5 Philosophy from the Field: An Environmental Hermeneutical Approach to Understand the Perception of Environmental Change

Environmental hermeneutics is a new method of interpreting environmental narratives to unfold various perceptions about a specific environmental issue from different points of view. Along with, it is a philosophical endeavor which allows “pondering and reflecting upon the experience in environments as a form of interpretation”1 and through that it also provides a scope to examine the traditional problems of environmental philosophy and environmental ethics in a renewed manner.

Hermeneutics emerged as a methodology for the interpretation of biblical and religious texts. Initially, hermeneutics was predominantly concentrated on textual interpretation. However, over time, with the influence of philosophers such as Heidegger and later by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, this branch of philosophy has managed to cross its earlier frontier and has been adopted as a method of interpretation in diverse fields. The discipline of hermeneutics is based on the idea that a progressive communication between subject and object creates an understanding through the interpretation of the object in the subject’s mind. Human beings as interpretive beings are always involved with the task of interpretation. In the context of environmental hermeneutics, nature is considered to be the text, and people as per their culture, context, and identity, read and interpret it, and subsequently make meaning out of it. Thus, one could say that “There is no nature that is not already interpreted”.2 Environmental hermeneutics as an ethical philosophy completely emphasizes on the “interpretive nature of our experience of the natural environment”.3 It also acknowledges that these experiences actually allow ethics to emerge. Thus, it advocates for an openness to accepting diversified views of nature and the environment, rather than subscribing to a singular perception. Mostly environmental hermeneutics is being employed as a conflict resolution method. However, it puts forth a process which goes beyond the conflict resolving attitude and encourages an understanding of the plurality of experiences in order to clarify the context or the underlying assumptions behind any conflict situation. It identifies that the reason behind a conflict lies on the spatial and temporal dimensions which play an important role in shaping our relation with a

3Ibid., 305.
landscape from different normative stances. Thus, it also provides a space for the acceptance of a pluralistic ethic rather than a universal one. Therefore, it can be said that not only resolving environmental conflicts, but also, this has the potential to interpret environmental narratives. And thereby, it provides a base that can possibly support a pluralistic ethic towards the environment.

As per Drenthen (2014), environmental hermeneutics teases out the spatial and temporal dimensions of narratives and thus, it is intricately connected to the place and the context from where narratives emerge. It argues that the pre-given context plays a major role to bring forth moral meaning and language. As it claims itself to be a practical philosophy, it emphasizes on behavior, practice, and “emplaced” understanding of the environment. Similar to hermeneutics, environmental hermeneutics is also a dialogical process of interpretation. It claims that “Things have something to say to us, even if they do so in silence.” This communication between ‘I’ and ‘other’ is joined together through common harmonious experiences, and these harmonious experiences subsequently make any understanding possible. In this regard, this chapter will be an initial attempt to demonstrate the different meanings of environmental change perceived by different groups of individual living in the island of the Sundarbans. In the next section, I will discuss how it is possible to apply environmental hermeneutics as a method to understand the concept of environmental change. After that, I will specifically discuss the importance of place and narrative to comprehend the environment. Subsequently, an attempt will be made to employ environmental hermeneutics as a methodology to comprehend ‘what is environmental change’. By doing so, my sole objective will be to explore the potential of this methodology and to see to what extent this methodology can provide an understanding about the islander’s everyday mode of being by analyzing their work-worlds.

i. Reading Meanings of the Environment: Methodological Possibilities

Treanor by extensively drawing from Ricoeur’s works, illustrates that environmental hermeneutics is a three step process. The first step is very much connected with the listener’s
pre-understanding about the subject of inquiry. For reading other’s perspectives, it is quite challenging to bracket out one’s own prefiguration because “As narrative beings, we have a certain prefigurative understanding—a grasp of the structural, symbolic, and temporal aspects of narrative that give it meaning”.10 Hence, in the first step of the hermeneutic circle, the interpreter should explicit her prefiguration. This prefiguration helps to understand the context from where the interpreter is coming from, as well as it clarifies her normative stance. The prefiguration also leads to the second step which is configuration, where, as a listener or interpreter of narratives, one explores the middle ground between intentional activities and inadvertent events mentioned in the narratives. The primary objective of configuration is to break down a narrative into parts and then through the understanding of the each part, the whole gets clearer. This back and forth reading of the parts of a narrative and the whole, helps to clarify a narrative. This exploration, as Tremain explains, happens between two elements: a specific incident vs. the narrative as a whole or its entire plot, and heterogeneous elements like the agent or unexpected result vs. temporal characteristics of a narrative.11 These involvements with a narrative lead to an understanding of the process and the causal relation between a part of a narrative and its conclusion. However, this entire process of configuration is not free from the listeners’ pre-knowledge, belief, and history. The third step can be seen as ‘an outcome from a narrative’, because it delineates how the understanding of a narrative has an effect on an interpreter. This very effect progressively extends the interpreter’s horizon. This step is termed as ‘refiguration’.12 The interactive nature of this process provides the possibility that both the researcher and the research can get the opportunity to evolve throughout these three steps. Through this ‘hermeneutic circle’ it gets clarified how context gives rise to diversified meanings of a particular environment in a perceiver’s mind:

Interpretation, experiencing life from a certain perspective and relating it in narrative, goes all the way down. There’s no escaping the hermeneutic circle.13

Eventually, the ‘hermeneutic circle’ enables us to comprehend environmental narratives, holistically.

Utsler et al. suggests environmental hermeneutics deals with four different dimensions: hermeneutics of environment, irrespective of its division like natural, built, cultural, etc.; the hermeneutics of environmental literature or texts; interpretation of our understanding of

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10Ibid., 185.
11Ibid., 185.
12Ibid., 185.
13Ibid., 198.
place as encountering a specific environment; the hermeneutics of environmental narratives. In the context of this chapter, I will be concentrating on the last two dimensions, which are: hermeneutics of place and environmental narratives, with the objective to explore how an inhabitant of an island gets connected to the landscape and creates meaning of the environment. The rationale behind this choice is that these two will help me to explore how an inhabitant of a particular place gets connected with the landscape through her work-world and creates meaning out of it. With this objective, the next section will try to explore the importance of place and narratives in the context of the human—environment relationship.

ii. Knowing Environment through Place and Narrative

Environmental hermeneutics proposes that neither theoretical nor practical approach can grasp the multidimensional perspectives of a specific environmental issue; hence narrative analysis can be employed as an appropriate method to get diversified perspectives about an environmental issue. Interpretation of a narrative, in reality, is a dialogical process which illuminates genuine, indeed, complex and multi-layered experiences of other human beings situated in diverse contexts. Thus, the interpretation of narratives can help one to make sense of other’s ‘world’ in a different way and can also act as a source of new knowledge. This kind of gathering of knowledge is quite important in the context of knowing ‘what environment is’. Knowing environmental issues from a theoretical point of view provides us one-dimensional knowledge, while, knowing it through practical exposures provides us a specific, subjective knowledge. Whereas, awareness of environmental issues through the interpretation of narratives, offers a dialogical knowledge which could illuminate the multiple dimensions of an environmental phenomenon.

To know environment, it is important to clarify how the environment is different from nature as very often these two terms are used interchangeably. The difference between the environment and nature that I want to highlight here is the manner in which the former connects with the term ‘immediacy’—the part of nature which is immediate to us is the environment, whereas the other holds vastness and an element of mystery within itself. In this regard, there are two crucial terms related to the experience of this ‘immediacy’, these are place and boundary. Utsler et al. posit that “For environmental hermeneutics, the intermediate location of hermeneutics is the place where meaning is discovered beyond the binaries.” The concept of

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\(^{14}\) Utsler et al., “Introduction”.


\(^{16}\) Utsler et al., “Introduction,” 8.
place brings forth the image of a boundary. Rather than the sense of a territory which confines a place, the idea of ‘boundary’ provides an opportunity to a subject to connect with the immediate environment and subsequently, provides a scope for mutual interaction. For example, in the Sundarbans, rivers, creeks or the sea acts as a boundary and thus instantly arouses a sense of immediacy to the islanders. In a way, boundary helps a place to occur and thus “our encounters with the ‘environment’ (broadly understood) occur with the experience of place as place”. Moreover, ‘place’ as a concept enables us “to organize our thinking about the meaning of environments and landscape as texts”. The dialogical process of interpreting the notion of the environment through narratives, happens in the background of place and landscapes. Place and landscapes provide the necessary context for the narratives to emerge.

In the next section, I will attempt to analyze the narratives to tease out the diverse meaning of ‘environmental change’. In doing this, I will particularly follow the three step method described by Treanor. I will also analyze the lifeworld referents which the narrators extensively mentioned in their narrations, for depicting changes in the environment.

iii. A Hermeneutical Analysis of ‘What is Environmental Change?’

The central section of this chapter will demonstrate the hermeneutical analysis of the collected narratives. Berghaller et al. (2014) suggest that environmental change is a crisis, but it is not only an ecological one; rather than it is a crisis of human perspectives. Hence, through this hermeneutical analysis, my primary aim would be to tease out these perceptual differences about environmental change. Here, it is necessary to mention that, to reveal the notion of environmental change through the hermeneutical analysis, I will particularly employ the sea, river or as a whole water as a lifeworld referent, as the narrators widely acknowledged this. All the narrators express their association with water quite differently. These perceptual differences about a lifeworld referent on one hand exist between the outsiders and the inhabitants of the islands, on the other hand, it can also be found among the inhabitants due to their varied association with the environment, mainly through their work-worlds. Hence, I employ water as one of the prominent lifeworld referent to make sense of what environmental change stands for them.

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17Forrest Clingerman, “Memory, Imagination, and the Hermeneutics of Place,” in Interpreting Nature (See note 1), 248.
18Ibid., 249.
Prefiguration: ‘What is Environmental Change?’

My point of departure in exploring the meaning of environmental change is the particular difference in perceptions of environmental change and widely evident conflicts between intervening agencies and the inhabitants of the places of intervention in various environmental conservation and protection initiatives, particularly, during the era of the climate crisis. As I have mentioned, due to the climate change discourse, the Sundarbans has attained a lot of attention from environmental protection and conservation institutions in the recent past. However, I doubt, the facts concerning climate change do not get incorporated in islanders’ worldview and thus protection and conservation measures often fall short to achieve the islanders’ support and cooperation. Treanor captures this disjunction between global facts and individual’s worldview and argues that:

If we want people to understand and accept the facts, we have to address their underlying worldview, for it influences what they will even accept as a fact. But a person’s worldview, like her personal identity, is a fundamentally narrative. To get people to change their minds about, for example, climate change, it is necessary to address the underlying narrative into which facts about climate change fit or do not fit. Simply bombarding people with more information, more facts and arguments, is unlikely to have any effect.20

Along with this, the limited acceptance of environmental ethics at the pragmatic level also indicates the presence of an underneath tussle between theory and practice. Positing these conflicts as prefiguration, I went to my study area, the Sundarbans. The place is generally marked as a fragile ecosystem—highly vulnerable to climate change, and for that reason, it is also subjected to different conservation and protection measures. Due to these interventions, various environmental changes such as loss of biodiversity, forest covers loss, the decrement in the arable land area, and the increase in frequency of floods and cyclones, are interpreted as symbols of an environmental crisis induced by climate change. A top-down effort is being implemented to prevent this crisis through biodiversity conservation, forest regeneration, construction of concrete embankments, etc. The community, however, does not respond to the notion of increasing vulnerability of the Sundarbans; they think changes in the environment and landscape, is the very characteristic of these islands where they are living, and it is far from being a phenomenon induced by climate change or global warming.

As already mentioned that the area of the study is one of the last islands facing the Bay of Bengal. Before I visited the island, I had imagined the island to be a cluster of interior and highly underdeveloped villages. However, as I entered this land for the first time during broad daylight, I was astonished by its human settlement and found it quite difficult to acknowledge that this was one of the last villages at the end of West Bengal, until one notices the presence of several collapsed ferries-jetties. As the Sun sets, however, the picture completely changed, and I found myself facing a dark evening with a solar lantern. And over time, I slowly discovered that the darkness of the place was not due to the lack of electrification, but it also extends to the lack of health care and poor communication facilities. In this context, my specific inquiry was geared towards exploring how people of this area relate to the environment and incessant changes in it. The answers to this inquiry were astonishing as well as a heartfelt discovery.

**Configuration 1: Hermeneutics of Water:**

On my initial visit to the island, it became evident that the sea (or river or water), land, forest and wind, are the four main elements that interviewee’s comprehend as their environment. Among these, the sea and the rivers play a major role and most of the narrators perceive the land, forest, and wind in relation to the sea (or the rivers or water). Water is always central to their life, not only because their prime source of income is generated from it (through fishing) but also, since their entire sense of time and place is centered on water. Even as inhabitants of an island which is surrounded by the wide and vast sea and from where it takes almost two hours in boat to come to the mainland, people of this area feel quite confronted with the notion of water as a boundary. Here, water is a zone of distance and time confrontation, isolating these people from the mainland in a very primordial sense.

Earlier it was hard to travel, but now there are plenty of boats so, it becomes easy for us to access Patharpratima [the mainland]. Still at night after 8pm, there are no means of transport available, hence at night, in case of some emergency, especially the medical ones, we feel helpless. Even if boats are there, it will take at least 2 hours to reach there… Life is uncertain here. [FLDN]21 Water is also an immersive environment for the residents, both as an inescapable reality of wetness as well as a marker of a sense of identity. From their narratives, what I found most profound is their sense of attachment with the water, which one woman spoke about in reference to bathing.

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21Responses of the residents of G-plot, henceforth, it is marked as FLDN.
Bathing! (With giggles) we are being bathed all the time, when we go to catch fish, collect fire woods, or in search of our children loitering on the seashore. We get drenched in the water all the time! [FLDN]

For the residents of the Sundarbans, the sea water is all around and naturally, from which no one can run away. The sea, for them, is a source of life as well as a threat of death. Even though they are in an ambivalent state concerning water, they still cannot imagine living far from the sea as if the very existence of the sea provides them their sense of identity. They take pride in the fact that they are connected to the sound of the sea, by the very way they recognize it, as one of the woman interviewees mentioned:

During the rainy season, any outsider will be afraid to stay here. The roaring sound of shao shao shao comes from the mingling of water, wind, and the shore. These sounds are so robust that you will feel that the water has come over the embankment; and is just next to your house—in our words, it is like a river-call. [FLDN]

At this point it is important to note that the water as a lifeworld referent arises from some deeper presuppositions and socio-political contexts of these residents. In the next section, I will briefly explore one of these contexts—the livelihood of the respondents. In the Sundarbans, people are mostly engaged in the occupation of fishing, honey gathering, and driving boats. Here, it requires a mention that I am not considering farming as a separate occupation, because it is not the primary occupation for most of the narrators, rather, it is only a subsidiary form of livelihood. Most of the narrators who do farming for a specific period in a year, introduced themselves as a fisherman (this is the primary occupation of them) or as a daily labor (as they work on other people’s land on a seasonal basis). Another reason to focus on these three occupations—fishery, boat driving and honey gathering—is that all of these compel them to spend a substantial period of their life on water. From people’s narratives, I realized that the level of involvement with the sea or water varies among people, depending on their occupations and daily responsibilities in the family.

**Configuration II: Reframing Geography through Livelihoods:**

I have observed some prominent differences among fishermen, boatmen, honey gatherers, and women, when they explain their way of living and their relationship with water. Each of them reads the flow of water from different perspectives and with the help of different environmental cues that they translate into different ideas about the environment.

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22Mostly people from indigenous communities of this area go deep inside the protected forest, generally, in a group for collecting honey from beehives.
For example, a fisherman begins his narration by analyzing how the fish and crab populations have changed in the sea. Fishermen are also able to give an account of how due to human population growth, fish seeds are decreasing day-by-day. Interestingly, one of the fishermen said:

Actually the number of fish is same but the human population has increased a lot, and all of us are competing to catch fish. So inevitably it is getting distributed, and we think the number of fish has decreased. [FLDN]

Through this statement, it is visible that the fisherman marked the increase in human population as a determining factor for fish availability rather than decreasing fish stock. To elaborate on the process of fishing many of the fishermen have stated that:

From the color of the water, we can understand if there is enough fish or not. Clean and clear water indicates the less scope of getting fish, where muddy and opaque water hints the presence of ample fish. [FLDN]

Not only they are experts in understanding the sea and its variations, but they can also differentiate changes in wind flow as well. One fisherman describes that:

…if there is a storm and windy weather, Hilsa\textsuperscript{23} come near to the seashore. We take a call when the southeast wind blows, at that time we should start the voyage to the sea. This is the perfect time to get Hilsa. If we go only 20-30 km inside the sea, we will meet them. Otherwise in search of them, we might have to go 60-70 km inside, but we will only get some random small catch. [FLDN]

These types of narratives clearly reveal that for fishermen, fish is the central referent point to connect with the rest of the elements of the environment like sea, river, and wind.

For boatmen, the scenario is quite different in comparison to the fishermen. One boatman expressed his sense of belonging to the sea by comparing it with \textit{being in mother's womb}. I felt from their narratives that for them the sea is a place which how much ever one tries, cannot grasp it entirely. There is always a mysterious element that remains unexplained and maybe beyond explanation—an ineffable environmental experience. According to a boatman’s narrative, it is difficult to predict sea. Moreover, he mentions that not only skills and knowledge are required to drive boat, one needs to depend on intuition and awareness about the sea and landscape as well. It is hard to know about every part of the sea. Even though at present there is a lot of technological development, still at the time of extreme natural events, one’s intuition can be the savior more than anything else. The boatmen acknowledge that as their lives and

\textsuperscript{23}Hilsa \textit{(Tenualosa ilisha)} is a very popular fish in West Bengal and in Bangladesh and considered as a delicacy.
livelihoods both depend on the sea and thus, inherently unpredictable. When they start on a voyage they are not at all sure of returning. Naturally, each and every voyage becomes a completely unpredictable journey for them. Their way of identifying place is intricately related to this sense of unpredictability. One of them explained that

If I get lost in the sea or at night, only my intuition and own way of marking can lead me back to the island. I mark islands and seashores. In my mind, I paint the images of seashore, which I have crossed [this seashore is in the process of washing away, there is a deposition in this seashore or there is a thick forest etc.]. These mental images help me during difficult times. [FLDN]

Although there is an unpredictability of life, they cannot imagine living without this mystical uncertainty. According to a boatman:

We, the people of Sundarbans, entirely depend on the sea to survive, although, we cannot grasp the movement of the sea, we cannot run away from it as well. I have a long relationship with the sea, if I, for a long time, do not go for a voyage, I feel incomplete. I feel life is always uncertain, but when one dwells in the sea, one can realize his uncertainty; this realization is the realization about life. [FLDN]

This boatman’s contradictory feeling of being at risk and peace emerge from the very same place [sea]. Yet the narratives of boatmen provide a whole different perception about the environment which is connected to their emotion and self-actualization.

Women, who are more or less engaged in household chores, farm work and occasionally goes for net fishing with a small boat, narrate various notions of the environment and that imprint a completely different picture in my mind. The sense of timings for these women is also coherent with the tidal cycle. Periodically, their daily work pattern changes on the basis of tide. Low tide is usually the time for them to go to the seashore. Moreover, their ‘sense of risk’ emerges from more pragmatic experiences than emotional reflection. A woman interviewee narrates:

We get cautious. We know the entire area well. Suppose the eastern side of the embankment is not in a good condition, we need to be ready as it can break anytime. Sometimes we prepare some dry food like puffed-rice. All important documents, we pack in a trunk and keep it safe. [FLDN]

From the accounts of honey gatherers, I obtain a relatively different perception of the sea. While for most of the people, the sea is a place which brings forth a sense of insecurity, for the honey

\[24\] Women of this area primarily engage with these types of work.
gatherers, it is the place of shelter—a secure terrain. For them a boat on the sea is the place which provides them with the feeling of being at home.

After a full day of hard work, when I come back to the boat, I feel more at peace. Between the forest and our boat, the strip of sea water stands like a caretaker. [FLDN]

Even this narrator states that the forest is the place for wild animals, so after an entire day’s worth of work and activity, honey gatherers should leave this place for wild creatures. Honey gatherers who have extensively work or dwell in the forest land, feel water is comparatively safer than the forest.

*Refiguration: Understanding Environmental Change from Reading the Narratives from the Sundarbans*

From these narratives, it becomes evident that if the lifeworld referents of water can elucidate so much of varied associations and perceptions, the environment as a whole will provide more complex and nuanced understanding. First of all, for the narrators, whenever I asked them ‘what is nature?’ they fell silent. Nevertheless, when I asked them ‘what is the environment?’ they started describing all the elements they think are part of their immediate environment. Rather than getting caught up with a metaphysical approach to understand the environment, I was keen to discover what I consider an epistemological response: how they get to know what is environment.

The experience from the study area made me realize that the people of this area distinctly differentiate between insiders and outsiders by using the knowledge of their lifeworld referents e.g. sea, river, forest, land, etc., as markers. The hermeneutic of these narratives, shows that for the islanders these various entities like water, forest and land do not form very distinct categories that they relate to, rather depending on one’s livelihood, her association with the environment provides meaningfulness to these lifeworld referents. However, a person who functions through binaries of land and water, would not be able to understand their notion of environment, which is a liminal one, and thus would remain as an outsider. To elucidate, often I became aware of my pre-figurative way of understanding—dividing a geographical region into land and water—as the islanders reaffirmed the same point that “water is everywhere”, “where shall we go from here”, “because of the sea we all are here” and ultimately, “we are the people of a floating land”. [FLDN] All of these repetitive references indicate that the islanders wanted to make the outsider (i.e. me as a field researcher) understands the fact that any prior knowledge regarding the distinct
division of various landscapes cannot be applied here and that there is a need to reconfigure the learning from a new perspective by rightfully taking their voices into account.

When a place or the environment of a place, exist in a dynamic state of transient modalities of meaning, then how can one ensure the conservation and protection of it? Where ‘change’ is the primary characteristic of the environment and people are completely in tune with it, can ideas and discourse of ‘climate change’ as such make any difference? Similarly, the notion of ‘environmental protection’ is also an alien concept for these islanders, as their involvements with the environment are entirely entangled to their work-worlds, and there is hardly any singular idea of environment that can be protected in this regard. In-depth conversations with the islanders have repeatedly unveiled a very different notion of the environment, which make them skeptical of any such interventions. Their understanding of environmental change as revealed by their work-worlds, emphasizes on the fact that change and impermanence are constant features that are associated with their notion of the environment. They asserted with confidence that any attempt to protect or conserve the environment to address the climate change would be a ‘futile’ one. Although most of the narrators have directly echoed this statement, one poetically states: “all these attempts are mere smoke, nobody can do anything”. [FLDN] More than a sense of fatalism, these views arise from a deep knowing of the transient nature of their environment and subsequently, accepting the change and impermanence as prime attributes of the Sundarbans’s environment.

iv. Conclusion

Through this place-specific study, I attempt to elucidate the manner in which environmental hermeneutics as a methodology has the potential to capture the nuances of phenomenological perceptions of environmental change. With the application of this three step process, it is possible to merge the horizons of distinctly different perceptions. However, it is important to clarify that the ‘hermeneutic circle’ is not only a conflict resolution tool, rather it is also equally capable of opening up new horizons for a nuanced understanding of some fundamental questions like ‘what is environmental change?’. And in the conclusion, it can be accentuated that the refugiation of environmental change in the Sundarbans definitely can open up a new possibility which can lead one to rethink the prevalent concern of the outside world about the slow submergence of the world’s largest delta. The lifeworld referents also help us to comprehend how the work-worlds play an important role to make those referents meaningful in the narrators’ lives.
However, before concluding this chapter, it would be worthy to evaluate environmental hermeneutics as a methodology to tease out a different level of understanding of the narratives. No doubt, environmental hermeneutics could make a significant contribution in collating diverse perspectives and re-formulating the very established notions of environment, that are dominating the discourse. As already discussed in this chapter, environmental hermeneutics does provide a novel approach to interpret the environment of the Sundarbans. I, as a researcher, thus mediate between the environment and myself as the subject of a hermeneutic act. Simultaneously, as the community is always already interacting with the landscape, they too get included in this process of mediation. They seem to read the water tides and the sounds of the waves. The semantics of environment in the form of wind, water, receding and rising tides, are rich with meaning for them. Till this point, hermeneutics as a method has successfully managed to comprehend the associated meaning of environment for the narrators. However, as we have seen in the case of the hermeneutic arc, hermeneutic methodology poses emphasis on language and lifeworld referents to understand the associated meaning with a particular expression. It considers the narrative as environmental texts and use lifeworld referents as an emblem to interpret the text. However, at this juncture, I would like to argue that the very act of considering the narratives as environmental texts portrays a detachment between the environment and the dwellers, and thus, inherently imbibes the subject/object duality. To be more specific, the duality is actually present at two layers. Primarily, a narrator as a subject gives an account of other objects and creates the text, furthermore, in the second layer, a researcher as a subject takes the narratives as an environmental texts to be analyzed. These two layers, as possessing subject/object dualism, I see, fall short to grasp the pre-theoretical experiential accounts of the dwellers, instead, it solely limits itself in providing an in-depth description of the concern phenomena and focus only on analyzing the multiple point of views of it.

At the same time, detailed understanding of the development of this methodology demonstrates that it incorporates a few attributes that do not exist in the philosophical tradition of hermeneutics. One such kind of attribute is that environmental hermeneutics endeavors to reveal ‘environmental identity’ of narrators. 25 Ustler 26 states that environmental hermeneutics reveals the hermeneutic of self, and which in turn, shows the manner in which an individual orients herself towards the environment. This hermeneutics takes account of the history of one’s

26 Ustler, Introduction.
emotional attachment to the environment and environmental heritage, to tease out her environmental identity. Ustler further explains, environmental identity helps to identify how different environmental identities lead to different types of engagement with the environment. In this regard, he explicitly mentions that “Environmental identity as a hermeneutical enterprise fosters a way of thinking about and encountering nature” [Italicised portion indicates the phrase I want to highlight].²⁷ He also adds “…depending on the outcome of that engagement or its effect on environment, it marks some engagement as good and some as bad”.²⁸ Although the concept of environmental identity is based on how people think about and encounter the environment, in my journey in the Sundarbans, I experience that the narrators’ ways of living and doing are linked in an inseparable nexus; they do not see the environment as ‘out there’ to encounter or to think about it. For my particular inquiry, I have seen that the environment and environmental change become the milieu in which the narrators’ life stories get embedded. Thus, I feel, a detailed value-neutral exploration of how environmental identity gets formed beyond merely placing it in a socio-cultural background, is highly essential, particularly, in the era of the Anthropocene.

Moreover, for analyzing narratives without imposing any value based on some prior-knowledge, I feel, there is a huge scope of bringing existentialist-informed phenomenological methodology. Furthermore, I have observed, the narrators hardly impose any objective value on the environment, rather, their very existence is integrally related to the environment without any prior judgement. Hence, from this chapter, I carry forward the configuration of water as a lifeworld referent which gives meaningful insights into the narrators’ perceptions of the environment. At the same time, I want to highlight the need of exploring it through existentialist-informed phenomenological analysis to tease out the narrators’ everyday modes of being. In the next chapter, my attempt will be to portray how phenomenological experiences of environment can provide a meaningful insight into Land ethic—a prominent school of environmental ethics, by opening up a new way of understanding the human—environment relationship through analyzing the narrators’ work-worlds.

²⁷Ibid., 133.
²⁸Ibid., 135.