Elite and Subaltern Voices in Amitav Ghosh’s

*The Hungry Tide*

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Postcolonial Introductions

In a postcolonial world, the issues of communication and equality between the once colonial West and the previously colonised peoples of the eastern and third world are ever present. Without effective communication and mutual respect existing between the two parties, discrimination and exploitation finds an opportunity to manifest. It is therefore essential to form connections and relationships across the divide of rich and poor. This essay will discuss how human relationships are formed in a postcolonial world across divisions of class and ethnicity and how they are developed through verbal and non-verbal language as represented in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. It will discuss the relationship that exists between educated, privileged peoples and uneducated, impoverished peoples; in effect how the people of the West respond to the people of the East and how educated westerners and city cosmopolitans respond to uneducated easterners and rural countrymen. The characters under analysis will primarily be Piya, a young English speaking, westernised woman brought up in the USA but of Indian origin, Kanai, an educated and multilingual cosmopolitan Indian and Fokir, an uneducated, Bengali speaking, rural-dwelling Indian. The suggestion of Ghosh’s novel is that in a postcolonial and subaltern environment it is possible to unite people of both privileged and impoverished backgrounds to campaign for a more prosperous future for the world’s poor. The aim of this essay therefore is to explore this state of union in cross-cultural relationships between people of the West and people of the East as displayed in *The Hungry Tide* – primarily this relationship is evident in Ghosh’s characters of western Piya and eastern Fokir. This union between cultures can be formed through non-verbal and verbal communication and when respect is established between the two parties, positive development for the world’s poor can manifest with the help of the West.
Theoretical considerations and complexity of cross-cultural relations

The first consideration will be the writings of Said, Fanon and Spivak in terms of colonial dominance of colonised peoples, subaltern voices and postcolonial theory. As Said states: ‘European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self’ (Said 3). This statement reflects the dominance that the West assumes over the East which is in turn reflected by the superiority that the cosmopolitan assumes over the countryman. This kind of relationship is represented by Ghosh between his characters Kanai and Fokir; it is the strict Indian caste system which divides them. Kanai belongs to a higher caste than Fokir does and this distinction mimics colonial power over colonised subjects. *The Hungry Tide* as a whole constantly reflects subaltern relationships; the educated, westernised reader responds to both the western and eastern elite characters and the impoverished eastern Indian characters within the novel, the elite western and eastern characters respond to the impoverished Indian characters and in turn the reader and the characters respond to the animals in the novel – namely the tigers – and adding one more thread to this relational web, both the rural poor and the tigers all have to potential to turn against their elite oppressors. All these relationships and connections are multifaceted and are in constant transitions of balance of power and understanding.

In terms of the subaltern being faced with the cosmopolitan and being subject to metropolitan dominance, India’s poor, as represented in the novel, are confronted with the authoritative values and language of the elite, as Fanon states:

Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is the culture of the mother country (Fanon 14).
This statement reflects colonial dominance over colonised peoples but it doubles for an example for the way in which the country is viewed by the city; inferior, uneducated and ultimately insignificant. The country is forced to yield to the wills of the cosmopolitan world; the city imposes its rule over the rural and confronts it with its metropolitan language and lifestyle, it is primarily the relationship between Kanai and Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* which displays this hierarchy. The people of the city are mistrustful of the people of the country, they assume that they are unable to make educated decisions about their lives and that they require guidance and control. It is a similar value that held the East under the control of the West during colonial rule, it was assumed that the East embodied a lack of reason and was therefore in need of the rationality held by the West. This dominance is displayed in *The Hungry Tide* by the authorities’ treatment of the people of the tide country; the attitude which is held by the authorities is that these people are: ‘too poor to matter’ (Ghosh 248). They are therefore disregarded in favour of the desires of the West and the conservation of the tide country is carried out with no regard to the wellbeing of the people that live there.

Following from Fanon, Spivak confronts the issue of allowing subaltern voices to manifest against the might of colonial and elite powers, to develop from Fanon’s point, the subaltern must face the ‘the language of the civilising nation’ (Fanon 14) yet must also develop methods to talk back. To define: ‘the term ‘subaltern’ is used to signify the many different peoples who did not compromise the colonial elite. These might include the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle-class peasants’ (Barry 109). In the case of *The Hungry Tide* the subaltern are the rural poor of West Bengal. When these impoverished eastern people exist in a world dominated by the West, the issue must be confronted with regards to their ability to have their voices heard and their opinions matter, as Spivak comments:
We must now confront the following question: On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak? (Spivak 283)

Spivak’s concern is with the politically and socially silenced subaltern, it is an injustice which requires a resolution. She suggests that some resolve exists in the narrative that elite Indians can provide on behalf of the subaltern Indians, yet this is still not sufficient:

Certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best native informants for firstworld intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other. But one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous (Spivak 284).

Kanai is Ghosh’s example of the Indian elite and to some extent he does speak for Fokir and may be included as a heterogeneous subaltern voice as he is not a westerner like Piya. Kanai’s representation of Fokir however is somewhat clouded by his pride in caste and his need for superiority. Ghosh allows for this misrepresentation so that the reader may empathise with Fokir’s struggle to be heard above the cosmopolitan din. Ghosh joins Spivak in her struggle to give the subaltern a voice and to empower this people group, as Morton comments on Spivak’s aims:

Can the subaltern speak?’ has been read as illustrating Spivak’s own position as a postcolonial intellectual, who is concerned to excavate the disempowered and silenced voices of the past from the material and political context of the present (Morton 58).

Morton illustrates that Spivak is opening a window to an alternate history by drawing forth the subaltern voices from among the ruins of the British Empire to counteract the dominating colonial narratives. In a postcolonial world, colonial rule has fallen and with it, its biased
historical narratives must be challenged also. Spivak is initiating an empire writes back movement in her statements and it is writings like these which echo in Ghosh’s character of Fokir, the subaltern Indian man. Ghosh attempts to unite the elite and the subaltern in his novel by allowing relationships to form between the two but also highlights the struggle for the subaltern voice to be heard by never displaying Fokir speaking directly to the reader. Kanai is often found to speak or translate for Fokir when he speaks to Piya, therefore he both speaks for the uneducated subaltern and displays the dominance of his caste through verbal language. *The Hungry Tide* therefore engages with Spivak’s theories on class division:

In the social context of India’s rigid class and caste system, the location of the subaltern is further effaced by the layered histories of European colonialism and national independence. In response to these changing historical conditions, Spivak has, from the beginning, sought to find an appropriate methodology for articulating the histories and struggles of disempowered groups (Morton 49).

It is these ‘disempowered groups’ that Ghosh is also looking to represent in his novel, he wishes to give India’s poor a voice. Colonisers and the colonised can be represented through verbal and non-verbal language as expressions of power and status. The colonial West may take power in literature though verbal language whereas the colonised East is often reduced to non-verbal language or is silenced completely. Ghosh complicates this relationship however between West and East with his character of Kanai as Kanai is eastern yet he is part of the educated Indian elite and therefore may stand in the gap between a stereotypical colonial view of an irrational East and a rational West. This is particularly apparent as Kanai translates verbal language between Piya and Fokir, he forms a relationship as it were, with the coloniser and the colonised, the cosmopolitan and the rural. In *The Hungry Tide*, it is the cosmopolitans, Piya and Kanai who are the main protagonists and they enter this role through verbal language. Fokir in contrast is seen through Piya or Kanai’s verbal description, he
doesn’t speak directly to the reader. The reader is distanced in some way from Fokir and is forced to listen to Kanai and Piya’s commentary on him instead. The reader is left wondering if they have received a correct interpretation of Fokir or whether his genuine character has been lost in translation as it were.

To add further to relational complexity, Fokir and Piya share a miscommunication of verbal language and therefore form a relationship on the basis of non-verbal communication only. This allows for equality to exist between them as neither can express dominance through verbal language. This equality is in part a delusion however with regards to Piya as to begin with she misjudges Fokir to a certain extent. Following the tiger killing incident she is resolved that her initial opinion of Fokir was not entirely correct. Kanai on the other hand can use verbal language to communicate with Fokir and therefore can express his privileged and cosmopolitan background though verbal language and subsequently can assume superiority over Fokir. Fokir is unable to compete with Kanai’s dominance through verbal language yet with Piya he is free from this dichotomy.

Building cross-cultural relationships

This essay will initially deal with the characters, Piya and Fokir. Ghosh presents the relationship between Piya, the educated, western and privileged cosmopolitan and Fokir, the uneducated, eastern and rural impoverished man mainly as an embodiment of mutual respect rather than as an example of elitist dominance over the rustic. Piya is in acceptance of Fokir’s uneducated background and does not feel the need to judge him for lacking a westernised education, she appreciates that he holds a different kind of knowledge and understanding and that his skills as a fisherman are invaluable in the tide country. At the first meeting, she allows Fokir to exist how he has always existed without challenging his lifestyle and in turn he allows her to do the same. It is not that their relationship is problem free as there is often
miscommunication between them; it is rather the respect and tolerance that they have for each other and their differences which keeps them close. Piya creates in part an illusion of the friendship that she has with Fokir, she at once respects him and seeks equality between them yet at the same time she is unaware of Fokir’s character as a whole. She is naive to think that on a first meeting she can understand him enough to believe that equality can exist without any complication and difference of opinion. The equality that Piya desires between her and Fokir is continually being challenged by changing circumstances however she remains determined to form a close bond with Fokir even if this results in her values being challenged. The first example of a deep respect between the two is shown when Piya is a guest on Fokir boat - he cordons off a space for her to wash and change, preserving her modesty:

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 (Ghosh 60).

This passage can be read as an indirect report of Piya’s thoughts and her interpretation of this incident may be somewhat biased by her romanticised thinking. She is assessing the situation as if Fokir is treating her as an equal yet he may be making allowances for her precisely because she is a foreigner. Furthermore, Piya has a limited understanding of Fokir as they cannot communicate through verbal language, as Piya being of Bengali heritage yet raised in America can speak English only, whereas Fokir speaks only Bengali. They communicate instead through gestures of kindness and respect; they create their own form of language, a way of communicating which is specific to their relationship. Their language is non-verbal and is free from the restraints of verbal language; they are both able to explore a new method of communication. It is the inability to communicate through verbal language that evidently
strengthens their relationship and sets them apart from the other characters in the novel as this situation does not occur between any of the rest. The subaltern pattern is reversed as cosmopolitan Piya refuses to assume authority. It is Piya’s ability to deal with the issues of difference she sees around her that allows her to continue a friendship with Fokir and a relationship with the environment around her. It is not that she agrees with all the values of the tide country rather it is her open mindedness, her malleability which is her strength. At times she assumes an elitist role whenever she comes up against a situation which challenges her western values yet she is quick to resolve these conflicts in her mind so she can continue living in peace in the tide country.

Piya and Fokir are strangely drawn to each other and are curious and intrigued by one another, they are culturally worlds apart, yet together in this subaltern space they make room for themselves to establish a connection, an acceptance and appreciation of each other’s peculiarities. For the East not to be at the mercy of the West and the impoverished not to be at the mercy of the elite, as is apparent in Piya and Fokir’s relationship, is an unusual reality. Piya is not concerned with expressing her privileged dominance over Fokir, she does not think herself superior to him and she does not at present see anything in Fokir’s character that she may wish to be reformed. However complex the relationship between these two may be, Piya in a sense represents progress with the way she treats Fokir, she departs from the racial, class and caste discrimination that has and still exists in India. This discrimination was served by the British during colonial rule but also by elitist Indians towards India’s poor. Piya is an instigator of postcolonial peace; she carries with her no determination to exercise her educated rule over the people she meets in the tide country. Through Piya and Fokir’s relationship, Ghosh represents the cooperation which is possible between the educated and the uneducated when communication, understanding and compassion are made possible.
despite verbal language barriers. When a mutual understanding is established between rich and poor, equality can then overtake segregation.

At the first meeting between Piya and Fokir, Piya appears settled in her subaltern surroundings. It is the introduction of a symbol of consumerism that reminds Piya and indeed the reader of the awkwardness of cosmopolitan influences in a rural setting. In effect, the culture of the cosmopolitan city shows its invasive nature towards the country during this incident:

a tiny but astonishing object – a plastic sachet of shampoo. She had seen strings of these dangling in the teashops in Canning and yet, when she picked it up to examine it, its presence seemed oddly intrusive. She would have liked to throw it away, except she knew that here, on the island that was this boat, the sachet was a treasure (bought at the expense of how many crabs?) and that it had been put there in her honour. To throw it away would be to abuse this offering (Ghosh 72).

Piya is astounded by this emblem of cosmopolitan materiality and is almost offended by its alien presence in this rural setting. This object is a non-verbal signifier of the city; it has echoes of an existence which is far removed from the place Piya finds herself in now. It is a symbolic whisper of another lifestyle, one which Piya wishes to forget at this moment in time. This object is able to speak to Piya through non-verbal symbolism in a place where verbal language at this moment cannot reach her. She attempts to detach herself from a western existence and instead associates herself with the lifestyle of Fokir and his son Tutul by distancing from this cosmopolitan object rather than welcoming it. By turning away from materiality Piya believes she is inviting a more authentic experience of the tide country yet she is naive to think that such a simple rejection will allow her to be more closely associated with Fokir than with her western background. She has no knowledge of the suffering people
like Fokir must face in order to survive in this part of the world and she will never truly be part of this suffering and struggle. She cannot join any part of Fokir’s history and because of the language barrier between them she will never learn of it either, at least not from his own lips. Although Piya is not aware of it, Fokir is in a sense a novelty to her, a symbol of the quaintness of rural life and its supposed oneness with nature. She is naive however with her assumptions. Fokir is not a nature loving eco warrior, he indeed has a great respect for nature yet he is still a human being trying to survive whilst living amongst the dangers of the tide country. It is Piya’s idealised perspective of Fokir which leads to the threat of segregation in their friendship as Fokir with never live up to her ideals, Piya must therefore must overcome and accept their cultural differences if they are to remain friends. Piya and Fokir are all at once connected in respect for one another yet at the same time are world’s apart. Piya builds an initial attachment to Fokir through her ideologies about this type of man rather than the realities of his character. She has a freedom in relying on her imagination: ‘In a way, it was a relief to be spared the responsibilities that came with a knowledge of the details of another life’ (Ghosh 72). She assesses Fokir from his appearance as he washes away the weariness from the long day: ‘With the salt gone from his face, he looked unexpectedly youthful, almost impish’ (Ghosh 72). Fokir’s appearance is idyllic to Piya and his gentleness of nature allows her to assign certain desirable qualities to him while rejecting the notion that any deception or violence is to be found in him.

One can only speculate that Fokir does not share Piya’s belief that she is able to become like him - authentically rustic. Although Piya resists associating her identity with capitalism, Mukherjee points out:

Piya herself, kitted out with the latest GPS monitor, range finder, depth sounder and binoculars, is the embodiment of the panoptic knowledge that was generated by, and in turn, sustained, capitalist colonialism (Mukherjee 120).
She is in denial that the people that first embarked in her line of work – conservationism – were imperial, patriarchal, western, colonial, educated and privileged, everything that a man like Fokir is not. Capitalism has made her career possible and western wealth has provided her with her sophisticated education and equipment to carry out her research. In a sense the novel breaks down the panoptic pattern established by colonial rule with the introduction of Fokir and the resilient tide country. Fokir and his surroundings refuse to be completely understood and ruled over, they retain an air of mystery which is frustrating to the elites, particularly to Kanai who would wish to use knowledge and colonial principles to dissect the people and the tide country and gain superiority over it. Piya on the other hand is reluctant to follow in Kanai’s footsteps and is always keen to find a solution to cultural differences.

As much as their cosmopolitan and rural lifestyles separate Piya and Fokir, verbal language will also always separate them, they can only guess at each other’s intentions and meaning. Mistranslation of non-verbal meaning is not easily rectified; an example of this would be when Fokir lies down in the boat with a shivering Piya to warm her with his body heat:

When her shivering stopped she sat up abruptly in embarrassment. He sprang back at the same time and she knew he was just as discomforted as she was. She wished she could think of a way to let him know it was all right – nothing had been misunderstood, no wrong had been done. But all she could do was clear her throat noisily and say thank you (Ghosh 93).

It is the strangeness of the situation which would normally require a verbal exchange as justification. However without words to aid them, Piya and Fokir must rely on the assumptions they hold about one another’s character for justification. They must decide to trust what they feel they have so far learnt of each other so that no offence is caused. For
Piya, an automatic ‘thank you’ is pushed through her lips even though it is most likely that Fokir will not comprehend these words. ‘Thank you’ is somehow thought to be universally accepted by native English speakers yet in many cases, as in this one, it is inadequate. Somewhere in Piya’s psyche she is aware of this yet she cannot refrain from speaking these two basic words as a consolation for lack of verbal communication she has with Fokir. However privileged or educated she is, she is bound by her monolingual identity, she is out of place in Fokir’s native land and detached from his native tongue. The equality that exists between the two of them is in a sense, a result of their mutual incapacity to comprehend each other’s verbal language, they are reduced to near silence, neither can claim dominance by using verbal language.

During the first days Piya spends on Fokir’s boat she wistfully enjoys his company and her rural surroundings. The tiger killing incident however that is described in detail by Ghosh highlights for the first time the truth about the cultural differences between Piya and Fokir. Piya automatically expects Fokir to be against such a brutal act. When the tiger enters the village the villagers are keen to exterminate it as it has killed a few of their people and many of their livestock. They have suffered much because of the tigers and the restraints imposed on them by the authorities because of the conservation of these animals. This conservation however appears not to take into account the cost to human life and wellbeing. The tigers are protected but the people that share their habitat are persecuted. In a sense this incident is symbolic an uprising against colonial powers. Because of the tide country peoples’ history with the tigers, it seems to them that this act is justified whereas Piya, who has no involvement in this history, is an outsider to this justification. She is angry and horrified at the killing. She assumes that Fokir will be like minded and will rise up to intercede for the tiger’s life, yet what he does is exactly the opposite and this shocks her. When Piya spots Fokir amongst the chaos:
she was certain he would know what to do, that he would find a way to put a stop to what was going on. But instead of coming to her aid, he put his arm around her...He carried her away, retreating through the crowd as she kicked his knees and clawed at his hands (Ghosh 295).

This incident is a perfect example of non-verbal miscommunication between Piya and Fokir, Piya has misinterpreted a fundamental aspect of Fokir’s character as he is not a conservationist in the sense that Piya is and she assumed him to likewise be. This misunderstanding is one of the pitfalls of relying on non-verbal communication alone to form a relationship. The lack of verbal communication between Piya and Fokir allows for equality to exist between them as neither of them can establish authority through language, however the lack of verbal communication also means that misunderstanding of each other’s fundamental characteristics and intent can arise and subsequently the threat of segregation may loom.

Fokir understands the history of the tide country and indeed has been a part of it as the villagers have; he therefore associates with the values of these people and not with Piya. As Tomsky explains:

For all their cosmopolitan beliefs, they find the views they had always presumed universally applicable are ineffective in the subaltern space. Because the space is situated outside the cosmos of their worldly ideology, it reveals the limitations of elite metropolitan philosophies (Tomsky 57).

Piya is disappointed as she has convinced herself that Fokir is a man of nature and would not be capable of engaging in a brutal act, she has not however been confronting reality. Ghosh uses ‘challenging counter-narratives that disturb their [Piya’s] normative understandings of
knowledge, civility and progress' (Mukherjee 122). This incident challenges Piya’s cosmopolitan values and is therefore the start of a transformation in her.

The spell of Piya’s delusion about her and Fokir’s concise mutual non-verbal understanding of each other has been broken. By Fokir aiding the villagers in the killing, he is removed from Piya’s cosmopolitan understanding of justice and animal rights; he has become isolated from her, distant in a way she finds difficult to accept. Her cosmopolitan ideology does not have a place for the sort of behaviour that has been displayed by Fokir and the villagers. She subsequently judges their actions without considering the relational history between the people and the tigers, the discrimination they have suffered at the hands of the authorities and the anger they therefore hold for the animal that is symbolic of their struggle to survive. Piya has previously been naive and idealistic about the tide country; she has not been considering the real struggle the people face. Piya must go through a transformation as it were, she must depart from her western mindset and begin to consider the tide country in its true context, unbound to western thinking, only then will she be able to connect and respond appropriately to the people, places and animals there. The tiger killing incident does not comply with Piya’s conversationalist ideals and therefore, through her distress, she exposes herself as an outsider, highlighting her western cosmopolitan identity against the rural East, as Mukherjee explains:

Piya’s conversationalist outrage here shows that she fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between the villagers and the tiger. Forkir’s explanation, translated by Kanai, is also the beginning of her encounter with, and realization of, an alternative history of and perspective on the postcolonial environment. In order to try to and comprehend this other perspective, the elites must first unlearn paradigmatic notions of history, environment and culture...Piya’s conversationalist ethos...remain[s] wedded to
idealistic and undifferentiated, not to say Euro-centric, notions of progress (Mukherjee 118).

It is this idealism which Piya closely holds to, particularly at the beginning of the novel, which causes her to stumble as her westernised concepts of the progress of humanity are insufficient when applied to the tide country. In other words Piya must rethink her westernised understanding of cultural and historical verbal and non-verbal language before she can relate to Fokir within his subaltern context. It is painful for Piya to consider that her and Fokir share no common thoughts and because of this, even following the tiger killing, she never fully accepts the division between them. She holds in her heart a vision of ‘oneness’ for her and Fokir. She finds a sense of peace and belonging in being able to relate to him and thinking that the two of them have an authentic connection. By creating their own form of language they are able sustain a friendship only they can share. Mukherjee comments however on Piya’s mistaken interpretations:

Initially, the linguistic, cultural and material gaps between them render Fokir an inscrutable sign to Piya, a sign she feels she is at liberty as a cosmopolitan to interpret and to attach meanings to as she sees fit. Thus’ she mistakenly idealizes him as the ‘natural man’. It is only in the shock of seeing Fokir’s exultation in the killing of the tiger’ that the difference between them becomes apparent (Mukherjee 131).

It is a symptom of Piya’s westernisation that she believes that she can interpret Fokir correctly, although she may downplay her association to the colonising and dominating West, it is exactly the influence of this culture which leads her to think that she can interpret Fokir and the tide country in line with her own opinions about the world. This is not something that she had been aware of until her western values had been challenged by the tiger killing. At
her first meeting with Fokir she sought equality first and this value must continue through every obstacle if she is to retain the friendship she so cherishes.

Unconsciously she has been conditioned to believe that because she is from an educated and privileged background she has the right to decide right and wrong for those living in the oriental world, a culture which in truth is entirely removed from her own. She cannot expect her opinions to be appropriate and applicable in the tide country. Is it a transformation process she must therefore go through and one which she ready to embrace as her desire to understand and respect Fokir is greater than her desire to refine his values that don’t fall into line with hers.

It is Piya’s non-verbal language of western and capitalist values and principles that means she is at first unable to understand the values that Fokir and people of the tide country live by. She cannot comprehend their verbal language so they can provide no justification to her for the tiger killing. She is therefore able to rely on her own interpretation alone and views the act as abhorrent. Her verbal and non-verbal communication and principles are from the West and do not translate effectively in the East. In the moments following the tiger killing, she is more distant from Fokir and more disturbed by foreign values than she appears to be anywhere else in the novel. The incident does not comply with her western ideologies of conservation and development.

Kanai however is in acceptance of the villagers’ justification for the tiger killing and attempts to explain the history between the tigers and the people to Piya. He does this so she might understand the reasoning behind the incident. Piya however refuses to accept that there is any logic in the villagers’ or Kanai’s argument:

Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What’ll be left then? Aren’t we alone enough in the
universe? And do you think it'll stop at that? Once we decide we can kill off other species, it'll be people next – just the kind of people you’re thinking of, people who’re poor and unnoticed (Ghosh 240).

Piya explains her opinion that if humans fail to protect and preserve animals then they allow themselves to decide what and who is worth keeping alive on this earth and what and who is not. Once that line is crossed, as Piya says, the discrimination will never end. If the barriers of respect for animals are broken down: ‘it’ll be people next’ (Ghosh 240). If killing becomes an accepted practice, then what is to stop animals and humans alike being killed by anyone who deem them unworthy of respect? Piya believes herself to be not simply a conservationist of animal life but a conservationist of all life. By protecting animals she will inevitably be protecting human life as well.

Fokir’s justification for the tiger killing is that: ‘when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die’ (Ghosh 295). He has assumed a role of non-verbal communicator between himself and the tiger. Fokir has determined how his relationship with the tigers should exist and has not been pressured to submit to the image of fear and oppression given to him by the authorities; he has risen above this. This contrast in vision between the authorities and the poor is apparent in Kanai’s uncle, Nirmal’s writings, a generation earlier:

Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their name?...As I thought of these things, it seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No one could think this a crime unless
they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil (Ghosh 216-217).

Fokir is prepared to preserve a connection with the tigers and steps out of the vicious circle of oppression between the tigers, the authorities and the poor. He will not allow the authorities to determine his fate in the tide country and will not yield to their tyranny. His non-verbal communication with the tigers allows him to do this, without it, the connection would be lost and fear and corruption would set in.

As for Piya, throughout her journey she respects what she knows of Fokir and the tide country and deals with what she learns and possibly doesn’t agree with, with grace and compassion. Piya is shocked by the tiger killing she witnesses yet must quickly decide how she will react to such a situation. It is her determination to preserve equality and respect between her and the people of the tide country however which enables her to overcome her disagreements with them. Piya continues to believe to a certain extent that her and Fokir are two of a kind, both at one with nature and that their connection does not require verbal language to complete it. Kanai, mainly out of jealously of Piya and Fokir’s relationship responds harshly to Piya’s thinking, even if commenting somewhat truthfully:

“And all that while you couldn’t understand a word he was saying, could you?” “No”, she said with a nod of acknowledgement. “But you know what? There was so much in common between us it didn’t even matter.” “Listen”, said Kanai in a flat, harsh voice. “You shouldn’t deceive yourself, Piya: there wasn’t anything in common between you then and there isn’t now. Nothing. He’s a fisherman and you’re a scientist” (Ghosh 222).

Kanai reinforces the distance between Piya and Fokir and highlights the distinction between West and East and cosmopolitan and rural. He enforces the cultural barriers Piya has
attempted to ignore or dissolve as she wants to form friendship with Fokir despite their cultural differences. Piya is educated, privileged, westernised, Fokir is uneducated, impoverished and characteristic of what the West would call the orient. These distinctions are a form of non-verbal language which exists between the East and the West, the cosmopolitan and the rural, a language that enables people to be categorised which in turn invites discrimination towards undesirable categories. Kanai attaches himself to western ideologies even though he is Indian and he separates himself from the identity he sees in Fokir. He appeals to Piya to do the same, to settle in her western identity and to reject thinking that her and Fokir could ever be alike.

Piya is clearly hurt by Kanai’s response, she wishes to remain ignorant of the realities which distance her and Fokir and even though she may admit there is some truth to Kanai’s statements, it is her desire for friendship, a sense of belonging and to some extent for romance which supports her wish for her and Fokir to be connected in some way. There exists an untamed and undomesticated spirit in her that longs to be of kin to Fokir and the life that he leads. It is a colonialist assumption that the colonised world is a romantic wildness of untouched, authentic beauty and adventure. It is a cry of Piya’s heart that she can be a part of this wilderness, in a career with little time to entertain romantic prospects that she can at least dream. Kanai, through envy, knowingly bursts this bubble in the hope that Piya would be realistic in her expressions of affection. He believes that he and Piya, through their shared privileged backgrounds, would be more appropriately romantically matched and attempts to direct her focus onto him and away from Fokir.

In contrast to Piya, who does not feel the need to exercise authority over the tide country, Kanai is presented as arrogant and proud and is uncomfortable in this place; he feels that he needs to assert his cosmopolitan and patriarchal superiority over it. This is particularly evident in his relationship with Fokir. Kanai represents arrogant and dominant colonial
attitudes whereas Piya represents equality but also to a certain extent holds a naive and romanticised notion of the East. When Fokir takes Kanai to an isolated island and they are alone together, Kanai becomes aware of his vulnerability in a place and among people that are foreign to him. Fokir is intending to show Kanai that he does not have to right to authority in the tide country and Kanai subsequently reacts badly to this manipulation:

His anger came welling up with an atavistic explosiveness, rising 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; the city’s antagonism toward the village. He had thought he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past, but the violence with which they spewed out of him now suggested that they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve (Ghosh 269).

Kanai’s reaction to Fokir is symbolic of the cosmopolitan attitude towards the country and the colonialist attitude towards the colonised. As much as Kanai would prefer to hide the degradation that he feels for people like Fokir, in this moment he is angered and feels he has an entitlement to superiority and a justification to discriminate against Fokir for his rural and uneducated background. It remains cemented into western and elite cultures that rural and impoverished eastern people exist in ignorance and are therefore to be dominated, controlled and ruled over. The attitudes formed by the long history of colonialism from the West towards the orient and the discrimination held by the elite towards the poor are ever present even if in the modern day they are somewhat hidden or repressed.

It is mainly a sense of pride which keeps Kanai from accepting Fokir as being equal to him, they are distanced by Kanai’s need to assume himself superior to Fokir, it is not Fokir who causes tension and discriminates against Kanai. Kanai feels insecure in this subaltern world, he is isolated as a cosmopolitan when alone in the boat with Fokir. Fokir however is at
peace with the surrounding wilderness and isolation and doesn't feel the need to highlight the
differences between the two of them as a way of establishing and reinforcing his identity in
the way in which Kanai does. It is Kanai who is out of place and it is through anger that he
attempts to find an understanding of his surroundings, he recognises himself however as:

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; he had become a token for a
vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose
value was less than that of an animal (Ghosh 270).

He acknowledges his contempt for Fokir and is all at once ashamed of his actions. Fokir is to
him, as to many others: 'too poor to matter' (Ghosh 248). This attitude is a symptom of high
consumerism and capitalism. In a world where money, possessions and education are all that
matter, people like Fokir have no chance of being accepted by the elitist members of the
human race like Kanai and it is easy to forget and disregard the poor when living as a
cosmopolitan. The poor can give no contribution to affect economic growth and are seen as a
liability rather than an asset to cosmopolitans, like Kanai, who are racked with pride and
greed. Unconsciously, Kanai has categorized people in so far that he allows himself to
discriminate against people who do not fall into a desirable category. A dehumanisation of
colonised or uneducated peoples occurs in the minds of the elite, Ghosh writes that Kanai
thought Fokir to be worth less than an animal in the moment of his anger. As Tomsky
suggests:

Kanai's abuse stems from his need to assert his class-inflected authority and
reconstitute his social and cultural norms. When he insults Fokir, Kanai becomes
conscious of how entrenched his class and cultural convictions are within him (Tomsky
61).
It seems that Kanai is more shocked of his own reaction than Fokir is, Kanai’s outburst is a manifestation of the cultural influences of enduring colonial attitudes in a postcolonial world, he has become a stereotype of the elite - of self-assumed patriarchal superiority. Kanai is embarrassed at his blunt and derogatory response. It soon as it has passed his lips he feels remorse for his actions:

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 not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged (Ghosh 270).

Fokir is aware of the underlying contempt that Kanai holds for him and takes him ashore to the island where tigers are known to roam. He uses this incident as a tool to reform Kanai’s character, to bring him into a realisation of his weaknesses in the tide country and his discrimination against the people there. The novel as a whole acts as a journey of reformation for Kanai and Piya and challenges the previous views they held about impoverished peoples, it therefore seeks to break down colonial mindsets. Kanai is fearful of the place where Fokir has taken him and this fear removes the attitude of superiority from his mind. He is reduced to anxiety and anger and is no longer in control of the situation he finds himself in. In a sense, fear cleanses Kanai; he is stripped of his arrogance and is forced into humiliation. Fokir predicts Kanai’s reaction and knows this transformation in him is long overdue. It is crucial for Kanai to go through this transformation if he is to affect any positive change in the tide country and aid the people who inhabit it, without it, his cosmopolitan, educated perception of the rural is insufficient to make any practical contribution. Fokir wants to see reformation of character in Kanai, he does not seek simply to punish him, it is the merciful quality in Fokir that brings forth a vision of a compassionate and intelligent human being whereas as Kanai is reduced to an angry beast – he is angry at being controlled and contained on the
island, unable to escape without Fokir's help. He is experiencing what is it to be a colonised individual, bound by someone else's will and denied freedom. This incident speaks of transformation through verbal and non-verbal language, although much of what Fokir does and says is not clear to Kanai, at this moment he is aware of Fokir's intentions without having to ask him directly, as Mukherjee explains:

Much of what...Fokir...say[s] may be incomprehensible to the elites, much of it is mistranslated, misunderstood. But...[he is] never dismissed, and it is in the novel's refusal to force transparency onto...[him], in its deferring to silences and gaps, that differences between various migrants, between powerful and powerless, are acknowledged as a relational rather than apartheid force (Mukherjee 117).

Fokir acquires a verbal and non-verbal voice during this incident and uses this to reform Kanai in replacing his ignorance and racial discrimination for a sense of equality. Although Fokir is given a voice in The Hungry Tide, the question may remain however: 'Can the refugee speak in the circuits of 'world literature' where the postcolonial English-language novel has accrued a considerable cultural prestige and economic clout?' (Mukherjee 114) Although Fokir, as a representative of impoverished and displaced peoples, is allowed to speak in Ghosh's novel, the question may be asked if the same opportunity is given throughout English literature and indeed world literature. Do novels dealing with issues of poverty stir the hearts and minds of cosmopolitans or have the elite become too familiar and comfortable with these books for them to still make an impact on our consciousness’? Can Fokir's voice truly be heard above the din of a capitalist and consumerist society where such novels are being sold? Ghosh however 'repeatedly asks us to question our desensitization to, and ignorance of, poverty and subaltern condition’ (Tomsky 62). He must make Fokir's voice profound, haunting and intriguing if it is to be noticed. Accepting that the subaltern voice is irretrievably heterogeneous however also means that Ghosh allows for profundness in
Kanai’s voice meaning that the distinction of the subaltern voice from Piya’s western voice is not easily established as both Kanai and Piya are classed as elite, this complexity of voice and class status therefore challenges readers to question the definition of subaltern. The novel continually confronts postcolonial theory by uprooting and replanting cross-cultural relationships and voices; this is particularly evident in the complexity of Piya and Fokir’s relationship but also in the way in which Kanai and Fokir relate to each other.

Fokir’s voice is at its most profound when he takes Kanai to the island, his main intent is to make Kanai realise his isolation, he is wishing to teach Kanai an important lesson of equality rather than simply wishing him to be dead. This incident is symbolic of a westerner’s isolation in an oriental world. Fokir is a diplomatic voice not just through speech but though gestures and actions and he will never be silenced by either Kanai or Piya. It is ebb and flow of communication and realisation between the characters that brings a greater sense of equality between them, their prejudices must be levelled out. Communication in The Hungry Tide is a delicate process; mistranslation of each other’s intent will lead only to division and the possibility of discrimination between them. They must find a common language whether this be verbal or non-verbal if they are to experience peace and equality between the elites and the poor. It is Fokir and Piya that are the most eager to see a union between both parties, it is the humility they embody that Kanai is jealous of as he cannot easily depart from his pride in his caste. Although Fokir and Piya do have some issues with miscommunication between them they manage to overcome these. Piya’s own attitudes of conservation and anthropology are challenged by her experiences in the tide country but she learns with grace rather than with anger as Kanai does. Piya and Fokir are the main instigators of equality and in a sense through their relationship they campaign to close the gap of understanding between the elites and the poor. It is a gap that at first Kanai is reluctant to cross and requires Fokir’s intervention to come into a realisation of his own shortcomings.
In turn with the transformation that Piya and Kanai go through, Ghosh also appeals to his readership, as Tomsky explains:

Ghosh’s engagement with the oppressions and inequalities of rural Bengal chafes at our conscious, heightening our awareness of our privileged status, and shakes us out of our comfortable contemplation (Tomsky 62).

The reader is morally challenged in a similar way to the characters of Piya and Kanai. We are unable to keep a neutral opinion of the delicate balance of life in the tide country, we are instead motivated to take notice of and speak against such injustice and poverty which afflicts so many people. It is the act of departing from a cosmopolitan concept of poverty and instead acknowledging individuals with individual needs. This individual is represented most prominently by Ghosh in Fokir but also in other subaltern characters such as Fokir’s mother, Kusum, who dies during the violence that was shown by the authorities towards the people of the island of Morichjhāpi in the tide country a generation earlier. This cross generational narrative is evident that the oppression these people face has had a long running history. The reader is able to form a connection with these characters and is offered the opportunity to feel compassion for them, for their struggle to be heard and their desire to be rescued from injustice. As Ghosh’s depiction reflects the realities of suffering for the inhabitants of West Bengal, a cosmopolitan reader’s concept of poverty is able to give way to real people with real lives.

This sense of compassion is displayed through the relationship between Piya and Fokir as they remain attached to each other throughout the novel and are constantly aware of each other and concerned about each other’s wellbeing. They grow closer, not through verbal language but by a non-verbal language of mutual appreciation and respect. In a defining relational incident, the mist of infatuation and romanticisation they hold for one another
appears to clear and they become aware of the equality they share purely because of their simple and vulnerable humanity:

They sat unmoving, like animals who had been paralyzed by the intensity of their awareness of each other. When their eyes met again it was as if he knew at a glance what she was thinking...It was as if their shared glimpse of the lunar rainbow had somehow broken something that had existed between them, as if something had ended, leaving behind a pain of a kind that could not be understood because it had never had a name (Ghosh 290-291).

As Mukherjee comments on this incident: ‘What has ended is the eroticization and eroticization of difference, and an acceptance of autonomy and through these, paradoxically, a sense of connection and belonging’ (Mukherjee 132). Through a new acceptance of each other, there is a sense of relief, they can be at peace, exist in simple humanity and leave to rest the romanticisation of difference between them. Piya is at first drawn to Fokir as she sees him as a ‘natural’ man, at one with nature and distinct from cosmopolitan life. As Piya becomes more realistic about Fokir’s character and their friendship, their connection appears to be more genuine, from this point up until Fokir death, their relationship is much more straight forward, there seems to be less speculation toward each other’s intent and meaning and they rest instead in the natural connection they have as human beings. They have grown familiar with each other and are more at ease than when they first met.

Ghosh allows for speculation that Piya and Fokir are in love, neither of them ever specify their feelings to anyone yet there are strong suggestions of an emotional connection between the two:
She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed on her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one (Ghosh 321).

With no verbal communication between the two and Fokir being married to a Bengali woman, there is never any possibility of a union between them. They are bound to their own thoughts and imaginations, none of which are ever specified to the reader yet are speculated about by the other characters in the novel. When the cyclone appears towards the end of the novel, it is the extreme desperation and fight for survival which appears to bring Piya and Fokir together, as together as they will ever be. Even though they are never able to fully comprehend one another, a beautiful appreciation and deep respect exists between them until the very end. They retain this connection exclusively for themselves, none of the other characters are fully aware of their connection and neither will it ever be explained to them by either Piya or Fokir. It appears symbolic of an enduring dream of union between West and East, city and county, elite and impoverished, a union, which if possible, may help to ease the suffering of people the world over. Piya and Fokir are able to form a relationship across cultural and verbal language barriers; they both refuse to let such barriers stop them from forming a friendship. Although there exists periods of misunderstanding between them, ultimately their relationship endures until Fokir’s death and even then, Piya’s appreciation, respect and love for him continues. It is Piya’s need to preserve Fokir’s memory that draws her back to the tide country after his death. His influence in her life lives on and she names her conservation programme after him. Through her relationship with Fokir, Piya has been able to learn the truth about her surroundings, the place, the people and the animals. These lessons have equipped her for her future in the tide country, a future she may not have been able to embark on or survive if had not been for Fokir’s teachings. She holds a greater
understanding of the suffering and struggles of the people of the tide country now than when she first arrived and this is evident in her proposal for her research:

I don’t want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it. If I was to take on a project here, I’d want it to be under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust, so the local fishermen would be involved. And the trust would benefit too. We’d share the funding (Ghosh 327).

She shares her dream with Nilima, Kanai’s aunt, who is a veteran of social service in the tide country and is from a cosmopolitan background herself. There is a mutual understanding between them of the needs of the people and the work that is required of them to serve the region that they live in. Piya is determined to settle in the tide country, to make it her home and to live in harmony with the people and animals around her. She represents a movement towards equality between West and East, rich and poor. Piya begins with a mistranslation of the people and environment around her yet she also represents hope for mutual understanding between the elite and the poor, as Mukherjee states:

If the novel exposes the cultural and linguistic mistranslation and misreading that enact the material and political distance between ruling elites and their subjects, it also holds out the possibility of reaching across that distance and imagining a form of belonging that brings the rulers and their human...subjects together in a sustaining relationship (Mukherjee 121).

As Piya works through the struggle to make sense of her surroundings and the people in it, her ability to play an affective role in the tide country increases as she learns more about this place. Her power to activate progress within the communities of the tide country is reliant on the knowledge she can acquire concerning it. As Spivak comments of Foucault’s theory of power/knowledge:
Pouvoir/savoir – being able to do something – only as you are able to make sense of it...Power as productive rather than merely repressive resolves itself in a certain way if you don’t forget the ordinary sense of pouvoir-savoir. Repression is then seen as a species of production. There is no need to valorize repression as negative and production as positive (Landry 151).

Piya’s involvement with the people of the tide country is not intended to cause them to be repressed for the sake of the notions of westernised progress. She has become more diplomatic towards the end of the novel and is looking for effective solutions to benefit both parties rather than discriminating against the people in order to protect the tigers. She represents progress which is determined to be detached from repression unlike the authorities of West Bengal who use force to control the people. She is not looking for control and neither is she prone to outbursts of pride as Kanai is. It is Piya’s diplomatic response to the tide country which carries the novel from beginning to completion as it ends with her compassionate research proposal.

Conclusion

The two worlds that were presented at the beginning of the novel, city and rural, have effectively begun to merge, Ghosh purposefully draws both Piya and Kanai back to the tide country at the end of the novel, as part of their dreams and desires were discovered and explored in this place, elements of their humanity will always exists in the tide country in ways that they are unable to exist in the city. They have come into a realisation of the mystical delights of the rural and have begun to question their complete faith in the city. It is a realisation that has changed the course of their future. The novel ends with a hope for sustained equality between the elite and the underprivileged peoples.
It is Ghosh’s intent that his readership should go through the same transformation as his characters Piya and Kanai do; he feels it is necessary for the west to be shaken out of their complacency. Ghosh in a sense acts as an intercessor between the educated elite and India’s poor, as Tomsky explains:

The novel, in other words, engages the overwhelming question: how should we, as readers and writers, position ourselves in relation to today’s geopolitical inequalities in spaces that are both conceptually and geographically distant? (Tomsky 54)

Following from these comments, as readers, Ghosh makes us witnesses to the suffering of the people of the tide country and in turn the reader must decide how they will act upon the information they are being given, therefore Ghosh’s representation of the poverty of West Bengal:

compels the reader to respond empathically; we can think of this as a form of affective conditioning where Ghosh makes the reader responsible for initiating real political change (Tomsky 55).

Ghosh’s novel is intended to leave resounding propositions in the minds of its readers. It represents the truth of poverty in India but also gives an insight into how the elite may help to initiate positive change; it is a message of hope and not of despair. It is the mobilisation of the comfortable western elite into action that Ghosh is aiming to encourage through his novel. Readers may interact with the subaltern world though the eyes of Piya and Kanai, with whom they can relate; they are never confronted directly with impoverished subaltern voices. This technique breaks the issue of poverty down into smaller, manageable pieces, allowing the reader to feel that it is possible for them to make a positive contribution to the lives of the less fortunate as Piya and Kanai are able to do. It is Fokir who teaches Piya and Kanai of the subaltern and in turn the reader learns from all three of these characters. Ghosh’s message in
a sense is powerless without the subaltern voice of Fokir; it is Fokir’s voice through Piya and Kanai’s representation which is able to challenge western thinking and provoke reform.

Fokir’s death towards the end of the novel secures the clarity of his voice and the strength of his character independent from the dominance of the West or cosmopolitan voices as he chooses to sacrifice himself to save Piya, he is in no way influenced or forced to make this decision. When he is faced with the cyclone he chooses to protect Piya’s life and has the power and authority to make this decision without having consult her in any way over the issue. Fokir’s actions speak clearly of his integrity and Piya realizes his desire to protect her, ‘Had he know right from the start that his own body would have to become her shield when the eye had passed’ (Ghosh 321). As Fokir is struck be a tree trunk and is in a dying state, him and Piya are able to exchange sentiments using non-verbal communication, ‘and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words’ (Ghosh 324). Despise the challenges that this friendship had faced and the comments from Kanai that the lack of verbal language between Piya and Fokir would always be a segregating issue, they have remained close and built a connection on trust and love. It is Fokir final act of friendship that is evident of an enduring love between them.

Although at the end of the novel only two of the original three main characters are still present, is it as though their differences in cultural background and communication have been levelled, Fokir’s influence on Piya and Kanai’s lives has brought about dramatic change and reformation to their naive elite cosmopolitan ideologies about anthropology. What endures in *The Hungry Tide* is respect between different peoples which in turn leads to effective mutual understanding and equality between rich and poor. It is the West in effect that now requires the knowledge of the East and of the poor if the world is to see positive change through social anthropology and economic stability.
Bibliography


