SUMMING UP

The creative literary pieces selected for the study prove Amitav Ghosh as a universally acknowledged social anthropologist. The four chapters of the thesis analyze the threads of social anthropological perspectives in the novels of Ghosh. Anthropology is a broader discipline that studies man, nature of man and physiology of man.

The broader aspects of anthropology are divided into several branches such as physical anthropology, cultural anthropology, ethnology and social anthropology. Physical anthropology examines the skulls in all its details and concerns with limited and restricted study of the human species. Cultural anthropology studies other cultures of the world. Ethnology studies the common cultural characteristics of a group of a people.

_In an Antique Land_ is a text which deliberately crosses the boundaries of race, religion and culture that it provides an ideal focus for exploration against which, once again, the novelist invokes the work of a number of theorist and experts in their fields to ascertain whether the simple fact of writing about another’s race and culture could still be said to constitute a form of cultural pillage. However, while Ghosh’s work may well be based on the ‘predicament of individuals’. _In an Antique Land_ is a diagnostic text that takes this interest to another level, that of a social, cultural, political and economic analysis of a people and location. Thus while Ghosh appears to claim a liberal humanist approach in this text particularly, this is deceptive as his writing is inevitably tempered by an ethnographical training that probes below the surface to add the type of cultural complexity that is emphasized by the lengths so many critics go to in their attempts to categorize the work. It is as much about social ethnography as it is a disjunctive text, a
multi level discourse, an amalgam of fiction, history, anthropological input, manuscript fragments, autobiographical incident and pure speculation, the blending and juxtaposition of which highlight the degree of self reflexivity Ghosh has brought to the work. Above all, it is a socially and politically conscious text. In this text, most of the main characters leave their birthplace for social, economic or political reasons and while some return, others do not. There is no question of assimilation to the contrary the narrative works to point the differences culture and traditions between nations. By setting himself apart from his birthplace, from writing about India from the distance of another continent and another time is how Ghosh best emphasizes a commitment to the sense of Indianness that it is through the act of dislocation that one arrives at a truer sense of place and self.

In terms of structure, this is achieved in two ways, on the one hand, his establishment of the twelfth century Indian slave as a parallel protagonist results in a text that is split two narratives which has the effect of constantly relocating reader attention, on the other as controlling narrator, Ghosh places himself the Ghosh of the text in a state of permanent flux. He re-constructs a picture of his own life as the Indian ethnographic, postgraduate undertaking field work in an Egyptian village, concomitantly; he is always apart from the village. As “participant observer” he always remains the outsider, the one arrives and departs. Juxtaposed with the main story, sub-narrative pieces together a mosaic of the existence of the slave who leaves his homeland of India for tenure in Egypt. By forging this rather tenuous connection between the slave himself, Ghosh produces a text, which in Clifford’s words maps older connections between India and Egypt, trade and travel relations which preceded and partly bypassed
the world’s violent polarization into West and East, empire and colony developed and backward.

The common cultural characteristics constitute an ethnic group. One of the aspects of ethnicity is ethnography. Ethnography studies the small-scale societies, the tribal and rural folk. Ethnography concerns with social anthropology as it provides the raw material to social anthropology. Social anthropology is rich in its skills and studies the social system culture, ethnology, the tribal, rural folk and the general weaker segments of the society such as marginal and subaltern.

Social anthropology has some interrelations with other branches of knowledge such as prehistoric archaeology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, mythology, ecology, political science, economics, human geography, anthropology. All these disciplines are concerned with aspects of human culture social anthropology takes interest in the whole social and cultural lives of the people.

In the Indian context social anthropology and history go hand in hand. There is also some breaking point between these two disciplines. The field of history is the people of society; the field of anthropology is the society and the masses of people who are illiterate, marginal and subaltern. In the Third World countries and particularly in India the tribal, rural, marginal, and subaltern can hardly be analyzed without explaining the historical processes which shaped their structure. Therefore, in India social anthropology cannot be properly understood without reference to its history.

The chapter *In an Antique Land* defies literary categories it is a work of fiction based on history and social anthropological research of Ghosh. It combines
ethnography, historiography and memoir. The novelist traces the two stories first, the experience of Amitav Ghosh, a young Indian social anthropologist from Oxford University, conducting his ethnographic field work in an Egyptian village, second, the search for the story of twelfth century Jewish Merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave. Their lives and histories are reconstructed by Amitav Ghosh using fragments of letters found in an Egyptian Synagogue. Ben Yiju lived in Egypt for many years before migrating to India, where he probably hired his slave, Bomma, who acted as an assistant and negotiated the large trade of Ben Yiju.

Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* is an archaeology of a great mercantile civilization that, from about the tenth century to the sixteenth century, extended from Fez and Seville in the west, through Cairo and Aden around the Red Sea, across The Indian Ocean to Calicut and the Malabar coast. As Clifford Geertz observed and virtually borderless region, which no one owned and no one dominated Arabs, Jews, Iberians, Greeks, Indians various sorts of Italians and Africans pursued trade and learning, private lives and public fortunes, bumping up against one another, but more or less getting along or getting by within broad and general rules for communication, propriety and the conduct of business. It was we might say a sort of multicultural bazaar. Today this part of the world is divided, like the rest of the globe, into singular and separated national state.

Amitav Ghosh’s novel *In an Antique Land* is the story of two Indians in Egypt, and Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant originally from Tunisia who came to India around A.D. 1130. Ben Yiju, who lived in India for seventeen years, married a Nair woman, acquired an Indian slave Bomma, a native of Tulunad. Bomma was with his
master when he went back to Egypt in the last years of his life. The other Indian in Egypt is the author Amitav Ghosh, who in 1980 went there to trace the story of Bomma. His search, which was to last more than ten years, began in a small village, two hours south of Alexandria. His guides in the village were his neighbours. Abu Ali his land lord, Khamees the Rat, the beady eyed local wit, his adversary, the Imam, Zaghloul the weaver, and the quiet Nabeel whose personal fate left stranded in Baghdad at the outset of the Gulf war, bespeaks a large one for Egypt and developing world.

Ghosh is trained social anthropologist who articulates the forgotten period of history, the strained relationship between Egypt and India, India’s collaboration with Arab and China in trade and commerce in the medieval period. He also throws light on the networks of the exchange that have circulated between Egypt and India in relation to money, goods and people. He examines carefully the less visible exchanges which have linked Egypt and India throughout history namely social, cultural and religious ones. His historiography question is embedded in the structure of the novel.

*In an Antique Land* straddles the generic borderlines between fact, fiction, autobiography, history, anthropology and travelogue. Ghosh fuses the main narrative and sub-narratives to produce a text which maps the connection between India and Egypt, trade and travel, West and East, developed and backward, history and fiction, ethnography and social anthropology, and migration and subaltern history. It is a multilevel discourse that deals with social and cultural history of Egypt. Ghosh acts as an observer and participant and gives inside view of the society. He informs about kinship, image, clan, marriage, religion, law and feud of the villagers. For the Egyptians, the Hindus remain uncircumcised, cremate their dead and worship cows.
These symbols of Hindu culture of Ghosh are sought to be understood and constitute an empire of signs, an unfinished empire. The colonialism has projected the picture of India and her culture like this to the world.

Ghosh faces the unimaginable challenge of interpreting an unfamiliar culture and pursuing his subjective experience in the objective form. Through the interactions with the locals, he discovers the strong social component that they ascribe to work. He fosters the bond of cooperation and friendship with the villagers. He learns the language of the villagers but finds it difficult in translating the cultural assumptions either in his language or in their language.

Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* deals with three major themes. First as a student of anthropology the novelist’s search for the life of Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant originally from Tunisia, and his Indian slave Bomma, a native of Tulund, second his deep and penetrating insight into the cultural and social development of Egypt from the crusades to operation Desert Strom and third the dreams and aspirations of ordinary human beings and the effect of political and historical changes on their lives. To deal with these themes the novelist has selected the form of a traveller’s tale, but this form is only a part of the entire design. Actually, the novelist desires to study the effect of history of mankind through this form. Brilliantly and systematically he arranges all the three themes, and successfully creates a unified story. The first two sections of the novel Lataifa and Nashaway deal with the social and cultural history of Egypt and third section, Mangalore deals with Ben Yiju’s Stay in India for seventeen years.

The novel contains the narrative in the form of translation which the local informants provided to Ghosh in the oral form. Though the book is in unconventional
form, the text conveys a wealth of detail about the cultural practices of Egyptian village. To sum up *In an Antique Land* shows the strong evidence of social anthropological training of Ghosh in reconstructing the history of marginal, in philosophical investigation, in careful observation of characters, and in depicting the social, cultural, and economical, life of the people.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is based on malaria research history. It is a fascinating and imaginative story of quest, investigation and discovery. The novel is an amalgamation of literature, history, anthropology, science, sociology, psychology and philosophy. As a social anthropologist, Ghosh approaches these human affairs and the disciplines from unconventional point of view and provides considerable information for the understanding of human beings. The aim of Ghosh is not to write a science fiction but to present alternative version of marginal reality. Ghosh believes in marginality and acknowledges the contribution of the marginal group in malaria research. He gives recognition to them and rewrites their history. The novel records the historical facts about malaria and the scientist, Ronald Ross’s findings on malaria fever. Ghosh deconstructs the malaria research history, the Western notion, aura, politics and their sense of superiority with the help of counter science, irrationality of the tribal society, their indigenous and self contradictory knowledge and religious beliefs.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is a serious novel written in the manner of a thriller. It is set in the near future but reaches back into the Victorian World. The protagonist, Antar is a cyber researcher who works at terminal in his apartment in a marginal New York neighborhood. From this unremarkable station, he helps to sort through a virtual rubbish leap of international bureaucracy, including not only documents but all sorts of
other detritus of official life which is incessantly inventoried by a super computer called Ava. By chance or so at first at seems, Antar comes across the identity card of Murugan, a former Co-worker who had disappeared in Calcutta while seeking to substantiate the theory that had consumed him and had made him a target of ridicule in the scientific community. Murugan had become convinced that Sir Ronald Ross’s discovery of the mechanism by which mosquitoes transmit malaria was in fact the singular evidence of a conspiracy of “counter Scientists” who had transcended western science in their recognition of its obverse. And so the seemingly simple accident in Antar’s coming across one of Murugan’s old identity cards provokes his dogged investigation of the incredibly convoluted complexities of Murugan’s theory and of his disappearances.

Malaria is a vector transmitted disease. Female mosquitoes ingest blood to fuel the production of eggs. Those that bite humans generally do so at night. Then, heavily laden, they sit on the nearest vertical surface to digest the meal. Later the mosquito will lay her eggs in nearby standing water, where they develop into larvae and then more mosquitoes. Sick people become a parasite reservoir the mosquitoes dip into and carry back into the world. With the vector’s help, a single human carrier can infect over one hundred others. Mosquitoes in their various forms eggs, larvae, adults, seem to travel easily in ships and airplanes, as do the parasites carried inside human bodies moving around the globe. It’s all about what’s in between, between human, vector, and parasite, and how these connect humans across space and in Ghosh’s novel, tiem as a newspaper headline recently put it. In Ghosh’s novel, The Calcutta Chromosome lashes together rich and poor, in India and in diaspora, it links Egyptian and journalist and Bollywood star, a self made man and nineteenth century laboratory assistant, colonial science and post colony counterscience and a social scientist.
Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* spans one century and three continents and the main characters are an Egyptian data analyst and a malaria obsessed Indian living in New York City. It is part science fiction, part history, part thriller part detective story. Certain chapters are reminiscent of Dickens or Poe, while others feel like something out of “The X-Files.” It is an ambitious, often entertaining novel that addresses, with mixed success big questions about history, science, knowledge and identity. The novel is framed by the story of Antar a lonely, law level, overworked Egyptian data analyst, and Murugan his Indian colleague. Murugan has a strange theory about Ronald Ross, the Nobel Laureate who discovered how mosquitoes transmit malaria that someone “had systematically interfered with Ronal Ross’s experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from others.” This “bizarre hypothesis” leads to Murugan’s disappearance in Kolkata on World Mosquito Day, August 20, 1995 years later, in a near future New York City, Murugan’s I.D. Card is discovered by Antar’s personable computer, Ava. For reasons that are never adequately explained, Antar decides to investigate Murugan’s disappearance and his “other mind” theory that Ross was a pawn in someone else’s malaria research project.

Nothing in this novel stands still for very long. The narrative soon leaves Antar and moves on rapidly from place to place traveling and mutating like one of the malaria parasites at the heart of this story. We see Kolkata in 1995, where Murugan meets Urmila Roy, a journalist struggling with conflicting demands of career and family, a military hospital in Secunderabad in 1895 where Ross is beginning his malaria research and where two uneducated servants, Lutchman and Mangala know more than they should about the malaria Parasite an abandoned train station in Renupur where the writer Phulboni spends a horrific night that will inspire a collection of allegorical
stories, a village in Egypt where as a child Antar watches an old Hungarian archaeologist sift the sand with tweezers.

These seemingly disparate episodes Cohere to expose a bewildering world in which none of the ordinary rules of science or logic apply. An alternative history of malaria research beings to emerge, in which a term working in India in the late 1880s discovers that the malaria parasite can be used to transfer a lot more than just malaria from person to person. Soon it’s impossible to know what’s true, or who. It seems that Antar, Murugan Urmila and Phulboni are all caught up in this counter-science project, but they don’t know exactly how. No one can ever really know, explains Murugan, because “to know something is to change it, therefore in knowing something you have already changed what you think you know so you don’t really know it at all, you only know its history”.

When Phulboni sees through a train window, “The still waters, lying in great silver sheets under the lowering monsoon skies”. In his writing, Ghosh displays a talent for finding vivid details and symbols a description of a stand of rubber trees or a young girl dancing at a wedding, that develop his ideas. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, ideas aren’t conveyed with this kind of imaginative force. Murugan explains his theories to Antar and Urmila in long, awkward dialogue passages that interrupt rather than impel the pace of the story.

Amitav Ghosh imagines the science of malaria, a disease dependent on multi connections, enmeshed in the logies of a colonial counter science. In turn, one can argue that the hybrid form of social science fiction may be the most adequate way to think about the delirious products and unlikely networks of these colonial laboratories.
Malaria as disease figure largely there, an emblem of the simultaneously faithfully and fickle nature of postcolonial connectivity. Laboratories are sites of hard work and discovery where theories and techniques are restit and new beings are created. Etymologically, “laboratory” is linked to labor and hardship but also to labi, to slip, fall or totter. Alien forms of animal, vegetable, and mineral circulate through them and just as twentieth century labs created transuranic elements and transgenetic animals, colonial and postcolonial encounters produce transcultural and transhistorical entities, including xenotransfer between the species of social science and science fiction. Ghosh however describes a near future and not so distant past in which humans are reconfigures through technologies ranging from railroads to genetic reprogramming, reminding, as an anthropologist who has worked in Guatemala for eighteen years, that mechanical and biological experiments are nothing new for colonized peoples, their sinews, hearts, minds, bodies, and germlines repeatedly have been used in the service of alien invaders. In Ghosh’s books, however and in the real world the colonizers themselves are visited and sometimes reprogrammed by encounters with other systems and by microscope invaders like the malaria parasite, which has led to the development of the counterinsurgent field of tropical Medicine, producing many Nobel Prize winners. Fever and dysentery are the ‘generals’ that defend hot countries against our incursions and prevent us from replacing the aborigines that we have to make use off, complained a French colonial official in 1908. The milieu of colonial laboratories produces strange alliance and emergent forms of the human.

Similarly one can suggest that social science fiction may itself be a tropical laboratory where one might dissect and examine the labor of other colonial labs and produce new ways of figuring the human. What might be called the postcolonial human
has been defined through stories, like the debates over mass murder and enslavement that asked whether the naked creatures “discovered” in the brave new world even counted as human. *The Calcutta Chromosome* explores a range of human technology interfaces, from railroads, computers, and bureaucracies to genetic engineering and the mysterious workings of the malaria plasmodia.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* the science fiction that has ascribed to the novel becomes more complicated. At the same time however the conspiracy theory that the novel posits concerning malaria research falls into that same neither region, it too seems neither possible nor verifiably impossible and yet it mostly takes place in a distinctly un-science fiction like setting 19th century India. In his 1979 study of science fiction novels. The novel is in many ways clearly interested in the struggle to make the unknown known, the two cities in *The Calcutta Chromosome* Kolkatta and New York, the later is the only one of real interest in terms of science fiction iconography since the scenes set in Kolkatta take place either in the distant past or recent past or almost present, but even the 21st century New York Ghosh portrays barely fits with the traditional science fiction city.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* science fiction identity since, despite her importance in helping Antar unite the disparate fragments of the story, the fact remains that the majority of the story occurs without Ava and her technological advancements, it is Murugan the science historian using rather conventional techniques like archival research who pieces the story together. Ultimately few of the obvious science fiction signifiers are really necessary to the overall structure and plot of the novel. The city and the futuristic setting provide an interesting context for the story but are largely
unnecessary to the novel’s final outcome. Really the only necessary science fiction device central to the plot is the all knowing, all powerful computer; it is Ava who in the end pieces the information together for Antar and the reader. Despite her importance, however, many of the crucial events in the story occur in a time and place for removed from Ava’s presence.

In the end, the novel is perhaps more post colonial than the publicity surrounding it gives credit for. *The Cacutta Chromosome* greatest strength lies in its success at blending the post colonial with science fiction tradition. Placed as they are in the science fiction framework Ghosh sets up, the familiar post colonial tropes of borders and resistance become unfamiliar and beg a closer examination. Ultimately, the novel forces readers to abandon their pre conceived notions regarding our often arbitrary classifications of literature. There is no reason a past colonial novel cannot employ science fiction tropes or vice versa. Success, as we can see in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, lies in being able to successfully exploit a given genre’s or tradition’s strength and themes to best suit one’s ultimate objectives. In his interrogation of the discourses of science and technology Ghosh primarily explores how Europeans and Indians exchanged sacred and scientific ideas.

*River of Smoke* traces the complex chain of events leading to the outbreak of the Opium War in 1839 between China and England. Ghosh’s projected Ibis Trilogy is a comprehensive historical research about the mid-nineteenth century Opium War. The European powers, cloaking their greed by the rubrics of free trade and internationalization of commerce, attempted to open the Chinese markets to the vicious opium trade. The first book of the trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* depicts the politics of
subjugation of the West and the efforts at resistance of the East in an inclusive
diachronic version of history, which incorporates the unheroic “wretched of the earth”,
*Sea of Poppies* ends with the escape of the convicts from the *Ibis*,
which is in the grip of a fierce cyclone in the Bay of Bengal. *River of Smoke* begins in
the wind-swept cliffs of Mauritius.

*River of Smoke*, the immoral trading practices of the West, in general and the
British, in particular, bred deceit hypocrisy and exploitation. The rhetoric of the
democratizing powers of free trade under the petext of which they carried out their
nefarious activities animates *River of Smoke* as it did in its prequel. European
colonialism was a lucrative politico-commercial enterprise inextricably tied with
capitalism.

Britain’s illicit opium trade with China served as British colonialism’s financial
engine is evident from the Chamber of Commerce’s influential member John Slade’s
observation that the Empire “reaps annual revenue of five million pounds and involves
the most vital interests of the mercantile, manufacturing, shipping and maritime interest
of the United Kingdom”. The several consecutive meetings of the foreign opium
merchants, English entrepreneurs passed themselves off as ‘crusaders in the cause of
Free Trade’. Like captain Chillingworth in the first part, Mr. Charles King, ‘one of the
few true Christian’s, is disillusioned with this vicious opium trade and exposes the
Britishers duplicity. Though they endlessly affirm their intention to bring freedom and
religion to China, they resort to ‘the most absurd subterfuges’ which breed corruption as
hundreds of Chinese officials are bribed to safeguard the safe passage of opium. When
he urges in a public resolution to refrain from a trade that is fraught with evils,
commercial, political, social and moral and desires to establish true Christian amelioration, his plea is instantly rejected. The European belief that free trade and the internationalization of commerce would create wealth for all nations and produce a new peaceful world order is contested by Chinese administration which rejects the idea that trade could elevate human society.

The newly appointed Commissioner of Canton Lin Zexu surprises foreign merchants by announcing that the opium trade was over and orders them to surrender their stock. Consequently a good and honest Commissioner, the best officer in country, an incorruptible public servant a scholar and an intellectual is disparaged as a madman or monster, who with the ordering of two executions shows that he has scant regard for human life. The unfazed Lin demands the protesting British to hand over the prominent opium trader Lancelot Dent. In calculated move, Captain Elliot the crown official appointed to look after British interest in Canton, decide to assemble expeditionary forces on the Chinese shores to open up Chinese markets to opium trade. Defying the dictates of the Chinese emperor, the British attempt to conceal their greed in nicely cloaked evangelical language. It is the work of another, invisible, omnipotent; it is the hand of freedom of the market of the spirit of liberty itself, which is none other than the breath of God. The war between China and Britain that this opium trade ignites does not simply stem from cultural difference or conflicting claims over territory but from the capitalist ideology. Trade is free when it suits England as is the concept of justice. The British merchants argue in a circular fashion that the devastation wrought by opium among the Chinese has nothing to do with them, yet when the Chinese government seeks to limit the entry of the dug, they cry foul claiming impedance of their natural right to trade.
Amitav Ghosh looks up to the novel as a “meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist, etc.” There are no limits to the novel as a form. For the eclectic Ghosh, it is not necessarily fictional rather, it overarches fiction and non-fiction and history, the present, the past.

*River of Smoke*, the central space is taken up by Bahram Modi, a Parsi merchant trading in Canton (now called Guangzhou). This novel is all set in Canton, except for an introductory passage telling what happened to those aboard the Mauritius-bound *Ibis*. Bahram Modi is sufficiently weighty or engaging personality to carry this book on his shoulders. Bahram business acumen is boasted of but many of his dealings in Canton seem obvious and naïve. Ghosh does not make enough of the moral battle within him to convince his interesting. Bahram is an opium trader and this book is set in 1838-39, when China was first struggle to throw off the coils of the drug.

The problem of the Chinese administration is further complicated by the complicit involvement of Indian and Chinese merchants profiteering from British imperialism. While British colonial expansionism couples with capitalist aggrandizement to seize political powers in Asia, it also opens up wonderful private opportunities for native entrepreneurs. The narrative traces the dynamics of collaboration and the complicity of Parsi Bahram Modi, one such collaborator and sympathizes with his professional struggles and personal dilemmas and his sad demise. Bahram establishes one of the largest and most consistent profitable export divisions in Bombay and resists the British monopoly of opium business in India. In the beginning
of the narrative, Bahram’s ship the Anahita, financed by his in-laws, carries not only the most expensive cargo that Bahram had ever been carried out of the Indian subcontinent.

A businessman of exceptional ability and vision, a kind of genius, Bahram is confident that in spite of the Chinese emperor’s edicts prohibiting opium trade. His knowledge about the Chinese demand for opium makes him assert to Napoleon that although it is in principle a clandestine race, it is difficult to put an end to it for many officials, petty and grand, benefit from it, which makes them find ways around the laws. Even the British merchants attribute the overwhelming success of the trade to the marvelous degree of imbecility, avarice, conceit and obstinacy of the Chinese race. *River of Smoke* is a novel of some import for its delineation of how the trade in opium served to fuel colonial ambitions, the view from the other side as it were. Its eddies and swirls are for the most part satisfying to navigate, even though its many tributaries do tend to drain it of energy.

Amitav Ghosh takes the novel off into numerous digressions, some of which are more absorbing than others. These even include a chance meeting between two of the characters with an exiled Napoleon in St Helena, the conversation with the erstwhile emperor serves to bring us up to date with the context of the period, one that was to end, as the novel does with the imminent outbreak of the so-called First Opium War between Britain and China.

*The Hungry Tide* is set in the extensive archipelago of tiny island and labyrinthian waterways known as the Sunderbans. Stretching from India to Bangladesh, this little known tide country offers no visible borders between the river and the sea, and sometimes not even between land and water. In this desolate and mysterious place of
mangroves and mudflats, the poor villagers lead a precarious existence. Through this novel Ghosh depicts the rural life in the Sunderbans, its micro society, human ecosystem, folk culture, rural cosmopolitanism, inter-cultural and cross-cultural relations, elite and subaltern relations, urban-rural and man-animal conflicts and syncretism.

This novel repays perseverance, seducing readers into its weave of nature and human resoluteness, of science superstition of personal and political dramas and history and modernity. At its core are dual triangles of relationship, each with intersections, tangencies and echoes between and within each other. The novel is also about language and translation both literal and metaphoric.

An Indian-American marine biologist, Piya travels to Sunderban, the easternmost coast in India. Here she meets Kanai Dutt, equally well educated and is described in the book as, a certain kind of Indian male, overbearing, vain, self-centered yet for all that not unlikable. The third protagonist is Fokir an illiterate fisherman who does not share a common language with Piya. They go through this journey together because of Fokir’s unavoidable knowledge about the environment and sea.

The three of them embark on this adventurous journey together and the sea becomes a symbol of the tumultuous political scenario. It is realized that the tides, the winds and storms are all reflective of the unpredictable game of life. Although the characters are from extremely distinct backgrounds and mindsets Ghosh posits urgent questions about humankind’s place in nature in an atmosphere and suspenseful drama of love and survival.
The book is definitely a treat for readers who enjoy visual imagery and the ability of the Amitav Ghosh to weave his characters into the story so seamlessly is commendable. The river’s channels are spread across the land like a fine mesh-net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable.

The tides reach as far as two hundred miles inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to reemerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily.

When the tides create new land, overnight the mangroves begin to gestate. And if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island in a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself.

Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s hostility to their presence of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in yet to the world at large this archipelago is known as the Sunderbans, which means “the beautiful forest.” This is the last great refuge of the Bengal tiger, whose life is valued above the human lives in the delta. Into this land comes Piya a young Indian-born American cetacean biologist, studying river dolphins. She is rescued from drowning and crocodiles by a fisherman, Fokir, whom she hires as her guide to help her find the dolphins. They do not speak the same language but they share an understanding and appreciation for the tides and mud and forest, the flora and fauna of the Sunderbans. Piya Roy is also befriended by Kanai
Dutt, whom she meets on her journey to the Sunderbans, and by his Aunt Nilima, who founded and runs the only hospital in the region.

Kanai takes possession of a recently discovered package of documents, left to him by his Uncle Nirmal, the poet local schoolmaster, who had died some 20 years earlier. Some of these papers concern a girl named Kusum. Kanai and Kusum had formed a brief friendship when as a schoolboy, he was sent to stay for a while with his aunt and uncle. The stories of these people, the land and water and the history and ecology of the Sundarbans are all intertwined. With Fokir’s help, Piya makes significant progress in her studies of the dolphins. Kanai slowly unfolds the story of his aunt and uncle and of Kusum her family her mother and her son. Ghosh is one of the best storytellers writing today, weaving together place and character in a complex matrix that keeps the reader turning the pages swayed and carried forward as if by the surge and ebb of the tides.

The book becomes a bit dragging at times due to the detailed description of the Sunderban belt and the extreme technical details of the Irrawaddy dolphins which Piya came to research about. Ghosh yet again shows his uncanny ability of addressing the most complex emotions of a human mind in a startlingly simple manner. We find the raw and wild brilliance of Fokir, the pride and arrogance of Kanai and the enthusiasm of Piya blend together to depict a universal human philosophy.

Particularly is the key to The Hungry Tide set in the Sundarbans, an immense shoal of island that makes up the Ganges Delta. Life within these treacherously attractive mudlands is precarious and primordial; the inhabited islands resisting twice
daily inundation only through unreliable embankments, there are also mosquitoes, mangrove forests and man-eaters such as an odd tiger or crocodile.

There is no particular answer to any question raised in the theme of this novel. Everything is all pervading and appeals to the general phenomena everywhere in this world. Ghosh through this novel brings out the pathos of human life and signifies how nature can a better teacher than nurturing.