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## AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE* ON THE PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL DISLODGMET

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### ABSTRACT

Ghosh intertwines two different cultures in this novel through Kanai Dutt, Fokir and Piyali Roy. Fokir represents the indigenous culture of Sundarbans and Kanai Dutt symbolizes the foreign culture. Ghosh vibrantly portrayed the conflict between two different cultures with his mastered method of Magic Realism.

*The Hungry Tide* conveys the breaking of cultural boundaries and borders through the attainments and achievements of the characters of the novel. It deals with the thought that culture is not an obstruction to accomplish one's goal. In this novel, Ghosh uses the journey as a path to self detection. He advocates a human centered world which is devoid of caste, creed, race, sex and religion. He highlights the breaking down of the artificial boundaries between nation and people. The novel opens up new and unexpected arenas, ethnic, cultural and territorial barriers. This paper focuses on the perception of Ghosh on cultural intersection as the pinnacle of human accomplishment.

**Key Words:** culture, conflict, exploitation, territorial barriers.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005), certainly, the novel published in the after effects of 9/11, attempts the environmental concerns, cultural elements and the principles of the globalization, becoming one of the first classics of eco criticism. In a distant area such as the Sundarbans, where the novel is set, which lies, broadly speaking, at the bottom of modern globalization and its new sub-alternities. Amitav Ghosh himself declared in an interview in 2007 that *The Hungry Tide* stemmed from two concerns, namely the protection of environment and the admiration of beauty. *The Hungry Tide* in the postmodern context one has to observe, that the novel while writing history, has made a radical departure from the historical novel.

The novel stands in antithetical positions from the customary art of storytelling.

In this novel, Ghosh directs the debate on eco-environment and cultural issues through the intrusion of the West into East. Ghosh's writing contains much of the same characteristics that have characterized the mode of the historical fiction. It is an exclusive kind of fiction which centers on certainty of perception and meaning. His fiction comes into view at once as an experimental, yet exponential novel and interrogative yet confessional in mode. He is no primordial when artistry is concerned and he knows for certain that he is dealing with the psycho-political dimensions of history and hence his narrative, while leaping from a specific time and space to the other, tends not to

blur the reality of socio-political time and space. One could quote the following lines as illustration of the above mentioned precept,

“From the far side of the Guest House roof Kanai could see all the way across the island to the Hamilton High School and even beyond, to the spot where Nirmal’s house had once stood. It was gone now but the image of it flickered in his memory was no less real to her than the newly constructed student hostel that had taken its place. (THT, pp. 88)<sup>1</sup>

This is Ghosh’s persuasive justification of his main concern to reality. His observation of the historical reality remains deep rooted in the colonial past. The reader is kept aware of the unfolding scheme of events. An example of this happens with the dialogue between Kanai and Kusum carry on. Kusum is from Satjela Island. When Kusum’s father dies, Kusum’s mother is left with no option and compensation. The landlord Dilip offers a job in the city to Kusum’s mother. She has no option but to leave Kusum in the custody of the relatives. While Dilip plans to trap her in a brothel house, Horen rescues her and puts her in the women’s union. When Kusum becomes friendly with Kanai, she wishes to go to Calcutta. Kusum falls a prey to the Calcutta massacre. After Kusum’s story, Piya reappears in the novel as watching the dolphins play which enunciates a continuance of life. Piya sees a dolphin now and then and she loves watching those dolphins. Piya is awestruck not only by the dolphins but also by the mangrove forest. She spends her research in watching the dolphins and worshipping in a shrine. She is fascinated by the eventual ceremony in the shrine.

“Piya stood by and watched as Fokir and Tutul performed a little ceremony. First they fetched some leaves and flowers and placed them in front of the image. Then, standing before the shrine, Fokir began to recite some kind of chant, with his head bowed and his hands joined in an attitude of prayer. (THT, pp.152)<sup>1</sup>

*The Hungry Tide* evokes the life of a tradition bound, decadent society fixed almost upon the demoralizing facts of colonialism. It is world with people only strongly rooted in their cultural ties and heritage. That is why, Ghosh keeps the past brilliantly returning to hit the present. The delta region, though representative of the culturally deep rooted inclination, also indicates a sense of anarchy, the confusion of the values and the lack of guiding knowledge owing to the impact of colonialism. Ghosh, thus through the juxtaposition of the presence of the tigers and the dolphins presents the picture of the Indian society. The novel stands crucially pinned to the pivotal role Piya plays as the researcher of sea animals. Her research on these sea animals punctuated by her frequent watches on the play of innocent dolphins is a dream proclaimed by Ghosh for an ephemeral future. It is the dream of the writer too. When Piya sees two dolphins approaching the boat and as they begin to circle around, she recognizes them as the cow and calf pair. She has identified earlier and she is delighted to see them again. She begins to develop a feeling that these dolphins recognize her too, “. . . for they surfaced repeatedly around the boat, and one occasion, the adult even made eye contact” (p.303)<sup>2</sup>.

The time structure is considerably expanded, however, through the books of past events, occasionally presented by the characters and at other times by the narrator through a journal written long ago and through a fairy tale which invented in a far distant past. The ever altering biodiversity, that is the Sundarban Islands of Bangladesh, is the location for Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*. The huge assortment of islands, rivers, and the infinite sea are in an incessant battle, “a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable” (Ghosh 18). Man must not only be wary of the water, for it threatens to overtake his home and life, but the original inhabitants of the islands whom seek out clear retribution for the destruction man has caused. In this novel, Ghosh explores the lines between environmentalism and human rights, and just how in the Sundarban Islands man is being dispossessed in favor of the creatures that reside there. There is an apparent line being strained in

The Hungry Tide, between the environmentally mindful groups and that of the underprivileged, banned people whom came to southern Bangladesh in hopes for a better life. Amitav Ghosh investigates this outlook through the development of two of the main characters Piya Roy and Fokir.

Piya Roy, a traveling American of Bangladesh ancestry, was raised in Seattle and plans to make her great feat as an aquatic biologist investigating the Irrawaddy dolphin. Piya is an emblem of the green politics that has forged the Sundarban Islands. "This island has to be saved for its tree, it has to be saved for its animals, it is part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people all around the world" (Ghosh 216). She struggles to have compassion and appreciate the unique culture surrounding her as well as its people, but is inhibited by her own morals and obligations that come with being a first world citizen. An example of this would include Piya's confrontation with the villagers who snare a tiger inside a mud hut, before viciously burning the animal alive in retribution of their deceased villagers and livestock slaughtered by the creature. In the beginning of the novel, Kanai Dutt, a middle-aged businessman from New Delhi, stumbles upon Piyali Roy, or Piya, a young marine biologist from Seattle. They are on a tour to Canning, in south eastern India, from the spot they will sail by boat to the Sundarban Islands, an archipelago in the Ganges Delta finished off with a quantity of small, mangrove-covered islands. Piya has some allowance to research a rare species of river dolphin, while Kanai has been solicited by his aunt to read carefully a notebook left by his uncle Nirmal Bose, who died under mysterious circumstances during a revolt thirty years earlier. Before they disconnect at Canning, Kanai graciously invites Piya to visit his aunt at her home on Lusibari, one of the Sundarbans' most distant islands.

Why would an alien, an adolescent woman, be standing in a south Kolkata traveler station, waiting for the train to Canning? It was true, of course, that this streak was the only rail connection to the Sundarbans. But, as of now as far as he aware it was never used by tourists - the few who travelled in that route usually went by boat, engaging steamers or launches on Kolkata's riverfront. The

train was mostly used by people who did *daily-passengeri*, coming in from far-flung villages to work in the city. He saw her spinning to ask something of a passerby and was apprehended by an advice to listen in. Language was both his source of revenue and his obsession, and he was frequently preyed upon by a near-irresistible obligation to overhear something on conversations in public places. Approaching his approach through the crowd, he arrived within audible range just in time to hear her cease a sentence that ended with the words "train to Canning?" One of the spectators began to elucidate, waving with an upraised arm. But the elucidation was in Bengali and it was mislaid on her. She blocked the man with a raised hand and said, in request for forgiveness, that she discerns no Bengali: "*Ami Bangla jani na.*" He might reveal from the ineptness of her pronunciation that this was literally true: "like strangers everywhere, she had learned just enough of the language to be able to provide due warning of her incomprehension".

Kanai was the individual who assumed as other "outsider" on the platform and he quickly attracted his own share of attention. He was of average height and at the age of forty-two his hair, which was tranquil thick, had begun to illustrate a small number of stripes of gray at the temples. In the slope of his head, as in the thickness of his posture, there was a hushed certainty, a sign of a well-grounded conviction in his ability to triumph in most conditions. Even if his face was or else unlined, his eyes had well wrinkles buffing out from their edges - but these furrows, by intensifying the mobility of his face, highlighted more his youth than his age. Even though he was once small of construct, his waist had condensed over the years but he still approved himself flippantly, and with alertness classed of the traveler's nature for occupying the instant.

It so took place that Kanai was shipping a wheeled airline carrier with a telescoping handle. To the sellers and roving salesmen who pursued their wares on the Canning line, this portion of luggage was just one of the many particulars of Kanai's appearance - together with his sunglasses, trousers and shoes-that recommended middle-aged affluence and metropolitan prosperity. As a result

he was overwhelmed by hawkers, urchins and bands of youths who were raising funds for a wide-ranging variety of causes: "it was only when the green and yellow electric train finally pulled in that he was able to shake off this importuning entourage". While mountaineering in, he observed that the overseas girl was not without some experience in travel: "she hefted her two huge backpacks herself, brushing aside the half-dozen porters who were hovering around her". There was might in her limbs that belied her minuscule size and flimsy build; she swung the backpacks into the compartment with practiced effortlessness and pushed her mode through a crowd of milling passengers. Momentarily he doubted whether he ought to tell her that there was a special compartment for women. But she was brushed inside and he lost sight of her.

At that time the whistle blew and Kanai stopped the crowd himself. On stepping in the glimpsed a seat and rapidly lowered himself into it. He had been scheduling to do some reading on this journey and in trying to get his papers out of his suitcase. It smacked him that the seat he had found was not at all satisfactory. There was no adequate light to read by and to his right there was a woman with a wailing baby: "he knew it would be hard to concentrate if he had to fend off a pair of tiny flying fists". It happened to him on manifestation that the seat on his left was appropriate to his own, being right beside the window - the only difficulty was that it was occupied by a gentleman immersed in a Bengali newspaper. Kanai took a minute to size up the newspaper reader and found that he was an elderly and somewhat submissive- looking person, someone who might well be open to a bit of influence.

"*Aré moshai*, can I just say a word?" Kanai smiled as he bore down on his neighbor with the full force of his persuasiveness. "If it isn't all that important to you, would you mind changing places with me? I have a lot of work to do and the light is better by the window."<sup>3</sup>

The newspaper reader goggled in amazement and for a second it seemed he might even complaint or oppose. But on taking in Kanai's garments and all the other particulars of his appearance, he

experienced a vary of mind: "this was clearly someone with a long reach, someone who might be on familiar terms with policemen, politicians and others of importance". Why court problem? He gave in elegantly and made way for Kanai to sit next to the window. Kanai was happy to have achieved his end without a commotion. Conveying his thanks to the newspaper reader, he determined to buy him a cup of tea when a chai wala next emerged at the window. Then, he arrived at into the outer flap of his suitcase and pulled out a few sheets of paper enclosed in intimately written Bengali script. He smoothed the pages over his knees and commenced to read. In our myths it is said that the goddess Ganga's fall from the heavens would have gashed the earth had Lord Shiva not controlled her violent flow by tying it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this tale is to see the river in a convinced way: "as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain". That there is an additional bend to the story which becomes obvious only in the concluding stages of the river's journey- and this fraction of the story always comes as a surprise, because it is never told and thus never anticipated. It is this: "there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle". Once past that peak the river throws off its requisites and disconnects into hundreds, even thousands, of tangled strands.

Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that here, interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal lies an immense archipelago of islands. But that is what it is: an archipelago, stretching for almost two hundred miles, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the ãchol that follows her, half wetted by the sea. They number in the thousands, these islands. Some are immense and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago. These islands are the rivers' restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent

dominion over their gift. The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. Some of these channels are mighty waterways, so wide across that one shore is invisible from the other; others are no more than two or three miles long and only a thousand feet across. Yet each of these channels is a river in its own right, each possessed of its own strangely evocative name. When these channels meet, it is often in clusters of four, five or even six: at these confluences, the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumor of land, echoing back from the horizon. In the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a *mohona* — an oddly seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement.

Piya makes arrangements for her studies, hiring the required forest guides and a boat, and heads out. However, almost immediately she begins to have misgivings, and after falling into the water and being rescued by a fisherman named Fokir, she decides to stay with him on his small boat rather than return to the guides, who seem excessively interested in her money and her equipment. Her decision proves to be a wise one. Although Fokir speaks no English and cannot read or write, he is so intelligent that Piya has no difficulty communicating with him. She has only to show him her equipment and several pictures of dolphins for him to grasp her reason for being in the Sundarbans and to understand that she wishes to hire him and his boat. Fokir and his young son Tutul make room for Piya on their boat, and they proceed.

While Piya explores the present, Kanai ventures into the area's past. First his aunt, Nilima Bose, delivers a lecture about the early history of the Sundarbans, and then Kanai begins reading the notebook of Nirmal, his late uncle. From that point on, the narrator will periodically insert into the story a separate, italicized chapter representing a section of the notebook. Kanai will not read the final entry until about two-thirds of the way through the novel. Fokir knows the area so well that he is soon finding dolphins for Piya to study. He also makes sure that, in her enthusiasm, she does not forget that they are

in crocodile-infested waters and that there are tigers in the mangroves. The narrative now begins switching back and forth, with one chapter devoted to the adventures of Piya and Fokir in the fishing boat and the next to Kanai on Lusibari, and the past. Some of the Lusibari chapters are notebook entries. In other chapters, the narration offers background information. For example, in a chapter titled "Nirmal and Nilima," the reader learns that the couple came to the Sundarbans in 1950, less than a year after they were married, because Nirmal's political activities had attracted the attention of the authorities and he needed to "disappear" for a while. His notebook was written in 1979, at the time of the Morichjhapi rebellion, and it reveals the fact that Nirmal never changed; he was just as idealistic at the end of his life as he had been in the beginning. Kanai begins to suspect exactly what Nilima would rather not...

There are no limitations here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as two hundred miles inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to resurface hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily — some days the water tears away entire peninsula and neck of land; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.

There is no attraction here to invite the stranger in: yet to the world at large this archipelago is known as the Sundarbans, which means "the

beautiful forest." There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove — the sundari tree, *Heritiera minor*. The settlers of the Sundarbans believe that anyone who dares gamble into the vast watery labyrinth without a pure heart will never return. It is the arrival of Piyali Roy of Indian background but stubbornly American, and Kanai Dutt, a sophisticated Delhi businessman, that disturbs the delicate balance of settlement life and sets in motion a fateful catastrophe. Kanai has come to visit his widowed aunt and to review some writings left behind by her husband, a political deep-seated who died mysteriously in the aftermath of a local uprising. He meets Piya on the train from Calcutta and learns she has come to the Sundarbans in search of a rare species of river dolphin. When she employs Fokir, an illiterate, yet proud local fisherman to guide her through the mystifying backwaters, Kanai becomes her translator. From this moment, the tide begins to turn.

Amitav Ghosh has discovered yet another new province, calling for a singular place from its history, language and myth and bringing it to life. Yet the achievement of *The Hungry Tide* is in its exploration of a far darker and more unknowable jungle, the human heart. It is a novel that asks at every turn: what danger resides there, and what delusion? What man can take the true measure of another? All the works of Amitav Ghosh reflect the idea of border crossing.

In 1950, eleven years after Hamilton's death, Nirmal and Nilima Bose had come to Lusibari. They had been married for less than a year and the reasons for their decision which made them move to this remote and fragile locale were intricate. When the couple arrived, they saw utter impoverishment and much had fallen into collapse in the last eleven years. At that time, the Hamilton Estate was also weakened by lawsuits. Not an individual was easily defeated. Nilima established the Women's Union and received support from outside. By the 1980's this had developed into the Badabon Trust.

"... Within a few years of Nirmal and Nilima's arrival in Lusibari, *Zamindaris* were abolished and large land holdings were broken up by law. The union Nilima had

founded, on the other hand, continued to grow, drawing in more and more members and offering an ever increasing number of services - medical, paralegal, agricultural". (p. 80-81)<sup>1</sup>

Without continual growth and progress such words as development, achievement and accomplishment have no meaning. Nilima is a woman of self respect. Though she lives in a new place, she establishes the trust for local village people and becomes a role model for all the characters in the novel. Nilima belongs to an aristocratic family with a good educational background. Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence. Nirmal has an optimistic point of view. He wanted to change his new place, Lusibari, and "he dreamed of a place where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening" (p.53)<sup>4</sup>.

When the action of the novel begins, Nirmal has passed away and passed on a notebook of his final reflections to his nephew, Kanai. The reader thus encounters Nirmal through his writing and through Kanai's and Nilima's memories of the man. The novel is also a record of the border that is present between ignorance and knowledge. Those who cross the borders of ignorance can achieve knowledge. Sometimes ignorance works as knowledge and knowledge as ignorance. Kanai, as a translator and interpreter, has the knowledge of six languages. He also takes the responsibility of translating the language of Fokir and he is so proud of being a translator who knows six languages. He thinks that he could achieve anything in the world with the knowledge of these languages. But the Sundarbans teaches him a good lesson which turns his pride into ignorance.

Kanai comes to terms with his past through a written text, his uncle's journal. Ghosh makes Kanai to realize the life's practicability and the rustic place takes responsibility for Kanai's tremendous change. Kanai's first step towards his quest for identity starts with his acknowledgement of the limitation of his linguistic skill: "I learnt how little I know of myself and of the world" (p.353)<sup>1</sup>. Kanai's search for

identity consists in his crossing the social, cultural and linguistic borders.

Though Kanai knows six languages, he is ignorant. Fokir is an illiterate person but his ignorance shapes his knowledge about nature. He never shows his knowledge. Thus Fokir achieves the knowledge of a literary man who comes from Delhi. Ghosh beautifully celebrates the achievement of ignorance over knowledge. Ghosh gives importance to the humanistic tradition. His dream is that of a human centered universe devoid of narrow-mindedness and cultural parochialism. He believes in breaking down the artificial human made boundaries between nations and people and focuses on the oneness of human spirit. Piya's development starts with her gradual understanding of Fokir. The research work that Piya undertakes requires her to be on water with Fokir.

Piya stumbles upon her life's work and acquires a taste for high ambition by conducting research on the mammals. She gives up the emotional language for the pure objective discourse of science. She is aware of her susceptible conditions as a scientist. The gigantic storm brings Fokir's death and erases her long held notions. She takes the moral responsibility to look after his wife and child. Piya never feels the inadequacy of language in translating her unspoken thoughts and communicating them to Fokir: "She remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved - and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words" (p.393). Piya arranges a house and college education for Fokir's family as a mark of moral responsibility. Piya has charted out her future project regarding the research work. She would undertake the responsibilities of Badabon Trust which is run by Nilima.

In her discussion with Piya about the latter's future plan, Nilima is astonished to know that Piya is talking about Sundarbans as her 'home'. Ghosh beautifully records the conversation thus:

Piya's choice of words surprised Nilima so much that she dropped the spoon that she was using to stir the tea leaves 'Did I hear you right? She, directing a startled glance at Piya. Did you say "home"? 'You know,

Nilima,' she said at last, 'for me, home is where the Orcaella are: so there's no reason why this couldn't be it'. (p.400)<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusion

Both Piya and Kanai appear to come out at the conclusion of the novel as fresh citizens who can feel homogeneously at home in a place as remote and rural as the tide country. As a result, the novel opens up novel and unexpected arenas, ethnic, cultural and territorial barriers. Ghosh, as an expatriate writer, has been able to incarcerate the true spirit of India which is borderless, inclusive in culture and celestial in character which again shows that his heart is in the right place in his homeland India though he has another home in another land.

For Ghosh, the might of a community is that the members are unsurprisingly bound together through shared human values. The community should be devoid of ideological and physical violence. The development and emancipation of human beings is demarcated not in material or corporal forms but in ethical terms. Ghosh's vision and discernment of the modern world in *The Hungry Tide*, presents the possibility of a human world which is devoid of class, colour, creed and culture.

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