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The Overseas Indian and the political economy of the body in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

In the often highly-charged cultural politics of India, difference is played out in various ways, including in gendered, religious, and social terms. A newer and less obvious difference emerges as India struggles to attract foreign investment to the country, beginning with the cultural and economic campaign to engage Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) – or Overseas Indians, to use the term now growing in popularity – and to kindle their interest in the homeland. The cultural and ideological gap between the Overseas Indian and the local or resident Indian, ostentatiously noted in literary narratives, marks the gap between India's ambitions to become a global socio-economy, and the reality of its present socio-economic state and its anxieties about globalization. In texts such as Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, this gap (despite the differences between the texts) ultimately appears to be persistent and insurmountable. The obduracy of the local Indian's cultural corpus, its resistance to the seemingly more dependent and malleable condition of the Overseas Indian, speaks not only of the persistence of the local against the global in India (contra many discourses of a rampant globalization), but also of anxieties about local problematics (corruption, social injustice, reactionary culture) which are not easily remediable.

Keywords

Overseas Indian, Aravind Adiga, Amitav Ghosh, *The White Tiger*, *The Hungry Tide*

Global ambitions, local reservations, and the Indian body

India, lauded over the last two decades or so as one of the emerging global economic powerhouses (together with Brazil, Russia, and China – known collectively in

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investment circles as the “BRIC” group), like many countries in that position has been intent on garnering foreign investment. This has meant the management of discourses to present an attractive and stable nation to the international community, as seen for example in its lavish and spectacular “Incredible India” tourism campaign, which was first conceived of in 2002 (Incredible India Campaign, 2002). At the same time, however, this has also meant countering the negative international attention that is attracted by episodes of communal violence such as the Babri Mosque incident, publicity about rampant corruption, including that highlighted by Anna Hazare’s crusade (Anna Hazare website, n.d.), concerns over possible human rights violations particularly in the treatment of women and of Dalits, and other such factors.

The ambivalent attitude that Overseas Indians might thus have towards their homeland is recognized in public and governmental discourses as well as in Indian Anglophone literature. The government of India’s High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora, which published its study in 2001, reflects this ambivalence in parts of its characterization of Overseas Indians and their likely relationship to India. Speaking of Overseas Indians in the USA, for example, the Committee notes their past contributions in the form of lobbying against anti-India legislation and financial contributions to disaster relief in India, but cautions that “they would also be keen to invest if the issues of corruption and related procedural obstacles are sorted out” (High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora, 2001: xx). While the Committee’s (and the Indian government’s) concern is primarily with Overseas Indians’ perceptions of and engagements with India, the report does also reflect something of the ambivalence on the part of the general Indian public towards Overseas Indians. The report acknowledges that “the Indian public is relatively unacquainted either with the kaleidoscopic traits of its diaspora, or with its contribution to Indian welfare” (High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora, 2001: xi). The express goals of the High Level Committee – to “acquaint the Indian public with the depth, variety and achievements of the Indian diaspora, sensitize it to their problems and their expectations from their mother country, propose a new policy framework for creating a more conducive environment in India to leverage these invaluable human resources – and thus forge stronger ties between the two” (xi) – point to an underlying awareness of the uphill task of not just familiarizing “the Indian public” with its diaspora, but indeed justifying the latter’s importance and role to the former.

Not unexpectedly, the body becomes the ideological and symbolic battleground in which this foreign–local distinction is played out. Bodily differences have often been the markers used to distinguish “outsiders” and “insiders” (and disparage the former), including in such obvious ways as the overt racism of colonial discourses encountering the “coloured” native body, or the use of skin colour (“varna”, the sanskrit word colour, is also used for the markers associated with each caste) in the caste scheme in India (Gikandi, 1997: 150; Sankaran, 2011: 96). More specifically, a politics of the body has been marshalled to posit a national cultural continuity and traditionalism at odds with, and resistant to, the change and transition associated with European modernity. Thus Tania Roy (2011: 29–31) mobilizes subaltern theory in her reading of the female body in Vivan Sundaram’s photo-montages, arguing that Sundaram’s use of the native female body in his search for a new and authentic indigeneity paradoxically relies on a cultural

traditionalism already imposed upon that female body by certain nationalist discourses. Sundaram's ironic stance thus foregrounds the femininity and nativeness of the body as a kind of "postcolonial re-take", a means of invoking cosmopolitanism while simultaneously denying its European roots (Roy, 2011: 32). Yet the appeal to a native authenticity need not necessarily be grounded in the body of the female native, of course: as Brian Keith Axel (2001: 35) shows, one of the key images in Sikh constructions of a homeland involves the "masculinized body of the amritdhari" (the orthodox observant Sikh male), thus as it were rooting the construction of a Sikh homeland in the observable bodily practices of the masculine Sikh way of life (see Axel, 2001: 35). Other debates over globalization have similarly focused on the body – the bent and servile body of the foreign domestic worker, the abject and broken body of the migrant worker, the hierarchical subordination of the foreign worker in cosmopolitan city-spaces, the crowded mass of bodies in foreign dormitories and ghettos – as the symbolic terrain wherein the values and consequences of globalization are most sharply delineated and contested (Constable, 2002; Ehrenreich, 2002; Harvey, 1997; Sassen, 1996).

How exactly are the global and local contested, in the symbolic domain of the body? In their far-reaching theory of the cultural and psychological processes of global capital, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari characterize capitalism as the ultimate abstracting machine, one that "tends toward a threshold of decoding that will destroy the socius in order to make it a body without organs" (1984: 33). Capitalism's work thus places it in opposition to the "primitive territorial machine" which "codes flows, invests organs, and marks bodies" through the processes of "tattooing, excising, incising, carving, scarifying, mutilating, encircling, and initiating" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 144). The primitive machine is associated with the local, since it is manifested (among other things) in "connective, disjunctive, and conjunctive relations" of peoples, in contrast to the de-territorializing and de-relationalizing work of global capitalism (1984: 145). Yet this is not to create a simplistic binary, a naïve anthropology of a native pre-economy utterly distinct from a capitalist economy. Primitive or pre-global economies are no less systems of codes, flows of production, and exchange, differing only in that they rely on "kinship", "local ties", the earthy and manifest signs of "filiation", in contrast to the homogenizing effect of a global capital which rides rough-shod over local particularities, transforming all peoples and communities into the abstract equivalents of labour machines, producing machines, desiring and consuming machines (1984: 142-7).

As sweeping as Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical conceptualization can be, it offers a useful schematization of two economies: an older one that operates on a more regional basis and mobilizes local ties and connections, and a newer vast post-Fordian one that tends to ignore local ties within its global logic. Stuart Hall seems to mean something similar, when he speaks of:

two forms of globalization, still struggling with one another: an older, corporate, enclosed, increasingly defensive one which has to go back to nationalism and national cultural identity in a highly defensive way, and to try to build barriers around it before it is eroded. And then this other form of the global post-modern which is trying to live with, and at the same moment, overcome, sublate, get hold of, and incorporate difference. (1991a: 33)

The older form, in its opposition to the global post-modern and its abstract homogenizing tendency, resorts to a “defensive exclusivism”, an insistence on a doggedly national, local, “masculine”, “ground up”, and “minority” culture (Hall, 1991a: 25, 34-5). It is thus cognate with Deleuze and Guattari’s (1984: 144) primitive economy, with its “marked bodies” whose inscriptions emphasize their place within local systems of production.

Marked bodies – masculine, obdurate, grounded, and earthy – thus become the symbolic domain of older and resistant forms of production, in their conflict with the invasive and transformative “global post-modern” or late transnational capitalism. The body, depicted as differently and adamantly “local” (through various narrative techniques), becomes the site on which to base the “counter-movements, resistances, counter-politics” of the local (Hall, 1991b: 61). Recent Indian Anglophone fiction registers this older resistant economy in the symbolism of peculiarly marked bodies – often masculine, odiferous, even diseased or deformed – that stand in brave if also futile opposition to the sophisticated resources and systems of knowledge that come in and threaten to transform and ultimately erase local particulars. Accordingly, it is the Overseas Indian – suave, knowledgeable, with a seemingly unflappable self-assurance, but also a disconnect with his or her own body, and with the body of the nation – who is figured as the invasive outsider, and whose bodily unease becomes the symbol of contemporary Indian society’s anxiety over late global capitalism.

The White Tiger: Bodies, values, and the Indian cautionary tale

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* is a significant text for this set of themes, since it explicitly foregrounds the clash of values between a primitive Indian heartland and an aspirational foreign sphere. Some critics have taken issue with what they see as the “re-orientalizing” and inventively “exoticizing” nature of the novel’s depiction of India, its capitalizing on poverty – what appears to be “stealing stories from the poor” – for an international audience (Korte, 2010/2011: 295; Mendes, 2010: 276-7). What the debate does not address is a complex and elaborate local–foreign distinction within the novel itself, which is not merely to accentuate the exoticism of the local, but to sound out a real socio-economic anxiety concerning contemporary India. Issues of exoticizing the Indian poor ultimately recede in the face of Adiga’s intense depiction of India’s “feudal” economy, localized in the body of both its oppressors and oppressed, and the implications this has within a transnational world order.

This epistolary novel takes the form of long narrative letters that the protagonist, Balram, addresses (whether or not they ever get sent or delivered) to Wen Jiabao, Premier of “the Freedom-loving Nation of China” (Adiga, 2008: 1).¹ As Balram expresses his admiration for China – the fact that it was never fully under colonial rule, that it is infra-structurally and socially “far ahead of [India] in every respect” (2) – this allows him to make the unfavourable contrast with India’s social backwardness that frames his own story. Although Balram is in many respects an unreliable narrator, and his expressions of China’s superiority often sound as exaggerated and ill-considered as many of his condemnations of aspects of Indian society, this trope of India’s unfavourable contrast with

China crops up elsewhere in Adiga's work. For example, in his most recent novel, *Last Man in Tower* (2011), a brash Mumbai property developer Dharmen Shah constantly raves about China, and Shanghai in particular, contrasting his work-related woes in Mumbai with what he imagines he could have accomplished in China: "Roads as far as the eye can see, skyscrapers, everything clean, beautiful ... Those Chinese have all the will power in the world. And here we haven't had ten minutes of will power since Independence" (Adiga, 2011: 55).

If this recurring preference for China over India indicates something of Adiga's own views, it also ties in with a larger indictment of India running through *The White Tiger*. India is characterized as a "dark" region, socially backward due to its caste system, corruption, appalling educational and other social systems, seemingly insurmountable income divide, and other such factors. This is particularly true of the North Indian "heartland" of Bihar (from which Balram hails) and surrounding states, but rather less true of some of the more progressive parts of India which have been the beneficiaries of foreign investment and influence – such as the high-tech city of Bangalore in South India, where the fugitive Balram transforms himself into an entrepreneur (Goh, 2011). This transformation, against all the odds that Indian society stacks against a poor, uneducated, low-caste, and unconnected individual like Balram, can only happen after he does the unthinkable: robbing and murdering his rich employer, and in the process consigning his extended family to a painful retribution.

Balram's own background and career clearly prejudice his narrative, and that certainly includes his view of his rich employer's family – "The Stork", an oppressive landowner from Balram's own village, and his two sons Mukesh and Ashok. However, this prejudice is what makes his positive view of Ashok's wife, Pinky, all the more significant. An American of Indian origin (she returns to the USA after the breakdown of her marriage to Ashok), Pinky's difference from the oppressive callousness typical of Indians of her class is even more marked than that of her US-educated husband. Pinky is the embodiment of the Overseas Indian in this novel: progressive in dress (she wears short skirts and trousers, to Balram's astonishment) and manner (she is reputedly a Christian, and her outspokenness violates expectations of Indian women), she stands in stark relief to the "darkness" of India all around, so much so that her impact on Balram is palpable. Initially his is a reaction of shock, to the superficial elements of her dress and behaviour:

She wore pants; I gasped. Who had ever seen a woman dressed in trousers before – except in the movies? I assumed at first she was an American, one of those magical things he had brought home from New York, like his accent and the fruit-flavored perfume he put on his face after shaving. (65)

Interestingly, Balram commodifies her, as a "thing" bought and imported from overseas by Ashok, and both Pinky and Ashok over the course of the novel will be identified by the clothes and possessions that make up their smooth surfaces.

Her difference is not merely external, however, and importantly also extends to her values, and her attitude to India and its people. Pinky acts as a crucial contrast to show up the moral paucity of the Indian upper class, and her defining act is to oppose Ashok's

family's plan to make Balram the fall guy for her hit-and-run accident. Ashok's family's plot reveals the depth of the privileged Indian class' oppression of their servants; as Balram puts it:

The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse. (145)

The outrageous oppressiveness of the Indian elite class is only slightly tempered by its members who have had the benefit of studying or working overseas; thus Ashok is a relatively benign member of his class. Balram pays him the high compliment of saying "he was capable of becoming someone better than his father" (135), and in the early part of the novel is willing to see the good in his master, contrasting him with his family members (none of whom have lived abroad). Ashok's family typifies the feudalism of Indian society, not just because their wealth is based in land holdings in the rural areas of Bihar state, but also because of their backward attitude to and treatment of their servants, their assumptions about the subordinate status of women, and their assumption of their own unassailable superiority compared to the Indian masses. Yet in the final analysis, Ashok is complicit in his family's scheme to make Balram go to jail for the accident. As Balram puts it: "He returned from America an innocent man, but life in Delhi corrupted him" (167). After his wife's abandonment, Ashok gradually gives up the behaviour and values of the Overseas Indian, assuming the *modus operandi* of Indian business: listening in on Ashok's self-justifying discourse with his brother "The Mongoose" when they refuse to give alms to a beggar late in the novel, Balram concludes

That was when it struck me that there really was no difference between the two of them. They were both their father's seed. (206)

Far from faultless, Pinky is depicted as a deracinated and unhappy individual, at odds with all that she sees in Indian culture and society (her tag-phrase, "what a fucking joke", becomes as much a running indictment of India's "darkness" as Balram's scathing and more detailed views), yet married into and thus complicit with a family that epitomizes the worst of India's corruption, oppression, and greed. Her treatment of Balram, while less oppressively feudal and systematic than that of Ashok's family members, is nevertheless dismissive and contemptuous. She makes Balram the butt of her jokes for his superstition, his lack of education, his mis-pronunciation of English words like "pizza" and "mall", and other deficiencies which are the product of his upbringing rather than any fault of his own.

Yet her response to the accident is unique, and defining. While Ashok and Balram are intent on leaving the scene as quickly as possible and covering up the incident, Pinky insists "we have to go back ... we have to take that thing to the hospital" (139). When the family's anxiety over the accident is relieved by the information that no-one has reported it, the family members engage in their characteristic activities – Ashok and his brother play a computer game, while Ashok's father has Balram bathe and massage his feet

– while neglecting to inform Balram and ignoring his fear and anxiety. It is Pinky who expostulates with the family over this cavalier treatment of their servant:

“Has no one told him? What a fucking joke! He’s the one who was going to go to jail!” (153)

When in his relief at the news Balram upsets the bucket in which he is bathing his master’s feet, and is smacked on the head for this, again the effect on Pinky is palpable:

Pinky Madam watched; her face changed. She ran into her room, and slammed the door. (Who would have thought, Mr. Jiabao, that of this whole family, the lady with the short skirt would be the one with a conscience?)

The Stork watched her go into her room and said, “She’s gone crazy, that woman. Wanting to find the family of the child and give them compensation – craziness. As if we were all murderers here.” He looked sternly at Mr. Ashok. “You need to control that wife of yours better, son. The way we do it in the village.” (153)

It is shortly after this that Pinky leaves Ashok, waking Balram up in the middle of the night to drive her to the airport, and in parting giving him an envelope with 4,700 rupees in it.

The clash between Pinky and Ashok’s family thus turns out to be a clash, not between anything as simplistic as good and evil, nor egalitarian and hierarchical social assumptions, but rather between the Overseas Indian’s vision of privilege, and that of the feudal native Indian. What she balks at is not the idea of having servants and being waited on hand and foot, but the idea that the lower orders are essentially owned body and soul by the Indian elite. Hers is a version of elitism consonant with the American market society which shapes her: she shows a respect for rule of law (she initially tries to return to the accident scene), but also expects that she can pay a dollar-price to “compensate” for her actions. Her farewell gesture to Balram typifies this value system: the 4,700 rupees she wordlessly and brusquely thrusts at him is essentially what might be termed “pain and anguish” money in a civil suit or out-of-court settlement. While rule of law and the idea of monetary compensation are staples within the kind of market ideology Pinky is used to, what is obviously incompatible with that ideology is the notion so deeply ingrained in Ashok’s family, that the life of the lower orders is so worthless and sub-human that they can be run over with impunity, and that servants can be compelled to go to jail for their employers.

Pinky can thus be seen as representing the kind of “global post-modern” capitalist culture that Hall speaks of (1991a: 33), one that seeks to transform local forms of business into its own image – an image that, while entirely exploitative and given to socio-economic inequalities, needs to temper its operations with discourses and gestures of humanism, and which believes that a large part of that tempering and humanizing effect can be carried out by money. It then makes sense to see Ashok’s family as embodying the kind of older, nationalistic capitalism that Hall (1991a: 33) places in opposition to the global version (1991a: 33). This older nationalistic capitalism of the Thakur family is marked by its literal rootedness in the land of India: the origins of their wealth are in land-ownership (“Thakur” is a title or name traditionally given to the landowning class), which is thoroughly feudal, although they subsequently also branch out into other forms of wealth.

As Deleuze and Guattari (1984: 144) suggest, the older form of capitalism tends to be distinguished from the newer global form by its marking of the body. Adiga's vision accords with this, his novel reinforcing the feudalism of "Dark" India by the curious physical marks on its denizens. This is done primarily through animalistic images that reinforce the socio-economic pecking order. All of the feudal barons of Balram's village have animal nicknames, according to their "peculiarities of appetite", but also according to their particular feudal economies: thus the "stork" is named for his control of rivers and taxing of fishing, the "raven" both for his control of the poorer pasture lands and for his predilection for "dipping his beak into [the] backsides" of goatherds who are unable to pay him, the "wild boar" both for his control of the good agricultural land but also for his two protruding tusk-like teeth which are exposed when he leers at females, and the "buffalo" because he is "the greediest of the lot" who had already "eaten up the rickshaws and the roads" (20-1). The stork, Ashok's father, had "bad legs, with blue veins in them" (60), which he requires Balram to bathe and massage in warm water, so it is almost as if his varicose condition had stemmed from his namesake animal's activity of standing in predatory pose for long periods of time. Adiga's animal symbolism, more than just exercising Balram's fancy and talent for caricature, calls attention to the gross material bodies of the feudal lords and their peculiar feudal enterprises. Adiga extends the animal imagery to the bodies of the servants as well. Balram's own nickname, given by another rich man's servant, is "country-mouse", which is meant to denote his rustic naïveté, but also reinforces his rural origins even when he is living and working in Delhi, and thus the perpetuation of his exploited position. This senseless but implacable logic of exploitation and victimization is reinforced through another animal image, Balram's favourite metaphor for Indian society, namely the "Rooster Coop". Adiga compares India's downtrodden working class to chickens in the slaughter house who "smell the blood" and "see the organs of their brothers lying around them", yet "do not try to get out of the coop" (147). This visceral image is echoed in the daily lives of the working poor that Balram sees all around him: from the worn-out body of his overworked labourer father with his spine like a "knotted rope" and clavicle like a "dog's collar", to the blood that spews out of his father's mouth as he dies of TB, to the *paan* that Balram and the other men chew which stains their mouths red, to the pronounced "vitiligo lips" that characterize another driver, to the slum-dwellers defecating in rows by the railway (22; 59; 102).

These "marked bodies" of the feudal economy are in stark contrast to the smooth, unmarked and attractive bodies of the Overseas Indians, whose distinctive features come not from bodily deformities and quirks, but rather from the expensive veneer placed on them by global capitalism. Balram initially notes Ashok's good physique, his tall and well-fed "landowner's body" unlike the dark stunted body of his brother the "mongoose". However, his subsequent descriptions of Ashok focus on his possessions and clothes: the cell-phone that he is constantly playing with, and the plain white t-shirt with a "foreign word" on it that Balram is so taken with that he immediately searches for and buys an imitation in the "local market". Pinky is even more closely defined by her possessions and appearance than Ashok. Balram's descriptions of Pinky frequently focus on her accoutrements – the "pants" and "short skirts" that mark her difference from local Indian women, her heavy make-up, the scent of her foreign perfume – so much so that her

careless appearance during the trauma of the traffic accident shocks him. This face, with “no makeup on, and her face...a mess” (153), is shocking precisely because it is habitually covered up, the smooth surface of the capitalist “body without organs”; its shocking appearance comes precisely at the point of her crisis moment, her realization that marriage to Ashok means living like an Indian in India, and that she would have to leave Ashok and India in order to resume her accustomed way of life. Likewise, the only time the smooth surface of Ashok’s cosmopolitan body ever slips, is when he discovers Pinky’s abandonment, when he becomes a drunken, dishevelled, “red eyed” creature, “not even talking on the phone, for once” (157-8). Interestingly, when Balram kills him, Ashok degenerates to a beastly physical form, a “crawling thing”, “The Stork’s son”, and finally a bleeding thing that reminds Balram of “the way Muslims kill their chickens” (245-6). Strangely enough, he also takes on the marked bodily characteristic of the Indian servant: just before Balram issues the *coup de grace*, he runs his fingers over Ashok’s “clavicles to make out the spot”, and in that instant is reminded of his father’s TB-consumed body, “the junction of the neck and the chest, the place where all the tendons and veins stick out in high relief” (245). Death, the proverbial great leveller, also reinforces the essential link between master and servant in the Indian economy, the bodies similarly marked by the socio-economic system in India, underneath the inequalities of wealth.

Adiga’s narrative fascination with marked bodies works out a logic that emphasizes the gulf in values and outlooks between local and Overseas Indians, underlying which is an implicit separation of Indian and global businesses. The “Great Socialist”, the politician assiduously courted by the Thakur family, makes this explicit early in the novel when the Stork introduces him to Ashok as his son “returned from America recently”, to which the politician replies “Good. We need more boys to come back and build India into a superpower” (87). Ashok’s decline (catalysed by the abandonment of his NRI wife) from Overseas Indian representing a more benevolent and humane outlook, to someone fully implicated in his family’s “landowner” mode of business, to a dying “thing” that brings out its underlying bodily resemblance to the mortal body of the labourers tormented by his family, does not bode well for the possibility of rapprochement between new and old, global and nationalistic capitalism, in Adiga’s vision of things.

The Hungry Tide: Romancing the native, planting the foreign

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, like Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, depicts a clash of local and foreign Indians, using its characters to symbolize a confrontation between locally rooted and transnational values and modes of operation. In both novels, what is at stake in this confrontation is implicitly the survival of India, figured in Ghosh’s novel in the precarious ecology and economy of the Sundarbans and their dwellers, and the ways in which they are affected by the presence of the foreigner. Ghosh may call himself a “disillusioned Marxist” (Alam, 1993: 140), and *The Hungry Tide* is almost as sceptical of socialist visions as Ghosh’s other novels; yet the remnants of socialist-style ideas about society can be seen in *The Hungry Tide*’s rejection of the Overseas Indian’s simplistic individualist values, even as it is simultaneously more sympathetic to the downtrodden

Indian class than is *The White Tiger*. As in Adiga's novel, Ghosh depicts a triangular relationship between the Overseas Indian female, the semi-cosmopolitan Indian elite male, and the adamantly local labourer, and as in Adiga's novel, too, the triangle leads to a confrontation with tragic consequences. However, there are a number of significant differences between the novels, which point to Ghosh's different vision of the local–foreign relationship. Ghosh's penchant for historical or epic romances – seen particularly in his other novel *The Glass Palace*, and also in the first two novels in his *Ibis* trilogy, but also evident in *The Hungry Tide* – creates a more sentimental plot and structure of meanings, than the scathing satire in Adiga's novel. It also seeks some form of resolution of the local–foreign impasse, some rapprochement of the two in the trope of sexual attraction. Yet viewed from the perspective of two different economies – the cash-driven and knowledge-intensive economy of the global, and the physical and oppressive economy of the local – in the final analysis Ghosh does not paint a much more optimistic vision of India's global future than does Adiga. It is thus instructive that Ghosh's romance of the native, seemingly so different from Adiga's dark cautionary tale, should ultimately reflect a common vision of the gulf between the Indian and the global spheres.

The Hungry Tide tells the story of Piyali (Piya) Roy, an American caetologist of Indian descent who goes to the Sundarbans to survey its marine mammal population. On her journey there, she encounters Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi on the way to the Sundarbans to visit his aunt and to sort out his deceased uncle's papers in accordance with his last wishes. Both Piya and Kanai are "outsiders", by the latter's own estimation (Ghosh, 2005: 4).² Piya is clearly marked as an Overseas Indian: although born in Calcutta, she considers Seattle her "hometown", speaks no Bangla at all (nor Hindi, for that matter) despite her Bengali background, and is free of the traditional markings of the Indian woman: "there was no *bindi* on her forehead and her arms were free of bangles and bracelets", her hair is severely cut unlike the long oiled locks of most Indian women, she wears "loose cotton pants and an oversized white shirt" rather than sari, and the "androgyny" of her "slim" figure is at variance with the more fuller figured Indian women depicted in the novel (3). The reader's first glimpse of her at the beginning of the novel, filtered through Kanai's eyes, marks her distinctly as "a foreigner", "not Indian, except by descent" (3). Kanai notices the "unaccustomed delineation of her stance", her quality of being "out of place, almost exotic", and later has a contretemps with her over spilled tea in which he blurts out challengingly, "Does anyone have a choice when they're dealing with Americans these days?" (3; 10).

Yet Kanai is no rooted local himself, neither Overseas Indian nor fully located in India. His deracination is established from the experience of "rustication" he undergoes as a child, in which he is sent away from Calcutta to his relatives in the Sundarbans for misbehaviour (15). As a student he wins a scholarship and studies in Paris and Tunisia (199). Later as an adult, he moves from Calcutta to Delhi in order to run a translation business that "specialized in serving the expatriate communities" of the nation's capital (20). Fluent in six languages (not including dialects), exuding a "metropolitan affluence" immediately noticeable to the beggars and hawkers who surround him at the train station, successful but without family of his own, flirtatious but emotionally unavailable, Kanai is clearly a version of the cosmopolitan Indian in India, someone with an international

education and outlook, but one who is in many ways still tied to his locale rather than a fully fledged expatriate like Piya.

Kanai's Indianness, notwithstanding his cosmopolitanism, is seen in his unconscious mirroring of many of the elitist assumptions and acts of inequity that he sees around him. His position in the highly hierarchical and exploitative social economy of India is hinted at in the very first chapter, when he "persuades" a train passenger (carefully noted to be "elderly and somewhat subdued-looking") to give up his window seat to Kanai (5). The victim of Kanai's subtle bullying cues the reader in to the workings of Indian society and Kanai's place in it. Initially thinking of resisting, the victim

on taking in Kanai's clothes and all the other details of his appearance...underwent a change of mind: this was clearly someone with a long reach, someone who might be on familiar terms with policemen, politicians and others of importance. Why court trouble? He gave in gracefully and made way for Kanai to sit beside the window. (5-6)

Like the Thakur family in *The White Tiger*, Kanai despite his education and cosmopolitan outlook is very much rooted in the system of privilege and connections (real or putative) that defines the Indian way of life depicted in both Adiga's and Ghosh's novels.

Piya and Kanai thus correspond to the figures of Pinky and Ashok respectively in Adiga's novel. They are sharply contrasted with the local denizens, in particular Kusum (Kanai's childhood companion who has been killed in settler violence in Morichjhapi, and who is described through the memories of Kanai's uncle Nirmal), and the fisherman Fokir who comes to Piya's rescue early in the novel and serves as her guide and factotum and who is also Kusum's son. The inhabitants of the Sundarbans are intimately but also tragically tied to the land, a particularly treacherous and unforgiving territory of small islands filled with predators like crocodiles and tigers, and deeply affected by silting and changes in the river's course over time. Survival in this strange land depends heavily not only on strength, hard work and courage, but also on a deep local knowledge, an almost mystical reverence for the land, which is personified in the local god and protector-figure Bon Bibi (100-5). In this novel, Ghosh is fascinated by the body of the terrain, and the effect that it has on the body of its inhabitants. The first description of the Sundarbans occurs in the excerpt from his uncle's journal that Kanai reads on the train, a highly poetic and symbolic description that emphasizes the region's vast body and complex contours: it is an "immense archipelago of islands", "stretching for almost three hundred kilometres", with each mangrove forest "a universe unto itself", often filled with an "impassably dense" foliage (6-8). The anthropomorphic parallels between the body of the Sundarbans and the Indian body are also made clear: the Sundarban islands are the "ragged fringe of [India's] sari" and, following that feminine metaphor, the shifting tides are said to "gestate...overnight mangroves", a "strange parturition, midwived by the moon" (7-8). If the islands are the birth-child of the feminine waters, the forests are the hardy masculine body grown to maturity, with "tough and leathery" mangrove leaves and "gnarled" branches like the hard body of the Indian worker. The primary masculine economy of the region, fishing (also Fokir's

occupation), is alluded to in this description as well, with the skein of river channels spreading across the islands “like a fine-mesh net” (7).

There is, of course, a productive logic underlying this metaphorical link between the land and its inhabitants: the “gnarled” hardness of the land literally produces gnarled native bodies as they struggle to make their living in this harsh environment. Piya’s first impression of Fokir is of a man much older than her, although he turns out to be close to her age, “in his late twenties”: worn out by hard living, “his frame was not wasted but very lean and his long, stringy limbs were almost fleshless in their muscularity” (46). Later he is explicitly linked to the foliage of the mangrove jungle in and around which he makes his living: stumbling her way through the jungle, Piya trips and throws “her arms around his torso as though he were a pillar or a tree trunk” (151). At the end of the novel, when he uses his body to shelter hers during the cyclone, the identification of man and tree is reinforced: “Where she had had the tree trunk to shelter her before, now there was only Fokir’s body” (390). His “skeletal frame”, look of “utter destitution” and “protruding bones” recall the body of the poor labourer, Balram’s father, in *The White Tiger*. However, while Balram’s father insists on Balram’s education – literally working himself to death to try to ensure it – as his son’s means of escaping the “Darkness” of Indian poverty, Fokir takes his son Tutul away from his wife Moyna’s ambitious educational plans, teaching him the life of the land instead.

This difference in the father–son relationship, and in the hope for India’s future represented by the child, points to Ghosh’s romantic idealism, and his different vision of India’s socio-economic future, compared to Adiga. Adiga’s view of the local economy is so scathing that it is only the complete outsider, the Overseas Indian, who can offer any hope for redeeming values, although in the final analysis neither Pinky nor Ashok is strong enough to endure and transform the local. Ghosh’s view of the local economy, in contrast, is – to use the social utopian terminology of Kanai’s uncle Nirmal – a “dream” of a better society (173), in which hardy and brave natives battle the elements to eke out an honest living from the land. Again, it is Fokir that embodies this dream: defying his wife’s materialistic and social-climbing ethos, he is most at home pitting his body against tide and jungle, and most emasculated and aetiolated in the presence of Moyna’s and Kanai’s urbane materialism. After he rescues her and brings her safely to Lusibari, thus coming back under Moyna’s control (and Kanai’s deprecating gaze), Piya notices the change that comes over Fokir:

There was a fugitive sullenness about his posture that suggested he would rather be anywhere but where he was: she had the impression it was only under great pressure (from Moyna or his neighbours?) that he had consented to be present at this occasion.

It stung Piya to see him looking like this, beaten and afraid. What was he afraid of, this man who hadn’t hesitated to dive into the river after her? (207-8)

It is in the presence of the foreign (non-physical, non-Sundarban) economy of money that Fokir’s decline is most marked. When Piya first attempts to give him money, on his boat right after he rescues her from drowning and from the depredations of the corrupt guide Mej-da, Fokir at first declines, then reluctantly takes a single bill to offset the

money that Mej-da steals from him. Later, when Piya again seeks to pay him in the presence of Moyna and Kanai, it is the money-minded Moyna who “pre-empt[s]” Piya by accepting the payment on her husband’s behalf – a move that Fokir resignedly accepts “as though he were invisible” (209). The entry of foreign capital, in the form of Piya’s US dollars converted into rupees, poses a threat to the difficult but brave economy of the Sundarbans; despite his reluctance, Fokir is forced to allow Moyna to accept the money because “there was no food in the house and no money either. Nothing except a few crabs” (209). While in the absence of foreign-derived funds, Fokir and his family would continue with their struggle for independent life, the injection of foreign funds demeans both Fokir and his way of life, and offers an alternative which threatens to cast Fokir’s entire physical being into “invisibility”, and the fruit of his labours into insignificance.

This is not to suggest, however, that Ghosh has any rosy vision of the rustic community. The precarious life of the natives in the Sundarbans is threatened, not so much by the natural forces that are part of that way of life, but rather by human predation. We see a glimpse of the corruption and oppression early in the novel, when Mej-da and his forest guard henchman essentially rob Fokir at gunpoint, under the pretext of fining him for “poaching”; as he does so, the guard’s expression is positively “predatory” (43; 45). Other human predators abound in the novel: from the human trafficker Dilip who steals away Kusum’s mother and hounds Kusum as well; to the Bangladeshi Muslims and high-caste Hindus who oppress and exploit the Dalits (or Harijans) who consequently flee from Bangladesh to India, only to be confined in “resettlement camps” by the Indian government; to the police who violently evict and massacre the settlers of Morichjhapi in the name of natural conservation; even Kanai, who is not above preying on Moyna’s troubled marriage to serve his own vanity and sexual desires, while simultaneously flirting with Piya. Here Ghosh’s vision of Indian society essentially agrees with Adiga’s: India’s polity and economy are characterized by oppression and exploitation by those in power, and this (more than the natural hardships) destroys the “dream” of a brave and independent-minded native existence in the Sundarbans, both in the present day and in the past of Kanai’s uncle Nirmal.

True to Ghosh’s romance narrative, it is love that offers some hope for the resolution of these contrary forces. The relationship between Piya and Fokir, who are initially divided by a gulf of language, culture, education, and wealth, grows progressively to the point that it threatens both Fokir’s marriage to Moyna, and Piya’s assured position as scientist and outsider. Ghosh returns to the landscape of the Sundarbans to figure the difficult resolution of this unlikely relationship: caught in the cyclone and lashed together for protection in the mangrove forest, man and tree alternately take on the role of shelter for Piya as the wind changes direction, and then the bodies of man and woman physically merge into each other under the pressure of natural force:

Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blow raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed on her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one. (390)

The other foreign figure, Kanai, is also changed by love: initially, he stands as foil and competitor to Fokir, sure that his “metropolitan” charms will win both Moyna and Piya. His growing feelings for Piya cause him to be checked and humbled when her preference for Fokir becomes clear. By the end of the novel, it is suggested that the superior and deracinated attitude of this Indian elite figure has become transformed into a deeper engagement with the local, with the promise that he will move back to Calcutta, take up a writing project about his uncle’s notebook, and visit Lusibari and Piya. Piya likewise seeks to take up PIO status and work in Lusibari in collaboration with Nilima’s Badabon Trust, with funding from “conservation and environmental groups” (397).

There is thus a transformation of the Overseas Indian in Ghosh’s novel that seems to be at the opposite end of the spectrum to the frustrated departure of the same figure in Adiga’s novel. Ghosh once again uses natural imagery, and in particular the leitmotif of the tree, to symbolize this process. If Piya has undergone quite a radical transformation in wanting to remain in Lusibari at the end of the novel, this is seen as in large part the result of the “fusing” of her body with the “gnarled” tree-like body of Fokir during the storm. Following the analogy, the Overseas Indian has become planted, her initial scientific (and supposedly temporary) interest in the Sundarbans becoming a more rooted engagement with the local through her deeply personal relationship with the native figure of Fokir. Ghosh pursues the analogy with Kanai’s transformation too: his turning point comes when, in his sexual competition with Fokir, he takes the dare to wade into a mangrove forest where tiger tracks are seen, and becomes symbolically planted in the mud:

Then suddenly it was as though the earth had come alive and was reaching for his ankle. Looking down, he discovered that a rope-like tendril had wrapped itself around his ankles. (325)

Left briefly alone rooted in the atavistic mud after his anger drives Fokir away, Kanai is “judged” by nature, his fear of tigers and crocodiles forcing him to “see himself” in a new and humbling light, stripping him of his false cosmopolitan superiority.

The rootedness of Ghosh’s natives in the natural environment notwithstanding, the symbolic logic of *The Hungry Tide* cannot deny the persistent gap between the local and the foreign, even at the end of the novel. Piya’s plans to start a research project named for Fokir, and seeking incidentally to benefit local fishermen and the Badabon Trust, does not change the fact that Fokir dies in service of her research, as they are caught in the open when other locals have returned to safe havens. In symbolic terms, the driving force of her foreign monied economy has overridden the local way of life, including the local knowledge that would normally preserve Fokir (as it preserves Horen and other native fishermen) from such storms. The novel’s ending also does not address the gap between foreign funding and local livelihood, the monied and the manual economies, conservationist and survivalist values, that have permeated the novel. Certainly it says nothing about the oppression of poor settlers by corrupt policemen, forest guards, and even the government that is depicted in the novel, in Nirmal’s time as well as in the present of Kanai and Piya.

Conclusion: Obdurate bodies, smooth surfaces, and Indian futures

Despite their differences in tone, genre, and narrative structure, both *The White Tiger* and *The Hungry Tide* offer an instructive comparison, one that throws critical light on India's ambitions on the contemporary global stage and in harnessing the power of its diaspora to that end. Balram's successes as an entrepreneur in the latter part of *The White Tiger* do not overturn the fact that he has to resort to murder and countenance the retaliatory murder of his extended family in order to overcome feudal oppression and rise in socio-economic terms. Balram's exceptional deed simply reinforces the hold of feudal-style oppression on the Indian social economy, even as he arguably retains the essential aspects of that feudal model (such as paying hush money to the accident victim) in his own later career. Ghosh's (qualified) romance of the native and of the commune in *The Hungry Tide* cannot quite shake off the awareness that the meeting of overseas and native Indians is tragically doomed, despite the more gently humane depiction of both in Ghosh's novel compared to Adiga's.

Operating in common in both novels is a kind of cognitive symbolism which marks the native body as obdurately gnarled, visceral, scarred: as part of an animalistic predatory world in Adiga's novel, and a no less violent struggle of man against (but also part of) nature in Ghosh's. In contrast to these, the bodies of Overseas Indians are commonly depicted as smooth surfaces, implicitly aetiologated by their consumerist lifestyles and intellectual developments. In the inevitable clash between these two types, it is the native body that prevails to mark and transform the Overseas Indian. The result – whether the collapse of the consumerist façade and the outright acknowledgement of failure by Pinky in *The White Tiger*, or the profound and arguably contrived localization of Piya and to a certain extent Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* – signifies a perpetuation and persistence of the stubbornly local entity. The corollary – implicit but clear in both novels, unpleasant yet unmissable in this symbolic logic – is the corresponding persistence of the local economy of feudal oppression, corruption, hardship, and suffering, its vindication over the less hardy economy of a global culture and its values.

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Notes

1. Subsequent references to *The White Tiger* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page numbers in the text.
2. Subsequent references to *The Hungry Tide* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page numbers in the text.

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