CHAPTER VI
THE HUNGRY TIDE
Through *The Hungry Tide* Amitav Ghosh illustrates how the history and geography of a place mould lives and shape identities and destinies. Ghosh also explores how people of different nationalities and different social and cultural identities have struggled against political and ideological positions that have pertinently confined them to the fringes of human society. He is predominantly a writer with a postcolonial consciousness. This consciousness makes him time and again to retrieve the events of the past that have been deliberately tucked behind the pages of history, out of human knowledge and vision. Unearthing stories and events that have deliberately been effaced from official government records is a passion for Ghosh. In *An Antique Land* he explores the history of Egypt and in *The Shadow Lines* he deals with the colonial impact on the cultural, social and political lives of people in India, Pakistan, Egypt, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. *The Glass Palace* that is painted on a vast, expansive canvas of epic dimensions also traces the years of colonial presence in Burma, Malay, and India. Amitav Ghosh’s deep sense of history is revealed in his interview with Hasan Ferdous:

I find history completely absorbing and fascinating. I am always interested to discover aspects of history; it adds a kind of richness to one’s experience of place. Speaking about history, one of the very important things in a text is that it becomes a place where those cultural interactions are performed in the most difficult possible ways.¹

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh succeeds in highlighting the plight of the subalterns of Sunderbans in West Bengal, where socio-political turmoil extracts as heavy a toll as the ravaging tides. Ghosh is deeply immersed in the Indian, especially Bengali, ethos. So, now and again, as the ebb and flow of tides, he returns, one novel after another, to document stories of how large sections of Indian society have been trampled down and defeated by the storms and tides of history. His books challenge
the centres of power and prestige, and crusade for the impoverished and displaced and create space for their plight to be heard.

In this novel Ghosh weaves together two temporal narratives: one unfolding through Nirmal’s journal recounting the Morichjhapi episode that happened twenty-eight years ago, and the second through Piya’s expedition, revealing the contemporary situation of the people and the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans. The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights the chief conflict in this novel – the problems and issues of wilderness conservation and its related social costs in areas populated by socially and economically disprivileged both in the past and in the present. The sub-narratives foregrounded in the character of Fokir represents the third voice of this ecological drama.

*The Hungry Tide* is divided into two sections – “The Ebb: Bhata” and “The Flood: Jowar” – and is set in the Sunderbans. Measuring over ten thousand square kilometers, this delta is the world’s largest mangrove ecosystem. The name “Sunderbans” means “beautiful forest,” and is located in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal. It stretches across coastal India and Bangladesh, from the Hooghly in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. It is the home of the Bengal tiger, and since the tiger is an endangered species, Government of India has taken steps to protect it by preserving its natural environments. This, however, has resulted in confrontations with the local populace, and that conflict is part of the history behind this novel.

*The Hungry Tide* is geographically narrow and does not have the sprawling canvas of *The Glass Palace*. Despite the limited number of characters and fewer events scanning a short period of history, the book is forceful and edifying. It is set in the Sunderbans, a labyrinth of rivers and islands, often subjected to catastrophic
floods and storms and famine. The Sunderbans is infested with snakes and crocodiles and, as mentioned earlier, is the home for the Royal Bengal tiger and the endangered Gangetic dolphins known as Orcaella. The waves here are treacherous. The tides reach several miles inland and everyday thousands of mangroves disappear to re-emerge hours later. And no one dares to make home there but the truly dispossessed and displaced who are unwanted and who have nowhere else to go. Yet, they have settled there to eke out a living from the barren, unyielding salty tracts of land. The people are mostly fishermen who depend on the river and the sand for fish and crabs for sustenance. Each day of their life is unpredictable, and survival is precarious on those islands, also referred to as the “tide country.”

As we probe into the novel, we are moved by the plight and suffering of the refugees from East Bengal who fled their place of birth after partition and also during the 1971 crackdown by West Pakistan. The great divide of 1947 wreaked havoc with the Hindus and Sikhs of West Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan etc., and also with Hindus of East Bengal. It was, however, the crackdown in 1971 on the people of East Bengal by the Punjabi dominated, Urdu speaking Muslims of West Pakistan that sounded a death knell for Hindus of East Bengal. They were the special targets of the army and thousands of them were literally butchered in cold blood. Many of them fled to neighbouring India, and were treated as refugees. Even after the formation of Bangladesh, many were reluctant to go back and wanted to live in India. These people made the Sundarbans their home and settled there. Life for these settlers is an incessant battle for survival against the unpredictable storms and tides, both natural and manmade. Despite its threatening environment charged with fears of the all devouring tides and man-eating tigers and crocodiles, it is the deep sense of human
bonding among the islanders which transcends differences of class, caste, creed, and nationality that helps the inhabitants defeat the forces bent on annihilating them.

The two prime locales of the actions in the Sundarbans—Lusibari and Garjontola— are fictitious places. However, Ghosh remarks that the secondary locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhapi, and Emilybari are real places inhabited by refugees from East Bengal and other dispossessed factions of society. Ghosh travelled to this area along with Annu Jalais, an authority on its history and culture. In fact, Ghosh acknowledges his deep sense of gratitude for the willingness with which she shared her knowledge of the islands with him. Besides, he had linkages with the tide country, for, as a young boy, he had stayed there with his uncle, Sri Chandra Ghosh, who had been for more than a decade the headmaster of the Rural Construction Institute, a school set up by Sir Daniel Hamilton, an Englishman, who dreamed of making it a land without the barriers of caste, class, race, and religion that divide and segregate human beings.

The tide in this area comes in twice daily, resulting in a constant reshaping of the land and uprooting anything permanent. Such a setting makes an apt symbol for the ebb and flow of history and the uprooting of populations, both of which have come to be seen as “Ghoshian” themes. Furthermore, just as the natural tides of the area tend to obliterate the sense of permanent division between land and sea, Ghosh’s characters gradually learn to recognize the transient nature of the divisions between individuals of whatever social class they might belong to.

Ghosh is respected across the globe as the strongest critic of the exclusionist nationalist discourse which often ends up repressing the moorings of its own people. His works defy generic categories, his discipline disciplinary categories, his career professional categories, and his identity national categories. Not surprisingly,
therefore, the primary engagement of all his novels is “to disturb the stable boundaries and epistemological conception of culture as fixed and homogeneous systems.”

Throughout his fictional journey Ghosh carries a sustained attack against the borders that divide nations, human beings, cultures, and disciplines. *The Hungry Tide* is yet another addition in Ghosh’s project of establishing a heteroglossic national identity and here he does this by using a largely realistic framework around a geographical space—which itself is fantastical, extremely unrealistic – and using the context of history and digressing into myth, not borrowed from established religions, but the local folktale that itself is reflective of the cultural hybrid of the land.

The novel begins with the meeting of the two important characters – Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy – on the railway platform in Kolkata waiting for a train to Canning, for their onward journey to the Sunderbans. As the story unfolds, it is clearly seen that Kanai and Piyali Roy are involved in their respective quests. Piyali Roy, a cytologist from Seattle in New York, is there for research on dolphins, the rare Orcaella. Kanai Dutt, who is bound for Lusibari in the Sunderbans, is there on his aunt’s request to claim a document bequeathed to him by her husband, Nirmal, at the time of his death twenty years ago. Both are not really sociable and are well guarded by their self-centred, overbearing attitude, quite becoming of people belonging to the educated, elite sections of society. However, the novel is structured on their individual quests – Piyali’s quest for information about dolphins and Kanai’s quest for the circumstances leading to his uncle’s mysterious death in 1979.

Piyali (Piyali Roy) had been born in Kolkata, but had moved to the United States when she was just one year old. She does not know Bengali, but she recalls that this is the language in which her parents argue. A graduate student in cytology from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California, she is interested in observing the
marine mammals that she thinks are unique to the Sundarbans. Her destination is the
town of Canning, the train stop for that region. Kanai’s real destination, on the other
hand, is Lusibari, the farthest of the inhabited islands, where his seventy-six-year-old
aunt runs a charitable organization called Badabon Trust.

Soon after they arrive in Canning, Piya hires a dubious guide and an even
more dubious guard imposed upon her by the government functionaries. The two men
soon become quite threatening to Piya. Then she hires the service of a poor fisherman
by name Fokir to direct her to the dolphins she wishes to study. In the process she
falls into the river and Fokir saves her from drowning in the salty, vegetation-filled
water. She pays her “helpers” to leave her with Fokir, who promises to take her to the
dolphin region. Fokir does not know English, but they manage to do the best with
what they can to communicate.

As the plot progresses, it becomes clear that Fokir is the son of Kusum, a
childhood friend of Kanai Dutt. Kusum’s story, which forms the subtext of the novel
and which is recounted in Nirmal’s journal, is instrumental in retrieving the history of
Moricjhap, which stands till today as one of the darkest spots in the history of
mankind. The events of 1979, “widely discussed in the Calcutta press, English as
well as Bengali” (402) were deliberately erased from the public memory, and also
from history. The reference to this gruesome incident is now available in an article by
Ross Mallick.3

The Badabon Trust that Nilima Bose runs and the high school that her
husband Nirmal had run until his death are built over the site of a commune
established by a British idealist named Sir Daniel Hamilton. This is called “Lusibari,”
a pidgin version of “Lucy’s House,” and was so named for Hamilton’s wife, who had
sadly died on her way from England to join him. Hamilton was a utopian visionary,
and he had bought ten thousand acres of the Sunderbans and invited impoverished people to come and populate the place, free to them on one condition – there should be no caste system, and no tribal nationalism. Many arrived brushing aside all dangers – dangers from crocodiles, tigers, snakes, etc. They were also ready to convert to fishermen from farmers, which had been their profession so far. This migration to the commune occurred in three waves – in 1920s, in 1947 after partition of India, and in 1971 after the Bangladesh war – and they helped Hamilton establish a semi-communist region where the inhabitants shared possessions.

In 1950, eleven years after Hamilton’s death, Nirmal and Nilima Bose arrived at Lusibari. They had been married for less than a year, and the reasons for their decision to move to this remote and tenuous locale were complicated. The year before, Nirmal had attended the conference of the Socialist International in Calcutta; he had been teaching at Ashutosh College at that time. Nilima was one of his students, her grandfather was a founding member of the Congress party, and her father was an eminent barrister at the Calcutta High Court. Although her family did not approve of their marriage, they nonetheless helped arrange the move so that the two could take the management of Hamilton’s estate. When the couple arrived, though, they saw utter destitution; much had fallen into decrepitude in the past eleven years. The Hamilton Estate was also crippled by law suits. Not an individual to accept defeat easily, Nilima established the Women’s Union and sought support from outside. By the 1980s this had developed into the Badabon Trust. It had become, in short, her life’s work though, not perhaps, her husband’s.

The geographical terrain of the Sunderbans that serves as the chronotope of the novel is itself a metaphorical representation of nature’s rigid resistance to be put into fixed categories and strict compartmentalization. Alok Rai, in his review of the
In this tide country boundaries collapse, diffuse, and become inconsequential. Nirmal’s journal says:

‘The islands are the trailing threads of India’s fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the akhol that follows her, half-wetted by the sea. They number in the thousands, these islands; some are immense and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago. These islands are the river’s restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift. The rivers’ channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. Some of these channels are mighty waterways, so wide across that one shore is invisible from the other; others are no more than two or three kilometers long and only a few hundred metres across. Yet, each of these channels is a ‘river’ in its own right, each possessed of its own strangely evocative name. When these channels meet, it is often in clusters of four, five or even six: at these confluences, the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distance rumour of land, echoing back from the horizon. In the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a mohona – a strangely seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement.

‘There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily – some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before….’ (6-7)
Thus continuously deceptive, the land bears a name, which is equally deceptive. Even though the place is called the Sundarbans, we are told, “At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them”(8).

It is in this hostile terrain that all action of the novel takes place, for, as Nirmal says, “…yet in the tide country, where life was lived on the margins of greater events, it was useful to be reminded that no place was so remote as to escape the flood of history”(77). As the characters from diverse realms of time and space drift to the island of Lucibari, each for a different reason, and as their lives cross paths with the local inhabitants, it can be realized that forces of history have great impact even in the remotest of regions and in the lives of the poorest of the poor. As already been noted, Nirmal and Nilima shifted to Lucibari, an island established by Sir Hamilton, because the leftist orientations of Nirmal made him a possible target of administration in Calcutta.

Kanai learns from his visit that his friend Kusum had been abandoned by her mother when she (Kusum) was a child. Kusum’s mother had been tricked into working at a brothel and had finally been literally worked to death there. In her mother’ absence, and to save her from a similar fate, a women’s organization had raised Kusum. She had eventually married Rajen, a poor man who had been made lame by a bus in Calcutta. Rajen had taken Kusum to see her mother in the brothel, and her mother died three months after the two had married in her presence. The couple had a son and they named him Fokir, but just four years after the child’s birth, Rajen fell in front of a train and died.
Kanai is a successful business man and owns a translation firm in New Delhi. As mentioned earlier, Kanai, a nephew of Nirmal’s, comes at his aunt’s request to take the dairy which his uncle had willed him before his death, and thinks of his stay on the island as “exile” and Piya comes to study the Gaagetic dolphins. The novel is structured around the personal histories of its characters – Nilima, Nirmal, Kanai, Piya, Kusum, Moyna, and Horen—played in the backdrop of the national history of the refugee camps in India as an aftermath of Bangladesh partition and the Left Front Government in West Bengal and its decision to carry out strong action against the refugees. Ghosh uses the local folk tale of Bon Bibi as a digressional strategy as opined by Meenakshi Mukhrjee: “There seems to be two distinct ways in which myths have been used in Indo-Anglican novel: as part of a digressional technique and as structural parallels, where a mythical situation underlines the whole or part of the novel.”

As the novel opens, there is a description of the history of the geographical region, and the legend of the Puranic tradition of Shiva taming the ferocious Ganga. Lord Shiva holds the waters of Ganga in his braids, lest Ganga drowned the entire universe. This region, however, is associated not with the popular part of the legend but with its lesser known later part where “there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where lord Shiva’s mattered hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, may be thousands, of tangled strands” (6). This part of the legend, tells the narrator, “is never told and thus never imagined” (6). Thus legends also go through a process of transition, travelling through the course of history as a result of various socio-political dynamics. It is to this legend that the Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands, owes its existence and to believe this one has to see it: “Until you behold it for yourself, it is
almost impossible to believe” (6). Thus history is a mere continuum of myth
distinguished from it only by the act of “witnessing.”

Kusum narrates to Fokir the story of Bon Bibi, a good spirit who fights with
the evil spirit Dokkhin Rai for control of the forests and waterways. In this story,
there is a man named Dhona who is seduced by the evil spirit into offering a young
lad named Dukhey as food to Dokkhin Rai, who sometimes takes the form of a tiger.
But Bon Bibi saves Dukhey at the last minute. Kusum passes this legend from her
childhood memories. Her father had built a little temple in Bon Bibi’s honour on the
island of Garjontola, and her son Fokir – and later, he and his son Tutul– often visit
there. The story has a strong and lasting effect, therefore, on her, on her child Fokir,
and on her grandson Tutul, but Kusum sadly admits that Bon Bibi had not helped her
years before (when Kusum had called out to her to save her own father, from whom
she had learned the legend) from a tiger. In fact, soon after passing along the story to
Fokir, Kusum herself abandons him. This is because she has been told by her friend
Horen that Dilip, the man who had forced her mother into a life of prostitution, is
hunting for her hoping to force Kusum to take her mother’s place.

The events leading up to the Morichjhapi turmoil, as documented by Nirmal,
Kanai’s uncle, follow closely the findings recorded in Annu Jalais’s article “Dwelling
on Morichjhapi.” The article, an authentic piece of history based on interviews with
the islanders, throws light on the politics behind the rehabilitation of East Bengal
refugees and the government’s attempts to evict them from the area by proclaiming
the area to be a Forest Reserve that was allegedly occupied illegally by the refugee
settlers. However, Amitav Ghosh’s text, based on the details provided by Annu
Jalais’s articles, reveals how the West Bengal Government and that too a Marxist one
had betrayed the refugees from East Bengal by not only refusing to rehabilitate them
in West Bengal as promised in their election manifesto but also how they were brutally evicted on charges of violating the Forest Act, when they returned to settle on the land promised to them. The uprising and its ruthless quelling, in a bid to preserve the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans that were allegedly being destroyed by the refugee settlers, sparked off a number of debates and the controversies continues till this day as to whether it is human enough to preserve forests and wild animals at the expense of the tribals and the dispossessed who have nowhere else to go and who, while living on the edge, struggle to eke out a meagre living from the protected forest reserves. And, as vested forces are always in the fray, an amicable settlement for the issue will be hard to come by and debates on it will continue “to be extremely acrimonious and heated” as noted by Sekhsaria. In this connection, Shampa Chattarjee remarks, “Ghosh’s book is all about the dichotomy – wild life versus human suffering or destruction of the ecosystem versus human survival.”

In her article “Dwelling on Morichjhapi” Annu Jalais remarks that the reasons leading to the massacre had their roots in the “intricacies of caste, class and communal differences.” When India was partitioned in 1947 on communal lines, there was a migration in huge numbers of East Bengali Hindus to West Bengal in India. The first wave of migration consisted of higher-class Hindus who were persecuted by their low-class Muslim tenants. They fled and found a haven in the homes of their affluent friends and relatives in Calcutta. But the low-caste Hindus found nowhere to go and they “squatted” on public and private land.

The historical event that lies at the core of the novel and guides its pivotal action at Morichjhapi is the event of Bangladesh independence in 1971, which had led to a huge influx of refugees into India. While the event is neither a contemporary reality nor did it occur in the recent past, its aftermath constitutes the lived reality of
the people. The inhabitants of the Sundarbans on both sides of the border are the poorest of the poor. It is therefore that the elitist nationalist forces on both sides of the border attempt to silence them. The refugees who came to India in the wake of violence unleashed at the time of Bangladesh war of independence are presented in the novel in choric voices: “When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash, we crossed the border because we had nowhere else to go” (115). Nilima tells Kanai about them: “In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of upper castes” (118). However, the refugees migrating to the island of Morichjhapi – now a part of a project funded by people from across the world to reserve forest land for animals – have not migrated from Bangladesh but have managed to escape from the rehabilitation camps set in Madhya Pradesh. Thus doubly dispossessed, these refugees receive inhuman treatment in the place of their asylum also. Nilima tells Kanai the truth of the so-called rehabilitation camps set up by the government for refugees:

‘They called it “resettlement”,’ said Nilima, ‘but people say it was more like a concentration camp, or a prison. They were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down.

‘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 them with bows, arrows and other weapons. …’ (118)

The migration continued during the 50s and 60s and later in 1975, after Mujib Rahman’s massacre and Zia-Ur-Rahaman’s rise to power in Bangladesh, when the last remnants of low-class Bengali Hindus who were persecuted by communal attacks fled and sought refuge in West Bengal. As the refugee influx in West Bengal went out of control, the Congress government under B.N. Roy sent them “to various
inhospitable and infertile areas – most infamous amongst them being Dandakarnya, a semi-arid rocky place which included parts of Orissa and former Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh,” now in Chhattisgarh. The Marxist opposition denounced it and promised that if they came to power they would settle them in West Bengal and Jyothi Basu, who was the leader of the opposition, also demanded in a public meeting in 1974 that the Dandakarnya refugees be allowed to settle in West Bengal. But contrary to what was expected, when the Left came to power in 1977, they failed in executing their promise. However, the refugees, hoping that there would not be any opposition, congregated at railway stations to move towards the Sundarbans. But the government acted against them and they were denied food and water and were asked to return. But many refugees managed to escape to various places inside West Bengal, and some of them went to the Sundarbans, where they had relatives who were brought there during the early part of the century by the British to clear the forest for cultivation. Of the estimated 1,50,000 refugees, 30,000 braved government opposition and sailed to Morichjhapi and under the leadership of Satish Mondal, a refugee sympathizer of the Communist party, settled there. But the government reacted by saying that refugee settlement in Morichjhapi was “unauthorized and violation of the Forest Act” and added persistently that the permanent settlement would “disturb the existing and potential forest wealth and also create ecological imbalance in the area.”

Within a few months of their arrival at the Sundarbans, the refugee settlers worked in perfect fraternity with the islanders. They built huts, cultivated the land, and some earned their livelihood by fishing. They dug tube wells and established fishing industry, saltpans, dispensaries, schools, and so on. Similar experiences of neglect and marginalization brought the islanders and refugees into a strong tie of solidarity. They bounded together for “a common cause, which was to fight for a
niche for themselves” (216), which would become a “metaphor” for the reclamation of voice in West Bengal.

The eviction of refugees at Morichjhapi as recounted in Nirmal’s journal is a recapitulation of details mentioned in Annu Jalais’ article. Here, once again, Amitav Ghosh reveals his sense of history and his books reverberate with it. Annu Jalais’s documentation reads:

Thirty police launches circled the island, thereby depriving the settlers of food and water; they were also tear-gassed, their huts razed, their boats sunk, their fish and tube wells destroyed, those who tried to cross the river were shot at … several hundred men and women and children were believed to have died during that time and their bodies thrown into the river.11

As Annu Jalais has remarked, no one will ever know how many lost their lives but what we know is that no charge was laid against the policemen and the politicians who launched the attack. It is amazing that these stories are yet to appear as histories. When hounded by police, the desperate out cry of the refugees, “Who are we? We are the dispossessed” (254) speaks of the utter failure of the modern nation state to voice the moorings of its underprivileged lot. Watching all this, Nirmal feels, “It was as if I were hearing the deepest uncertainties of my heart being spoken to the rivers and the tides. Who was I? Where did I belong? In Kolkata or in the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?” (254)

Kusum, an Indian deciding to fight for the cause of the refugees, feels aghast at the irrationality of the nation state, which is willing to butcher people to save animals. Disgruntled, she wonders:

‘…Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is
being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil....’ (261-262)

Kanai also sees the inhumanity of the government’s endeavour, when he tells Piya:

‘Because it was people like you,’ said Kanai, ‘who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I’m complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons. It’s not hard to ignore the people who’re dying – after all they are the poorest of the poor....’ (301)

The Hungry Tide approaches the question of refugees from the human angle and exposes the apathy of the politicians from across the borders. The entire Morichjhapi event, with the irresolute spirit of the settlers who create a habitation for themselves in an otherwise hostile environment, the determination of the West Bengal government, despite its leftist ideology, to uproot these poor people using violence, the apathy of intellectuals from whom these settlers expect sympathy and admiration, all these re-establish the views voiced by Bill Ashcroft:

We must remember that the concepts we treat as entities: imperialism, anti-colonial resistance, nationalism are processes not entities.... The imperial dynamic is a crucial feature of all nationalisms. Imperialism, the extension of nationality, reproduces itself endlessly in those nationalisms which rise up to oppose it.12

This event, based on a real historical event, as Ghosh informs in the author’s note, has now been erased from official records and except for a couple of articles, no
historical treatment of the event is available. Thus the official versions of history – colonial or nationalist, tend to displace and dislocate events that do not suit the dominant interests. Amia Loomba observes, “Nations are communities created not simply by forging certain bonds but also by fracturing or dividing others, not merely invoking and remembering certain versions of the past but making sure that others are forgotten or repressed.”13

The fictional reconstruction of the event by Ghosh points out the process that this phenomenon follows. Not surprisingly, therefore, except for Nirmal’s diary, which has been recovered after many years of his death, the event has been completely wiped out from the public discourse. Nilima also feels reluctant to speak of it. Thus a historical incident, a state-engineered massacre of hundreds of people in the name of protecting the tiger reserves, is reduced to mere memory, the site from where legends and myths emerge.

Conversely, the legend of Bon Bibi carries history within its fold, and as Kanai identifies, “In those words, there was a history that is not just his (Fokir’s) own but also of this place, the tide country” (354). The cult of Bon Bibi occupies a significant place in the life of the people of the tide country. Kusam, surprised that Kanai had never heard of Bon Bibi, asks innocently, “Then whom do you call on when you’re afraid?”(101). This view contrasts with the view of Nirmal, a townsman who calls this folk tale a “false consciousness” and dismisses it as “all the usual stuff, Gods, Saints, animals and demons” (102). Thus, unlike the historical narratives which make pretence of objectivity and universality, these cultural narratives operate on the contractual principle and therefore make no attempt to speak for those who are unwilling to believe in them. Orally transmitted from one generation to another, the story has a written version available too inscribed at some point.
The ritual prayer to Bon Bibi is also a queer mix of Islam and Hindu rituals. Thus even though clay images of Bon Bibi and Shah Jangoli are worshipped – something heretical in Islam – and the rhythm of recitation is that of Puja, the prayers, like all Quranic prayers, begin with Bismillah and are repeatedly interspersed with repeated invocation to Allah. This syncretism in the folk tale becomes significant in the face of the violent forces of history that have caused disharmony and divide. The folklore represents not only cultural syncretism but also linguistic and generic syncretism. Thus the written text of this primarily oral tradition too is marked by hybridity. Even though the legend follows the prosody of Bangla folklore with its usage of the verse form called *dwipodipoyar*, it is written in continuation like prose. Besides, despite being written in Bangla, the booklet opens to the right as in Arabic. This strange “hybrid” (247) can best be explained in terms of folklore being a residual site for existence of the displaced and marginalized aspects of the linear history, as Vladimir Propp appropriately posits:

The extensive study of the historical development of folklore shows that in case where history produces new form of life, new economic achievements, new form of social relations …. older forms do not die off or become replaced by new ones. The old continues to co-exist with the new, either simultaneously or by creating different hybrid combinations (impossible in nature or in history) with it.14

Nirmal wrote his journal – the one that has now been bequeathed to Kanai – in the village of Morichjhapi the year after his retirement as headmaster. All through her years of establishing the Badaban Trust, his wife had thought he was a writer: in fact, however, the journal is the first and last thing he had written since coming to Lusibari. In it, Nirmal reassessed his life, which he thought had been a failure, and reassessed his marriage, which he thought had been over-shadowed by his wife’s dedication to
the Trust and her dismissal of his leftist idealism in favour of her own pragmatism. Nirmal had gone to Morichjhapi to find Kusum. He wanted to warn her of the danger facing the Bangladeshi refugees who had recently fled to Morichjhapi from the resettlement camp in Central India to which they had been sent. Morichjhapi is a tiger preserve and the government considered the refugees squatters. When he reached them in the dangerous and shifting region, Nirmal was won over to their cause. Kusum took Nirmal to Garjontol, where the Bon Bibi shrine is. During the time Horen had been protecting Kusum from Dilip, he had fallen in love with her. He proposed marriage to her this time and they have sexual relations, but the next day she was killed in the massacre perpetrated by the government against the “squatters.” Her son, Fokir, was just five or six at that time.

The events of journal, of course, had taken place a good many years before the events of the immediate story in the novel. In the present time, Kusum’s son Fokir is an adult, and is married to Moyna. Moyna is a very determined young woman who has managed to give herself an education. She wants to go to a nursing school, but her family baulks at the idea of her leaving them for further schooling. Their response to her desire had been to force her to marry Fokir. When he first meets her, Kanai immediately admires Moyna for her determination and ambition. Piya, meanwhile, hires Fokir to take her out to observe the dolphins for several weeks.

Piya and Fokir are kept apart by language and class and by the social institution of marriage; Nirmal and Nilima live side by side for years but are unknown to each other, divided by different dreams for their lives, and by a lack of respect for other’s way of embracing life. This aged couple is, in fact, reminiscent of Balaram and his wife in *The Circle of Reason*. Balaram’s wife is driven to distraction by her husband’s obsessions. So is Nilima. She complains to her husband:
‘... It was for your sake that we first came to Lusibari, because your political involvements got you into trouble and endangered your health. There was nothing for me here, no family, friends or a job. But over the years I’ve built something – something real, something useful, something that has helped many people in small ways. All these years, you’ve sat back and judged me....’ (214)

Horen and Kanai accompany Piya and Fokir and go off on their own for a while. Before they can get very far, though, Kanai senses that cyclone is approaching. They also learn that Piya and Fokir have gone out in Fokir’s dangerously small boat. As the storm approaches, Horen decides that he can no longer wait for the two and so, he and Kanai return to Lusibari. Meanwhile Fokir steers to Garjontola – in what amounts to a tender instinct handed on to him by his mother, and laden with the hope of Bon Bibi’s intervention on behalf of the poor – and he and Piya climb the highest mangrove tree and tie themselves to of the trunk. The storm is soon upon them, pausing only momentarily before hitting them repeatedly with full force, followed by a massive tidal wave. Eventually it subsides. Fokir shields Piya from flying objects, lashing water, at the cost of his life. The act of shielding Piya with his body soon takes on sexual under tones:

Their bodies were so close, so finely merged that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one. (390)

Thus, class, caste, gender, linguistic, and national boundaries collapse in the face of nature’s fury that purges all characters of their cultivated sensibilities.
Fokir first appears on the scene as something of a knight in shining armour saving Piya from the two “guides.” He is an honest, possibly complex figure and has the subaltern character. Fokir is cremated. A few days pass and Kanai returns to New Delhi, leaving a letter for Piya. He makes clear in the letter that he understands himself very poorly and wishes her happiness. He leaves her a full translation of the Bon Bibi legend as a way to understand better Fokir’s spirituality, and his struggle in his short life, and an invitation to her to understand that, in differing ways, she is loved by both of them, as if human relations reflect the ebb and tide, the mix of fresh water and salt water of the Sundarbans. Piya was able to do her research mostly due to Fokir’s generosity. At the beginning, Piya was a great skeptic of relationships, reading them through her own experience of her parents’ relationship:

The two of them, Fokir and herself, they could have been boulders or trees for all they knew of each other: and wasn’t it better in a way, more honest, that they could not speak? For if you compared it to the ways in which dolphins’ echoes mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being. (159)

Fokir is the trust soul in the novel. He is an illiterate man, but possesses more knowledge of the river and its wild life than all the outsiders who do not understand him.

Piya leaves for a month, but then returns to work at the Badabon Trust. She sets her sights on raising money to see to it that Nilima’s dreams will live on – first by financing a house for Moyna and a college education for her son, Tutul. Piya also decides that she will move the Trust in the direction of conservation of the endangered dolphins, in consultation with local fishermen. She describes her proposed multi-year project in the Sunderbans thus: “It would be as fine a piece of descriptive science as
any. It would be enough; as an alibi for a life, it would do; she would not need to apologize for how she had spent her time on this earth” (127). It was the initial view of life for Piya which was very sad and seemed to her a perfect way to avoid human relationships: “As with many of her peers, she had been drawn to field biology as much for the life it offered as for its intellectual content – because it allowed her to be on her own, to have no fixed address, to be far from the familiar, while still being a part of a loyal but loose-knit community” (126). But this same lady is completely different at the novel’s end.

On the other side, Ghosh has created a space for a dialogic discourse on the conflict between environmentalists and the refugee settlers who fight against eviction. The contending views are voiced through Nirmal and Nilima, who are ideologically and politically opposed to each other. When Morichjhapi is in turmoil, Kusum, one of the springboards of resistance, approaches Nilima for medical help for her people. Nilima refuses to help as she does not want to distance herself from the government and get into trouble by aligning with the refugees. She “could not afford to alienate herself from the government” (122) especially when she needed their help to run her hospital in Lusibari. She makes herself clear:

‘... I simply cannot allow the Trust to get involved in this. There’s too much at stake for us. You’re not involved in the day-to-day business of running the hospital, so you have no idea of how hard we’ve had to work to stay on the right side of the government. If the politicians turn against us, we’re finished. I can’t take that chance.’(214)

She is insensitive to the cause of the people of Morichjhapi who have been imaged as violators of the Forest Act. And the voice of bureaucracy that speaks through her is revealed in her words to Kusum: “Those people are squatters; that land doesn’t
belong to them; it’s government property. How can they just seize it? If they’re allowed to remain, people will think every island in the tide country can be seized. What will become of the forest, the environment?” (213). But Nirmal, who is a revolutionary and a humanist to the core, is quick to retort that it is discrimination against the settlers: “Were the dreams of these settlers less valuable than those of a man like Sir Daniel just because he was a rich shaheb and they impoverished refugees?” (213).

Ghosh uses Kusum’s voice to apprise the readers of how the government had stepped up pressure on the settlers. Policemen and officials surround the place and offer inducements for them to leave. They try to break their collective strength by offering them bribes. But when it fails, they resort to threats of physical violence as their next strategy. The island is besieged by boatloads of policemen waiting for orders to attack. Kusum tells Nirmal about the fierce steadfastness of the settlers, braving thirst and hunger, brushing aside the threats of police violence, as they listen to the callous, dehumanizing announcements thrust at them through loud speakers: “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world” (261). Kusum wonders as to who those people are who “love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them” (262). After the so-called police action, Nirmal is found stranded and unconscious in Canning. He is let off only after his identity is revealed as Headmaster. But, he succumbs to the trauma and torture he is subjected to.

The people of Lusibari including Nilima suspect that Nirmal’s frequent visits to Morichjhapi in the year of his death were because of his infatuation for Kusum. But the words of Horen who knew Kusum and Nirmal better than anybody else clear all
misapprehensions. To Kanai’s query whether Nirmal really loved Kusum, Horen is visibly agitated. He remarks that the city people might think like that for they are not mature enough to understand the spirit of the committed revolutionary within Nirmal that identifies with Kusum’s own commitment for the amelioration of her people’s sufferings. Nirmal did not love Kusum as a man does a woman but in a very different way. He loved her for the spirit of freedom and liberation from oppression that she signified and fought for with selfless devotion. And Kanai, assured, agrees: “He (Nirmal) loved the work of Rainer Maria Rilke, a great German poet, whose work has been translated into Bangla by some of our best-known poets. Rilke said ‘life is lived in transformation’, and I think Nirmal soaked this idea into himself in the way cloth absorbs ink. To him, what Kusum stood for was the embodiment of Rilke’s idea of transformation” (282).

By supporting and taking part in Kusum’s resistance, Nirmal had made amends for his wasted years as a mere school teacher, when he had suppressed the idea of revolution even though it burned as fire within him. But, after retirement, Kusum’s cause and the struggle of the people in Morichjhapi gave him the chance to indulge in it despite his wife’s resentment. It was a passion that would not die. And, as Nilima also remarks, “he couldn’t let go the idea of revolution” (302) even though it meant a great deal of suffering and sacrifice.

Though Kusum and Nirmal are destroyed in their fight for justice, their story opens up a debate for the posterity. When environmentalists world over press for preservation of the forests of the Sundarbans and even contribute towards it, should they not think of the dispossessed people of the place who had nowhere else to go? Is it a human quality to create spaces for tigers to thrive by evicting the poor islanders from their homes? This is a question that ought to be seriously debated. The words of
Kusum to Nirmal, who later helps the settlers in their struggle against eviction is indeed note worthy as it reflects Ghosh’s humanistic concerns: “…this whole world has become a place for animals and our fault, our crime was that we were just human beings trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil” (216).

Pankaj Sekhsaria opines in his article in *The Hindu* that wild life and wilderness do face a severe crisis but he wonders whether the tribals alone can be held wholly responsible for it. The government often justifies its policy of tribal eviction by propagandizing that they are a threat to forest life, especially to the tigers sanctified as the national animal worthy of veneration. Sekhsaria sums up the tribal’s predicament as follows:

Thousands of acres of productive land are being acquired to create special economic zones at the cost of thousands of families and millions of existing livelihoods; traditional tribal lands are being mined and drowned with impunity, … huge infrastructure projects and dollar earning tourism projects are being advocated in land where traditional communities are being displaced in the name of wild life preservation.¹⁵

It is always the tribal who is at the receiving end, whenever the issue of preservation of wild life and policies of economic expansion are discussed. It is rather strange that people fail in registering that tigers are killed and forest reserves are laid waste not by tribals but by poachers and timber merchants who want to make fast money. Sekhsaria regrets that “all problems of the tiger and forests are being laid at the door of the tribal and to the complete exclusion of everything else.”¹⁶

Although the squatters of Morichjhapi did not envision themselves as revolutionaries, Nirmal finds them to be extraordinary:
But between what was happening at Morichjhapi and what Hamilton had done there was one vital aspect of difference: this was not one man’s vision. This dream had been dreamt by the very people who were trying to make it real.

I could walk no more. I stood transfixed on the still-wet pathway, leaning on my umbrella while the wind snatched at my crumpled dhoti. I felt something changing within me: how astonishing it was that I, an ageing, bookish schoolmaster, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without!(171)

Their is, in effect, a revolution “from below,” and they become for Nirmal the subaltern consciousness that he has been seeking all his life. Nirmal describes Kusum, meanwhile, as the muse he never had, representing to him both poetry and revolution. Such “unhistorical” individuals apparently have a capacity to change lives of those who meet them, since they view the word through quite different eyes. Crossing the water on their way to the shrine, for example, Kusum tells Nirmal that they have just crossed the border between the realm of humans, protected by Bon Bibi, and the realm of the evil Dokkhin Rai and his demons. There is an eerie echo of The Shadow Lines here, as Nirmal suddenly recognizes the “imagined” nature of all such borders:

I realized, with a sense of shock, that this chimerical line was, to her and to Horen, as real as a barbed-wire fence might be to me. And now, indeed, everything began to look new, unexpected, full of surprises. I had a book in my hands to while away the time and it occurred to me that in a way a landscape too is not unlike a book – a compilation of pages that overlap without any two ever being the same. People open the book according to their taste and training, their memories and desires: for a geologist the compilation opens at one page, for a boatman at another and still another for a ship’s pilot, a painter and so on. On occasion these pages are ruled with lines that are invisible to some people,
while being for others, as real, as charged and as volatile as high-voltage cables.

To me, a townsman, the tide country’s jungle was emptiness, a place where time stood still: I saw now that this was an illusion, that exactly the opposite was true. (224)

Advanced as he is in years, he (Nirmal) can still empathize and imagine the world through a pair of eyes very different from his own. He finds himself identifying with the refugees, who refuse to budge and who shout in unison to the on-rushing police: “…who are we? We are the dispossessed.” Nirmal first responds by acknowledging the universal yearning of the wretched of the earth, the millions without a home:

_How strange it was to hear this plaintive cry wafting across the water. It seemed at that moment, not to be a shout of defiance, but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves, but on behalf of a bewildered humankind._

_Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong? (254)_

But the longer he listens, the more he hears the question as one arising from not only the poor, but from all humanity – and, indeed, from himself. His experience parallels that of Arjun in _The Glass Palace_. Sure of himself as well-situated in following the English, Arjun, ultimately throws all that overboard when he honestly “sees” the world through the eyes of the less-advantaged Kishan Singh. Nirmal, similarly, now recognizes how alienated he has been through most of his life, and how appropriate it is now to see the world through the eyes of these desperately poor refugees and the uneducated Kusum.

All of this is revealed in the journal that Kanai alone has been allowed to read. Nirmal sounds remarkably like the narrator of _The Shadow Lines_, who wants to make sure his memories are not erased, and so writes them down. Nirmal seems to have had
a similar motivation in writing his journal: “No one knows better than I how skilful the tide country is in silting over its past... perhaps I can make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world” (69). But Kanai makes this observation early in the novel, and he is still standing on the outside as an observer. As the story proceeds, the reader begins to recognize that Kanai and Piya are entering into an experience that might be read as a quest for their souls – a journey in which their minds, finely tuned, are no longer adequate in the face of the Sundarbans. Kanai is forty-two and single, a resident of New Delhi who is a translator and interpreter by profession: in effect, he makes one person understood by another, and yet he does not understand himself. However, Ghosh is explicit about Piya in this regard, noting (through her mind) that “she had no more idea of what her own place was in the great scheme of things than she did of theirs” (35). Ghosh has found a metaphor that represents an erasure of the border between what is familiar and what is uncanny, by setting the book in this strange spot.

Kanai initially identifies with Moyna and her strong will:

Her ambition was so plainly written on her face that Kanai was assailed by the kind of tenderness we sometimes feel when we come across childhood pictures of ourselves – photographs that reveal all-too-unguardedly the desires people spend lifetimes in learning to dissimulate. (135)

As it happens, this is the mirror image of the insight Nirmal had years ago, into the cynical Kolkata officials – some of whom he had known in college – when they visited Morichjhapi to negotiate evacuation of the refugees: “He laughed, in the cynical way of those who, having never believed in the ideals they once professed, imagine that no one else had done so either” (192).
Piya, who feels drawn to Fokir and senses female hostility from Moyna, has a different insight into Moyna’s and Kanai’s need for her. She thinks that Moyna, with her ambition, confirms for Kanai the approach he has taken to his own life. As Piya puts it, “It was important for him to believe that his values were, at bottom, egalitarian, liberal, meritocratic” (219). By this logic, even the poorest of the poor can lift themselves up by their own bootstraps, given the requisite will power. Conversely, “… this was a looking- glass in which a man like Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was Lusibari” (220). Yet, Piya recognizes that Fokir, far more than Moyna, embodies the dominant spirit of Lusibari and forgotten places like it – countries “full of these ghosts, these unseen presences whose murmurings could never quite be silenced no matter how loud you spoke” (220).

_The Hungry Tide_ is a revelation of the spirit of humanity, of the fact that human beings are bonded not 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 other human persona, no matter how distinctly dissimilar they might be in their external appearances.

Ghosh achieves this unique triumph in displaying such a bond between Piya and Fokir, a relation that does not require speech to convey a message, and in 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 each another. Serving as Piya’s guide, Fokir ties his small boat to Horen’s larger one
and, with Kanai accompanying them as translator, the four head out. When in return they near the land, they see a large group of people in circle. Approaching, they see that a tiger is in the centre and the mob is frantically trying to kill it, first with spears and then with fire. Piya and company learn that the tiger had recently killed a new born calf. Piya objects and tries to stop them. She has to be dragged away from the angry mob by Fokir and Horen – she seems, in fact, reminiscent of May Price in the face of Dhaka mob in *The Shadow Lines*, and like May she is oblivious to the danger in which she is putting every one by romantically standing before a force of nature. Later, Piya and Kanai remember the scene in a way very suggestive of *The Heart of Darkness*. When Piya remarks that “It was like something from some other time – before recorded history. I feel like I’ll never be able to get my mind around the….The horror,” Kanai intriguingly responds, “… aren’t we a part of the horror as well? You and me and people like us?” (300).

The tide country, two-thirds of which lies in Bangladesh and one third in India, a divide caused by the divisive forces of history, nurtures folklore where this divide is obliterated, where there is harmonious co-existence of conflictual voices – something that history based on hierarchy and hegemony disallows. Badabon the Bengali word for “mangrove,” is the name chosen for Nilima’s trust by Nirmal because as he tells Nilima, “… *while our Bangla word joins Arabic to Sanskrit—‘bada’ to ‘bon’, or ‘forest’. It is as though the word itself were an island, born of the meeting of two great rivers of language – just as the tide country is begotten of Ganga’s union with Brahmaputra*” (82).

Thus the very topography of the region along with its linguistic and socio-cultural formations is revealed in the innate hybridity of the Bon Bibi folk tale. Nirmal, an intellectual, a poet, and a philosopher, does not fail to notice this:
...the mud banks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else? Flowing into each other they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. And so it dawned on me: the tide country’s faith is something like one of its great mohonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a circular roundabout people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions. (247)

Linguistic plurality marks the cultural scene of India but in the wake of the formation of the new nation in the post-independence period, the pressures of having one national language and the ensuing debate flared by nationalist and patriotic fervours gave a major blow to it. Thus while the major movements of history often suppress and rupture the cultural fabric, the folktales and legends retain them. The Bon Bibi tale truly mirrors the sentiments of the people of the region who, eventhough politically and historically belong to two different nations, identify with each other from across the border. Thus Kusum living in Dhanbad, and longing for home, identifies with the refugees from Bangladesh who are running away from Dandakaranya: “...these were my people, how could I stand apart? We shared the same tongue, we were joined in our bones; the dreams they had dreamt were no different from my own. They too had hankered for our tide country mud; they too had longed to watch the tide rise to full flood” (165).

The folktale, thus, is closer to the history of the people of tide country than the official versions, which insist upon unnatural lines drawn on a map. When Bon Bibi defeats demon Dokkhin Rai, she is generous enough to draw a boundary line leaving one half of the region for the demon and the other half safe for human settlement. Nirmal, while going to Garjotola with Kusam and Horen, discovers to his shock, “...this chimerical line was to her and to Horen as real as a barbed wire fence might
This generosity of Bon Bibi is in contrast to the stubborn action of the Left Front government in West Bengal, which does not hesitate to massacre hundreds of human beings to further its interests. This complete identification of local people with the miracle of Bon Bibi also lends a magical realist impact to an otherwise overtly realist narrative. The objective realist framework in the novel constantly overlaps with the magical realist framework. This is apparent in the very choice of the terrain which itself is phantasmagoric. Nirmal, when he reaches the heart of the wilderness, realizes:

_To me, a townsman, the tide country’s jungle was an emptiness, a place where time stood still: I saw now that this was an illusion, that exactly the opposite was true. What was happening here, I realized, was that the wheel of time was spinning too fast to be seen. In other places it took decades, even centuries for a river to change course; it took an epoch for an island to appear. But here, in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days._ (224)

Even though the region is described in all its objective details, the very objectivity makes it magical to the reader not familiar with this geography. It is in this region that the dynamics of the cross-cultural interaction within the same national community and the cross-national interaction of the people belonging to same cultural rubric is worked out. Not surprisingly, therefore, the folktale of Bon Bibi, which represents the cultural reality of people who believe in it, people belonging to the two different geographical and political entities called India and Bangladesh, appears surreal and incomprehensible to the people outside this cultural community even though belonging to the same nation – such as Nirmal, Nilima, Piya and Kanai. The nightmarish hyper-reality of insurmountable social differences becomes apparent to
Kanai when he is left alone on the island of Garjontole with Kusum’s son Fokir. Kanai, who till that time considered himself to be an insider as far as the region was concerned, and was mediating as a translator between Piya, a representative of global culture, and Fokir, representing the local culture of the tide country, is immediately turned into an outsider:

It was as though his own vision were being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes, and he were seeing not himself, Kanai, but a great host of people – a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men who had destroyed Fokir’s village, burnt his home and killed his mother. (327)

Kanai does not have to wait long for his own psychic encounter with his strengths and weaknesses. When left alone, he was facing the “inscrutability of life” himself, and Fokir refused to “translate” for him. In fact, Fokir casts off from shore and leaves Kanai behind. Kanai panics and runs head long into the mangrove forest, cutting his feet and finally imagines that he sees a tiger stalking him. He gets irritated and leaves for New Delhi next day. But, he does not stay in the known world of the city very long before he recognizes the pull of the Sunderbans and returns. This is a remarkably altered man from the one who cynically accepted his aunt’s invitation to visit and read his uncle’s mysterious journal.

Dreams too are an integral part of this magic realism and run counter to the realist linear mode. The first colonial settler John Hamilton’s utopian dream of establishing an egalitarian society in the Sundarbans, “Here there would be no Brahmins or untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together” (51); Nirmal’s utopian vision of seeing in Morichjhapia possibility of a Dalit nation, “Was it possible, even, that in Morichjhapi had been planted the seeds of what might become if not a Dalit nation, then at least a safe heaven, a place
of true freedom for the country’s most oppressed?” (191); Piya’s utopian dream of establishing seamless communication with illiterate Fokir; and Fokir’s dream of his mother asking him to bring his son to Garjontola—all these dreams challenge the linear temporality of rationalist discourse because here past always re-enacts itself in the present and future has already happened.

Sagarika Ghose writes of this novel that the setting evokes a series of paradoxes in the interaction of these characters:

Piya learns to love Fokir without language. Kanai, the translator of cultures, finds himself stripped down of all urban defences facing a tiger in swamp. Fokir, the unlettered fisherman, falls in love with a woman who is an embodiment of science (Piya). A massive storm brings death and terminates a potentially rich love; Nirmal falls in love with Kusum and finally breaks with his armchair past. Ghosh’s musings on language, on translatability, on the forgotten massacre of Morichjhapi in which dominant cultures forcibly wipe out movements from below, are deafly woven into the interaction between the characters. Yet the most dominant theme is of a great sweep away by water, the flood on land, the revolution in the mind. As the reigning deity of the tide country Bon Bibi, in Ghosh’s vision a plural syneretic local cult, presides over this flood; she is a goddess of hope but also of vengeance.17

The last point is certainly true: the cyclone is powerfully described and reminds the readers very forcefully of the humility that is demanded in the face of nature, and our place in it. If much of Ghosh’s writing career has demonstrated a fascination with the passage of history, and it continues over time, this novel seems more to underscore the fragility of our brief time on earth. This emphasis on the tenuous nature of human existence offers a powerful context for the book’s concentrated focus on characters like Fokir who come into life and pass away without rippling the waves of history. As
far as the records are concerned, they are simply among the legions of unimportant individuals like Alu in *The Circle of Reason*, Bomma in *In An Antique Land*, Laakhan in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, grandmother Thamma’s poor relations in *The Shadow Lines*, or Kishan Singh in *The Glass Palace*. They are voiceless nobodies. Yet Ghosh spills a lot of ink on their behalf as if to record their personal histories with as much vigour and detail as he does in recovering his own childhood memories in *The Shadow Lines*.

Comparisons might be made between *The Hungry Tide* and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* – a novel similarly obsessed with a mysterious animal that has been real as a symbol of all sorts. For *The Hungry Tide*, the Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaellafluminalis*) that Piya has come to study reveals itself as a symbol of an original unity. Like many good symbols it takes on various meanings depending upon the one who considers it. It is rumoured to be Bon Bibi’s messenger. For Nirmal, it represents the “*gaze of the poet*”(235). A poet would, of course, see it in those terms. For Fokir and his family, it would represent their faith in a supportive force beyond the destructive forces that threaten them each day, a kind and intervening mother that wards off the evil that would otherwise wipe them off from the earth. For Piya, who remembers the Indian language that she now hears around her as the language in which her parents argued, it represents the peace of a family that can be pieced together from those around her. That, of course, is why she chooses this unlikely spot as her home. Nirmal had learned much the same thing among the refugees: “*Standing on the deck of the bhotbhoti, I was struck by the beauty of this. Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave. I joined my feeble voice to theirs: Morichjhapi chharbona!*”(254).
To conclude, though Amitav Ghosh himself does not suggest means by which the ever-raging conflict between the settlers and the “eco-friendly” officials of forest conservation, and environmentalists world over can be resolved, by bringing the geography and history of the Sudarbans into focus and by highlighting the plight of refugees settlers who have nowhere else to go, he has invited his readers to participate in a dialogue to find out and understand the real issues at stake. And it is hoped that constructive debates and discussions will pave way for amelioration of the plight of the subalterns and tribal people who continue to be neglected lot, and who are striving incessantly for the right to survive by living in conjugation with the land and the sea as their ancestors of yore had done, without being threatened by the so-called environmentalists whose eco-friendly consciousness is a Damocles’ sword hanging perpetually over their heads.
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