

# CONDITIONALITY, NON-SELF, AND NON-ATTACHMENT IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*: A BUDDHIST READING<sup>1</sup>

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## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้วิเคราะห์นวนิยายเรื่อง *The Hungry Tide* ของอามิตาฟ โขซ จากมุมมองของพุทธปรัชญา โดยนำเสนอว่าความคิดเรื่องอนิจจัง อนัตตา และปัจจุสมุปบาทปรากฏอยู่ในการพรรณนาสถานะทางกายภาพของผืนป่าชายเลนชั้นเดอร์บันส์ แนวคิดเหล่านี้ยังพบได้ในการนำเสนอมิติทางสังคมที่ว่าด้วยระบบความคิดที่สังคมสร้างขึ้น อัตลักษณ์ และการปะทะสังสรรค์ของตัวละครในนวนิยาย นอกจากนั้นกระแสนุรักษ์ธรรมชาตินิยมแบบโลกตะวันตกซึ่งเป็นสิ่งที่ตัวละครเอกสตรียึดเป็นสรวงจะกีดกอยู่ภายใต้กฎแห่งปัจจุสมุปบาท จะเห็นได้ว่านวนิยายเรื่องนี้วิพากษ์ความพยายามอันมีคบอดที่จะนำความคิดของโลกตะวันตกที่ว่าด้วยการพิทักษ์

รักษาป่ามาบังคับใช้กับชาวบ้านที่เป็นคนชายขอบในประเทศอินเดีย และนวนิยายยังนำเสนอชุดความคิดการอนุรักษ์ธรรมชาติในรูปแบบอื่น ๆ ด้วย นวนิยายเรื่องนี้นำเสนอการปะทะสังสรรค์ของคนเมืองกับชาวบ้านในถิ่นชนบทที่ก้าวข้ามกรอบการต่อสู้เชิงอำนาจในโลกหลังอาณานิคมและมีรากฐานอยู่บนความรู้สึกร่วมแห่งความเป็นมนุษย์ โดยเน้นให้เห็นเหตุปัจจัยที่ก่อให้เกิดปฏิสัมพันธ์ในรูปแบบนี้ นอกจากนั้นแล้ว บทความนี้อธิบายว่าผืนป่าชายเลนชั้นเดอร์บันส์ ปัจจัยอื่น ๆ ในชีวิตของตัวละครเอก และปฏิสัมพันธ์กับชาวบ้านมีบทบาทสำคัญอย่างไรที่ทำให้พวกเขาตระหนักถึงความสิ้นไหลของสิ่งที่พวกเขาสำคัญมั่นหมายว่าเป็นอัตลักษณ์ของตน ประเด็นสุดท้าย การบรรยายในนวนิยายเปิดให้เห็นการทำงานของกฎปัจจุสมุปบาทและความไม่เป็นอนิจจัง โดยพยายามที่จะเน้นถึงทรรศนะแห่งความไม่ยึดมั่นถือมั่น *The Hungry Tide* ซึ่งนำเสนอแนวคิดทางพุทธศาสนาที่กล่าวมาข้างต้นนี้จึงนับเป็นวิธีการอันแยบคายในการสลายความยึดมั่นถือมั่นต่อความคิดหรือการรับรู้ความเป็นจริงในรูปแบบใดรูปแบบหนึ่ง และเสนอทางเลือกใหม่ - การปฏิสัมพันธ์ของมนุษย์ที่ก่อปรด้วยความเปิดใจกว้างยอมรับความแตกต่างที่หลากหลาย

## Abstract

*This article approaches Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy. It argues that the Buddhist notions of impermanence (anicca), non-self (anattā) and*

<sup>1</sup> ปัจจุสมุปบาท อนัตตา และความไม่ยึดมั่นถือมั่นในนวนิยายเรื่อง *The Hungry Tide* ของ อามิตาฟ โขซ: การตีความจากมุมมองของพุทธศาสนา

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*conditionality (iddappaccayatā) are evident in the novel's portrayal of the physical reality of the Sundarbans. These principles are also at work in the novel's representation of the social realm of ideologies, identities and human interactions.*

*As Western environmentalism, to which the female protagonist is attached, is subject to the law of conditionality, the novel critiques the blind attempt to impose the Western ideology of wilderness preservation upon marginalized locals in India and highlights other forms of environmental ideologies. The novel also depicts the interaction between those from the metropolitan center with locals which transcends the postcolonial framework of power struggles and which is instead based on a shared sense of humanity, emphasizing specific conditions that give rise to the interactions. Moreover, the article discusses how the Sundarbans and various factors in the protagonists' lives and interactions with the locals play a crucial role in prompting them to realize the slipperiness of what they perceive as their identities. Finally, the narrative in the novel itself orchestrates the workings of the law of conditionality and impermanence, trying to inculcate an attitude of non-attachment. As an embodiment of the afore-mentioned Buddhist concepts, *The Hungry Tide* serves as an expedient means to disrupt one's tendency to cling to certain views or perceptions of reality and to offer an alternative approach to human interactions which entails open-minded tolerance of difference.*

The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. . . .

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as two hundred miles inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to reemerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily—some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. (2005: 6)

The above passage is the depiction of the archipelago of the Sundarbans on the India-Bangladesh border in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. One of the striking features of the tide country is the interpenetration of entities which are normally perceived as different from each other: fresh water/sea water and river/sea. The passage also highlights the power of the tides that compel the constant transformation of sea into land and vice versa, thus calling our attention to the fact that physical reality in the tide country is always in flux. The indeterminate nature of the Sundarbans not only incessantly eludes our attempt to impose our conceptual framework upon the place in order to firmly grasp its stable meaning but also challenges such permanent

geographical categories as land and water that we humans employ to make sense of the planet.

As a Buddhist reader, I found the novel's portrayal of the mutable landscape strikingly reminiscent of the Buddhist notions of impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anattā*) and conditionality (*iddappaccayatā*). To elaborate on this point, I would like, first, to discuss these Buddhist concepts. As Buddhist philosophy postulates, phenomena are inevitably marked by three characteristics; they are subject to constant change (*anicca*), thus causing suffering (*dukkha*) and are empty of any permanent essence (*anattā*) (Harvey 1990: 50-51; Payutto 1995: 67-78). The three characteristics are interwoven with the notion of conditionality. This notion teaches that the emergence, existence and cessation of all things depends upon the concurrence of conditions as explained by the Lord Buddha in the following formula:

When there is this, that is;  
With the arising of this, that  
arises.  
When this is not, neither is that;  
With the cessation of this, that  
ceases. (Payutto 1994: 4)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars' translations of the formula slightly vary. Kalupahana translates the formula as follows:

When this is present, that comes to  
be;  
from the arising of this, that arises.  
When this is absent, that does not  
come to be;  
on the cessation of this, that ceases.  
(1976: 28)

Conditionality or, as Peter Harvey puts it, the notion that "all things, mental and physical, arise and exist due to the presence of certain conditions, and cease once their conditions are removed" is also the fundamental principle for the Buddhist explanation of the twelve stages that bring about entrapment in and liberation from, suffering in the cycle of birth and death, which is known as the notion of dependent origination (*paticcasamppāda*). (Harvey 1990: 54; Keown 2007: 269). More significantly, Buddhism postulates that conditionality is the nature of everything. Referring to conditionality as "the law above all laws," Buddhadasa Bikkhu (2006: 333-368) explains that nothing is not subject to this law.<sup>4</sup> Conditionality accounts for the three characteristics of all existence. That is, if the arising and ceasing of things hinges upon causes and conditions, they are always subject to change and thus suffering. As Buddhist scholars point out, this notion is connected with the interrelatedness of all things and the notion of non-self: as "all things exist dependent of determinants," they are "inter-related and inter-dependent" and thus have neither "intrinsic entity" nor

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<sup>4</sup> Referring to passages in the Pali Canon, Payutto explains that the principle of conditionality "was described by the Buddha as a natural law, a fundamental truth which exists independently of the arising of enlightened beings" (1994:1). An example of the passages is "Whether a *Tathagata* appears or not, this condition exists and is a natural fact, a natural law; that is, the principle of conditionality" (Payutto 1994: 1).

“enduring existence, not even a moment” (Payutto 1994: 14; Harvey 1990: 54). In other words, as Damien Keown states, the notion of conditionality “dovetails with the teaching of no-self” (2007: 269). Just as “[t]he not-self teaching . . . is primarily a practical teaching aimed at the overcoming of attachment” (Harvey 1990: 52), the teaching of conditionality aims at deconstructing our perception of reality as having permanent essence and also at undoing our tendency for attachment. David J. Kulapahana elaborates on how the discernment of conditionality will lead to spiritual liberation:

When [a person] responds to that world of experience with his understanding of conditionality his responses will not be rigidly predetermined . . . . Abandoning passion or craving . . . , his actions will be dominated by dispassion . . . , and more positively, by compassion . . . for himself as well as others. . . . The recognition of the possibility of replacing ignorance . . . with wisdom . . . and craving and grasping with dispassion and compassion leaves the individual with the capacity to attain freedom. (1995: 486)

In Buddhism, a profound insight into conditionality as the fundamental nature of all things constitutes right seeing, one element of the eightfold path towards enlightenment or nibbāna (Harvey 2007: 333). It enables one to fathom the true nature of reality as constantly changing and without any essence for one to cling to.

These principles of impermanence and non-self are embedded in the opening description of the Sundarbans. This is a place where “*the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable.*” Not only are the lines dividing land from water impermanent but incessant mutability at this place also induces us to question the stability of disparate entities such as river/sea or land/water. Due to the powerful tides, the islands are constantly changing to the point where one can no longer grasp what one perceives as their “essential” nature. The “epic mutability” (2005: 128) of the Sundarbans manifests itself preeminently in front of the human eye, awakening us to the fact that our perception of reality and even reality itself are always provisional. An even more vivid image of this eerie mutability is that of the creation of new land by the tide and the rapid growth of a mangrove forest on the island: “*When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years*” (2005: 7, emphasis mine). This description points to impermanence and the provisionality of physical reality at the Sundarbans and also to the fact that the tides, the agent of change, deprive the place of any fixed quality. More importantly, the clause “if the conditions are right” suggests that the concurrence of conditions accounts for the arising and ceasing of the natural or geographical entities. Thus the reality of conditionality is also embedded in this landscape.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the novel celebrates new possibilities created

by the reality of impermanence and non-self. In the chapter “An Epiphany,” Piya discovers the peculiar behavior of the Sundarban Orcaella, the coastal dolphins that congregate in a pool on a daily basis. Observing that the Sundarban dolphins congregate “twice each day” whereas “their Mekong cousins did once every year,” Piya thus proposes a new hypothesis that the Sundarban dolphins “adapt their behavior to this tidal ecology” by “compress[ing] the annual seasonal rhythms of their Mekong relatives so as to fit them into the daily cycle of tides” (2005: 104). An existing study on the Sundarban ecosystem explains that its uniqueness causes the miraculous creation of multifarious life forms:

This proliferation of aquatic life was thought to be the result of the unusually varied composition of the water itself. The waters of river and sea did not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta; rather, they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of fresh water running along the floors of some channels, creating variations of salinity and turbidity. These microenvironments were like balloons suspended in the water, and they had their own patterns of flow. They changed position constantly, sometimes floating into midstream and then wafting back toward the shore, at times being carried well out in sea and at others retreating deep inland. . . . This proliferation of environments

was responsible for creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms—from gargantuan crocodiles to microscopic fish. (2005: 104-105)

In this depiction, the Sundarban ecosystem is the vivid embodiment of mutability and non-self. The interpenetration of sea and river waters results in the emergence of various ecological niches. Due to the mutability of this place, these microenvironments constantly change, thereby bringing into existence “a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms.” What is further implied in the odd behavior of the Sundarban dolphins is that, in such a place where everything hinges upon constantly changing conditions, an ability to “adapt” (2005: 104) is indispensable to one’s survival. Seen from a human perspective, adaptability entails the attitude of non-attachment.

The representation of the Sundarbans’ unique characteristics has drawn much attention from critics. Existing criticism discusses the landscape’s undecidability in light of postcolonial theory. For example, in “The Postcolonial Uncanny: The Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,” Pramod K. Nayar argues that the tide country, characterized by its “intellectual uncertainty” and “delusion and secrecy,” constitutes “the postcolonial uncanny” as perceived by visitors such as Kanai and Piya (2010: 91-94). Postulating that “the postcolonial uncanny in Ghosh is the working-out of the issues of knowledge and power,” Nayar examines the relations of this uncanny landscape to the issue of

epistemology and the cross-cultural interactions between “Westernized, metropolitan, technology-reliant” visitors and the dispossessed locals (2010: 91, 97). He cogently contends that “the postcolonial uncanny” can be transformed into a safe home by those whom he calls “the indigenous canny,” the locals such as Fakir and their “mystic, mythic knowledge” (2010: 91). Another example is Lisa Fletcher’s (2011) “Reading the Postcolonial Island in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*.” Focusing on “Ghosh’s representation of the interstitial space of the Sundarbans” as unstable and unpredictable, Fletcher argues that the novel raises “key issues” in island studies in its blurring of such binary oppositions as land/water, insider/outsider, fact/fiction and scientific/literary (2011: 7-12). The novel suggests that “any individual’s comprehension of a locality and its history is contingent on multiple vectors of identity and thus always partial and vulnerable to change” (2011: 11) and that “a multiplicity of perspectives” is indispensable in any attempt to enhance one’s understanding of islands, which are intrinsically mutable (2011: 9).

Similarly concentrating on the representation of the Sundarbans as indeterminate and elusive, my reading of *The Hungry Tide* in this paper will, however, take on a different approach. Interpreting the novel in light of Buddhist philosophy, the paper will argue that the notions of impermanence, conditionality and non-self are evident not only in the physical reality of the Sundarbans and its ecosystem but also in the social reality of the characters’ ideologies, identities and

cross-cultural interactions and that these Buddhist principles are also embedded in the narrative itself. It will discuss how the novel reveals that Western environmentalism is subject to the laws of change and conditionality. The novel thus critiques the blind attempt to impose the Western ideologies of wilderness preservation upon marginalized locals in India and accentuates alternative forms of environmental ideologies, as exemplified in the locals’ relationship with nature. Furthermore, while I concur with the existing criticism on the reality of oppression in postcolonial India in the novel, this paper will contend that the novel’s depiction of the cross-cultural interactions between those from the metropolitan center with locals that are based on a shared sense of humanity and are subject to specific conditions that give rise to them, transcends the framework of power politics in postcolonial theory. More particularly, the novel deploys nature—the landscape of the Sundarbans and the tides—as an agent of change that cautions humans against their tendency fiercely to grasp at certain views, perceptions or ideologies. While Nayar argues for Ghosh’s “humanistic vision” which blends “the spiritual mystic” and “the technological modern” at the novel’s end (2010: 110), my paper will contend that *The Hungry Tide* recommends an attitude of non-attachment which is founded upon a discernment of conditionality and non-self as an alternative approach to human existence and interactions. As an embodiment of the Buddhist concepts, *The Hungry Tide* thus serves as an expedient means of helping to disrupt the reader’s tendency to fixedly

cling to certain views, concepts or perceptions of reality.

**Conditionality  
of “Environmentalism”:  
A Cetologist’s Epiphany at the  
Sundarbans**

In addition to the portrayal of physical reality at the Sundarbans as embodying the principles of impermanence, conditionality and non-self, the novel also suggests the workings of these principles in the social realm. This section will examine the social dimension of these Buddhist concepts as exemplified in Piya’s environmental ideologies. As it focuses on the novel’s critique of the protagonist’s adamant attachment to her Western brand of environmental ideologies, it argues that these ideologies are subject to the law of conditionality and are thus devoid of the permanent substantiality that one should cling to. Moreover, the novel highlights other forms of environmental ideologies than Western ones, as illustrated in the locals’ relationship to nature. As I will argue, the novel suggests an attitude of non-attachment which entails open-minded tolerance of difference.

At the very beginning, *The Hungry Tide* presents Piya as a prime product of the Western environmentalist discourse. Strongly committed to her mission for the preservation of nature, this Indian-American cetologist travels all over the world to conduct research on marine mammals and save dolphins from human exploitation. Her passionate belief in ecocentric environmentalism can be seen as her religion and Piya, herself, as a

martyr. She refers to her trip to Calcutta as a “catecean pilgrimage” (2005: 188). Upon responding to Kanai’s question of whether she would be willing to die for dolphins, she says: “If I thought giving up my life might make the rivers safe again for the Irrawaddy dolphin, the answer is yes” (2005: 249). It is important to note that Piya’s Western environmentalism is founded upon her belief in the power of science and technology in unveiling the mystery of nature. Her faith in technology is saliently made evident by the image of all kinds of instruments securely tied to her body, ranging from a GPS monitor, a range finder and a depth sounder to binoculars. In addition, her genuine concern for the natural world is tinged with her desire for human mastery of the knowledge of nature. When she is able to capture an image of her close encounter with a dolphin with the GPS monitor, she is described as filled with “a sense of triumph” as well as delight to see that the dolphins are reproducing (2005: 95).

The novel presents Piya’s fierce attachment to Western environmentalism and how her experiences in the Sundarbans call into question the validity of these ideologies once they are applied to reality in this particular place. Piya’s adamant belief in nature’s intrinsic value as independent of humans can be clearly seen in the scene when she risks her life in her fanatical attempt to stop an enraged mob from killing a blinded tiger. Despite Kanai’s explanation that this tiger has “been preying on this village for years,” Piya is still unable to discern the reality of the locals’ struggles for survival against the threats of dangerous wildlife. Her

statement “This is an animal” hints at her respect for the non-human world and her single-minded resolve to preserve it. Moreover, she imposes her environmental ideologies upon others when she runs away from Kanai in order to seek Fokir with the firm belief that she will get help from the fisherman who is gifted with intuitive sensitivity for the natural world. However, Piya is hard hit by sheer disappointment to see that Fokir is helping the villagers to set the penned tiger on fire. In Fokir’s view, “when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die” (2005: 244). The ensuing conversation between Piya and Kanai demonstrates how ecocentric ideologies have been so deeply ingrained in Piya’s way of thinking. Kanai reminds Piya that Fokir is not “some kind of grass-roots ecologist,” but “a fisherman” who “kills animals for a living” (2005: 245). However, Piya is still perturbed by the scene of the locals killing the helpless tiger. She considers this act to be primitive, “like something from some other time—before recorded history” (2005: 248). Moreover, the appalling “horror” for her is the fact that it is part of the daily lives of the locals such as Fokir and Horen. As Kanai puts it, “they’ve learned to take it in their stride” (2005: 248). Even when Kanai points out that, in this particular case, human suffering is caused by the tigers and poses the question “Isn’t that a horror too—that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings,” Piya’s ecocentrism cannot be undermined. She simply replies: “everywhere in the world dozens of people are killed every day—on roads, in cars, in traffic. Why is this any worse?” (2005:

248). Piya’s only concern is the preservation of the endangered tigers.

Her attachment to ecocentrism, as opposed to anthropocentrism, significantly limits her range of vision. All in front of her is the value of endangered species whereas the reality of human suffering becomes her blind spot. Piya is not cognizant that as an ecologist she is complicit in this act of horror. Kanai explains how they both are involved in the politics of Western environmentalism in India:

“Because it was people like you,” said Kanai, “who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I’m complicit because people like me—Indians of my class, that is,—have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favor with their Western patrons. It’s not hard to ignore the people who’re dying—after all, they are the poorest of the poor.” (2005: 248-249)

Part of what Kanai is referring to is “Project Tiger” launched by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the late 1970s. Instigated and financially supported by the WWF (World Wildlife Fund), this project aims at creating tiger reserves in different parts of India, including the Sundarbans. As Kanai’s statement suggests, the preservation of endangered species was part of the politics between postcolonial India and the West and it has been conducted at the expense of the lives of the impoverished (Clark 2011: 127;



Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 186). Not only is Piya unaware of the adverse impact of Western environmentalism upon the marginalized but she is likely to romanticize nature and human-nature relationships. For example, while she realizes that Fokir fishes in prohibited areas, she is incapable of connecting the problem of the locals whose survival depends on the use of natural resources with the practice of preservation environmentalism that lacks “regard for the human costs.” Her awareness of the fisherman’s poverty tends to be clouded by her romantic view of his closeness to nature.

In addition, the novel juxtaposes Piya’s voice with the voice of Kusum, Fokir’s mother, who represents the Morichjhāpi refugees. First fleeing to India after the East Pakistan genocide and later moved to a government resettlement camp in the forests of Dandakaranya, these dalit refugees fled to settle on the island of Morichjhāpi (Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 185-190). However, in its attempt to keep the island from human habitation as part of the WWF project to preserve endangered tigers, the government persecuted and eventually massacred thousands of the refugees. As Rajender Kaur points out, this project for tiger preservation with Indira Gandhi’s support was “an example of the insensitivity of neocolonial environmental schemes that override the concerns of local people” (Clark 2001: 127). In the novel, Kusum, who was in search of a home, joined the refugees in fighting against the government. As recorded in Nirmal’s diary, she shared with him her reflections upon the “crime”

of being “just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil” (2005: 217):

It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust. ‘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.’ Every day, sitting here with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? (2005: 216-217)

Kusum’s painful feeling is caused by the wilderness preservation discourse that privileges non-humans over human beings. In light of the sufferings of the dispossessed, Western environmentalism becomes a form of imperialist oppression. It is then an attempt to impose certain Western ideologies upon the lives of people in India. Kusum’s story may also serve as a cautionary lesson for good-intentioned activists like Piya who are, however, unbendingly attached to their ecocentric ideologies.

In its critique of Piya’s adamant attachment to environmentalism and its inclusion of the voice of those victimized by these ideologies, the novel suggests that

the wilderness preservation discourse which originated under specific circumstances in America may not be applicable on Indian soil. This idea is confirmed by Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier's point about the distinction between environmentalisms in the northern and southern hemispheres in their book entitled *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*. The former partakes of values produced in a society of affluence whereas the latter, which they call the "environmentalism of the poor", should be founded upon the reality of poverty and necessity for survival (qtd. in Heise 2008: 59). More specifically, Guha points out in "Toward a Cross-Cultural Environmental Ethics," that "while the dominant environmental philosophy in India is *agrarianism*, in the United States it is *wilderness thinking*" (1990: 438). Even within India, he advocates what he calls the "ideological plurality" (1988, 2578) found in divergent environmentalist movements. Jettisoning the dominance of the Western ideologies, the notion of varieties of environmentalism carefully examines both the specific conditions which inform certain environmental philosophies and the conditions of situations to which certain types of environmentalisms can be applied.

At the same time, the novel presents the background to what may be called Fokir's "environmentalism," revealing a different set of complex factors and conditions that shapes his sense of place and his intimate relationship with non-human inhabitants. His "environmentalism" is informed by local folk beliefs that were passed on to

him from his ancestors through his mother, Kusum. For Fokir, Garjontola is not only an actual place where he grew up but it is also the embodiment of his mother who tells tales and sings songs about it. Moreover, his intuitive knowledge of the dolphins finds its origins not in actual creatures but in the stories that he learned from his mother: "As for the big *shush*, the dolphins who lived in these waters, I know about them too, even before I came here. These animals were also in my mother's stories" (2005: 254). His environmentalism is also grounded not only in the physical world but also in the spiritual one. He believes that the dolphins were "Bon Bibi's messengers" who conveyed "news of the rivers and khals" (2005: 254). Tied to this belief in the spirit world and the existence of Bon Bibi is the bequeathed knowledge Fokir needs for his livelihood: "he [his grandfather] told her [his mother] that if you could learn to follow the *shush*, then you would always be able to find fish" (2005: 254).

*The Hungry Tide* thus cautions against dogmatic attachment to ideologies and also reveals the conditionality and non-self of these ideologies. The novel suggests that Piya's Western environmental ideologies are merely one of the provisional conceptual frameworks that are subject to change and modification. As the novel reminds us, far from being a universal or totalizing way of thinking about human-nature relationships, these ideologies came into existence due to the concurrence of certain causes and conditions. As such, they are devoid of fixed essence and subject to change. They

are not universal truths but merely constructed discourses that one should be cautious not to blindly cling to or impose upon others. As Piya realizes, after her traumatic experience in the destructive storm, that “[she] do[es]n’t want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it,” she opts to involve local fishermen in her project and makes sure that the Badabon Trust benefits from it (2005: 327). Her decision marks the beginning of her change. Once she learns to let go of her fierce attachment to her ideologies, she is able to step beyond the opposition of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism and thus to discern the interdependence of humans and non-humans. The novel seems to insinuate that while one may still need certain ideologies to hold on to, one’s attitude should be that of non-attachment as one should be willing to put them to the test, modify them or even let go of them, depending on changing conditions. This attitude, together with an awareness of the provisionality and multiplicity of ideologies/perspectives, is also conducive to “eco-cosmopolitanism,” which Ursula K. Heise defines as “an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary ‘imagined communities’ of both human and nonhuman kinds” in a world where the local and the global are intricately interwoven (2008: 61).

### **A Dreamer’s Idealism in the Tide of Time**

In *The Hungry Tide*, Piya’s attachment to her Western environmentalism is interestingly presented in parallel with that of Nirmal’s to his idealism. As the novel

primarily focuses on the initiation of Piya into the mutable reality of the Sundarbans, the embedded narrative presented in the form of Nirmal’s diary presents the story of an old schoolmaster who believes himself to be in pursuit of idealism as he was involved in the Morichjhāpi refugees’ struggle. As this paper argued in the preceding section, the novel pits Piya’s Western environmental ideologies against different forms of environmentalism in order to bring to one’s attention the multiplicity of environmentalism as well as its conditionality and to suggest the dangers of fierce attachment to certain ideologies. Focusing on Nirmal’s idealism, this section continues to examine the conditionality and non-self of ideologies. It specifically demonstrates how the novel sheds the light of conditionality on the blind attachment that it cautions against, treating it with non-attachment and non-judgmentalism. That is, while the novel presents Nirmal’s blind idealism, it also shows that his attachment to idealism arises because of certain conditions. Moreover, the novel presents how Nirmal’s diary, the embodiment of his unbending idealism, can, thirty years after his death, bring about Kanai’s and Piya’s better understanding of reality at the Sundarbans. Time and changing conditions can render fruitful the seed that originated in Nirmal’s futile idealism. In other words, the novel suggests that attachment itself is subject to the law of conditionality.

From the beginning to the end of his life, Nirmal was a man of idealism who was in love with poetry and the idea of revolution. As a professor of English literature in

Calcutta, he was known as “a leftish intellectual and a writer of promise” (2005: 64). Nilima, his wife and his former student, was first attracted to him because of “the light of idealism in his eye” (2005: 64). However, he is presented as a man of thought not of action. After being detained for his participation in a conference organized by the Socialist International in Calcutta, he lost his will to live. His “frail” temperament thus threw him on to the responsibility of his wife who comes from a respectable family that is dedicated to public service (2005: 65). Through her family’s influence, she manages to secure him the position of schoolteacher in Lusibari. He is profoundly fascinated with Sir Daniel Hamilton, the “idealistic founder” (2005: 66) of the Hamilton Estate in Lusibari who bought an expanse of the Sundarbans with a dream to transform it into fertile land and build an ideal socialist society where no class/caste division nor exploitation exists. At the end of his life, after his retirement, he becomes obsessed with Kusum and the Morichjhāpi refugees’ struggle and hopes to employ his teaching ability to contribute to what he perceives as the concretization of the people’s revolutionary spirit.

However, Nirmal is unable to turn his idealism into action. As his wife accuses him, “you live in a dream world—a haze of poetry and fuzzy ideas about revolution” (2005: 178). Moreover, she also points out his unbending attachment to idealism in her conversation with Kanai: “Men like that . . . can never let go of the idea: it’s the secret god that rules their hearts” (2005: 100). Nirmal’s strong

attachment to idealism is evident in Nirmal and his wife’s first encounter with Lusibari where “hunger and catastrophe were a way of life” (2005: 67). The couple’s different reactions present them as foils to each other. While Nilima attempts to understand the situation by talking to the local women, all Nirmal can do is “read and re-read Lenin’s pamphlet without being able to find any definite answers” (2005: 67). As Kanai points out, his uncle was not so much attached to “politics” as to “words” (2005: 233). His attachment to words is clearly seen again when Nirmal is caught with the problem of categorizing as “class” the local women who are forced to cope with life after their husbands’ deaths: “Workers were a class, he said, but to speak of workers’ widows as a class was to introduce a false and unsustainable division” (2005: 68). His fixation with language is contrasted with his wife’s practicality because she cares not “what they were” but what she could do to help them (68). Her humanitarianism leads to the foundation of the Women’s Union and the Badabon Trust. Even at this point, Nirmal does not support her projects due to his obsession with language: “for him they [his wife’s efforts] bore the ineradicable stigma of ‘social service,’ *shomaj sheba*” (2005: 69). His contribution can then only be in the realm of language as he gave the name to the Trust.

His blind attachment to idealism induces him to live a life of self-delusion, unable clearly to see himself and his world. For example, in his diary he reveals his “despondency” (2005: 130) after his retirement from the position of headmaster. Due to his strong attachment

to his idealistic envisioning of himself as a great poet, he is unable to realize the value of his thirty years work as a teacher. Instead, he conceives of himself as a poor loser who abandoned his love of reading and writing and could only see his failure as opposed to his wife's success. Moreover, as a man with an "aversion to servility," Nirmal believes that he treats the locals with an "egalitarian" attitude (2005: 134). However, he is not cognizant of his cultural bias as can be seen during the boat trip to Kumirmari with Horen, when he dismisses Horen's first-hand experience of the tide country and his folk beliefs as nonsensical and insists upon the West, as exemplified in Bernier's *Travels*, as the authoritative source of knowledge. Furthermore, perceiving himself to be a "historical materialist," he regards the story of Bon Bibi as "false consciousness" and criticizes the locals as superstitious, "prefer[ring] the imaginary miracles of gods and saints" to "the true wonders of the reality around him" (2005: 84, 233). Lastly, his attachment to the idea of revolution finds its final expression in his involvement with Kusum and the cause of the Morichjhāpi refugees. While he is obsessed with this noble cause, his wife sees it not as being charged with the revolutionary spirit but as a plain reality that the refugees simply "wanted a little land to settle on" (2005: 100). Nirmal's idealization of their struggle is founded upon his desire to be part of revolution. However, his dreams are shattered by his realization that he is of no use to these refugees and that their struggle will end in failure. This disappointment seems to be the culmination of his life's failures. As he writes, "I became aware as never before of

all my unacknowledged regrets" (2005: 158). His life thus ends with despair and mental instability.

While the novel presents Nirmal's attachment and its adverse effect upon him, it simultaneously invites the reader to look at his flaws with understanding and sympathy. In his talk to Piya about his uncle, Kanai grounds his uncle's idealism in his passion for language and poetry, as shown by his fascination with Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry. As Kanai sees it, Nirmal's yearning for revolution comes from a line of Rilke: "life is lived in transformation" (2005: 187) and to him, Kusum becomes the embodiment of this poetic idea of transformation. He further explains that the odd contradictions of "Marxism" and "poetry" in his uncle "were typical of his generation" (2005: 233). Presented as such, Nirmal's idealism can be seen as being created by a combination of his poetic temperament and the socio-political and cultural makeup of his own time. The Buddhist notion of conditionality thus enables us to penetrate into the rigidity of Nirmal's attachment and extend our sympathy, rather than harsh judgment, to this man whose dreams seemed to be wasted.

However, Nirmal's idealism, albeit futile during his lifetime, leaves its seed to yield fruit in the minds of Kanai and Piya thirty years later. He left the legacy of his idealism in the form of a diary to Kanai. During the Morichjhāpi event, when he was unable to do anything to stop the impending disastrous end of the refugees' fight, he decided to record the story of Kusum who, for him, embodies the notion

of revolution. As he puts it, “perhaps I can make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world” (2005: 59). That he intended to have Horen pass this diary on to Kanai demonstrates his hope to immortalize the revolutionary spirit. He entrusted this narrative of idealism to Kanai because he was “certain that [Kanai] will have a greater claim to the world’s ear than [he] ever had” (2005: 230). His uttered hope that Kanai’s generation will be “richer in ideals” (2005: 230) bespeaks his firm faith in idealism.

It is interesting to note that the seed of Nirmal’s idealism, like that of Sir Daniel Hamilton’s, does not yield the same fruit as initially intended. In Sir Daniel’s case, even though his idealistic dream to build a Utopian society at the Sundarbans would never come true, the portrayal of fertile Lusibari at the time of Kanai’s second visit, as opposed to the barrenness of the land when Nirmal and Nilima first moved there, suggests that Sir Daniel’s initial effort to transform the tide country eventually yielded some fruit, which was different from what he envisioned. Likewise, despite the failure of his idealism in the 1970s, Nirmal’s diary, as the crystallization of his idealism and his firm faith in poetry and language, will, thirty years later, play a significant role in bringing about Kanai’s and Piya’s better understanding of life at the Sundarbans.

Kanai slowly reads Nirmal’s diary in the course of his and Piya’s journey at the Sundarbans. To a certain extent, the diary may influence Kanai’s response to some situations. For example, his discussion with Piya after the tiger scene about the problems of environmentalism in India

and his attempt to stimulate Piya to sympathize with the impoverished, whose livelihood hinges upon the use of natural resources, can be seen to be influenced by the story he read in the diary about the painful struggle of Kusum and the Morichjhāpi refugees. More significantly, this diary records Nirmal’s experience at Garjontola where he was “enthralled” not only by a recitation chanted by Horen to pay respect to Bon Bibi but also the ability of Fokir, who is illiterate, to recite the prayer (2005: 203-206). His observation that the recitation “was a strange variety of Bangla, deeply interpenetrated by Arabic and Persian” confirms his idea that “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?” (2005: 204-205). This episode in the diary bespeaks not only Nirmal’s fascination with language and the poetic imagination but also his admiration for the tide country as a meeting place of cultures, faiths and religions. Nonetheless, one may ask to what extent this admiration enables Nirmal to see through his own prejudice in his interactions with the locals. It is worthy of note that thirty years later, under changing factors and conditions, the idealism of Nirmal the dreamer which is encapsulated in the diary undergoes a transformation. Since Kanai is unable to understand the meaning of Fokir’s song and translate it for Piya, he rewrites the story about the song which was recorded in his uncle’s diary and offers that piece of writing to Piya as a gift. While Nirmal’s narrative in the diary focuses more on his fascination with the linguistic and literary construction of this recitation and does not

express much attention to Kusum's statement that "these words have become a part of him [Fokir]," Kanai interprets the narrative and its emphasis somewhat differently. As Kanai explains to Piya, "Nirmal recognized also that for this boy those words were much more than a part of a legend: it was the story that gave this land its life" (2005: 292). This statement suggests that Kanai transfers the mystery of the words to the land and that he sees the mystery as embodied in Fokir himself. Furthermore, this knowledge about the song which he passes on to Piya is one of the factors that enables her to better understand Fokir's sense of place that is intricately tied to the folk stories. Together with her life-changing experience in which Fokir sacrifices his life to protect her during the cyclone, this knowledge about the factors and conditions that gave rise to Fokir's different sense of place induces Piya to step beyond her rigid attachment to Western environmentalism and recognize the plurality of human relationships with the natural world. Therefore, it can be seen that Nirmal's attachment to language and imagination which proved futile during his lifetime, is transformed under new conditions thirty years later and brings about fruitful changes in not only Kanai but also Piya, enabling her to start disengaging herself from her adamant attachment to her ideologies.

### **Beyond Power Struggles: Buddhist Conditionality and Postcolonial Interactions**

*The Hungry Tide* situates Nirmal's and Piya's attachment to their ideologies in the

history of India. As Nayar points out, the novel reveals not only "the failed colonization by humans" of the Sundarbans but also "the inadequacy of the postcolonial state to provide a safe 'home'" for "dalits, minorities and other marginalized" (2010: 89). Nayar argues that the novel is "Ghosh's critique of the politics of possession/dispossession" (2010: 89). In this novel, one clearly witnesses discrimination, oppression and domination of different kinds that have taken place at different levels in postcolonial India—ranging from the history of the British colonization of India and the story of the Morichjhāpi refugees in the 1970s to injustice done to the dispossessed in the 2000s. More particularly, it is possible to consider the novel as partly joining the attempt of the Indian "Subaltern Studies Group" to "produce historical accounts in opposition to the dominant versions" by restoring subaltern voices into public awareness (Childs and Williams 1997: 37).

This paper concurs with the existing criticism which highlights the politics of postcolonial interactions in *The Hungry Tide*. However, it would like to re-examine the interactions of Piya with Fokir as well as those of Kanai with Moyna and Fokir. While, as Robert J. C. Young points out, "[p]ostcolonial critique focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world" (2001: 11), this paper will argue that the protagonists' unique interactions with the locals cannot easily be subsumed under this postcolonial framework. Instead, the novel depicts interactions that are based on or foster the

characters' shared sense of humanity, emphasizing specific conditions that give rise to the interactions. Given Ghosh's statement that he does not want to be labeled as a "post-colonial" writer (Mondal 2010: 2), this paper contends that the novel may caution against an attachment to the dominant postcolonial critique and thus the proclivity to impose the politics of power struggles upon cross-cultural interactions. More specifically, the paper will discuss how the Sundarbans, the embodiment of change and instability, and factors or conditions in the protagonists' lives and interactions with the locals here play a crucial role in prompting them to realize the slipperiness of what they perceive as their identities. The principle of conditionality functions to debunk the solidity of the postcolonial framework, thereby revealing that human interactions, like other things, cannot be fixedly defined by any totalizing concepts.

The novel highlights Piya's realization of the instability of her identity as a "foreigner" in her very first encounter with the locals in the Sundarbans. At the novel's beginning, Piya is perceived by Kanai at a Kolkata train station as a "foreigner" who is "not Indian, except by descent." Her foreignness is inscribed on both her "posture" and on "the neatly composed androgyny of her appearance" which Kanai describes as "out of place, almost exotic" (2005: 3). The novel then calls into question the stability of this identity as a foreigner in the scene when she is on the same steamer controlled by Mej-da and a forest guard. Mej-da who is dressed "exactly as she was, in blue pants and a white shirt" ridicules her with "a

curious little pantomime" to suggest that they are almost identical twins except for "the organs of language and sex" (2005: 29-30). This obscene disrespect awakens Piya to the reality that her present situation deprives her of her foreignness on which she relied unawares for protection during her cetacean expeditions elsewhere:

She had not realized then that on the Irrawaddy, as on the Mekong and the Mahakam, she had also been protected by her unmistakable foreignness. It was written all over her face, her black, close-cropped hair, the sun-darkened tint of her skin. It was ironic that here—in a place where she felt even more a stranger than elsewhere—her appearance had robbed her of the protection. (2005: 30)

Piya's situation at the Sundarbans changes her identity and causes her vulnerability. The novel's representation of Piya's "foreignness" suggests that this quality is not permanently fixed on her but that her possession of this quality is, in reality, impermanent and dependent on the concurrence of certain conditions. In the Sundarbans, she has come to realize how her identity is not essentially characterized by "her unmistakable foreignness."

In addition to implying the notion that human identity is unstable because it is complicatedly constructed by conditions, the novel also presents the unique interaction of Piya and Fokir that transcends the postcolonial framework of power struggles in relation to the specifics



of the conditions that give rise to them. On the one hand, Piya is not without some stereotypical views of the locals. Despite her respect for Fokir, she associates this local fisherman with nature, viewing him as being mystically imbued with instincts to communicate with dolphins. When she imagines Fokir's past, based on what she heard from her father, she creates an image of Fokir as a child living in a natural environment. Her tendency to associate the locals with primitive nature and childhood is also accompanied by her romanticized view of poor peasants in the countryside: "although they were poor their lives did not lack for warmth and companionship: it was a family . . . in which want and deprivation made people pull together all the more tightly" (2005: 131). Moreover, her attempt to use the fisherman's local knowledge to enhance her research project may be seen as similar to the colonizer's intention to benefit from the colonized.

On the other hand, the novel also creates specific conditions that open up possibilities for postcolonial interactions which are necessarily based not upon power struggles but on the shared experiences of human existence that are subject to suffering and longing for love and understanding. Piya is presented as a South Indian-American woman with a painful past. Her childhood was traumatized by her parents' endless quarrels which she tried to avoid by hiding in the closet "to shut out those sounds" (2005: 78). This period of the quarrels was then followed by her mother's seclusion from the family and later by her suffering from cancer. Moreover, her

parents, who wanted to erase their roots, never told her anything about her Indian "heritage" (2005: 79). She is thus deprived of a "home" where she can enjoy parental love and understanding as well as ties with her cultural roots. Moreover, the only love relationship she had with a man in Cambodia ended in his betrayal, which prompted her to learn to "get used to the idea of being on [her] own" (2005: 259). The only genuine communication she can achieve seems to be with dolphins. Her dedication to her work as a cetologist may be read as an attempt to seek the love and intimacy which are lacking in her interactions with humans. As she tells Kanai, her fascination with the first Orcaella dolphin originated when she met a stranded dolphin in Cambodia. She spent days feeding the dolphin whom she named Mr. Sloane and tried to find a way to take it back to the river only to find out that it was sold for trade. Her devoted care for the dolphin might point to the care that she herself had always longed for. Her statement that "I swear to you it *recognized me*" indicates her need for the creature to confirm her existence (2005: 252, emphasis mine).

As discussed earlier, the trip to the Sundarbans awakens Piya to a sense of her vulnerability. Fokir is the one who plays the role of caring protector of Piya. When she falls into the river, he saves her from drowning and resuscitates her. Later when Piya reflects upon this moment, she remembers that she tried to move away from his hand "until she understood it was not a predator that had touched her but a human being, someone she could trust, someone who would not hurt her" (2005:

92-93). In addition to this feeling of trust, Piya feels that, while she is in his boat, Fokir shows his respect. For example, he provides a private space for her to change her clothes. More importantly, Piya's description of his treatment reflects her appreciation of the fisherman's kindness:

It was not just that he had thought to create a space for her; it was as if he had chosen to include her in some simple, practiced family ritual, found a way to let her know that despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she was a person to him and not, as it were, a representative of a species, a faceless, tongueless foreigner. But where had this recognition come from? (2005: 60)

In a sense, this "recognition" is reminiscent of the one that Piya joyfully received from Mr. Sloane, the dolphin in Cambodia. Furthermore, Fokir recognizes her as "a person" and includes her as a member in his family ritual. In addition, in this situation, the innocent presence of Tutul, Fokir's son, enables her to trust Fokir even further. As she puts it, "she knew that if it weren't for him it would have been much harder for her to put her trust in a complete stranger as she had done" (2005: 54-55). She sees the boy as "her protector" (2005: 55). In the midst of dangers in the Sundarbans, the father and his son therefore supply her with a sense of safety and a feeling of being part of a family or a home.

Piya's trip to the Sundarbans provides her with an opportunity to return home even

though she does not feel at home in this place. Similarities between her parents' culture and that of Fokir, among other things, bring back her past. Since she feels that Fokir includes her in his family ritual, it is interesting to see that she associates his belongings and activities with those of her parents at home in Seattle. The texture of the printed sari that Fokir uses to create her private space reminds her of the saris that her mother wore at home (2005: 60). The checkered cloth that Fokir provides as a towel is again reminiscent of the cloth that her father used and did not want to throw away (2005: 73). Finally, the smell of food that Fokir cooks forces upon her "the smells of home" (2005: 81). His "flying fingers" also remind her of her mother's cooking hands (2005: 80). In this scene, Piya feels "as though she were a child again, standing on tiptoe to look at a clutch of stainless-steel containers lying arrayed on the counter beside the stove" (2005: 80). In this boat, "those images of the past" which "were almost lost to her" re-surface in her mind (2005: 81).

In each of the scenes in which she connects the atmosphere of Fokir's boat with that of her parents' home, she recalls memories of painful or dissatisfying experiences with them. For example, she describes her mother's "faded graying saris" as a source of her humiliation when she brought friends home (2005: 60-61). Her father's cloth also caused her sadness because of the contradiction within her father who wanted to destroy the memories of his motherland but who insisted on keeping this "old and tattered" cloth. Moreover, the word for the cloth,

“gamchha,” that she learns from Fokir brings back memories of her traumatic childhood experience of locking herself up in a closet to shut out the sound of her parents’ quarrelling in Bengali (2005: 78). The smells of her mother’s kitchen used to follow her so relentlessly everywhere like “domesticated animals” that she reacted by “fight[ing] back . . . against them and against her mother” (2005: 81).

However, these images somewhat fade as they re-surface in Piya’s memory. More particularly, Fokir functions as the person who wards off “the phantoms” of the smells that Piya is so apprehensive of. When Piya runs away from what she perceives as attacks from the ghostly smells, Fokir follows her to offer her food. When Piya tries to refuse the food, Fokir does not force it on her. On the contrary, he is described as “accept[ing] her refusal with a readiness that surprised her” and he gives the food to Tutul instead. If Piya associates Fokir with her parents, then he functions as a parent who offers love and understanding. In reality, Fokir performs the multiple roles of a fellow human, a friend and a surrogate parent for Piya.<sup>5</sup> Not only does he save her life when they first meet but he also protects her as if she were another child of his all along. He watches over her and Tutul when they are sleeping, hugs her while she is shivering and cautions her against the dangers of wild animals. Therefore, Fokir can be seen as taking the protective role that her

own parents failed to fulfill. Moreover, in the powerful storm in the Sundarbans he sacrifices his own life to protect her. In addition, while Piya’s father denies her Indian cultural legacy, Fokir is able to fill this lack by bequeathing her his knowledge of the river and the dolphins’ habitat. Lastly, while the sounds of Bengali words evoke painful memories in Piya’s mind, Fokir’s song functions as a lullaby that heals her and enables her to understand the oneness between her surrogate parent and the land. Undoubtedly, Piya is drawn to Fokir, wholeheartedly trusts him and also wants to immortalize his legacy after his death.

In this encounter between Piya, a cetologist from a civilized technology-based center and Fokir, a poor local living on the mystical margins, there is, thus, a concurrence of various conditions such as their familial and cultural background, Piya’s childhood experience, their being put together in the Sundarbans and the unexpected torrential storm that gives rise to a genuine relationship that is founded upon respect, trust and love. Similarly, the novel also depicts Kanai’s strange encounter with Fokir and the natural environs at Garjontola. This life-changing experience not only allows Kanai to discern his mind more clearly but also significantly awakens him to impermanence, instability and conditionality in his sense of self, thereby lessening his arrogance and pride in his ability to comprehend the world.

At the novel’s beginning, Kanai is presented as a wealthy cosmopolitan interpreter from New Delhi whose

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<sup>5</sup> The author would especially like to thank Ajarn Puckpan Tipayamontri for suggesting the point about the mutable multiplicity of Fokir’s roles in his interactions with Piya.

arrogance is accompanied by a complacent attitude towards everything around him. When Piya first catches sight of him, she notices “the self-satisfied tilt of his head and the unabashed way in which he stared at everyone around him, taking them in, sizing them up, sorting them all into their places” (2005: 8). He also takes great pride in his ability to speak five languages. Moreover, his tendency to flirt with women is illustrated by his approach to Piya and his invitation for her to visit him at Lusibari with the hope of enjoying “whatever pleasures might be on offer” (2005: 14). His interaction with the locals is similarly characterized by his self-importance and his condescension towards them

However, his encounter with Fokir and the natural environs at Garjontola forces upon him a harsh lesson that dismantles his self-importance and shatters the illusion of what he assumes to be his identity. The two men’s interaction can be generally characterized by the politics of the power struggle. Kanai is patronizing, rather rude and through his use of the familiar second-person pronoun, sometimes treats the fisherman as if he were a child. As for Fokir, he tries to keep his distance from Kanai, remaining silent most of the time. In the scene where the two men are alone together at Garjontola, the novel particularly depicts the conditions of their interaction. The “heat and haze” of “the steaming midday” there generates a state of torpor (2005: 263) in which Kanai dreams about Fokir and Piya travelling together. The presence of tigers on the shore of the island is the topic of their conversation. While Kanai expresses his

ridiculing disbelief of the fisherman’s warning that the tigers come to look at the humans, Fokir who, perhaps, feels offended throws him a series of challenges, ranging from grasping Kanai’s hand and placing it on the back of his neck to feel his fear, daring him to go deeper into the island to find the tigers, asking him whether he is a good man since a good-hearted man would have nothing to fear at this sacred place, to replacing the respectful pronoun form with the familiar one that Kanai condescendingly uses with him. In this situation, Kanai is aggravated by the intimate touch of Fokir’s body and what he perceives as the man’s “mocking” tone (2005: 268). The muddy ground further increases his anger as he helplessly falls into it. At this moment, swear words flow out from his mouth. Appallingly, he realizes that his anger comes from “sources whose very existence he would have denied: the master’s suspicion of the menial; the pride of caste; the townsman’s mistrust of the rustic” (2005: 269). Whereas Kanai has long conceived of himself as a sophisticated gentleman, this intense encounter with Fokir and the uncanny environs on the island induces him to meet his other undesirable side face-to-face. Furthermore, as he violently refuses Fokir’s offer to help and his eye contact with Fokir gives him a peculiar vision of what Fokir sees in him:

[I]t was as though his own vision were being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes and he were seeing not himself, Kanai Dutt, but a great host of people—a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men

who had destroyed Fokir's village, burnt his home and killed his mother. . . . In seeing himself in this way, it seemed perfectly comprehensible to Kanai why Fokir should want him to be dead—but he understood also that this was not how it would be. Fokir had brought him here . . . because he wanted him to be judged. (2005: 270)

In this passage, Kanai is prompted to put himself in Fokir's position and perceive reality from his perspective. He discerns that, in Fokir's eyes, he represents deadly enemies from "the outside world" who oppress him and his ancestors. This discernment may also enable Kanai to realize the excruciating afflictions that his own caste has inflicted upon the marginalized. This realization, together with his shocking discovery of his own internal feeling of antagonism towards the lower caste, may galvanize him into realizing the shameful vanity of his own pride and his reprehensible proclivity to treat these people with so much condescension. His encounter with Fokir in the strange conditions of the Sundarbans provides him then with an opportunity to examine and make judgment of himself.

This eye-opening experience, followed by his sheer terror at what he believes to be his encounter with a Sundarban tiger, significantly transforms Kanai. Piya finds the change incredible as she contrasts her memories of "the certainty of his stance and the imperiousness of his gestures" on the train with his "halting, diffident

manner" after the traumatic event. Kanai's decision to return to Lusibari and New Delhi on the following day and his statement that "This is not my element" (2005: 275) demonstrate his inability not only to cope with the reality at the Sundarbans but also to maintain his sense of self as a confident sophisticated gentleman. This statement also implies his realization of the instability of this assumed identity. After all, the identity he assumes as exclusively his is not inherent in him but it is brought into existence by certain conditions. This interpretation is illustrated by Kanai's invitation to Piya to visit him in New Delhi and his statement that "I want you to see me—on my own ground, in the place where I live" (2005: 276). He needs the right place and conditions in order for his assumed identity to be constructed. This realization of the impermanence, non-self and conditionality of his identity, gained from his encounter with Fokir and the physical environs of the Sundarbans, finally results in his sense of humility. As he confesses in a letter to Piya, "I had always prided myself on the breadth and comprehensiveness of my experience in the world. . . . At Garjontola I learned how little I know of myself and of the world" (2005: 291).

### **Narrative of Non-Attachment in the Tide of Change**

Examining the scene of the fatal storm and its aftermath, this section attempts to argue that the narrative at the novel's end interestingly disrupts the reader's tendency to settle into or be attached to certain fixed

ideas.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the narrative itself orchestrates the working of the law of conditionality and impermanence, trying to inculcate an attitude of non-attachment in the reader. The novel's narrative about the torrential storm presents this aspect of the natural world as an active agent of change and unpredictability that is beyond human control. Piya and Fokir are caught together in a boat while the storm is about to break. At first, Piya calculates that the wind is favorable for them to return to Garjontola in a few hours before the outbreak of the storm. However, it is only "as the minutes crept by" that her expectation is dismantled by a radical change in the wind's speed and direction (2005: 304), which places them in a situation where they are desperately hard hit by stronger winds and taller waves. The novel deploys the similar pattern of how what seems possible or certain is disrupted by an unexpected change in the scene where Piya loses her backpack. Because of the storm, Piya's backpack is blown into the air but fortunately kept in place because of protection from the boat's hood. Piya and Fokir later successfully secure it by using rope to "[binding] it tightly to the bamboo hoops of the hood" (2005: 306). However, this attempt is nullified when the hood is torn away from the boat. The image of "the whole unlikely assembly of objects—the hood, the plastic sheet, the backpack with all its equipment, its data and Kanai's gift —[being] carried so far off as to become a

small speck in the inky sky" (2005: 307) suggests not only the human inability to take control over anything in this condition but also the impermanence and uncertainty of life, which the violent storm of the Sundarbans magnifies and discloses right in front of the eyes of Piya and the reader alike.

It is also important to note that the ideas or situations that have been earlier established in the novel are dismantled at the end both during and after the storm. For example, in his narrative about his experience of a cyclone in 1970, Horen tells Kanai that while "three hundred thousand people had died," he and his uncle were able to survive the natural disaster by using "gamchhas and lungis to tie themselves to the tree" (2005: 288). This story seems to establish the reader's expectation that the same method should be helpful to Fokir and Piya who also resort to this local wisdom. However, in the different condition of the storm that Fokir and Piya experience, the sari that they use to bind themselves to the tree can help protect only Piya whereas Fokir who uses his body as "a shield" to cover Piya's body is fatally hit by "an uprooted stump" (2005: 323). Furthermore, one sees that while the novel stresses the terrifying fierceness of Sundarban tigers that claim human lives, the image of the tiger that Piya and Fokir spot during the storm becomes one that is harmless and itself assaulted by fear. It simply "watch[es] them," "twitch[es] its tail" and moves away. Piya even imagines that if she touched its coat, she would feel "the pounding of its heart" (2005: 321).

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<sup>6</sup> As for this point of interpretation, the author is partly influenced by Professor Langdon Hammer's reading of William Carlos Williams's "A Red Wheelbarrow" in on-line *Open Yale Courses*.

Another important example that illustrates how the narrative instills the attitude of non-attachment relates to the dichotomy between modern science and local knowledge that has been evident throughout the novel. At first, the novel seems to privilege the latter over the former as a scientist equipped with advanced equipment like Piya relies on the local fisherman's skills and his knowledge of the river and dolphins. However, the novel later depicts the blending of science and local knowledge in the scene in which Piya uses the GPS monitor to detect the river with Fokir's help. At the end, the local way of using the cloth to save oneself from a storm fails whereas the GPS monitor enables Piya to find her way out of the storm back to Lusibari. Eventually, it is her hand-held monitor that helps retrieve all of the data lost with the backpack. Again, the novel highlights how Piya sees the data as the embodiment of Fokir's life and wisdom. While critics such as Nayar argue for the integration of science with mystical local knowledge, this paper further argues that an attitude of non-attachment is also suggested. Neither science nor local wisdom nor even the blending of the two can be fixedly set as a totalizing framework in the pursuit of knowledge or solutions to problems. Instead, one's choice of these different options hinges upon conditions and related factors.

In the changing tide of life, death and loss are replaced by healing and restoration at the novel's end. A new project that Piya initiates when she returns to Lusibari demonstrates the significant change in her attitude. Her fierce attachment to

ecocentrism is superseded by her realization of the importance of both dolphin preservation and the locals' livelihood. That she tries to involve Nilima's Badabon Trust in the project also shows her consideration for the well-being of both humans and non-humans. Moreover, that the data she will employ in the new project originated from Fokir's knowledge and was retrieved by modern technology implies the possibility of integrating science with local wisdom. However, while this may serve as a new foundation for her to build her project upon, it is important to point out that the novel's end stresses an attitude of non-attachment. Piya's reference to Lusibari as "home" and her statement that for her "home is where the Orcaella are" imply the healing of her mind and thus the ability eventually to find herself a home, albeit in an unconventional sense (2005: 329). Concurrently, it points to her affirmed love of dolphins which is now tintured with her ability to embrace change. Likewise, Nilima's statement that "[f]or me, home is wherever I can brew a pot of good tea" (2005: 329) hints at the woman's ability to contentedly adapt herself to possible changes as well. The two characters' comments thus similarly indicate their adaptability and attitude of non-attachment.

## **Conclusion**

In an interview with Hasan Ferdous and Horst Rutsch, Ghosh mentioned cultural gaps and subsequent difficulties for interaction in a globalized world and pointed to "the possibility of deep communication," as exemplified by that

between Piya and Fokir who are unable to speak to each other” in *The Hungry Tide* (2005: 48-49). In such a world where human identities and interactions are very complicated, an awareness of the transience, conditionality and non-self of all things, together with an attitude of non-attachment, may be beneficial for the human attempt to understand themselves and the world. Just as Buddhist philosophy postulates that the principle of conditionality pervades everything, so *The Hungry Tide* presents the pervasiveness of the principle not only in the physical reality of the Sundarbans but also in the social reality of the characters’ ideologies, sense of self and cross-cultural interactions, as well as in the narrative itself. Applied to human ideologies and their sense of self, the notion of conditionality enables one to see through the seeming solidity of these entities and understand that any brand of ideology or any sense of identity is merely a construct created by certain conditions in a particular context and, thus, is subject to transformation. Moreover, the novel accentuates the possibilities of cross-cultural interactions that transcend the postcolonial framework of the politics of oppression. It calls attention to the fact that human interactions are subject to the law of conditionality. Similar to Donna Haraway’s feminist notion of situated knowledge that “resists fixation” and emphasizes “the webs of differential positioning” (1991: 196), this awareness of conditionality and the attitude of non-attachment can be used as an antidote to self-righteousness, attachment to views and the imposition of those views upon others. Simultaneously, it can help foster

respect for difference and diversity, possibly leading to a more harmonious co-existence of all beings. Lastly, in *The Hungry Tide*, in which the narrative enacts the message it conveys, nature, or more specifically, the “epic mutability” of the Sundarbans, plays a crucial role in constantly teaching the law of impermanence, conditionality and non-self to human beings, making them realize the incomprehensibility of reality and thus the limitation of their ability to comprehend anything. With this discernment, one then interprets Rilke’s line, “Life is lived in transformation,” as suggesting that life should be humbly lived with an awareness of mutability, leading to an attempt to treat oneself and the world with more tolerance, understanding and compassion.

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*Conditionality, Non-self, and Non-attachment in Amitav Ghosh's  
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