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# Silenced worlds: Language and experience in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

## **Abstract**

Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* is a story about the people of the Sundarbans, the tidal islands at the mouth of the Ganges and how they have survived the continual onslaughts of natural disasters and the equally violent shifting tides of postindependence politics in an area where such forces have had an ongoing and often destructive effect as peoples have been forced to move from their ancestral lands. The novel seeks to link the human stories with the broader story of the ecological and environmental forces that have acted on the region. Throughout Ghosh's novel language, speech, writing, translation and interpretation are confronted by forms of experience that resist the mediation of language.

GARETH GRIFFITHS

## Silenced Worlds: Language and Experience in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* is a story about the people of the Sundarbans, the tidal islands at the mouth of the Ganges and how they have survived the continual onslaughts of natural disasters and the equally violent shifting tides of post-independence politics in an area where such forces have had an ongoing and often destructive effect as peoples have been forced to move from their ancestral lands. The novel seeks to link the human stories with the broader story of the ecological and environmental forces that have acted on the region. Throughout Ghosh's novel language, speech, writing, translation and interpretation are confronted by forms of experience that resist the mediation of language. Experience always refuses to be contained by any single representation, but here it seems often to resist representation entirely, dramatising that not everything can be 'translated' between different cultures, let alone between different species. Each of the characters the novel 'goes behind' (in Henry James's telling phrase) Kanai, Piya, Niljiri and Nilima are outsiders to the Sundarban islands, the Bhata Desh or the Tide Country at the mouth of the Gangetic delta of Bengal. The characters they seek to represent, the 'natives' (using the term in its literal sense of those born there) of this marginalised world resist the various attempts each of these elite outsider figures makes to represent and define them. In turn, they define themselves only against further and radical forms of difference, the creatures, real and mythic, with whom they share this landscape.

How is this engagement with the limitations of representation signalled in the text? Kanai, the first figure whose point of view the reader shares is a professional translator, grounded in the belief that people can speak and be heard across the differences that separate them. But at crucial moments this confidence is brought down. For example, when Kanai asks Moyna, the ambitious trainee nurse to whom he is attracted, why she married the illiterate crab-fisherman, Fokir. She responds that he would not understand and he reacts angrily:

'I wouldn't understand?' he said sharply. 'I know five languages; I've travelled all over the world. Why wouldn't I understand?' 'She let her *āchol* drop from her head and gave him a sweet smile. 'It doesn't matter how many languages you know,' she said. 'You're not a woman and you don't know him. You won't understand.' (156)

It is Kanai's simplistic equation of language with experience that her answer reveals. Language has its place, but it is embedded in experience and cannot function as a substitute for it. Later, when Moyna asks Kanai to warn Fokir of the dangers of an entanglement with Piya, she makes clear the nature of language, its role and its limitations. Asked why she cannot explain this to her husband and a stranger can, she tells him:

Because words are just air, Kanai-babu... When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river runs beneath, unseen and unheard. You can't blow on the real river from below, Kanai-babu. Only someone who's outside can do that, someone like you. (258)

Language is confronted by experience in this way throughout this novel. For the scientist Piya, naming — and the control it seems to offer — is constantly defeated by the complexities of the people and landscape of the Tide Country. Her confidence in scientific definition and her need to understand and classify the world is constantly challenged, and slowly she is forced to accept that she can only 'witness' this difference and not know and control it through naming. When Fokir and Tutul take her to the Bon Bibi shrine she is lured away from her usual classificatory role into that of a 'witness', an observer, who can never be a full participant.

Piya stood by and watched as Fokir and Tutul performed a little ceremony. First they fetched some leaves and flowers and placed them in front of the images. Then, standing before the shrine, Fokir began to recite some kind of chant, with his head bowed and his hands joined in an attitude of prayer. (152)

Hearing the name 'Allah' spoken she wonders if Fokir is Muslim. But thinks he cannot be, as a Muslim would not pray to an image. Her defining mind is puzzled as the event cannot be settled into a fixed and neat category. But then she moves past this need to analyse. 'But what did it matter either way? She was glad to be there, as a witness to this strange little ritual' (152).

Even those who have lived their whole lives in the Tide Country, the Calcutta born couple Nirmal and Nilima, remain outside the world they have sought to understand and shape in crucial ways. Nirmal, the revolutionary dreamer and would be poet dismisses the way the boatman, Horen, interprets the narrative of the 17th century Jesuit traveller, Bernier, through his own intimate experience of the Tide Country.

'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. But never mind all that, Saar. Go on with your story.' (146)

When the Priest and his Portuguese guides are overtaken by a storm Horen interprets this through the Bon Bibi narrative as the result of their having crossed the line that divides the land of Bon Bibi from that of the demon Dokkhin Rai. This mythic interpretation provokes the rationalist Nirmal.

I grew impatient and said, 'Horen! A storm is an atmospheric disturbance: it has neither intention nor motive.'

I had spoken so sharply that he would not disagree with me, although he could not bring himself to agree either. 'As to that Saar,' he said, 'let us leave each other to our beliefs and see what the future holds.' (147)

Horen allows the myth to speak not through assertion but through embracing silence. In similar ways Fokir responds to the demands of the modern translator and language expert Kanai (Nirmal's nephew and his literary executor, to whom he addresses his revelation after the Marichjhāpi attack) through a similarly powerful silence. Seeking to hire Fokir to accompany Piya on her search for the Irrawaddy dolphins he speaks to him in a hearty way meant to be friendly. But as Piya notes 'there was no mistaking the condescension in Kanai's voice as he was speaking to Fokir: 'it was the kind of tone in which someone might address a dimwitted waiter, at once jocular and hectoring. It didn't surprise her that Fokir had responded with what was his instinctive mode of defence: silence' (210).

Each of these outsider characters comes to realise in time that language cannot fully translate let alone replicate the experiential reality of the Tide Country, an experiential reality that is translatable, if at all, only in the evanescent and fluid symbols of oral performance and story, that like the river and its islands are constantly shifting and evolving.

Kanai, like Nirmal, and Piya need to re-vision their conception of language and how it relates to and embodies experience. This is a progressive revision moving from the need to acknowledge the silenced human beings they encounter, to a need to listen to and acknowledge the many other 'silenced' entities of the Tide Country. These include all the entities and forces embodied in the myth of the Bon Bibi story, the usually 'silenced' worlds of the human, and the non-human, the animals, and the plants that together constitute the world of the Tide Country. For Nirmal the young Fokir becomes the means by which he can articulate his own growing acknowledgement of the power of the land and the voices it contains, which can be heard only if listened to in a receptive silence.

Nirmal takes the young Fokir to the bādḥ (the tidal dike) and asks him to listen. He hears the sound of the crabs, crabs that are burrowing into the bādḥ and which will in the end cause it to collapse when the tide flows. How long Saar asks can 'this frail fence last against these monstrous appetites — the crabs and the tides, the winds and the storms? ... Neither angels nor men will hear us and, as for the animals, they won't hear us either.'

'Why not, Saar?'

'Because of what the Poet says, Fokir. Because the animals

‘already know by instinct  
We’re not comfortably at home  
In our translated world.’ (206)

Acknowledging the animals allows Nirmal to begin to listen to the voices of others, and find his humanity not in its exclusivity and permanence but in its continuity with the transience and transformative processes of the natural world.

Pablo Mukherjee has suggested that the novel engages with the limitations of the ability of elite representation to encompass the reality of the subaltern inhabitants of the Sundarbans. He sees moments such as Kanai’s admission of his inability to translate Fokir’s sung account of the Bon Bibi legend as the moment when he sees himself ‘through other eyes’. A crucial perception of this moment is when Kanai recognises the significance of Fokir’s bringing him to the shrine of Bon Bibi. This is the shrine to which Fokir has previously brought Piya to witness that her dolphins are not only the scientifically named and so controlled species of river dolphins but also and uncontrollably the messengers of the hidden world of Bon Bibi. The shrine represents the endless struggle that underpins the whole natural world, a struggle that requires acceptance of the balance of disaster and triumph, of natural forces that destroy and create at the same time, and that requires human beings to recognise their own limitation and the role these broader forces play in their lives.

Much earlier in the novel this perception has been foreshadowed in Kanai’s childhood exposure to the Bon Bibi play when he learns that Bon Bibi has divided her realm allowing Dokkhin Rai and the forces of destruction a space to coexist.

Bob Bibi was merciful in victory and she decided that one half of the tide country would remain wilderness; this part of the forest she left to Dokkhin Rai and his demon hordes. The rest she claimed for herself, and under her rule this once-forested domain was soon made safe for human settlement. Thus order was brought to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order. (103)

Mukherjee is correct I think in suggesting that the novel asks us to question the universal and see it as needing to be revised through the locality of any action. He is correct too I think in seeing Piya as achieving ‘an understanding of the universal by learning to limit and revise her cosmopolitanism’ (Mukherjee 2006:187). But my own reading of the novel would want to go beyond Mukherjee’s concern to replace older critiques of the universal with a broader definition of what constitutes the human universal. The novel seems to me less concerned with this social revisionary goal, than with examining the concerns that underpin post-humanist theories, which argue that the exclusivity of the very category of the ‘human’ has been used to underpin a distinction from all other living beings that permits the exploitation of the animal world, and the natural resources of the plant world, the forests and the vegetation on which all life on the planet depends.<sup>1</sup> This larger theme is reflected in many places in the novel and each of the characters

moves towards a clearer sense of this interdependence of all life. Nilima's view that respects all life but which prioritises human lives represents perhaps the basic liberal, humanitarian position from which and against which all the other positions of the 'outsiders' are calibrated. But all the views of these 'outsider' characters whose inner reflections dominate the narrative are also placed against the broader and more communalist voice of the 'silenced' beings of the Tide Country, whose ultimate voice is expressed in the narrative of myth and in their enacted, not stated, connection with the rhythms of the natural world they inhabit and the creatures with whom they share it. Their relationship with that world is not defined by abstracted concepts such as conservation, as for them the natural world is one with which they live in mutual dependency, fishing it and when necessary defending themselves against it. It is this different — but in a way more profound — relationship with the natural that Piya has to accept when she is forced to realise that Fokir is not a projection of her ideal understanding and preserving nature. When she sees the villagers killing the tiger trapped in their animal pen she yells at Kanai: "I'm not going to run off like a coward ... If you're not going to do anything about this, then I will. And Fokir will — I know he will." (294) When Fokir joins in the killing of the trapped tiger who has attacked the villagers she is shocked and disappointed since she has assumed that he would share her beliefs. When Fokir offers her his view of the event, that when a tiger comes into a human settlement it wants to die, she refuses to hear it and literally covers her ears. But in short order she realises that her rejection of the villagers viewpoint of the tiger places her in the same camp as the foresters, when she sees the same corrupt guard that she had encountered on her trip to Lusibari on his way to beat and bully and extort bribes from the village for its self-preservative action.

The tiger killing leads to the most explicit discussion of the issue of conservation and its human effects in the novel. Kanai argues that perhaps these conflicts result from 'people like you who made a push to protect the wildlife here without regard for the human costs' and people like himself '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 are dying — after all they are the poorest of the poor' (301). Piya's counter, that 'if we do not respect what was intended — not by you or me — but by nature, by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive' if we '[cross] that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves... Once we decide we can kill off other species, it'll be people next — just the kind of people you're thinking of, people who're poor and unnoticed' (301). What are we to make of this debate? Piya encapsulates the argument at the heart of the post-humanist position. It was by assuming that some humans were not really human (for example, black slaves, Jews classed as *Untermenschen*, that is, subhumans) that their enslavement and killing could be justified. So the category of the human is itself implicated in these genocidal moments of history.

The defence of other species is the defence of all life, including our own. Yet in order to achieve this or to survive an attempt to act on this principal must we necessarily become involved in the kind of compromise that Nilima has lived — dramatised in her visits to the politicians in Delhi and her meetings with the Prime Minister Morarji Desai. In the same way, Piya is saved from the foresters only because Kanai ‘mentioned the names of a few friends and parted with a few notes’ (299). Nirmal (Saar)’s inability to make this compromise — having turned his back on the levers of power — has rendered him and his fellow teachers on their protest boat unable to effect any change in the attitude of the government towards the massacre at Morichjhāpi, and even helpless to save the few people they have taken off when they are ordered to return them or be arrested. So is the novel suggesting that the kind of compromise that Nilima and her foundation represent is the answer? At the end of the novel this is certainly the road that Piya begins to tread when she suggests that although her commitment to conservation is unabated her work should proceed under the banner of the Babadon Trust, with whom it would share its funds. This suggests that now she sees that ‘I don’t want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it’ (397).

But while this is part of the resolution it seems to me that *The Hungry Tide* asks us to think in larger terms, to consider not only the issue of environmental conservation and how it might be achieved but the issue of how we might begin to understand the diversity of the human not only as a readjustment between different kinds of human societies and values (the rich, the poor, the developed, the undeveloped, the articulate and the silenced) but also as a readjustment of the idea of how the human is defined in itself and how this needs to reflect the broader categories of life across species and even across the idea of the whole interrelated pattern of living forces that constitute the planet. This broader view which brings together the speechless world of the wild and the ultimate sign of cultivation, language and culture, is prefigured in the many moments when the human inhabitants or the visitors to this world of the eighteen tides interact across the boundaries of species and of speech — for example when Nirmal (Saar) sees the dolphins rising around his boat when Kusum takes him to see Bon Bibi’s messengers.

All the time our boat was at that spot, the creatures kept breaking the water around us. What held them there? What made them linger? I could not imagine. Then there came a moment when one of them broke the surface with its head and looked right at me. Now I saw why Kusum found it so hard to believe that these animals were something other than they were. For where she had seen a sign of Bon Bibi, I saw instead the gaze of the Poet. It was as if he were saying to me

Some mute animal  
Raising its calm eyes and seeing through us,  
And through us. This is destiny... (235)



This is Nirmal's reading but every figure in the novel has a reading that seeks to explain this communication, this conjunction of human and non-human, the intersection of all living things. For Piya, the scientist, it is a series of replicable and describable behavioural patterns that her research will be able to fix and understand. For Kanai it is a moment when the delta, itself is seen as a confluence not only of rivers but of languages and cultures including those species whose 'language' is, for the moment, untranslatable to human speech. For Fokir and Kusum it is the message that Bon Bibi represents, the larger pattern of myth in which all figures are inscribed both human, animal, and spirit. For the native inhabitants of the tide country the world of nature and the world of men interpenetrate and survival depends on the balance that Bon Bibi has inscribed in the mythic divided line of the Tide Country, and the actual lines of the tide resisting *bādh*, lines that are always threatening to be breached by the forces of destruction and greed, whether it is the devouring lust for flesh of Dokkhin Rai, or the desire for power and wealth of modern Indian society, forces that must be held in balance with the natural world. These readings are not reconciled but are rather used to explore the tension that must always ensue when language and human thought seeks to define its boundaries, boundaries that by definition always need to be breached and rebuilt for speech, writing and human consciousness to be realised at all since only in reaching and confronting a boundary is it defined.

Since these issues are posed here in the very form that the text seeks to question and define, language, writing and even in a sense literature and myth as the essence of story and narrative, it is perhaps in the continual referencing of the poet Rilke's idea of transformation, invoked throughout by Nirmal, that this key issue is posed. Nirmal is both a political animal and a poet. His failure as a revolutionary is also his success as a person who can transcend the brute materialism that allows his revolutionary colleagues, now successful social leaders, to remind him that for true revolutionaries people are to be set below ideology, 'you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs' (192). In defining Nirmal I would suggest Ghosh comes very close to defining the procedures of his own text, not that Nirmal represents Ghosh, but both are the figures in the novel that seek to find a way of writing their experience, even if that writing is always inevitably a failure, lost in the storm of the river, or in the impossible confluence of different languages and experiences. Trying to explain Nirmal to Piya Kanai (the other figure who seeks and fails to find a way of writing experience when he tries to translate Fokir's oral telling of the Bon Bibi myth) he says that Nirmal loves the poet Rilke for his belief in transformation and that Nirmal was a person 'who lived through poetry'. As a result, he says, his Marxist belief that the underlying material world shaped everything led him not to celebrate the domination of nature by man and the control of nature by industrialisation but rather to a sense that each thing acts to transform and modify everything else and to be transformed in its turn, As Kanai expresses it:

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 became stories — of a kind. (282–83)

This reflects Ghosh's own story-telling in many ways. Each of the characters speaks for one of these many elements of the world, the articulate, the silent, the living and the great forces of nature that shape their environment. To draw them together the narrative assembles facts then by the power of language transforms them into a single story — of a kind. So the novel simultaneously affirms the failure of language ever fully to encompass experience whilst by its very existence as language asserts the need always to struggle against this limitation. The pessimism that sometimes seems to colour the views of the protagonists as to the failure of language is finally answered in the fact of the novel's existence, making the novel one that 'speaks' for the silenced even while it acknowledges how difficult and partial such speech must always be.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The literature on posthumanism is now vast but one might perhaps consider the following as some key texts in a complex ongoing debate : Harraway 1991, 2003; Fukuyama 2002; Wolfe 2003a, 2003b; Tiffin and Huggan 2009.

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