



SENSE OF PLACE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE HUNGRY TIDE: A CRITIQUE

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Amitav Ghosh's greatest gift as a writer may well be his sense of place. A landscape, a city, a village on the edge of a desert: it is these images that we summon from his novels when we are distanced from them in memory. Perhaps this is what makes him such a master of the travel narrative, a form whose contours are shaped by places and their histories. His most recent book, *The Hungry Tide*, is set in the Sundarbans, the vast, intermittently submerged archipelago, largely covered by mangrove forests, that forms the delta of the Ganges as it debouches into the Bay of Bengal. The region is supposed to derive its name from the sundari tree, as the mangrove is locally called; in his book, Ghosh speculates on whether the name may not more simply correspond to *sundar ban*, beautiful forest, as many prefer to believe. Two-thirds of the Sundarbans are in Bangladesh, only one-third in India: it is a region whose fishing folk easily traverse the imaginary boundaries of the modern nation-state, crossing, as the wind and the tides take them, the mouths of the many river-channels that set up a unique turbulence of fresh and salt water washing the islands of the archipelago.

To this land discovered by the ebb-tide, *bhatir desh*, as Ghosh calls it in a remarkable and poetic application of the term used in Mughal land-records, come a young cetologist from the United States on the trail of a breed of freshwater dolphin, the *Orcaella brevirostris*, and a middle-aged linguist who runs a translation bureau in Delhi. The two are thrown together by chance, and for a time the male translator, Kanai Dutt, accompanies the female scientist, Piya Roy, as an unofficial interpreter. But the novel is not

really about their developing acquaintance. Much more centrally and in a far more extended way, it is about the many histories of the region they have come to. Kanai's aunt Nilima has lived in one of the islands for years; she sends for him after the discovery of a diary belonging to her long-dead husband Nirmala, a Marxist schoolteacher whose withdrawal from political activism had brought them to settle in a Sundarbans village. As Kanai reads the diary, its narrative of past events, hopes and disappointments (held together as much by the inexorable flow of historical time as by Nirmal's constant evocation of lines from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*), is interwoven with other stories. These include Kanai's own memories of a visit he paid his uncle and aunt as a child, his present experiences as a guest at Nilima's hospital, and Piya's search, aided by the fisherman Fokir, for the *orcaella*.

At the heart of Nirmal's diary is an historical event: the eviction of refugee settlers from the island of Morichjhapi in the Sunderbans by the Left Front government of West Bengal in 1979. For the old Communist in the novel, like many others at the time, this act of state violence was a betrayal of everything left-wing politics in the post-Partition era had stood for. It was these very leftists who had declared, in the face of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy's attempts to find land in neighbouring states for the successive waves of refugees who crossed over from East Pakistan in the forties and fifties, that they would not consent to a single one being resettled outside West Bengal. And indeed the conditions of such resettlement were harsh and alien. In 1978 a group of refugees fled from the Dandakaranya

camp in Madhya Pradesh and came to the island of Morichjhapi in the Sundarbans with the intention of settling there. They cleared the land for agriculture, and began to fish and farm. But their presence there alarmed the Left Front ministry, who saw it as the first of a possibly endless series of encroachments on protected forest land, and the settlers were evicted in a brutal display of state power in May, 1979. Many, like the girl Kusum in Ghosh's novel, Kanai's childhood playmate who becomes the repository of Nirmal's idealist hopes, were killed. Nirmal, who stays with the settlers during those final hours, is later discovered wandering in the port town of Canning; he is shattered by the event and never recovers. As the last significant expression of the trauma of Bengal's Partition, the story of Morichjhapi occupies a central place in the novel.

But it is only one of the histories - part fact, part fiction - that the Sundarbans of Ghosh's novel enfolds. There are others: the life cycle of the Orcaella, the story of its identification and the aquatic history of which it is part; the story of the port town of Canning, and the folly of its foundation by the British; the storms, named cyclones by the shipping inspector Henry Piddington, which ravage the region with irresistible ferocity; the visionary ambition of Sir Daniel Hamilton, who bought ten thousand acres of land in the Sundarbans and set out to build an ideal community; the tale of Bon Bibi and her worship, recounted in many folk epics, fusing Muslim and Hindu faith; and of course the present histories of Kanai, Nilima, Piya, Fokir, Fokir's wife Moyna and their son Tutul, among others. In a land regularly obliterated, at least in part, by the flood tide or by the huge tidal waves dredged up by cyclones (one of which marks the novel's climax), Ghosh makes us aware of the sedimentation of human history, the layers of past knowledge, experience and memory that constitute our human sense of place.

In our reading of such a work, characters may seem less important to us, appearing more as aspects of the places they occupy. Yet this would not be a true reflection of Ghosh's project in this novel. His sense of Bengali social history is, as always, unerring and profound. One of the most moving things in the novel is the textual tenor, at once perceptive and self-deceived, of Nirmal's diary, especially as it stands framed by the more

robust and enduring social activism of his wife Nilima, and by the common sense of his companion on his last journey, the fisherman Horen Naskor. To some extent the two visitors to these islands, Piya and Kanai, are thin-fleshed outsiders to the end, contributing much less by way of personal depth to the complicated tangle of genealogies and emotional and sexual history that makes up the plot. Yet their presence as focalizing centres is vital to the narrative: each, in her or his own way at once egotistic and work-obsessed, offers an opportunity to the narrator which Ghosh never fails to exploit.

Most remarkable is Ghosh's treatment of Kanai, a self-important, sometimes cocksure individual who ultimately becomes the locus of some of the novel's central reflections on language and on translation. It is through Kanai's translation, his mediating sensibility, that Nirmal's personal record, the Rilke that he reads in Buddhadeva Bose's Bangla translation, and the folk narrative of Bon Bibi that he writes down from Fokir's recitation, reach us, so the novel seems to claim, in English prose and verse. Some Bengali reviewers of *The Hungry Tide* have already asserted that their experience of reading it was like that of reading a novel in Bangla. This claim seems to me mistaken. Rather, the novel seems to push us into the crisis at the heart of translation, the paradox of representation itself. At one level, everything in the novel is translated, in that it seeks to represent, in English, a life, a culture, that is experienced principally through the medium of Bangla and its local variants. At another, nothing is: if representation is always a form of translation, one language is at any time as good as another - at most it may involve special difficulties that are also special opportunities. The one moment at which Kanai is robbed of the language that is his livelihood and his means of control is when, stranded on the mudbank, he sees the tiger. "The sounds and signs that had served, in combination, as the sluices between his mind and senses had collapsed: his mind was swamped by a flood of pure sensation." The meeting with the tiger, which may mean death or life, here as in the story of Dukhey and Dokkhin Rai, lies at that boundary of language which representation seeks, but never succeeds in containing.

Piya's scientific quest constitutes another pole of perception. Not that she is lacking a background:

she has a family history, which she recalls in moments of reflection, a present involvement with Fokir and Kanai, and a future, which she calmly claims at the novel's close. But it seems to me that her function in the novel is to represent the life she studies in the mingled waters, salt and sweet, of the tidal pool at Garjontala; the always-threatened, always-precious material of scientific enquiry which is also, in the fragile and immensely overburdened ecosystem of the Sundarbans, nature itself. She is by no means the novel's only conduit for reflections on the unique environment that affords her material for study. Nirmal, thinking of the necessity that compels the refugees to clear the forest and till the land on Morichjhāpi, as of the honey-collectors and woodcutters who go into the forest and are eaten by tigers and crocodiles, also asks a question central to the novel's concerns: whose is this land, nature's or man's? It is a question that cannot be answered, not even by the idealizing solution of co-existence. Piya is ultimately too practical and obsessive to bother with large answers; Nirmal is overcome by the very effort of posing the question.

It is the tone of the novel, alternately poetic, scientific and businesslike, that may suggest the nature of Ghosh's own thoughts on this subject. Beside the manifest threats posed by human settlement to the unique diversity of aquatic and terrestrial life in the mangrove swamps of the Sundarbans, beside the constant depletion of

aquatic species by fishing and trawling, there are equal dangers for the human settlers. Not only does the forest take its toll; the tides, too, exact their revenge. The constant erosion of dykes and embankments, the silting up of channels, the flooding by storm-waters, make human life on the islands no more, in the last analysis, than an accident or miracle. It was on such miracles that the hopes of visionaries like Daniel Hamilton or the settlers of Morichjhāpi were founded, and indeed there is no reason why human beings, like the many other species that uniquely inhabit this delta, should not serve to illustrate nature's capacity for survival. But the imminence of disaster, whether natural or human, covers the world of this novel with a kind of film by which "precious objects appear doomed and irrecoverable in the very moment of their perception", as Freud said in his essay *On Transience*. Its mood is elegiac, like that of the river novel in Bangla, as Bhaswati Chakravorty has named the form: but at the same time, it embodies the practical hope that leads us as human beings to continue to struggle and build on our doomed planet. Ghosh's critique of past and present mistakes, whether administrative or political, is at all times muted and restrained.

Works Cited

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*, Noida, Harpor Coollins Publishers. 2004