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‘Interlopers’ on Land: The Politics of the Postcolonial ‘Green’ in *The Hungry Tide*

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The interdisciplinarity of academic discourses of the ‘here and now’ is a phenomenon which has brought together ecocritical and postcolonial modes of reading, often at the level of a familiar complementarity. Such a mode not only identifies common points of reference in the comparative politics of identification among marginal figures of human cultures and ‘endangered’ species who battle against extinction in the biological ladder. Using both of these modes together, this paper locates Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* as a familiar site of exemplification of the by now famous biocentrism/anthropocentrism debate in ecocritical studies, trying to locate its ‘politics of preference’ within the field and concludes, as a terse rejoinder that the novel’s allegiances, in spite of its purported ambivalence, end up on the anthropocentric side of the divide.

The interpenetration of disciplines such as postcolonial and ecocritical studies insinuate a number of questions as regards their historical foci of research. ‘Deep ecology’, for example, rejected outright conventional ‘conservationist’ stances that foreground the preservation of natural and non-human life forms due to their usefulness. The primary objective of ‘deep ecology’, as put forward by Naess, was developing an awareness of an intensely relational field of existence, wherein all living and non-living life forms were connected to each other and it also emphasized the “flourishing of human life and cultures” as compatible to a “substantial decrease of human population”, especially since such a flourishing necessitates such a decrease. (Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*, 24-26) As such, ‘deep ecologists’ have denied any possible interpenetration between the two fields at all by highlighting the dominantly ‘human-centred’ (anthropocentric) concentration of postcolonial studies which strive to address issues of social justice and is thus insufficiently attuned towards a ‘life-centred’(biocentric) approach. ‘Deep ecologists’ such as Cheryll Glotfelty argued —that the prefix “enviro-” is “anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment” (Glotfelty, quoted in Graham Huggan, “‘Greening’ Postcolonialisms: Ecocritical Perspectives’) Therefore the ‘deep ecologists’ or the ‘dark greens’ have drawn a distinction between themselves and the ‘light greens’ (environmentalists/ecocritics) whom they view as typically less radical and according to Andrew Dobson, with a propensity to adopt “a managerial approach to environmental problems”.(Andrew Dobson, quoted in Huggan, “‘Greening’ Postcolonialisms’, 721)

In spite of such disagreements, it is perhaps not altogether naïve to assume, as I am going to do in this paper, that there is a definite conflation of interests between the twin fields of postcolonial and ecocritical studies. Theorists such as Graham Huggan have drawn

attention to the possibilities of exchange between the two fields as well as admitting that both of them could suggest newer avenues to pursue as well as ‘correct’ tendencies within each other which their practitioners might deem ‘untoward’. Thus, while postcolonial criticism will have —effectively renewed, rather than belatedly discovered—its commitment to the environment, reiterating its insistence on the inseparability of current crises of ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse, the postcolonial turn in ecocritical thought will “combat the tendencies of some Green movements toward Western liberal universalism” or a more fashionable ‘nature protection’ espoused by the white middle class elite.” (Pepper, *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice*, 246). Similar objectives have also inflected Pablo Mukherjee’s work on postcolonial environments, where he hopes that environmental criticism has the ability to inject “a much needed materialist strain into postcolonial critical thinking; conversely, with its attention to the broad patterns of emergence and consequences of modern colonialism and imperialism, postcolonial theories should be able to offer eco-/environmental positions a broad and flexible historical framework within which to locate the specific dynamics of the various agents that constitute the environment.” (Mukherjee 18)

This paper hopes to examine the complex interplay of anthropocentric/biocentric concerns which remained a key binary in ‘deep ecological’ thought and hopes to see them through the lens of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* as a text where conflicting rights of humans and animals on an unstable landscape are explored and negotiated towards resolving a crisis.

In *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Amitav Ghosh brings to focus concerns regarding the legitimate entitlement to postcolonial spaces through the depiction of the tide country in the southernmost tip of West Bengal. The question of human and animal rights in an ecological space which is unstable, ever-changing and sometimes antagonistic to survival becomes Ghosh’s subject of study in this novel. At the same time, the basis of entitlement to the ‘empty’ spaces in the tide country is worked out through the concepts of migrancy and rootedness which essentially challenge our normative understanding of belonging and displacement. In trying to examine *who* is entitled to *what*, Ghosh also foregrounds the question of priorities which a postcolonial nation might have to answer to its inhabitants.

In so far as *The Hungry Tide* is about the displacement of refugees and settlers across borders, it becomes important to investigate the history of the Sunderbans in the light of political events in postcolonial Bengal to fully make sense of the Marichjhanpi incident. The Sunderbans form a vast delta to the south of the mouth of the river Ganges which fans out into a great number of distributaries. Therefore, the mouth of the delta is an unstable landscape of salt waters and vast mangrove forests which extend across the territorial borders between India and Bangladesh and effectively make a mockery of political divisions of landscape. The landscape is one of incessant change and mobility as older landmasses are instantly submerged under waters whereas newer islands emerge within very short spans of time. But this apparently dynamic space is also regarded ecologically as one of India’s most coveted heritage sites across the globe, since the site is intersected by a complex network of tidal waterways, mudflats and small islands of salt-tolerant mangrove forests, and presents an excellent example of ongoing ecological processes. The area is known for its wide range of fauna, including 260 bird species, the Bengal tiger and other threatened species such as the estuarine crocodile and the Indian python. Therefore the region has secured for itself a place on the global agenda of conservation, earning for itself the support of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and also developing three wildlife sanctuaries (Sundarbans West, East and

South) lying on disjunct deltaic islands just west of the main outflow of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, close to the border with India. The UNESCO website tells us that:

“All three wildlife sanctuaries were established in 1977 under the Bangladesh Wildlife (Preservation) (Amendment) Act, 1974, having first been gazetted as forest reserves in 1878. The total area of wildlife sanctuaries was extended in 1996. The entire Sundarbans is reserved forest, established under the Indian Forest Act, 1878.” (The Sundarbans’, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/798>, accessed March 29, 2014).

And yet, the dire poverty of region, of the nearly 1000 villages that lie outside the purview of the Tiger Reserve, is a result largely of government neglect and oppression. Villagers risk their lives in trying to gather firewood, honey and wax by venturing into the forests as well as going on fishing expedition in the face of violent cyclones. A 2005 study by Annu Jalais on the Marichjhanpi incident has revealed that the poverty in the Sunderbans has earned it the name *Kolkatar Jhi* (Calcutta’s servant) because of the huge numbers of people who migrate to the metropolis to work as domestic labourers. (Mukherjee 108). In the year 1978, which was a momentous year in the history of State politics in West Bengal, a steady flow of Bangladeshi refugees started arriving in this hitherto ‘unoccupied’ space. By April 1978, more than thirty thousand migrants thirty thousand migrants from Dandakaranya reached the small island of Marichjhanpi to the south of Kumirmari of Sundarbans. The post-independence infiltration across the border from East Pakistan (and later Bangladesh) to West Bengal and the adjoining states of Assam and Meghalaya was hardly a new phenomenon. But the novelty of 1978 immigration was that the settlers had arrived not directly across the border to the East but from Central India. Infiltration across the borders had risen to a great extent by the early 1970s and by the time the Left Front government came to power in 1978 through the support of an overwhelming majority of people, it was immediately faced with this problem. Infiltrators from Bangladesh who arrived during the 1970s primarily did so because of the supposed better jobs that Calcutta could offer them. Besides, the vast communalization of politics which had happened during the early 1970s in East Pakistan led to the emergence of a new nation, Bangladesh which was still in turmoil on issues of religion and caste.

Ross Mallick’s article, ‘Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre’ (Mallick 104-126) draws attention to the peculiar problems faced by the lower caste *namasudra* Hindus in East Pakistan. There had been a seemingly ‘unholy alliance’ between the Muslims of East Pakistan (who were largely lower caste Untouchables and had converted to the more emancipatory ideals of Islam) and the other Untouchable tenants of the upper-caste landed aristocrats of East Bengal during the colonial period. The East Bengal *namasudra* movement had been one of the most powerful and politically mobilized Untouchable movements which had opposed the Bengal Congress since the 1920s in their alliance with the Muslims. This exclusion of high-class Hindus from power led to the upper-caste Hindu section of the population and eventually the Congress campaigning for Partition during independence, so that at least the Western half of Bengal remained in their control. Partition however meant that “the Untouchables lost their bargaining power as a swing-vote bloc between high-caste Hindus and Muslims and then became politically marginalized minorities in both the countries.” (Mallick 109) The upper-class Hindus, who had the means and the wherewithal in education and assets to migrate had done so already, and the first wave of traditional upper-caste refugees in West Bengal, most

of whom did not have means of accommodation prior to partition simply squatted on private and public land holdings, refusing to be evicted by the Congress government. On the other hand, the Communist Party of India seized the initiative and capitalized on the anti-Congress sentiment of these 'intruders' and already organized themselves along Left front organizations. Rising public sympathy resulted in a powerful resistance on part of the early settlers, forcing the Congress government to acquiesce in the illegal occupations.

On other hand, the near-total eviction of upper-caste landed or elite middle class Hindus in East Pakistan turned communal sentiment against the lower caste *namasudra* people—especially after the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971, Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975 and Zia-ur- Rahman's coming to power – who were forced to move out into India. Later refugees who began to arrive therefore lacked the financial means or caste connections to secure themselves of stable accommodation and the means of surviving on their own. They depended largely on government relief and had to simply accept the government decision of relocating them to other states. By doing this, the Congress government succeeded in dispersing the *namasudra* settlers and political activists. The upper caste, elite *bhadralok* leadership of the Bengal Congress was aware of the politically educated nature of the *namasudra* activists and did not want them to be near the seats of power. On other hand, the relocation of these lower class refugees to Dandakaranya made their lives even more difficult since the soil was not a particularly fertile one and *adivasi* people there largely resented such infiltration in their territory. Moreover, they had the protection of the local police. Under such circumstances, it was again the Bengal Communists who took up the issue and used it as political capital to gain leverage. They demanded that these refugees be resettled in their native Bengal. The areas proposed for resettlement were either the Sunderbans area of the Ganges delta or other vacant lands scattered throughout the state.

Jhuma Sen's article 'The Silence of Marichjhanpi' (Sen, Bangalnama) illustrates the Left Front's policies regarding approaching the refugee problem:

“As late as 1974 Jyoti Basu had demanded in a public meeting that the Dandakaranya refugees be allowed to settle in the Sundarbans. The West Bengal Left Front Minister Ram Chatterjee visited the refugee camps and is widely reported to have encouraged them to settle in the Sundarbans, which had been a long held Left Front opposition demand. What was not foreseen by the refugees was that Ram Chatterjee, belonging to a smaller party in the Left Front coalition, was speaking for current policies rather than the imminent shift in policies as soon as the Left Front would be in power.”

The Left Front came to power in June 1977. By early 1978, the first wave of refugees had started travelling from Dandakaranya to Orissa's Malkangiri towards West Bengal, crossed Habra, Barasat and finally arrived at Hasnabad station. But once their number reached a lakh, the Left front government turned back on its words and began putting forward a policy of revisionism through which they stated that although it had been decided earlier that the refugees would be relocated in the Sunderbans, under the new plans the policy was not a feasible one and the only proper place for the refugees to go back would be Dandakaranya. Among the places that the Left Front had earlier designated for the resettlement of the refugees, Marichjhanpi was one. It was the 18th of April, 1978 that more than 10,000 refugees crossed Kumirmari and reached Marichjhanpi. They declared that they did not want any aid from the Government towards their resettlement there. They only demanded that they be allowed to stay at Marichjhanpi as citizens of the Union of

India.

10,000 refugees sold their belongings to disburse for the trip to Marichjhanpi. They left Dandakaranya only to find that the refugee policy had changed and many were arrested and returned to the resettlement camps. The remaining managed to slip through police cordons and reach their destination at Marichjhanpi island and settlement began. According to Mehta, Pandey, and Visharat, three Members of Parliament who visited Marichjhanpi in 1979 under orders from Prime Minister Desai inspite of vigourous objections on part of the Left Front government just prior to the eviction reported that:

“At Hasnabad, the refugees coming from Dandakaranya camped nearly for two months to find out proper ways of earning, living and to gauge the policy and principles of the State Government towards refugees at Hasnabad. After residing 15/20 days at Kumirmari without any obstruction from local authorities, they entered into the plantation, Bagna, Marichjhanpi in 24 Parganas. By their own efforts they established a workable fishing industry, salt pans, a health center, and schools over the following year.”⁽ⁱ⁾

The exemplary resolve of the settlers can be discerned from their memorandum to the visiting Members of the Parliament, the settlers at Marichjhanpi declared that:

“We started our new lives with a full arrangement of daily consumption such as living house, school, markets, roads, hospital, tube wells, etc. We managed to find out sources of income, also establishing cottage industry such as *Bidi* factory, Bakery, Carpentry, Weaving factory etc. and also built embankment nearly 150 miles long covering an area of nearly 30 thousand acres of land to be used for fishing, expecting an income of Rs 20 crores per year. That may easily help and enable us to stand on our own feet. Moreover, after one or two years washing by rain water, preventing saline water to flow over those lands will yield a lot of crops such as paddy and other vegetables.” (Sen)⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾

Not disposed to tolerate such illegal settlements, the Left front government immediately declared them illegal, stating that the refugees were in “unauthorized occupation of Marichjhanpi which is a part of the Sunderbans Government Reserve Forest”. Mallick states that it is debatable whether for the CPM, the primacy was to be placed on ecology or they merely feared that this settlement might lead to thousands of more refugees across the border. When persuasion failed the State government began an infamous economic blockade by placing thirty police launches, rampant use of tear gas, destroying tubewells in an attempt to deprive the settlers of food and water and such other measures. This began on January 16, 1979. But the settlers were astute enough to have secured the sympathy of the press and a coterie of Calcutta-based academics and intellectuals such as Ross Mallick, Annu Jalais, Tushar Bhattacharjee, Mahasweta Devi, Sunil Gangopadhyay and Jagadish Chandra Mandal. Chief Minister Jyoti Basu accused the press of sensationalism and manufacturing the Marichjhanpi problem of their own. His censure was against a host of leading dailies such as Jugantar. There was also the added fear that the Marichjhanpi problem would ttract the opposition into reaping political advantage, just as the Communists themselves had done before 1978.

Several hundreds were killed of disease, starvation, police firing and drowning of boats which were supposed to carry provisions for the settlers. On January 27, 1979 the government prohibited all movement into and out of Marichjhanpi under the Forest

Preservation Act and also promulgated Section 144 of the Criminal Penal Code in the area. The refugee settlers then appealed to the Calcutta High Court which ruled against any interference with the movements of the refugees and their access to food and water. Surprisingly the government flatly denied that there had been any blockade at all and continued the blockade in defiance of the court's verdict. Mallick writes that since the police union was backed by the CPM, the court's verdict in the matter had been effectively bypassed. But the refugees were still resolute in their decision of not budging. The State Government then organized a campaign of forcible eviction from May 14-16, hiring Muslim gangs to assist the police. Then followed a systematic programme of butchery where the men were first separated from the women, arrested and sent to prisons and the women were raped at random by the police. However, no criminal charges were undertaken against any of the involved and Prime Minister Desai, wishing to maintain Communist support for his government, did not pursue the matter further.⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ The Central Governments Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission, which had newspaper clippings, memoranda and a list with the names and ages of 236 men, women and children prior to the massacre in their Marichjhanpi file, reported that there were no atrocities committed against the Untouchables in West Bengal in their annual report.

And if these were not enough, there was a final twist to the tale. Mallick writes:

“In the final twist to the episode, the CPM settled its own supporters in Marichjhanpi, occupying and utilizing the facilities left by the evicted refugees. The issues of the environment and the Forest Act were forgotten”^(iv)

It is certainly interesting to see the effect that the state-sponsored Marichjhanpi massacre had on the survivors of the area. Annu Jalais published an intriguing article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in April 2005 (Jalais, 'Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger-Food') where he looks at how the memory of Marichjhanpi was evoked by the islanders to talk about their resentment about the unequal distribution of resources between them and the Royal Bengal tigers of the Sundarbans reserve forest. With the government's primacy on ecology, and the brutal evacuation of settlers at Marichjhanpi, the islanders considered their state as one resulting out of a double betrayal. Because they considered that they were situated at the periphery, marginalized due to their 'nimboborno' identity by the Bengali 'bhadrolok' (anglicised, moneyed or upper-caste Bengali Hindus), the tigers had taken the cue and started feeding on them:

“Many islanders explained to me that they and tigers had lived in a sort of idyllic relationship prior to the events of Marichjhanpi. After Marichjhanpi, they said, tigers had started preying on humans. This sudden development of their man-eating trait was believed to have been caused by two factors. One was the defiling of the Sundarbans forest due to government violence, the second was because of the stress which had been put thereafter on the superiority of tigers in relation to the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. The brutality and rhetoric with which the refugees had been chased away, coupled with measures for safeguarding tigers which the government initiated soon after the events of Marichjhanpi, had, explained the villagers, gradually made tigers 'self-important'. With this increased conviction of their self-worth, tigers had grown to see poorer people as 'tiger-food'.”

What Jalais was effectively dealing with was the anthropomorphisation of tigers in the villagers' history which equated them to the 'bhadra' image. Folk memory of the

massacre conjured up the governmental wrongs which the tigers had internalised in effect and were thus turning maneaters increasingly, especially during the 1980s and 90s. The association of the image of the tiger in the

Bengali '*bhadra*' consciousness with forms of regal or colonial heritage (or the officially sanctioned image of the 'national animal', for that matter) is radically deconstructed here by folk counternarratives which view governmental action as a sacrilege committed *simultaneously* on tigers and humans, thereby incurring the wrath of the animal through their violation of the natural laws of the forest. It highlighted, to the islanders, that their status as refugees and illegal migrants were simply inconsequential when compared to tigers, whose ecological protection is ensured by inflicting systematic brutalities on the settlers. Marichjhanpi thus became the site of the Fall to the settlers, and the inevitable outcome was that in this fallen world, the natural behaviour of tigers had become altered forever; inoffensive beasts had become eternal maneaters. Having enormous implications for the anthropocentric/biocentric debate, this counternarrative could be treated as a perfectly viable mythification of the visible reality of the Sunderbans, where, with scarce natural resources for survival, humans and tigers have to live in a state of perpetual competition. But this is a point to which I shall return later.

Following Pablo Mukherjee's analysis of the novel, I find it particularly helpful to explore Ghosh's rendering of migrancy and belonging as a central binary in the novel. Characters freely shift according to, and in between, these two categories. From the beginning, Kanai and Piya are the two 'outsiders' who travel to the tide country for different purposes, belonging to a dominant orders of the postcolonial metropolis and the globalised cosmos. Kanai is a successful Delhi-based entrepreneur running an international translation agency while Piya is an American cetologist travelling to the tide country to study the Gangetic river dolphin. In that restricted sense, both of them are migrants away from home. They are preceded by an earlier generation of settlers, Nirmal and Nilima who had come to reside at Lusibari from their original base at Calcutta, another postcolonial metropolis. Nirmal is doubly displaced as a refugee too, who had arrived in Calcutta from Dhaka in 1947. The 'migrant' characters interact with a host of 'others' who are based at the local level. But even these locals; Fakir for example, are not strictly 'insiders'. Fakir is the son of the deceased Kusum, who was sold to a local pimp at an early age. To a greater degree, characters like Horen could be regarded as rooted to the tide country but strictly speaking, even they are not. Most of the settlers in the erstwhile uninhabited islands at the mouth of the Ganges delta were regional migrants displaced from the mainstream of colonial economy and later reorganised by Daniel Hamilton, who built the first settlements in the tide country. It becomes meaningful for Ghosh to explore the ideas of rootedness and displacement, more so in the context of the Marichjhanpi massacre which lies at the heart of the novel. The ways of comprehending the massacre are inextricable to understanding the 'organicity' of the local population who 'belong' to the tide country. But as in *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh radically deconstructs stable categories of uprootedness and belonging, and the novel is also a reflection on finding appropriate mimetic techniques to narrate a specific juncture of historical events in the tide country as a defining event in a study of postcolonial environments.

If it was the quest for a 'home' away from home that impelled the refugees to build a settlement at Marichjhapi, it was the same impulse that had impelled Nirmal and Nilima. The only difference between their position as migrants is that the Marichjhapi refugees had stepped on the wrong side of the habitational axis; into 'tiger territory'. But the unstable geography of the tide country is the very site which reflects the human condition of

migrancy, as Nirmal notes in his diary:

“The rivers’ channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable...There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea.” (p.7)

That the participants in the novel’s events are all migrants is emphasized all too well in the final chapter which is titled ‘Home: An Epilogue’. Kanai and Piya return to the tide country by the end of the novel, but that belonging is also of a different order than possible through birth or blood ties.

Much of the novel deals with the widening of the mental landscape and admitting flexibility within it, especially while exploring the nature of progress. This is true in case of all colonial and metropolitan elites who step into the tide country. To begin with, Nirmal’s liberal universalist humanism which is a legacy of colonial modernity and also a product of the historical materialist lens offered by Marxism, finds itself shaken greatly in the tide country. Ever since their arrival at Lusibari, Nirmal and Nilima had been baffled by the mismanagement in the tide country estate, the corruption of the overseers and the estate managers. Yet Nirmal’s reading and re-reading of ‘Lenin’s pamphlet’ offers him no solution to solving the problem and effect an equitable distribution of resources. His refusal to acknowledge the widows of the island as a ‘class’ has historical materialist roots, but yet, Nilima’s socially charitable impulses are more effective in addressing their problem than Nirmal’s overriding dependence on dialectical theory. In effect, the Badabon Trust, which is the product of Nilima’s resourcefulness could never have been accomplished by Nirmal, who was had a consciousness more akin to a poet deeply in love with the idea of revolution. Kanai sums up his position later in the novel:

“Nirmal was perhaps the least materialistic person I’ve ever known. But it was important for him to believe that he was a historical materialist.” (p. 282).

It is this lack of materialism which leaves the unforeseen gap between him and the Marichjhanpi refugees with whom he loves to identify himself. Their position is clearly comprehended by Nilima, unlike Nirmal who fails to fully grasp the meaning of the refugees settling there:

“Their aims were quite straightforward. They just wanted a little land to settle on. But for that they were willing to pit themselves against the government. They were prepared to resist until the end. That was enough. This was the closest Nirmal would ever come to a revolutionary moment. He desperately wanted to be a part of it. Perhaps it was his way of delaying the recognition of his age.” (pp. 119-120)

For Nirmal as well Nilima, who were products of an emergent colonial modernity, their position as the intellectual and economic elites finds radical challenges in the eyes of the marginalized subaltern population of the tide country. The liberal universalism they profess is ultimately bound up within the shackles of philanthropy which cannot accept a final mobilization of class. Their efforts are valuable in their own place, but delimited by the imperatives a statusquo of power relations. Nilima for example, realises that she has to remain on the “right side of the government” (p. 214) in order to ensure continuing support for the smooth running of the Badabon trust. This pragmatic sensibility impels her to

stay aloof from the Marichjhanpi settlers.

In many ways, Nirmal's support of the refugee cause at Marichjhanpi is also derived from the latent desire he nourishes within himself of a social utopia. Therefore, he idealises the example of a 'benevolent' imperialist Daniel Hamilton. In Nirmal's understanding notions of progress are in the equitable distribution of resources of which the prime example is Hamilton who turns, in Nirmal's eyes from a *monopolikapitalist* to a utopian socialist. (Mukherjee 129) Therefore, he is intrigued by the unwillingness of the Marxist government to aid the refugees who had already set a great example of dignified labour in Marichjhanpi by building the settlement without government help. Failing in his grasp on the real, Nirmal does not take into account the other possibilities: political hypocrisy of the Left Front government and building political capital out of the issue of resettlement. His failure to analyse history through a materialist lens leaves him confounded and straddled his ideal conceptions of progress.

Just as Nirmal is trapped in his position as an idealist in his inability to fully comprehend the Marichjhanpi massacre, Piya finds it difficult to transcend her cosmopolitanism. Her vocation as a scientist is restricted to observing, recording, classifying and analyzing the marine mammals without the relationship of affect which would make her feel intimate with the tide country. In a way similar to Nirmal, her ideological and intellectual role models are a host of 'benevolent imperial knowledge gatherers' such as J.E. Gray, William Roxburgh and Edward Blyth. These naturalists of the 19th century are also the initiators of the movement for conservation throughout the Empire. They embody the liberal humanism that accompanies post-Enlightenment European thought, pursuing the vast expanse of knowledge available for its own sake. They are therefore, also the ideologues of initiative and enterprise. In their impulses of charting the habitat and the ecosystems of the Empire, they objectify life forms and are participants of a discourse of 'speciesism'. The 'deep ecological' conservatism embodied by Piya is derived directly from her precedent idols in the 'field' and cannot conceive of a nature which is not a stable category, a disjunct from the simultaneous political, historical and cultural processes that accompany it.

Piya's 'ecological bias' is constructed on the assumption of a stable and unchanging concept of nature which also allows her to see Fokir as the 'man of nature' as 19th century naturalists were prone to do, regarding the native insider as an adept guide of the landscape to be charted. The guide also functioned as a stable signifier of meaning which demonstrated, in effect, the relationship of unequal power between the naturalist and himself. Fancying Fokir to be also sharing her 'deep ecological' sympathies (Mukherjee 132), Piya makes the familiar mistake of presupposing that there was something 'common' between them. Kanai chastises her for entertaining such a supposition:

"You shouldn't deceive yourself, Piya: there wasn't anything 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...You're from different worlds, different planets."(p. 268).

In light of the later incident of tiger killing that Piya and Fokir come across in the novel, their difference surfaces most. What Piya forgets is that Fokir is far from the 'noble savage' living in communion with nature as she had envisioned him to be but the son of Kusum who was killed in the Marichjhanpi massacre, and therefore harbours strong vengeance against tigers. While the poor islanders and the tigers are engaged in fierce

competition in order to survive among meagre resources offered by the landscape, the specific imperatives mutual hatred converge when the villagers slaughter a tiger who had sneaked into human habitation. This atrocity is an act of barbarity to the ‘deep ecological’ sympathies of Piya for whom an animal is an animal and nothing more. Therefore, to avenge oneself upon it is an act of betrayal to the environment. But Kanai, being aware of the human-tiger relations in the tide country, is acutely aware of the problem and tries to refrain Piya from attempting to stop the killing. Piya disagrees, but in attempting to stop the killing is physically prevented by Fokir from intervening:

“He says, when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die.” (pp. 294-295)

This is the moment when Piya realises the relation between the villagers and the tiger and it is also her point of entry into an alternative historical perception of the postcolonial environment. This is also the subaltern perspective Nilima validates to Kanai. That the oddities of the postcolony has deemed the tigers to be more important than the humans of the tide country is evident from Nilima’s comment:

“Just imagine that!” said Nilima, “they [the forest department] were providing water for tigers! In a place where nobody thinks twice about human beings going thirsty!” (p. 241)

According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, what Ghosh attempts to advocate is —the sensible policy of no conservation without local consultation and participation (and to attack the alternative of interventionist arrogance, an arrogance matched by the brutal indifference of some of the Indian government park wardens, exemplified in the episode when, in pursuit of villagers who have burned alive a captive tiger, they accidentally run over a river dolphin “Piya’s symbol of hope for the survival of the species – in their boat.”)(Huggan & Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 188) By the end of the novel, Piya has also arrived at the same conclusion, realising she does not want to do “the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it” (p. 327)

Two parallel orders of knowledge or *epistemes* pervade the novel while describing the ecology of the tide country. One is the scientific-rational paradigm of understanding natural phenomenon that Piya and Nirmal adopts to understand the forest. This perspective privileges empirical objectivity and dissectibility of the natural surroundings as does Piya when she examines natural objects during her fieldwork. The same view is taken by Nirmal who considers himself a historical materialist and thus dismisses forms of other ‘knowledge (s)’ as superstition and false consciousness.

But these alternative forms of knowledge also challenge the normative understandings of both Nirmal and Piya. One such episode is the novel occurs when Nirmal, travelling on a boat reads from one of the iconic accounts written European historiography to Horen, the boatman, Bernier’s *Travels*. While reading the account of a storm three hundred years ago which Bernie recounts in his *Travels* on the same river they are travelling, Nirmal hopes to instruct Horen on the flows of history as recorded in the colonial consciousness. But through his intimate knowledge of the tide-country landscape, Horen keeps interrupting Nirmal’s reading with his own ‘text’:

“‘Oh!’ cried Horen. ‘I know where this happened: they must have been at Gerafitola.’ . ‘Rubbish, Horen’, I said. ‘How could you know such a thing? This happened

over three hundred years ago’

‘But I’ve seen it too’, Horen protested, ‘and it’s exactly as you describe—a creek, just off a big river. That’s the only place where you can see the moon’s rainbow—it happens when there’s a full moon and a fog.’ (p. 146).

Bernier’s account of the tempest he faced is interpreted by Horen as a violation of the mutual agreement between Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai in the folk mythology of the tide country. When Nirmal sharply chastises Horen saying that a storm, being an atmospheric disturbance, “has neither intention nor motive”, Horen calmly replies:

“As to that Saar...let us leave each other to our beliefs and see what the future holds” (pp. 146-147).

It is only gradually that Nirmal comes to realise that Horen’s knowledge and experiences are of a different order than his and this realisation leads him to see himself through the eyes of others. It is in the same way that the Gangetic and the Irawaddy river dolphins, which are legitimate objects of scientific study for Piya, are transformed into ‘Bon Bibi’s messengers’ in the stories of Kusum which she had told to her son Fokir. His coming to the Garjontola pool to meet his deceased mother is welcomed by the host of his *shushuk* friends’. (pp. 307-308).

The elaborate geography of the tide country crisscrossed with the distributaries of the Ganges are likened by Nirmal to “the rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else?”. (p. 247). As a confluence of cultures the tide country becomes the polyglossic site of converging voices, and nowhere is this more poignantly brought out than the legend of Bon Bibi in the *Bonbibibi Johuranama* which mythically brings out the origins of the tide country. Both the book and the *jatra* Kanai remembers going to when he was a child reveal this polyglossic aspect as Kanai realises,

“...the story of the tiger goddess did not begin either in the heavens or on the banks of the Ganges, like the mythological tales with which he was familiar. Instead, the opening scene was set in a city in Arabia...Medina, one of the holiest places of Islam.” (pp.102-103)

Arnapurna Rath and Milind Malshe, in their article titled ‘Chronotopes of ‘Places’ and ‘Non-places’: Ecopoetics of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*’ (Rath and Malshe 18) have drawn upon the chronotopic motifs proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in the ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’ in order to explore what they call the ‘ecopoetics’ of the tide country, largely in terms of its ‘idyllic’ as well as ‘folkloric’ chronotopes. For Bakhtin, there remains a strong sense of location (topos) and history (chronos) in his assessment on the nature of human communication based on dialogue and differences, plurality and time-space configurations. The time-space configurations which Bakhtin identified were based on ‘immediate realities’ rather than a ‘transcendental’ version of Kant’s analysis of time and space. With reference to the tide country, these ‘immediate realities’ could be taken to signify human-ecological/nature interactions. Time and space are construed as an inseparable whole, subverting perceived binaries between culture/nature and human/ nature. Bakhtin approaches the human-ecology dialogue through the interplay of ‘folkloric’ and the ‘idyllic’ chronotopes. The evolution of a class society, personal and public spaces, human labour and *collective time*, are constantly in dialogue with forces of nature in

the 'folkloric bases' of the community. The tidal land is witness to colonisation and decolonisation in the projects of Daniel Hamilton, the mass exodus of people of the tide country to the metropolis of Calcutta such as Kusum, the mass migration of refugees from Dandakaranya, the war of silences between Kanai and Fokir, the gaps between the official records of the Marichjhanpi massacre and the version recorded in Nirmal's memoirs and the gaps between wildlife conservation and the human crisis.

These fissures are rendered in the novel through phases of short, contradictory dialogue that demarcate the individual or 'private' spaces from the collective or 'public' ones. For example, the conflict between human and animal habitation is often worked out in terms of 'human' spaces and 'animal' spaces within the geography of the tide country, and the novel throws up certain significant questions on *who* interlopes on *whose* space:

"See, he says, people lived here once, but they were driven away by tempests and tides, tigers and crocodiles. "*Tai naki?*" says S'Daniel. Is that so? —But if people lived here once, why shouldn't they again? This is after all no remote and lonely frontier – this is India's doormat, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent." (p. 50)

The chronotopic motif of 'fear' pervades the interaction and intimacy between humans and tigers. This 'fear' is located both at the particular moment of contact (or perceived contact) with the animal as well as the site at which such a contact takes place. The peculiar relation of 'fear' is dealt with at the moment when Fokir explains to Kanai the reason why he knows the proximity of the unseen animal:

"Those are just burrows", he [Kanai] said smiling. "I saw crabs digging into them. What makes you think they have anything to do with the big cat?"

Fokir turned to flash him a bright, white smile. "Do you want to know how I know?"
'
Yes. Tell me.'

Leaning over, Fokir took hold of Kanai's hand and placed it on the back of his neck. The unexpected intimacy of this contact sent a shock through Kanai's arm and he snatched his hand back – but not before he had felt the goose bumps bristling on the moist surface of Fokir's skin....

'That's how I know,' he said. 'It's the fear that tells me.'" (p. 322)

It is this relationship of 'fear', embedded in the collective space of the tide country that gets mythologised in the elaborate legend of Bonbibi (the good) and Dokkhin Rai (the realm of evil).

For all of their exposure to the alternate histories of the tide country, the privileged elites like Nirmal and Piya have their normative constructions of what they understand as 'progress' radically altered. But the ecological conflict between humans and tigers over the territory of the tide country is left deliberately open-ended. The precise solution to the 'tiger problem' is evaded or rather displaced by the relatively easy 'dolphin solution'. Huggan and Tiffin argue that "the tortured tiger becomes a scapegoat for the past-and present sufferings of the refugees and is implicitly presented as being expendable in individual, if not collective, terms."⁴⁶ Piya's deeper understanding of the local habitation and

her decision to base herself in Sunderbans is possible only because the imperatives of local habitation do not have a problem with dolphins. Thus, even though the novel seems to offer a provisional solution to the human-animal ecological conflict, in the final analysis human responsibility is evaded and in the politics of preference over the anthropocentric/biocentric debate, the novel seems to imply that human beings, under all circumstances necessarily matter first. And finally, with such turn of argument, the novel also constitutes a wilful erasure of the competing narratives that foreground animals and deliberately chooses upon an anthropomorphic vein and locates its politics of preference therein.

Notes:

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- (i) Mehta, Pandey, and Visharat's report after visiting Marichjhanpi, quoted in both Mallick, 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves' and Sen, 'The Silence of Marichjhanpi'
- (ii) Memorandum to the visiting Members of the Parliament, quoted in Sen, 'The Silence of Marichjhanpi'
- (iii) Mallick has not cited any source to support this argument other than stating that this was learnt from 'Interviews with Indian Civil Service (ICS) Officers', which is probably owing to the need for secrecy.
- (iv) This is also footnoted as 'Interviews with IAS State Secretary, West Bengal' in Mallick's article.

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