

## **“Against the Waves of Globalization” in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide***

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After the era of colonization, globalization became a powerful driving force implementing the West’s rationalistic and capitalist way of life in the third world countries. Now, the majority of the global population wears westernized clothes and makes use of its technology, such as cellphones. It is natural to expect that the world is becoming more homogeneous.

In Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, however, we see a different picture of the world whose way of life and thinking is quite different from that of the West. In this novel, cultural and religious traditions of Sundarbans provide alternative ways of life in the globalized world. This article aims to demonstrate how *other* indigenous cultural and religious traditions in *The Hungry Tide* offer resources for imagining different ways of life in the globalized world.

I argue that in *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh shows that *peaceful coexistence is possible between humans and between humans and nature, though consumerism and cosmopolitanism not only degraded human beings but also separated them from fellow human beings and nature. Lessons from religious and cultural traditions of Sundarbans - valuing of human dignity and the natural life - can still be viable for modern capitalistic society.*

### **Facing Globalization in *The Hungry Tide*: The Problem of Modern Capitalist Society**

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh reveals problems of people controlled by two ferocious beasts of globalization: *cosmopolitanism* and *consumerism*. First, *cosmopolitanism* disregards the suffering of the subalterns. For example, Piya, as a cosmopolitan environmentalist and a cetologist, thinks that humans should be always in friendly relationship with nature. That is why she was in shock, when she saw that the villagers were killing a tiger. Even when she heard that the tiger killed two people, she says, “This is an animal, Kanai, . . . You can’t take revenge on an animal.”<sup>1</sup> She is so absorbed in her naive ideal of what the world should be like that she ignores the suffering of the subalterns. Thus, Kanai says, “Because it was people like you . . . who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs.”<sup>2</sup>

Second, *consumerism* degrades the value of humans by turning everything into commodity. An example of this is the killing of the subalterns. As Bengal Tigers became the Cosmopolitan Tigers treasured by “Western and urban middle-class” along with other animals like “dolphin, penguin, giraffe,”<sup>3</sup> the preservation of the Bengal Tiger became a priority for the Indian government. According to Annu Jalais, “protecting this cosmopolitan tiger is a badge of one’s own cosmopolitanism, because it is seen as moving beyond the parochialism of one’s location.”<sup>4</sup> However, the preservation of the Tiger is not simply based on abstract terms, but also

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<sup>1</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Boston, New York: A Mariner Book, 2005), 242.

<sup>2</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 248.

<sup>3</sup> Annu Jalais, “Unmasking the Cosmopolitan Tiger,” *Nature and Culture* 3(1), Spring: 25, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Jalais, “Unmasking the Cosmopolitan Tiger,” 33.

based on economic terms. By naming Sundarbans “a World Heritage Site and prime tiger area,”<sup>5</sup> the Indian government receives a lot of money from “their Western patrons”<sup>6</sup> and eco-tourism.<sup>7</sup> Tigers are turned into commodities for display and for profit. This huge tide of consumerism made everything evaluated in material terms. Since Dalits who live in the forest are not making any profits for the country and rather doing harm for Tigers, they should be removed from the forest. That is why when the Forest Department found out that there was a tiger killing, “arrests, fines, beatings”<sup>8</sup> followed. The concern of the middle class is money not their lives. Therefore, Kanai says, “these people are too poor to matter . . . we choose not to see it.”<sup>9</sup>

Cosmopolitanism and consumerism also separated people from fellow human beings and from nature. Since nature is an object of human exploitation, peaceful coexistence between the two became impossible. For example, Human greed to make profit out of the spawn of tiger prawns is also eradicating eggs of other fishes with the new nylon nets.<sup>10</sup> Humans are considering nature as another commodity, the object of consumption, rather than another organism coexisting with them.

It is not only nature being separated from humans in this process but also human beings from each other. Since the forest becomes exclusively a place for wild animals like tigers, the subalterns who live there are driven out. The reason for eviction was that the settlers violated the Forest Acts by “disturbing the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance.”<sup>11</sup> At the bottom, however, this decision was made to “legitimise their ejection from Morichjhapi in the eyes of the Kolkata bhadralok.”<sup>12</sup> For the Kolkata middle class, bhadralok,<sup>13</sup> they are *different* and *separated* from the subalterns whose value is worth nothing. Therefore, they do not write about the death of the subalterns in the papers, even though they are killed by tigers almost every day.

### **Overcoming Globalization in *The Hungry Tide*: Bon Bibi myth and the Life of Subalterns**

Unlike the cosmopolitanism and consumerism which ignores and degrades the value of humans and nature for the purpose of gaining more money, Bengali religious and cultural traditions value both humans and nature *and* teach that peaceful coexistence between humans and nature *and* between humans is possible.

First, Bengali religious and cultural traditions *value both humans and nature*. The Bon Bibi myth that subaltern characters - Fokir, Kusum, Horen - cling to illustrates this aspect.

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<sup>5</sup> Annu Jalais, “Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers Became ‘Citizens’, Refugees ‘Tiger-Food,’” *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 23, 2005: 1758.

<sup>6</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 249.

<sup>7</sup> Jalais, “Unmasking the Cosmopolitan Tiger,” 36.

<sup>8</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 244.

<sup>9</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 248.

<sup>10</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Jalais, “Dwelling on Morichjhanpi,” 1759.

<sup>12</sup> Jalais, “Dwelling on Morichjhanpi,” 1759.

<sup>13</sup> “The term bhadralok (gentle-folk) is widely used and well understood in Bengal. It refers to the rentier class who enjoyed tenurial rights to rents from land appropriated by the Permanent Settlement. This was a class that did not work its land but lived off the rental income generated.” Jalais, “Dwelling on Morichjhanpi,” 1762.

The demon wanted the boy that Dhona had brought on his boat . . . he was now riven with a longing for the taste of Dukhey's flesh. In exchange he would give Dhona wealth beyond imagining, as much as could be carried on the boats . . . he was stalked by a tiger . . . The animal was none other than Dokkhin Rai in disguise . . . he recalled his mother's parting words and called out, "O Mother of Mercy, Bon Bibi, save me, come to my side!" Bon Bibi was far away, but she crossed the waters in an instant. She revived the boy, taking him into her lap while her brother, Shah Jongoli, dealt a terrible chastisement to the demon.<sup>14</sup>

Two points are noticeable in this story. First, money is a central medium for dehumanization. Dhona is promised to receive a boat full of money from Dokkhin Rai at the cost of Dukhey. The boy is basically sold to the demon as a commodity. Second, Bon Bibi cares for the poor. Dukhey is a miserable boy living "in abject poverty with his old and ailing mother."<sup>15</sup> Bon Bibi, however, does not ignore his suffering. She comes immediately from afar and saves him. Indeed, she is "the savior of the weak and a mother of mercy to the poor."<sup>16</sup> Bon Bibi values human dignity.

This does not mean, however, that Bon Bibi ignores the value of nature. She also cares for nature. Though she punishes Dokkhin Rai, she accepts his apology and receives him as her 'son.' Moreover, she gives a half of the Sundarban forest to him, while giving the other half to humans.<sup>17</sup> Since she is the mother of Dokkhin Rai and guardian of Dukhe who governs the forest, there can be no exploitation of the nature. They are to remain caring for nature.

Second, Bengali religious and cultural traditions teach that *peaceful coexistence between humans and nature and between humans* is possible. On the one hand, the plot of the Bon Bibi myth explains that peaceful relationship between humans and wild animals are possible.<sup>18</sup>

However, Dokkhin Rai starts arguing that if humans are given a free reign there will be no forest left. So, to be fair and ensure that Dokkhin Rai and his retinue of tigers and spirits stop being a threat to humans, and humans stop being a threat to non-humans . . . Bonbibi elicits promises from Dukhe, Dokkhin Rai and the Ghazi that they are all to treat each other as 'brothers.' She does this . . . by making Dukhe promise that he and his kind heed the injunction that they are to enter the forest only with a *pobitro mon* (pure heart) and khali hate (empty handed).<sup>19</sup>

Two points are worth noting. First, Bon Bibi is aware of the hostile relationship between nature and humans. Nature can be detrimental to humans. Tigers and other wild animals can kill them. Humans can also be hostile to nature by taking too much from it. Second, humans are given behavioral imperatives in the forest. They should enter the forest with 'pure heart' and 'empty hands.' The promises between Dukhe, Dokkhin Rai, and the Ghazi have been made. Thus, as long as humans come into the forest "without any greedy or violent disposition" and "without

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<sup>14</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 87.

<sup>15</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 86.

<sup>16</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Annu Jalais, "Bonbibi: Bridging worlds," *Indian Folklife Serial*, No. 28, January 2008: 7.

<sup>18</sup> Another example of peaceful coexistence between humans and animals is found in the catch of silver fish by fishermen and dolphins: "The net landed right in the center of the perimeter the dolphins had been patrolling . . . The other dolphins in the pod joined in and began to make darting charges, thrashing the surface with their flukes in order to drive the fast-scattering fish back toward the net. The fishermen pulled in the net and a wriggling . . . The dolphins, meanwhile, were celebrating a catch of their own." Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 140.

<sup>19</sup> Jalais, "Bonbibi: Bridging worlds," 7. Ghazi is a friend of Dokkhin Rai who pleaded Bon Bibi on Dokkhin Rai's behalf so that she might forgive him.

firearms,” tigers will also remain faithful to the covenant.<sup>20</sup> Their covenant can be broken, when the one crosses the boundary. They both should not enter each other’s territory for the purpose of the killing others. If one does so, s/he or it is destined to be killed. Therefore, Fokir says in the killing of a tiger: “when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die.”<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the language and the origin of the Bon Bibi myth explain that peaceful relationships between humans are possible. When Horen recites a mantra at the shrine of Bon Bibi off the shore of Garjontola, Nirmal is amazed.

*(In Allah’s name I begin to pronounce the Word . . . ) the language . . . was a strange variety of Bangla, deeply interpreted by Arabic and Persian. The narrative, however, was familiar to me: it was the story of how Dukhey was left on the shore of an island to be devoured by the tiger-demon Dokkhin Rai, and of his rescue by Bon Bibi and Shoh Jongoli . . . the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else? . . . the tide country’s faith is something like one of its great mohonas.*<sup>22</sup>

Here, two points are worth noting. First, in the Bon Bibi myth Arabic and Bengali cultures are mixed. Bon Bibi’s father, Ibrahim, is a pious Muslim who lived in Medina. Bon Bibi and her twin brother, Shah Jongoli, are sent by the archangel to Sundarbans, “in order to make it fit for human habitation.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the mantra starts with praise to Allah. The center of the story, however, is thoroughly Sundarban. It is about the conflict and resolution between humans - *Dukhey* - and forest animals - *Dookkhin Rai*. Its use of Arabic and its Hindu content show symbolically that the story demonstrates peaceful “coexistence of Muslims and Hindus.”<sup>24</sup> Second, therefore, the mixed origin of the Bon Bibi myth reveals that people of different religious traditions can live harmoniously. In this myth, Hindus and Muslims are neither in conflict nor “forced to convert,” because “the use of the terms Muslim are absent from the *Jaharnama*.”<sup>25</sup> Bon Bibi does not care what the person’s religion is in the forest. Whoever is “good at heart” will “never be alone,” she will protect them.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Bon Bibi myth shows that different traditions, people, and religions can live peacefully together.

## Conclusion

The tide of globalization is enormous. It is as though an atomic bomb is dropped, and all the lives are devastated, if not killed, severely deformed. The preservation of the forest and natural animal habitat is not really preserving lives, because by being mesmerized by the money

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<sup>20</sup> Jalais, “Bonbibibi: Bridging worlds,” 7.

<sup>21</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 244.

<sup>22</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 204-205.

<sup>23</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Mathew N. Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk eds, *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 72.

<sup>25</sup> Schmalz and Gottschalk eds, *Engaging South Asian Religions*, 72. *Jaharnama* is the story of Bon Bibi’s life. Satyapir, a popular folk divinity in Bengal, is similar to Bon Bibi, because he is also “the product of the synthesis of Lord Satyanarayan (a form of) of the Hindus and of the cult of Pir of the Muslims” and he protects “the welfare of both the communities of Bengal.” Gouri Sanka Bandyopadhyay, *Folk Religion and Mass Culture in Rural Bengal: Tradition and Transformation* (Kolkata: Touchstone Publication, 2007), 27-28.

<sup>26</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 193.

from its Western patrons people often ignore the sufferings of the people living there. However, as lives still remain under the ground even after the flood, old traditions do not go away. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is the story of these traditions and life of the people who are still holding onto these cultural and religious traditions. Ghosh throws in the face of cosmopolitanism and consumerism another way of life. As the myth of Bon Bibi and the life of subaltern characters show, peaceful coexistence between humans *and* between humans and nature are still possible. Most importantly, this novel teaches that human dignity and coexistence are irrevocable values. Old cultural and religious traditions, in this sense, can be viable in capitalistic modern society, because there are still many places where these values should be rejuvenated. For the people who dare to restore those values, these stories will be no more their story, but "my" story.