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Restoration of Human Spirit in *The Hungry Tide* of Amitav Ghosh

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Introduction:

Divided into two broad sections: "The Ebb: Bhata" and "The Tide: Jowar," *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, an archipelago of hundreds of scattered islands, some densely populated while others completely uninhabited, at the mohona (confluence) of several rivers in the Bay of Bengal. "The islands are," the novelist says, "the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringes of her sari, the alcohol that follows her, half-wetted by the sea"

Interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal this archipelago stretches—for almost three hundred kilometers—from the Hooghly river in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. It is called 'India's doormat, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent'. For hundreds of years the foreigners—the Arakanese, the Khmer, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Malays, the English—have taken this eastern route to the Gangetic heartland. It is an untamed area where the Ganga empties into the Bay, where there is no border to divide freshwater and salt, and the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, creating a diverse natural habitat where tigers and snakes, crocodiles and sharks roam free. This is a place where floods continually inundate the land and whole forests lift their heads above the tides and then disappear. It is a liquid landscape where surging cyclones can wipe out thousands of lives with the flick of one giant wave, where animals and humans, myth and reality imperceptively merge into each other in a ritual struggle for survival. 'Midwife by the moon' and sculpted by colossal tides and titanic storms, this estuarine region—known variously as the Sundarbans, after the sundari tree, Heriteria minor; Badaban, after the mangroves, and Bhatir Desh, the tide country—is home to the Royal Bengal Tigers and the Irrawaddy dolphins, *Orcaella brevirostris*. Some even call it atthero bhatir desh, the land of eighteen tides. The place was mentioned in the record books of the Mughal emperors and in Francois Bernier's *Travels in the Mughal Empire*. The multiplicity of names for the Sundarbans is a metaphor for its ephemerality. The land itself is inconstant, subject to radical transformation as a result of late summer storms and tide water. Whole islands are washed away by the cyclones that sweep in from the Bay with huge tidal surges. Thousands of human beings and animals routinely die here in natural disaster. As a character in the novel puts it: "in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week and islands are made and unmade in days". Here, for hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed braved the tigers, crocodiles and sharks to eke out a precarious existence from the mud and the forest produce.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a rich and visionary Scotsman, Sir Daniel MacKinnon Hamilton, who believed in the dictum 'labour conquers everything,' founded Utopian settlement where people of all races, classes and religions could live together 'without petty social distinctions and differences'. He wanted to establish a new society, a new kind of country: "It would be a country run by co-operatives. . . . Here people wouldn't exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land". The news was spread and people from Orissa, eastern Bengal and San-thal Parganas rushed to the tide country in search of free land. Villages sprouted on the islands and Hamilton gave them names. Everything was provided for them: electricity, telephone, bank and currency. It was a magnificent dream dreamed by a leading capitalist of colonial India: "He dreamed of a place where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening". But, unfortunately, his dream did not come true. The tide country was not yet ready for Hamilton's progressive ideas. His memory is preserved the names of the islands given by him and in the estate he had founded.

The tide country is not very far from Calcutta and the mainstream Indian society—only ninety seven kilometers away. Yet it represents another world where it is impossible to tell who is who, and what their castes and religious beliefs are. It is not just the legacy of Daniel Hamilton, but the hostile environment erases all societal strata, since everyone is equal in the struggle to survive in the adverse surroundings. Here people live amidst utter poverty and 'hunger and catastrophe [are] a way of life'. It is a difficult life that leaves most women widowed at a young age and land barely arable because of the salt water of the hungry tide that cannot always be prevented from flooding the fields. As in his other novels, Amitav Ghosh shows here an anthropologist's fascination for the place and its people and the stories they tell—the local myths and legends that subvert the official versions of history and religion. The tide country people have an epic narrative of origins which they pass on orally from generation to generation. They have a kind of local religion—they worship a goddess named Bon Bibi, the presiding deity of the Sundarbans and the arch-enemy of Dokkhin Rai who represents evil. But the epic of Bon Bibi—Bon Bibir Karamoti or that Bon Bibir Johuranama (The Miracles of Bon Bibi or the Narrative of Her Glory—is strongly inflected by Islamic influences, which evince the syncretic nature of the archipelago's culture and religion. The Hungry Tide is a powerful evolutionary story of this region and its people. The setting, unlike in *The Glass Palace*, is geographically limited, yet vast in its implications of some wider global concerns, like preservation of endangered species, environmentalism versus survivalism, rights of the homeless and the dispossessed.

Into the transformative sphere of the tide country, where life is lived 'on the margins of greater events', venture two individuals from the outside world. They are Piya (Piyali) Roy, a Bengali-American cytologists from Seattle who cannot even speak her mother tongue, and Kanai Dutt, a prosperous and proud owner of a translation business in New Delhi. The narrative space is taken up by them and a handful of other characters, each on a personal quest through life. Piya is drawn by the tidal water; she has come to study the Irrawaddy dolphin, *orcaella brevirostris*, a rare river dolphin that can negotiate the mix of fresh and salt water. She is trying to unravel the mystery of this marine mammal that

lives in the tidal pools, where they travel and why. Kanai, on the other hand, has been summoned to the land by his aunt, Nilima Bose, a renowned social worker who runs a trust—Badabon Trust—that supports the rights of the poor and the underprivileged and offers manifold services—medical, paralegal and agricultural—to a population of several thousands in Lusibari, the most southerly of the inhabited islands of the tide country. He comes to Lusibari on account of a posthumously discovered notebook—a diary of sorts written by his late uncle and addressed to him. He uses this notebook to decipher another mystery, that of his uncle's death. Linking the two narrative strands is Fokir, an illiterate fisherman who knows the watery labyrinths of the Sundarbans better than anyone and is a key to both the quests. The two stories—one of the notebook and the other of Kanai, Piya and Fokir—that make up the narrative structure of the novel, are unfolded in a braided manner in alternate chapters, the former shedding light on, and containing the seed of, the latter.

Kanai's narrative brings to life the character of his uncle, Nirmal Bose, who is dead before the story begins. Nirmal was a teacher of English literature at Asutosh College in Calcutta where he had made a name for himself as a leftist intellectual and promising writer. He was a poet at heart and a very good speaker. Nilima was his student, and she fell in love with Nirmal, being mesmerized by his fiery lectures and impassioned recitations. They were married in a civil ceremony against the opposition of Nilima's family. The couple came to Lusibari in the years following independence when Nirmal's radical politics became too dangerous in Calcutta and got him into trouble.

Appalled by the dire poverty of the tide country people, Nilima organized the women of the island, mostly widows, and founded the Badabon Trust which brought help, medicine and finally a hospital to the place. Over the years her dedicated work immensely benefited the islanders and brought them a semblance of respectability and financial independence. Her life-long service to the destitute and dispossessed did not go unrewarded. The Badabon Trust was officially recognized as a model NGO in India and Nilima was decorated with one of the country's highest honours by the President. Nirmal spent his career as headmaster of the island's high school named after Daniel Hamilton. He never supported his wife's single-handed efforts to bring about a qualitative change in the lives of the people they lived with. Because, for this erstwhile Marxist, they bore the stigma of social service. But it was Nirmal who gave her trust its name and suggested the construction of a cyclone shelter in the hospital which saved the lives of many islanders. Kanai had been to Lusibari in 1970, sent by his parents to be rusticated for his audacity, arrogance and misbehavior with teachers.

For a brief period, during his stay in Lusibari, a young and spirited girl named Kusum passed their lives. She became Kanai's mentor and guide in the island and left a deep impression on his mind. He learnt about the Sundarbans and its people through his association with Nirmal, Nilima and Kusum, particularly the former. In fact, the relevant information about the tide country is presented in the novel through the perspective of Nirmal and his social awareness, his knowledge of its history, myth, geology and geography.

A poet at heart, who constantly invoked Rilke's Duino Elegies and sought confirmation of his ideas and thoughts in the lines of the German poet, Nirmal approached retirement from service, feeling like his life was poorly spent because he had never lived up to his revolutionary ideals. It was at this stage of his life, in the late 1970s, he accidentally came across Kusum, now a widow with a five year old son named Fokir. It was through Kusum and her relative, Horen Naskar, that Nirmal came to know about, and was ultimately involved in, the unique experiment of a large number of East Bengali refugees to re-invent themselves and establish a classless, egalitarian society in one of the uninhabited islands of the Sundarbans, named Morich Jhapi, that falls within the purview of a reserve forest. (Kusum's back story, her mysterious disappearance from Lusibari and reappearance in Morich Jhapi as a member of the squatters' colony occupies a substantial portion of Nirmal's notebook).

The notebook, now left to Kanai, contains a first person account of the events at the end of Nirmal's life, which revolved round Kusum, her son Fokir, her relative-turned-lover Horen, and the catastrophic struggle of the refugees to create a new habitat on the Morich Jhapi island. The notebook was written hurriedly over one or two days in mid-May, 1979, hours before the Morich Jhapi massacre, in Kusum's hut where Nirmal had taken shelter.

Nirmal's account of the squatters' movement that swept across the tide country in 1978-79, is rooted in a real uprising among a truly dispossessed and uprooted people (mostly east Pakistani refugees who had fled to India after Partition). They ran away from the hostile environment of their resettlement camp in central India (Dandakaranya) and tried to remake their lives in the familiar terrain of the Sundarbans. They were the poorest of the poor who belonged to the lowest strata of the society. But their revolt was quelled by the Left Front government which had always championed the cause of the refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan.

Amitav Ghosh's historically engaged fiction presents the whole episode more or less objectively, even though the specific political actors and discourses that led to the gruesome massacre and forceful eviction of the refugees are downplayed in the novel. The Morichjhapi massacre is a shameful story of betrayal and of state-sponsored terrorism to evict Indian nationals from the land where they felt at home. It goes to the credit of Amitav Ghosh that he has dared to record, in terms of fiction, this little publicized historical event. But one would expect him, despite his aversion to overtly political writing, to at least assign some historical responsibility to particular political players. The state authorities had declared Morichjhapi as a 'protected forest reserve' for tigers, and they proved unbending in their determination to throw out the 'squatters.' Was it possible, one wonders, that the issue of socioeconomic class—and caste—was involved in the making of the policy that unduly privileged nature at the expense of human beings? The novelist elaborates: "Was it possible that in Morichjhapi had been planted the seeds of what might become, if not a Dalit nation, then at least a safe-haven, a place of true freedom for the country's oppressed?". And it was something that the self-styled champions of the 'have-nots' who have made hypocrisy and doublespeak their political trademark, could not swallow?

It is true that the Sundarbans is the only habitat where Royal Bengal tigers, with their dwindling number, continue to live in the wild. They are zealously protected by various international environmental groups who apply economic and diplomatic pressures on the Indian and Bangladeshi governments to maintain the tiger habitats by military/ police force. But in the name of tiger preservation human lives are threatened; the tigers routinely maul and kill the islanders and their cattle. Amitav Ghosh questions this human cost of wildlife preservation when he makes Kanai ask Piya, the American marine biologist, who exclaims horror at the killing of a tiger: "Isn't that a horror too that we can feel the suffering of an animal but not of human beings?" . The novelist uses this haunting trope of Romantic literature ('Tiger, tiger, burning bright') to bring the continuing debate between environmentalists and survivalists to a memorable climax. Hours before she was raped and killed by the criminals and gangsters deployed by the people's government of West Bengal to unsettle and dislodge the settlers from Morichjhapi island (on which they had made this home because they felt less unwanted, less of a burden there than anywhere else), Kusum told Nirmal about her experience of the 'siege' and asked: "Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?" . Kusum's anguished question sent the former Marxist's head reeling, and without giving any reply he lay down on a mat. In the Sundarbans, Ghosh argues, human lives are valued less than those of tigers.

Nirmal desperately wanted to be a part of the Morichjhapi movement, ignoring the appeal of his practical wife who advised caution and non-involvement, because as a young man he had been in love with the idea of a revolution and he could never let go of the idea even when he had turned his back on his party. The squatters' uprising against the government and their resistance till the end 'was the closest Nirmal would ever come to a revolutionary moment' . The refugees' attempt to establish a classless, casteless, secular society and create a new future for themselves seemed to him to be the fulfillment of Daniel Hamilton's dream with the only difference that it was not an individual's dream. The dream had been dreamt by the very people who were trying to make it real. Nirmal whole-heartedly believed in Rilke's idea that 'life is lived in transformation' and to him what the settlers of Morichjhapi 'stood for was the embodiment of Rilke's idea of transformation' . It showed him that a man like him could be changed even after retirement, that he could begin anew. His other interest was Kusum for whom he had developed a romantic attachment. Centered on the doomed, Utopian settlement in the tide country, the romantic triangle that emerged involving Nirmal, Kusum and Horen strangely prefigures the Kanai-Piya-Fokir story and seems to be its earlier incarnation. But Kusum chose Horen as her lover. On the night before her death, she not only offered her body but also handed her son Fokir to Horen who took him back to safety.

The revolution did not succeed. The settlers were forcibly driven out of the island. Scores of people were murdered. Women were raped and killed. The corpses were thrown either into the rivers to be eaten by crocodiles and sharks or into the tiger reserves. The rest were sent back to Dandakaranya. Their quest to re-invent their lives and make their own future proved futile. So did Nirmal's life-long search for a pure revolution. He did not survive long after the failed uprising. Before the final assault of the government force on the refugees, he hurriedly jotted down his experience in a notebook in the form of an

extended letter and addressed it to Kanai in the hope that his nephew, with his mastery over many languages, would be able to carry it to the notice of an unheeding world. The notebook, which was thought to be lost, surfaces again, twenty years after Nirmal's death. Nilima requests Kanai to visit Lusibari to receive the notebook, which Nirmal had bequeathed to him, and decipher its content. In the process of doing so, Kanai's path crosses that of Piya, the American marine biologist of Indian origin, who travels to the Sundarbans to study and document river dolphins.

Kanai is smug, intelligent and a snob who knows six languages and has travelled across the world. He is self-centred and arrogant and is not above using his social status to get his own way. Although he is a bachelor, he has had a number of affairs. His aunt aptly describes him to Piya as "one of those men who likes to think of himself as being irresistible to the other sex. Unfortunately, the world doesn't lack for women who're foolish enough to confirm such a man's opinion of himself, and Kanai seems always to be looking for them" . In fact, Nilima warns Piya against her nephew who, she knows, has an eye on the American girl.

Piya, on the other hand, is a reticent, sober, self-reliant and practical scientist who is devoted to her work and yet very sensitive to people and their environment. She is used to the solitude and rigors of life as a cytologist working in the remote fields. She often works in areas where she knows neither the language nor customs and can survive for days on just nutrition bars and ovals. While Kanai, like his uncle, is a man of many words, Piya has learned to view speech as 'a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being' . She studies the river as though 'puzzling over a codex that had been authored by earth itself' . She comes to the Sundarbans in search of the elusive Irrawaddy dolphins. Her search takes her along the meandering waterways of the tide country until events land her in a small boat belonging to Fokir, a young fisherman who catches crabs with his son. (In fact, Fokir saves her from drowning when she is knocked into water by a dishonest forest guard).

Fokir is a son of the soil, perhaps the truest soul of the tide country. He is illiterate but possesses more knowledge of the rivers and the wildlife of the Sundarbans than all the outsiders who do not understand him. Piya and Fokir are as different as two such persons could be, persons who cannot exchange a word with each other and have no idea of what is going on in one another's head. Yet they seem to understand each other perfectly, even without words. Piya feels an affinity for Fokir and his life which is attuned to the rhythm of his environment. Over the days, as Fokir takes her through the mazy waterways that crisscross the Sundarbans and to the tidal pools where the Irrawaddy dolphins take shelter, they develop a latent but live sympathy for each other. They cannot speak a word of each other's language, yet through the reciprocal anticipation of simple needs, they achieve an intimacy beyond words. Fokir's knowledge of Sundarbans' rivers proves invaluable to cytologist Piya and with his help she collects valuable data about dolphins.

Piya's discoveries about dolphins' activities and behavioral patterns constitute an astonishing piece of research in the book. The nature of the tides and the nature of the dolphins' movement to and from the tidal pools as well as the symbiosis between human

beings and this cetacean population comprise the essence of the tide country in this novel. We also learn a number of scientific details about cytology, climatology, Global Positioning System and depth sounding. These detours add an extra authority to the narrative and are much better integrated into the story than in his previous novel, *The Glass Palace*.

It is Fokir who brings Piya to Lusibari where the paths of Kanai, Piya and Fokir all merge. Piya is introduced to Nilima, Kanai's aunt, and Moyna, Fokir's educated and ambitious wife, who works as a nurse in Lusibari hospital, and she learns about idealist Nirmal and his relationship with Kusum and Horen. Kanai decides to accompany Piya and Fokir as an interpreter on a trip to the estuarine terrain to track down the Irrawaddy dolphins. The three of them embark on a motorized boat into the heart of the Sundarbans which brings lasting changes to their lives.

Kanai, attracted to Piya and envious of Fokir who is able to establish an emotional contact with the foreigner despite the communication barrier, constantly harps on the difference between the two: "You shouldn't deceive yourself, Piya: there wasn't any thing in common between you then and there isn't now. Nothing. He's a fisherman and you're a scientist. What you see as fauna he sees as food". Kanai, about whom the novelist says: 'Language was both his livelihood and his addiction', fails to fathom the mind of Piya (or of Moyna with whom he tries to flirt), while the illiterate Fokir is able to enter the emotional tide of her heart. He has to go through an ordeal by water to realize the hidden nature of this emotionally wrought relationship and the inefficacy of language to unlock the mystery of the human heart. As Moyna, who senses trouble in Fokir's intimacy with the unmarried American, correctly says to him: "words are just air, Kanai-babu . . . when the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard".

As Piya pursues her dolphin study even deeper into the mangrove swamps, she and her fellow travelers put themselves at great risk. They encounter a cyclonic storm that brings a huge tidal wave in its wake. Piya and Fokir, dissociated from the larger vessel and its crew, take shelter in an island. While Kanai returns to the safety of Lusibari with the help of Horen and his son, Fokir is killed in an attempt to save Piya from the devastating Jhor. Their unusual relationship finds a weird consummation in the form of a dying Fokir breathing heavily down Piya's neck as, watched over by a tiger, they sit tied together by a sari to the trunk of a tree when the eye of the storm passes. The climax is reached in a terrific manner and its haunting quality leaves a lasting imprint on the memory.

The Hungry Tide is a stunning novel of humane breadth which is epic in scope, sophisticated in its observations of people and their milieu, poetic in its evocation of the 'terrible beauty' of the Sundarbans and astute in its analysis of the geographical and socio-cultural forces that have shaped this region. Although the book focuses on certain issues of global concerns, it offers no easy solutions. Amitav Ghosh seems, as always, to be more interested in people than in issues. His book is about the people of the Sundarbans and their heroic struggle for survival. His greatest strength lies in the way he maps the geography of the human heart and examines the nature of man's identity. The questions

asked by the refugees of Morichjhapi: "Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong?" strike the mind of sensitive readers as the existential queries of a bewildered humanity. Despite hunger and poverty, disease and disaster (both natural and man-made), which are a way of life for the islanders of the tide country, none of his characters loses his/ her faith in the essential grandeur of existence. Buffeted by their adventures and experiences, their sufferings and consequent realizations, both Kanai and Piya return to Lusibari, to the refuge of Nilima's towering personality whose Trust has erected a solid bulwark against the vagaries of nature and life on the unsteady soil of the chimerical island, the former to rewrite his uncle's story for a larger audience and the latter to fulfill her life's mission: studying and documenting the riverine dolphins. Nor do they forget the victim and his family. Piya's sincere effort brings financial assistance for Fokir's widow and orphaned son from other corners of the world. In an adverse environment where life is fragile and uncertain, the essence of man, the book suggests, is reduced to its very core. Amitav Ghosh allows the country of the hungry tide to break down the barriers of his characters and their society.

Conclusion:

The erosion of borders between nations and/ or genres emerges as a recurring feature of Amitav Ghosh's writing. The Hungry Tide, like his previous novels *The Circle of Reason* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, challenges the conceptual boundaries that have been erected to separate academic disciplines. The book intermingles marine biology, geography, geology, myth, history, climatology, economics, environmental studies and anthropology in a masterly but effortless manner. While talking about the defeated 'historical materialist' Nirmal to Piya, Kanai says: "For him it meant that 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". That seems to be a fitting description of Amitav Ghosh's unique story-telling skill in this exquisitely researched novel.

In an interview with the *Outlook* in 2002, Ghosh had remarked: "My fiction has always been about communities coming unmade or remaking themselves."⁵ The Hungry Tide is the story of one such community of people who, having come unmade from their ancestral roots, try to remake themselves in a place where, as Nirmal writes in his notebook, 'transformation is the rule of life' After finishing this riveting novel, the readers too feel that they have made an imaginative journey to the tide country and that the experience has remade them.

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