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THE IDEAL SOCIETY – AMITAV GHOSH'S THE HUNGRY TIDE

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Society consists of likeminded people governed by their own norms and values within a dominant, larger society. Broadly, a society may be described as an economic, social, or industrial infrastructure, made up of a variety collection of individuals. Moreover, it is an organised group of persons associated together for religious, benevolent, cultural, scientific, political, patriotic, or other purposes. The society may be consisted more or less ideological phenomena.

Many a great thinkers give various definitions on society. Aristotle, the great thinker, considered family as a federal society which unites three different groups or societies namely, the husband and wife, the parents and children, the master and servants. Sir Ernest Barker, the professor of political science at Cambridge (1928-1939) wrote many books and his *The Values of Life* stresses that Family is a single society. Robert E Park and Ernest W Burgess in their book *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* write that "the family is the earliest, the most elementary, and the most permanent of social groups (213).

Indian English fiction writers, by and large, feel concerned with the social problems of all kinds. Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* (1966), Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* (1963), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) and Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* (1968) and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) are the best examples for such issues.

Among the contemporary writers, Amitav Ghosh a well-known Indian author, is mainly focusing on contemporary social issues. He highlights the character, traditions, and dichotomies of his native land through his novels and essays. His famous novel *The Hungry Tide* (2008) deals with the ideal society.

The Hungry Tide is impeccably researched, and appears as an example of the novel as ethnography. Ghosh's ethnographic qualifications are well-enough known especially in *In an Antique Land;* here, he delineates a series of cultural features of the tide country's micro-community of its human ecosystem, placed in both complementary and conflictive relation to the natural ecosystem which is Piya's task to explore.

Kanai's experiences and his reading of his uncle's journal brings past and present into a symbiotic encounter. The Bengali location allows Ghosh the immediate possibility of drawing on the particular utopian tradition of a part of the subcontinent where, over a good two centuries, Western rationalist influences have coalesced with an older vein of Indian syncretism to produce a unique strain of social thought, as expressed in the movement known as the Bengali Renaissance and notably manifested in the work of Rabindranath Tagore and his school and, later, university at Shantiniketan. In *The Hungry Tide*, it reappears in various forms, both exogenous and endogenous, in the utopian community founded in the Sundarbans at the beginning of the twentieth century by the visionary Scot Sir Daniel Hamilton: "Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everybody would

have to live and work together." (51); in Nilima's hospital and school, which despite her insistence on the need to temporise with government nonetheless offer the local community the hope of a better world; and in Nirmal's eminently Bengali brand of Marxism. It resurfaces, too, in Piya's doomed belief that she can somehow communicate seamlessly across cultural barriers with the illiterate Fokir.

The visionary Hamilton's concept of utopia hankered after by Nirmal, always runs the risk of eliding the concrete historical realities of class. The vexed issue of social class barriers appears in Ghosh's novel twice over, across two generations - in the refugees' revolt of which Kusum is a part, and in the friendship that develops across class lines between Fokir, her illiterate son, and the cosmopolitan outsider, Piya. Here, Kanai reconstructs, via his uncle's journal, the revolt of a group of resettled refugees from the then East Pakistan, their creation of a short-lived community in the Sundarbans with visible utopian-rationalist features, and the bloody retaliation of the authorities. Kusum, Fokir's mother, is part of that revolt, and dies in the course of its repression.

The refugee community is forcibly resettled by the Indian government in Madhya Pradesh state, hundreds of kilometers from Bengal, but in 1978 makes the collective decision to return "home" - if not to East Pakistan/Bangladesh, at least to West Bengal and the Sundarbans. Its members bed down on one of the islands that on which Nilima's hospital stands and begin to create the bases of an organised micro-society, and both Nirmal and Kusum find themselves drawn into the refugees' struggle. Nirmal, in his journal, finds a strong utopian strand in their endeavour, in this attempt by the dispossessed to possess something of their own:

> ... there had been many additions, many improvements. Saltpans had been created, tubewells had been planted, water had been dammed for the rearing of fish ... It was an astonishing spectacle — as though an entire civilization had sprouted suddenly in the mud (190-91).

However, the utopia cannot and does not last; it is brutally repressed by the government forces, and in its aftermath Kusum is killed, while Nirmal, whose journal ends at the moment of the repression, having got mixed up in the events loses his sanity and dies soon after. If Nirmal as a Marxist believed in a rapprochement across class barriers that could bring him and Kusum together on some level, a generation later Piya repeats this pattern with Kusum's son, Fokir. As it is seen, Piya, it seems not feeling at home in a translated world and seeking one where translation is not necessary, naively believes she can do without Bengali/English interpretation in her interaction with Fokir. This attitude is at one with her imported, greenish view of the world. On witnessing an invading tiger set on fire by villagers, she is horrified and gets on a moral-absolutist high horse, rejecting such an act out of hand. At that point Piya, shocked at Fokir's approval of the killing of the tiger, admits to Kanai: "'Fact is, you were right and I was wrong' .... about there being nothing in common between —?' 'You and Fokir?' 'Yes', ... 'You were right. I was just being stupid"' (296-97).

Piya temporarily distances herself from her desire for a translation-free world. However, she soon reverts to type and accompanies Fokir, without

Kanai there to interpret, on a fresh expedition which will soon be subsumed into all the rigours of a tide-country storm. And here indeed she and Fokir get as close as they ever will: the storm takes Fokir as he clasps Piya's body with his protective arms. He, the illiterate villager, perishes; she, the privileged outsider, lives to tell the tale:

> She tried to break free from his grasp, tried to pull him around so that for once, she could be the one who was sheltering him. But his body was unyielding and she could not break free from it, especially now that it had the wind's weight behind it. Their bodies were so close, so finally merged that she would feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one (390).

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

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

> When the twins came of age, the archangel [Gabriel] brought them word that they had been chosen for a divine mission: they were to travel from Arabia to 'the country of eighteen tides' — athhero bhatir desh — in order to make it fit for human habitation. Thus charged, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli set off for the mangrove forests of Bengal dressed in the simple robes of Sufi mendicants (103).

Phenomena of syncretism viewed as part and parcel of the islands' human ecosystem, the ethnologist Ghosh also notes that the observance of widowhood in the Sundarbans differs from the usual Hindu norm: "here, on the margins of the Hindu world, widows were not condemned to lifelong bereavement; they were free to remarry if they could" (81). That human ecosystem is, of course, inserted problematically into a wider

natural ecosystem — or eco-polysystem. The migratory dolphins have their own logic, while that of the tigers and crocodiles, if part of a greater natural whole, is not in any immediate sense compatible with that of the human community those animals prey on; to that, Kanai can vouch when he escapes as if miraculously from a tiger's clutches. No less unkind is the logic of the horrendous storm that kills Fokir and almost sweeps away Piya too. Piya, true to type, tends to sentimentalise the animal world and its imagined beneficent relation to humanity, asking herself when a group of dolphins seem to be consciously sharing a catch of fish with their human acquaintances: "Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals?" (169), but is later sharply taken to task by the tiger-burning episode and the awkward questions it raises.

Across the novel as a whole, and despite the attractive notion of idealising cetacean communities, the general sense is that the basic humanity/nature relationship in the Sundarbans even remains highly problematic - death and destruction, from storms or tigers, can face the villagers at any moment however the life in the Sundarbans is quite impressive as unique. Thus Amitav Ghosh in his novel, *The Hungry Tide*, assumes the present society as the ideal of the Sundarbans.

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