

## "IN OUR TRANSLATED WORLD": TRANSCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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### I

*The Hungry Tide* (2004)<sup>1</sup> is the fifth novel and sixth substantial book by Amitav Ghosh<sup>2</sup>. Born in Calcutta/Kolkata in 1956 and now resident in New York, Ghosh is by now established as one of the best-regarded of the "post-Rushdie" generation of expatriate Indians writing in English. If his first three novels revealed a writer experimenting with a diversity of forms and genres (magic realism and picaresque in *The Circle of Reason* (1986), impressionistic family history in *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and, in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), a mélange of detection and science fiction), *The Glass Palace* (2000) marked an embrace of mainstream realism of an almost nineteenth-century type, manifested in the genre of the historical novel. Ghosh's fiction has thus far exhibited a remarkable geographical spread, taking in, for *The Circle of Reason*, India, the Gulf region and Algeria; for *The Shadow Lines*, India, Bangladesh and the UK; for *The Calcutta Chromosome*, India and the US; and for *The Glass Palace*, Burma, India and Malaya<sup>3</sup>. Generically, *The Hungry Tide* continues in the realist mode of *The Glass Palace*, this time with a contemporary setting plus historical flashbacks; geographically, its scope is more limited than that of Ghosh's other novels, as it homes in on the human and natural ecosystems of a small and highly particular area of India, though also taking account of the wider world through characters hailing from Delhi and the US.

Ghosh's narrative, rather than encompassing vast swathes of South and South-East Asia, here prefers, then, to focus a magnifying lens on what might be called a micro-culture within the region<sup>4</sup> - namely, the Sundarbans or "tide country," the islets of the Ganges delta that lie south of Kolkata and just east of the West Bengal/Bangladesh frontier. The *Economist* reviewer took the view that "it is its sense of place that dominates the novel,"<sup>5</sup> and Ghosh himself might seem almost to vindicate such a view in his remark of 1998: "A novel ... must always be set somewhere: it must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves."<sup>6</sup> That "almost" needs to be noted, however, and indeed *The Hungry Tide* highlights not only place but, crucially, dynamically evolving human relationships, in a context that includes - as in his other writings - the dimensions of work (he stated in 2002 that "even the most mundane forms of labour can embody an entire metaphysic"<sup>7</sup>), crosscultural barriers and communication, and the relationship between past and present. History is, indeed, a recurring theme in Ghosh's writing, as acutely noted by the critic Brinda Bose (2001), who states: "Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of re-assessing its troubled antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of - or at least come to terms with - our troubling present."<sup>8</sup>

The story centres on two visitors to the Sundarban community, Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy (Piya), and their interaction with that community and with each other. Kanai, a Delhi businessman in his forties, is a semi-outsider, paying a rare visit to his aunt Nilima, an NGO activist who runs a hospital on one of the islands; Piya, an Indo-American scientist from

Seattle in her twenties, irrupts into the Sundarban world as - despite her Bengali origins - less a diasporic Indian than an outsider pure and simple, "the American." Kanai is there to pick up and read a journal left him by his late uncle Nirmal, an idealistic, Marxist intellectual in the Bengali tradition, whose contents will oblige him to delve deep into his family history; Piya's journey to the tide country is part of her ongoing research on dolphins. Piya knows no Bengali ("you know no Bangla?' ... 'I was so little when I left India that I never had a chance to learn'" - 12). Her ignorance of her own language heritage induces her to take Kanai on board as interpreter between her and Fokir, the illiterate fisherman and protégé of Kanai's aunt who serves as her guide. 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. The tension between global and local is articulated through the characters, with, for most of the novel, globalisation embodied by the Americanised Piya with her hi-tech GPS device, local identity symbolised by Fokir, and Kanai, the Delhi-resident, part-globalised modern entrepreneur, shifting uncertainly somewhere in between.

## II

A central metaphor for the notion of communication in a hybrid world is provided by the theme of translation. Postcolonial or transcultural literature in general, and Indian Writing in English in particular, have frequently been viewed by critics via the concept of the already-translated text. This position is explicated by the translation scholar Dora Sales Salvador (2004): "Las narrativas transculturales son ejemplos peculiares de autotraducción derivados del bilingüismo de sus autores. Son textos *originales* que en sí ya llevan la carga de la traducción, ya constituyen una traducción ..., motivan un replanteamiento de las nociones elementales del proceso traductor." ("Transcultural narratives are highly particular instances of self-translation arising from their authors' bilingual status. They are *original* texts which already bear the burden of translation, are already a translation ..., thus giving rise to a new questioning of the basic notions of the translation process.")<sup>9</sup> Certainly, *The Hungry Tide* offers concrete evidence for such a textual model, as Kanai is shown across the novel cumulatively reading extracts from his uncle Nirmal's Sundarban journal: the extracts are "reproduced" in full and *in English*, but the reader is asked to imagine Kanai reading them *in Bengali*. An imputed transcultural shift is thus written into the very fabric of Ghosh's text. Meanwhile and across the entire text, Ghosh's narrative, in what might be called, at least for the non-Bengali reader, a deliberate "foreignising" strategy, incorporates a large number of Bengali terms, mostly italicised on first occurrence and in some (but not all) cases glossed. The reader is thus left in no doubt as to the cultural provenance of the text, even despite the overarching role of English as its matricial language.

Significantly, Kanai himself is a translator/interpreter by profession: he knows six languages (his native Bengali plus Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, English and French - 199)<sup>10</sup>, runs a translation and interpretation agency, and offers to act as interpreter for Piya, who only knows English and has no means of communication with the local Bengali speakers whose knowledge and lore are vital for her research. Nirmal's written records are presented to the reader *translated* (from Bengali into English); Kanai *interprets* - mediates orally - between Piya and Fokir. The need for translation arises from the phenomenon of multilingualism in an interrelated world. Multilingualism has always been a part of the Indian context, Ghosh himself is multilingual, and his earlier novels contain episodes reflecting a keen awareness of the complexities and

difficulties of language interaction, both among Indians and between Indians and the wider world<sup>11</sup>. Kanai interprets for Piya for a portion of her expedition, but at a certain point he concludes she does not in fact need his services, apparently supposing she can communicate intuitively with her guide Fokir: "I think you'll be able to manage perfectly well without a translator." (333) Piya has already shown an attitude to Fokir that supposes the two can communicate intuitively across the language and cultural divide that separates them: "And all that while, you couldn't understand a word he was saying, could you? 'No' (...) 'but you know what? There was so much in common between us it didn't matter.'" (268) What is involved here is an essentialist world-view, based on unexamined notions of a common humanity, that may be seen as either enticingly utopian or dangerously naïve. At one point, Piya asks Kanai to explain the content of a traditional song that Fokir is chanting, asking him "Can you translate?", and Kanai replies: "... this is beyond my power ... the metre is too complicated. I can't do it." (309) Later, he writes Piya what is intended as a farewell letter in which he focuses on the impossibility of (adequate) translation/interpretation: "You asked me what Fokir was singing and I said I couldn't translate it: it was too difficult. And that 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) Rather than considering translation unnecessary, Kanai seems here to despair of it as impossible, because cultural barriers are too wide. Yet, paradoxically, in the moment of appearing to give up, he appends an approximate translation - rendered in verse presented as prose, in an act of generic hesitation that seems both to reflect and overcome Kanai's translator's doubts - of the Bengali folk poem that Piya had heard Fokir sing<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, Kanai even ends his letter reclaiming the translator's place in the scheme of things, curiously echoing the polemical ideas of the translation theorist Lawrence Venuti, in first affirming the stock notion of the "good translator's" invisibility and then turning things round to demand his own visibility after all: "Such flaws as there are in my translation I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading into sight as a good translator should: for once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible." (354) Against Piya's essentialist willingness to dispense with translation, then, Kanai stands as conscious of both its limitations and its necessity<sup>13</sup>.

Technically, and certainly within professional contexts such as university schools of translation/interpretation or international organisations, translation refers *only* to the written word and interpretation *only* to the spoken word. The UN, the European Union and similar bodies employ *translators* and *interpreters* via separate recruitment procedures, in separate career paths with no horizontal mobility between them. However, it is rare for the lay person to grasp, let alone practise, this semantic distinction. Certainly, Amitav Ghosh does not, despite the interest that, as we have seen, he shows across his novels in the world of work and the technical details of occupations. The text of *The Hungry Tide* repeatedly employs "translate/translator" ("Do you know what your expedition lacks?' ... 'A translator!'" - 231; "Can you translate?" - 309) to refer to the practice and practitioners of what is technically interpretation<sup>14</sup>; the conceptual confusion is, be it added, shared in equal measure by Ghosh's reviewers<sup>15</sup>. It is, though, also true that Kanai, working in the private sector and in contradistinction to the usual public-sector practice, does himself practise both activities: "I'm a translator you see, and an interpreter as well, by profession." (10) The very lexical hesitation between the terms "translator" and "interpreter", even if unjustifiable in strict technical and semantic terms, throws into relief the potentially ambivalent role of translation/interpretation - is the activity a transposition of meanings between cultural systems (translation), or is it, by its very nature, a rewriting and recoding of others' messages (interpretation)? Both translation and interpretation may theoretically be considered as forms

of linguistic transfer, but it remains important not to occlude the dialectic of similarity and difference between the two activities.

Kanai's role as translator/interpreter is also significant in the sense that his work straddles the divide between the written (translation) and the oral (interpretation). This is of interest in the light of the wider interplay, or counterpoint, that operates across the text between written and oral modes. Kanai comes to terms with his past through a written text, his uncle's journal; Piya's scientific work relies on written reports and data sheets; Fokir is illiterate, and his illiteracy is a long-standing cause of tension between him and his upwardly mobile and literate wife, the nurse Moyna. As is frequent in Indian writing, in a country where an ancient heritage of written literature coexists with a rich oral tradition, Ghosh's novel, written text though it is, also invokes the popular storytelling tradition - with the inevitable references to the *Thousand and One Nights* (Nirmal in his journal compares himself to 'some misplaced, misgendered Scheherazade ... trying to stave off the night with a fleeting pen' - 148). The 'Nights' are, of course, a text which, though written, is based on older oral materials and which is structured around the act of storytelling, as, to save her life, the celebrated princess Scheherazade spins out tale after tale, many of them of Indian origin<sup>16</sup>. For the illiterate popular strata, the oral narrative tradition is crucial: thus, Nirmal's journal has a episode in which he converts material from a book he is reading into oral form to make it accessible to his villager companion Horen ("Saar, what is that you're reading? Are there any stories in it? Why not tell me too ..." - 145). 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). In addition, the tell-tale verb "Listen", signal of the storyteller, occurs, indeed, in Nirmal's journal - not only in the above episode with Horen ("All right, then ... Listen,") but also in a true story told by a fellow Bengali woman to Fokir's mother Kusum ("Listen, sister, we'll tell you: this is the story" - 164.)<sup>17</sup>

The translation factor in the text is further complicated by a curious intertextual element, namely the recurrent quotations in Nirmal's journal from a work of Western literature originally written in not English but German - the *Duino Elegies*, the celebrated sequence of nine poems from 1923 by the Austrian Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>18</sup>. The extracts from Rilke appear in a "real" English translation, but are imputedly quoted by Nirmal, and read by Kanai, in (for the Indian reader) the more domesticated form of a Bengali version<sup>19</sup>. It is, furthermore, from one of Rilke's texts (the First Elegy) that Ghosh's own text quotes (within the journal) the crucial lines: "we're not comfortably at home/in our translated world", later to paraphrase the same lines as if from Kanai's viewpoint: "being so little at ease in your translated world" (206, 328)<sup>20</sup>. It is if, in the complex and multiple social universe bequeathed by colonialism and traversed by globalisation, even so basic a phenomenon as human communication has, more often than not, to be handled at one remove, indirectly, through a process of mediation that may also prove a distortion. Nonetheless, to translate is, necessarily, to communicate, however imperfectly, across human-made barriers.

### III

*The Hungry Tide* is, like *The Glass Palace* before it, impeccably researched, and appears as an example of the novel as both history and ethnography. Ghosh's ethnographic qualifications (he has a doctorate in anthropology from Oxford University) are well-enough known and have been amply demonstrated in the pages of *In An Antique Land*; here, he delineates a series of cultural features of the tide country's micro-community - of its human ecosystem, placed in

both complementary and conflictive relation to the natural ecosystem which it is Piya's task to explore. History, meanwhile, intervenes in the particular areas of utopia and class conflict.

The alternation between Kanai's here-and-now experiences and his reading of his uncle's journal brings past and present into a symbiotic encounter. The Bengali location allows Ghosh the immediate possibility of drawing on the particular utopian tradition of a part of the subcontinent where, over a good two centuries, Western rationalist influences have coalesced with an older vein of Indian syncretism to produce a unique strain of social thought, as expressed in the movement known as the Bengali Renaissance and notably manifested in the work of Rabindranath Tagore and his school and, later, university at Shantiniketan. This tradition is strongly present in Ghosh's earlier writing - in *The Circle of Reason*, with its rationalist village school and cult of Pasteur, and in the fusion of western scientific endeavour with native esoteric thought in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Here in *The Hungry Tide*, it reappears in various forms, both exogenous and endogenous: in the utopian community founded in the Sundarbans at the beginning of the twentieth century by the visionary Scot Sir Daniel Hamilton ("Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everybody would have to live and work together." - 51); in Nilima's hospital and school, which despite her insistence on the need to temporise with government nonetheless offer the local community the hope of a better world; and in Nirmal's eminently Bengali brand of Marxism (after all, West Bengal, along with Kerala, has long been exceptional among Indian states in the continued institutional presence of the local communist party). It resurfaces, too, in Piya's doomed belief that she can somehow communicate seamlessly across cultural barriers with the illiterate Fokir.

The idea of utopia, as conceived by the visionary Hamilton and hankered after by Nirmal, always runs the risk of eliding the concrete historical realities of class. The vexed issue of social class barriers appears in Ghosh's novel twice over, across two generations - in the refugees' revolt of which Kusum is a part, and in the friendship (if that is the word) that develops across class lines between Fokir, her illiterate son, and the cosmopolitan outsider Piya. The failed popular revolt is, not surprisingly, a recurrent topos in postcolonial/transcultural/third-world writing: examples in Latin American literature include the salt rebellion of the indigenous women in José María Arguedas' *Los Ríos profundos* (1958) and the banana workers' strike in Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967)<sup>21</sup>, while in Indian literature Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), with its Gandhian women villagers' insurrection, provides a classic exploration of the theme. In *The Hungry Tide*, Kanai reconstructs, via his uncle's journal, the revolt of a group of resettled refugees from the then East Pakistan, their creation of a short-lived community in the Sundarbans with visible utopian-rationalist features, and the bloody retaliation of the authorities. Kusum, Fokir's mother, is part of that revolt, and dies in the course of its repression.

The refugees' plight is in the first place the product of Partition, and therefore ultimately of British colonialism and its divide-and-rule strategies (Ghosh's novel thus connects with the dominant theme of his earlier *The Shadow Lines*). The refugee community is forcibly resettled by the Indian government in Madhya Pradesh state, hundreds of kilometres from Bengal, but in 1978 makes the collective decision to return "home" - if not to East Pakistan/Bangladesh, at least to West Bengal and the Sundarbans. Its members bed down on one of the islands - that on which Nilima's hospital stands - and begin to create the bases of an organised micro-society, and both Nirmal and Kusum find themselves drawn into the refugees' struggle. Nirmal, in his journal, finds a strong utopian strand in their endeavour, in this attempt by the dispossessed to possess something of their own: "... there had been many additions, many

improvements. Saltpans had been created, tubewells had been planned, water had been dammed for the rearing of fish ... It was an astonishing spectacle - as though an entire civilisation had sprouted suddenly in the mind." (191) However, the utopia cannot and does not last: it is brutally repressed by the government forces (which recruit gangster elements for the purpose), and in its aftermath Kusum is killed, while Nirmal, whose journal ends at the moment of the repression, having got mixed up in the events loses his sanity and dies soon after.

If Nirmal as a Marxist believed in a rapprochement across class barriers that could bring him and Kusum together on some level, a generation later Piya repeats this pattern with Kusum's son Fokir. As we have seen, Piya, it seems not feeling at home in a translated world and seeking one where translation is not necessary, naively believes she can do without Bengali/English interpretation in her interaction with Fokir. This attitude is at one with her imported, greenish view of the world: on witnessing an invading tiger set on fire by villagers, she is horrified and gets on a moral-absolutist high horse, rejecting such an act out of hand. At that point Piya, shocked at Fokir's approval of the killing of the tiger, admits to Kanai: "Fact is, you were right and I was wrong ... about there being nothing in common between -?' 'You and Fokir' - 'Yes ..; You were right. I was just being stupid.'" (297) At such a moment, Piya temporarily distances herself from her desire for a translation-free world. However, she soon reverts to type and accompanies Fokir, without Kanai there to interpret, on a fresh expedition which will soon be subsumed into all the rigours of a tide-country storm. And here indeed she and Fokir get as close as they ever will: the storm takes Fokir as he clasps Piya's body with his protective arms. He, the illiterate villager, perishes; she, the privileged outsider, lives to tell the tale: "She tried to break free from his grasp, tried to pull him around so that for once, she could be the one who was sheltering him. But his body was unyielding, and she could not break free from it, especially now that it had the wind's weight behind it. Their bodies were so close, so finally merged that she would feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon 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)

On one level, this denouement seems to call in question the utopian imperative and interrogate the possibility of transcending cultural barriers. If Fokir dies that Piya may live, if the storm makes them one only to disgorge Piya as sole survivor, then surely the privileged are still in their position. Nonetheless, if we now look at the novel's presentation of the Sundarbans' human ecosystem, a fresh utopian dynamic may be distinguished, in a conciliatory form of popular religious syncretism. This impulse manifests itself in the curious tale of Bon Bibi.

The cult of Bon Bibi, peculiar to the community in which Kanai finds himself, has been handed down through the generations, through the oral tradition of story and song: the tale, "told by Abdur-Rahim" (354), appears to have been written down at one point, and at one point is staged as a theatre play, "The Glory of Bon Bibi" (101), but its transmission remains essentially oral. It may fairly be seen as representative of a certain strand of Hindu-Muslim syncretism<sup>22</sup> that runs through the byways, and sometimes even the highways, of Indian history. The tide people are a priori Hindu, and have ended up in India rather than East Pakistan/Bangladesh, but that does not prevent them taking on substantial elements from the adjacent world of Islam. According to the story, two twins, Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli, were born in the holy city of Medina to a Sufi faqir. They are marked out for a special destiny: "When the twins came of age, the archangel [Gabriel] brought them word that they had been chosen for a divine mission: they were to travel from Arabia to the "country of

eighteen tides" - *atthero bhatir desh* - in order to make it fit for human habitation. Thus charged, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli set off for the mangrove forests of Bengal dressed in the simple robes of Sufi mendicants." (103) Bon Bibi becomes the tutelary deity of the islands. Kusum sees the dolphins as her messengers (234); and Piya is amazed to find Fokir and his son praying at a shrine dedicated to her: "Piya recognised a refrain that occurred over and over again - it contained a word that sounded like 'Allah'. She had not thought to speculate about Fokir's religion, but it occurred to her now that he might be Muslim. But no sooner had she thought this, than it struck her that a Muslim was hardly likely to pray to an image like this one. What Fokir was performing looked very much like her mother's Hindu *pujas* - and yet the words seemed to suggest otherwise." (152) The strange coexistence of the name of Allah with puja-type gestures points to a transcultural fusion of elements from both Hinduism and Islam, at the opposite pole from the Hindu-Muslim confrontations that have too often disfigured the post-Raj subcontinent<sup>23</sup>.

Syncretist phenomena such as this may be viewed as part and parcel of the islands' human ecosystem (the ethnologist in Ghosh also notes that the observance of widowhood in the Sundarbans differs from the usual Hindu norm: "here, on the margins of the Hindu world, widows were not condemned to lifelong bereavement: they were free to remarry if they could" - 81). That human ecosystem is, of course, inserted problematically into a wider natural ecosystem - or eco-polysystem. The migratory dolphins have their own logic, while that of the tigers and crocodiles, if part of a greater natural whole, is not in any immediate sense compatible with that of the human community those animals prey on: to that, Kanai can vouch when he escapes as if miraculously from a tiger's clutches. No less unkind is the logic of the horrendous storm that kills Fokir and almost sweeps away Piya too. Piya, true to type, tends to sentimentalise the animal world and its imagined beneficent relation to humanity, asking herself when a group of dolphins seem to be consciously sharing a catch of fish with their human acquaintances: "Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals?" (169), but is later sharply taken to task by the tiger-burning episode and the awkward questions it raises. Across the novel as a whole, and despite the attractive notion of idealising cetacean communities, the general sense is that the basic humanity/nature relationship in the Sundarbans remains highly problematic (death and destruction, from storms or tigers, can face the villagers at any moment) and is not susceptible to facile ideological simplifications.

#### IV

Neither human nor natural ecosystem in Ghosh's novel appears easy to place or interpret. Here, though, the reader may recall that a novel is not only a narrated tale but a construct within a wider literary system, and at this point the notion of intertextuality may come to our aid. *The Glass Palace* already exhibited a significant intertextual element, recalling and rewriting images and themes from Rudyard Kipling and George Orwell, and this novel too finds Ghosh the writer taking on certain of his distinguished precursors. To take the Bon Bibi, Hindu-Muslim element first, it is possible to hypothesise a curious dialogic encounter, implicit in the text, between Amitav Ghosh and one of his most celebrated "Indo-Anglian" peers, Salman Rushdie<sup>24</sup>. There are, in fact, a number of interesting convergences between *The Hungry Tide* and Rushdie's work. Rushdie has himself briefly featured the tide country in his own fiction, in a chapter of *Midnight's Children* (1981), indeed entitled "In the Sundarbans", in which his narrator Saleem, in the wake of the Bangladesh war, finds himself lost in a dark, sinister and rather Kiplingesque jungle world, "through incomprehensibly labyrinthine salt-water channels overtowered by the cathedral-arching trees"<sup>25</sup> (Ghosh, one

may speculate, may in part be motivated by the desire to make comprehensible what Rushdie treats as "incomprehensible"); in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) Rushdie too quotes Rilke (the *Sonnets to Orpheus*), in the epigraph and intermittently across the text; and in *Shame* (1983), the narrator, who may approximately be identified with Rushdie himself, anticipates Ghosh's notion, via Rilke, of a "translated world" by referring to himself, formed by the life-experiences of more than one culture, as a "translated man."<sup>26</sup> The most significant case of intertextuality with Rushdie, however, relates to no less a text than that writer's famously controversial novel of 1988, *The Satanic Verses*<sup>27</sup>.

Bon Bibi and her brother are born in Medina, "one of the holiest places in Islam" (103), and, indeed, one of the two holy cities in what is now Saudi Arabia; Rushdie's novel locates its two controversial chapters in a place named Jahilia, a thinly disguised version of the other holy city, Mecca. Ghosh's twins are fathered "through the intervention of the archangel Gabriel", a figure who later instructs them to go to India and who also appears in Rushdie's ironic rewriting of the dictation of the Koran to the Prophet, in the demented dreams of his filmstar namesake Gibreel Farishta ("Gibreel, hovering-watching from his highest camera angle."<sup>28</sup>) The twins' crossing from Arabia to India, too, parallels in reverse the "crossing of the Arabian Sea" delusion from the Ayesha episode, another of Gibreel's dreams in *The Satanic Verses*. It needs to be stressed, however, that where Rushdie's text, intentionally not, ended up stoking the fires of religious controversy, Ghosh's rewriting of themes from *The Satanic Verses* works in the direction of syncretism and, therefore, intercommunal understanding: it is as if Ghosh, via his mentor Rushdie, had been through the confrontational, hardline secularist attitude to religion, and come out on the other side with the objective of finding common areas between the subcontinent's two largest faiths - a dynamic of rapprochement that is movingly symbolised in the image of Fokir and his son worshipping Bon Bibi in a ceremony that is, at one and the same time, both Sufi and Hindu.

On the vexed plane of the humanity/nature relationship, Ghosh's intertextual practice appears to play a similar role. We are certainly dealing with an important theme in the novel, for Ghosh himself has declared in a 2004 interview: "I wanted to write a book that is grounded in nature."<sup>29</sup> Here, *The Hungry Tide* matches itself against not an Indian text but one from Piya's adopted America - Herman Melville's famous maritime epic of 1851, *Moby-Dick*. When Piya pronounces the term "cetologist" before Kanai, in explanation of her work ("I'm a cetologist. That means ...' (...) 'You don't need to explain. It means you study marine mammals'" - 11), the reader familiar with the Anglo-American literary canon will immediately think of Melville's whale of a novel, which not only holds vast amounts of marine-mammal lore in its belly, but actually entitles its thirty-second chapter "Cetology." The analogy is confirmed later in Ghosh's text, when Kanai declares to Piya, "I thought you were going to lead me to my Moby Dick." (304) However, where Melville's novel pits man against whale, Piya's research, focusing not on whales but dolphins, aims not to kill cetaceans but to understand them, and, as we have seen, has a strong - if at times naïve - utopian element. If Ahab is driven by the will to power ("Oh, his unappeasable brow drives on towards one, whose duty tells him he cannot depart"<sup>30</sup>) Piya seems to embody the will to knowledge (as Kanai puts it: "You go through a lot for these creatures" - 226)<sup>31</sup>: her desire is, metaphorically at least, to dive into the depths of the dolphin world and return with scientific treasures, in a quest which she would certainly see as non-exploitative towards the natural environment. It is as if Ghosh were reversing Melville by seeking in his text the essence of a non-confrontational, cooperative relationship between humanity and nature. In the Sundarban world, such a relationship can - the crouching tiger reminds the reader - be sketched only in embryo. Nonetheless, it may still be argued that through Piya Ghosh is edging his readership away from Melville's heroic-confrontational

mode, centred on the nineteenth-century Western notion of the mastery of nature, towards a different kind of human insertion into the natural world - where, as Walter Benjamin put it in 1926, what matters is "not the mastery of nature but of the relation between nature and man"<sup>32</sup>. The intertextuality of *The Hungry Tide*, in ambivalent dialogue with both Melville and Rushdie, seems to be pointing away from heroic-male literary models, be it for crosscultural or for culture/nature relations, and towards less polarised and more dialogic frames of being.

## V

For all the above conciliatory trends in its writing, Ghosh's narrative nonetheless, as we know, climaxes harshly in the dark and tragic death of Fokir in the storm. With such a denouement, it may, somehow, fairly be asked whether Kanai was not right, and whether Piya's notion of a seamless communication beyond words with Fokir was not, at bottom, an impossible reverie born of a naively idealist world-view. Their relationship in fact goes as far as it could and no further: the moving image of the dying Fokir with his body protectively surrounding Piya's, yet calling out for his wife and child in his last moments, serves to establish the outer limits of their communication. On the one hand, Ghosh eschews all sensationalism: as a visual image, the Fokir-Piya pair, apparently transcending the barriers of class and literacy, might remind some readers of another male-female dyad, Velutha and Ammu in Arundhati Roy's best-selling novel set in Kerala, *The God of Small Things* (1997) and their doomed, cross-caste love affair, but Roy's unlikely pair perpetrate a transgression which Ghosh's narrative carefully falls short of<sup>33</sup>. Piya does not take her relationship with Fokir beyond the culturally permissible limits. On the other hand, though, those same limits serve to point up the difficulty of communication too. The monolingual Piya, knowing neither Bengali nor Hindi, appears, despite her Indian origins, as typifying the monoglot attitudes of the Anglo-Saxon world in general and the US in particular. Those who only know English are doomed not to understand other cultures, unless they draw on the services of a translator-interpreter and cultural mediator like Kanai - services which, however flawed and imperfect, prove indeed to be necessary, in the very context of the globalisation that brings the likes of Piya to locations like the Sundarbans.

Despite this, the novel's conclusion, though open-ended, paradoxically seems to find Ghosh - and, in all probability, the reader - moving tentatively towards an admission of the possibility, after all, of communication across cultural barriers, at least within certain limits and subject to a rational effort of will. At the end, both Piya and Kanai voluntarily undertake a reconstruction (and reinterpretation) of their experiences in the Sundarbans: each has lost the textual evidence (the sea claimed both Kanai's uncle's journal and Piya's cetological data-sheets), but each is willing to piece the text back together from memory. Beyond this, both actually, and surprisingly, return to the Sundarbans: Kanai shifts his residence from Delhi to Kolkata to be near the tide country and visit often, thus moving at least halfway, towards a neo-Gandhian renunciation of cosmopolitan and metropolitan India in favour of the more demotic claims of what some call the "real India" (in a evolution that might recall the nativist conversion of the English Teacher in R.K. Narayan's novel of that name of 1945). Piya goes further, electing to base herself and her research in the Sundarbans themselves and to learn Bengali, giving a surprising preference to the local over the global, to her Indian roots over her globalised-American identity. A makeover, Bengali-speaking Piya could indeed have greater possibilities of communicating cross-culturally with the likes of Fokir than the "American" whom the reader has accompanied across the book. Meanwhile, whether the

future will hold any convergence of a more affective nature between Piya and Kanai is left open, but clearly their paths will cross once more.

It is as if the diverse strands of Ghosh's narrative have finally come together. In his earlier work, Amitav Ghosh employed the metaphor of weaving - the spinning of yarns, in more than one sense - as symbol for the connective role of writing and of human communication in general. In *The Circle of Reason*, weaving - the activity of the main character, Alu - appears as an emblem of connection, even being linked to the development of computers, and the text offers the pregnant aphorism: "Weaving is hope because it has no country, no continent"<sup>34</sup>, while the pages of *In An Antique Land* contain the image of the weaver as storyteller: "Later, when I got to know [the weaver] Zaghoul better, I discovered that besides being very fond of stories, he had a manner of telling them that was marvellously faithful to the metaphorical resonances of his chosen craft."<sup>35</sup>. However, in both texts the weaving image seemed more a matter of unrealised potential: in *The Circle of Reason* Alu's creative gift finally leads him nowhere, while the Indo-Egyptian encounter of *In An Antique Land* runs up against cultural differences that at times appear unbridgeable. By contrast, the narrative of *The Hungry Tide* is made up of interwoven strands - Kanai's narrative and Piya's, the present lived by the characters and the past of Nirmal's journal - that variously alternate, converge, diverge and reconverge. As the novel comes to an end, the utopian possibility opens up of a coming-together of all the book's narrative and conceptual strands: global and local, urban and rural, linguistic and scientific, anglophone and Bengali-speaking - even, it may be, male and female. The hungry tide has claimed its sacrificial victim in Fokir, but Piya plans a memorial to him and even begins to speak of the Sundarbans as "home" (399). The utopian goal of mutual understanding, implicit in this novel's recurrent theme of translation, begins to appear as something actually possible. As both Piya and Kanai seem to morph into a new kind of cosmopolitan who can actually feel at home in a place like the tide country, the reader finds this latest of Amitav Ghosh's fictions opening up new and unexpected perspectives: the postcolonial text, product and reflection of a translated world, nonetheless proclaims the need and the desire, for us as global citizens, to communicate in new forms - to think transculturally, and to build new bridges across that world.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations and page numbers refer to the edition of *The Hungry Tide* published by Harper Collins in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Ghosh's non-fiction includes *In An Antique Land* (1992), which combines ethnographic reflections on Egypt with the reconstruction of a historical episode linking Egypt with India; *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), a travel book; and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), a volume of essays. The generic status of *In An Antique Land* has given rise to critical disagreement. Salman Rushdie, in his preface to *The Vintage Book Of Indian Writing 1947-1997* (1997), describes Ghosh's book as a "non-fiction study," further hazarding the view that his "greatest strength [may] turn out to be that of an essayist of this sort." (xxii) Tuomas Huttunen, in "Connections beyond Partitions: Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*" (2003), treats *In An Antique Land* as a novel, as too does Brinda Bose, in "Footnoting History: The Diasporic Imagination of Amitav Ghosh" (2002). However, such readings are, to say the least, contentious, especially as large portions of that book also appear in a different form in the essay collection *The Imam and the Indian*. John Thieme ("The Discoverer Discovered: Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*", 2001) is on firmer ground when he stresses, in general terms, Ghosh's "blurring of the boundaries between anthropology and fiction" (178-179).

<sup>3</sup> A similar geographical breadth characterises Ghosh's non-fiction. *In An Antique Land* shifts between Egypt and India; the title of *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* is self-explanatory; and *The Imam and the Indian*, apart from the alternate versions of parts of *In An Antique Land* mentioned above, also contains pieces dealing with Sri Lanka and Tibet.

<sup>4</sup> Some intertextual continuity with the novelist's earlier work is nonetheless supplied by references to Calcutta/Kolkata (Ghosh's text, in a suitably hybridated compromise, uses both "old" English and "new" Bengali names), Burma and Cambodia. It may be added that *The Hungry Tide* continues in the line of Ghosh's earlier work (notably *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*) by drawing on his family history. Kanai's uncle Nirmal is partly based on an actual uncle of the author's - Ghosh states in his "Author's Note": "My uncle, the late Shri Chandra Ghosh, was for more than a decade the headmaster of the Rural Reconstruction Institute founded by Sir Daniel Hamilton in Gosaba." (401)

<sup>5</sup> *Economist* review, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Ghosh, "The March of the Novel through History: the Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase", 1998, repr. in *The Imam and the Indian* (2002 - 294).

<sup>7</sup> This quotation is from Ghosh's "Acknowledgements" to *The Imam and the Indian* (2002 - x), where he refers to his own writerly "interest in patterns of work" and stresses the presence of that theme in *The Circle of Reason* and *The Glass Palace*. Indeed, in the former Ghosh homes in on the details of weaving and gardening, while the latter brings to the fore such diverse activities as timbering, oil production and photography.

<sup>8</sup> Bose, "Footnoting History", 235. For readings of Ghosh's earlier work through the notion of coming to terms with (colonial/postcolonial/subaltern) history, see, for *The Shadow Lines*, Kevin Jonas Lenfest, "Reflections from the Cave: Negotiating Identity in *The Shadow Lines*" (2003), and N. Nagaraju, "Entity and Nationality in the Fictional Narratives of Amitav Ghosh" (2004); for *The Glass Palace*, Shanthini Pillai, "The Gaze of a Diasporic, the Voice of a Subaltern: Amitav Ghosh's Articulation of the Indian Immigrant Labour Experience in *The Glass Palace*" (2002), and T. Vinoda, "Reflections on the Crystal Palace: *The Glass Palace* as a Postcolonialist Text" (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Dora Sales Salvador, "Literaturas transculturales y ética de la traducción" (2004), 70.

<sup>10</sup> Kanai's language skills correspond closely to Ghosh's own. Indeed, he tells Piya, "an opportunity turned up [for him] to learn Arabic in Tunisia" (199) - as was actually the case for his creator.

<sup>11</sup> In *The Circle of Reason*, a policeman from Delhi posted to Kerala finds the Malayalam language all but unlearnable: "You chaps in your home states are lucky. You don't know what it's like for us [...] I've got myself a teacher and I've tried to learn the bloody lingo, but it's impossible." (162-163); while in another episode, a Hindi-speaking woman has to ask for help with a Bengali text (Tagore's drama *Chitrangada*) from a native speaker of that language: "I have a Hindi translation of the original done by my father, but there are a couple of places where I can't read his handwriting. He copied the original down with the translation, but the trouble is I can't read Bengali [...]. So, if you could just help a little." (394) In *The Glass Palace*, the multiple examples of the complexities of language interaction include the Burma-resident Indian Rajkumar, who speaks "fluent but heavily accented Burmese" (3), and the Burmese princesses exiled in Ratnagiri (in today's Maharashtra), who "learned to speak Marathi and Hindustani as fluently as any of the townsfolk." (77)

<sup>12</sup> Krishna Dutta, the UK-based writer and author of an acclaimed book on Kolkata, says in her *Independent* review of *The Hungry Tide* ("At sea in the waters of Bengal", 2004) that this passage is "an English pastiche of the Bengali metre *dwipadi poyar*: a rhymed couplet of about 12 lines with a caesura."

<sup>13</sup> Translation is, besides, present as an element in Ghosh's other work, in the specific context of the Bengali/English dyad. Ghosh has written: "It happens that although I write in English, my native language is Bengali" ("The Fundamentalist Challenge", 1995; repr. in *The Imam and the Indian*, 2002 - 278), and *The Imam and the Indian* includes both mention of the translations of his work into Bengali ("Acknowledgments", 12) and his own translation of 1995, from Bengali into English, of Rabindranath Tagore's short story "The Hunger of Stones". In this connection, it is far from tangential to note that, according to Ramya Ramamurthy ("I think in images", 2004), Ghosh "has announced that he may translate *The Hungry Tide* into Bengali".

<sup>14</sup> Ghosh, it has to be said, displays a similar lexical looseness in his essay "Dancing in Cambodia" (1998): "The friend who I had persuaded to come along with me to translate ..." (7); "King Sisowah spoke no French, and it was Minister Thiounn who served as his interpreter." (23)

<sup>15</sup> Of the reviews listed below under "Works Cited", two (Alfred Hickling in *The Guardian* and Khushwant Singh in the *Deccan Herald*) refer to Kanai as an interpreter ("found[er of] a successful interpretation agency"; "runs a firm of language interpreters") and three (Mitju C. Banerji in *The Observer*, Partha Chatterjee in *The Hindu* and Indrajit Hazra in *The Hindustan Times*) describe him as a translator ("from a translating job in New Delhi", "runs a successful translation bureau in New Delhi", "(heads) a professional translating company", but none gets it right or makes it clear that he actually does both!

<sup>16</sup> Ghosh's textual invocation of the *Thousand and One Nights* runs in a tradition of Indo-Anglian cultural reference that includes Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra and, indeed, Tagore. Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), with its names Haroun and Rashid - the latter its storyteller hero - refers back self-evidently to the *Nights*, while in his *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), Moraes Zogoiby ends up telling stories to save his life, "made a Scheherezade" (421); Chandra rehandles the "writing ape" theme from one of the "Nights" in a central image of his *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995); while in Tagore's "The Hunger of Stones" (1895), the story translated by Ghosh, the protagonist declares: "It seemed to me that a night from the Thousand and One Nights had transported itself here from the realm of fiction" (*The Imam and the Indian*, 332).

<sup>17</sup> The verb "Listen", similarly, plays a key role in the strongly orally-influenced fictions of Vikram Chandra, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) and *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997).

<sup>18</sup> Ghosh also mentions Rilke in "Dancing in Cambodia". Here, the context is Rilke's relationship with no less a European artistic icon than Auguste Rodin, whose personal secretary he was in 1905-1906: the poet is cited as praising, in a letter of 1907, the artist's sketches of Cambodian dancers: "For me, these sketches were amongst the most profound of revelations" ("Dancing in Cambodia", 42). The intertextual link between essay and novel indicates that the presence of Rilke in the Bengali consciousness is not historically innocent: the Rodin sketches evoked by the poet derive from the official visit of the King of Cambodia, then a French protectorate, to Marseille in 1906, and would not have existed had it not been for French colonialism in Indochina. Rilke, though not French, was thus an indirect participant in France's colonial enterprise.

<sup>19</sup> Ghosh explains in his "Author's Note" that his Rilke quotations are from the English translation of 1975 by A. Poulin Jr., while the Bengali translation imputedly used by Nirmal is that by Buddhadeva Basu, from the 1960s (402-403).

<sup>20</sup> Curiously, where the translation used by Ghosh has "in our translated world," another rendering of the First Elegy, that by J.B. Leishman (in the Penguin *Selected Poems* of Rilke, 1964), reads "this interpreted world." The German original has "in der gedeuteten Welt", and "gedeuteten" means "interpreted" rather than "translated" ("deuten" = "to interpret"). These discrepancies point up, yet again, the complexities of the conceptual slippage between translation and interpretation.

<sup>21</sup> Partha Chatterjee, in her review in *The Hindu* (2004), suggests García Márquez's novel as a major influence on *The Hungry Tide* (cf. also Amit Chaudhuri's comments in note 24 below). Also to be noted is the circumstance that Arguedas, like Ghosh, was at home in the worlds of both anthropology and fiction.

<sup>22</sup> One may here compare a historical example from a completely different part of India: William Dalrymple narrates in *White Mughals* (2003) how the Muharram celebrations in Hyderabad in 1801 were "transformed into a sort of syncretic Indo-Islamic saturnalia which had almost as much in common with Hindu river festivals such as the Kumb Mela as it did with the purely Islamic Muharram" (293).

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the novelist and critic Khushwant Singh (who, as author of the celebrated novel of 1956, *Train to Pakistan*, is, to say the least, informed on such issues), speaks in his review of *The Hungry Tide* of "scheduled caste Hindus subscribing to a faith which is a happy blend of Islam and tribal Hinduism" ("Legendary writer", 2004).

<sup>24</sup> For Rushdie on Ghosh, see note 2 above; for Ghosh on Rushdie, see note 27 below. Amit Chaudhuri, in *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* 2001, sees Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* as "a response to his readings of [García] Márquez and Rushdie," and *The Shadow Lines* as still under the latter's influence (538).

<sup>25</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981), 360.

<sup>26</sup> Rushdie, *Shame* (1984), 29.

<sup>27</sup> In his 1990 essay "The Diaspora in Indian Culture", reprinted in *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), Ghosh refers to Rushdie as among the "fine[st] writers writing in the English language today," and openly attacks the Indian government's "reprehensible and senseless" ban on *The Satanic Verses* (*The Imam and the Indian*, 243).

<sup>28</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), 123.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Ramya Ramamurthy, "I think in images". (*Mid Day*, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851), 621.

<sup>31</sup> The will to knowledge is also a major theme in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, with the quest to penetrate the enigma of malaria, but in that novel the overall context is altogether more ambivalent.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street" (1926), 104.

<sup>33</sup> With regard to the possible intertextual relation between Roy's and Ghosh's novels, it may be noted that Piya's surname happens to be Roy, and that Ghosh locates an episode of *The Circle of Reason* in Kerala.

<sup>34</sup> Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason*, 58.

<sup>35</sup> Ghosh, *In An Antique Land*, 137.