CHAPTER 7
BORDERS-DISSOLVED:
AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE HUNGRY TIDE


The front flap of the hardback edition acquaints us with the precarious existence of an eclectic population, in the ever transforming Sundarbans.

“Between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands. Some are vast and some no larger-than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others have just washed into being. These are the Sundarbans. Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. Here, for hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed braved the man-eating tigers and the crocodiles who rule there, to eke precarious existence from the mud. Here, at the beginning of the last century, a visionary Scotsman founded a utopian settlement where peoples of all races, classes and religions could live together.”¹

This elaborate but very apt introduction sets the tone of this novel, with a fascinating setting. Once more, Ghosh has successfully brought to life a singular territory which defies boundaries whether physical or those of caste, class and race in the face of all pervading and dominant presence of nature in all its fury.
Hoping to make her mark in the cetological world, Piyali Roy, an Indian American marine biologist, travels across this watery labyrinth in search of the once plentiful Irrawaddy dolphin. In her pursuit she comes across Fokir, an illiterate fisherman who leads her to a dolphin–rich river enclave making her venture successful, at least professionally. She also meets a sophisticated Delhi businessman, Kanai Dutt, a linguist and an interpreter, who has arrived in the region from New Delhi to retrieve his deceased uncle Nirmal’s writings addressed to him. Through Nirmal, a Rilke-quoting former school headmaster and erstwhile revolutionary, Ghosh recounts the history of the islands with a detailed account of the true story of the 1979 siege of Morichjhapi in which destitute squatters were brutally evicted by the Indian Govt. in order to preserve a wildlife sanctuary, which again displays Ghosh’s penchant for traversing the fiction/non-fiction boundary. Intending to avoid a simple romantic love story plot, Ghosh mingles ecological concerns, issues of language and land in the unfolding of complicated relationships among Piyali, Fokir and Kanai. The confounded relationships are resolved by the climactic ending of the novel with a cyclone which kills Fokir, who dies trying to save Piya.

The setting of the novel in the very heart of nature, puts the ecological perspective at the forefront. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration if nature is called the chief protagonist of this work. This study of literature with an ecological perspective, or eco-criticism or ‘green studies’ began in USA in the late 1980s and in UK in the early 1990s. The founder Cheryll Glotfelty, of USA
defines it as the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment. Along with Harold Fromm she co-edited collection of essays entitled, *The Eco Criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press, 1996) and also co-founded ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment). The concept of eco-criticism first arose in the late 1970s at meetings of the WLA (the Western Literature Association). The term ‘eco-criticism’ is traced back to William Rueckert’s 1978 essay ‘Literature and Ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism.’ The related term ‘ecological’ is first used by prominent US critic Karl Kroeber in his article “Home at Grasmere - Ecological Holiness” (1974). But both the terms were revived and made popular by Cheryll Glotfelty.

The history of eco-criticism can be traced back to three major nineteenth-century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force, and the wilderness. They are Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). All three were members of the group of writers, essayists and philosophers collectively known as the transcendentalists. Emerson’s first short book *Nature* (1836) is a reflective essay on the impact upon him of the natural world. Fuller has expressed her encounter with the American Landscape in her book *Summer on the Lakes, During 1843* and Thoreau’s *Walden* is an account of his two year stay, from 1845 in a hut he had built on the shore of Walden Pond, a couple of miles from his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts.
Before embarking on a perusal of the novel under study, it is worthwhile to dwell slightly on the history of ‘eco criticism’ in UK. The UK version of ecocriticism takes its inspiration from British Romanticism of the late 1790s rather than American transcendentalism of the 1840s. The founding figure on the British side is the critic Janathan Bate, author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (Routledge, 19991). British ecocritics trace their history (before the term ‘ecocriticism existed) to Raymond William’s book *The Country and the City* (Chatto & Windus, 1973). The definitive UK collection of essays is Laurence Coupe’s *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticisms to Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2000).

The preferred American term is ‘eco-criticism’ whereas ‘green studies’ is frequently used in the UK. While the American writing is ‘celebratory’ in tone and revels in the beauty of nature, the British variant seeks to warn us of the environmental threats emanating from industrial, commercial and other man-made forces. For instance Jonathan Bate in his book, *The Song of the Earth* (Picador, 2000) argues that colonialism and deforestation generally go together. For the ecocritic, nature is an existing reality, which can affect us and is affected by us, if we mistreat it.

*The Hungry Tide*, besides other concerns, is quite eloquent about the ecological concerns of the Sunderbans, the mangrove forests between the sea and the plains of Bengal, which is slowly being denuded of its biodiversity. The ecological balance in this part of India, with a population comprising of the poorest of the poor, is seriously being threatened. As the scientist Mr Piddington
warned against the establishment of town Canning, he said if the forest itself is endangered that is certainly to diminish the possibility of Calcutta being protected anymore against the devastating oceanic storms of Bay of Bengal. This concern for the ecological balance is visible throughout the novel. The ever practical Mashima is besotted with concerns for the dwindling aquatic life. Moyna tells Kanai how Nilima wanted to get the nylon nets banned.

“These new nylon nets, which they use to catch ‘chingrir meen’ – the spawn of tiger prawns. These nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of other fish as well.”

Nature comes out as hostile and antagonistic to human beings right at the outset when Ghosh acquaints us with the world of mangroves:

“A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s utter 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” (THT, p.7-8).

The extreme hostility of the terrain is evident in most of the details of its physical aspects. In the section ‘Canning’ Kanai froze in disbelief on seeing the plight of the passengers in the boat due to the vast expanse of the billowing mud:
“...on stepping off the plank, there was a long-drawn out moment when each passenger sank slowly into the mud, like a spoon disappearing into a very thick daal. Only when they were in up to their hips did their descent end and their forward movement begin. With their legs hidden from sight all that was visible of their struggles was the twisting of their upper bodies”(THT,p.24-25).

In the section entitled ‘S. Daniel,’ Nirmal and Kanai discuss S. Daniel’s efforts in inhabiting the furious and hostile terrain with people. The furious picture of the risky surroundings is highly pathetic “...think of what it was like: think of the tigers, crocodiles and snakes that lived in the creeks and nalas that covered the islands. This was a feat for them. They killed hundreds of people”(THT,p.52).

Piya’s fall quite early in the book is also described in the same vein “...the muddy brown water was rushing up to meet her face.”

“With her breath running out, she felt herself to be enveloped inside a cocoon of eerie glowing murk and could not tell whether she was looking up or down. In her head there was a smell or rather a metallic savour she knew to be not blood, but inhaled mud. It had entered her mouth, her nose, her throat, her eyes, - it had become a shroud folding her in its cloudy wrappings”(THT,p.54-55).

The protagonist Kanai, a professional interpreter and translator, reveals the history behind the nomenclature of the Sunderbans through his uncle’s explicative notes.
Even the mythological allusion as to the origin of the watery labyrinth bears the picture of an unruly and untamed aquatic habitat. Krishna Dutta in her review of the book comments:

“Hindu myth has it that the mighty Ganges frees herself from the taming dread locks of Shiva – the God of creation and destruction near the Bay of Bengal in meandering strands, to create the Sundarbans. It is an immense stretch of mangrove forest where thousands of hectares become immersed and remerge with the tide. Ghosh skilfully depicts this truly vengeful place, where fantasy and reality constantly overlap.”

For the inhabitants of the islands, nature is a bountiful mother as well as a hostile force. The storms and the tigers are the forms in which nature expresses its hostility to human beings. Piya, the cetologist from America is averse to the inhabitants avenging the cruelty of these forces. Her strong reaction to the incident when a trapped tiger is being tortured by people from an island who had earlier lost many men and livestock to the beast, shows Piya, the environmentalist at her forceful best. But the inhabitants prevail and even the author seems to sympathise with them. The gentler aspects of nature are represented by the river dolphin which Kusum names for her son as ‘God’s Messengers’. Even the slightest change in river waters or big threats like cyclones can be predicted with a change in the dolphins’ behaviour and appearance in and out of water. Even mythology is beautifully linked with nature and science. Nirmal in his fervour to teach the children of Morichjhapi dwellers beautifully brings the river dolphin in his explication of
the rivers Ganga and Sindhu. He imagines himself telling the children:

“And do you know how you can tell that the Sindhu and the Ganga were once conjoined? … Because of the ‘shushuk’ – the river dolphin. This creature of the sea was the legacy left to the twins by their mother Tethys. The rivers nurtured it and made it their own. Nowhere else in the world is the shushuk to be found, but in the twin rivers, the Ganga and the Sindhu” (THT, p.182).

Nature, as represented in *The Hungry Tide* is a major force in the erasure of all divisions and even effects of generations, which is a preoccupation in almost all of Ghosh’s works. Nirmal tells Kanai about S. Daniel’s vision and why he chose the particular part of Bengal: “The speciality of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts” (THT,p.50). Nirmal in his journal uses the metaphor of *mohonas* to bring together rivers of language:

“…the mudbanks 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 round about people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions”(THT,p.247).

A study of Amitav Ghosh’s novels inevitably involves a meditation on the arbitrariness of border whether physical, racial or
psychological. This novel involves more personal divisions between men and women, besides other borders. Self confessedly Ghosh concerns himself with the predicament of the individual against a broader historical or, as in *The Hungry Tide*, a geographical backdrop. Here nature itself defies categorisation and keeps changing its form.

“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... There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and everyday 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” (THT, p.7).

Just as the national tides of the watery labyrinth obliterate the sense of permanent division between land and sea, Ghosh’s characters learn to recognise the transience of these divisions between individuals irrespective of their social class.

Every work by Ghosh involves a coming together of characters of disparate backgrounds and disposition. Piya and Fokir are divided both by language, class and the institution of marriage. Just like Balaram and Toru Debi in *The Circle of Reason*; the aged couple of Nirmal and Nilima, are divided in their dreams and visions. In spite of living side by side for years, Nilima’s outburst against Nirmal reveals her dissatisfaction:
“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... All these years you’ve sat back and judged me” (THT,p.214).

The communication between Piya and Fokir, on the other hand, despite a lack of language and difference in culture, builds understanding and trust in a very brief time span.

“... 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”(THT,p.159).

Piya, the very embodiment of science, seeks refuge in research to lead a life free of boundaries and addresses and at the same time loosely connected to a global community.

“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” (THT,p.126).

And yet she evolves into a Piya who’s very much emotionally involved into a relationship with Fokir. Sagarika Ghosh points out the paradoxical interaction of these characters:
“Piya learns to love (Fokir) without language. Kanai, the translator of cultures, finds himself stripped of all urban defences facing a tiger in a 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 form below, are deftly woven into the interactions 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 syncretic local cult presides over this flood, she is Goddess of hope but also of vengeance.”

Nirmal realizes the imaginary nature of borders, when crossing the water on their way to the shrine in Satjelia, Kusum tells Nirmal that they had just crossed the border between the realm of humans, protected by Bon Bibi, and the realm of the evil Dokkhin Rai and his demons.

“I realised, 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 ... To me, a townsman, the tide country jungle was an emptiness, a place where time stood still. I saw now that this was an illusion, that exactly the opposite was true” (THT, p.224).

Nirmal identifies himself with the refugees, who refuse to leave the island of Morichjhapi and who shout in unison to the attacking police. “Who are we? We are the dispossessed.” Nirmal
voices his sympathy with the wretched displaced millions of the earth, 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?” (THT,p.254)

John Hawley comments on the theme of diminishing borders in the novel:

“Like many other fine novelists, in setting the book in this very strange spot, Ghosh has found a metaphor that represents an erasure of the border between what is familiar and what is uncanny, and he invites into it a man of letters and a woman of science.”

Ghosh’s abiding interest in crossing borders and his ultimate obliteration of all separations is evident in Nirmal’s ominous prediction to five years old Fokir that the crabs are eating away at the dikes, and sooner or later the tides will cover the lane:

“…because the animals (Quoting Rilke) already knew by instinct/we’re not comfortably at home / in our translated world” (THT,p.206).

The very setting of the novel invokes a region where the familiar markers of identity are constantly shifting. First according to Hamilton’s rules: “It was impossible to tell who was who, and what their castes and religions and beliefs were” (THT,p.79). Geographically too “there were no borders to divide fresh water from sea” (THT,p.7).
The travel across boundaries and cultures which is a preoccupation in almost all the works by Ghosh, is prominently visible in *The Hungry Tide* also. Piya’s comment that “the world Kanai inhabited was as distant from the India of her father’s memories as it was from Lusibari and the tide country” (THT, p.200). Brinda Bose very aptly comments here:

“… As he travels between cultures / lands that diasporas straddle (India/Bangladesh/England in *The Shadow Lines* ; India/Egypt in *In an Antique Land*; India/Burma/ Malaya in *The Glass Palace* ), the burden of India’s colonial past appears to weigh heavily on a migrant post colonial generation, and Ghosh seems to be constantly in search of that elusive epiphanic moment in which individuals may come to terms with their histories, thereby releasing themselves from the metaphoric and metaphysical burden of their condition ... In Ghosh’s fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by both time and space-history and geography - and attempts to define the present through a nuanced understanding of the past.”

Amitav Ghosh’s penchant for experimenting with and; mixing genres is visible in *The Hungry Tide* in full force. M. Abhijit Dhakuria very rightly comments: “Amitav Ghosh is a master of the genre ‘fictionalized thesis’.” Ghosh the researcher dominates in all his fictional works making them appear very diligently doled out research tracts. All his stories are firmly based on history which he lays bare in front of the reader. The complete historical account of how the geographical backdrop of the novel i.e the sundarbans, the islands came into being, is provided with full clarity. Daniel Hamilton’s vision and the description of settlers, is elaborately
discussed through the character of Nirmal. He dwells in detail even on the nomenclature of the islands like lusibari, Emilybari, Jamespur etc.

“And as the population grew, villages sprouted and S’ Daniel gave them names. One village became “Shobnomoskar” “welcome to all”, and another became “ Rajat Jubilee”, to mark the silver jubilee of some king or the other. And to some he gave the names of his relatives that’s why we have here a Jamespur, an Annpur and an Emilybari, Lusibari was another such”(THT,p.51).

Here again, like Ghosh makes Alu create a Marxist society without any divisions and separations as in The Circle of Reason. S. Daniel visualizes a world where all are welcome irrespective of their caste, class or nationality.

“They could not bring all their petty little divisions and differences. Here there would be no Brahmins or untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together when the news of this spread, people came pouring in, from northern Orissa, from eastern Bengal, from , Santhal Parganas”(THT,p.51-52).

Ghosh’s vision of a secular world free from petty divisions and boundaries gives the work the feel of a Marxist tract. Daniel Hamilton’s dreams speak for him:

“What he wanted was to build a new society, a new kind of country. It would be a country run by co-operatives, he said here people wouldn’t exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land” (THT,p.52).
Even the banknotes he has designed for this new free land says:

“The note is based on the living man, not on the dead coin. It costs practically nothing, and yields a dividend of one hundred percent in land reclaimed, tanks excavated, houses built, etc and in a more healthy and abundant life” (THT, p.53).

Through Nirmal, Ghosh recounts the history of the islands in elaborate detail. Nirmal’s accounts of the true story of the 1979 siege of Morichjhapi, in which destitute squatters were brutally evicted by the Indian Govt in order to preserve a wildlife sanctuary, poignantly displays the author’s gift for traversing the fiction/non fiction boundary.

As more prominently in his earlier works such as The Calcutta Chromosome, Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide disseminates scientific information with minute details of processes and phenomena, and in a very aesthetic manner. We are instructed in geography, climatology and marine biology. We are taken through the use of the GPS, and the behaviour of the river dolphin along with the research history, are very painstakingly described.

“They had said much about Calcutta, for instance, yet had never thought to mention that the first known specimen of Orcaella Brevirostris was found there, that strange cousin of the majestic killer whales of Puget Sound” (THT, p.95).

Besides these historical research facts, even the physiological and behavioural details of the dolphins are discussed very minutely. Even crabs are researched upon in great detail:
“Their (Crab’s) feet and their sides were lined with hairs that formed microscopic brushes and spoons. They used these to scrape the diatoms and other edible matter attached to each grain of sand. They were a sanitation department and a janitorial team rolled into one: they kept the mangroves clean by removing: their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris…” (THT,p.142).

Ghosh the researcher and portrayer of characters and relationships brings together a practical fisherman and a woman of science and creates perfect harmony in the fulfilment of their respective chores:

“It was surprising enough that their jobs had not proved to be utterly incompatible especially considering that one of the tasks required the input of geostationary satellites while the other depended on bits of shark-bone and broken tile. But that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously – people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another’s heads – was far more than surprising: it seemed almost miraculous”(THT,p.141).

Ghosh, the erudite scholar that he is, even manages to enlighten us about the happenings during the Indian freedom struggle while discussing the building of Port Canning. For instance he informs us:

“If you were here then, on the banks of the Matla, you would never have known that in northern India chapattis were passing from village to village; that Mangal Pandey had turned his gun on his officers; that women and children were being massacred and rebels were
being tied to the mouths of cannons” (THT, p.285).

He even unravels to us the secrets of Language like how the English word ‘typhoon’ originated from the Indian word *tufaan* and how Mr. Piddington the scientist studied cyclones, and it was he, who invented the word ‘cyclone’ to describe them.

Ghosh’s depiction of the proposed utopian society is eclectic not just in the backgrounds of the population, but even the religious beliefs and the way they are worshipped show an erasure of borders. For instance Fokir and Tutul pay homage to a shrine in Garjontola and their method of prayer is a mingling of Hindu and Muslim methods.

“Fokir began to recite some kind of chant, with his head bowed and his hands joined in an attitude of prayer... It contained a word that sounded like ‘Allah.’ She had not thought to speculate about Fokir’s religion, but it occurred to her now that he might be Muslim. But no sooner had she thought this than it struck her that a Muslim was hardly likely to pray to an image like this one. What Fokir was performing looked very much like her mother’s Hindu Puja” (THT, p.152).

Earlier, it was Nirmal, who had witnessed such a performance with Horen, Kusum and Fokir as a child. He was surprised to hear Horen recite a Muslim chant:

“I was amazed. I’d thought I was going to a Hindu Puja: imagine my astonishment on hearing these Arabic invocations. Yet the rhythm of the recitation was undoubtedly that of a Puja: how often, as a child, had I heard those
endless chants, rolling on and on in temples as well as in our home?” (THT, p.246)

Nirmal tells us of his surprise on seeing the religious book of the islanders *Bon Bibir Karamoti arthat Bon Bibi Johurnama*.

“I had another surprise; the pages opened to the right, as in Arabic not to the left as in Bangla. Yet the prosody was that of much of Bangla folklore. 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 round about people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions” (THT, p.247).

The novel is full of extraordinary characters. Each protagonist distinctly stands out in the crowd and is an individual in his own right. They are strongly tied to the Sundarbans, but each bonds differently with the islands. Fokir is rooted in the old traditions; his wife, Moyna, who is training to be a nurse, wants to have better prospects for her son. Nilima runs a charity, a hospital, a guest house and educational services in the name of Badabon trust, for the welfare of the island people. Piya and Kanai, both well educated, professionals in their own right want to go back to the Sundarbans.

Nirmal Bose, school teacher, erstwhile revolutionary and an idealist is brought alive by the older narrative. We learn about the Sundarbans through his perspective and social consciousness, his knowledge of history, geography and geology. His diary jottings about the revolution that sweeps across the island of Morichjhapi are rooted in a real uprising among dispossessed people trying to give themselves, a life, a world, and an existence beyond that of the
mainland Indians. But the revolution does not succeed and the dispossessed remain so. Their quest to reinvent themselves is futile. So is Nirmal’s life long quest for a pure revolution.

Nirmal’s nephew is Kanai Dutt, who has a thriving business of translators and interpreters and it is to him that Nirmal leaves his diary. He comes out to be a supercilious individual yet he’s considerate and generous for his uncle and aunt. It is on behest of his aunt Nilima Bose that Kanai comes to the island in order to read and decipher Nirmal’s diary. In the process of doing so, his path crosses that of Piya’s, the all American scientist of Indian origin, who travels to the tide country in search of the Gangetic dolphin.

Piya is an efficient, knowledgeable researcher, keen on her research and yet is sensitive to the natives and the environment. Her quest for the river dolphin takes her along the meandering and labyrinthine waterways of this estuarine locale. In the process she comes across Fokir and other natives. Her relationship with the quiet and knowledgeable fisherman Fokir attains a sublimity incomprehensible to someone like Kanai. It is Fokir who sacrifices himself to save Piya from the climactic storm.

Piya’s findings about the river dolphin create a wonderful piece of research and deductive reasoning. But this work required the cooperation of Nilima, the diligent and pragmatic social worker. Her work has benefited the island’s people and created a safety shield against the vagaries of nature and life. It is with Badabon trust and the tide country that Piya and Kanai find their refuge after being buffeted by their adventures and experiences. Besides fulfilling her lifelong quest of studying and documenting the
Orcaella Brevirostris, Piya would be able to look after Fokir’s grieved family to whom she is indebted for her very life.

Of the half-dozen central characters, in *The Hungry Tide*, the most compelling goes by the name of the Sundarbans. The rapturous description of the Sundarbans in the very opening pages of the novel shows how crucial the setting is to the plot and how the novel is indebted for its charm to the waters and forests of the Sundarban islands. The plot of the novel is organised through acts and turns of nature and the book is very adequately divided into two sections *The Ebb* and *The Flood*. The story is also told in the unhurried prose to be expected in such a narrative involving natural currents. Charles Foran in his review of the novel says:

“Not since the sodden Fens of Graham Swift’s *Waterland* has a contemporary novel so abandoned itself to the kind of primordial literary landscape first conceived by Thomas Hardy more than a century ago. For the most part we fancy ourselves too light – footed and plugged in at the mercy of such 19th century determinism a self conception as pleasing as it is naïve.”

The two narratives that of the diary and that of the immediate experiences of Kanai, Fokir, Piya and Nilima – move parallel to each other, the former heightens the appreciation of the latter – each reaches towards the climax simultaneously wreaking havoc with the character’s minds, lives, feelings and aspects of human nature and strife; each plays a part in the larger scheme of things that the island symbolizes. In the words of Suchitra Dutta

“Characterisation and the minutiae of narrative technique take a back seat in this exquisitely
researched product from one of the most refined minds in serious fiction writing today. However, it is Amitav Ghosh’s erudition, researched sensibilities and his eye on the larger meaning of all human activity that makes the book, and its images so riveting, that make the mind read and rethink the realities of our environment and its various facets—human activity, human predisposition to ignore the other, and our environment. These are the facts we take for granted.”

The construction of the novel, besides chapters alternating between Piya and Kanai has many threads, involves Nirmal’s notebook, which is an important thread weaving the entire book. The events reported by Nirmal are essential in the newest history of the Sundarbans. The local myth of the goddess Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai, is also beautifully woven in the study. Nirmal, an admirer of Rilke, quotes his poem at every turn in his notebook which most of the time are not really relevant. Aleksandra Nita compares The Hungry Tide to James Michener’s novels:

“I could compare The Hungry Tide to James Michener’s novels, it is in the same way well researched (Ghosh is an anthropologist so his interest and knowledge of the natural sciences are profound) and concentrates on the specific region. Unlike Michener though, Ghosh tells one actual story and his book is a real novel, an attempt to span the centuries of history, so it is way less superficial and concentrated on his characters.”

His previous novel The Glass Palace tells the story of Burma, Malaya, the Indian National Army during World War II, in other words it is an epic tale of south-east Asia. The Hungry Tide in contrast, is limited to Sundarban islands and is geographically quite
narrow. Apart from various intertwining stories, characters, it has only two important plots. First is how the humans’ share a complex and dangerous ecosystem with animals (river dolphins and tigers) and the other is the plight of displaced refugees of the Morichjhapi islands who are literally butchered by the govt. Amardeep Singh writes in his review of the novel:

“The Hungry Tide is the work of a novelist at the peak of his powers. It is similar in style and tone to Ghosh’s overlooked masterpiece, The Glass Palace. But despite the similarities, smaller scope and more limited range of characters makes it feel somewhat more accessible than the earlier book. Ghosh has managed to turn The Hungry Tide into a veritable page turner – beautifully controlled and plotted while sacrificing none of his trademark historical sweep.”
NOTES AND REFERENCES


*All the subsequent references are from the same edition here after referred to with page numbers in parentheses within the chapter itself.

