

FROM ENFORCED SILENCE TO CREATIVE SILENCE: AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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Abstract:

In this essay, I have attempted to explore how Ghosh traces the trajectory of the silence of the subaltern primarily through the character of Fokir as a movement from the act of being silenced to the act of first resisting that silence, then to the act of appropriating that silence, and eventually to an ultimate journey of making that silence one's own and transforming it in such a manner that it characterises our way of knowing and being. Silence then is not opposed to language, but is something that is complementary to language: it adds meaning to language. Silence here functions as rhetoric; and we shall see that it is not treated in terms of Western binaries as something that is opposed to speech and is characterised by absence; rather my contention in this essay would be like that of the writer Phulboni in *The Calcutta Chromosome*— that silence is characterised by presence and has a life of its own; silence here is a creative force. In both the cases, it can be a matter of choice when we take into consideration the subaltern or marginal characters. Subaltern groups frequently use silence as rhetoric, since they are often denied the privilege of representation in mainstream narratives. Silence would often be a better tool than language, because language is the discourse of the powerful. Silence would not only resist the equation of power, but would also disrupt the very tools that have created the discrimination. In this essay, I would like to point out how in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* we have a journey from enforced silence to creative and collaborative silence.

Keywords: silence, history, epistemology, subaltern

Resumo:

Neste ensaio, procuro explorar como Ghosh traça a trajetória do silêncio do subalterno, principalmente através do personagem Fokir, enquanto movimento que ocorre desde o ato de ser silenciado até ao primeiro ato de resistência a esse silêncio, em seguida, até ao ato de se apropriar desse silêncio e, finalmente, até uma derradeira jornada que consiste em tornar esse silêncio seu, transformando-o de tal modo que acaba por caracterizar o seu, o nosso, modo de saber e ser. O silêncio não se opõe, então, à linguagem, mas é algo complementar: acrescenta significado à linguagem. O silêncio funciona aqui enquanto retórica e, como se verá, não é tratado em termo dos binários ocidentais como algo que se opõe ao discurso e que é caracterizado pela ausência. O meu argumento neste ensaio é semelhante ao do escritor Phulboni em *The Calcutta Chromosome* - o silêncio é caracterizado pela presença e possui vida própria; o silêncio é, aqui, uma força criativa. Em ambos os casos, será uma questão de escolha o facto de se ter em consideração as personagens subalternas ou marginais. Os grupos de subalternos usam frequentemente o silêncio como retórica, uma vez que muitas vezes lhes é negado o privilégio de representação nas narrativas principais. O silêncio seria, muitas vezes, uma ferramenta melhor do que a linguagem, porque a linguagem é o discurso

dos poderosos. O silêncio não resistiria à equação do poder, mas também corromperia as mesmas ferramentas responsáveis pela criação da discriminação. Neste ensaio, gostaria de salientar como em *The Hungry Tide*, de Ghosh, nos deparamos com uma viagem que parte de um silêncio forçado para um silêncio criativo e colaborativo.

Palavras-chave: silêncio, história, epistemologia, subalterno

I. Introduction

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh chiefly focuses on the Sundarbans which consists of an archipelago of islands in the southern coast of Bengal and is predominated by tigers and mangrove vegetation. The people living in the Sundarbans share an extremely complex ecological system with the fierce man-eating tigers and crocodiles. Two-thirds of the Sundarbans are in Bangladesh and only one-third of it belongs to India. Ghosh primarily concentrates on the Indian part, and shows how the wind and the tide, the turbulence of the fresh and salt water, the violence of the fierce man-eaters and crocodiles push the people living on these islands to the verge of life, and how their daily heroic struggle is ignored and forgotten in the greater narratives of history.

A sense of place dominates the novel, as Supriya Choudhury points out in her review of *The Hungry Tide*. In a beautiful poetic epithet, Ghosh calls this place 'bhatir desh', a term borrowed from the Mughal records of agronomics. To this land of ebb-tide, arrive two outsiders—Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy (Piya)—both cosmopolitans, who meet each other by chance; there evolves a complex relationship not only between themselves, but also between them and the community they visit, among whom Fokir, Kusum, Moyna, Horen, Nilima and Nirmal are prominent figures. Kanai is an interpreter/translator by profession, who runs his business in Delhi. He is in his forties, a semi-outsider to the place, and has come to visit Nilima, an NGO activist, who runs a hospital on one of the islands. Piya is an Indo-American scientist, in her twenties, who is a pure outsider, in spite of her Bengali origins; she has come here to conduct research on the rare river dolphins.

Kanai happens to pick up and read a journal left by his late uncle, Nirmal, an idealist, Marxist intellectual, whose writings oblige Kanai to delve deep into his family history as well as the history of the exotic islands. Piya's ignorance of her own linguistic heritage induces her to take Kanai as her interpreter and Fokir, the local fisherman, as her guide. Ghosh explores, as in his other novels, the intertwined elements of communication and silence. Fokir helps Piya to trace the dolphins and even sacrifices his life to save Piya from a raging storm. Fokir symbolises a way of life and a form of knowledge essentially different from what Kanai or Piya represent. Through the intermingling of outsiders like Kanai, Piya, Nirmal and Nilima, and insiders like Kusum, Fokir, Moyna and Horen,

Ghosh shows how life is lived in close proximity with great historical events, a violent nature and a menace called death.

The central figure of this novel is a subaltern, Fokir, who seems to be an important repository of local myths and knowledge; he assists an experienced and trained cetologist regarding the dolphins living in the Sundarbans area. The muted voice of the subaltern, his myths, magic and behaviour are parts of a different epistemological system, which needs to be acknowledged. Ghosh himself states in the Acknowledgement to *The Imam and the Indian*: "...even the most mundane forms of labour can embody an entire metaphysique" (x). Fokir moves about in his boat for a living by catching crabs for food; yet even such an ordinary person can have his own set of beliefs and "an entire metaphysique" of life. My paper argues how people like Fokir and Kusum are silenced by the social order and history and yet how their silences could embody a mode of resistance as well as an entire metaphysique.

II. Enforced Silence: The Silence of History

Partition, resettlement and issues of history recur in Ghosh's novels, and here also, they provide both a backdrop and a theme for the novel. Ghosh explores the trauma of resettlement of the refugees in Morichjhāpi after the partition of Bengal and the consequent cruelties perpetrated on them by the people in power. There are people whose histories and personal memories are not recorded because they do not possess power enough to register their own identity. The Morichjhāpi incident hardly finds mention in the history books related to the Sundarbans: "...those killed in the Morichjhanpi massacre are yet to find justice, and their stories yet to appear in histories" (Jalais 1761-1762). Ghosh's purpose is to register such a possibility of alternative history in fictive form. Ghosh's desire for rewriting such a history is evident in Nirmal's words: "But I was once a writer; perhaps I can make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world" (69). The Morichjhāpi incident, which strongly affected several families, hardly figures in either historical documents or fictional forms; so Ghosh takes up the responsibility of making it known to the people of the world.

The historical event of the eviction of refugee settlers from the island of Morichjhāpi in the Sundarbans by the Left Front Government of West Bengal in 1979 is the cardinal point of Nirmal's journal entries; not only that, it is also the pivot of *The Hungry Tide*. The Morichjhāpi incident, which constitutes "the last significant expression of Bengal's Partition" (Choudhury) and which reflects the treachery of the Government, has been carefully effaced from the annals of history. These people were from the other side of the tide country. As a result of the Partition, their village was burnt and they crossed over. They were then taken to a settlement camp far away from where they were habituated to live. These people longed for their 'bhatir desh' and eventually found this small island

and decided to resettle there. What followed was an “act of state violence [which] was a betrayal of everything left-wing politics in the post-Partition era had stood for” (Choudhury). Their dream was akin to that of Sir Hamilton: to create an organised society in the island with their intelligence and diligence. It was a systemised effort by the common people— ‘the subalterns’— and their experiment seemed something that was beyond belief. As Nirmal comes in, he wonders at their industry and diligence, given that it had only been a few weeks then since they had come.

The people of Morichjhāpi, with their limited means and sheer determination, did whatever they could to enlist public support, but in vain. As undeserving as it was, the consequences were appalling, though expected. In the name of conservation of the ecological system of the Sundarbans, the Left Front Government carried out a brutal attack against the villagers:

The ease and brutality with which the government wiped off all signs of the bustling life which had been built there in the last 18 months were proof for the villagers that they were considered completely irrelevant to the more influential urban Bengali community, especially when weighed against tigers. (Jalais 1760)

Ghosh weaves the Morichjhāpi incident in the text with the help of the character of Kusum, who is Fokir’s mother, and Nirmal, who is a young Marxist intellectual. It was a great effort to create a community and a nation for the subalterns; it deserved recognition even beyond its immediate context. Since time immemorial, civilisation propagated through clearing of forest lands and putting up settlements there. But when the poor refugees attempt to do the same, the Government comes up with what they call ‘ecological’ causes: “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world” (*Hungry Tide* 261). The villagers felt that “the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit there, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, “hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust”” (261). At a point in Nirmal’s journal entries, we almost find the humanitarian self of the author speaking: “No human being could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived— by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil” (262). This assault on the refugees happened only because the Morichjhāpi people were poor and, so, they hardly mattered. The fact that this incident has been silenced and effaced from historical records suggests that the voices of the poor go unrepresented and, at most times, are silenced.

“The anthropomorphisation of tigers in relation to the villagers’ history” is quite intriguing. Indeed, in the Sundarbans it is believed that there existed “a sort of idyllic relationship” (Jalais 1758) between the tigers and the villagers prior to the events of Morichjhāpi.

Jalais, in the article which Ghosh himself had acknowledged while researching on the history of the tide country¹, explains that the villagers believe the taste of human flesh from the corpses of the killed refugees which had floated across the forest, had turned the tigers into man-eaters. As the subtitle of Jalais' article suggests, tigers had become 'citizens' and refugees, 'tiger-food'. While reporting the incident of the two people who were killed by the tiger, Kanai tries to explain to Piya, who is essentially foreign to the ways and emotions of the Sundarban community, what implications it really has:

‘That tiger had killed two people, Piya,’ Kanai said. ‘And that was just in one village. It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. (300-301)

Thus the incident of Morichjhāpi speaks volumes about the forced silence of the people living at the margin— those who are technically termed the ‘subalterns’. The Government should have encouraged these people to settle in the Sunderbans as these people, despite belonging to the lowest rung of the society, had set up an organised society in a place where life is lived in close proximity to death. Moreover, these people lived in a communal harmony which is a pleasant relief to the Hindu-Muslim confrontations that have too often disfigured the post-Raj subcontinent. The religious coalition of these people is attested by articles in magazines and newspapers from the second half of the nineteenth century. *The Calcutta Review*, in July, 1889, states:

The chief local divinities are Chawal Pir (boy saint) and Ban Bibi (Lady of the forest). Both seem to be of Mohammedan origin, but they are worshipped by both Mohammedans and Hindus and their shrines are often marked by nothing more than a bamboo topped by a flag.² (*Sundarbans* 52-53)

Piya is also amazed at the manner of Fokir's prayer. Piya could hear the refrain ‘Allah’ being uttered by Fokir which suggested to her that he might be a Muslim and yet the manner in which he seemed to worship an idol seemed to her more like a Hindu ‘puja’.

In a land which is threatened by death at every single moment, not only does men live in harmony, but both men and animals adjust to the ecosystem too. The pathetic condition of the islanders is almost similar to what the Aran islanders in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* face: “... she learnt that in the tide country girls were brought up on the

1 In the ‘Author’s Note’, Ghosh expresses his acknowledgements to this article, which was till then unpublished.

2 I am using it as quoted in *The Sundarbans*.

assumption that if they married, they would be widowed in their twenties— their thirties if they were lucky” (*Hungry Tide* 80). Even the dolphins have their own logic here. They also seem to adapt to the salinity of the waters, as the tigers do. The Government, instead of finding ways and means of uprooting these poor people, ought to have encouraged the way in which these people live in communal harmony. Yet, it all goes unrecorded in the great narratives of history. These subalterns who had dreamt of creating an organised society free from religious differences in a land of their choice were ultimately silenced by the powers of the government as well as excluded from the narratives of written history.

III. Silence as Resistance and Creative Silence

Myth and science coalesce to constitute an entirely different epistemology, where Nirmal could be its ideal teacher:

‘Tell me, children,’ I would begin. ‘What do our old myths have in common with geology?’ ... ‘Think about it,’ I would say, ‘and you’ll see: it’s not just the goddesses— there’s a lot more in common between myth and geology. Look at the size of their heroes, how immense they are— heavenly deities on the one hand, and on the other, the titanic stirrings of the earth itself— both equally otherworldly, equally remote from us. (180)

Nirmal’s view is an acknowledgement of how alternative systems of knowledge can come together and enrich our way of living and being.

Piya is one such scientist who goes around the world in search of dolphins— especially the rare river type— the Irrawaddy Dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) and the Gangetic Dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*). Irrawaddy dolphin was first identified by Sir Richard Owen in 1866. Piya did not expect the Irrawaddy dolphins to be in the Sundarbans because of the extreme salinity of the water. On account of their coastal nature, Irrawaddy dolphins are more susceptible to human interference than any other species of cetaceans. It is an endangered species and the most direct threat is the capturing of these dolphins for their oil. Piya had expected to find the Gangetic Dolphins in the Sundarbans. Ghosh himself informs us in the novel that William Roxburgh discovered the Gangetic Dolphins, which, he said, was found in the rivers and creeks to the south and south-east of Calcutta. This, like the Irrawaddy Dolphin, is also an endangered species. Piya was astounded to find that Fokir recognises Irrawaddy Dolphins, *Orcaella brevirostris* from the cards that she shows him.

Piya is amazed to come across Fokir’s ability to trace the Irrawaddy Dolphins because the movements of these dolphins are hardly predictable. The Irrawaddy Dolphins are often seen to move in groups, and Piya noticed around seven dolphins moving together. Piya observes strangeness in the behaviour of the *Orcaella* and a part of her hypothesis

is to point out the adaptability of the Orcaella dolphins in the saline tidal waters of the Sundarbans. The Orcaella that she notices are of a coastal variety, but she is surprised to find them congregating in a pool. Piya's quest now gets a definite direction:

Had they found a novel way of adapting their behaviour to this tidal ecology?
Could it be that they had compressed the annual seasonal rhythms of their Mekong relatives so as to fit them into the daily cycle of tides? (124)

The answer to these questions can be of profound implication for the conservation of this endangered species. Piya is delighted at the possibilities that this fact, if it could be established, would open up.

Piya knew that this work on dolphins would be a "work of a lifetime" (126). Fokir understood whatever gestures she made, and assisted her in every possible manner by bringing her as close to the dolphins as was feasible. Piya had surveyed all the places that the Irrawaddy Dolphins inhabit—the Mekong, the Irrawaddy and the Ganges—which makes her an expert in the field. Yet people like Fokir, with their intuitive understanding of the rivers, can be of immense help.

One of the most important elements of research is the selection of appropriate sources of knowledge: books, people and other aids that assist the researcher in the process. Ghosh, in his fictional works, has always emphasised on the fact that even an ordinary person can provide an entirely new outlook or an entirely new metaphysique. There do exist unconventional modes of acquiring knowledge and one must not ignore them. Mangala and Lutchman in *The Calcutta Chromosome* account for an entirely new epistemology, where the ultimate aim of knowledge— "to know something is to change it" (105)— is essentially different from the purpose and nature of conventional knowledge. So is Fokir in *The Hungry Tide*: his knowledge of the sea and his relation with the sea provide different ways and means of knowing nature, which Piya readily acknowledges. She is astonished at the manner in which Fokir seems to know exactly where the dolphins would be:

It was possible of course, that dolphins frequented that route and were often seen in this stretch of water— but even then, how could he have known that they would be there on that day, at that time? Groups of migrating Orcaella were anything but predictable in their movements. (113)

Fokir probably knew where the dolphins would be because he knew where the crabs would be. Nirmal had once asked little Fokir about the soft sound coming from the embankment, and he knew that it was being made by the crabs. Nirmal appreciated Fokir saying that to pick up such a sound is a rare ability. Fokir's knowledge of the place was so important to Piya that she felt the imperative to explain to Fokir the reason of her coming

to the Sundarbans. Piya takes the decision to return to Garjontola with Fokir, even though Kanai and Fokir's wife, Moyna, are dismissive of Fokir's abilities. Kanai relates to Piya what Moyna asks: "She wants to know why a highly educated scientist like you needs the help of her husband— someone who doesn't even know how to read and write" (211). This is a question which recurs in most of Ghosh's novels. Piya answers this question in a very definitive manner: "His knowledge can be of help to a scientist like myself" (212). Be it the tigers, the crabs, the dolphins or the storms, Fokir seems to be conversant with them all. His instinct, his concentration and his obvious strength to go on moving make him the perfect one for the job:

It's like he's always watching the water— even without being aware of it. I've worked with many experienced fishermen before but I've never met anyone with such incredible instinct: it's as if he can see right into the river's heart. (267)

Fokir appears to be a totally different person when he is on the land, but in the waters, he is cheerful and always in command. It seems his soul resides in the sea. Piya is surprised at Fokir's extraordinary ability of observation which makes her journey with Fokir in search for the Dolphins the most exciting experience of her life. His philosophy of life is extremely simple, and it is this simplicity that enables him to brave the troubled waters and even save Piya from the storm: "...no one who was good at heart would ever have cause for fear" (307).

Fokir's memory of the 'athhero bhatir desh' is interwoven with myths and tales— Bon Bibi, rivers, tigers, storms and crabs. His relation with this place started from his very childhood, when he listened to the stories told by his mother. Piya realises, and with her, the readers realise too, that although Fokir does not know the tricks of language, his communication goes much beyond the depth and extent of the spoken or written word, simply because he is good at heart:

The two of them, Fokir and herself, they could have been boulders or trees for all they knew of each other: and wasn't it better in a way, more honest, that they could not speak? For if you compared it to the ways in which dolphins' echoes mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being. (159)

It is in situations of adversity, fear and death that the character of a person can be truly judged. Even the simple-minded Fokir is well aware of it; he puts Kanai to test— Kanai, who is learned, civilised and seems to know himself: "Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged" (327).

Fokir then brings about transformation not only in Piya, but also in Kanai. After Fokir's death, when Piya returns to the Badabon Trust, she acknowledges Fokir's

contribution to her knowledge— so much so that she wants to name her project ‘Fokir’. Luckily for her, the GPS survived and all the routes that Fokir showed were stored there. Thus Fokir, an illiterate fisherman, who can be conventionally termed ‘the subaltern’, assists a trained scientist in her process of accumulating knowledge.

That intuition is a possible mode of acquiring knowledge is also emphasised in the novel. Fokir’s intuitions enable him to understand nature better than any other present on the islands. From Piya’s perspective, apart from collecting data or following a hypothesis or using scientific instruments, the intuition of a cetologist can guide her along the right path. Piya uses her intuition to pose questions about the dolphins that would be helpful for her research. Piya instinctively understands that something interesting is taking place in these waters and that this knowledge might be extremely helpful towards mapping the behavioural pattern of the Irrawady dolphins.

Communication, interaction and relation have vital roles to play in field research. Moreover, language and silence are important concerns in all of Ghosh’s novels. Christopher Rollason rightly suggests:

Ghosh’s novel takes as its task the exploration of a vast field of human communication testing both its possibilities and its limits as the characters seek to cross multiple barriers— the barriers of language, religion and social class, those between human beings and nature, between traditional and cosmopolitan India, between urban and rural, between India and the wider world. (2)

In this novel, through the interactions among the three main characters— Fokir, Piya and Kanai— Ghosh explores the problems arising out of the phenomenon called multilingualism in an inter-related world. It is an essential part of the Indian context, and Ghosh, himself being multilingual, is keenly aware of the difficulties and complexities of communication. He also focuses on another significant linguistic aspect: language can become a barrier rather than a bridge between individuals, while bringing in several classes together. Ghosh emphasises that in order to understand each other properly, there must be warmth of understanding. Language can often become treacherous; it can become a signifier of class:

... that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously— people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another’s heads— was far more than surprising: it seemed almost miraculous. (*Hungry Tide* 141)

Piya, a cetologist settled in America, knows no Bengali and the language only reminds her of the endless quarrels her parents had with each other. Fokir, on the other hand, is an unlettered fisherman, whose language is intricately woven with local myths, songs and stories that have been passed down the generations through traditions purely oral.

However, strangely enough, language hardly becomes a barrier between Piya and Fokir; they intuitively understand each other. The relationship between Piya and Fokir and that between the two of them and the sea are often described in terms of the metaphors of silence. When Fokir's boat reaches close to a hamlet, Piya fears the queries, the introductions that may break her silence; but without even a word, as if Fokir knew her mind, he steers the boat away: "...all she wanted was to be in this boat, in this small island of silence, afloat on the muteness of the river" (84). At night Fokir seems to be chanting a song and, although Piya does not understand the language in which the song is being sung, she realises that she has heard nothing like it before, for it has a sort of grief that is unsettling. The incomprehension of the meaning of the song on her part does not stop Piya from understanding its relevance:

She would have liked to know what he was singing about and what the lyrics meant; but she knew too that a river of words would not be able to tell her exactly what made the song sound as it did right then, in that place. (99)

Silence as a possible mode of response coupled with an understanding beyond the confines of language can assist one a long way in procuring knowledge. And this issue finds its manifestation in the relationship between Piya and Fokir. Piya assertively answers Kanai's questions about Fokir:

'And all that while, you couldn't understand a word he was saying, could you?'
'No,' she said, with a nod of acknowledgement. 'But you know what? There was so much in common between us it didn't matter'. (268)

Silence is an important aspect of the Hindu tradition. Silence is a preparation, a way of knowing oneself, and also of knowing the world, as is revealed in the *tapashyaa*(s) (meditation) of the *muni*(s) (sages). In fact, the word '*muni*' has its origin in the Sanskrit word '*mauna*', meaning silence, the maintenance of which is believed to inculcate power and knowledge, as opposed to speech that saps all energy. Silence, as a spiritual entity, is common both in the Buddhist philosophy and in the Hindu philosophy. Ghosh deals with silence in great detail and explores its various connotations both in *The Calcutta Chromosome* and in *The Hungry Tide*. Silence, in both these novels, seems to suggest an alternative epistemology— an alternative way of knowing the world. That alternative methods of knowing the world do exist beyond the Eurocentric methodology of acquiring knowledge has been repeatedly pointed out in Ghosh's novels. The subaltern does have a voice and even his silence speaks; only it is incomprehensible to most people because they are lost in the presumption of their superiority. Kanai shows the same sort of superiority:

... 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 clearly his instinctive mode of defence: silence. (210)

Fokir's silence thus becomes the language of resistance; it also leads him to an empathetic understanding of the world beyond the confines of the language of power. The subaltern silence then becomes the individual's agency against the institutions of power. This attitude of Kanai continued till he is transformed, which happens only when he is faced with danger in the Garjontola incident, where he sees a tiger: "... if you see a tiger the chances are you won't live to tell the tale" (242). One can know oneself only in adversity is a theme that is classically explored in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. Even Rilke could not write a word for years, and then he wrote *The Duino Elegies* in a couple of years: "I think of Rilke, going for years without writing a word and then, producing in a matter of weeks, in a castle besieged by the sea, *The Duino Elegies*. Even silence is preparation" (*Hungry Tide* 193).

The intricacies of translation and interpretation, which Ghosh, being a person writing in a language different from his mother tongue, himself confronts, are explored in great detail through the character of Kanai. The bilingual or multilingual status of an Indian author writing a text in English, itself renders the art a unique characteristic: in essence, it becomes an act of translation. In this novel, Kanai acts as a translator/interpreter, who translates Nirmal's journal in English, while the reader is asked to imagine Kanai reading them in Bengali. The issues that are subtly addressed by Ghosh include the question of translation as an act of representation, the authority of the translator in that representation, the truth and the reliability of that representation, and the visibility of the translator in that translation. When Piya asks Kanai to interpret the traditional song that Fokir is chanting, Kanai replies: "But this is beyond my power: he's chanting a part of the Bon Bibi legend and the metre is too complicated. I can't do it" (309). Later on, in his farewell letter to Piya, Kanai emphasises upon the impossibility of adequate translation:

You asked me what Fokir was singing and I said I couldn't translate it: it was too difficult. And this was no more than the truth, for in those words there was a history that is not just his own but also of this place, the tide country. (354)

Indeed, it is often impossible to truly represent myths and legends of a particular culture outside its context, because they incorporate cultural history and a way of living that belongs typically to the inhabitants of that place. It is never possible to translate the essence of the culture, the tradition and their value outside their emotional periphery to people, who are not intricately involved within the system. Moreover, in this case, the cultural divide between Kanai and Fokir is so great that the elements of sympathy, pity, superiority and other related presumptions are bound to permeate the translation. However, Ka-

nai appends an approximate translation rendered in presentable prose. The doubts of the translator and his visibility in the translated work make it more humane and more suitable to the foreigner's context:

Such flaws as there are in my rendition of it I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading from sight as a good translator should: for once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible. (354)

Communication is a vital aspect of field research. To understand what Fokir has to say to her or show her is important to Piya's research. Intuitive communication and understanding can reach such a level that translation is rendered unnecessary. Mutual respect for each other's knowledge beyond the barriers of class distinction can render this possible. It is emphasised that knowledge is not restricted to only those who possess words and language, but it spreads well beyond the elite or literate class of people: even an ordinary illiterate person like Fokir has power over a wealth of knowledge about his own natural surroundings through his experience and perception. There is also an underlying current throughout this novel of an intuitive understanding between two persons— an understanding that has the redemptive capacity of ennobling communication without any language.

A postcolonial theorist like Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak "insists that we must first unlearn the privileged systems of Western knowledge that have indirectly served the interests of colonialism and neo-colonialism" (*Spivak*, 9). This is necessary in order to represent the subaltern in proper light, which is fundamental to any postcolonial discourse. This is so because the voice of the subaltern is often appropriated by those who seek to represent them. Ghosh, however, treats their epistemology at par with and often even superior to the conventional Euro-centric methods of acquiring knowledge. So, Kanai's or Piya's representation of Fokir is not appropriated, because in their relationship with each other, there is an underlying sense of respect. Fokir in this regard can also be classified as an intellectual in the Gramscian sense of the term, since people like him can also make a significant contribution to knowledge: "There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*"(9).

The conflict between the oral and the written aspects of culture also surfaces as an issue in *The Hungry Tide*. The superiority of the written word is not privileged over the oral forms of knowledge. Fokir is illiterate and, therefore, ignorant of the conventional forms and methods of acquiring knowledge. He is conversant with the oral forms of literature— the myths, the legends, the stories and the songs, which allow him to commune with nature more intimately than others. Piya, Nirmal and later Kanai express their awe at the amazing powers of recitation and observation that Fokir possesses. For the illiterate people, the oral narrative is not only imperative, but it is everything that they have as their source of both knowledge and entertainment: in fact, it is the very essence of their

existence. Nirmal's journal has an episode in which he converts a written book into oral form in order to make it accessible to his village companion, Horen, who asks:

Saar, what is it that you're reading? Are there any stories in it? Why not tell me too, since we have such a long way to go. (145)

Rollason rightly opines:

The novel's translation theme thus embraces not only conversion between languages (Bengali and English), but conversion between written and oral modes of the same language (Bengali). (4)

Intertextuality in the form of extracts from Rilke's *Duino Elegies* also enriches the emotional texture of the novel. Rilke's famous phrase, "translated world" (*Hungry Tide* 206) appears as a potent symbol throughout the novel. In such a place where "hunger and catastrophe were a way of life" (*Hungry Tide* 77), where life has to be lived on the fringes of death, myths and scientific discourses come together and get inter-related in the tales and stories, thereby evolving a distinct epistemology—a poetry of survival. To survive in a "translated world" is to "live[d] in transformation" (*Hungry Tide*, 282), as Rilke observes in *The Duino Elegies*.

The Hungry Tide is the story of the subalterns and the poor, whose voices are not loud enough to be recorded in history, but good enough to create poetry of its own, to be inscribed in memory, and to form a part of Ghosh's fictional world.

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