

The Hungry Tide: Amitav Ghosh's *Heart of Darkness*

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Set in the Sundarban, the vast, intermittently submerged archipelago, a UNESCO World Heritage, “an inconsequential piece of land in the political or economic calculus of the nation state of India” (2009: 55), Amitav Ghosh’s magnum opus *The Hungry Tide* (2004), a Bengali work of fiction in terms of ethos, temperament and the telling of the story according to the Bengali novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay, addresses the aftermath of the 1947 partition in Bengal and looks at the suppressed history of the desperately poor and wretched refugees of Morichjhapi who were butchered and battered on the threshold of their undone years by the fascist C.P.I.M. Government of West Bengal in 1979 that it led to, thus highlighting one of the most vexed and long-standing unresolved issues of the complex post-Independence subcontinental politics. Hindu myth has it that the mighty river goddess Ganges frees herself from the taming dreadlocks of Shiva --- the god of “destroyer and preserver” (to borrow a Shelleyan phrase) --- near the Bay of Bengal in meandering strands, to create the Sundarbans, an immense stretch of mangrove forest, which forms the watery labyrinth of islets in the delta of the Ganges as it debouches into the the Bay of Bengal, an eerie place where fantasy and

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reality constantly overlap: "At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence; of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them" (2004: 7). Here tigers, sharks, snakes and crocodiles kill dozens of people in the embrace of that dense foliage per year, and violent cyclones often have hundreds of thousands dead in their wake, as occurred in 23rd May, 2009 in the form of the horrendous storm called "Cyclone Aila". Thus, *The Hungry Tide*, which has been described as " a broader ecological agenda i.e. sensitive to the symbolic codependency of the human and nonhuman creatures that inhabit the particular biospace of the sundarbans" (2007:128), becomes a Conradian expedition, and Forsterish collision between Western assumptions and Indian reality, between the Occident and the Orient, which throws in some Indiana Jones- style encounters with tigers and crocodiles on board the Dunn and Duffy Combined Circus train in Utah in 1912.

To this land discovered by the ebb-tide, *bhatir desh*, as Ghosh calls it in a remarkable and poetic application of term used in Mughal land - records, come Calcutta-born tenacious marine biologist from the U.S. on the trail of a breed of freshwater dolphin, the Irrawaddy or *Orcaella brevirostris fluminalis*, and a Delhi businessman who fancies himself above being charmed, a middle-aged linguist who runs a translation bureau in the Capital of India, "my mind was full of poetry. At the start of my career, I wanted to translate *Jibanabanda* into Arabic and Adonis into Bangla" (2004:199). On Choosing the *Orcaella* as a research object draws her to her ancestral home, where she realizes she has "no more idea of what her own place was in the great scheme of things (2006: 152). We are introduced to Kanai Dutt at a south Kolkata commuter train station (Dhakuria), observing the "exotic" "foreign" Piyali Roy and waiting to board a local train to Canning, a ghastly port-town once abandoned by the British (named after Lord Canning), "the only rail connection to the Sundarbans" (2004: 4). Her journey begins with a disaster: Piyali jumps off the

motorboat she has hired into swirling, muddy waters to save herself from two potential rapists; one a guard foisted on her by the forest department and the other, owner- pilot of the boat she has hired. She is saved by Fokir (Bengali version of Faqir), a lonely, sensitive, illiterate yet proud boatman, the “indigenous canny” according to Pramod K. Nayar (2010:112), married to Moyna, a subaltern woman who wants to be a nurse. When Piyali needs a translator to connect with the local folk who will help her locate the dolphins she needs to study, Kanai is fortuitously available. As the three of them launch into the elaborate backwaters, they are drawn unawares into the hidden undercurrents of this isolated world, where political turmoils exact a personal toll i.e. every bit as powerful as the ravaging tide.

Kanai goes off to the Hamilton Estates in Lusibari, where his aunt Nilima runs a hospital as a part of her NGO activities. Nilima has lived in one of the islands for years; she sends for him after the discovery of a diary belonging to her long- dead life-partner Nirmal, an idealist Marxist school teacher, would -be poet, and failed revolutionary, a prototype of Balram of *The Circle of Reason* who was obsessed with Pasteur and phrenology, the carbon copy of the Muslim trader Hossain Miya of Manik Bandopadhyay *Padma Nadir Majhi* who wants to set up a little utopia on an island in the Padma delta, whose withdrawal from political activism had brought them to settle in a village of Sundarban. As Kanai reads the diary, its narrative of past events, thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears, dreams and despair, frequent triumphs and infrequent tragedies, is interwoven with other stories, such as Kanai’s own memories of a visit he paid his uncle and aunt as a child, his present experiences as a guest at Nilima’s hospital, and Piya’s search, aided by the subaltern fisherman Fokir, for the Orcaella. Through the diary, we get a picture of Nirmal, a “misplaced, misgendered Scheherazade with a flying, fleeting pen” (2004: 148), a poet, fascinated with Rilke’s motto of life: “life is lived in transformation” (2004: 282). In his self-

inflicted exile in Kusum's hut on the island of Morichjhapi, he has nothing with him except his notebook and "a copy of a Bangla translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* - the translator, Buddhadeb Basu, was a poet he had once known" (2004:27). Rilke is important to Nirmal in another sense: Nirmal's notebook is a testimony of the events that take place on the island of Morichjhapi (2012: 155). This is what post-modernist calls "intertextuality", a phenomenon described as "a hyperawareness on the part of the text itself of its cultural reception" (1992:9). The term "intertextuality", popularized in recent decades, especially by Julia Kristeva (in 1966) among others, denotes the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before it and therefore challenges traditional notions of literary influence, saying that intertextuality denotes a transposition of one or several sign systems into another or others. In two essays, *The Bounded text* and *Word, Dialogue and Novel*, written in the late 1960s, Kristeva draws on the work of Bakhtin and the Russian Formalist Medvedev to propose the idea of "intertextuality": "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (1986:37). For Roland Barthes, "Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc, pass into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text. Intertextuality, the condition of any text whatsoever, cannot, of course, be reduced to a problem of source or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located, of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks" (1981:39). Foucault also underscores this process of automatic inter-lapping and overlapping of various texts within a specific text: "The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, its autonomous form, it is caught up in system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences" (1972:23). Bill Ashcroft remarks that "the most compelling achievement of

testimonio is its representation in the history of the unhistoricized, the 'voiceless'" (2001:113) and that " a key function of *testimonio* is the strategic attempt to control representation, to interpose a voice that has been silenced, oppressed or misrepresented, a goal which lies at the core of all interpolating strategies" (2001: 114). Indeed, Nirmal regards himself as a witness who must tell the story of Kusum and the refugees: "I remember that her voice changed as she was recounting her story; it assumed new rhythms and distinctive cadences My pen will have to race to keep up; she is the muse and I am just a scribe" (2004: 162).

In *The Hungry Tide*, the theme of immigration, sometimes voluntary and sometimes forced, along with its bitter or sweet experiences, runs through most incidents in the core of the novel - the ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistani refugees in the forties and fifties who had run away from the Dandakananya refugee camps to Morichjhapi as they felt that the latter region would provide them with familiar environs and therefore a better life. In an interview with the Italian newspaper *II Manifesto*, Amitav Ghosh declares, "We know the world only in fragments and what concerns me about it is to explore the connections among people and their stories, to retrace the lost pieces from the mosaic. In my previous books, I had moved across different historical and geographical landscapes, but the fact of choosing a more restricted setting does not represent a limit, since a single place can really contain a whole universe" (2012:105-106). At the heart of Nirmal's diary is the Morichjhapi massacre which, as an important illustration of the general tug-of-war between human rights and ecological preservation," was backed by the *bhadralok* who perceived the refugees and the Sundarbans islanders as lesser beings who came behind tigers in their classificatory scheme of importance" (2005: 1759). Many, like the girl Kusum in Ghosh's post-modern novel, Kanai's childhood playmate who becomes the repository of Nirmal's idealist hopes, were killed. Nirmal, a romantic, Bengali Marxist

believer in a world where people can be “farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening” (2004:53), is later discovered wandering in the port town of Canning; he is shattered by the event and never recovers. As the concluding significant expression of the trauma of Bengal’s Partition, the story of Morichjhapi occupies a central place in the novel. Nirmal’s poignant response to the defiance of the Morichjhapi settlers in the face of government repression resembles us Jethamoshai’s words in *The Shadow Lines*: (1988) “I know everything, I understand everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don’t believe in this India-Shindia. It is all very well, you are going away now, but suppose when you get here they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I will die here” (1988:215). Listening to those refugees crying out,

“Amra Kara, bastuhara
Morichjhapi chharbona”.

(“Who are we? The homeless. We won’t leave Morichjhapi.”), Nirmal says, “Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave” (2004: 254).

The friction between land and sea in the Sundarbans creates unique ecosystems for plant and animal life, and given the increasing human encroachment on the habitat coupled with lopsided conservative initiatives, tensions between these various elements seem inevitable. The number of people killed by the Royal Bengal tigers in the Indian Sundarbans tiger reserve has fluctuated between 66 in 1975-1976, 15 in 1989, 42 in 1992 and 22 in 2002 according to the *Carnivore Preservation Trust*. When Fakir points out animal tracks in the mud that he claims belong to a stalking tiger, Kanai assumes the fisherman shares his own instrumental view of knowledge as a commodity. When Kanai rejects Fakir’s wisdom and the local

saying: "that if you see a tiger, the chances are you won't live to tell the tale" (2004: 242), Fakir leaves him alone on the island; only then does Kanai see himself as the ignorant outsider: "Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged" (2004: 56). Thus, Fokir belongs to the elusive band of initiates in Ghosh's oeuvre- Shambhu Debnath in *The Circle of Reason* (1986), Mangala in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) and Detti in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) --- who with their extra- sensory perceptions erode Enlightenment's empirical rationalism (2014: 10). Without understanding the desperation of the villagers, Piyali Roy tries to single-handedly stop the villagers to the killing of a tiger that had been causing havoc in a village and has to be dragged away from the angry mob that burn a man-eating tiger to death by Fokir and Horen, Naskar though, however, Piyali Roy is devastated and their blissful communion is broken. Hawley comments: "She is reminiscent of May Price in the face of the Dhaka mob in *The Shadow Lines*, and like May, she is obvious to the danger in which she is putting everyone by romantically standing before a 'force of nature'" (2005:139). The tiger trapped and killed by villagers (especially by the tiger killing Kusum's father) in the cowshed plunging their staves into the pen, setting fire to it, and "screaming in a maddened blood lust, Maar Maar!" (2004:95) and the dolphins killed by the coast guard's boar are counterpoised to underscore the plight of the nonhuman world of the Sundarbans (2008: 33). Kanai reasons the uncertain numbers and unpublicized death toll of humans killed by tigers is because "these people are too poor to matter. We all know it but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too---that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?" (2004: 300-301) which resembles us the Marxist leader Radhika Ranjan Pramanik's words, "Tigers are the best conservators of the forest. They keep human beings away. If there are no tigers in the Sundarbans, the forest area would be left bare in months" (2008: 34-35). This relation between man and animals in *The Hungry Tide* reminds Yoti

Das's interest in birds and the analogy between the migrating birds and the migrating characters in *The Circle of Reason*, the tale of a young weaver, who attempts to recover a continuing tradition of the interweaving cultures from his village in Bengal to the Gulf states and North Africa.

Different ghosts emerge from the islands' past and they are the product of those passages of people and cultures in the course of time: "Every generation creates its own population of ghosts" (2004: 50). One of the most surprising legacies of such-contamination is the survival of an ancient ritual in the worshipping of the protecting mythical tiger goddess of the tide country, Bon Bibi, whose legend, *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, involves a strange mixture of Islamic mantras in the form of a hindu *puja*, representing the hybridity of the tide country. "The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' "(1990:211), where, as Edward Soja illustrates,"... everything comes together.... subjectivity and objectivity the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable mind and body, consciousness and unconsciousness, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and mending history." It starts from Medina, "one of the holiest places in Islam" (2004: 103), and travels from Arabia to "the country of eighteen tides (2004: 103), where the twins Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli conquer the demon king, Dokkhin Rai, and "decided that one half of the tide country would remain a wilderness the rest was soon made safe for human settlement" (2004: 103) and she becomes in the legend "the saviour of the weak and a mother of mercy to the poor" (2004: 104) for everyone living in the tide country and people still call on her when they are in danger. This kind of syncretism is an extraordinary example of the stories that flow across borders and arbitrary divisions, since there was a time, as also Ghosh illustrated in *In an Antique Land* (1992), where communities of people in an Egyptian *fellaheen* village would exchange their cultural and popular knowledge for a better

understanding of each other. Horen tells this story of Bon Bibi to Nirmal and reveals that the stories actually come from a very, very old book, written by a Muslim author Abdur Rahim, further Fokir learns it as a song from his mother, Kusum; and finally Kanai translates it on paper for Piya (2012: 158): “Suddenly the language and the music were all around her, flowing like a river, and all of it made sense ... Although the sound of the voice was Fokir’s, the meaning was Kanai’s and in the depths of her heart she knew she would always be torn between the one and the other” (2004:360). The poetry of Rilke sings of a primal love (in the third elegy) that is Piya’s for Fokir’s hymn of Bon Bibi:

“Look, we don’t love like flowers
With only one older than memory rises in our season behind
us; when we love,
A sap older than memory rises in our arms. O girl,
It’s like this: inside us we haven’t loved just some one
In the future, but a fermenting tribe; not just one
Child, but fathers, cradled inside us like ruins
Of mountains, the dry riverbed
Of former mothers, yes, and all that
Soundless landscape, under its clouded
Or clear destiny - girl, all this came before you” (2004: 360).

Piya tries to write the spatial history of the tide country: an act of psychological translation which trans-creates the time-space continuum of the sundarbans into language that Pia knows. Piya’s scientific expedition inevitably resembles us one of other river journeys: it mirrors Bernier’s travels in India referred to in the novel, and it even has the classic moment of an encounter with the “horror” (2004:300), when a tiger is killed in the deepest jungle village (2012:161). Impressed against Marlow’s will by Kurtz’s intensity in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*(1902), the intermediate narrator Marlow, who traces his first visit to colonial Africa and his growing awareness of the evils, found that, back in Brussels, he could not tell the colonial intellectual Kurtz’s “Intended” the truth of his concluding words, “The

horror! The horror (1988:68). It reminds us of the concluding stanza of Robert Southey's poem *To Horror*:

"Horror! I call thee yet once more !
Bear me to that accursed shore,
Where on the stake the Negro writhes" (2004:47).

The profound affinity and understanding between Fokir and Piyali is conveyed many times through a gift, a token, an offering, unexpected and rare, offered in the exchange between equal human beings without expectations of return or reward. In the simple routine of living, washing and cooking, in the confined space of the boat, floating in the endless universe of the sea, on the barest terms of survival, the contact and communication between them are on the purest terms of human exchanges. This relationship rekindles in Piya her deepest memories of her childhood that "were almost lost to her, those images of the past, and nowhere had she less expected to see them than on this boat" (2004:96): the touch of her mother's sari, the smell of the kitchen at her house in Seattle, her father's attachment to a piece of old cloth, *gamchha*, a word she once knew but has now forgotten (2012:163). Fokir saves her life three times: once from drowning by instinct, as one human helping another, a complete stranger in the circumstance, once from a man-eating crocodile add the third time when he willingly sacrifices his life for hers, out of love, a pain and longing i.e. yet undefined and unnamed during the cyclone: "it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one" (2004:390). Piyali's journey reminds us of Ishmael's romantic desire to experience a transcendent truth in the wild of Melville's *Moby Dick* or *The Whale* (1851) which will remain a fascinating hodge-podge of the "higgledy-piggledy whole statements" (2007:54). Through this intriguing tale of history, folklore, ecology, migration, love and grief, the Sundarbans, like Conrad's Belgian Congo, becomes "the heart of an immense darkness." (1988:76).

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