Chapter Four

Place, Modernity and Identity in *The Hungry Tide*

> Place presents itself to us as a condition of human experience. As agents in the world we are always "in place," much as we are always "in culture." For this reason our relation to place and culture becomes elements in the construction of our individual and collective identities.
>
> — J. Nicholas Entrikin (*The Betweenness of Place*, 1)

I

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) which won the 2004 Hutch Crossword Award under the category of "best work in English fiction" is set in the Sunderbans. Located in the estuarine confluence of the Ganga, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna, the Sunderbans is the largest coastal mangrove forest in the world, and is famous/infamous for its tigers and crocodiles. Portions of it have been recognised as World Heritage Site by UNESCO which describes the place as "an excellent example of ongoing geological processes" and also as a "landmark of ancient heritage of mythological and historical events" (UNESCO website). But here not only live tigers and crocodiles, but human beings too who earn their livelihood by catching fish and crab and by collecting honey and wax from the mangrove jungle. It is a place where natural disasters like storm and flood are quite frequent. Here death of human beings by tigers or crocodiles is not uncommon, and life is precarious and full of challenges.

In Ghosh's novel, the Sunderbans is not a mere scenic background for human actions to unfold, but is a participator in the events that determine human predicament. Recognising the importance of place in the novel, Supriya Choudhuri writes in her review that Ghosh's insight regarding 'sense of place' is perhaps his most significant accomplishment as a novelist. It is Ghosh's skill of interlocking human tales with the ungraspable land that constitutes his sense of place. In another article titled "Translating Loss: Place and Language in Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie" Chaudhuri praises Amitav Ghosh for overcoming the challenge of representing Indian experiences and places in English language by not trying to bring the places under mimetic verisimilitude, and instead, by creating the sense that they are "simply there." *The Hungry Tide* subtly captures the intricate interaction between the ebb-tide cycle which reshapes the region every day and the multi-layered human histories. Choudhury notes that Ghosh has made us "aware of the *sedimentation* of human history, layers of past knowledge, experience and memory that constitute our human sense of place" ("Review," Paragraph 4). My analysis of the novel takes cue from this observation as I focus on the complex dynamics between man and place against the backdrop of modernity.

Thus the explanation of this dynamics warrants a brief discussion on place. Place is an essential condition of human existence on earth. As human beings we are mostly located in a particular place. In fact, the geographical-cultural specificity of the place where we live plays a crucial role in determining who we are. But what is place? In commonsense view, a place is a piece of land or a site; it may be very small or very large; it can be applied to one's room to one's house to village to city to state to the planet itself. Theorists of place have attempted to understand place from varying perspectives. Some of them, as gathered by Eric Prieto in *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*, are:

- "space enriched with human experience and understanding; an organized world of meaning" (Tuan, *Space and Place* 179);

- "a particular constellation of social relations" (Macey, 154);
- "the locus of desire"(Lippard 4);
- "a setting to which individuals are emotionally and culturally attached" (Altman and Low 5).

Out of these multiple views, Prieto postulates that any geographical site can be called a 'place' if people have a meaningful relation with it. A site is not a 'place' on its own; it becomes a 'place' for two factors. First, the human relation which establishes an affective bond between man and land. "A site does not become a place," writes Prieto, "until a person comes along and enters into a meaning-generating relationship with it" (*Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*, 13). A 'place' is to be differentiated from 'space' in that whereas 'space' designates openness and freedom, 'place' designates pause and stability. Second, every site is not a 'place' to everyone; under different situations, a site may be a 'place' to one while to others it may not be a 'place.'

A place or a site is often a setting or background in the fictional reality of a poem, story, or novel; but it can be more than a mere backdrop. In *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space,* the editor Robert T. Tally Jr. argues that the setting of a story is not merely a background, but is pivotal for its meaning. "Distinctive locales, regions, landscapes, or other pertinent geographical features," says Tally, "are often crucial to the meaning and effectiveness of literary works" (1). Whereas geographers, geologists, anthropologists, urban planners and scientists try to understand place on a fact-based, reductive and realistic paradigm, imaginative literature attempts to provide a "hypothetical modes of representation." The sites that become particularly interesting in literary representations are the *entre-deux* or "in-between" sites. These in-between sites are those sites which fall between established categories; they defy easy cognition and frustrate our expectation. Such

interstitial sites, Prieto thinks, are better represented in imaginative literature because literature enjoys relative freedom than the documentary realism of scientific approaches. The literary approach which focuses on human sensitivity towards geographical sites may be termed, as proposed by Prieto, as 'geocriticism.' *The Hungry Tide,* I think, is a text that provides a geocritical understanding of 'place.' It challenges the universalist approaches of Western epistemology to comprehend any place. In order to understand how Ghosh has critiqued colonial modernity through his 'sense of place,' I conjoin Mignolo's idea of 'geopolitics of knowledge' with certain theories of place.

'Geopolitics of knowledge' is an approach, according to Mignolo, to resist Western epistemology's tendency to erase "the possibility of thinking about a conceptualization and distribution of knowledge emanating from other local histories (China, India, Islam)" ("The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," 96). It is a strategy to resist 'egopolitics of knowledge' which upholds Western science as the limit of what counts as knowledge. 'Egopolitics of knowledge' dismisses knowledge produced in non-European places and in non-scientific forms such as myth, folklore as non-knowledge. The purpose of 'geopolitics of knowledge' is to pay attention to the indigenous forms of knowledge emanating from non-European places. What it stresses is that a particular knowledge system is always bound up with the place of its production. To apply it as a universal model to other places is epistemic violence. Decolonial thinking and activism resist such epistemic imposition. Decolonial thinking, however, does not want to reverse the binary of European/non-European knowledge cherished and upheld by 'egopolitics of knowledge.' Rather, it strives to problematise such unjust hierarchies and, thus to create a space for the co-existence of multiple epistemologies. Mignolo characterises 'geopolitics of knowledge' as 'I am where I do and think' (*The Darker Side,* 93). As we can see, he does it by twisting the universalist Cartesian dictum 'I think, therefore I am.' 'Geopolitics of knowledge' thus seems

to challenge the very foundational principle of 'egopolitics of knowledge.' Decolonisation of knowledge is the most important means to get rid of 'the colonial matrix of power,' and 'geopolitics of knowledge' is a significant step towards that goal. With the decolonisation of knowledge from the 'Western Code,' come the decolonisation of being and the possibility of new identity. *The Hungry Tide* dramatises this process of decolonisation of knowledge and being in post-colonial times.

Geocritical approach to place is akin to 'geopolitics of knowledge' to a large extent. It takes issue with the role of modernity in changing our attitudes to 'space' and 'place.' In *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies,* Robert T. Tally Jr. and Christine M. Battista argue that the Enlightenment/modernity created a separation between man and nature by implicitly suggesting that man can master over nature with the power of modern science. They hold:

> This "splitting off" of self from nature is a necessary precondition to the formation of an individual that maintains superiority over nature and other natural elements. From the foundations laid by Cartesian rationality and by ordering the world accordingly, it is a small step to the anthropocentric theory of mankind's separation from, and sovereignty, over nature. (*Ecocriticism and Geocriticism*, 5)

This anthropocentric ontology has caused psychic separation between man and nature, and has led him to possess and exploit nature. This anthropocentric philosophy of possessing and utilising nature has not only endorsed enterprises like those of colonialism and capitalism, but it has become the universally accepted cultural model also. For example, in literature, nature is often viewed as a background upon which human drama is enacted, with no spiritual connection between the two. Amitav Ghosh deals with this issue quite incisively in *The Great*

Derangement (2016).[1] What Ghosh identifies as the root of man-made environmental crisis and the failure of literature to address this issue sufficiently is the unquestioned acceptance of the ontology of modernity.[2] It is this ontology which he questions in *The Hungry Tide*.

With the proliferation of multi-faceted approaches to space studies in the wake of the 'spatial turn,' the notion of 'place' as fixed and static is no longer tenable. In his 'Foreword' to *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* Robert T. Tally Jr. posits that as individual or collective subjects we are always located in the state of a perpetual in-between. He broadly categorises place as bounded and liminal, and differentiates between the two in this way: "Unlike the closed space or place given form by its perceived limits (limites), the liminal space or site of the *limen* is one of opening, unfolding or becoming" (xi). So, a liminal place constantly breaks free of any sort of boundaries or limits. The Sunderbans, which is literally located between land and sea, and where sea and rivers make and unmake new lands every day, can well be identified as belonging to this category.

In modern period, a place/site is broadly mapped through two contradictory perspectives. It is viewed either through an objective gaze or through a subjective gaze. Proponents of the Enlightenment have viewed the specificity of place and the variety of human life in terms of detached, objective, universal criteria. Opponents of the Enlightenment, however, advocate that a place should be viewed through centered, particularistic criteria and in terms of its unique specificities. J. Nicholas Entrikin thinks that the gap between these two perspectives is the "perceived crisis of modernity" (*The Betweenness of Place*, i). This contradiction in attitudes to place has only been intensified with European colonialism which believes in dominating non-European places.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin contend that the idea of place has been reconceptualised in the colonial and post-colonial context. In precolonial times, 'sense

of place' indicated a person's embeddedness in cultural history, legend and language. In the so-called non-modern societies, place is still conceived in different ways. For example, in Aboriginal societies, place is a "tangible location of one's own dreaming, an extension of one's being" (*Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 179). The notion of possessing a place and utilising it for economic benefit of man is the offshoot of modernity. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin make clear the difference between modern and non-modern perspectives to place:

> The ideas of not owning the land but in some sense being 'owned by it' is a way of seeing the world that is so different from the materiality and commodification of a colonizing power, that effective protection of one's place is radically disabled when that new system becomes the dominant one. (*Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* 179-80)

So modernity has a decisive impact in altering man's relation with place from spiritual connection to materialist connection. Most post-colonial societies now view any place as an object of possession and domination. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh tries to capture the complex consequences of the materialist philosophy of modernity through human predicament. In doing so, Ghosh challenges the universalist claim of modernity. He does so by proposing myth to be the source of an alternative system of knowledge which makes the Sunderbans a 'place' for its inhabitants.

In India, myth has been an organising principle of people's life since time immemorial. Mythological stories are transmitted from generation to generation through sacred texts, oral narration, songs, paintings, dramatic performances, modern soap operas and the like. In today's context, it is not that people do not know that myths are imaginary stories, yet these stories continue to exert strong influence on people's daily conduct, ethical stance

and identity. Sudhir Kakar has contended that in India the mythical stories which are transmitted orally from generation to generation "reflect the answers of forefathers to the dilemmas of existence and contain the distillate of their experiences with the world" (*Exploring Indian Sexuality*, 2). In post-colonial Indian nation-state, modernity, which is the legacy of colonialism, has been adopted as a principle of official policy for progress and development. We have to remember Mignolo's contention that 'the rhetoric of modernity' produces 'the logic of coloniality.' Thus, modernity only valorises Western knowledge as authentic, and invalidates Indian myths as inauthentic, unreliable, fantastical and outdated source of knowledge. It is this much-boasted authenticity of modernity which has been questioned by Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide.* So the novel very subtly provides, as I hope to show in this chapter, a critique of colonial modernity in proposing that in certain places, the ethos of modernity does not hold sway. The novel shows that modernity is not as universal as it is supposed to be, and there are other forms of knowledge which deeply inform one's subjectivity and which are essential for one's survival. In this chapter, I focus on this point mainly with reference to two characters — the highly educated Nirmal and Kanai — who come to the tide country from the outside world and who are pitted against the local, illiterate fishermen Horen and Fokir. But without a brief account of the backdrop of the story, the point cannot be adequately established.

II

The Hungry Tide is set, as has already been mentioned, in the easternmost coast of Bengal where lies "an immense archipelago of islands" known as the Sunderbans (i.e., the beautiful forest) or the tide country. The tide-ebb cycle not only submerges and denudes the islands and the mangrove, but also makes the place extremely volatile and dynamic. The narrator describes the specificity of the place thus:

> ‘There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge 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 selves and sandbanks where there were none before.
>
> ‘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 new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. *At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them.* Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (*The Hungry Tide*, 7-8) [emphases added]

As the self-explanatory passage suggests, this place is not a common, ordinary place like any city or village where novels and stories are usually set. What is alarming of the place is not merely its precarious geography, but also its anthropomorphic will. The tide country harbours an active spirit which is inimical to human settlement. Pramod K. Nayar recognises the place as ‘uncanny’ (“The Postcolonial Uncanny: The Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*”) because it is home and non-home, familiar and strange. It is such a place which can be called liminal not merely because it is juxtaposed between land and water but also because it is known and unknown, tangible and mysterious. It constantly transgresses its

own boundaries and contours. To Nirmal, the tide country embodies Rilke's dictum: "life is lived in transformation" (*The Hungry Tide*, 225). Moreover, the presence of dangerous animals like tigers and crocodiles makes it one of the most inhospitable places in the world. It is a place which is ever shifting, always changing its shape. It defies any easy mapping, literally and metaphorically.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh reveals that while writing *The Hungry Tide*, he recognised that in the Sunderbans, the non-human presences are very operative. In fact, non-human presences may use human beings to their end. In the Sunderbans, the rivers are so active that they change the landscape almost on daily basis, affecting people's life tremendously. Here the flow of river makes and unmakes new mud banks in weeks whereas in other places these processes would take years, even ages. Ghosh quotes from his notebook written in May 2002 when he visited the tide country to have a firsthand experience:

> I do believe it to be true that the land here is demonstrably alive; that bit does not exist solely or even incidentally, as a stage for the enactment of human history; that it is [itself] a protagonist. (*The Great Derangement*, 7-8)

This perception of the place as "a protagonist" is at the heart of the novel. In "The March of Novel through History: The Testimony of My Grandfather's Bookcase" Ghosh has written that a novel "must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves" (296). In *The Hungry Tide*, the dangerous landscape is not merely a backdrop in which incidents of human life take place; rather, like a protagonist, the land controls and shapes human destiny. The anthropomorphic motive of the place is suggested in the title of the novel itself. The anthropomorphic will of the land appears to be, as Ghosh's historical research reveals, particularly hostile to human endeavour to plant modernity in the tide country. The tragic

history of Canning port and the failure of Hamilton's project are factual examples of the tide country's antagonism to modern projects. In his 2004 article "Folly in the Sunderbans" Ghosh seriously criticised the Sahara Parivar's proposed grand project to turn the Sunderbans into a grandiose tourist hotspot featuring "5-star floating hotels, high-speed bathhouses, land-based huts, luxury cottages" and similar provisions (Paragraph 1). Given the region's volatile nature, such a project is most likely to become a disaster for everybody involved. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh issues warnings against the ethos of modernity, but this time he does it through individual predicament.

In the novel, there are two interlocking narrative strands presented through third person point of view. One narrative strand is that of an Indian-American cetologist named Piyali Roy aka Piya who is on a tour to the tide country to track and study the behavior of *Orcaella brevirostris*, the shrinking species of Irrawaddy dolphins. The other narrative is that of the Delhi-based translator-cum-businessman Kanai Dutt who is paying a visit to his aunt at Lusibari, one of the southernmost islands of the tide country, to read his late uncle's recently-found notebook which was written in 1979 in the time of Morichjhapi imbroglio. Further embedded in Kanai's narrative is the narrative of his uncle and aunt—Nirmal Bose and Nilima Bose—who had lived at Lusibari since 1950s, though his uncle died in 1979. Nirmal's notebook contains the narrative of Morichjhapi massacre as well as the transformation of his own worldview. The immediate time of the two narratives is the year 2002 but Kanai's narrative stretches back to 1950s. The two narratives—those of Piya and Kanai—can be said to converge in Fokir, a local illiterate fisherman. People like Nirmal, Kanai and Piya who come to the tide country from the outside world bring with them their rationalist worldviews which are being tested in the unique reality of the tide country.

The novel has fascinated readers and critics alike since its publication in 2004. Consequently, there have been attempts to understand and interpret it in multiple ways. A

good many articles focus on the following issues: Morichjhapi episode and nation (Nishi Pulugurtha, 2010; Annie Cottier, 2012; Sukanta Das, 2012; P. Prasanna Devi, 2012; Richa Joshi Pandey, 2013; Piyas Chakraborty, 2013; R. Das, 2015); ecocriticism and enviornmentalism (Alexa Weik, 2006; Rajender Kaur, 2007; Divya Anand, 2008; Jens Martin Gurr, 2010; Brahma Dutta Sharma, 2012; S. Jai Singh, 2015; G. Prabhu, 2015; Y. Sumati, 2015; S. Karunya, 2017; SJ Soumya, 2017); translation and communication (Christopher Rollason, 2005; Fausto Galuzzi, 2012; Thomas Huttunen, 2012). As my analysis focuses on myth, modernity and subjectivity, I pay particular attention to those critical works which deal, more or less, with these issues. In "The Postcolonial Uncanny: The Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" Pramod K. Nayar reads the novel by placing the local knowledge which he calls "indigenous canny" against the uncanniness of the Sunderbans. In Nayar's argument, Kanai and Piya fail to understand the land because they look at it through the gaze of tourist. In "Unlikely Encounters: Fiction and Scientific Discourse in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh" Lou Ratte notes that we do not get to know much about Fokir's indigenous knowledge because everybody talks about him except himself. We get a glimpse of his knowledge system when he sings of Bon Bibi but do not get to know much of its working mechanism. Thus, Ratte only hints at the potential of the Bon Bibi myth but does not elaborate it much. In "Myth, Politics and Ethnography in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" Nilanjan Chakraborty contends that in the Sunderbans, myths are more "potent realities than the 'rational' mind would like to believe"(27). But neither has he elaborated much on this issue nor mentioned how this myth undermined and transformed the rational minds of Nirmal and Kanai. In "*The Hungry Tide* as a Neo-Colonial Machine" Jai Singh contends that Ghosh implicitly endorses Orientalist prejudices by making Fokir a spiritual rustic who knows a lot about marine animals but who is disinterested in money. Singh thinks that Ghosh is an accomplice in neocolonial machine which "digs deep and searches for myths to confirm

Western depiction of India that still sells readily for the metropolitan market" (204). I would like to disagree with this point, and I return to it later in this chapter. In "Black Jungle, Beautiful Forest: A Postcolonial, Green Geocriticism of the Indian Sunderbans" Luca Raimondi contends that the novel exposes the Orientalist tendency of exoticising Asian places. In Piya's urban, rational, objective outlook the tide country is a potential field of scientific investigation. In her global vision, the land is meant for tigers rather than for local people.[3] Ghosh resists this paradigm, thinks Raimondi, by giving "voice to a more local perspective, historically disregarded and silenced by those in power—not least on account of the nonstandard forms it employs (such as folk theatre, songs, and oral storytelling)" (130). But he does not discuss at all how these underprivileged forms function in the novel. Rather, he ends the essay by mentioning that Ghosh is careful enough not to establish the local expressive forms as another logocentric form of knowledge. My reading of the novel takes into account all the above-mentioned points but goes further in exploring a relatively less discussed issue in the novel: how Ghosh's strategic undermining of colonial modernity in an uncanny place is accomplished by postulating myth as an alternative form of knowledge system which not only informs the subjectivity of locals like Horen and Fokir but also undermines and transforms the rational selves of Nirmal and Kanai.

Nirmal, a former lecturer of English at Ashutosh College in Calcutta, was a rationalist-cum-Marxist. He and his wife Nilima settled in Lusibari in the 1950s after Nirmal's traumatic experience of police arrest. He took the job of the headmaster of the local school. Soon Nirmal became fascinated with geographical and geological wonders of the tide country, and with his sceptical outlook, tried to understand the way of life in the Sunderbans. He easily understood the geographical characteristics of the tide country, but took many years to realise the inner spirit of the place.

Kanai remembers from his childhood visit to Lusibari in 1970 how sarcastic his uncle had been to myth. As it happened, Kusum told him of the folk play *The Glory of Bon Bibi* that was to be staged at Lusibari. When Kanai asked Nirmal about the story of Bon Bibi, Nirmal was absolutely dismissive of it. He termed the story in Marxian paradigm as "false consciousness", and advised Kanai not to be bothered about it (*The Hungry Tide*, 101). He disdainfully opines that in the Sunderbans, people are engrossed in "imaginary miracles of gods and saints" whereas they should have paid attention to the "true wonders of the reality around them" (*The Hungry Tide*, 102). To satisfy his curiosity, Kanai decides to watch the play. Being accustomed to urban theatres, Kanai "had only expected to be bored by this rustic entertainment" (*The Hungry Tide*, 105). But on the contrary, he noticed that the entire audience was deeply engrossed in it.

In Ghosh's presentation, the Bon Bibi myth is despised by the rationalist outsiders, but it holds a special poignancy for the islanders. But what is myth? And how does modernity view myth? These are important questions in order to understand how Ghosh has reinscribed these ideas in the particular context of the Sunderbans. Generally, a myth is a story which explains, in terms of the deeds of gods or other divine figures, natural phenomena. But Robert A. Segal, an exponent of the modern studies on myth, is critical of such simplistic idea of myth. For him, a myth is primarily a story. But all stories are not myth; only those stories which are very significant for a community, having the divine, human or even animal as its protagonist, and most importantly, having tremendous influence upon the adherents, can be deemed as myth. The question is not whether the story is true or false; rather, the question is its tenability for the believers: "A myth is a conviction false yet tenacious" (Segal, 6). In Segal's proposition, "to qualify as a myth, a story, which can of course express a conviction, be held tenaciously by adherents" (*Myth*, 6). This tenacity is the power of myth to withstand all sorts of challenges towards it. But in modern period, myth has faced many stringent

attacks. The most potent attack has come from science which sees myth as an unscientific explanation of the world. Demythologising, that is, the attempt to separate science from myth, has been one of the offices of modernity which explains natural phenomena through impersonal, objective laws. With modernity, religion is invalidated and with it, myth is also discredited. Today, religion is relegated to an immaterial plane, and one turns to religion for ethical purpose only. Whatever, with the advent of modernity, science and myth have become totally incompatible.

The opposition between myth and modernity reached its height in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, however, there were attempts to reject the dichotomy, and to view myth as tenable and necessary. It can be said that myth was rejected by modernity and reinstated by modernism. Laurence Coupe argues that the Enlightenment which, during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries glorified reason above everything else, attempted to do away with myth on the ground that myth falsifies truth. The Enlightenment, according to the rationalists, aimed to emancipate man from myth. But the irony is that it failed miserably in this project. Coupe describes this failure of modernity to obliterate the credibility of myth as "counter-Enlightenment" and "the myth of mythlessness." The Enlightenment, which allegedly branded myth as "a product of the childhood of humanity" and viewed reason as supreme, was trapped in its own game (Coupe, 109). Coupe writes:

> In the desire to contest any form of animistic enchantment by nature, Enlightenment set out to think the natural world in abstract form. Thus, it could only 'think' that which could be systematized. In a word, reason has been reduced to…a specific *form* of reason. More importantly, this specific inflection of reason is also now presented as if it were reason-as-such, as if it were the only valid or legitimate form of rational thinking. What offered itself as emancipation turned out to be suppression.…Reason, that is, became

> power; and power could only function by having an 'other' to suppress, whether nature, human beings (as 'savages') or myths. (*Myth,* 110-111)

As the passage shows, to legitimise one form of reason at the cost of others is a kind of epistemic violence, and a power game is at the back of delegitimisation of myth. But greater irony is that the Enlightenment itself invented and relied upon myths— the metanarratives (like the liberation of mankind, the speculative unity of all knowledge etc.) which promise to emancipate mankind from all problems. If the persistence of myth is to be understood, then it has to be seen not as "failed attempt to articulate rational truth, but a creative impulse underlying human history" (qtd. in Coupe, 112). Imagination is key to myth. Paul Ricoeur contends that "we must go beyond the modern view of myth as 'false explanation' to a sense of its 'exploratory significance and its contribution to understanding'" (Coupe, 8). Myth, as Segal says, has to be evaluated on the basis of how it is a living reality for its adherents. The Bon Bibi myth and its representation in *The Hungry Tide* have to be understood in this light. Moreover, Ghosh's choice of the Bon Bibi myth is remarkable because this myth does not feature in the mainstream Hindu pantheon, and it is almost unknown to the people outside the Sunderbans.

Nirmal was utterly disdainful of mythical stories. He considered the local people's blind faith in the Bon Bibi myth to be a sign of psychological immaturity. His allergy to mythical explanations of natural phenomena is evident in his confrontation with Horen. As it happened, once Horen was taking Nirmal to Kumirmari on his boat. The distance being long, Nirmal started to read Francois Bernier's *Travels* which narrates Bernier's strange experience of travelling in the tide country in 1665. The journey being arduous, Horen asked Nirmal if there are stories in the book Nirmal was reading, and requested him to tell stories if stories are in it. Then Nirmal recounts the story of Bernier, a French Jesuit priest, who visited India with two Portuguese pilots and many servants. The book gives an account of astonishing

experiences of Bernier and his crew when they were passing through the tide country. As Nirmal tells the miraculous incidents one after another, Horen promptly comes up with explanations based on his own firsthand knowledge of the tide country. Their contradictory worldviews collide strongly when Nirmal narrates how Bernier and his two companions faced a severe storm one night. Horen interprets the storm as Dokkhin Rai's deed: *"They crossed the line by mistake and ended up on one of Dokkhin Rai's islands"* (*The Hungry Tide*, 147) (Italics original). Nirmal, on the other hand, proffers the meteorological explanation: "*A storm is an atmospheric disturbance: it has neither intention nor motive."* (*The Hungry Tide*, 147) (Italics original).The invisible line that Horen talks about is as palpable to him as a barb-wire fence is to Nirmal. But Nirmal is absolutely dismissive of such imaginary shadow line and division of area. His explanation of storm as an "atmospheric disturbance" is rational and scientific. He chides Horen for the latter's puerile faith in myth. Being a simple person and stranger to modern education, Horen did not argue with Nirmal whom he respects a lot. He leaves it to future to decide what is what.

Nirmal's first disillusionment with modernity came when he expressed his desire to educate the children of Morichjhapi after his imminent retirement. But the leader of the Morichjhapi refugees forbade him to do so as their children have no time to waste after conventional education. As a secular Marxist with the idea of socialist revolution at the back of his mind, he has been dismissive of any mythico-religious story. But after the pricking of the bubble of modern education by the leader of the refugees, he realises that in the Sunderbans modernity is ineffectual, and that the unique reality of the place necessitates myth as psychological sustenance. This realisation transforms Nirmal: *"I am not my old self anymore."*(*The Hungry Tide*, 179). To an astonished Horen, Nirmal declares that after his retirement he would begin "a new life" (*The Hungry Tide*, 179). He decides that he would come back to Morichjhapi and teach the children as he has never done before. He would now

tell the children "magical tales", and he would teach geology through myth (*The Hungry Tide*, 180). Debunking the scientific approach to teach the history of the earth, he would teach geomythology. He would narrate to the children the story of Lord Vishnu's Vamana avatar whose "errant toenail" created the huge hole from which emerges the Ganga which flows through heaven and earth, and after merging with the Bay of Bengal, flows underneath the surface and there merges with the Brahmaputra (*The Hungry Tide*, 180). He would also tell the children the mythological story of the Greek Goddess Tethys to explain the creation of the Himalayas and rivers like the Ganga and the Sindhu.

Nirmal's realisation of the ineffectualness of modernity in the Sunderbans turns into a conviction with his visit, in the company of Horen, Kusum and child Fokir, to the island of Garjontola in January 1979. He is amused to see Horen, Kusum and Fokir doing genuflections after entering into the supposed area of Dokkhin Rai. As Nirmal asked Kusum the reason of their visit to Garjontola, Kusum hesitates to reply: "…you'll probably laugh: you won't believe me" (*The Hungry Tide*, 233). However, on Nirmal's insistence, she tells the story of how her father was once struck at Garjontola because of a fierce storm and how he was saved by Bon Bibi. Kusum also told him that they would see Bon Bibi's messengers, the dolphins, soon. Having listened the story, Nirmal could not resist his mocking laughter. But the "unbelieving secularist" had to digest his laughter as the dolphins appeared, circled around their boat, and one even looked straight to his eyes (*The Hungry Tide*, 234). Nirmal who had thought to "confound her credulousness" has to concede that the "triumph was hers now" (*The Hungry Tide*, 234).

Nirmal's disenchantment with rationality becomes complete as they come to Garjontola. As they neared the shore, Horen playfully smiled and asked Nirmal if he was feeling any fear. It is fear that protects them in the tide country by making them extra-cautious. Horen admits that he had a sudden feeling of fear. Nirmal notices symptoms of

fear—"an alertness, a gravity, a sharpening of the eyes"—on Horen's face (*The Hungry Tide*, 244). Nirmal has had a mocking attitude towards Horen's child-like fear prompted by imaginary stories. But now in the mysterious atmosphere of Garjontola Nirmal himself feels fear. As Horen starts to chant mantras that were supposed to keep the big cat's mouth shut, Nirmal's rationality betrays him. In the eerie ambience of Garjontola, Nirmal realises that rationality is insufficient to cope with the strange reality of the tide country and the local people's unflinching faith in Bon Bibi is a sustaining element in their life. He confesses:

> *Perhaps in another circumstance would have laughed. But it was true that I was afraid now: I did not need to feign my fear. I knew Horen could no more shut the mouth of a tiger than he could conjure up a storm – but I was still reassured by his meaningless mumbles, by his lack of bravado. His manner was not that of a magician weaving a spell: he was more like a mechanic, giving a spanner an extra turn, in order to leave nothing undone. This reassured me*. (*The Hungry Tide,* 244-5) (Italics original)

Rationality with its sequential scientific cause and effect explanation could no longer give him the sense of assurance which the mumbling of Horen's enchantments provided him in that weird situation. The more Nirmal remained on the island, the more chastened and fascinated he became. He felt himself to be a complete outsider at Garjontola despite his claim that the river flowed in his veins. Nirmal perceived that in a precarious place like the Sunderbans, the myth of Bon Bibi informs the core of the islanders' knowledge system and it is this knowledge system which sustains them. It is this myth which creates an affectionate bond between the land and its inhabitants, making the site a 'place.' This perception changes him from a rationalist to a believer in the efficacy of myth. His last writing (which Kanai was reading at the beginning of the novel) on the mythological origin of the Ganga and its journey across the vast plains into the Bay of Bengal testifies how the tide country has altered

Nirmal's very identity. Instead of geological explanation of the origin of the Sunderbans, he explores the mythological tale, and found a "twist to the tale," a relatively less recognised aspect of the Ganga's descent from heaven and her journey on earth. It is well known that the immense torrent of the Ganga is caught and contained by the matted locks of Lord Shiva, and then flows into the vast plains like "a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water" (*The Hungry Tide*, 6). But what is less discussed is that, having come to the final part of its journey, "the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle" (*The Hungry Tide*, 6). Then the river breaks into thousands of strands, and before merging into the Bay of Bengal, creates thousands of islands, an archipelago that ranges 300 kilometres from the Hoogly in West Bengal to the Meghna in Bangladesh. Kanai's recognition—after he has completed reading his uncle's notebook—that in his last days Nirmal's realisation of an interrelation between all existing things like "the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature" again endorses the point that Nirmal has rejected Cartesian rationality (which stresses man's separation from nature) and has moved from an anthropocentric view to a geocentric one (*The Hungry Tide*, 282-3). He realised how the tide country is inextricably bound up with its myth and history. This change in worldview consequently transforms his self and identity—from an unbelieving rationalist he becomes a believer in the efficacy of myth.

Nirmal's chastising experience is repeated with greater irony in the case of Kanai when the latter revisits the tide country after a gap of thirty two years. Born in an affluent family, educated in cities and proficient in six languages, Kanai believes in the positive approach to life for success. He grooms himself to master any situation. The third person narrator describes forty two year old Kanai thus: "In the tilt of his head, as in the width of his stance, there was a quite certainty, an indication of a well-grounded belief in his ability to prevail, in most circumstances" (*The Hungry Tide*, 4). He is particularly proud of his ability

to remain unfazed in the face of embarrassing situations. His rationalistic overconfidence is evident since childhood. During his first visit to the tide country, when he learns from Nilima that Bon Bibi "is the goddess of the forest" and in the Sunderbans, "people believe she rules over all animals of the jungle" (*The Hungry Tide*, 28), Kanai could not restrain his sarcastic laugh. He could not bring himself to believe that even the grown up people can believe in such tales. His aunt notices the young boy's sarcasm, and rebukes him: "Don't act like you know everything. You're not in Calcutta now" (*The Hungry Tide*, 28). This warning of Nilima regarding Kanai's all-knowing attitude and the need for place-specific consciousness falls flat on him but reappears with ironic reversal thirty two years later.

Kanai has the habit of affirming self-importance by interpreting instances from life in line with his philosophy of success. For example, when Moyna tells him of her dream to become a nurse and make her son Tutul a graduate, Kanai implicitly congratulates himself because there are people who think like him. Kanai's sexually-edged vocabulary and his tactful flirting with Moyna and Piya have its root in his assertive personality groomed in the ethos of modernity which professes to create a strong, positive personality. What Kanai fails to see initially is that there are places where modernity is undermined by the spirit of the place. His venture to Garjontola with Fokir makes him realise that the rhetoric of modernity is not as omnipotent as he thought. This realisation forces him to re-examine his notion of myth and modernity. It disillusions him of his confident self and leads him to discover his true self.

As it happens, Kanai volunteers to act as a communicator between Fokir and Piya in their second venture to track the dolphins. Kanai decides to do so to get a diversion as well as to impress Piya of his abilities. Little did he know that his proclivity to prevail upon any situation will be turned on its head in this venture. All his education and his confidence are pitted against the indigenous knowledge of illiterate Fokir in the alien space of Garjontola.

Fokir can be said to be a person who puts his sensitive fingers on the very pulse of the tide country. He is Kusum's son and was born in Bihar. Kusum brought her to Morichjhapi when he was five. But even before coming to the tide country, he came to know minutiae of the place through the stories that Kusum used to tell him. Brought up in extreme poverty, he had never been to school, and therefore is unlettered. As a grown up man and father of a child, he supports the family by catching fish and crab on the rivers of the tide country. Fokir's specialty lies in that he not only knows the myriad waterways and the animals of the tide country, but he also seems to reckon the mysterious spirit of the tide country. In fact, he is much at ease when out on water. He feels like a fish out of water at his house, in the presence of his wife Moyna who harbours modern progressive ideas. Like Kanai, Moyna also wants to "do well," to "make a success of her life" (*The Hungry Tide*, 219). Piya recognises that to the progressive Kanai and Moyna, Fokir is a kind of distant, "a diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was Lusibari" (*The Hungry Tide* 220). But she reckons that despite all the progressive philosophy of Moyna and Kanai, the presence of ghost-like Fokir will always be there, undermining its confidence and complacency. To Moyna, the reason why a scientist like Piya needs the help of illiterate Fokir may be incomprehensible, but not to Piya who rightly recoginises that Fokir is a reservoir of local knowledge of the tide country. She has discovered in Fokir "an incredible instinct: it's as if he can see right into the river's heart" (*The Hungry Tide* 267). It is the reason Piya values him so much. Moyna sarcastically plays with the words 'gyan' and 'gaan', making fun of her husband's 'gyan'(knowledge) as well as 'gaan'(song). Ironically enough, as we come to know in course of the narrative, the 'gaan' which Fokir sings is an integral part of his knowledge-cum- faith system that sustains him in the uncanny ambience of the tide country. It is this 'gaan' which first gives Kanai's confidence a jolt. While they were on boat at night, Piya asks Kanai to

translate Fokir's song, and Kanai admits that it is beyond his capacity to translate the song. In fact, the moment Fokir starts talking, Kanai's bullying authority vanishes.

Kanai's disenchantment with rationality and his much-boasted confidence comes to full circle in his venture to Garjontola. The twist in the tale comes when Fokir and Kanai were passing by Garjontola while returning to *Megha* after a long watch for the dolphins. Fokir is alarmed at seeing the fresh depressions in the shape of tiger's paw on the sloping mud of the island and a whole trail of marks from the trees to the water. Kanai thinks them to be crab's burrows and runnels of retreating water. There was a small debate between the two of them. Fokir argues that the marks indicate the presence of a tiger. Fokir ascertains that the tiger must have seen them and descended close to water to observe their movement. Fokir even suggests that the tiger might have smelled Kanai, a newcomer to the place. Kanai immediately interprets this to be Fokir's game to exploit his vulnerability in an unknown place just as he does with the foreigners in Delhi. He is amused at the situation and covertly congratulates himself for understanding Fokir's game of exaggerating the menace than it actually is. He thinks that it is Fokir's ploy of elevating self-importance just as he does with foreigners: "every new peril was proof of his importance; each new threat evidence of his worth" (*The Hungry Tide*, 321). He now decides to handle the situation with professional tact; instead of surrendering to Fokir's trick, he decides to expose Fokir's game.

Kanai accepts Fokir's challenge to go to the island. He boasts that he is not afraid. Fokir, on the other hand, is visibly in fear as the rising goosebumps on his skin show. At Garjontola, Kanai goes through the most disconcerting but epiphanic experience of his life. Noticing Kanai's anxiety, Fokir assures him that "No one who is good at heart has anything to fear in this place" (*The Hungry Tide*, 324). Gradually the power dynamics between Kanai and Fokir gets reversed. Fokir starts to address Kanai informally as 'tui.' The third person narrator remarks: "it was as though on stepping on the island, the authority of their positions

had been suddenly reversed" (*The Hungry Tide,* 325). At Garjontola, Kanai makes himself absolutely miserable. He feels that the entire place is engulfing him, as if the earth has become alive. He gets tangled up in creepers and falls full face on mud. He rises from the mud, and in extreme anger hurls all sorts of obscenities to Fokir. In his professional life, he has occasionally digested insults but he dismissed them as part of job. He has seen his clients losing their calmness, crossing "the boundaries of selfhood" and throwing obscenities to him (*The Hungry Tide,* 326). He did not take them personally, thinking it to be the inscrutability of life itself. But now his restraint fails and he "was powerless to stop the torrent of obscenities that were pouring out of his mouth" (*The Hungry Tide,* 326). He scolds Fokir hard and asks him to get away from him.

As Fokir leaves, Kanai starts hallucinating. He feels to be beside himself; his mind is transported to another plane of reality. Suddenly he sees himself not as Kanai anymore, but as a representative of the people of the outside world, the people who have "destroyed Fokir's village, burnt his home and killed his mother" (*The Hungry Tide,* 327). Then comes the worst part of his experience. Suddenly his mind gets filled with the horrific images of tiger's attack. He then imagines the horror of crocodile attack. As these horrible thoughts press hard on his mind, it becomes blank except panic. He could not remember what he was thinking of. His mind which prided itself on his linguistic skills, gets denuded of any expression. In such a frenzied state he hallucinates a big tiger in crouching position in less than hundred metres in front of him. Despite his frantic state, he palpably notices the animal's bright colour stripes, the mud on his belly and the glaring eyes. Kanai becomes so afraid that his body freezes. However, he collects himself, and starts to move backwards on his knees, keeping his eyes fixed on the animal. When he could not move because of entangling mangrove, he stands up and makes his way through the mangrove roots and branches which tear his limbs. He becomes forgetful of the pain caused by these wounds. On reaching the mudbank, he falls

forward on his knees on the mud and prepared himself for the attack. But just then Fokir, Horen and Piya reach there and call his name. He sees them and falls full face on the mud once again, with his mind blacking out completely.

When he regains his sense, he is on the boat of Horen, and is being nursed by Piya. He tells her that he was on the island alone for too long. Piya assures him that he was alone there only for ten minutes. He tells her that he had seen a tiger. But Horen dismisses his claim. Horen says to him that he and Fokir have looked around but found nothing. Horen ascertains that if the animal had been there, Kanai would not have been on the boat. To this claim, Kanai could not find words to answer as his sense of panic is not completely over then, and his breath runs short to answer. His body is still shaking involuntarily. He tries to speak but "his breath kept getting caught in his throat" (*The Hungry Tide*, 330). He needs complete rest.

III

The Garjontola episode leaves a lasting impression on Kanai. It shakes the basic foundation of his faith in rationality, and changes him completely. The proud, imperious and egoistic Kanai now realises the limitations of his worldview, and becomes calm, diffident and humble. He decides to return to Lusibari and then to Delhi as the tide country turns out too much for him. He admits that "it is not in his elements" (*The Hungry Tide*, 334). He uncertainly asks Piya to visit Delhi. When Piya explains the impossibility of their situation, he calmly agrees and behaves very maturely. Before bidding goodbye to Piya, he gives Piya a gift which is priceless and which nobody could have given her except him. To Piya he writes a letter in which he translates Fokir's song which he had failed to translate earlier. It is actually the Dhona episode of the Bon Bibi myth. But before Kanai recounts the tale, he

reveals what the Garjontola experience has taught him. The Garjontola incident has revealed to him a "new ground, uncharted terrain" (*The Hungry Tide*, 353). Kanai's letter to Piya may be an expression of love as Pramod K.Nayar thinks, but it is also, I think, an acknowledgement of the limitations of his anthropocentric worldview, and an acceptance of the alternative worldview of Kusum, Horen and Fokir, at least in the Sunderbans. Kanai's confession shows the mutation of a haughty, proud Kanai to a new, humble Kanai who knows his own self better:

> I had always prided myself on the breadth and comprehensiveness of my experience of the world: I had loved, I once liked to say, in six languages. *That seems now like the boast of a time long past: at Garjontola I learnt how little I know of myself and of the world.* (*The Hungry Tide*, 353) [emphases added]

So Garjontola episode becomes a learning curve for Kanai. His journey into the interior of the Sunderbans is also a journey into his self. The I-ness of his ego-logic is pressed to extremity only to unravel its limitations. He comes to discard his anthropocentric worldview in favour of a geocentric one. His pride for his knowledge of himself and of the world is undermined in the enigma which the tide country is. His unsettling experience forces him to re-evaluate his notion of knowledge, place and self. He could have gifted Piya anything expensive but he decides to gift Piya the narrative of the Bon Bibi myth because he now realises that "in these words there was a history that is not just his own but also of this place, the tide country" (*The Hungry Tide*, 254). He recounts his uncle's amazement at five year old illiterate Fokir's recitation of the Bon Bibi myth while visiting Garjontola. Kanai interprets Nirmal's narrative of Fokir's feat as Nirmal's profoundest realisation regarding myth and modernity. Kanai writes to Piya:

> [But] Nirmal recognised also that for this boy those words were very much more than a part of a legend: *This was the story that gave this land its life*. That was the song you heard on Fokir's lips yesterday: it lives in him and in some way, perhaps, *it still plays a part in making him the person he is.* (*The Hungry Tide*, 355) [emphases mine]

I take this observation by Kanai as the crux of the novel. Like Nirmal, he now realises that the Bon Bibi myth is not a mere legend; it is a story that is embedded in the very land, and which animates the land. It is this story that establishes a spiritual bonding between Fokir and the tide country, making it a 'place' for him. The Bob Bibi legend can be said to transform 'the tide country from a 'space' into a 'place' for its inhabitants. One is reminded of Segal's proposition that a "myth is a conviction false yet tenacious." It does not matter whether the Bon Bibi myth is true or false; what matters is its viability, and the significance it holds for its believers. The failure of Nirmal and Kanai to comprehend the site with their rationalistic outlook only undermines modernity's much-touted supremacy over myth.

Nirmal's realisation that the myth of Bon Bibi breathes life to the enigmatic landscape of the tide country is accomplished at the cost of his rationalistic worldview. Ghosh's handling of Nirmal's life and philosophy is also his nuanced critique of Marxism, one of the metanarratives of modernity. He frantically wishes to help the settlers in Morchjhapi; but his Marxist sympathy for the settlers turns out—from Kanai's speculations and Horen's revelations—to be a disguise of his infatuation with Kusum. Through Nirmal, Ghosh tries to imply that abstract theory fails before the lived experience. His further realisation is that the Bon Bibi myth forms the very core of selfhood of Fokir, and makes the latter deeply perceptive of the enigmas of the tide country. These realisations cause a paradigmatic shift in his long-cherished notions of place and knowledge, and consequently initiate a transformation of his self. Kanai reflects on his uncle's realisation because he now realises

the same. The tide country undermines their notions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Because of their blind faith in modern rational knowledge, they fail to realise at first that there may be other knowledge systems which are essential for survival of people in particular places, and there may be spiritual connection between a place and its people. One is reminded of the distinction between non-modern and modern attitudes to place pointed out by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin: in a non-modern society land is the part of people's psyche, and they are owned by the land whereas in a modern society people possess and dominate the land. Kanai now perceives that the tide country is an extension of the selves of people like Fokir and Horen. Given that he is educated in anthropocentric system, he is used to believe in man's superiority over nature. But his grim realisation regarding the fallacy of his worldview at the end of the novel transforms Kanai, endowing him with a new self and identity.

Fokir and Horen never think of owning the place; rather, they believe to be owned by it. Their ontology is deeply informed by this belief. Jai Singh's contention that Ghosh subtly promotes neocolonialism by making the islanders unscientific in temperament and dependent on myth appears untenable for two reasons. First, to accept rationality as the only legitimate worldview is to suffer a psychological defeat even before the battle between the coloniser and the colonised starts. Second, Ghosh is proposing that the non-rationalistic and spiritual attitude is perhaps more feasible to grapple with the challenging territory of the Sunderbans. So Ghosh is not batting for neocolonialism; rather his resistance to neocolonialism is epistemologically very nuanced and subtle.

In Ghosh's representation, the tide country forces Nirmal and Kanai to reexamine their preconceived notions of myth and modernity. The objective and subjective approaches to place, as pointed out by Entrikin, are exemplified by Nirmal and Kanai on one hand, and Horen and Fokir on the other. Ghosh has done in fiction what the humanist geographers do in

their objective research. Eric Prieto's geocritical observation can be helpful in understanding what Ghosh accomplishes in the novel:

> If humanist geographers have felt the need to remind us of the centrality of human experience in place and of the importance of place as a locus of meaning, it is because they worry that the forces of modernity threaten the bonds of affection and identity that link individuals to their habitats. (*Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*, 18)

By showing that modernity creates disorienting disjunctions between man and sites, the novel can be said to give more importance to the subjective, experiential and qualitative understanding of place than to the objective, rationalistic and quantifiable understanding of place. The subjective experience of place is particularly effective in a liminal place like the Sunderbans.

The conflict between myth and modernity can be said to be at the centre of the novel. Secular rationalists Nirmal and Kanai experience the limitations of modernity. Nirmal and Kanai at first fail to realise that rationality can only 'think' of that which can be systematised. But the Sundarbans is a place that cannot be systematised. In order to comprehend the place and make it a 'home,' imagination and adherence to myth are needed. Fokir exemplifies this. Moreover, by making Fokir someone who is possessed by nature and who is uncontaminated by modern education which alienates man from nature, Ghosh is advocating a syncretism that defies the hierarchical, divisive principle of modernity. Everything about Fokir — his simple lifestyle, his knowledge and his belief exemplify geocentric selfhood in which nature and self are fused in one. The very existence and self of Fokir is deeply embedded in the indigenous knowledge system that creates a fusion between place, its myth and man. The indigenous knowledge system has all the four necessary criteria identified by Laurelyn Whitt in *Science,*

Colonialism and Indigenous Peoples: The Cultural Politics of Law and Knowledge to qualify as "knowledge system". First, on the epistemological question of what counts as knowledge, it can be argued that though the indigenous knowledge system lacks the rigour of scientificity and is mocked by Nirmal and Kanai before their transformation, it ultimately is very useful for Horen and Fokir who traverse the precarious landscape by banking on it. Second, on the question of transmission, unlike the rationalist knowledge system which relies on writing as the legitimate form of transmission of knowledge, the indigenous knowledge system of Horen and Fokir is transmitted orally. Though there is a written account of the Bon Bibi myth, neither Horen nor Fokir uses it. Fokir learnt it from his mother in his childhood, and without knowing how to read, he sings it in such a way as if it is a part of him. Third, on the question of power, it can be said that externally Horen and Fokir are powerless in the rationalist eyes of Nirmal and Kanai; but internally, Horen and Kanai know that it is their knowledge system that gives power to them to make the tide country a 'place' to them. The reversal of power relation between Nirmal and Horen and between Kanai and Fokir explains this. Fourthly, on the question of innovation, it can be posited that the fear of both Horen and Fokir at Garjontola is part of the improvisation that precautions and protects them in the dangerous surroundings at Garjontola. And last but not least, like any other true indigenous system, they never proclaim their knowledge system to be the only legitimate and other systems to be illegitimate; they hardly talk about their knowledge system at all. But it is there, sustaining them in a dangerous land and making them who they are. What Ghosh wants the reader to recognise is the beauty and rationality-defying nature of this knowledge system. In an interview with Alessandro Vescovi, Ghosh reflects that all of his books are about knowledge, and some forms of knowledge are ungraspable:

> Procedures of knowledge are interesting to me, because there is a certain point at which knowledge stops — there are certain sorts of mysteries which not

> only do exist in one's life, but they should exist, one should respect those mysteries; there are certain ways in which one really does have to pull back from this relentless search for exhaustiveness. (132)

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh endorses, as he does in *The Calcutta Chromosome* also, this kind of mysterious knowledge as an alternative, though not as the only option, system of knowledge that exists and is very much operative in places. Nirmal and Kanai seek exhaustive knowledge; the indigenous knowledge system stretches beyond the cognitive boundary of rationalist framework of Nirmal and Kanai. In the same interview, Ghosh also reveals that one of his inspirations in writing *The Hungry Tide* was that he wanted to remind people about the magnificent mysteries of the world in the face of rising nihilism in the post 9/11 world.

Ghosh's method of critiquing modernity chimes with Mignolo's concept of 'geoploitics of knowledge' and 'border thinking.' What Ghosh does in the novel is to bring attention to the place-specific, myth-based indigenous epistemology which grates against the universalist Western epistemology of modernity. Instead of focusing on willing resistance to modernity by identity formation as we see in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Hungry Tide* illuminates us regarding the psychological victimisation of post-colonial subjects due to internalisation of the ethos of modernity. The result is the replication of what Mignolo calls 'the logic of coloniality.' The way Nirmal and Kanai are disillusioned and transformed only testifies to the incompatibility of Western epistemology in every place. Unlike modernity's "splitting off" of self from nature, which according to Tally and Battista, "is a necessary precondition to the formation of an individual that maintains superiority over nature and other natural elements," Fokir is psychologically inseparable from the land and its myth. The land and its stories are constitutive of his self. For Nirmal and Kanai, the land is to be mastered over; their approach to the land is materialistic and rationalistic and they fail miserably.

Fokir's relation to the land is spiritual and holistic, and he navigates better in the inhospitable and enigmatic landscape. Fokir's life and death are intrinsically embedded in his knowledge and faith. Even he hints his death when he talks about his dream of his mother who, he says, appeared to him in a dream and wished to be united with him soon. By making Fokir die to save Piya from the fierce storm, Ghosh suggests, perhaps, that Fokir's knowledge system and belief system make a holistic system in which life, death, identity and everything else of him are fused. Accidental Fokir's death may seem to a rationalist, but, perhaps, it may not be so. This is one of the ways of transgressing different barriers, one of the recurrent themes in Ghosh's works. This is not to say that Ghosh has summarily discredited the rationalistic worldview; it is very efficient across the globe and is the dominant worldview. The novel presents a confrontation of the two worldviews—one modern and another mythic—not to prioritise one over another. This is very deftly indicated in the debate between Nirmal and Horen regarding the various strange phenomena in the tide country. For every unusual incident Horen has a supernatural or mythological explanation whereas Nirmal explains them with science. As Nirmal gets angry with Horen for his superstitious explanation, Horen ends the debate by proposing: "let us leave each other to our beliefs and see what the future holds" (*The Hungry Tide*, 147). Fokir rarely talks and he never proclaims that the Bon Bibi myth is the only authentic form of knowledge. Rather, it can be said that the indigenous knowledge system is nonassertive, as we have seen in *The Calcutta Chromosome* also. But in Ghosh's presentation, the predicaments of Nirmal, Kanai and Fokir do suggest that colonial modernity might not be the only worldview for all and for every place, and that there are other epistemologies which might be equally viable.

So far I have discussed Ghosh's critique of Western epistemology with reference to three novels. In the next two chapters I turn to sexuality and gender which constitute another important arena of colonial modernity. An analysis of sexual and gender roles of the

coloniser as well as the colonised can show us how these are fraught with ironies. For that purpose, I have chosen only three characters — Mr. Burnham, Mrs. Burnham and Baboo Nobokrishna Panda — from *The Ibis Trilogy*.

Notes

1. In section 16 of part one ("Stories") of *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh discusses the important function played by modernity in widening the gap between nature and culture. Modernity "could not tolerate Nature-Culture hybrids" (96).

2. In *The Great Derangement* Ghosh postulates that modern worldview is dominated by the exclusion of the fantastic, the improbable, and the inclusion of rational, intelligible explanation of everything. In other words, with the advent of modernity, Catastrophism (which viewed the earth as being shaped by unpredictable unique events like earthquakes) is replaced by Gradualism (which viewed as the present condition of the earth as the result of slow, predictable process) which is labeled as primitive and obsolete. Novel, whose advent corresponds with that of modernity, is set in particular time and place, and as a corollary to this finitude, modern realistic novels exclude the fantastic and the improbable, and focus on stable, secured life of the bourgeoisie. Modern novels are thus complicit with modernity (and the bourgeois capitalism) in generating anti-Nature desire and apathy to climate change. Ghosh deals with all these issues in the first section of *The Great Derangement.*

3. This line of argument echoes Ramchandra Guha's critique of global environmentalism. In his essay "The paradox of Global Environmentalism" (2000) Ramchandra Guha contends that the increasing demand by the global environmentalists from the First World countries for national parks and sanctuaries in the Third World countries for preservation of

animals and biodiversity at the cost of evicting local people is highly paradoxical as these environmentalists themselves enjoy highly luxurious lifestyle. Guha postulates that the self-certified environmentalists' clamour for conservation of nature in parks and sanctuaries is merely for paving the path for pleasure trips to these places.