THE HUMAN SPIRIT AND ITS TRUE MEASURE IN

THE HUNGRY TIDE

The novel is constructed in a unique manner. The novel begins with an accidental meeting of two young persons, by the name of Kanai and Piyali Roy in an Indian railway platform. Their meeting is followed by a subsequent conversation in the train. The novel progresses with these two protagonists, getting separated after they reach their destination, that is, Canning and pursuing along their own respective directions of interest. At this point, the novel takes a two way track methodology of composition.

The author carries forward two separate tales, one dealing with the life and times of Kanai and the other, with that of Piyali or Piya, as she is addressed throughout the entire breadth of the novel. These two plots are carried on in alternate chapters of the novel in such an innovative way that it sustains the reader’s interest and does not lose the thread of commonality of one plot while initiating the other.

The story of Kanai and Piya, moves on comfortably with Kanai reaching his aunt’s place in one of the islands of Sunderbans by the name of Lusibari. Kanai has been called by his aunt Nilima Bose, for a special assignment of delivering her husband Nirmal Bose’s self collected diary that he had particularly instructed to be located on the hands of his nephew, Kanai at the time of his last breath on earth.

The novel in itself spills out the contents of the diary which deals with Nirmal Bose’s expeditions and his revolutionary spirit-given expression during the days of political combats in the island of Morichjhapi—an island that had been occupied illegally.
by homeless Bangladeshi refugees. The diary was composed in the last months of his existence.

Along with the contents of the diary that Ghosh etches out on the pages of his novel, the tale of Kanai’s relationship with Lusibari along with the island history and geographical details are also give a voice of expression. Parallel to that, on the other hand, the plot gives us an account of Piya’s adventurous expeditions on the river where she goes for a short survey on river dolphins. The account moves on with her contact with Fokir, a village fisherman who is the primary helping hand to serve her in the desired purpose. Her almost wordless interactions with Fokir, is enough to bring her to the very island of residence which is none other than Lusibari itself. This is where the plot converges into one, bringing the discrete, separate tales of Kanai and Piya on a single platform.

The plot ultimately comes to a close with Kanai’s departure to his workplace in Delhi and Piya’s struggle in a deathly combat with cyclone. What is touching in this novel is the developing relationship between Piya and Fokir-a relationship that has not been given any name and can neither be given any. The concluding section of the story talks about Fokir’s attempt to save Piya from the hands of Cyclone while sacrificing his own life. This is probably the maximum intimacy that’s showed between them. It is after all, a wonder to even think that an Americanized Indian woman can share her thoughts and emotions with an unlettered village rustic like Fokir.

This book is a revelation of the spirit of humanity-of the fact that human beings are bonded not by their by their status or their similarity of backgrounds, be it religious, cultural, political or even regional but by the similarity in experiences shared and
struggled, by the similarity in mental make ups and the ability of understanding one
another. This is what makes an individual adaptable to the whims and norms of the
other human persona, no matter now distinctly dissimilar they might be in their external
appearance.

Ghosh achieves his unique triumph in displaying such a bond between Piya and
Fokir’s relationship, a relation that does not require speech to convey a message and the
account of Nilima and Nirmal’s relationship that remains voiceless in spite of being tied
with the bond of marriage and having had innumerable instances to share with one
another.

The novel is a captivating read with fearful instances of a tidal country dictated
in line with superstitious beliefs, the poverty of the islanders and the effort made by an
entrepreneur like Nilima lead the path of such illiterate island dwellers from their
subjugated existence to a healthy, educated and liberated livelihood.

Lusibari was about two kilometers long from end to end, and was shaped
somewhat like conch shell. It was the most southerly of the inhabited islands of the tide
country – in the fifty kilometers of mangrove that separated it from the open sea, there
was no other settlement to be found. Although there were many other islands nearby,
Lusibary was cut off from these by four encircling rivers. Of these rivers two were of
medium size, while the third was so modest as almost to melt into the mud at low tide.
But the pointed end of the island – the narrowest spiral of the conch – jutted into a river
that was one of the mightiest in the tide country, the Raimangal. Seen from Lusibari at
high tide, the Raimangal did not look like a river at all, it looked more like a limb of the
sea, a bay perhaps, or a very wide estuary. Five other channels flowed into the river
here, forming an immense mohona. At low tide the mouths of the rivers were clearly
visible in the distance – gigantic portals piercing the ring of green galleries that
encircled the mohona. But the rising waters of the mohona would swallow up the jungle
as well as the rivers and their openings. If it were not for the tips of a few kewra trees
you would think you were gazing at a body of water that reached beyond the horizon.
Depending on the level of the tide, he remembered the view was either exhilarating of
terrifying. At low tide when the embankment was riding high tide was it evident that the
interior of the island lay well below the level of the water. At such times the unsinkable
ship of a few hours before took on the appearance of a flimsy saucer that could tip over
at any moment and go circling down into the depths.

From the narrow end of the island a mud bank extended a long way into the
water. This spit was like a terrestrial windsock, changing direction with the prevailing
currents. But just as a windsock can generally be counted on to remain attached to its
mast the mud bank too was doggedly tenacious in keeping a hold upon the island. It
formed a natural pier and that was where ferries and boats usually unloaded their
passengers. There were no docks or jetties on Lusibari for the currents and tides what
flowed around it were too powerful to permit the construction of permanent structures.

The islands main village – also known as Lusibari – was situated close to the
base of the mud spit in the lee of the embankment. A newcomer looking at Lusibari
from the crest of the badh would see a village that seemed at first glance no different
from thousands of others in Bengal, a tightly packed settlement of palm-thatched huts
and bamboo-walled stalls and shacks. But a closer examination would reveal a different
and far from commonplace design.
At the center of the village was a maiden an open space not quite geometrical enough to be termed a square. At one end of this ragged-edged maiden was a marketplace a jumble of stalls that lay unused through most of the week, coming alive only on Saturdays which were the weekly market day. At other end of the maiden dominating the village stood a school. This was the building that was chiefly responsible for endowing the village with an element of visual surprise. Although not large it looked like a cathedral over the shacks huts and shanties that surrounded it. Outlined in brick, over the keystone of the main entrance were the school’s name and the date of its completion, Sir Daniel Hamilton High School 1938. The façade consisted of a long shaded veranda equipped with fluted columns, neoclassical pigments, vaguely Saracenic arches and other such elements of the school house architecture of its time. The rooms were large and airy with tall shuttered windows.

A large proportion of the island’s women were dressed as widows. These women were easily identified because of their borderless white saris and their lack of adornment: no bangles or vermilion. At the wells and by the Ghats there often seemed to be no one who was not a widow. Making inquiries, she learnt that in the tide country girls were brought up on the assumption that if they married, they would be widowed in their twenties- their thirties if they were lucky. This assumption was woven, like a skein of dark wool, into the fabric of their lives:

When the men folk went fishing it’s the custom for their wives to change into the garments of widowhood. They would put away their marital reds and dress in whit saris; they would take off their bangles and was the vermilion from their heads (THT 80).
One day, during a meeting in the courtyard, a woman began to recount a story in exceptionally vivid detail. Her husband being away on a boat her father-in-law had come home drunk one night and forced his way into the room where she was sleeping with her children. In front of her children, he had held the sharpened edge of a da to her throat and tried to pull off her sari. When she tried to fight him off, he had gashed her arm with the machete, almost severing the thumb of her left hand. She had flunked a kerosene lamp at him and his lungi had caught fire giving him severe burns. For this she had been turned out of her marital home, although her fault was only that she had tried to protect herself and her children. Here, as if to corroborate her story, her voice rose and she cried out. It was as though they were trying to hold misfortune at bay by living through it over and over again. Or was it merely a way of preparing themselves for that which they knew to be inevitable?

During the months Kusum had spent in Lusibari, she had come to know the island well and she became Kanai’s guide and mentor, she told him about its people and their children and about everything happening around it – cockfights and pujas, births and deaths. Kanai in turn, would tell her about his school, his friends and the ways of the city.

The stage for *The Glory of Bon Bibi* was erected on the open expanse of Lusibari’s maiden, between the compound of the Hamilton House and the School. Its design was so simple that it took less than a day to set up. The floor, a few planks of wood, was laid on a trestle and enclosed within an open scaffolding of bamboo poles. During performances, sheets of painted cloth were suspended from the poles at the rear. These served as backdrops for the audience and as screens for the actors, so that they
could eat, smoke and change costumes out of public view. Several large, hissing gas lamps served to illuminate the spectacle and music was provided by a battery-operated cassette recorder and loud-speakers.

As a rule, night came early to Lusibari. Candles and lamps were expensive and used as sparingly as possible. People ate their evening meal in the glow of twilight and by the time darkness fell, the island had usually fallen silent except for the few animal sounds that carried across the water. For this reason, a night-time diversion was a major occasion, the anticipation of which provided at least as much pleasure as the event itself. Great numbers of people, Kanai and Kusum among them, stayed up, night after night, to attend the performances.

The bazaars of Canning were much as a jumble of narrow lanes, cramped shops and mildewed houses. There were a great many stalls selling patent medicines for neuralgia and dyspepsia – concoctions with names like Hajmozyne and Dardocytin. The only buildings of any note were the cinema halls, immense in their ungainly solidity; they sat upon the town like sandbags, as though to prevent it from being washed away.

The bazaars ended in causeway that led away from the town towards the Malta River. Although the causeway was a long one, it fell well short of the river, on reaching its end the Malta as a vast waterway, one of the most formidable rivers he had ever seen. But it was low tide now and the river in the distance was no wider than a narrow ditch, flowing along the centre of a kilometer-wide bed. The freshly laid silt that bordered the water glistened in the sun like dunes of melted chocolate. From time to time, bubbles of air rose from the depths and burst through to the top, leaving rings
upon the burnished surface. The sounds seemed almost to form articulate patterns, as if to suggest they were giving voice to the depths of the earth itself.

Look over there, pointing downstream to a boat that had a come sputtering down the remains of the river. Although the vessel could not have been more than nine meters in length, it was carrying at least a hundred passengers and possibly more, it was so heavily loaded that the water was within fifteen centimeters of its gunwales. It came to a halt and the crew proceeded to extrude a long gangplank that led directly into the mud bank. On the boat, preparations for the crossing were already in train.

The women had hitched up their saris and the men were rolling up their lungis and trousers. On stepping off the plank, there was a long-drawn-out moment when each passenger sank slowly into the mud, like a spoon disappearing into a bowl of very thick daal, only when they were in up to their hips did their descent end and their forward movement begins. When their legs hidden from sight and all that’s visible of their struggle, the twisting of their upper bodies.

Nilima frowned as she watched the men and women who were floundering through the mud. Even to look at that hurts my knees, said Nilima, I could do it once, but I can’t any more – it’s too much for my legs. That’s the problem you see, there isn’t as much water in the river nowadays and at low tide it gets very shallow. We brought the Trust’s launch to take you to Lusibari, but it will be at least two hours before it can make its way here to pick us up. She directed an accusatory glance at Kanai. I didn’t know said Kanai ruefully; I wish you had told me. The only reason I wanted to come through Canning was that this was the route we took when you brought me to Lusibari
in 1970. As he looked around, taking in the sights, Kanai had a vivid recollection of Nirmal’s silhouette, outlined against the sky.

Nirmal had put him in mind of a long-legged waterbird – maybe a heron or a stork. The impression was heightened by his clothes and umbrella; his loose white drapes had flapped in the wind like a mantle of feathers, while the shape of his chhata was not unlike that of a long pointed bill.

**Culture and Society Attitude in The Hungry Tide**

Amitav Ghosh sets his appealing the novel, *The Hungry Tide*. The book is told from the perspective of its two main characters, Kanai Dutt, a Delhi businessman, and Piya Roy, an American scientist who has come to study the rare Irrawaddy dolphin in which lives in the rivers of the tide country.

Kanai was hauling a wheeled airline bag with a telescoping handle. To the vendors and traveling salesmen who plied their wares on the Canning line, this piece of luggage was just one of the many details of kanai’s appearance – along with his sunglasses, corduroy trousers and sued shoes that suggested middle-aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence. As a result he was overwhelmed by hawkers, urchins and bands of youths who were raising funds for a varied variety of causes, it was only when the green-and-yellow electric train lastly pulled in that he was capable to shake off this importuning entourage.

Kanai, educated as translator and owner of a successful translation business, comes to the island of Lusibari to visit his aunt, Nilima. Kanai is a conceited and
arrogant and not above using his class to get his own way. He tries to be always in control of the relationships of his life. Nilima describes him as,

‘One of those men who like to think of himself as being irresistible to the other sex. Unfortunately, the world doesn’t lack for women who’re foolish enough to confirm such a man’s opinion of himself, and Kanai seems always to be looking for them.’

Kanai was the founder and chief executive of a small but thriving business. He ran a bureau of translators and interpreters that specialized in serving the expatriate communities of New Delhi, foreign diplomats, aid workers, charitable organizations, multinational companies and the like. Being the only such organization in the city, the services of Kanai’s agency were hugely in demand. This meant its employees were all overworked – none more so than Kanai himself.

Kanai had been to Lusibari as a teenager, sent by his parents to be ‘rusticated’ for his pride and arrogance. He’s now being summoned by Nilima because of a package left to Kanai by her late husband, Nirmal, which has been just been found some 20 years after his death. More than thirty years had passed since the first set foot in this station but he still remembered vividly the astonishment with which he had said to his uncle aunt, but there are so many people here. Kanai smiled to recall his last encounter with Nirmal, which dated back to the late 1970s when Kanai was a college student in Calcutta. He had been hurrying to get to a lecture, and while running past the displays of old books on the university’s footpaths he’d barreled into someone who was browsing at one of the stalls. A book had gone flying into the air and landed in a puddle.
Kanai was about to swear at the man he had bumped into, Bokachoda, why didn’t you get out of my way, when he recognized his uncle’s wide, wondering eyes blinking behind a pair of thick-rimmed eyeglasses. His uncle asked him, Kanai is that you, in bending down to touch his uncle’s feet, Kanai had also picked up the book he had dropped. His eyes had fallen on the now-damaged spine, and he had noticed it was a translation of *Francois Bernier’s Travels in the Mugal Empire*. The book seller in the meanwhile had begun to yell, you have to pay – It’s expensive that book, and it’s ruined now, a glance at his uncle’s stricken face told Kanai that he didn’t have the money to buy that book. It’s so happened that Kanai had just been paid for an article he had sent to a newspaper. Reaching for his wallet, Kanai had paid the bookseller and thrust the book into Nirmal’s hands, all in one flowing motion. Then to forestall an awkward expression of gratitude on his uncle’s part, he had mumbled, I’m late, have to run, and had then fled, leaping over a puddle. In the years since he had always imagined that when he next ran into Nirmal it would be in a similar fashion – he would be in a bookshop fondling some volume he could not afford and he, Kanai, would reach discreetly into his own pocket to buy him the book. But it hadn’t happened that way, two years after that accidental encounter, Nirmal had died in Lusibari, after a long illness.

**Women Characters in *The Hungry Tide***

Piya is the daughter of Bangla parents who had immigrated to Seattle. She’s a woman used to the solitude and rigors of the life of a scientist working in the field. Piya often works in areas where she knows neither the ethnicity nor the language, and can stay alive for days on just power bars and Oval tine as she studies river dolphins. She’s come to the Sundarbarns to find more of these rare creatures, but her trip doesn’t begin
well. With an official permit, she’s forced to use a government approved guide and guard, but she finds herself at their whims until events land her in the small boat belonging to Fokir brings Piya to Lusibari, where the paths of Piya, Kanai, and Fokir all merge. Deep in the interior of Canning’s bazaar Piya had come to a halt at the gates of the Forest Department’s offices. Because of the circumstances of her work she had, over the years, developed a reluctant familiarity with the officialdom of forests and fisheries.

Piya had been expecting a grimy bureaucratic honeycomb and was taken aback to find herself looking at a small brightly painted bungalow. But still, before stepping up to the entrance she steeled herself for what promised to be a very long day. But as it turned out, her experience was not quite as grim as she had anticipated. It did indeed take a full hour of waiting before she could even make her way past the first doorkeeper, but once she was inside her progress was unexpectedly swift. After a polite exchange she was handed over to a subordinate, who led her down a number of corridors, through cubicles of diminishing size. In between were long intervals of drinking tea, waiting and starting at walls blotched with red *paan-stains*. But apace or not, the paperwork did proceed and within a mere four hours of her entry into the building she was in possession of all the necessary documents.

It was only then, just as she was about to march out of the office, giddy with joy at her triumph, that she learnt that the procedures weren’t quite over yet – the last remaining requirement for her survey was that she be accompanied by a forest guard. Her face fell in dismay for she knew from previous experience.

That official escorts were always a hindrance and sometimes needed more attention than the survey itself, she would have far preferred to travel on her own, with
only a boat man or pilot for company. But it was quickly made clear that to her, a man who knew the route and would help with the hiring of a boat and all the other arrangements. She dropped the matter without further demur. It was good enough that she had got her papers so quickly – better not try her luck too far.

The guard, dressed in a starched khaki uniform, proved to be a small ferret-faced man. He greeted her with a deferential smile and his appearance provided no cause for misgiving – not until he produced her to make her way back down the corridors to ask if the gun was really necessary. The answer was yes, it was regulations required it because her route would take her through the reserve. There was always the possibility of an attack. There was nothing more to be said. Shoudering her backpacks, she followed the guard out of the bungalow.

Then Piya and the guard had not gone far before the guard’s demeanour began to change. Where he had been almost obsequious before, he now became quite officious, herding her ahead without any explanation of where they were going or why. In a short while she found herself at a teashop on the embankment, meeting with a man of vaguely thuggish appearance. The man’s name, so far as she could tell, was Mej-da, he saw squat of build and there were many shiny chains and amulets hanging beneath his large, fleshy face. Neither he is not the guard spoke English but it was explained to her through intermediaries that Mej-da owned a launch that was available for hire. He was a seasoned guide who knew the area better than anyone else.

She asked to see the launch and was told that that would not be possible – it was anchored some distance away and they would have to take a boat to get to it. On inquisitive about the cost she was quoted a plainly excessive figure. She knew now that
this was a set-up and she was being cheated. She made a desultory effort to find other boat–owners, but the sight of Mej-da and the guard scared them off. No one would approach her. At this point she knew she was faced with a choice. She could either go back to lodge a complaint at the Forestry Department’s office or she could agree to the proposed arrangement and get started on her survey. After having spent most of the day in that agreed to hire Mej-da’s launch.

On the way to the launch, remorse set in. Perhaps she was judging these men too harshly. Perhaps they really did possess great funds of local knowledge. In any event, there was no harm in seeing if they could be of help. In one of her backpacks she had a display card she had chosen especially for this survey. It pictured the two species of river dolphin known to inhabit these waters – the Gangetic dolphin and the Irrawaddy dolphin. The drawings were copied from a monograph that dated back to 1878.

They were not the best or most lifelike pictures she had ever come across (she is a new innumerable more accurate or more realistic photographs and diagrams) but for some reason she had always had good luck with these drawings, they seemed to make the animals more recognizable than other, more realistic representations. In the past on the other rivers, display cards like these had sometimes been of great help in gathering information.

In between them the communication was possible; she would show them to fishermen and boatmen and ask questions about sightings, abundance, behavior, and seasonal distribution and so on. When there was no one to translate she would hold up the cards and wait for a response. This often worked; they would recognize the animal and point her to places where they were commonly seen. But as a rule only the most
observant and experienced fishermen were able to make the connection between the pictures and the animals they represented. Relatively few had ever seen the whole, living creature and their view of it was generally restricted to a momentary glimpse of a blowhole or a dorsal fin. This is being so, it was not unusual for the cards to elicit unexpected reasons, but never before had this illustration provoked a response as strange as the one she got from Mej-da. First he turned the card around and looked at the picture upside down. Then pointing to the illustration of the Gangetic dolphin he asked if it were a bird. She understood him because he used the English word, Bird, Bird.

Piya was so startled that she looked at the picture again, with fresh eyes, wondering what he might be thinking of. The mystery was resolved when he stabbed a finger at the animal’s long snout with its twin rows of needle-like teeth. Like an illusionist drawing, the picture seemed to change shape as she looked at it, she had the feeling that she was looking at it through his eyes. She understood how the mistake might be possible, given the animal’s plump, dovelike body and its spoon-shaped bill, not unlike a heron’s. And of course the Gangetic dolphin had no dorsal fin to speak of. But then the ludicrousness of the notion had hit her – the Gangetic dolphin a bird, She took the card back and put it away quickly, turning her face aside to hide her smile. In the clear water of the open sea the light of the sun wells downwards from the surface in an inverted cone that ends in the beholder’s eyes. The base of this cone is a transparent disk that hangs above the observer’s head like a floating halo. It is through this prism, known as Snell’s window, that the oceanic dolphin perceives the world beyond the water, in submersion, this circular portal follows it everywhere, creating a single clear
opening in the unbroken expanse of shimmering silver that forms the water’s surface as seen from below.

Nirmal and Nilima Bose first came to Lusibari in search of a safe haven. This was in 1950 and they had been married less than a year. Nirmal was initially from Dhaka but had come to Calcutta as a student. The events of Partition had cut him off from his family and he had elected to stay on in Calcutta where he had made a name for himself as a leftist intellectual and a writer of promise. Nirmal was teaching English literature at Ashutosh College when his pathway crossed Nilima’s: she happened to be a student, in one of his classes.

Nirmal and Nilima came to the sundarbans when his revolutionary ideas became too dangerous in Calcutta. Nilima founded a cooperative which brought help, medicine, and ultimately a hospital to Lusibari, while Nirmal spent his career as headmaster of the local school.

Nilima, sitting on a bench in the shaded section of the platform, sipping tea while a couple of dozen people milled around her, some vying for attention and some being held at bay by her entourage. Kanai made his way quietly to the outer edge of the circle and stood listening. A few among the crowd were supplicants who wanted jobs and some were would-be politicians hoping to enlist her support. But for the most part, the people there were just well-wishers who wanted nothing more than to look at Nilima and to be warmed by her gaze.

At the age of seventy-six, Nilima Bose was almost circular in shape and her face had the dimpled roundness of a waxing moon. Her voice was soft and it had the
splintered quality of a note sounded on a length of cracked bamboo. She was small in height and her wispy hair, which she wore in a knot at the back of her head, was still more dark than grey. It was her practice to dress in saris woven and crafted in the workshops of the Badabon Trust, garments almost always of cotton, with spidery borders executed in batik. It was in one such, a plain white widow’s sari, thinly bordered in black, that she had come to the station to receive Kanai. Nilima’s customary manner was one of abstracted indulgence. Yet when the occasion demanded she was also capable of commanding prompt and unquestioning obedience – few would willingly cross her, for it was well known that Mashima, like many another figure of maternal nurture, could be just as inventive in visiting retribution as she was in dispensing her benedictions, Now, on catching sight of Kanai, it took her no more than a snap of her fingers to silence the people around her. The crowd parted almost instantly to let Kanai through.

Horen was a fisherman, Nilima had explained and he lived on an island called Satjelia not far from Lusibari. He was younger than he looked probably not yet twenty but like many other tide country boys, he had been married off early – at the age of fourteen in his case. This was why he was already a father of three while still in his teens.

As for Kusum, she was a girl from his village a fifteen-year-old, whom he had put into the care of the women’s Union in Lusibari. Her father had died while foraging for firewood and her mother without other means of support had been forced to look for a job in the city. It wasn’t safe for her on her own, Nilima had said. All kinds of people
tried to take advantage of her. Someone was even trying to sell her off. If Horen hadn’t rescued her who knows what might have happened.

For a short time in 1970 while Kanai was visiting, a young woman named Kusum, her son Fokir, and the catastrophic struggle of the dispossessed to form a new society on the island of Morichjhapi. Kusum was from the nearby island of Satjelia. Her father had died foraging for firewood in a place that was off-limits to villagers. He had not been in possession of a permit at the time, so Kusum’s mother had received no compensation. With no means of livelihood she was reduced to a state of such destitution that she considered herself fortunate when a man from their village, a landowner by the name of Dilip Choudhury, had offered to find her a job in the city.

Knowing that he had found employment for other women, Kusum’s mother could see no reason why she should not accept Dilip’s offer. Leaving Kusum with relatives, she had gone off with him to take the train into Calcutta. Returning alone, Dilip had told Kusum that her mother was doing house work for a good family and would send for her shortly. That time came shortly enough, a month or so later, Dilip came to see Kusum and told her that her mother had sent word, asking him to carry Kusum to Calcutta. It was at this stage that Horen had got to know of Dilip’s plan. Horen had worked with Kusum’s father, and he also happened to be distantly related to her through his wife. He had sought her out and warned her that Dilip was linked to a gang that trafficked in women. What kind of job could this procurer have found for Kusum’s mother? She was probably trapped in a brothel somewhere.

As for Kusum, she was of much greater value to him than her mother had been – young girls like her were known to fetch large sums of money. If Dilip had his way, she
would end up either in Calcutta’s red light district or, worse still, in some brothel in Bombay. Instead, Horen had brought Kusum to lusibari and put her in the custody of the Women’s Union.

Moyna was both ambitious and bright, Nilima said. Through her own effort with no encouragement from her family, she had managed to give herself an education. There was no school in her village, so she had walked every day to other village kilometers away. She had done well in her school-leaving exams and had wanted to go on to college, in Canning or some other nearby town. She had made all her preparations and had even got her scheduled Caste certificate. But her family had balked at the scene of her departure and to prevent her plans had insisted she get married. The man chosen to be her husband was Fokir – all accounts, a perfectly fine young fellow except that he could neither read nor write and made his living by catching crabs.

The remarkable thing is that Moyna hasn’t abandoned her dreams, said Nilima. She’s so determined to qualify as a nurse that she made Fokir move to Lusibari while she was in training. And is Fokir happy about that? I don’t think so, Nilima said. I hear they’ve been having trouble that might be why he disappears sometimes. I don’t know the details the girls don’t tell me everything. But I do know that Moyna’s been having a difficult time. She joined the Trust years ago, when we started our ‘barefoot nurse’ programme. It’s an outreach project, for providing medical assistance to people in out-of-the-way villages and hold training classes of their own. But I take it Moyna has risen in the ranks? Yes, said Nilima. She’s not a barefoot nurse any more. She’s training to be a fully fledged nurse in the hospital. She applied a couple of years ago and since her record was very good we were happy to take her in. the strange thing was that even
though she had worked for us for a long time, we had no idea who she was – in the sense that we didn’t know she was married to Kusum’s son. Just think of the life she’s led, said Kanai. She’s struggled to educate herself, against heavy odds. Now she’s well on her way to becoming a nurse. She knows what she wants – for herself and her family – and nothing is going to keep her from pursuing it. She’s ambitious, she’s tough and she’s going to go a long way.

There was an edge to his voice that implied a comparison of some kind and Piya could not help wondering how she, Piya, would fare by these lights – she who’d never had much ambition and had never had to battle her circumstances in order to get her education? In Kanai’s eyes, she knew she must appear not blame him for seeing her in this way – any more than she could blame herself for seeing him as an example of a certain kind of a Indian male, overbearing, vain, self-centered, yet, for all that not available. Partly because, she is training to be a nurse and partly because she is trying to gives her son an education. That’s why she was so upset that Fokir had taken him away on this fishing trip of his.

Piya saw that Fokir was squatting in the dwelling’s doorway half-hidden by a grimy blue curtain. He did not look up and offered no greeting or any sign of recognition, his eyes were lowered to the ground and he seemed to be drawing patterns with a twig. He was wearing as usual a T-shirt and a lungi but somehow in the setting of his own home his clothes looked frayed and seedy in a way Piya had not thought them to be before. It stung to see him looking like this beaten and afraid. What was he afraid of this man who hadn’t hesitated to dive into the river, after her? She would have liked to go up to him to look into his eyes and greet him in a straightforward ordinary way.
But she thought better of it for she could tell from his stance that with Moyna and Kanai present this would only add to his discomfiture.

With Kanai translating Piya explained to Fokir that she was doing research on the sort of dolphin that frequented the Garjontola pool. After these last two days she said it had become clear to her as it evidently was to him that the dolphins left the pool to forage when the water was running high during the day. Now she wanted to trace their routes and map the patterns of their movement. The best way to do this she had decided was for her to return to Garjontola with him Fokir. They would take a bigger boat a motorboat if possible, they would anchor near the dolphin’s pool and Fokir would help her surway the dolphin’s daily migration.

The expedition would last a few days – maybe four or five depending on what they found. She would pay all expenses of course – the rent for the boat, the provisions and all that – and she would also pay Fokir a salary plus a per diem. On top of that, if all went well there would be a bonus at the end all told; he would stand to make about three hundred US dollars. Kanai had been translating continuously as Piya was speaking and when he finished, Moyna gave a loud gasp and covered her face with her hands.

While Piya was in the bow, watching the water Fokir and Tutul were sitting in the stern, patiently tending a set of fishing lines. The lines had worried Piya at first for dolphins had been known to get themselves tangled in certain kinds of fishing gear. But a close look had shown that Fokir’s tackle was too flimsy to pose a threat to animals of that size and she had let the matter pass deciding that it was all right to ignore such lightweight lines. The fish evidently had not come to the same conclusion for neither father nor son had a single strike all morning. But this didn’t seem to worry them – they
seemed content where they were at least for the time being. But when would Fokir and Tutul demand to leave? The night before, she had hoped they would set off at first light. But the dolphins had changed everything.

She saw now that it was imperative that she stay till the next day. This was the only way she could discover whether there was any truth to her intuition that these dolphins had adapted their behaviour to suit the ebb and flow of the water – by staying here through a whole cycle of tides. It was possible of course that this was just a fantasy and, in any event it would take years to find the supportive data. For now all she needed was a few more shreds of evidence, a few indications to suggest that she was thinking along the right lines. If only she could remain here till the next sunrise – that would be enough.

She went back to her position in the bow and readied herself to proceed with her mapping. With her monitor in hand she directed Fokir to the position from which they were to start. Then just as Tutul was dropping the first weight in the water, she dipped the echo-sounder and pressed the button. The initial run was about a kilometer long, and by the time they reached the end the whole line had been paid out. It was after they had turned to retrace their course that Piya discovered what the line was for, it was pulled in with a live crab hanging on to every ninth or tenth morsel of bait. The creatures had snapped their claws on the cartilage and would not let go. Fokir and Tutul had only to peel them off with a net and drop them into a pot filled with leaves. The sight made Piya laugh so this was where the word ‘crabby’ come from a creature so stubborn that it would rather be captured than let go?
When the crab pot was full, Fokir covered its mouth with an aluminium plate and passed it to her so she could release the catch into the hold. Looking in she saw that there were some fifteen crabs inside the pot eyeing her balefully snapping their claws. When she tipped the pot over them tumbled out in chain and disappeared into the hold with an angry outburst of clicking and clattering. The unlikely eloquence of the sound drew a laugh from Piya. Her birthday was in July and she had often wondered why the ancients had included a crab in the Zodiac when there were so many other more interesting animals to choose from. But now as she watched the creatures scuttling about in the hold she found herself wishing that she knew about more crabs.

The Human Spirit in *The Hungry Tide*

Cyclone Aila has snapped the fragile balance between man and nature in the Sunderbans, a mangrove-covered mud-flat where human settlement was enabled roughly 100 years ago by the construction of 3,500 km of embankments. An entire coastal ecosystem based on rain-fed sweet water perished in the deadly embrace of salt that came with Aila. At low tide, when the embankment was riding high on the water, Lusibari (island) looked like some massive earthen ark, floating peacefully above its environment. Only at high tide was it evident that the interior of the island lay well below the level of the water. At such times the unsinkable ship of a few hours before took on the appearance of a flimsy saucer that could tip over at any moment.

A fine view of a tide country sunset: with the rivers running low, the surrounding islands riding high on the reddening water. With the first circumambulation of the roof, Kanai found he could count no fewer than six islands and eight ‘rivers’ in the immediate vicinity of Lusibari. He saw also that Lusibari was most southerly of the
inhabited islands; on the islands beyond were no fields or houses, nothing other than dense forests of Mangrove.

The soil was rocky and the environment was nothing like they had ever known. They could not speak the languages of that area and the local people treated them as intruders, attacking with them bows, arrows and other weapons. For many years they put up with these conditions. Then in 1978 some of them organized themselves and broke out of the camp. By train and on foot they moved eastwards in the hope of settling in the Sundarbans.

Ghosh has an anthropologist’s fascination for the stories people tell – the local mythologies that subvert the official religious and national versions of history. In a number of his books there is a perspicacious exploration into the 'local reality', and with it, critiques of the official version of history. Here the local reality is that of the Sundarbans, a densely populated archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, which straddles Indian west Bengal and Bangladesh.

The tide country people have an epic tale of origins that they pass on orally. They have a kind of local religion – they worship a Goddess called Bon Bibi – but the epic of Bon Bibi is strongly inflected by Islamic influences. This type of syncretism too will be recognizable to Ghosh readers -- it is one of the middle points of his *In an Antique Land*, a book that is a landmark in cross-cultural imaginative non-fiction.

The tide country is perhaps a relatively remote corner of Bengal. But it is also possible to see it as a separate region. The protagonist Kanai, a professional translator, is entrusted the notebooks of his deceased uncle, and comes across the following
explicative passage: There is no attractiveness here to invite the outsider in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as the Sundarban, 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, Heriteria minor. But the word’s origin is no easier to account for than is its presence prevalence, for in the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide—bhati. And to the population of the islands this land is known as bhatir desh—the tide country—apart from that bhati is not just the "tide" but one tide in meticulous, the ebb-tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwives by the moon, is to know why the name ‘tide country’ is not just right but necessary.

For as with Rilke’s catkins hanging from the hazel and the spring rain upon the dark earth, when we behold the lowering tide

We, who have always thought of joy As rising…… feel the emotion That almost amazes us When a happy thing falls (8).

One of Ghosh’s most importunate themes is of the ephemerality of concepts of national and tribal identity. The multiplicity of names for the Sundarbans is a metaphor for that ephemerality. Another metaphor for ephemerality, albeit one which has a great deal of material heft behind it, is the fact that the land itself is inconstant subject to sometimes radical alterations as a result of late summer storms. Whole islands are washed away by the cyclones that sweep in with huge tidal surges. Thousands of human beings and animals habitually die in these storms.
The Hungry Tide captured the essence of the precarious existence of the inhabited islands of the Sunderbans with remarkable accuracy. Ghosh only changed the real name of his island. To a reader unfamiliar with the tide country, it would be difficult to imagine what the daily onslaught of tidal water means for the island population. These low-lying, half-formed, mangrove-dominated mud-flats were reclaimed for cultivation about 100 years ago.

Human settlement on them was made possible only by building earthen embankments all around them. In this watery labyrinth, the embankments run up to 3,500 km in length. They were the lifelines of human existence in the islands. Aila damaged an unprecedented 400 km of the embankments, of which 139 km have reportedly been washed away altogether, with their bases! The damage is fairly uniformly distributed across all the islands. None of them was spared.

The hours are slow in passing as they always are when you are waiting in fear for you know not what: the moments before the coming of a cyclone, when you have barricaded yourself into your dwelling and have nothing else to do but wait. The moments will not overtake; the air hangs still and weighty; it is as however time itself has been slowed by the friction of fear (68).

beauty is nothing but the start of terror we can hardly bear, and we adore it because of the serene scorn it could kill us with (69).

Though the cyclone had been predicted, the people and the administration had no clue what a 100-120 kph wind speed would mean for this inter-tidal zone when combined with an unusually high tide. The fateful day was a no-moon day -- a day
when the high tide water level reached its maximum, almost licking the upper fringes of the embankments around the Juvenile Island. In the Indian part, the Islands float like lotus leaves in a shallow bay of seawater.

The average height of the upper surface rises barely 4 meters above mean sea level. With a tidal amplitude of 8-10 meters, most parts of the islands would have been submerged twice during the day had the embankments not existed. On full moon and no moon days, with tidal amplitude exceeding the usual margin, the rivers look like high watery expressways. And expressways they are; they are the only means of transportation across the islands. During high tide, standing on the inner basin of any island, one can see country boats of all sizes moving over the foaming, undulating waterways seen over the embankments’ rim. From a boat on that high river, one can see what Ghosh described - the interior of the islands awkwardly holding on their lap a freshwater ecosystem and a dense population.

Look we don’t love like flowers with only one season at the back us; when we love, a juice older than memory rises in our arms. O girl, It’s like this: inside us we haven’t loved just someone 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.

The ever-bending rivers coil around the islands like a mythological serpent that could crush the fragile embankments at will, but perhaps refrains from doing so out of mercy for the poor people. Or is it recognition by mother -nature of the hard work of the islanders? For braving the mangrove-covered mud-flats to grow freshwater crops?. For
carrying out a massive project of manual labour in salty isolation?. For around 100 years of their existence, nature’s mercy remained intact. But normal life on these islands has always held a deep insecurity. On May 25, nature didn’t do anything unusual. It just coordinated the timings of a no-moon high tide with a cyclone blowing all during the day.

This part of the Sunderbans has withstood cyclones before. It is true that cyclonic storms generated in the Bay of Bengal mostly veer away to make landfall on the Bangladesh and/or Orissa coast. Though outside the storm’s eye, the Indian part of the Sunderbans has faced winds of greater velocity than the winds that blew that day. But those were in times when tidal amplitude didn’t peak. That made all the difference.

The islands in the Sunderbans survive on two vital man-made factors - embankments and village tanks. While the embankments stand guard against saltwater, the tanks store rainwater for year-long use. The islands are dotted with tanks of all sizes. In earlier times, some of these village tanks were reserved exclusively for drinking water a very precious item on the islands as the groundwater, for the most part, is saline too.

On these premature islands, lifting groundwater for drinking and irrigation purposes is not feasible with shallow pump sets. Only at certain places on the bigger islands can an underground stock of freshwater be found and lifted by deep tube wells. Some of these tube wells were built over time by government departments and NGOs. Where they came up, tanks reserved for drinking water were gradually allowed to be used for other purposes as well. Even now some islands are still totally, and some partially, dependent on village tanks for drinking water. These village tanks provide a
vital service to the islanders throughout the year. They provide drinking water for livestock, the water is used for bathing, washing clothes, cleaning utensils and nurturing freshwater fish stocks. Some of the stored water is also employed to grow vegetables and other crops in the dry season. But mostly the islanders practice rain-fed mono-crop cultivation.

Classically, the residence units are simple mud huts; mud applied to a bamboo skeleton makes the walls. The roof is mostly dry straw, occasionally earthen tiles or corrugated tin sheets. The huts generally stand on a high earthen platform. Although the immediate impact of Cyclone Aila is tragic, on the television screens it doesn’t look very unusual. Then fallen trees twisted and collapsed huts, and a landscape strewn with debris of all sorts. So the villagers robbed of their belongings huddled in groups on a relatively high village road or surviving embankment, or clinging to their rooftops just above the water. The large pools of water trapped in rice fields and village tanks. The flowing in a stream carrying the carcasses of livestock, occasionally even a human body.

The first shock was the stench, which recognized to be that of rotting fish. Perhaps also the smell of rotting livestock, but lots of decomposing fish dumped on the riverside of the village. All stocks of freshwater fish had died within a day, when the tanks were overrun by saltwater. Marooned and displaced villagers could not use them immediately. And they knew that eating dead fish after a day was dangerous. The best way to dispose of rotting fish is to bury it. But there was hardly any ground left above the water.
All the grass, standing crop and shrubs that were under water for more than a day looked like they had been burnt by acid! Juvenile trees with their leaves and branches 4-5 feet up showed the high water mark by their burnt black-brown colour. By the villagers that the salty inundation was fatal to small trees and that all of them would soon die. A few of the dead carcasses were ensnared in the islands’ interiors, although most had flowed out into open rivers. But in this 4,500 sq km delta, water doesn’t really flow out; it circulates like a whirlpool, moving back and forth every 12 hours with the turning tide. Bodies that were washed away by the river in the ebbing tide came back with the high tide. And so they circulated within the region until they were completely decomposed.

Almost all the mud huts that managed to withstand Aila were under a few feet of water for a couple of days. The mud at their base had washed off, baring the bamboo skeleton. That none of them could be repaired because the mud had soaked in too much salt and that fresh mud does not mix with salty soil. Salt changes the texture of the soil; it makes it brittle and eventually turns it to dust when it is dry. All the standing huts in the villages, therefore, would have to be completely rebuilt. An uniqueness of Aila in other ways as well. It is practically impossible to repair the protecting embankments within a short time. Many parts of the islands remained devoid of any embankments flat a fortnight after Aila, with saline water frequently coming and going with the turn of the tide. Even though there were no fresh storms or heavy rain, the islands received another big splash on full moon day, June 7. No one can say how many days will be needed to complete a patchwork of the entire length of the embankments. It is like having an open wound in sultry weather, with no hope of it healing naturally.
The obvious fallout of the event is the nerve-wracking shortage of drinking water. Many of the tube wells are submerged and all the village tanks lost their fresh water within an hour. Ordinary trips by respite vessels from the mainland keep the surviving islanders in food and drinking water. But no amount of portable relief supplies is ever enough for a disaster of this scale. There is tremendous damage everywhere and no signs of any restoration. People spend nights and days in the open, mostly gathered on surviving embankments, looking for the relief boats. They are unable to initiate any restoration of order by themselves, crippled by the exposed lands that are regularly swept by water from the high tide.

The scale of the disaster has been recognized in the concerned government quarters. Relief supplies are forthcoming. Many civil society organizations and NGOs have pitched in with the relief operations. But in this chaotic situation it is obvious that supplies are not always equitably distributed or given to the most vulnerable. Many people remain in makeshift relief camps housed in village school buildings. Nobody knows when they can return home, or where their homes once stood.

One impact of the huge drinking water problem is widespread diarrhea. Thousands of people are affected, with no official estimates forthcoming on this. An official estimate of livestock loss is also not available.

Relief supplies in other natural disasters are a temporary lifeline, to be followed by gradual restoration of normal life. Recovery from floods in other parts of the mainland is an un-directional process. It means gradual restoration of order and livelihoods - with outside help. Instantaneous harvest losses from freshwater floods are generally followed by a good harvest during the next season. But the situation in the
Sunderbans is different. As long as the embankments are not fully restored all over the islands, no improvement is possible. Floods will continue to recur. Each fortnight there will be bright flooding due to the solar boost in water levels.

Salt deposits in the soil will mean nil or little agricultural activity for at least a couple of years. One can hardly imagine the implication of this on half-a-million people, over 90% of who are directly dependent on agriculture. This event has crushed the very backbone of the islands’ economy, after the cyclone, that almost one quarter of the people of the village had vacated the islands and had moved to the mainland.

Scientific research has already established that the greatest threat to the future of the Sunderbans is posed by continued global warming and the resultant increases in sea level. Apart from this, more short-term threats to human lives and livelihoods could come from an increased frequency of cyclones, even super cyclones. This also means greater probability of their coinciding with extreme high tides. Cyclone Aila has shown what this means for the delta. If Aila is a forerunner of many such events in the future, one has to seriously re-think the present method of repairing the embankments. At stake is a population of half-a-million. In a densely populated state, rehabilitating all these people on the mainland would be a difficult prospect.

And yet, a solution has to emerge. It is impossible to allow the recurrence of such tragic events. If this happens, the Sunderbans will, for all practical purposes, be depopulated. It is a disaster that must be handled with utmost care by all concerned. A long-term feasible solution must be found.
The event as ‘unprecedented in recent history’. But the Sunderbans have a much older history of human settlement. Historical findings in the region tolerate convincing proof that the area was populated even at the time of Ashoka (273-232 BC), while the evidence so far has failed to add up to a comprehensive account of continued civilization in the delta.

However, it is well established that due to a series of natural calamities the region gradually lost its population during the Middle Ages. Eventually, after the invasion of Portuguese and Arakan pirates in the waters of the delta, the area was completely depopulated. The forests reclaimed the land, and when the British East India Company set up its headquarters in Kolkata it was at the edge of these forests. Almost all the inhabited islands of the Sunderbans were cleared of forests for human settlement between the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century. The settlements were planned by the British administration with the stated objective of revenue collection.

The present-day population of the islands thus bears a history of a little over 100 years. I was told by the older generation that they had never seen - or even heard from their forefathers - of a calamity of this scale in the Sunderbans. It would appear that the British started an economic venture - almost a gamble against nature’s wishes - that somehow held its own until now. That black Monday, the islands’ luck finally ran out.

Transcultural Communication in The Hungry Tide

The notion of communication in a hybrid world is provided by the theme of translation. Postcolonial or transcultural literature in general and Indian writing in English in particular have frequently been viewed by critics via the concept of the
already translated text. “Transcultural narratives are highly particular instances of self-translation arising from their author’s bilingual status. They are original texts which already bear the burden of translation are already a translation…, thus giving rise to a new questioning of the basic notions of the translation process”. The Hungry Tide offers concrete evidence for such a textual model, as Kanai is shown across the novel cumulatively reading extracts from his uncle Nirmal’s Sunderban journal: the extracts are reproduced in full and in English, but the reader is asked to imagine Kanai reading them in Bengali. An imputed transcultural shifts is thus written into the very fabric of Ghosh’s text.

Ghosh’s narrative, in what might be called at least for the non-Bengali reader, a deliberate ‘foreignising’ strategy, incorporates a large number of Bengali terms, mostly italicized on fist occurrence and in some (but not all) cases glossed. The reader is thus left in no doubt as to the cultural provenance of the text, even despite the overarching role of English as its matricial language.

Kanai himself is a translator/interpreter by profession: he knows six languages (his native Bengali plus Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, English and French – 199), runs a translation and interpretation agency and offers to act as interpreter for Piya, who only knows English and has no means of communication with the local Bengali speakers whose knowledge and lore are vital for her research. Nirmal’s written records are presented to the reader translated from Bengali into English. Kanai interprets – mediates orally – between Piya and Fokir. The need for translation arises from the phenomenon of multilingualism in an interrelated world.
Ghosh himself is multilingual and his earlier novles contain episodes reflecting a keen awareness of the complexities and difficulties of language interaction, both among Indians and between Indians and the wider world. Kanai interprets for Piya for a portion of her expedition, but at a certain point he concludes she does not in fact need his services, apparently supposing she can communicate intuitively with her guide Fokir: she thinks you’ll be able to manage perfectly well without a translator. Piya has already shown an attitude to Fokir that supposes the two can communicate intuitively across the language and cultural divide that separates them. What is involved here is an essentialist world-view, based on unexamined notions of a common humanity, that may seem as either enticingly utopian or dangerously naïve.

At one point Piya asks Kanai to explain the content of a traditional song that Fokir is chanting, asking him “Can you translate?” and Kanai replies: .... This is beyond my power .. the metre is too complicated. I can’t do it. Later, he writes Piya what is intended as a farewell letter in which he focuses on the impossibility of translation/interpretation: you asked me what Fokir was singing and I said I could not translate it: it was too difficult. And that was more than the truth for in those words there was a history that is not just his own but also of this place, the tide country. Rather than considering translation unnecessary, Kanai seems here to despair of it as impossible, because cultural barriers are too wide. Yet, paradoxically in the moment of appearing to give up, he appends an approximate translation – rendered in verse presented as prose in an act of generic hesitation that seems both to reflect and overcome Kanai’s translator’s doubts – of the Bengali folk poem that Piya had heard Fokir sing. Indeed Kanai even ends his letter reclaiming the translator’s place in the scheme of things, curiously echoing the polemical ideas of the translation theorist.
Lawrence Venuti, in first affirming the stock notion of the “good translator’s” invisibility after then turning things round to demand his own visibility after all: “Such flaws as there are in my translation I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading into sight as a good translator should: for once, I shall be glad if my willingness to dispense with translation, then Kanai stands as conscious of both its limitations and its necessity.

Technically and certainly within professional contexts such as university schools of translation/interpretation or international organizations, translation refers only to the written word and interpretation only to the spoken word. The UN, the European Union and similar bodies employ translators and interpreters via separate recruitment procedures, in separate career paths with no horizontal mobility between them. It is rare for the lay person to grasp, let alone practice, this semantic distinction.

Amitav Ghosh does not despite the interest that as we have seen he shows across his novels in the world of work and the technical details of occupations. The text of *The Hungry Tide* employs “translate/translator. The very lexical hesitation between the terms ‘translator’ and ‘interpreter’ even if unjustifiable in strict technical and semantic terms, throws into relief the potentially ambivalent role of translation/interpretation – is the activity a transposition of meanings between cultural systems. Both translation and interpretation may theoretically be considered as forms of linguistic transfer but it remains important not to occlude the dialectic of similarity and difference between the two activities.

Kanai’s role as translator/interpreter is also significant in the sense that his work straddles the divide between the written (translation) and the oral (interpretation). This
is of interest in the light of the wider interplay or counterpoint that operates across the
text between written and oral modes. Kanai comes to terms with his past through a
written text, his uncle’s journal; Piya scientific work relies on written reports and data
sheets; Fokir is illiterate and his illiteracy is a long-standing cause of tension between
him and his upwardly mobile and literate wife, the nurse Moyna. As is frequent in
Indian writing in a country where an ancient heritage of written literature coexists with a
rich oral tradition, Ghosh’s novel written text though it is also invokes the popular
storytelling tradition – with the inevitable references to the Thousand and One Nights
(Nirmal in his journal compares himself to some misplaced, misgendered Scheherazade
… trying to stave off the night with a fleeting pen (148).

The Nights are of course a text which is structured around the act of storytelling
as to save her life, the celebrated princess Scheherazade spins out tale after tale, many
of them of Indian origin.

The translation factor in the text is further complicated by a curious intertextual
element, namely the recurrent quotations in Nirmal’s journal from a work of Western
literature originally written in not English but German – the Duino Elegies, the
celebrated sequence of nine poems from 1923 by the Austrian Rainer Maria Rilke. The
extracts from Rilke appear in a ‘real’ English translation, but are imputedly quoted by
Nirmal and read by Kanai in (for the Indian reader) the more domesticated form of a
Bengali version. It is furthermore from one of Rilke’s text (the First Elegy) that Ghosh’s
own text quotes (within the journal) the crucial lines: ‘we’re not comfortably at home/in
our translated world’, later to paraphrase the same lines as if from Kanai’s viewpoint:
‘being so little at ease in your translated world’. It is if in the complex and multiple
social universe bequeathed by colonialism and traversed by globalization even so basic a phenomenon as human communication has more often than not to be handled at one remove, indirectly through a process of mediation that may also prove a distortion. Nonetheless to translate is necessarily to communicate however imperfectly across human-made barriers.

The alternation between Kanai’s here and now experiences and his reading of his uncle’s journal brings past and present into a symbiotic encounter. The Bengali location allows Ghosh the immediate possibility of drawing on the particular utopian tradition of a part of the subcontinent where, over a good two centuries, Western rationalist influences have coalesced with an older vein of Indian syncretism to produce a unique strain of social thought, as expressed in the movement known as the Bengali renaissance and notably manifested in the work of Rabindranath Tagore and his school and later university at Shantiniketan.

Piya temporarily distances from her desire for a translation-free world. However, she soon reverts to type and accompanies Fokir, without Kanai there to interpret on a fresh expedition which will soon be subsumed into all the rigours of a tide-country storm. And here indeed she and Fokir get as close as they ever wil: the storm takes Fokir as he clasps Piya’s body with his protective.

Piya, knowing neither Bengali nor Hindi appears despite her Indian origins, as typifying the monoglot attitudes of the Anglo-Saxon world in general and the US in particular. Those who only know English are doomed not to understand other cultures, unless they draw on the services of a translator-interpreter and cultural mediator like Kanai – services which, however flawed and imperfect, prove indeed to be necessary in
the very context of the globalization that brings the likes of Piya to locations like the Sunderbans.

The novel’s conclusion though open-ended, paradoxically seems to find Ghosh – and in all probability the reader – moving tentatively towards an admission of the possibility after all of communication across cultural barriers, at least within certain limits and subject to a rational effort of will. At the end both Piya and Kanai voluntarily undertake a reconstruction (and reinterpretation) of their experiences in the Sunderabans: each has lost the textual evidence (the sea claimed both Kanai’s uncle’s journal and Piya’s cetological datasheets), but each is willing to piece the text back together from memory.

Kanai shifts his residence from Delhi to Kolkata to be near the tide country and visit often, thus moving at least halfway, towards a neo-Gandhian renunciation of cosmopolitan and metropolitan India in favour of the more demotic claimed of what some call the “real India”. Piya goes further, electing to base herself and her research in the Sunderbans themselves and to learn Bengali giving a surprising preference to the local over the global to her Indian roots over her globalized-American identity. A madeover Bengali-speaking Piya could indeed have greater possibilities of communicating cross-culturally with the likes of Fokir than the “American” whom the reader has accompanied across the book. Meanwhile, whether the future will hold any convergence of a more affective nature between Piya and Kanai is left open, but clearly their paths will cross once more.

The narrative of The Hungry Tide is made up of interwoven strands – Kanai’s narrative and Piya’s the present lived by the characters and the past of Nirmal’s journal
— that variously alternate, converge, diverge and reconverge. As the novel comes to an end, the utopian possibility opens up of a strands; global and local, urban and rural, linguistic and scientific, anglophine and Bengali-speaking — even, it may be male and female.

_The Hungry Tide_ has claimed its sacrificial victims in Fokir, but Piya plans a memorial to him and even begins to speak of the Sunderbans as ‘home’. The utopian goal of mutual understanding, implicit in this novel’s recurrent theme of translation, begins to appear as something actually possible. As both Piya and Kanai seem to morph into a new kind of cosmopolitan who can actually feel at home in a place like the tide country, the reader finds this latest of Amitav Ghosh’s fictions opening up new and unexpected perspectives: the postcolonial text, product and reflection of a translated world, nonetheless proclaims the need and the desire for us as global citizens to communicate in new forms — to think transculturally and to build new bridges across that world.

**Existence of the Characters**

Amitav Ghosh's greatest gift as a writer may well be his sense of place. A landscape, a city, a village on the edge of a desert: it is these images that we summon from his novels when we are distanced from them in memory. Perhaps this is what makes him such a master of the travel narrative, a form whose contours are shaped by places and their histories. _The Hungry Tide_ is set in the Sundarbans, the vast, intermittently submerged archipelago, largely covered by mangrove forests, that forms the delta of the Ganges as it debouches into the Bay of Bengal.
The region is supposed to derive its name from the sundari tree, as the mangrove is locally called; in his book, Ghosh speculates on whether the name may not more simply correspond to Sundarban, beautiful forest, as many prefer to believe. Two-thirds of the Sundarbans are in Bangladesh, only one-third in India: it is a region whose fishing folk easily traverse the imaginary boundaries of the modern nation-state, crossing, as the wind and the tides take them, the mouths of the many river-channels that set up a unique turbulence of fresh and salt water washing the islands of the archipelago.

To this land discovered by the ebb-tide, Bhatir desh, as Ghosh calls it in a remarkable and poetic application of the term used in Mughal land-records, come a young cetologist from the United States on the trail of a breed of freshwater dolphin, the Orcaella brevirostris, and a middle-aged linguist who runs a translation bureau in Delhi.

The two are thrown together by chance, and for a time the male translator, Kanai Dutt, accompanies the female scientist, Piya Roy, as an unofficial interpreter. But the novel is not really about their developing acquaintance. Much more centrally and in a far more extended way, it is about the many histories of the region they have come to.

Kanai's aunt 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 husband Nirmal, a Marxist schoolteacher whose withdrawal from political activism had brought them to settle in a Sundarbans village. As Kanai reads the diary, its narrative of past events, hopes and disappointments (held together as much by the inexorable flow of historical time as by Nirmal's constant evocation of lines from Rilke's Duino Elegies), is interwoven with other stories.
These include 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 fisherman Fokir, for the Orcaella. At the heart of Nirmal's diary is an historical event: the eviction of refugee settlers from the island of Morichjhapi in the Sunderbans by the Left Front government of West Bengal in 1979. For the old Communist in the novel, like many others at the time, this act of state violence was a betrayal of everything left-wing politics in the post-Partition era had stood for. It was these very leftists who had declared, in the face of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy's attempts to find land in neighbouring states for the successive waves of refugees who crossed over from East Pakistan in the forties and fifties that they would not consent to a single one being resettled outside West Bengal. And indeed the conditions of such resettlement were harsh and alien. In 1978 a group of refugees fled from the Dandakaranya camp in Madhya Pradesh and came to the island of Morichjhapi in the Sundarbans with the intention of settling there.

They cleared the land for agriculture, and began to fish and farm. But their presence there alarmed the Left Front ministry, who saw it as the first of a possibly endless series of encroachments on protected forest land, and the settlers were evicted in a brutal display of state power in May, 1979. Many, like the girl Kusum in Ghosh's novel, Kanai's childhood playmate who becomes the repository of Nirmal's idealist hopes, were killed.

Nirmal, who stays with the settlers during those final hours, is later discovered wandering in the port town of Canning; he is shattered by the event and never recovers. As the last significant expression of the trauma of Bengal's Partition, the story of
Morichjhapi occupies a central place in the novel. But it is only one of the histories - part fact, part fiction - that the Sundarbans of Ghosh's novel enfolds. There are others: the life cycle of the Orcaella, the story of its identification and the aquatic history of which it is part; the story of the port town of Canning, and the folly of its foundation by the British; the storms, named cyclones by the shipping inspector Henry Piddington, which ravage the region with irresistible ferocity; the visionary ambition of Sir Daniel Hamilton, who bought ten thousand acres of land in the Sundarbans and set out to build an ideal community.

The tale of Bon Bibi and her worship, recounted in many folk epics, fusing Muslim and Hindu faith; and of course the present histories of Kanai, Nilima, Piya, Fokir, Fokir's wife Moyna and their son Tutul, among others. In a land regularly obliterated, at least in part, by the flood tide or by the huge tidal waves dredged up by cyclones (one of which marks the novel's climax), Ghosh makes us aware of the sedimentation of human history, the layers of past knowledge, experience and memory that constitute our human Sense of place.

In our reading of such a work, characters may seem less important to us, appearing more as aspects of the places they occupy. Yet this would not be a true reflection of Ghosh's project in this novel. His sense of Bengali social history is, as always, unerring and profound. One of the most moving things in the novel is the textual tenor, at once perceptive and self-deceived, of Nirmal's diary, especially as it stands framed by the more robust and enduring social activism of his wife Nilima, and by the common sense of his companion on his last journey, the fisherman Horen Naskor.
To some extent the two visitors to these islands, Piya and Kanai, are thin-fleshed outsiders to the end, contributing much less by way of personal depth to the complicated tangle of genealogies and emotional and sexual history that makes up the plot. Yet their presence as focalizing centre is vital to the narrative: each, in her or his own way at once egotistic and work-obsessed, offers an opportunity to the narrator which Ghosh never fails to exploit.

Most remarkable is Ghosh's treatment of Kanai, a self-important, sometimes cocksure individual who ultimately becomes the locus of some of the novel's central reflections on language and on translation. It is through Kanai's translation, his mediating sensibility, that Nirmal's personal record, the Rilke that he reads in Buddhadeva Bose's Bangla translation, and the folk narrative of Bon Bibi that he writes down from Fokir's recitation, reach us, so the novel seems to claim, in English prose and verse.

Sir Daniel Hamilton’s schooling was in Scotland, which was a harsh and rocky place, cold and unforgiving. In school his teachers taught him that life’s most important lesson is ‘labour conquers everything’, even rocks and stones if need be – even mud.

The tide country resembles a desert is that it can trick the eye with mirages. This is what it did to Sir Daniel Hamilton. When this Scotsman looked upon the crab-covered shores of the tide country. He saw not mud, but something that shone brighter than gold. ‘Look how much this mud is worth’, he said. A single acre of Bengal’s mud yields fifteen mounds of rice. What does a square mile of gold yield? Nothing.
Nirmal raised a hand to point to one of the portraits on the wall. ‘Look’, he said, ‘That’s him, Daniel Hamilton, on the day when he became a night. After that his name was forever S’Daniel. Some Bengali reviewers of The Hungry Tide have already asserted that their experience of reading it was like that of reading a novel in Bangla. This claim seems to me mistaken. Rather, the novel seems to push us into the crisis at the heart of translation, the paradox of representation itself.

At one level, everything in the novel is translated, in that it seeks to represent, in English, a life, a culture, that is experienced principally through the medium of Bangla and its local variants. At another, nothing is: if representation is always a form of translation, one language is at any time as good as another - at most it may involve special difficulties that are also special opportunities. The one moment at which Kanai is robbed of the language that is his livelihood and his means of control is when, stranded on the mud bank, he sees the tiger. The sounds and signs that had served, in combination, as the sluices between his mind and senses had collapsed: his mind was swamped by a flood of pure sensation. The meeting with the tiger, which may mean death or life, here as in the story of Dukhey and Dokkhin Rai, lies at that boundary of language which representation seeks, but never succeeds in containing.

Piya's scientific quest constitutes another pole of perception. Not that she is lacking a background: she has a family history, which she recalls in moments of reflection, a present involvement with Fokir and Kanai, and a future, which she calmly claims at the novel's close. But it seems to me that her function in the novel is to represent the life she studies in the mingled waters, salt and sweet, of the tidal pool at Garjontala; the always-threatened, always-precious material of scientific enquiry which
is also, in the fragile and immensely overburdened ecosystem of the Sundarbans, nature itself. She is by no means the novel's only conduit for reflections on the unique environment that affords her material for study.

Nirmal, thinking of the necessity that compels the refugees to clear the forest and till the land on Morichjhapi, as of the honey-collectors and woodcutters who go into the forest and are eaten by tigers and crocodiles, also asks a question central to the novel's concerns: whose is this land, nature's or man's? It is a question that cannot be answered, not even by the idealizing solution of co-existence. Piya is ultimately too practical and obsessive to bother with large answers; Nirmal is overcome by the very effort of posing the question. It is the tone of the novel, alternately poetic, scientific and businesslike, that may suggest the nature of Ghosh's own thoughts on this subject. Beside the manifest threats posed by human settlement to the unique diversity of aquatic and terrestrial life in the mangrove swamps of the Sundarbans, beside the constant depletion of aquatic species by fishing and trawling, there are equal dangers for the human settlers. Not only does the forest take its toll; the tides, too, exact their revenge. The constant erosion of dykes and embankments, the silting up of channels, the flooding by storm-waters, make human life on the islands no more, in the last analysis, than an accident or miracle. It was on such miracles that the hopes of visionaries like Daniel Hamilton or the settlers of Morichjhapi were founded, and indeed there is no reason why human beings, like the many other species that uniquely inhabit this delta, should not serve to illustrate nature's capacity for survival. But the imminence of disaster, whether natural or human, covers the world of this novel with a kind of film by which precious objects appear doomed and irrecoverable in the very moment of their perception, as Freud said in his essay On Transience. Its mood is elegiac, like that of the
river novel in Bangla, as Bhaswati Chakravorty has named the form: but at the same time, it embodies the practical hope that leads us as human beings to continue to struggle and build on our doomed planet. Ghosh's critique of past and present mistakes, whether administrative or political, is at all times muted and restrained.