**Fixity amid Flux: Aesthetics and Environmentalism in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide***

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[[1]](#endnote-1)

In his October 2004 essay, “Folly in the Sundarbans,” novelist Amitav Ghosh opposes a plan to make a beach resort and ‘eco-village’ in the Sundarbans archipelago off the north-east coast of India. [[2]](#endnote-2) Proposed by the Sahara Parivar business, the plan was under review by the West Bengal state government at the time Ghosh wrote his essay. Ghosh exposes the government’s and the capitalists’ “folly” in thinking the Sundarbans could become a site for beach tourism. This, he argues, is a region 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.[[3]](#endnote-3) Then, considering the potential ecological costs of the project, Ghosh writes: “The floating hotel and its satellite structures will … disgorge a large quantity of sewage and waste into the surrounding waters,” which in turn would affect the population of crabs and fish as well as endangered species such as the Irrawaddy Dolphin. Moreover, while “The Sahara Parivar 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”—much of which has suffered eviction at the hands of the state government in the name of the very ecological concerns that it would be ignoring 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 Sahara Parivar plan would only 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.”

Project Tiger— which Ghosh invokes as precedent — is a “network of parks hailed by the international conservation community as an outstanding success” and, according to Ramachandra Guha, “managed primarily for the benefit of rich tourists” (75). Funded by environmental groups like the Worldwide Fund for Nature, and backed by the Indian government, the project exemplifies how, as Rob Nixon puts it, “Too often in the global south, conservation, driven by powerful transnational nature NGOs, combines an antidevelopmental rhetoric with the development of finite resources for the touristic few, thereby depleting vital resources for long-term residents” (18). [[4]](#endnote-4) Although more explicitly profit-driven, the Sahara Parivar’s business plan resembles Project Tiger in its use of conservation rhetoric to justify takeover of land and natural resources. What the business plan and state-led conservation project have in common is that they 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, neocolonial 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 points out that the global expansion of a neoliberal, free market agenda over the last forty years has meant acceleration in the use of such methods of accumulation, typically involving displacement by private corporations (like the Sahara Parivar) of poor and historically marginalized populations. “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 entailed the devastation of poor rural communities in India, as elsewhere in the world. In 1991 the Indian government adopted the Structural Adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, furthering the reach of private capital and diminishing state support for farmers and peasantry. Ushering in trade liberalization and competition from the world market, these policies have led to a significant increase in indebtedness and poverty among India’s rural population. Small farmers are the worst affected, the alarmingly high rate of suicides among this group offering the harshest testament to the vulnerability of the rural poor.[[5]](#endnote-5) Others continue to be forced to migrate to cities or to 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. His voice, in fact, joins many within the Indian public sphere protesting evictions justified in the name of modernization and development. For instance, Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy, and others 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 that dam building along the Narmada river could continue. Like the Narmada Valley activists, Ghosh invokes simultaneously anthropocentric and bio-centric 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 has focused on urban life, Ghosh’s novel invests in the recovery of a forgotten moment of dispossession and grassroots resistance in the rural Sundarbans. Corporations like the Sahara Parivar do not figure in the novel’s plot, however; instead, it is by looking back at the state’s role in Morichjhapi that Ghosh challenges an environmentalist politics that ignores human histories within areas that are 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 in 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 impacts directly or indirectly 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 had been a long time resident of the Sundarbans; and Nirmal’s Delhi-based nephew, Kanai, who comes to the islands in the early 2000s alongside the Indian-American cetologist and environmentalist, Piya.

Kusum’s story is an important node within what is essentially a “network narrative” featuring the experiences of two generations of metropolitan and rural characters whose lives intersect in the Sundarbans. Often seen as the quintessential narrative mode of contemporary globalization, the network form enables Ghosh to alternate between perspectives and to link characters across time periods and geographies.[[6]](#endnote-6) As the stories of these intersecting lives unfold, we realize that the daily reshaping of the islands by the tides serves as a metaphor for the shifting internal states of Nirmal, Kanai, and Piya— the narrative’s focalizers. Nirmal’s political consciousness is altered from 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 bring social justice concerns to her bio-centric environmentalism. Together, the transformations experienced by Nirmal, Kanai, and Piya convey Ghosh’s vision of a radical politics—one that requires subjective change and, eventually, collaboration across class and cultural divides.

Although these transformations imply a view of human subjectivity as fluid and produced in interaction with the environment, the novel’s network form occasionally exposes a curious underlying tension between fluidity and fixity, and between processes of transformation on the one hand and idealization on the other. This tension manifests itself most strikingly in the contrast between the metropolitan characters’ evolving identities and the fisherman Fokir’s relatively stable subjectivity. If Kusum triggers Nirmal’s shift in consciousness, then her son Fokir acts as 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 figures of relative fixity. Fokir in particular functions as an anchor of sorts, his deep connection to the islands’ geography making him seem almost timeless and his eventual death in a storm bringing the narrative to its end. The fixity offered by Fokir’s character in a narrative that not only thematizes subjective interconnectedness and transformation but also embodies these qualities in its network narrative speaks to some of the provocative internal contradictions of *The Hungry Tide*. What are the implications of Ghosh’s construction of this figure of fixity within a novel that imagines a more fluid relationship between environment and subjectivity for its metropolitan characters? In what follows, I explore how the aesthetic strategies at work in Ghosh’s novel both advance and limit its environmentalism. By considering the countervailing forces shaping *The Hungry Tide*, I reflect on the possibilities and constraints of Ghosh’s novelistic critique of rural dispossession.

NETWORKS, CONNECTIONS, AFFINITIES

Derived from a sub-genre of contemporary postcolonial fiction, the return “home” of an Indian-American woman, Piya, supplies the “event frame” that brings together *The Hungry Tide*’s web of perspectives and stories.[[7]](#endnote-7) As is the case with, Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2001), for instance, 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 woman 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” (Burton 41). Moreover, in *The Hungry Tide*, as in *Anil’s Ghost*, this Westernized woman engages in recurring ideological debates with one or more local males 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 emerge out of Piya’s status as an outsider attempting to interpret the geography and culture of the Sundarbans. What is interesting about Ghosh’s novel, however, is that it explores the outsider position of not only the Seattle-born cetologist researching the Gangetic dolphin, but also the former Calcutta resident, Nirmal, and his Delhi-based nephew who is a professional translator with little exposure to rural India. Through the course of the novel, as Patrick D. Murphy points out, not only Piya but also the “national cosmopolitans”—Nirmal and Kanai—are “revealed at various points as having failed to hear and respect the systemic knowledge of local peoples” (163). Ultimately, as Emily Johansen notes, Ghosh’s novel 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 the perspectives of Piya, Kanai, and Nirmal. Speaking of the use of networks as a structuring principle within contemporary fiction, David Bordwell suggests that the “multi-protagonist plot” of films like *Babel* (Dir. Alexandro Gonzales Inarritu 2006) provides viewers with a “satisfying omniscience” (99). Similarly, Rita Barnard—describing the “hyperlinking techniques” of David Mitchell’s novel *Ghostwritten* (1999)—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 us a view of these characters “first from the inside and then from the outside.” For instance, 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 then reverses Kanai’s gaze by giving us Piya’s perspective of him, thereby introducing as a key thematic the gendered dynamic between the two and preparing the reader 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 to one another.

For instance, a sustained pattern of connections emerges between Nirmal, writing in the 1970s, and Piya, encountering the islands in the early 2000s. Chapters alternating between Nirmal’s and Piya’s experiences prompt the reader to notice affinities between the Marxist intellectual and the marine biologist —and therefore between perspectives that are human-centered and those focused on animals and non-human species. In one of his diary entries Nirmal makes the following observation 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, meeting not just of many rivers, but a circular roundabout people can use to pass in many directions—from country to country and between faiths and religions (267).

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 one that attends to the region’s bio-diversity, 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 life balloons suspended in the water, and they had their own patterns of flow…. This proliferation of environments was responsible for creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms—from gargantuan crocodiles to microscopic fish” (131).

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. If Nirmal is struck by the “proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow” (267), Piya takes note of the “proliferation” of “micro- environments…suspended in the water” that “had their own patterns of flow” (131). 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” (131). The parallel between Nirmal’s and Piya’s observations counters the assumed opposition between humanism and science, suggesting that, for Ghosh, Piya’s focus on the varied aquatic life need not be seen in opposition to but rather alongside Nirmal’s preoccupation with the Sundarbans’ linguistic and cultural hybridity. Moreover, Ghosh 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 each develop—to Kusum and Fokir respectively. In both cases of inter-class attachments, thenovel 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 was forcibly evicting Kusum and the refugee settlers of Morichjhapi in the name of ecological conservation. Nirmal is moved when he hears the protesters’ cry out, “‘Who are we? We are the dispossessed,’”—as he sees reflected in these cries his own feelings as a displaced urban subject living in the Sundarbans. 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. Formerly from Calcutta, Nirmal felt only a tenuous sense of belonging to the Sundarbans. Moreover, although a lifelong Marxist, he had only ever dreamed of revolution. His attachment to Kusum develops in part out of his feeling that what he was witnessing in Morichjhapi was revolution in practice.

Years later, Piya identifies with Kusum’s son based on their shared love for the water and passion for living a life “far from the familiar” (126). At moments, 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 imagination of a hidden affinity with Fokir is reinforced when she realizes as well 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 despite the lack of verbal communication between them. In the end, as in Nirmal’s case, Piya’s sense of affinity with Fokir alters her political vision and sensitizes her to the importance of understanding local culture for any broader, global, 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 with some network theory and ecological discourse a tendency 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 on in the novel. Kanai describes his uncle as a “historical materialist,” one 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” (283). Nirmal’s fascination with interconnected particularities resonates powerfully with the novel’s own practice of connecting characters’ lives to one another as well as to 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; or about 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); or about the Morichjhapi settlers’ utopian vision and uprising against state power; or about the various versions of the legend of Bon Bibi, the “woman of the forest” endowed with divine power to protect forest inhabitants. [[8]](#endnote-8) 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 created between Nirmal’s and Piya’s trajectories is hence only one example of the novel’s sustained effort at plotting interconnectedness.

Speaking of the rise of ecocriticism in the field of literary studies, Susie O’Brien suggests that while this mode of analysis 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. For this ecological model of interconnectedness—like the triumphalist narratives of free-market globalization— can celebrate the idea of human connection while obscuring the material conditions that produce unequal access to resources. In the next section, I will explore some of the contradictions that underlie *The Hungry Tide*’s “model of inclusivity and interconnectedness”— particularly the tension between the metropolitan characters’ fluid and evolving subjectivities and Fokir’s relatively stable self.

FIXITY AMID FLUX

The Sundarbans archipelago functions in *The Hungry Tide* not merely as setting but also as character—its ecology and tidal patterns inspiring 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 in the early pages of the novel, set up Nirmal’s as a privileged voice that recognizes the wisdom of attending to nature’s patterns. As Nirmal points out, in the tide country it is nature itself—rather than the forces of modernization—that speeds up the pace of life and makes boundaries appear or disappear. The constant re-shaping of the islands by the currents gives new meaning to the problems of flux and instability— that typically are said to accompany modernity— and also forces reflection on the folly of human attempts at defining territorial boundaries. Like his celebrated novel, *The* *Shadow Lines*, *The Hungry Tide* exposes the disastrous consequences of boundary-making; but here Ghosh’s canvas is broader as he explores how boundaries destroy because of not only the parochialism of the nation-state— or its perpetuation of communalism and class/ caste-based violence— but also its myopic agenda of development that ignores nature’s patterns as well as the vital and fluid relationship of humans with their surroundings.

Further moments of reflection in Nirmal’s diary foreground the novel’s parallel 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. (224)

Nirmal has these thoughts as he himself undergoes subjective transformation from watching generationally-oppressed Dalit settlers enact their vision of an egalitarian society in Morichjhapi. Not long before her tragic death, Kusum described how the police would bombard their settler community with announcements that “This 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). [[9]](#endnote-9) Kusum wondered how their living in Morichjhapi could possibly be a crime when this in fact 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 are what eventually enable him to overcome writer’s block and to put pen to paper. In the process, Kusum becomes Nirmal’s muse as well as romantic interest.

Years later, Piya and Kanai undergo similar internal transformations, and this time it is Kusum’s son, Fokir, who serves as inspiration and catalyst. Piya comes to rely on Fokir’s vast knowledge of the river for her cetological research and in the process develops romantic 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 for nature—Fokir would be opposed to the killing. Eventually, Piya comes to see Fokir’s reality as a peasant and begins to appreciate the extent to which his values and mode of relating to nature are not identical with hers. Kanai—playing the role of the relatively knowledgeable national cosmopolitan (like Sarath in *Anil’s Ghost*)— pushes Piya to re-evaluate 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, here Kanai appears 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, it is her bond with Fokir that propels the cetologist to include within her Western, science-driven environmental activism a concern for the economic and cultural context of local inhabitants. Even after his death, Fokir’s prior transferring of local geographical knowledge—which Piya saves in her GPS device—is crucial in giving this otherwise rootless Indian-American woman a reason to stay behind in the Sundarbans and in offering her a sense of belonging there. 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, through his exposure to Fokir, Kanai is forced to re-evaluate his privilege as an Indian male of the urban middle class. Kanai’s transformation is triggered when Fokir dares Kanai to an island where he had earlier spotted tiger prints. As the narrator informs us, “it was as though in stepping on the island, the authority of their positions had been suddenly reversed” (325); for 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 begins to realize 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, would be moving closer to the Sundarbans and putting his translation skills to use by relaying his newfound regional awareness to a global audience.[[10]](#endnote-10)

In her insightful reading of *The Hungry Tide*, Anupama Mohan argues that the novel differs from the majority of South Asian writing in English where the village is placed within a necessarily utopian or dystopian imaginary of the postcolonial nation-state. Moreover, Ghosh departs from this dominant trend “not only by creating in the rural a critique of national utopia but also by investing 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 about the novel investing in “the rural” the political capacity to counter state and official policy. What is also striking about the ending, however, is the relative subordination of “local and subaltern” agency to that of the metropolitan characters. Although it recalls the grassroots struggle of a prior generation of Sundarbans inhabitants, rural characters play only a supportive role by the novel’s end.

Throughout the novel, in fact, “gifts” of subaltern knowledge play a crucial role in engendering the transformation of metropolitan subjects and in ensuring that they deploy *their* agency in socially responsible ways.The extent of Kanai’s transformation, for instance, becomes first 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, which we later find out is 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 a parting gift— a written version of the song she heard but could not understand. In the letter that accompanies his gift to Piya, 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” (354). Gifts—like the song that Kanai translates for Piya or the geographical information that Fokir leaves behind before his death— contribute toward the preservation of local cultural knowledge and expertise; this preservation, however, entails a containment and transfer of knowledge and expertise to the agency of 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 imagination 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 “unmediated access” to Fokir’s thoughts and knowledge; nevertheless, the novel also conveys the possibility for “deep-seated affinity and community” across social divides. As Lazarus puts it, “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 noteworthy the novel’s emphasis on cross-class connection— 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” (Dawson 248). Lazarus and Dawson are no doubt right in emphasizing Ghosh’s investment in political possibilities born out of cross-class and empathy-based affiliation. What complicates *The Hungry Tide*’s politics of solidarity, however, is the construction of its primary rural character, Fokir, as a rooted and unchanging peasant. Fokir’s fixity, moreover, is in marked contrast with the metropolitans’ fluid, transforming subjectivities.

While Fokir acts as catalyst for the transformations of Piya and Kanai, he himself remains unchanged and exceptional for his longstanding knowledge of and connection to the region’s geography. Horen mentions that, “the river is in his veins” (264). This sentiment is later echoed by Piya who notes, “It’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” (289). Through the course of the novel, Piya learns to appreciate and rely on Fokir’s instinctive, embodied wisdom. She also repeatedly reflects on human connection to nature through her observation of Fokir. For instance, watching him fish, “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” (179). Through her marveling at Fokir, the novel too marvels at Fokir’s connection to a simpler time in which human beings’ closeness to—and dependence on—nature was clearly visible. Fokir’s connection to the Sundarbans ecology, his “local knowledge,” is something Piya seeks and admires.

This connection to nature, however, makes Fokir occasionally appear “childlike.” For instance, 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 (343-44). Kanai tries to understand how the worldly, upwardly mobile, and literate Moyna would choose to be married to the illiterate and “unformed” Fokir who insists on continuing with his life as a fisherman despite the impossibility of making a living in this manner. Although Kanai’s urban perspective is one that the reader learns to read with a grain of salt, his perception of Fokir as possessing a childlike innocence is not particularly challenged elsewhere in the novel.

Fokir’s exchanges with Piya are repeatedly described for their wordlessness, and Piya even validates their inability to connect through verbal language. In response to Fokir’s singing, for instance, she notes that, “There 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. Throughout the novel, Fokir speaks rarely but sings often. Others make observations – without his knowing or in his absence— about Fokir’s capacities (of which he himself is unaware). Although he does not know how to read and write, the legend of Bon Bibi is “all in his head”: Kusum had told him the story so many times “that these words have become a part of him,” as Kanai informs us (268). Fokir is also not worldly-wise and does not accept Piya’s money when he first saves her from drowning. In all these ways, he is constructed as innocent, his death in the storm reinforcing his close affinity with nature and foreclosing possibility for further development of his character.

Fokir’s treatment in Ghosh’s novel (including his eventual death) resonates with the representation in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* of Velutha, an “untouchable” with whom the relatively privileged Ammu has an affair. 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, too, dies tragically—though not as a result of a natural disaster but rather at the hands of a casteist police. Before they first make love, Ammu watches the “untouchable,” 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” (333-334). If Fokir is seen as having the “river in his veins” and as having the unique capacity to see “right into the river’s heart,” then Velutha is seen as moving with a special ease through the water, mud, trees, fish and stars. Velutha’s perceived grounding in his environment become 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. [[11]](#endnote-11) Like *The God of Small Things*, Ghosh’s novel responds to the devastation of rural ecology and culture by depicting Fokir as bearing an organic and stable connection to the natural world.

Criticizing a trend in American environmentalism known as “deep ecology,” Ramachandra Guha speaks of its problematic commitment to an “unspoilt wilderness,” as well as its construction of “primal” peoples—especially from Eastern cultures—as the bearers of deep ecological knowledge. As Guha points out, “Many 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). As I have shown,through its deliberate paralleling of Piya’s and Nirmal’s perspectives as well as its critique of Piya’s thinking, Ghosh challenges the sort of bio-centric environmentalism popularized by trends like deep ecology. Yet, even as it opposes Piya’s privileging of conservation on deep ecological grounds, *The Hungry Tide*—at least in its construction of Fokir—is informed by deep ecology’s view of peasant communities as possessing prescientific knowledge and a “mystical affinity with nature.” This mode of construction, however, treats Fokir’s subjectivity as fixed, timeless, and outside of history, thereby weakening the novel’s critique 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 then by the culture of big fishing that is making his way of life increasingly unsustainable and his ties to the land increasingly fraught. At one point, Fokir’s wife, Moyna, speaks of the new nylon nets used by the fishing companies to catch tiger prawns: “The nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well” (134), thereby depleting the river of the diversity of its marine life and making fishermen like Fokir “disposable.” Fokir’s characterization in these moments testifies to what Rob 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? (Nixon 19)

In some of its most interesting moments— such as when Fokir resists his wife’s attempts to make him abandon fishing— Ghosh’s novel comments on the fisherman’s “existing out of place in place” within the “new” economies of contemporary globalization. However, these brief moments exist in tension with the novel’s overwhelming tendency to represent Fokir as an innocent who possesses a stable, mystical connection to nature. His death—while trying to protect Piya in the storm—resolves the novel’s underlying tension but only by further fixing Fokir’s character.

Victor Li argues that Fokir is constructed as the idealized subaltern of much Subaltern Studies theory who dies so that the subaltern ideal can be preserved. In the process, argues Li, “The 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). Drawing 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 the destabilizing social and economic forces of the present, while also denying the rural character agency (except on a symbolic level) to respond to these forces. Thus, although it 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 like Fokir complicates *The Hungry Tide*’s articulation of a solidarity-based environmentalism that integrates social justice and ecological concerns.

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 who sees the ghost of his mother everywhere? In an interview with Alesssandro Vescovi, Ghosh speaks of his experience of 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*. (Italics mine)

While he starts by speaking about the pleasures of being exposed to the songs and language of the Sundarbans, of the “magic” of being there at night, Ghosh moves on to describe what he finds more difficult to put into words—the “quality” and “texture” of his interaction with the fishermen. This “texture” of interaction he later attributes to him being a Bengali “of a certain age”: “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). One senses in Ghosh’s words, a sense of loss—loss of his own connection to peasant life, imminent loss of this way of life for the fishermen, and therefore also the loss of a basis for this “simple,” “open” and trusting interaction between Ghosh and the fishermen.

What is powerful about *The Hungry Tide* is its attentiveness to the various dimensions of loss incurred as a result of longstanding processes of accumulation by 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 comes out of a sense of needing 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 underlying the novel— the fear of the eclipsing of rural culture by the forces of capitalist globalization and the need to therefore leave “some hold upon the memory of the world.” As I’ve shown, however, Fokir’s idealization complicates the novel’s critique of rural dispossession. Although it gestures toward Fokir’s longstanding sense of alienation—as a child of migrants who is further marginalized within the contemporary economy— his character is for the most part 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 have undergone an internal transformation in *The Hungry Tide*. Rather, my concern lies with how, as a figure of fixity, Fokir reflects our 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. What is problematic about mourning a vanishing rural ideal through this figure is that we may—like Ghosh— end up unwittingly preserving a paternalism that has for so long characterized the relationship between rural and urban. For Fokir’s idealization contributes towards a political imagination in which resistance is seen as depending overwhelmingly on the transformation of metropolitan subjects and only indirectly on the agency of rural populations.

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Notes

1. Interview with Alessandro Vescovi, 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Sundarbans National Park—a UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site— spreads across India and Bangladesh. Annu Jalais points out that what makes the Sundarbans a unique ecosystem is that, “Apart 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.” (“The Sundarbans: Whose World Heritage Site?” 2) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ghosh describes the grandiose project as envisioned by the Sahara India Parivar 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).” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Interestingly, Guha notes that “The 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 (IDCN), seeking to transplant the American system of national parks onto Indian soil” (75). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For more on peasant indebtedness and farmer suicides in post liberalization India, see Arindam Banerjee and V. Sridhar. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. According to Patrick Jagoda, “Network 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). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. David Bordwell uses the term “event frame” to refer to strategies deployed within popular 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). Within postcolonial fiction like *Anil’s Ghost* or *The Hungry Tide*, the return of a diasporic woman to South Asia serves as the “event” that brings the novel’s various characters in connection with one another. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For an anthropological approach to life and culture in the Sundarbans, including an account of the inhabitants’ relationship with Bon Bibi, see Annu Jalais’s *Forest of Tigers*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For more on the massacre—justified in the name of tiger conservation— see Annu Jalais and Ross Mallick. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The ending of *The Hungry Tide* has been criticized in many responses to the novel. In a review for *The Nation*, Nell Freudenberger, 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). Victor 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 hegemonic modernity, die so that their stories can be recounted and memorialized by literate, modern characters like Nirmal, Kanai and Piya” (291). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Victor Li points out that subaltern characters in novels like *The Hungry Tide* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*—novels that explicitly stage inter-class and inter-caste romances—eventually die in the end. “But,” asks Li, “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 paper focuses not merely on the death of the subaltern but also on the fixity that characterizes his/her construction. Moreover, I am interested in the extent to which the construction of Fokir 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)