geography over ecological systems to suppress the dispossessed. It concludes by comprehending that any justice-based approach (here, social and environmental) still favours non-human beings and ends up causing a multi-layered crisis for marginalized human populations.



Citation: Biswas, Camellia, and Sharada Channarayapatna. 2022. Marginalization of Sundarbans' Marichjhapi: Ecocriticism Approaches in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Deep Halder's *Blood Island*. *Literature* 2: 169–178. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature2030014>

Academic Editor: Jerome F. Bump

Received: 1 January 2022

Accepted: 11 July 2022

Published: 12 August 2022

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Keywords: marginalization; environmental (in)justice; ecocriticism; Sundarbans; Marichjhapi

1. Introduction

'Marginality' is the position of people living on the fringe areas, with limited or no access to resources and opportunities controlled by hegemonic forces. They are often excluded from the societal process, entwined with other aspects of economic, geographical and ecological function (Von Braun and Gatzweiler 2014, p. 3). 'Marginality' was introduced in 1980, during the environmental justice movement, which aimed to locate environmental problems across the globe, such as the lack of rights during the Bengal famines and many other climate disasters like floods and cyclones (Pelc 2017, pp. 4–5).

Much of the literature on environmental justice portrays indigenous peoples in harmony with nature and defiant of the encroachment by capitalist markets and governments over their livelihoods. The article uses the term 'environmental (in)justice', highlighting both justice and injustice and how these two terms act as counterparts in Western notions to pay less attention to marginalized people¹ and social injustice than to nature. The environmental (in)justice movement often portrays 'economically backward people' as allies for environmental activists against large-scale projects and policies (Mallick 1999, p. 118). However, when portrayed as environmental degraders, marginal communities do not fit into the normative depiction given by Western environmentalists. They therefore tend to be overlooked in the prevalent literature—for instance, the Marichjhapi Dalit² refugees, represented as 'environmentally unfriendly'. National and international conservation groups offered them no support because they stood against the state-imposed rules and regulations for conservation.

This paper brings forth the reflections on 'marginality' from the ecocritical lens of conservationism and environmental (in)justice associated with the Dalit refugees of

Marichjhapi in the context of two primary texts: Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Deep Halder's *Blood Island*.

The Hungry Tide, written in 2004, revolves around the character 'Piya', a cetologist from the USA who comes to Sundarbans for her research on Dolphins. During her travels, she engages a local fisherman, Fokir, to help in her research. She finds a translator in Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi and learns about his aunt and uncle: Nilima and Nirmal, longtime settlers in the Sundarbans, Lusibari. The *Blood Island* is an oral history of the Marichjhapi constructed from the narratives of nine people who are all connected with the bloodbath in some way—survivors, descendants of survivors and other accomplices associated with this incident. It reveals the unexpected flux of refugee tragedies³ interfaced with the rising change in the political scenario of West Bengal in 1970. The victims talk about their journey around Marichjhapi, highlighting life struggles, endurance and courage.

The massacre accounts for state-sponsored violence on Dalit refugees, mainly comprising lower sub-caste groups of 'Namasudras'⁴ and 'Poundras'⁵. These refugees migrated from East Bengal (also known as East Pakistan) to West Bengal in India during the 1960–70s.

Scholars, such as Ross Mallick, Annu Jalais, Amitava Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* and, more recently, Deep Halder in *Blood Island*, have written about the many ways in which the Dalit refugees were wronged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These writers attempted to observe the incident as a carnage disguised behind the incumbent government's rigidity in safeguarding the ecological aspect of the landscape. According to Jalais (2005, p. 1760), the majority of the Marichjhapi settlers were from the lower caste and were given the 'shriff' by the Left Front government, which professed to be 'the government for the casteless and classless people' but was bound by upper-caste hegemony.

'There was a meeting in Bhilai, where Jyoti Basu himself had made a promise to refugees that they would be welcomed back with open arms once the Left came to power in West Bengal'. (Halder 2019, pp. 113–14)

One can infer from the above excerpt that the massacre was orchestrated by the then-West Bengal administration of the Left Front, which had pledged during their election campaigns to return refugees from the Dandakaranya refugee camps to Bengal if they were elected. However, after winning the elections, their promises turned out to be a betrayal. They did not rescue the refugees, and many who fled the camps to settle in Marichjhapi in anticipation of the promises were either forcibly evicted or killed (Elahi 1981; Mallick 1999, pp. 104–5; Jalais 2005, pp. 1758–60; Chowdhury 2011, p. 669; Sen 2015, pp. 112–14; and Halder 2019, pp. 11, 73, 113–18). The paper analyses the multiple ecological, social and spatial processes of marginalization as depicted in the two texts using the case study of Marichjhapi. The evolution of India's forest conservation legislation and various conservationist discourses that emerged after the Stockholm conference in 1972 are examples of ecological processes. Dalits (also known as Scheduled Caste in India and Chotoloks⁶ in Bengal), tribal and religious minority groups, occupy the Sundarban landscape. In this paper, the marginal population corresponds to Dalit refugees/Chotoloks, while the dominant population refers to upper-caste/Bhadralok⁷ or powerful people, such as the state. The author enumerates the process of marginalization through the lens of environmental (in)justice extracted from conservationism, whereby the 'politically and socially marginal', such as the Dalit refugees of the Sundarbans, are pushed into 'ecologically marginal spaces' of the Marichjhapi island and an 'economically inferior position', resulting in their increasing demand for the limited productivity of the landscape or state subsidies and dole.

2. Conservationist Approach to Environmental (In)justice in Ecocriticism

Nature writing and criticism are used in 'conservation ecocriticism' to increase appreciation and attitudes toward the natural world. It also aids in the preservation and extension of wilderness, as well as the conservation of endangered species and other aspects of environmental care (Reed 2002, p. 148). *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh is a good example of

depicting the relationship between the Sundarbans' natural environment and their humans. His writing creates the concept of conservation in the Sundarbans landscape by integrating scientific explorations and experiences with legends, myths and history, thereby expressing human interaction with the non-human realm. The main character, 'Piya', and her efforts to study the dolphin, an endangered species in the Sundarbans' ecosystem, show the reader how both the author and the reader can consciously connect with nature. It also starts a conversation about the world's environmental looming catastrophes, such as species extinction, which demands conservationists' intervention.

'These waters had once contained large numbers of dolphins . . . several 19th-century zoologists had testified to it . . . Piya had been hoping the trip would yield a few encounters with knowledgeable boat people, but such opportunities had been scarce'. (Ghosh 2005, p. 45)

Power, hegemony and knowledge, on the other hand, play a key role in conservation discourses, similar to how the state used its 'power' in Marichjhapi to declare the region a reserve forest and prohibit human habitation. It demonstrates how state-sponsored conservation notions can be radical and exclusionary. As propounded by John Muir, Bill Adams or Terborgh, classical conservationism has enhanced the concept of protecting non-humans, which involves the forcible evacuation of marginal people from their homes to maintain the pristineness of the protected area (Wapner 2013). They opted for a nature reserve that is 'restricted' and 'people-free'.

Contemporary environmentalists criticize and question traditional conservationists, branding them outmoded for ignoring indigenous and marginalized populations where the wilderness and other protected places fail as exclusionary conservation (Brockington et al. 2008, p. 50; Adams and Hutton 2007, pp. 156–57). This remark further points to the continued loss of biodiversity and an increase in species extinctions worldwide as prima facie evidence that wilderness preservation, like that of the dolphins, has failed. They are nearly extinct in the Sundarbans (Ghosh 2019). One of the key reasons for its failure is the exclusion of natives and their knowledge from conservation efforts. When they are incorporated, if at all, it is in an exclusionary way, by forcing displacement or uprooting their traditional links to the land, which has a drastic socioeconomic impact on them, as witnessed in Marichjhapi. Both fictional and nonfictional texts explore how the state views nature as superior to humans and advises forceful intervention with self-destructive results.

Cajete (2000), a Native American anthropologist, asserts that Natives/locals have a more nuanced understanding of environmental knowledge since it is typically transmitted intergenerationally, as evidenced in *The Hungry Tide*, where not only Fokir but also his son Tutul have superior knowledge of the landscape, the river and nature compared to Piya's academic expertise. To Piya and Kanai's surprise, Fokir explains that his mother Kusum had told him stories about the dolphins in Garjontola as a child, about how they were Bonbibi's messengers who delivered news of the rivers and floods. The novel particularises folktales and mythology into contemporary human lives on multiple occasions, like the tradition of worshipping Bonbibi (Symbol of Mother Nature/Forest Guardian) or attending Bonbibi Jatra (Ghosh 2005, pp. 176–88). This demonstrates the residents' long-standing relationship with the Sundarbans' biophysical environment, where ecological knowledge is shared as a customary practice.

The classical conservation approach also leads to another ecocritical discourse called 'environmental (in)justice'. In this discourse, humans, who are 'in power' and more advanced than other life forms, can bring justice to nature. They are in charge of maintaining the balance between humans and non-humans. This authoritative discourse serves humans' unappeasable need to dominate the natural world and locals by ignoring race, class, gender and caste, which is essential to understanding the history and future of environmental thinking and behaviour.

An environmental (in)justice thesis frequently investigates how the ecosystem functions and the necessity to address the global environmental issue and then brings attention to the effects of environmental deterioration and its consequences on humanity. However,

for decades, people in power, such as governments and profit-seeking absentee capitalists, have enabled the worst forms of environmental destruction. It has supported various corporate policies that have wreaked havoc on marginal third-world communities. When contemporary thinkers, such as Mishra (2016), antagonize environmental (in)justice as ‘if humans try to damage nature, they would be paid back by their own money’, it trivializes the death and suffering of Dalit refugees to save the pristine forest and its Royal Bengal tiger. Similarly, if we bring in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis’ findings, it highlights how powerful people misuses and exploits the non-human entities for their benefits in the name of bringing justice to ecological world. Berkman (2020) in his paper *Must We Love Non-Human Animals? A Post-Laudato Si Thomistic Perspective*, says that human society, with its distinct scientific viewpoint, tends to view creation as nothing more than nature. It stems from the cultural authority of what Michel Foucault refers to as a specific ‘look’, or a scientific gaze. It is characteristic of persons with intellectual authority and/or positions of power to objectify what they observe. According to Pope Francis, persons who adopt a scientific perspective toward nonhuman creatures ‘will be masters, consumers, and cruel exploiters unwilling to impose limits on their immediate needs.’ To view an animal, in this case the Royal Bengal tiger and the mangrove forest, through a ‘scientific’ lens or to measure their value based on our economic or medical advantage is humiliating and ‘disintegrating’. Consequently, it implies that one person’s conception of environmental justice is unjust for another.

Gopal Guru (2000) says Dalits are marginalized in the ‘natural realm’. It is situated in degraded, remote places where Dalits live and use inferior resources. When they begin to use better natural resources and spaces intended to benefit dominant classes, they disrupt the power hegemony established by dominant groups. It is comparable to how the inhabitants of Marichjhapi seized control of the island, which was intended as a tiger habitat, by increasing tourism aesthetics via palm and coconut plantations and thereby supporting capitalist conservation. This argument continues to state that conservation principles do not always reflect the environmental justice of marginalized communities. Because of this, ecocriticism needs to shift its main focus to the indigenous and marginalized people to obtain an accurate picture of the connections between culture, criticism and the environment. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh fails to acknowledge how the inclusion of class, caste, race and gender may have permitted greater environmental accountability in recognizing the ‘injustice’ on the marginal and poor inhabitants of Marichjhapi.

On the contrary, Halder’s *Blood Island* is an appropriate response to the injustice that has been perpetrated against Dalit refugees. It defies the oft-cited dichotomy between Bhodrolok and the lower classes, and Halder explicitly shows how marginals are treated throughout his writings. He reveals how marginalized Bengalis, particularly the lower caste Bengalis, are forced to live and operate inside a system of illegality, injustice and tragic history, which we address in the following sections.

3. Marginal Identity vs. Dominant Identity

Because the Sundarbans’ ecosystem traverses India and Bangladesh’s political and administrative borders, it automatically creates a multi-layered dilemma regarding conservation, coastal, climate disaster and socioeconomic concerns. Thus, without a doubt, the Sundarbans represent one of the region’s most intricate landscapes and have woven a narrative that is incomprehensible to the Bhodroloks. The Sundarban islands and islanders are especially susceptible to global warming and hydro-climatic dangers, culminating in the total submersion and numerous others on the brink of inundation. For the islanders, their marginality manifests in their daily position and struggles in fishing, crab collection, honey and other non-timber forest produce collection, where tigers, snakes, crocodiles and sharks often attack them (Nadiruzzaman and Wrathall 2015, p. 26). The islanders handle their marginality as Dalits, Adivasis and religious minorities through their oral histories.

The letter excerpts from *The Hungry Tide*, found in the journal written by Nirmal to his nephew Kanai, give a thick description of his ineffable attachment to Marichjhapi. In letter-based chapters, he shows how refugees claimed their identity as Bastu-Hara, or the

dispossessed, and were let down by the then-left-wing government regarding the dream of having a homeland. Unlike Halder, Ghosh does not go into detail regarding the plight of Dalit refugees in refugee camps before they decide to declare Marichjhapi as their home. Despite his best efforts to integrate them within a larger geographical understanding of the Sundarbans' landscape, he falls short of explaining the microcosm traces of Dalit and marginal atrocities. Ghosh chose his poor and afflicted characters as locals, such as Fokir, Kusum and Horen, and his saviours as upper caste Bhodroloks, such as Piya, Kanai, Nirmal and Nilima.

Furthermore, Kanai continues to transcribe Nirmal's account over Fokir or Horen's, proving that Ghosh meant to emphasize the Bhodroloks' narrative over that of the locals. The novel's central characters, Fokir, Nilima and Nirmal, are all born outside the Sundarbans. Nonetheless, they adapt to their surroundings and inherit the landscape by reconstructing a new identity. However, Fokir's identification remains vague as he strives to find his native roots in Lusibari, as does the identity of every other refugee in Marichjhapi whose identity is irrelevant to the state, while Nilima becomes 'Mashima'⁸ and Nirmal becomes 'Mastermoshai'⁹; these famous titles hold privileged positions, especially for those from Kolkata who relocate to the Sundarbans to 'civilize' islanders.

In *Blood Island*, Halder describes the narratives in detail, both in terms of personal and collective form, thus constructing 'narratives of identity' (Anderson 1991). The interlocutors attempt to explain how they see themselves and how the world sees them, i.e., beyond the image of a helpless refugee and Chotoloks (the classless and casteless) who dared to be self-sustaining, reliant and not dependent on the Bengali Bhodrolok (Biswas 2020). As one of the interviewees from the book *Manaranjan Baypari* (Chapter 9) says:

'They could not tolerate the fact that we could dare to dream without bending before him. Marichjhapi settlers had declared that they did not need any government assistance. They had formed their own community and had become self-sufficient'. (p. 187)

The Bhodrolok protagonists in *The Hungry Tide*, whether Piya or Kanai, lured to the Sundarban for various reasons, could never have imagined the 'cost' these Dalit refugees had to pay to preserve the pristineness of the Sundarban forest. Environmentalists will always debate if the suffering was justifiable, especially when city-dwelling Bhodrolok never imagined they could survive in the Sundarbans due to the odd geology, natural disasters and dangerous wildlife (Mallick 1999, p. 114).

'At no moment can human beings doubt the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy and expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes, and crocodiles'. (Ghosh 2005, p. 21)

Thus, in the Sundarbans, for human habitations, space becomes marginal too, and those inhabiting it are inferior to the urban populace. Simultaneously, the landscape evokes social and ecological longing for the East Bengali refugees' long-lost homeland. The hamlets of Kumirmari, Satjelia and Lusibari (the three major villages described in Ghosh and Halder's book) are populated by East Bengalis or individuals of the same marginalized group who practice fishing and agriculture, which made the refugees feel more at home.

Regardless, the same landscape brings capital and state honour for its globally acknowledged heritage status and unique habitat of the Royal Bengal Tiger, which forced the state to ban any movement into and out of Marichjhapi in 1979 under the Forest Conservation Act. Mallick (1999, p. 110; Chowdhury 2011, p. 669; Halder 2019, pp. 113–18), describes the Dalit refugees' detention as a 'forced evacuation' that resembled the removal of pests from the Sundarbans landscape's destined space for tigers (Mallick 1999, p. 110; Chowdhury 2011, p. 669; Halder 2019, pp. 113–18).

'... to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements ... Our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust.'. (Ghosh 2005, p. 284)

‘It has to be saved from its trees; it has to be saved for its animals. It is a part of a reserve forest; it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all over the world’. (Ghosh 2005, p. 284)

‘For eighteen long days, there was complete lockdown on such movements to the other side. There was no food to eat. Children died in large numbers, ‘Khub koshto [a lot of pain]’. Mana’s tears flow freely now. When people tried to venture out, they were attacked by the river police with tear gas and bullets. Women were raped’. (Halder 2019, pp. 149–50)

Both authors emphasize the injustice suffered by the residents of Marichjhapi in the extracts mentioned above. The torture inflicted on these Dalit exiles did not occur on a single day but was ongoing from the end of 1978 until May 1979. They threatened people, attacked them randomly, raped refugee women, shut off food and water supply networks from adjacent communities and imposed a total lockdown. It is also said that they found sacrificing the lives on the Marichjhapi island to be easy. Most people there, were unregistered Indian citizens, so sacrificing a few lives for biodiversity and the tiger was a simple trade-off. The state and naturalists purposefully created the ‘royal’ identity to elevate the tiger to a global figure and provide it with much-needed protection from human interference. Protected areas (PA) like reserve forests have ideated western conceptions and restrictive methods to conservation laws of integrating the ‘wilderness’ since colonial regimes (Adams and Hutton 2007, pp. 152–56). A similar classical conservation idea was given by Soulé and Terborgh (1999). Marichjhapi’s ‘order and discipline input to maintain biodiversity in the developing countries by asking the international elite forces to be legally allowed to carry guns and make arrests for more robust governance’ is a violation of human rights from a socio-environmental ‘justice’ point of view.

Ghosh, in some instances, contradicts his pro-poor stance through Nilima’s character, an ally to the state’s decision. She is a law-abiding person who refuses to provide medical treatment to Kusum or the Marichjhapi residents because she believes they are anti-government. If she had assisted them, she would have lost funds from the government for her hospital and related objectives. As stated in the statement, ‘Nilima was concerned about the hospital and the Women’s Union; she could not afford to alienate the government’. She had to consider the ‘greater good’ (p. 209). Moreover, in her conversation with the doctor in the chapter ‘Alive’, both characters appear to appreciate the fact that ‘when a party comes to power, it must govern; it is subject to certain compulsions’ (p. 451), even if it leads to genocide.

Along with tigers, Ghosh focuses on prominent species such as the Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) and saltwater crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*), emphasizing the Sundarban biodiversity’s exoticness. According to Ramchandra Guha (1990), Western and Global North environmentalists, such as Piya in Ghosh’s novel, prioritize endangered species protection over the well-being of local people. Piya’s incognizance of the human–nature interactions among the Sundarban inhabitants are well captured when she tries her best to save the trapped tiger in a livestock pen that is tortured by the villagers but is helpless in the face of the hostile crowd. Another example is how she is more interested in the existence and peril of the dolphins than how her guide, Fokir, understands the river better than a researcher like her. In contrast to Ghosh’s exoticization of the Sundarbans and their biodiversity, Halder’s novel is an example of human–animal conflict resulting from the Marichjhapi massacre.

‘Do you know how the tigers in the Sundarbans turned into man-eaters? Some bodies would be drowned in the rivers by tying them to boulders; others would be dumped in deep forests. The tigers developed a taste for the human flesh of the dead of Marichjhapi’. (Halder 2019, p. 189)

Several scholarships argue that ‘corpses of refugees’ floating in forest rivers and creeks give tigers a taste for human flesh, making humans an ‘easy access’ as prey and turning tigers into man-eaters (Mallick 1999, p. 114; Jalais 2008, p. 39). These narratives provide

more evidence that the safety of the forest and the tiger was the primary priority, as it was presented as a source of national pride globally. Renowned historian Ross Mallick (1999) brings forth various narratives on how tigers' 'identity' and 'existence' became more significant than the Dalit refugees. In the 1970s, the Sundarbans were the subject of international concern due to the large financing they received from the WWF¹⁰ to conserve tigers and the mangrove ecosystem. This resulted in people all over the world wanting to help protect a world heritage site and provided more reasons for forcing out the refugees.

4. Environmental Injustice in Accessing Commons

In Marichjhapi, injustice can also be studied through the lens of caste discrimination (Sharma 2017, p. 2). The Bhodroloks, or the governmental representation of nature and the environment, have suppressed and erased Dalit environmentalist narratives from popular history (Sharma 2012, p. 46). The complexity of the Sundarban landscape is linked with the social construction of 'caste' and the naturalness of the 'commons', as shown in Halder's *Blood Island*, which attempts to rescue marginal history from the dustbin of history and oral narratives. Commons are also known as natural resources, such as land, forest, water bodies, grasslands, roads, air and soil, which have been a focal point of debate among environmentalists of all types for decades. When people look at shared resources in a social setting, especially when public arenas are built for everyone to enjoy, and marginalized or lower caste people want to be included, the situation becomes tense and contentious (Thorat 2010; Nagla 2014, pp. 41–55). The Dalit refugees' lack of access to land or shelter becomes a major provocation for the Marichjhapi insurrection.

This concept highlights how the state denied Dalit refugees access to basic requirements, such as drinking water, medications, and other essentials, in order to weaken them as a threat. The economic blockade, the passing of Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, and the killings and rapes of the Dalits show the resistance and assertion of Dalit identity, which further establishes a socially constructed reflection of the 'commons'. From a Dalit perspective, the commons are multi-layered and have complex social, economic and environmental importance. For Ambedkar, caste-shaped nature and natural resources like water have a defined status because they become 'polluted' when touched by a Dalit. In this case, being unable to get water is a unique 'tragedy of the commons', in which state hegemony affects access to, exclusion from and control of natural resources (Sharma 2017, pp. 215–18).

Furthermore, common resources, such as water and land, have become a focus of investigation and conviction regarding the value of identity between Dalit refugees and the Royal Bengal tiger. The conservation team projected freshwater ponds surrounded by high mud banks in different locations of the Sundarban forested landscape during the implementation of Project Tiger, which ran concurrently with the Marichjhapi atrocity. For the tiger to drink 'sweet water' instead of saltwater makes tigers irritable and threatens their royal status (Jalais 2008, p. 29). The Marichjhapi islanders, on the other hand, were denied access to drinking water, violating their human rights. In the Marichjhapi, palm and coconut trees were planted to beautify the woodlands and attract tourists. However, when the refugee islanders used these trees to make roofs and sell the by-products for subsistence, the state charged them with trespassing and damaging government property (Ibid). Unlike the definition of the 'Tragedy of the Commons' (Hardin 1998, p. 1244), which provides an opportunity for an individual to benefit themselves while spreading out any adverse effects across the larger population, resulting in the over-exploitation of natural resources, in Marichjhapi, the tragedy is extended as injustice by denying access to the 'commons' and classifying it as 'state-regulated'.

'The refugees did not ask the government for money, nor did they squat on others' property. They only wanted a marshy wasteland'. (Halder 2019, pp. 3–14)

According to Niranjana Halder's *Blood Island* (p. 105), Bhodrolok refugees were given land in Jadavpur, Kolkata (West Bengal's capital city), to establish a refugee resettlement colony. In contrast, Dalit refugees were considered homeless by the government. In *Blood*

Island, the stories of Marichjhapi victims point out the blasphemous actions of the left-wing government, which once promised them a place to live in exchange for votes but then refused to give them land and killed them randomly when they did not follow the state's rules (pp. 114–15). Commons resources, in this case, the allocation of land for residence, illustrate the interplay between society, space and caste. For the Dalit refugees, Marichjhapi and its space supported every day's livelihood practices. It depicted different physical dimensions of how a village or settlement should function.

'It had become a functional village with three lanes, a bazaar, a school, a dispensary, a library, a boat manufacturing unit, and a fisheries department! Who could have imagined that so much was possible in so little time? Maybe all those wasted years in Dandakaranya have given us superhuman will'. (Halder 2019, p. 76)

Refugees created these common areas to symbolize the conflict and mistreatment they experienced in their camps. This exhibits the tension between social integration, caste inequality, and state supremacy. Additionally, the values of common spaces, which are supposed to be collaborative, inclusive and able to help people survive and make a living, make it easy for Dalit refugees to fight back in the name of fair physical and economic distribution and against the state's control of the commons (Sharma 2017, pp. 218–23).

5. Conclusions

In a true sense, Marichjhapi has become an apt example of sharing the history of displacement and injustice in the name of wildlife protection with other marginal people in India and around the world, thereby imposing an unequal distribution of common resources between humans and non-humans. It has become a site of identity building and reconstruction, conflict and protest, dominance and resistance, exclusion, control and fear. The modification of the physical features of the Sundarbans into a national park galvanized the attention of conservationists from the Global North, accrediting it as a world heritage site. However, it masks the devastation of marginalized people who sacrificed their lives to preserve the 'heritage-ness' of Marichjhapi and Sundarban. At the same time, the benefits went to the animals, the state and tourists, implying that nature is being preserved for the benefit of the entire world. Inferring from our textual analysis, the management of forests or the environment has always been in the hands of the rich and elite. It imposes a political perspective intertwined with ecological geography to oppress the poor, limiting their access to food and leaving them vulnerable to epochal disasters and extinctions. Thus, environmental justice problems are embedded in a broader scope of social justice, where the question of whose resources are being exploited, who has the most resources and space and what sort of environmental and social costs people have to endure in the name of conservation, from which they rarely profit, becomes a crucial form of assessing conservation processes.

The tragedy highlights the complex reality of how marginal identities are depicted as hostile in order to rationalize the perpetuation of wrath towards them. Influential bodies have appropriated this massacre by preventing people from speaking and repressing them. Ghosh avoided caste complexities or the Bhodrolok vs. Chotolok conflict. The novel goes beyond the idyllic environment of the Sundarbans by vividly presenting it as an exotic landscape teeming with crocodiles, tigers, dolphins and, eventually, humans. Contemporary scholars have criticized Ghosh's strategy for not focusing on the casteist tension in the Bengali society from which he comes (Hussain 2019).

We find a 'responsiveness' towards these critical issues only through Nirmal's perspective: 'was it possible that in Marichjhapi had been planted the seeds of what might become, if not a Dalit nation, then at least a haven, a place of true freedom for the country's most oppressed' (Ghosh 2005, p. 146). Ghosh picked Nirmal's story over Kusum's to emphasize the Bhodrolok saviour's sympathy for Marichjhapi residents. Kusum is an Adivasi immigrant whose sufferings are worthy of attention but are obscured by Nirmal's 'ultimate sacrifice.' Thus, Ghosh's approach to the Marichjhapi story is biased and not focused on Dalit refugees. Halder's oral anecdotes also demonstrate that Indian elite

historiography has never included subaltern/marginal narratives in its agenda for writing history (Chowdhury 2011, p. 679). He claims that most scholarly works, including *The Hungry Tide*, have perpetuated their own success by vending marginal stories without giving them the agency to speak.

Researchers have taken Marichjhapi to Oxbridge lecture circuits. Sociologists, historians and Dalit activists have put out theories on what happened and why. Amitav Ghosh fictionalized Marichjhapi in his book *The Hungry Tide* (Halder 2019, p. 14).

The marginal population continually negotiates with mainstream historical evidence through their marginal voices, which, in the case of Marichjhapi, have become an intrinsic part of their social and cultural life, a memoir for Sundarban islanders. It has prompted Dalit refugees and other marginalized communities to mobilize resources, protest and contribute to communal experiences, thereby establishing a 'distinct identity and community closeness', as Benedict Anderson (1991) theorized. This identity is what we call the 'marginal identity'.

From the perspective of ecocriticism, *The Hungry Tide* mostly caught the attention of conservation eco-critics, for whom non-human creatures and the Sundarban's exotic-romantic nature are accorded a higher moral standing than marginalized groups. On the other hand, Halder's book is a significant symbol of environmental (in)justice. He attempts to revive the 'forgotten history' by transcribing the accounts of victims who have endured the crimes committed against them during the Marichjhapi massacre and the ordeals that ensued. It inspires us to better understand the socio-ecological and cultural entanglements by looking at the lived experience of the Marichjhapi ordeal in the past and present, which has become a conduit for exploring the endurance, struggle and marginalization processes of changing socio-ecological situations.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.B.; methodology, C.B.; formal analysis, C.B. writing—review and editing, C.B. and S.C.; supervision, S.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: The authors are grateful to the IIT Gandhinagar library services for providing them with necessary help in procuring books and literature related to the paper. They also thank the editors and peer reviewers of *Literature*.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Marginalized people are communities confined to society's lower or peripheral edge. Such a group is denied involvement in mainstream economic, political, cultural and social activities due to their living conditions, lifestyles or active exclusion.
- ² In the constitutional term in India, Dalits are known as Scheduled Caste. Also known as 'Untouchables', they are members of the lowest social group in the Hindu caste system. The word 'Dalit' means 'oppressed' or 'broken' and is the name members of this group gave themselves in the 1930s. A Dalit is born outside the caste or varna system and hence is also called *Avarna*, retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/who-are-the-dalits-195320> (accessed on 4 February 2020).
- ³ A part of the second-wave migration from East to West Bengal during the 1960s–70s. They were sent to several refugee camps, mainly to Dandakaranya. A few refugees escaped and went to Marichjhapi, one of the islands in the Indian Sundarbans, to settle down and start afresh as Indian citizens. Sengupta (2011, pp. 101–23).
- ⁴ Namasudra is the largest Bengal Dalit sub-caste group belonging from to the avarna community. They are labelled as a Scheduled Caste in the Indian constitution. The community was earlier called *Chandals* (a term usually considered a slur).
- ⁵ They are also known as *Pods*, mainly residing in the Sundarban region and the North and South 24 Parganas districts. They are primarily refugees coming from East Bengal, now known as Bangladesh. They are one of the Dalit sub-caste groups in Bengal, labelled as a Scheduled caste under caste by the constitution. For more information, refer to Barman, Rup Kumar, 'From Pods to Poundra: A study on the Poundra Kshatriya movement for social justice 1891–1956.', *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 7.1 (2014): 121–38.
- ⁶ A Bengali slur, used for someone belonging to lower caste/strata or marginal communities.
- ⁷ The Bhadrak community includes all gentfolk belonging to Bengali society's wealthy and middle-class segments. They represent the elite, upper caste people within the Indian Caste system.

⁸ Bengali term, used for some senior female out of respect.

⁹ Bengali term, used for a school teacher.

¹⁰ Acronym for World Wildlife Fund.

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