

## Reading the Postcolonial Island in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Lisa Fletcher

University of Tasmania

Australia

[lisa.fletcher@utas.edu.au](mailto:lisa.fletcher@utas.edu.au)

**Abstract:** This paper argues that literature has much to contribute to the theoretical work of island studies, and not just because literary texts provide evidence of the ways islands are conceptualized in different historical and cultural contexts. To this end, it discusses Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), a novel which actively theorizes key concepts in island studies. *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, an "immense archipelago" in the Ganges delta, and tells the largely forgotten history of the forced evacuation of refugees from the island of Morichjhāpi in 1979. The liminal space of the Sundarbans, the "tide country", is an extraordinary setting for a literary exploration of the relationship between postcolonial island geographies and identities. Ghosh's depiction of the "watery labyrinth" (Ghosh, 2004: 72) and "storm-tossed islands" (Ghosh, 2004: 164) of the Sundarbans raises and addresses questions, which should be at the heart of the critical meta-discourse of island studies.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, island studies, literature, Morichjhāpi, Sundarbans, *The Hungry Tide*.

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### Introduction

"The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the *āchol* that follows her, half-wetted by the sea" (Ghosh, 2005: 6).

Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, the lower region of the Ganges delta, which extends over 250 km from the Hugli River estuary in West Bengal, India, to the banks of the Meghna River in Bangladesh. The characters in Ghosh's novel refer to this region as "the tide country"; the flat, marshy islands on which they live are part of an "immense archipelago" (Ghosh, 2005: 6) in which "islands are made and unmade in days" (Ghosh, 2005: 224). Embedded in *The Hungry Tide* is a detailed historical account of colonial and postcolonial settlement in the Sundarbans, which describes in rich detail this region's "perpetually mutating topography" (Anand, 2008: 25); moreover, this novel actively theorizes concepts which are central to island studies. This essay argues that Ghosh's exploration of the "imaginary geographies" (Aldama, 2002: 142) of estuarine islands in *The Hungry Tide* covers the very intellectual territory which island studies scholars need to traverse if we are to think in genuinely interdisciplinary ways about the relationship between the representation of islands in diverse textual fields (e.g. literature, history, popular fiction, journalism, travel writing) and their historical and contemporary geo-political realities. If a key goal of island studies is to identify and

interrogate the habits of thinking which manage discourses about islands, then *The Hungry Tide* is an apposite text. This novel provides compelling evidence that the analysis of literature should not be a peripheral or subordinate activity for island studies, especially when the task at hand is to develop theoretical frameworks for studying islands.

In broad terms, *The Hungry Tide* shows that the work of theory is not the preserve of academic writers. This is not a new point to make in relation to Ghosh. For instance, Mondal (2007) identifies Ghosh as a postcolonial writer whose novels articulate and interrogate some of the core issues of postcolonial scholarship; other critics make similar claims in relation to ecocriticism (Anand, 2008; Gurr, 2010; Mukherjee, 2006; Weik, 2006) and cosmopolitan theory (Grewal, 2008; Johansen, 2008; Tomskey, 2009; Weik, 2006). Mondal (2007: 7) also suggests that novels such as *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) and *The Glass Palace* (2002) intervene in broader public discourses about the aftermath of colonialism: “[w]hat really sets [Ghosh] apart from academic discourse is the accessibility of his work, the way in which his intellectualism is worn lightly on the fabric of his prose”. This essay makes a similar claim in relation to *The Hungry Tide* and Ghosh’s engagement with some of the core issues of island studies.

### **Speaking Up for the Sundarbans**

Ghosh received his PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Oxford in 1982. His fictional and non-fictional work strongly communicates his interest in “representation in both its political and discursive senses” (Mondal, 2007: 25). In these terms, Ghosh both *speaks of* and *speaks up for* the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide*. In preparation for writing the novel, Ghosh spent a significant amount of time in the Sundarbans (Kumar, 2007: 100), including travelling with Annu Jalais (Ghosh, 2005: 401), a post-doctoral fellow at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and the author of a recent monograph, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (Jalais, 2010). To make a simple point, with *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh sought both to tell a fictional story set in the Sundarbans and to present a rigorously researched factual account of the region’s extraordinary history. Ghosh explains:

The characters in this novel are fictitious, as are two of its principal settings, Lusibari and Garjontola. However the secondary locations, such as Canning, Gosoba, Satjelia, Morichjhāpi and Emilybari, do indeed exist and were indeed founded or settled in the manner alluded to here (Ghosh, 2005: 401).

This merging of fictional and factual histories and geographies is important to Ghosh’s project in *The Hungry Tide* and relates to his view of the novel as “a meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist etc.” (Hawley, 2005: 166). In short, Ghosh’s representation of the interstitial space of the Sundarbans both reflects and enables his exploration of the spaces between academic disciplines and literary genres. Importantly, this novel’s intense focus on the geographical specificity of particular locations and their histories is typical of Ghosh’s fictional and non-fictional work. He is clearly fascinated by interstitial spaces such as oceans, estuaries, rivers and, of course,

islands, and frequently uses such locations as settings in order to scrutinize and critique nationalist accounts of British colonialism and its aftermath. In novels such as *The Glass Palace*, a devastating family and political saga which ranges across the coastlines, waterscapes and islands of India, Burma and Malaya, the mutability and indeterminacy of his settings—in political and geographical terms—is crucial to Ghosh's interrogation of the tremendous violence national policies and international conflicts inflict on families and communities living in disputed territories and on the borderzones of nations.

*The Hungry Tide*, like much of Ghosh's work, explores the significance of place (in multiple senses) to the formation and expression of personal and social identities in India and the Indian diaspora. Ghosh's opposition to the label "postcolonial" is well known. In an interview in 2007, he stated his preference to be attentive to the specificity of each "place" (Kumar, 2007: 105), rather than "to imagine", for instance, "that the postcolony of India is the same as the postcolony of Pakistan" (Kumar, 2007: 105). Ghosh explains the impact of this view on his approach to writing novels:

I don't want to write just about the individual in a particular place. I also want to write about what is there, the geology, the deep time that exists outside the individual, and the immediacy of time, and the times that make up every aspect of the circumstance (Kumar, 2007: 103).

Thus, for Ghosh—and *The Hungry Tide* attests to this—sensitivity to the specificity of particular places involves imagining them in spatial and temporal terms: "All narratives are really the unfolding of events in time" (Aldama, 202: 90). And, in relation to the Sundarbans, a terrain typically defined in terms of "nature" and thus by the "absence of history" (Kumar, 2007: 105), he suggests, "the dense layering of ... history is what makes this place possible, that gives it a location, [and] makes it continually surprising" (Kumar, 2007: 105). Jalais (2005: 1760) writes, "The usual portrayal of the Sundarbans is that of an exotic mangrove forest full of Royal Bengal tigers rather than that of a region which is often referred to as 'mager mulluk' for the lawlessness and violence which characterizes it<sup>1</sup>; moreover, the lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity, drinking water and health centres make it one of the poorest regions of West Bengal". *The Hungry Tide* asks readers to be attentive to historical and contemporary attitudes to the islands and waterways of the Sundarbans, an area little known outside India. In this regard, the words with which one of the central characters, Nirmal, begins his journal resonate extratextually:

I am writing these words in a place that you will probably never have heard of: an island on the southern edge of the tide country, a place called Morichjhāpi ... (Ghosh, 2005: 67).

Ghosh uses the form of the novel to tell a history which had been largely forgotten beyond the Sundarbans. In 1979, the recently elected Communist government of West Bengal forcefully evicted tens of thousands of refugees from the island of Morichjhāpi in the northern-most forested region of the Sundarbans. Only four years earlier, the island's

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, 'Mager Molluk' is the title of a famous satirical poem by Govindachandra Das published in 1893. The Encyclopedia translates the title as 'The Land of Fools' (Islam, 2003: 223).

mangroves had been cleared for a government-sponsored agricultural program (Jalais, 2005: 1758); however, the refugees' eviction was justified on environmental grounds. The settlement of Morichjhāpi was described by Jyoti Basu, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, as illegal trespassing on a state Forest Reserve and on land designated for tiger preservation (Mallick, 1999: 115). There is scant documentary evidence to produce a conclusive history of this event (referred to variously as the 'Morichjhāpi incident' or the 'Morichjhāpi massacre'); however, Mallick (1999: 114) estimates that as many as 17,000 of the refugees who had settled on the island died of starvation or disease, were drowned when police scuttled their boats, were shot by police, or were brutally killed by men hired to assist the police with eviction. Jalais (2005: 1761) explains that, while there will never be certainty about the number of deaths, locals consistently report that only one in four of the refugees survived: "This figure is important because it reflects what the villagers feel rather than for its factual veracity" (*ibid.*) The refugees were principally dalits—untouchables—who had fled to India from Bangladesh in waves after Partition in 1947 and then, in increasing numbers, after the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence. Enormous numbers of these refugees were detained in resettlement camps in east-central India. Not only were the camps desolate and dangerous, they were "entirely removed, both culturally and physically, from the refugees' known world" (Jalais, 2005: 1758). As Ghosh (2005: 402) states in the "Author's Note" in *The Hungry Tide*, while the Morichjhāpi incident was covered in the Calcutta press at the time, when he came to write his novel, only one scholarly account was available in English: this was Mallick's (1999) essay, titled "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre". As Tomsy (2009: 57) explains, "Prior to its fictionalization in Ghosh's novel, Morichjhāpi's history had all but lapsed into oblivion".

Ghosh has also spoken up for the Sundarbans in the news media. For instance, shortly after the novel's publication, Ghosh (2004) wrote an article for the Indian weekly news magazine *Outlook* in which he revealed—and condemned—a business plan to establish a major tourism complex in the Sundarbans. The plan re-imagined the archipelago as "an arena for water sports and a haven for beach lovers" (Ghosh, 2004: n.p.). Ghosh (*ibid.*) explains that the proposed project was based on a utopian vision of island tourism. He writes:

This is an area of mud flats and mangrove islands. There are no 'pristine beaches' nor are there any coral gardens (*ibid.*).

The project failed, but his impassioned critique highlighted the Sundarbans as a region in which the "imaginary geographies" of islanders and outsiders clash:

The Sahara Parivar [the company responsible for the project proposal] claims that it will open virgin areas to tourists. But the islands of the Sunderbans [*sic*] are not 'virgin' in any sense. The Indian part of the Sunderbans supports a population of close to four million people—equivalent to the entire population of New Zealand. The Sunderbans are an archipelago of islands, large and small. Many, if not most of the islands, have been populated at some time or the other. In fact, several islands were forcibly depopulated in order to make room for Project Tiger (Ghosh, 2004: n. p.).

The description of the Sundarbans as “virgin” territory—a landscape in its untouched natural state—is both ignorant and amounts to a serious denigration of local knowledges and identities. However, *The Hungry Tide* depicts the Sundarbans as an area in which neat oppositions of insider to outsider and knowledge to ignorance break down and become untenable; the topography of the estuarine islands comes to be emblematic of the tenuousness of human categories of meaning and identity, especially in relation to our relations to place.

### ***The Hungry Tide* and Key Issues for Island Studies**

One of the principal tensions in island studies, as the field increasingly seeks to establish its parameters and protocols, is between a commitment to the “locality” of islands and an awareness that most island studies research is conducted by “outsiders”, or from a position of relative “externality” (see Baldacchino, 2004; Baldacchino, 2008). Reading *The Hungry Tide*'s deeply moving tale of “outsiders” who visit and then settle in the Sundarbans might help to chart a route past the intellectual impasse which this islander/outsider dualism produces (see Fletcher, 2010). In other words, the prevalence of the insider/outsider dualism in island studies risks cementing the assumption that the most valid and credible interpretations of islands will come from islanders, an identity which this novel complicates. *The Hungry Tide* raises a basic question, which must be addressed if island studies is to adequately theorize key notions such as “island” and “islander”: what terms do we use to describe the relationships between places and people? Literature employs a standard vocabulary, which is a good starting point for addressing this question; this includes, most obviously, terms such as “character”, “setting”, “actor”, and “stage”. Johansen (2008: 10) commends *The Hungry Tide* for not treating various locales in the Sundarbans as “static backdrops” to human action. The novel's reviewer for *The Economist* (2004: 73) writes, “far more than any of its characters”, a “sense of place ... dominates the novel”. Similarly, in his monograph about Ghosh, Mondal (2007: 18) argues that the Sundarbans itself “comprises the most significant ‘character’ in the narrative”. For Anand (2008: 15), “[i]n locating the novel in an environment such as the Sundarbans, place emerges as a larger-than-life character”. But: what does it mean to say that Ghosh elevates place from “setting” to “character”? What assumptions—about people and place, about literature and geography—underpin such claims? Discussions of literature in the forum of island studies should examine thoroughly the “where and when” of island narratives and, in so doing, scrutinize the discursive assumptions which underpin the conceptualization of islands as *settings* for narratives from “local” or “external” perspectives. That is to say, island literary studies has a dual task: to identify and examine the literary histories of particular islands and island regions; and, more broadly, to consolidate such studies by archipelagraphically tracing connections and divergences between ideas about islands in different literatures.

*The Hungry Tide* is a deliberate attempt to provoke readers to think in fresh ways about the role and meaning of place in fictional and nonfictional narratives—both in narratological and ideological terms. In short, Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans exposes the limits of conceiving character and setting as distinct (and opposed) categories. Further, it successfully deconstructs this opposition and those to which it relates (people/place;

fiction/reality; culture/nature etc). Mondal (2007: 4) sees in Ghosh's oeuvre "a recognition that space is not an inert physical dimension exterior to human consciousness but is rather intimately shaped by the particular ways in which it is imagined ..." This analysis of Ghosh's treatment of setting is especially pertinent to island studies and its emphasis on the "systematic treatment of the island phenomenon [...] backed up by substantial theoretical underpinnings" (Depraetere, 2008: 3). Thinking in "systematic" ways about islands must involve careful and thorough analysis of the imaginary dimensions of "island" and related concepts. Such analysis must also remain open to employing the methodologies and theoretical frameworks of other interdisciplinary fields of study that consider the interplay between geography, history and social structures. This essay highlights the synergies between island studies and postcolonial studies, but the interdisciplinary reach of island scholarship is much wider. Where, for instance, are the points of connection between island studies and gender studies? What might the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of animal studies contribute to the academic discourse about islands through its investigation of the relationships between humans, animals and their environments (a pertinent question here given the significance of tigers in *The Hungry Tide*)?

One of the most commonly stated goals for scholars who align themselves with island studies is, in the frequently cited words of McCall (1994: 2): "the study of islands on their own terms". In what sense can islands be said to have their "own terms"? McCall's maxim can be interpreted either as an insistence on the local specificity of island knowledge, or as a claim that diverse islands share a set of terms or ideas which distinguish them from mainlands. Reading *The Hungry Tide* reveals some major problems with such a statement of purpose, whether "their own terms" refers to the uniqueness of particular islands or to the shared qualities and experiences sometimes described as "islandness". The novel is in the third person; chapters alternate between the perspectives of two characters: Kanai Dutt and Piya Roy. Both characters are visitors to the islands in 2002; both, in varying senses, have set out for the purpose of "study".

The novel opens on the platform of a Kolkata train station where Kanai and Piya are each waiting for the train to Canning, a port on the "threshold of the Sundarbans" (Ghosh, 2005: 9). Piya is a scientist, a cetologist; she has planned a field trip to survey the marine mammal population of the Sundarbans. Kanai, who owns a lucrative translation business, is en route to the island of Lusibari, at the request of his aunt, Nilima. She wants him to examine some papers left for him by his uncle, Nirmal, recently discovered decades after his death. The first chapter is narrated from the perspective of Kanai, who "spotted [Piya] the moment he stepped onto the crowded platform" (Ghosh, 2005: 3). Whereas Kanai feels and projects a confident cosmopolitanism, Piya is shaken from the outset by feeling even more a "stranger" (Ghosh, 2005: 34) in West Bengal than she has on field trips to other places. On the train platform in Kolkata, she is "struck" by the "unabashed way in which [Kanai] stared at everyone around them, taking them in, sizing them up, sorting them all into their places" (Ghosh, 2005: 10). Piya, in contrast, is intensely aware of her lack of understanding of "her own place ... in the great scheme of things" (Ghosh, 2005: 35). It is immediately apparent to Kanai that Piya is "out of place" (Ghosh, 2005: 3), but he is less able to reflect on his own foreignness in this environment. Kanai is the "one other 'outsider' on the platform" (Ghosh, 2005: 4). His appearance of "middle-aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence" (Ghosh, 2005: 5) means he too is out of place, and "quickly

attract[s] his own share of attention” (Ghosh, 2005: 4). However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that neither Piya nor Kanai is, in any straightforward way, an “outsider” in the archipelago. Not only are they both connected to the place by their Bengali heritage—by the complex ties of family and memory—but everyone in the Sundarbans becomes an “outsider”. As Mukherjee (2006: 150) explains, the characters in this novel “[operate] under the sign of migration” rather than native belonging. Even Fokir, a survivor of Morichjhāpi and the character with the most intimate knowledge of the region, is more a migrant settler than a native islander. The goal to study islands “on their own terms”—however the phrase is interpreted—assumes the existence of stable, identifiable viewpoints from which particular islands or island regions can be best understood. As *The Hungry Tide* shows, enriching one’s knowledge of the science and culture of islands and its “waterscape” (Anand, 2008: 24) should involve both being attuned to a multiplicity of perspectives and being conscious that there is no single lens through which any island locality can be viewed in its entirety and complexity. Importantly, the novel makes it clear that the instability and unpredictability of islands is not just a function of the limits of human perspectives, but intrinsic qualities of places where land and water meet.

From an island studies perspective, Ghosh’s depiction of the Sundarbans highlights the importance of considering and critiquing the land/water dualism so fundamental to prevailing ideas about islands. Ghosh’s depiction of the “waterscape” of the islands interrogates the familiar notion of an island as a definite landmass surrounded by, but apart from, river, lake, sea, or ocean. Instead, land and water are in a constant relationship of fluid exchange in which neither prevails. *The Hungry Tide*’s deconstruction of this fundamental binary begins, of course, with the novel’s title and its evocation of the daily struggle for survival in an “unpredictable and hostile terrain” (Ghosh, 2005: 33) and the ever-present threat that natural disasters pose to settlements on shore. Furthermore, Ghosh uses the tide as a structuring device—the book is in two parts, one titled “The Ebb: *Bhata*” and the other “The Flood: *Jowar*”—and as the key metaphor in his deconstruction of the binaries which manage official histories of places such as the Sundarbans. For instance, by interspersing the contemporary narrative with extracts from Nirmal’s diaries, he shows the past and present of the Sundarbans to be in fluid relationship of ebb and flow, in which no vision of the islands is fixed or invulnerable. Similarly, by alternating the perspectives of Kanai and Piya and showing their movement from opposition to intimacy, Ghosh both reinforces the “tidal” structure of the novel and fosters optimism about our potential to learn how see the world anew.

### **How to Read Islands**

As Mondal (2007: 19) notes, Ghosh’s novels often deconstruct the hierarchy of fact to fiction in discourses of national identity. They ask: “are the explanatory narratives of, say, historiography or science *necessarily* more truthful than those of fiction?” Nirmal, a retired school principal, offers to help the Morichjhāpi settlers by teaching the children about the Sundarbans. He imagines his first lesson, which he would begin by showing the children a map of the Bay of Bengal not as a means to present facts, but to begin telling the stories of the region: “This map shows that in geology, as in myth, there is a visible Ganga and a

hidden Ganga: one flows on land and one beneath the water” (Ghosh, 2005: 181). While Nirmal never has the opportunity to teach the children of Morichjhāpi, his story of the Sundarbans teaches his nephew how to ‘read’ the islands, but with an awareness that no reading is ever final or complete:

... a landscape is not unlike a book—a compilation of pages that overlap without any two ever being the same. People open the book according to their taste and training, their memories and desires: for a geologist the compilation opens at one page, for a boatman at another, and still another for a ship’s pilot, a painter and so on. On occasion these pages are ruled with lines that are invisible to some people, while being real for others, as real, as charged and as volatile as high-voltage cables (Ghosh, 2005: 224).

Over the course of the novel, both Kanai and Piya come to learn that they look at the islands through narrow apertures. The binoculars with which Piya scans the water for the dorsal fins of dolphins symbolize both her expertise—her control over knowledge—and the limits on her vision. She looks to Kanai “like a textual scholar poring over a yet-undeciphered manuscript: it was as though she were puzzling over a codex that had been authored by the earth itself” (Ghosh, 2005: 269). She looks, that is, like Kanai himself, in a “trance” (Ghosh, 2005: 217) over the “closely written Bengali script” (Ghosh, 2005: 6) of his uncle’s notebook, a literary text contained within Ghosh’s novel. *The Hungry Tide* asks us to take seriously the role diverse texts, fictional and non-fictional, can play in enriching or even transforming our knowledge of a region like the Sundarbans; in so doing, it exemplifies the contribution literature can make to the theoretical project of island studies.

The idea that any account or analysis of place is partial and incomplete relates to the novel’s depiction of the opposition between Piya’s “scientific” worldview and Kanai’s “literary” sensibility. Piya defines herself through “her vocation” (Ghosh, 2005: 112) and is committed to the methods and routines of data collection and recording. Similarly, Kanai’s professional life as a translator is a key aspect of his characterization. He is intensely aware that he privileges text over materiality and experience: “Language was both his livelihood and his addiction” (Ghosh, 2005: 4). Kanai seeks to know the Sundarbans by listening to the stories of other characters and by reading his uncle Nirmal’s notebook, long sections of which are included in the text. Nirmal’s writings give his account of the doomed settlement on Morichjhāpi and highlight for Kanai the local mythologies of Bon Bibi, the forest goddess, and her profound role in the stories locals tell of island life. When Kanai visited Lusibari as child, he watched a local performance, *The Glory of Bon Bibi*. He recalls that, before the performance, his uncle expressed frustration with the islanders’ preference for fiction over reality:

You would think that in a place like this people would pay close attention to the true wonders of the reality round them. But no, they prefer the imaginary miracles of gods and saints (Ghosh, 2005: 102).

As a child, Kanai was “utterly absorbed” (Ghosh, 2005: 105) by the story of Bon Bibi; Nirmal’s journal reveals that, over time, he too was drawn into the ‘imaginary’ history of the Sundarbans.



As noted above, Ghosh uses the estuarine tide as a dense symbol for the “flow” between the present and the past of the novel’s characters and locations. The present-day story of Piya’s and Kanai’s emotional and intellectual transformation in the Sundarbans intersects with, and is informed by, the narrative of Nirmal’s transformation over twenty years earlier. Similarly, the initial conflict between Kanai’s and Piya’s worldviews echoes the tension between Nirmal and his wife, Nilima, which reached its highpoint in the months leading up to the Morichjhāpi incident. When Piya begins her fieldwork, she is certain that the success of field trips to foreign places depends on remaining an outsider, on avoiding “intimate involvements” (Ghosh, 2005: 112); she eschews friendship with locals and represses any curiosity about local language and culture. However, her time in the riverboat with Fokir—a “small island of silence, afloat on the muteness of the river” (Ghosh, 2005: 84)—radically changes her sense of her place in relation to her “vocation” and her Bengali heritage. In the second half of the novel, Piya embarks on her second survey of the waterways’ dolphin population with Fokir as guide and Kanai as translator. Early in the journey, Kanai tells Piya about the history of Morichjhāpi and of its impact on his aunt and uncle’s relationship. Nilima, he explains, interpreted Nirmal’s support for the refugees as an effort to hold on to the Marxist ideals of his youth; “she would tell you that the reason he got mixed up with the settlers in Morichjhāpi was because he couldn’t let go of the ideals of revolution” (Ghosh, 2005: 282). Kanai disagrees: “As I see it, Nirmal was possessed more by words than politics. There are people who live through poetry, and he was one of them” (*ibid*). Nirmal’s poetic approach to the world—especially through reading Rainer Maria Rilke—means, for Kanai, that his uncle’s belief in historical materialism was based on an idiosyncratic interpretation of Marxist philosophy:

For him it meant that everything was connected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature. He hunted down facts the way a magpie collects shiny things. Yet when he strung them all together, somehow they did become stories – of a kind (Ghosh, 2005: 282-3).

In a sense, this description of Nirmal’s approach to facts and stories explains the form of *The Hungry Tide* and echoes Ghosh’s own views on the potential richness of the novel as a literary form which can cut across the boundaries between “poetic” and “material” discourses. Kanai goes on to tell Piya of his childhood visit to the Sundarbans and of Nirmal’s “outraged” (*ibid*) reaction when he described Canning as “a horrible, muddy little town” (*ibid*). Nirmal shouted: “A place is what you make of it” (*ibid*). This impassioned statement echoes throughout the novel and encapsulates the lessons learned by Kanai and Piya. By the end of the novel, both Kanai and Piya are sensitive to the limits on their ability to fully comprehend the Sundarbans and open to new ways of thinking about this place and others like it. *The Hungry Tide* does not essentialize the island places it depicts by offering any one view of them as true and accurate; instead it insists that any individual’s comprehension of a locality and its history is contingent on multiple vectors of identity and thus always partial and vulnerable to change.

The tenuousness of any opposition between islander and non-islander perspectives—between the terms of islands and the terms of other places—is also revealed through the depiction of an archipelagic landscape which is “always mutating, always unpredictable” (Ghosh, 2005: 7). In the terrain of the Sundarbans, classic images of island topography— isolation, insulation, smallness—fall apart. At low tide, Lusibari—a fictional island modelled on actual places—is a “gigantic earthen ark, floating serenely above its surroundings. Only at high tide was it evident that the interior of the island lay well below the level of the water ... a flimsy saucer that could tip over at any moment...” (Ghosh, 2005: 37). Life on Lusibari is only possible because of the “tall embankment that circled its perimeter, holding back the twice-daily flood” (Ghosh, 2005: 59). *The Hungry Tide* offers a powerful depiction of the vulnerability and ultimate impermanency of human settlement; as argued above, this novel refuses to naturalize the bond between humans and place. It exposes, instead, the degree to which such bonds are always linguistic and cultural constructions. In this sense, the narrator seems closest to Kanai.

Importantly, however, *The Hungry Tide* does not suggest that identification with or attachment to place is thus misguided or based on false principles. The embankment—the “*bādh*”—is symbolic of the value and the necessity of imaginative geographies. Nirmal explains in his notebook “...the *bādh* is not just the guarantor of human life on our island; it is also our abacus and archive, our library of stories” (Ghosh, 2005: 202). During the Morichjhāpi crisis, he takes Fokir—then five years old—to look at the *bādh*: “*See how frail it is, how fragile. Look at the waters that flow past it and how limitless they are, how patient, how quietly they bide their time. Just to look at it is to know why the waters must prevail, later if not sooner*” (Ghosh, 2005: 205, italics in original). Nirmal wants to put the boy’s “*young mind at rest*” (*ibid.*), but decides not to deceive him: “*A storm will come, the waters will rise and the *bādh* will succumb, in part or in whole. It is only a matter of time*” (*ibid.*). Nirmal tells the boy to put his head on the *bādh* and listen; he hears the scratching of the “*multitudes of crabs ... burrowing into the *bādh**” (Ghosh, 2005: 206). This key scene encapsulates the ideas about human settlement and estuarine islands that are at the heart of this novel. Nirmal tells Fokir that the “*frail fence*” of the *bādh* will be destroyed by the “*monstrous appetites [of the] crabs, the winds and the storms*”. Nirmal tells the boy, when the next storm comes, “*Neither angels nor men will hear us, and, as for the animals, they won’t hear us either*” (*ibid.*). To explain his point, he quotes Rilke: the animals “*already know by instinct/we’re not comfortably at home/in our translated world*” (*ibid.*). Nirmal and Fokir’s conversation at the *bādh* foreshadows the massive and devastating storm in the closing chapters of the novel, during which Fokir dies protecting Piya from huge waves and flying debris. In short, making any place home involves “translating” it into language and story, but the “epic mutability” (Ghosh, 2005: 154) of the Sundarbans reveals the tenuousness of this process.

The metaphor of island landscape as library—immense and fragile—is powerfully reinforced late in the novel when Kanai loses Nirmal’s notebook in the surging currents of the approaching storm:

...it was as if the wind had been waiting for this one unguarded moment: it spun him around and knocked him sideways into the water. He thrust his hands into the mud and came up spluttering. He scrambled to his feet just in time to see the notebook bobbing in the current, some ten metres away. It stayed on the surface for a couple more minutes before sinking out of sight (Ghosh, 2005: 376).

Piya and Kanai survive the storm and both plan to stay—at least for a while—on Lusibari. In the novel's final chapter, "Home: An Epilogue", Piya begins planning a research project based on the island, which she wants to name after Fokir, since the data he provided will be fundamental: "Fokir took the boat into every little creek and gully where he'd ever seen a dolphin. That one map [recorded on Piya's GPS] represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge" (Ghosh, 2005: 398). Kanai intends to "write the story of Nirmal's notebook—how it came into his hands, what was in it, and how it was lost" (Ghosh, 2005: 399). The relation between the physicality of the Sundarbans and their textual representation—the waterways/Fokir's route/the GPS data; Nirmal's notebook/Morichjhāpi/ the 2002 storm—evoke a conceptual Möbius strip on which the Sundarbans archipelago can only be comprehended in relation to factual and imaginary narratives.

## Conclusion

Nirmal writes in his notebook: "The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable" (Ghosh, 2005: 7). In an interview conducted just before Ghosh went on tour to promote *The Hungry Tide*, he said:

What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness, their constructedness—the ways in which they are "naturalized" by modern political mythmaking. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be "given" or taken-for-granted. This is why I distrust also the lines that people draw between fiction and non-fiction. I think these lines are drawn to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded. (Hawley, 2005: 9)

As I read it, *The Hungry Tide* should both spark thinking about the geopolitics and ecology of islands, and prompt self-reflection about the prioritisation of "non-fictional" sources in island studies. Ghosh's (2005: 72) depiction of the "watery labyrinth" of the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* has much to contribute to island studies theory because it presents a sustained and nuanced response to questions, which should be at the heart of the critical metadiscourse of our field: What is an island? What meanings and values are attributed to islands in different social, cultural, political and academic fields? How can we describe the relationship between the "reality" of islands and their diverse textual representations? Whose perspectives are privileged in those representations? Wrestling with such questions must be part of the core business of island studies.

*The Hungry Tide* helps us understand that the human comprehension of an island or group of islands is contingent upon a complex of linguistic, discursive and material factors. In these terms, this novel inadvertently contributes to the exploration of the interdisciplinary potential of island studies, because it illustrates the degree to which no single disciplinary framework is up to the task of a comprehensive study of a particular island or archipelago. *The Hungry Tide* might prompt readers to think in new ways about human settlement on islands; in particular, it critiques the idea of belonging in relation to islands still marked by a legacy of British colonialism. This is especially pertinent to the theoretical work of island studies as the field seeks to develop a nuanced vocabulary for describing the multiple ways in which individuals and groups conceptualize and articulate their experience of, and in, particular islands. Any connection to place is always in the process of being made and liable to transformation. While Nirmal's dictum, "A place is what you make of it", suggests that humans have agency in relation to their environment, the depiction of the "terrain's hostility to their presence" (Ghosh, 2005: 8) in the Sundarbans reminds us that, ultimately, we may read but we neither possess nor control the places in which we live.

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