

Fixity Amid Flux:
Aesthetics and Environmentalism
in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*
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Abstract: This essay explores the formal means by which Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), a novel set in the Sundarbans islands, articulates an environmental politics that reconciles social justice and ecological concerns. However, the novel's internal contradictions surface in its treatment of South Asian fisherman Fokir as an idealized peasant whose fixity is in marked contrast with the fluid subjectivities of the metropolitan characters. I argue that Fokir's idealization is a problematic way in which the novel mourns the loss of peasant culture in the context of neoliberalism's destruction of rural ecologies.

Keywords: rural, neoliberalism, dispossession, environmentalism, network narrative, fixity

I do think that writers of my generation have a duty to address issues of the environment. When we look at writers of the Thirties and Forties, we ask "where did you stand on fascism?" In the future they will look at us and say "where did you stand on the environment?" I think this is absolutely the fundamental question of our time.

Amitav Ghosh ("Amitav Ghosh in Conversation" 137)

In his October 2004 essay "Folly in the Sundarbans," novelist Amitav Ghosh opposes a corporate plan to make a beach resort and "eco-village" on the Sundarbans archipelago off the northeast coast of India.¹ The plan, proposed by the Sahara India Pariwar, was under review by the

West Bengal state government at the time. Ghosh criticizes the government's and capitalists' "folly" in thinking the Sundarbans could become a site for beach tourism. The region, he argues, is made up of "mud flats and mangrove islands," home to sharks and crocodiles, and particularly vulnerable to cyclones and tidal waves. It is therefore not only unfit for a beach resort but also extremely dangerous.² Ghosh also considers the potential ecological costs of the project: "The floating hotel and its satellite structures will . . . disgorge a large quantity of sewage and waste into the surrounding waters," which will in turn affect the population of crabs and fish as well as endangered species such as the Irrawaddy dolphin. Moreover, he suggests, while "[t]he Sahara Parivar³ claims that it will open 'virgin' areas to tourists . . . the islands of the Sundarbans are not 'virgin' in any sense." The Indian part of the Sundarbans alone "supports a population of close to four million people," many of whom have suffered eviction by the state government in the name of the very ecological concerns that it would ignore were it to permit the proposed plan. In 1979, West Bengal's government violently displaced tens of thousands of mostly Dalit or lower caste refugee settlers from the island of Morichjhapi in order to make room for a conservation project called Project Tiger. Ghosh warns that the business plan would exacerbate the injustices of the past by turning "large stretches of this very forest, soaked in the blood of evicted refugees, into a playground for the affluent."

According to Ramachandra Guha, Project Tiger—which Ghosh invokes as a precedent for the Sahara Pariwar plan—is a "network of parks hailed by the international conservation community as an outstanding success" and is "managed primarily for the benefit of rich tourists" (75). Indeed, funded by environmental groups like the World Wide Fund for Nature and backed by the Indian government, Project Tiger exemplifies Rob Nixon's argument that "[t]oo often in the global south, conservation, driven by powerful transnational nature NGOs, combines an anti-developmental rhetoric with the development of finite resources for the touristic few, thereby depleting vital resources for long-term residents" (18).⁴ Although the Sahara Pariwar plan is more explicitly profit-driven, it resembles Project Tiger in its use of conservation rhetoric to justify the takeover of land and natural resources. Both the business plan and state-

led conservation project directly or indirectly fuel an economic logic that David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession,” or

the continuation and proliferation of accumulation practices that Marx had treated as “primitive” or “original” during the rise of capitalism. These include the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations (as in Mexico and India in recent times); conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; [and] colonial, neo-colonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources). (43)

Harvey’s definition of “accumulation by dispossession” reveals the importance of control over land, natural resources, and “(indigenous) forms of production and consumption” for the survival of capitalism and maintenance of class power. He notes that the global expansion of a neoliberal free market agenda over the last forty years has meant an acceleration in the use of such methods of accumulation, which typically involve the displacement of poor and historically marginalized populations by private corporations such as Sahara India Pariwar. “The state,” adds Harvey, “with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting these processes” (43).

Neoliberal modes of accumulation by dispossession have resulted in the devastation of poor rural communities in India, as they have elsewhere in the world. In 1991, the Indian government adopted the Structural Adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which furthered the reach of private capital and diminished state support for farmers and peasantry. These policies ushered in trade liberalization and competition from the world market and led to a significant increase in indebtedness and poverty among India’s rural population. Small farmers have suffered the most; the group’s alarmingly high rate of suicide over the past two decades offers the harshest testament to the vulnerability of the rural poor.⁵ Others have been

forced to migrate to cities or flee their homes, leading to the shrinking of villages and rural culture more generally. Ghosh's revival of the memory of Morichjhapi is significant in this context because it prompts reflection on the continuities between prior and existing modes of accumulation by dispossession in rural India. Indeed, his voice joins many in the Indian public sphere protesting evictions justified in the name of modernization and development. Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy, and other activists involved in the Narmada Bachao Andolan have for many years brought attention to the atrocities committed and ecological devastation caused as the Indian government bulldozed its way into villages and pushed poor farmers and *adivasis* off their land in order to continue building dams along the Narmada river. Like the Narmada Valley activists, Ghosh invokes simultaneously anthropocentric and biocentric concerns when exposing the history of dispossession in the Sundarbans.

In his internationally acclaimed novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Ghosh explores the context and afterlife of the 1979 Morichjhapi evictions to which he alludes in "Folly in the Sundarbans." Whereas the majority of contemporary Anglophone fiction tends to focus on urban realities, Ghosh's novel recovers a forgotten moment of dispossession and grassroots resistance in the rural Sundarbans. Corporations like Sahara India Pariwar do not figure in the novel's plot, however; instead, by looking back on the state's role in Morichjhapi, Ghosh challenges an environmentalist politics that ignores human histories in areas deemed nature reserves. One of *The Hungry Tide's* characters, Kusum, dies as the state forcibly removes settlers like her in the name of tiger conservation. A Dalit refugee from Bangladesh, Kusum had chosen to settle on the Indian side of the Sundarbans because of her longstanding ties to the ecology and culture of the region that locals refer to as the "tide country." Her death while resisting eviction directly and indirectly impacts a host of characters, including her son, Fokir, who grows up to become a fisherman with strong ties to the region; her Marxist friend from Calcutta, Nirmal, who by the time of the Morichjhapi evictions is a longtime resident of the Sundarbans; and Nirmal's Delhi-based nephew, Kanai, who comes to the islands in the early 2000s at the same time as Piya, an Indian-American cetologist and environmentalist.

Kusum's story is an important node in what is essentially a "network narrative" that features the experiences of two generations of metropolitan and rural characters whose lives intersect in the Sundarbans. Frequently deployed within literary and cinematic narratives of contemporary globalization, the network form enables Ghosh to alternate between perspectives and to link characters across time periods and geographies.⁶ As the stories of these intersecting lives unfold, the reader realizes that the daily reshaping of the islands by the tides is a metaphor for the shifting internal states of Nirmal, Kanai, and Piya—the narrative's focalizers. Nirmal's political consciousness is altered by his contact with Morichjhapi settlers like Kusum; years later, Kanai undergoes a parallel transformation after reading his deceased uncle's account of Morichjhapi; and Piya's collaboration with Fokir teaches her to integrate social justice concerns into her biocentric environmentalism. Together, the transformations experienced by Nirmal, Kanai, and Piya convey Ghosh's vision of a radical politics that requires a change in perspective and, eventually, collaboration across class and cultural divides.

Although these transformations imply a view of human subjectivity as fluid and produced via interaction with the environment, the novel's network form occasionally exposes a curious underlying tension between fluidity and fixity as well as processes of transformation and idealization. This tension manifests itself most strikingly in the contrast between the metropolitan characters' evolving identities and Fokir's relatively stable subjectivity. If Kusum triggers Nirmal's shift in consciousness, then her son acts as a catalyst for the transformations of the next generation of metropolitan characters, Piya and Kanai. Whereas the metropolitans' internal transformations supply the dynamism that propels the plot's forward movement, the rural characters emerge as enablers of these transformations while themselves remaining relatively fixed. Fokir, in particular, functions as an anchor of sorts; his deep connection to the islands' geography makes him seem almost timeless and his eventual death in a storm ends the narrative. The fixity offered by his character in a text that not only thematizes subjective interconnectedness and transformation but also embodies these qualities in its network narrative speaks to some of *The Hungry Tide's* provocative internal contradic-

tions. What, then, are the implications of Ghosh's construction of this figure of fixity in a novel that imagines a more fluid relationship between environment and subjectivity for its metropolitan characters? In what follows, I consider the countervailing forces that shape the novel and reflect on the possibilities and constraints of its environmentally conscious critique of rural dispossession.

I. Networks, Connections, Affinities

Like Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2001), Ghosh's novel opens with the diasporic subject's arrival in South Asia and ends with the question of whether or not she will stay. Margaret Scanlan refers to this type of female protagonist as the "Westernized outsider" (305), while Antoinette Burton calls her "a stock character in postcolonial fiction: the Europe-or-America-returned professional woman struggling to maintain her hard-won status against all odds" (41). Moreover, in both *The Hungry Tide* and *Anil's Ghost* this Westernized woman engages in recurring ideological debates with one or more local men and is thereby compelled to shift her Euro-American thinking. Critics have read these ideological debates as the novels' mechanism for staging the conflict between "global" and "local" perspectives. John Thieme argues that "the returning woman protagonist[s]" in Ondaatje's and Ghosh's novels act as "metonyms for the hermeneutic problems that arise when, despite the cliché that globalization is shrinking the world, we try to read across cultures" (32). Indeed, as in *Anil's Ghost*, much of *The Hungry Tide* explores the tensions that result from Piya's attempt to interpret the geography and culture of the Sundarbans from her position as an outsider. Ghosh's novel, however, explores the outsider position of the Seattle-born cetologist researching the Gangetic dolphin as well as that of the former Calcutta resident, Nirmal, and his Delhi-based nephew who is a professional translator with little exposure to rural India. Patrick D. Murphy observes that over the course of the novel, Piya and the "national cosmopolitans" are "revealed at various points as having failed to hear and respect the systemic knowledge of local peoples" (163). Ultimately, as Emily Johansen notes, *The Hungry Tide* is critical "of models of the global that are applied from outside . . . and that assume that rural

places are waiting to become metropolitan rather than having cultures of their own" (12).

Thus, while the convention of the America-returned woman frames the novel's opening, the rest of it is structured as a "network narrative" that alternates between Piya's, Kanai's, and Nirmal's perspectives. David Bordwell uses the term "event frame" to refer to strategies deployed in cinematic network narratives to justify the convergence of multiple protagonists' stories. These strategies might include "a common fate or significant occasion" such as "a celebration and a weekend holiday" or even a disaster event (97). In postcolonial fiction like *Anil's Ghost* and *The Hungry Tide*, the return of a diasporic subject serves as the "event frame" that brings the novel's various characters in contact with one another. Bordwell also suggests that the "multi-protagonist plot" of films like *Babel* (2006) provides viewers with a "satisfying omniscience" (Bordwell 99). Similarly, in describing the "hyperlinking techniques" of David Mitchell's novel *Ghostwritten* (1999), Rita Barnard discusses "the cumulative effect . . . of a kind of synthetic or sutured omniscience that transcends any single individual's experience and spans *Ghostwritten's* disjunct mise-en-scènes. As one moves from one section to the next, it becomes possible to see a character first from the inside and then from the outside" (212). As *The Hungry Tide* moves between the perspectives of its three narrative focalizers, it allows readers a view of these characters "first from the inside and then from the outside." For example, the novel opens with a third person narrator channeling the haughty, self-satisfied Kanai as he observes Piya at a railway station. When Kanai settles down to read sections from his uncle's journal, the point of view shifts to Nirmal's first person description of the Sundarbans' history and ecology. The next chapter reverses Kanai's gaze by providing Piya's perspective of him, thereby introducing the key thematic of the gendered dynamic between the two and preparing readers to expect a "synthetic or sutured omniscience." As the narrative unfolds, this patterning of perspectives also reveals surprising affinities that link all three displaced urban subjects.

For instance, a sustained pattern of connection emerges between Nirmal, writing in the 1970s, and Piya, who encounters the islands in

the early 2000s. Chapters alternating between Nirmal's and Piya's experiences prompt readers to notice affinities between the Marxist intellectual and the marine biologist, and therefore between perspectives that are human-centered and those that focus on animals and non-human species. In one of his diary entries, Nirmal documents his observations about the islands' geography and its inhabitants' syncretic belief system:

I have seen confirmed many times, that 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 roundabout people can use to pass in many directions—from country to country and even between faiths and religions. (Ghosh, *Hungry* 247)

As a Marxist humanist, Nirmal is interested in how the mudbanks and rivers of the Sundarbans inform the hybrid religion and social life of the region. He sees the islands' cosmopolitan cultural life as an expression of its physical geography. In very similar language, but attending to the region's biodiversity, Piya recalls “a study which had shown that there were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe”:

This proliferation of aquatic life was thought to be the result of the unusually varied composition of the water itself. The waters of river and sea did not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta; rather, they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of fresh water running along the floors of some channels, creating variations of salinity and turbidity. These micro-environments were like balloons suspended in the water, and they had their own patterns of flow. . . . Each balloon was a floating biodome, filled with endemic fauna and flora, and as they made their

way through the waters, strings of predators followed trailing in their wake. This proliferation of environments was responsible for creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms—from gargantuan crocodiles to microscopic fish. (125)

Although Nirmal is more prone to read the local geography in human-centered terms, there are striking similarities in language and emphasis between his observations and Piya's. Nirmal is struck by the "proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow" (247), while Piya takes note of the "proliferation" of balloon-like "micro-environments . . . suspended in the water" that "had their own patterns of flow." Both, moreover, notice how these "small worlds" and "micro-environments"—of language and marine life—add collectively to the region's overall diversity while nevertheless retaining "their own patterns of flow." The parallel between Nirmal's and Piya's observations counters the assumed opposition between humanism and science and suggests that Piya's focus on the varied aquatic life can be seen as a complement to rather than in conflict with Nirmal's preoccupation with the Sundarbans' linguistic and cultural hybridity. Moreover, the narrative suggests that both humanist and natural scientist agree on the importance of local cultural and ecological diversity for global sustenance.

Beyond charting convergences in their perception of the Sundarbans geography, the novel parallels Nirmal's and Piya's trajectories through the unconventional romantic attachments they develop, to Kusum and Fokir respectively. In both cases of inter-class attachments, the novel suggests that a shared structure of feeling becomes the basis for inter-subjective identification, solidarity, and even love. A central incident in Nirmal's diary is his realization that the postcolonial Indian state is forcibly evicting Kusum and the refugee settlers of Morichjhapi in the name of ecological conservation. Nirmal is moved when he hears the protesters cry, "Who are we? We are the dispossessed" (254). He sees his own feelings as a displaced urban subject living in the Sundarbans reflected in these lamentations. Nirmal wonders:

Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong? And as I listened to the sound of those syllables, 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)

Nirmal is able to identify with the refugee settlers because of his lifelong struggle to belong and to find an effective political and artistic voice. He is originally from Calcutta and has felt only a tenuous sense of belonging to the Sundarbans. Moreover, although a lifelong Marxist, he has only ever dreamed of revolution. His attachment to Kusum develops in part because of his feeling that what he is witnessing in Morichjhapi is revolution in practice.

Years later, Piya identifies with Kusum's son based on their shared love of the water and passion for living a life "far from the familiar" (126). At times, though, Piya is puzzled by her ability to connect to this rural fisherman:

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. And nor was she the only one to remark on this: once when her glance happened accidentally to cross Fokir's, she saw something in his expression that told her that he too was amazed by the seamless intertwining of their pleasures and their purposes. (141)

Piya's imagining of a hidden affinity with Fokir is reinforced when she realizes that they share the experience of having lost their mothers at an early age. She senses in Fokir a familiar melancholia, and this allows her to connect to him despite class and cultural difference and a lack of verbal communication. In the end, as in Nirmal's case, Piya's sense of personal affinity with Fokir alters her political vision. Through Fokir, Piya learns to respect the concerns of Sundarbans inhabitants and this sensitizes her to the importance of understanding local culture for any global environmentalist politics.

In its emphasis on revealing the interconnectedness of social and ecological concerns as well as affinities forged across class and geographical divides, Ghosh's novel shares the tendency of some network theory and ecological discourse to suggest that, ultimately, "everything is connected with everything else" (O'Brien 182). Nirmal most clearly embodies this belief, and his perspective is privileged early in the novel. Kanai describes his uncle as a "historical materialist" (Ghosh, *Hungry* 282) for whom "everything which existed was interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature. He hunted down facts in the way a magpie collects shiny things. Yet when he strung them all together, somehow they did become stories—of a kind" (282–83). Nirmal's fascination with interconnected particularities resonates powerfully with the novel's practice of connecting characters' lives to one another as well as to the fragments of stories emanating from the islands' history and geography. Thus, through Nirmal's journal entries the reader learns about the tide patterns that remake the islands on a daily basis; the Morichjhapi settlers' utopian vision and uprising against state power; the various versions of the legend of Bon Bibi, the "woman of the forest" endowed with divine power to protect forest inhabitants; and Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scottish "monopolikapitalist" and dreamer who bought the islands from the British with the hope of establishing a utopian society where "people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences" (53).⁷ Although the novel occasionally reveals the limits of Nirmal's thinking, it nevertheless validates his drive to see connections between all beings across temporal, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries. The parallel between Nirmal's and Piya's trajectories is only one example of the novel's sustained effort at plotting interconnectedness.

This emphasis on tracing networks and linkages, however, finds its limit in the novel's portrayal of Fokir as an idealized figure whose fixed subjectivity sets him apart from the evolving metropolitan characters. Fokir's construction recalls debates within literary ecocriticism about the limitations of ecologically informed theories of connection. For instance, Susie O'Brien argues that ecological theories—like the triumphalist narratives of free-market globalization—can often celebrate the

idea of human connectedness while obscuring the material conditions that produce unequal access to resources. As a result, she suggests that while ecocriticism has, since the late 1970s, “brought literary criticism productively to bear on science and vice versa” (185), its “model of inclusivity and interconnectedness” (186), borrowed from the field of ecology, has also limited its political efficacy. In the next section, I build on O’Brien’s critique and explore some of the contradictions that underlie *The Hungry Tide*’s “model of inclusivity and interconnectedness,” particularly the tension between the metropolitan characters’ fluid subjectivities and Fokir’s relatively stable self.

II. Fixity Amid Flux

The Sundarbans archipelago functions in *The Hungry Tide* as both setting and character and its ecology and tidal patterns inspire the novel’s contemplation of the relationship between human beings and their environments. In his journal entries, Nirmal considers the implications of the region’s unique geography:

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.

When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. (7)

These lines, which appear early in the novel, set up Nirmal’s voice as one that is authoritative and recognizes the wisdom of attending to nature’s patterns. As Nirmal points out, in the tide country it is nature—rather than the forces of modernization—that speeds up the pace of life and makes boundaries appear or disappear. The constant reshaping of the islands by the currents gives new meaning to the problems of flux and

instability that are typically said to accompany modernity. Such moments in the novel prompt the reader to reflect on the folly of human attempts to define territorial borders. Like Ghosh's celebrated novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Hungry Tide* exposes the negative consequences of boundary-making. In *The Hungry Tide*, however, Ghosh's canvas is broader: he explores how boundaries destroy not only because of the parochialism of the nation-state and its perpetuation of communalism and class/caste-based violence but also because of its myopic development agenda that ignores nature's patterns and the vital and fluid relationship between humans and their surroundings.

Further moments of reflection in Nirmal's diary foreground the novel's concern with transformation as a force that challenges human tendencies to cling to static boundaries or fixed identities: "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" (Ghosh, *Hungry* 224). Nirmal has these thoughts as he undergoes a personal transformation from watching generationally oppressed Dalit settlers enact their vision of an egalitarian society in Morichjhapi. Not long before her tragic death, Kusum describes how the police would bombard their settler community with announcements that "[t]his island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is 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).⁸ Kusum wonders how their living in Morichjhapi could possibly be a crime when this was how "humans have always lived—by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil" (262). The geographical, political, and internal transformations that Nirmal witnesses and experiences eventually enable him to overcome writer's block and put pen to paper. In the process, Kusum becomes Nirmal's muse and romantic interest.

Years later, Piya and Kanai undergo similar internal transformations and Kusum's son, Fokir, serves as inspiration and catalyst. Piya comes to rely on Fokir's vast knowledge of the river for her cetological research and develops amorous feelings for him. She also romanticizes

his decision to remain a fisherman despite the increasing difficulty of his way of life. Her witnessing of Fokir's participation in a tiger killing is, however, the turning point in her consciousness. She had assumed that, because of their shared love of nature, Fokir would be opposed to the killing. Eventually, Piya comes to appreciate Fokir's reality as a peasant and begins to notice the extent to which his values and mode of relating to nature are different than hers. Kanai, playing the role of the relatively knowledgeable national cosmopolitan (like Sarath in *Anil's Ghost*), pushes Piya to reevaluate her thinking following the tiger killing:

‘[I]t 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. But just ask yourself whether this would be allowed to happen anywhere else? There are more tigers living in America, in captivity, than there are in all of India—what do you think would happen if they started killing human beings?’ (301)

Despite his urban arrogance, Kanai seems more aware than Piya of how class and transnational power relations inform the project of tiger conservation. Over time, Piya begins to see that Kanai is right. Eventually, however, her bond with Fokir propels the cetologist to care about the economic and cultural context of local inhabitants in her Western, science-driven environmental activism. Even after his death, Fokir's prior transfer of local geographical knowledge—which Piya saves in her GPS device—is a crucial factor in this otherwise rootless Indian-American woman's gaining both a reason to stay behind in the Sundarbans and a sense of belonging. In the novel's epilogue, Piya declares her intention to continue her cetological research but this time in close collaboration with the local community. Fokir, in other words, plays a vital role in enabling a socially responsible environmentalist politics to take root in the Sundarbans.

Meanwhile, Kanai's exposure to Fokir forces him to reevaluate his privilege as an urban, middle class Indian man. Kanai's transformation is triggered when Fokir dares Kanai to go to an island where he had earlier spotted tiger prints. The narrator remarks that "it was as though in stepping on the island, the authority of their positions had been suddenly reversed" (325). Kanai, the townsman, is helpless and at Fokir's mercy. As Kanai angrily confronts Fokir and begins to see himself through the latter's perspective, he realizes the ways in which he is inevitably attached to a social class and thereby to a history of oppression that has not only dehumanized men like Fokir but also destroyed the Sundarbans' ecological balance. This exchange with Fokir triggers Kanai's transformation. The novel's epilogue suggests that Kanai, too, will move closer to the Sundarbans and put his translation skills to use by relaying his newfound regional awareness to a global audience.⁹

In her insightful study of the village in South Asian literatures, Anupama Mohan proposes that novels such as *The Hungry Tide* and *Anil's Ghost* "are remarkably different from the essentializingly utopian or dystopian ways in which much twentieth-century literature has cast the South Asian village" (181). She describes the village in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) as a "homotopia" or "largely static space where everyone is putatively the same (Hindu, Sanskritized)" (177). "In contrast to *Kanthapura*," Mohan writes, "the island villages that make up the Sundarbans in Ghosh's novel are constituted of settlers and refugees, and the constantly changing demographic creates continual changes in registers of social interaction and meaning" (177). Moreover, she contends, "Ghosh ties up patterns of human migration with the rhythms of the waters and the cycles of natural life, thus suggesting that there is something elementally *dynamic* about the construction of such a rural collectivity" (177; emphasis in original). Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, Mohan argues that *The Hungry Tide* is a "heterotopic novel" (172) that not only "creat[es] in the rural a critique of national utopia but also . . . invest[s] in it a capacity to counter the bureaucratisms of official policy with local and subaltern forms of ecologically sustainable civic agency" (174). The novel's ending, marked by Piya's and Kanai's decisions to deepen their commitment to the

Sundarbans, highlights Mohan's point that the novel grants "the rural" the political capacity to offer an alternative to state and official policy. What is also striking about the ending, however, is the relative subordination of "local and subaltern" characters' agency to that of the metropolitan subjects. Fokir dies in a storm while trying to protect Piya, and it is she and Kanai—rather than a dynamic "rural collectivity"—that possess the local knowledge as well as global connections through which to create social change. Although the novel recalls the active efforts and grassroots struggle of a prior generation of Sundarbans inhabitants, contemporary rural and subaltern characters like Fokir play only supporting roles in remaking their environment.

Throughout the novel, in fact, "gifts" of subaltern knowledge perform the vital function of engendering the transformation of metropolitan subjects and ensuring that they deploy their agency in socially responsible ways. The extent of Kanai's transformation, for example, first becomes visible when he translates for Piya the local Bon Bibi legend that the natives, including Fokir, sang, recited, and performed. When Piya is on the boat with Fokir, she hears the fisherman sing a song that is later revealed to be the story of Bon Bibi. This story/song plays a vital part in the love triangle that forms between Piya, Fokir, and Kanai. Once he realizes his inability to win Piya's heart, the chastened Kanai gives Piya the parting gift of a written version of the song she heard but could not understand. In the letter that accompanies his gift, Kanai writes: "[T]his was the story which gave this land its life. . . . This is my gift to you, this story that is also a song, these words that are a part of Fokir" (Ghosh, *Hungry* 354). Gifts like the song that Kanai translates for Piya or the geographical information that Fokir leaves behind prior to his tragic death contribute to the preservation of local cultural knowledge and expertise. This preservation, however, entails a containment and transfer of knowledge and expertise to the surviving metropolitan subjects.

Since the metropolitan subjects do not appropriate or claim ownership over the knowledge they receive, it is possible to see these gifts as part of Ghosh's vision of a politics of solidarity and collaboration across class and geographical divides. As Neil Lazarus argues, Ghosh is aware of the danger of appropriation and therefore does not give us "unmedi-

ated access” to Fokir’s thoughts and knowledge; nevertheless, the novel also conveys the possibility for “deep-seated affinity and community” across social divides (149). As Lazarus writes, “Ghosh’s self-conscious use here, as elsewhere in his work, of sentimentality and sensationalism (the novel’s very title is significant in this respect), of romance and narrative suspense, all point . . . towards the idea . . . of deep-seated affinity and community, across and athwart the social division of labour” (149). Ashley Dawson also finds the novel’s emphasis on cross-class connection noteworthy and even sees it as complementing the solidarity-building work of rural landless people’s movements: “[I]f contemporary landless people’s movements are advancing radical democratic strategies that hinge on the rejection of authoritarian social relations, *The Hungry Tide* deploys narrative to involve its readers in a complementary process of empathy and affiliation with the marginalized” (248). Lazarus and Dawson are no doubt right to underscore Ghosh’s investment in political possibilities born out of cross-class and empathy-based affiliation. However, the construction of *The Hungry Tide*’s primary rural character, Fokir, as a rooted and unchanging peasant complicates its politics of solidarity. Fokir’s fixity is in marked contrast with the metropolitans’ fluid, dynamic subjectivities.

While Fokir acts as catalyst for the transformations of Piya and Kanai, he remains unchanged and exceptional for his longstanding knowledge of and connection to the region’s geography. Observing Fokir as a child, Horen mentions that “the river is in his veins” (Ghosh, *Hungry* 245). Piya echoes this sentiment years later when she notes about the adult Fokir that “[i]t’s like he’s always watching the water—even without being aware of it. I’ve worked with many experienced fishermen before but I’ve never met anyone with such an incredible instinct: it’s as if he can see right into the river’s heart” (267). Over the course of their relationship, Piya learns to rely on Fokir’s instinctive, embodied wisdom. She also reflects on the human connection to nature while observing Fokir. When watching him fish, for instance, “Piya was awestruck. Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals? She could not think of one” (169). Through Piya’s marveling at Fokir, the novel marvels at his con-

nection to a simpler time in which human beings' closeness to—and dependence on—nature was clearly visible. Fokir's death in a storm further reinforces this emphasis on his affinity with his natural environment.

Fokir's connection to nature is part of his overall construction as an innocent who presents a refreshing alternative to the materialism and pragmatism of modern life. Kanai is struck by Fokir's declaration that he sees his mother everywhere: "The phrasing of this was simple to the point of being childlike. . . . There was something about him that was utterly unformed, and it was this very quality that drew [Moyna, Fokir's wife] to him: she craved it in the same way that a potter's hands might crave the resistance of unshaped clay" (319). Kanai tries to understand why the worldly, upwardly mobile, and literate Moyna would choose to be married to the illiterate and "unformed" Fokir who insists on continuing his life as a fisherman despite the impossibility of making a living in this manner. Although Moyna occasionally pushes back against Kanai's identification with (what he imagines are) her motives and desires, and although the reader learns to take Kanai's urban perspective with a grain of salt, his perception of Fokir's childlike innocence is not particularly challenged elsewhere in the novel. Through much of the narrative, Fokir rarely speaks but often sings verses from the Bon Bibi legend. From Nirmal's diary, we gather that the legend is "all in his head," as Kusum had told him the story so many times as a child "that these words have become a part of him" (248). Piya appreciates her wordless exchanges with the adult Fokir. In response to Fokir's singing, she ruminates that "[t]here was a suggestion of grief in it that unsettled and disturbed her. . . . She would have liked to know what he was singing about and what the lyrics meant—but she knew too that a river of words would not be able to tell her exactly what made the song sound as it did right then, in that place" (99). In the end, Piya believes that the language barrier between them makes for a special relationship that is unlike any other in her life.

Fokir's treatment in the novel (including his eventual death) resonates with the representation of Velutha, an "untouchable" with whom the relatively privileged Ammu has an affair in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Like Fokir, Velutha possesses a special connection to the river that runs

through the village of Ayemenem where the novel is set. And like Fokir, Velutha dies tragically—though at the hands of casteist police rather than because of a natural disaster. Before they first make love, Ammu watches Velutha with a sense of awe: “As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world [his feet] stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it” (Roy 333–34). If Fokir is presented as having the “river in his veins” and the unique capacity to see “right into the river’s heart,” then Velutha is described as moving with a special ease through the water, mud, trees, fish, and stars. Velutha’s perceived grounding in his environment becomes especially significant given how the river changes over time, eventually smelling of “shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans” (13). Following his death and in the context of Ayemenem’s increasing destruction by the tourism industry, Velutha emerges as a symbol of lost wholeness.¹⁰ Like *The God of Small Things*, *The Hungry Tide* responds to the devastation of rural ecology and culture by depicting Fokir as bearing an organic and stable connection to the natural world.

Fokir’s construction resonates with representations of indigenous inhabitants within some strains of environmentalist discourse and activism. Such representations have elicited critique, particularly from postcolonial environmentalists. Guha, for instance, criticizes the trend in American environmentalism known as “deep ecology,” particularly its problematic commitment to an “unspoiled wilderness” as well as its construction of “primal” peoples from Eastern cultures as the bearers of deep ecological knowledge. Guha notes that

[m]any agricultural communities do have a sophisticated knowledge of the natural environment that may be equal (and sometimes surpass) codified “scientific” knowledge; yet, the elaboration of such traditional ecological knowledge (in both material and spiritual contexts) can hardly be said to rest on a mystical affinity with nature of a deep ecological kind. (77)

Through its deliberate paralleling of Piya’s and Nirmal’s perspectives as well as its critique of Piya’s thinking, *The Hungry Tide* challenges the sort

of biocentric environmentalism popularized by trends such as deep ecology. Yet even as it opposes Piya's privileging of conservation on deep ecological grounds, the novel—at least in its construction of Fokir—is also informed by deep ecology's view of peasant communities as possessing prescientific knowledge and a “mystical affinity with nature.” This construction treats Fokir's subjectivity as fixed, timeless, and outside of history, thereby weakening the novel's critique of the social consequences of past and ongoing practices of rural dispossession.

A few instances in the novel suggest that Fokir is doubly displaced: first, along with his mother, from Morichjhapi, and later by the culture of big fishing that makes his way of life increasingly unsustainable and his ties to the land increasingly fraught. At one point, Moyna speaks of the new nylon nets used by the fishing companies to catch tiger prawns: “The nets are so fine,” she says, “that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well” (134). The new equipment depletes the diversity of the river's marine life and makes fishermen like Fokir “disposable.” Fokir's condition, as implied in these moments, testifies to what Nixon describes as a

more radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable. . . . Such a threat entails being simultaneously immobilized and moved out of one's living knowledge as one's place loses its life-sustaining features. What does it mean for people declared disposable by some “new” economy to find themselves existing out of place in place, as against the odds, they seek to slow the ecological assaults on inhabitable possibility? (19)

In some of its most interesting moments—such as when Fokir resists his wife's attempts to make him abandon fishing—*The Hungry Tide* comments on the fisherman's “existing out of place in place” within the “new” economies of contemporary globalization. However, these brief moments that suggest Fokir's social and economic context are in tension with the novel's overwhelming tendency to represent him as an innocent

who possesses a stable, mystical connection to nature. Fokir's death at the novel's end resolves this underlying tension but only by reinforcing his position as an idealized figure and foreclosing possibilities for further development of his character.

Victor Li argues that Fokir is constructed as the idealized subaltern of much of Subaltern Studies theory who dies so that the subaltern ideal can be preserved. In the process, Li argues, “[t]he complexities of subaltern existence fall away before the novel’s project of aesthetic idealization in which a chosen subaltern, especially in death, becomes for the reader a symbol of utopian desire and hope” (288). Building on both Li and Nixon, I would add that what “fall[s] away before the novel’s project of aesthetic idealization” is deeper engagement with the dispossession that, as the novel fleetingly suggests, characterizes the “new” rural economy of the Sundarbans and shapes Fokir’s subjectivity. Ghosh’s construction of Fokir as a timeless figure of fixity obscures insight into how the destabilizing social and economic forces of the present affect rural inhabitants; moreover, this construction denies the rural character the agency to respond to these forces (except on a symbolic level). Thus, although *The Hungry Tide* usefully recalls a history of eviction and popular resistance at a time when neoliberalism normalizes predatory capitalism, the relative flatness of its depiction of contemporary rural inhabitants complicates its articulation of a solidarity-based environmentalism that integrates social justice and ecological concerns.

III. The Idealized Rural

What is at stake in the novel’s construction of this figure who appears as a still point in a changing world—this man who is almost childlike in his simplicity and sees the ghost of his mother everywhere? In an interview with Alessandro Vescovi following the Pordenonelegge literary festival, Ghosh speaks about his experience writing *The Hungry Tide*:

What I liked most about writing *The Hungry Tide* was just spending time in the Sundarbans. With those people it was so beautiful to hear the language around me all the time and to hear the songs. It was such a wonderful thing to experience

the simplicity of that life, because people like me, in Bengal, we all come from a peasant background. And I certainly feel a very deep sense of connection with that sort of life. . . . If I was to write ten books like *The Hungry Tide*, it would never do justice to the absolute magic of being there at night with the tide changing, under the moon, and to hear the tiger nearby. And you know, the quality of one's interaction with the fishermen—there is something so lovely in it, something so beautiful about the texture. I suppose you can experience that if you go to some rural part of Italy. It is something you cannot experience as a tourist. It is because I am Bengali, because I am of a certain age that they can interact like that with me. With that sort of simplicity and openness and a kind of trust. (140)

Ghosh emerges as a global citizen—a former professor in New Delhi and the United States and a socially and environmentally conscious writer who finds an audience even in non-English speaking contexts like Italy. He speaks as an urban cosmopolitan who can appreciate the “simplicity” of life in the rural Sundarbans because of his “peasant background” and “deep connection” to peasant life. Ghosh's description of the pleasures of being with “those people” and of “hear[ing] the language around [him] all the time,” illuminates his separation from rural life and desire to reconnect with what he sees as his heritage. It is interesting that he attributes the beautiful “quality” and “texture” of his interaction with the Sundarbans fishermen to his position as a Bengali “of a certain age.” Ghosh suggests that the fishermen are able to relate to him “[w]ith that sort of simplicity and openness and a kind of trust” (140) not only because he is Bengali but also because he belongs to a generation that still feels connected to its peasant roots. Ghosh's words subtly imply an awareness of change as well as loss. One senses that this open, trusting relationship between fishermen and urban men like him is precious to Ghosh in part because he sees it at risk of being challenged or eroded.

The Hungry Tide registers a similar awareness of change as well as attentiveness to the various dimensions of loss incurred as a result of ongoing processes of rural transformation and dispossession. This sense of

loss animates episodes such as the one in which Piya hears Fokir sing the legend of Bon Bibi when she is on the boat with him at night. Nirmal narrates his account of Morichjhapi out of a fear of the skillfulness of “the tide country . . . in silting over its past” (69). His urge to narrate his account of Morichjhapi emerges from his need to leave behind a “trace, some hold upon the memory of the world” (69). Fokir’s construction as a figure of fixity expresses a related fear that underlies the novel: the fear of rural culture being eclipsed by the forces of capitalist globalization and our subsequent desire to (like Nirmal) place “some hold upon the memory of the world.” As discussed, however, Fokir’s idealization complicates the novel’s critique of past and present forms of rural dispossession. Although the text gestures toward his longstanding sense of alienation—he is a child of migrants who is further marginalized within the contemporary economy—his character is mostly contained within the trope of the “authentic” peasant. During his lifetime Fokir provokes Piya and Kanai to change; after his death, his local knowledge is preserved in the form of “gifts” received by the metropolitan characters.

I should clarify that my problem is not with idealization per se, nor am I arguing that Fokir ought necessarily, like the metropolitan characters, to undergo an internal transformation. Rather, my concern lies with how, as a figure of fixity, Fokir reflects our collective desire to preserve a stable idea of peasant life at a moment when rural ecologies are in flux as a result of neoliberal practices of accumulation by dispossession. Mourning a vanishing rural ideal through this figure is problematic in the sense that it contributes to preserving a paternalism that has for so long characterized the relationship between rural and urban. Indeed, Fokir’s idealization reinforces a political vision in which resistance overwhelmingly depends on the transformation of metropolitan subjects and only indirectly on the agency of rural populations.

Notes

- 1 The Sundarbans National Park—a UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site—spreads across India and Bangladesh. Jalais observes that the Sundarbans is a unique ecosystem in that, “[a]part from providing home to an important number of rare and endangered flora and fauna, it is the only mangrove forest in the world inhabited by tigers” (“Sundarbans” 2).

- 2 Ghosh describes the grandiose project as envisioned by the Sahara India Pariwar business:

[T]he project will include many different kinds of accommodation, including '5-star floating hotels, high-speed boathouses, land-based huts, luxury cottages' and an 'eco-village.' Landing jetties are to be built and the project is to be serviced by hovercraft and helicopters. 'Exclusive, beautiful virgin beaches' are to be created and hundreds of kilometres of waterways are to be developed. The facilities will include 'a casino, spa, health, shopping and meditation centres, restaurant complexes and a mini golf course', and tourists will be offered a choice of 'aqua sports' including scuba diving. The total cost of the project will be somewhere in the region of six billion rupees (155 million US dollars). ("Folly")

- 3 In the original essay in *Outlook India*, Ghosh refers to the business as "Sahara Parivar."

- 4 Guha notes that

[t]he initial impetus for setting up parks for the tiger and other large mammals such as the rhinoceros and elephant came from two social groups, first, a class of ex-hunters turned conservationists belonging mostly to the declining Indian feudal elite and second, representatives of international agencies, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), seeking to transplant the American system of national parks onto Indian soil. (75)

- 5 For more on peasant indebtedness and farmer suicides in post-liberalization India, see Sridhar and Bannerjee.

- 6 According to Jagoda, "[n]etwork aesthetics are not merely an analytic that informs a wide range of contemporary theory, fiction, film, and digital media, but a necessary corollary to an era in which interconnection has become a dominant architectural mode, a multivalent metaphor, and even a weapon [as in the case of terrorist networks]" (66).

- 7 For an anthropological approach to life and culture in the Sundarbans, including an account of the inhabitants' relationship with Bon Bibi, see Jalais' *Forest of Tigers*.

- 8 For more on the massacre—justified in the name of tiger conservation—see Jalais' "Dwelling" and Mallick.

- 9 Many have criticized the ending of *The Hungry Tide*. In a review for *The Nation*, Freudenberg argues that a "tendency to be overly neat is most jarring in the book's epilogue, where Ghosh can't help tying up every loose end. The dead are memorialized, the characters are reunited and Kanai's wonderfully prickly Aunt Nilima offers a final observation worthy of Walt Disney" (27). Li points to the troubling political implications of this "overly neat" ending: "Both Kusum and Fokir, as 'authentic' subalterns who resist and remain heterogenous to hegem-

onic modernity, die so that their stories can be recounted and memorialized by literate, modern characters like Nirmal, Kanai and Piya” (291). It is the ending’s political implications—rather than its aesthetic limitations—with which my article is more concerned.

- 10 Li notes that subaltern characters in novels like *The Hungry Tide* and Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, which explicitly stage inter-class and inter-caste romances, eventually die. “But,” Li asks, “what is the cost of this sacrifice? Why should death be the price for idealization? Is there a danger that the subaltern’s death is made to serve purposes other than the subaltern’s own?” (291). My reading complements Li’s, though my essay focuses on the death of the subaltern as well as the fixity that characterizes his or her construction. Moreover, I am interested in the extent to which Fokir’s construction as a rooted, unchanging character takes the place of deeper engagement with neoliberalism’s destruction of rural India and the effects of this destruction on rural subjectivities.

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