

## Kanai (Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*)

## Self-centred

**Character** Kanai Dutt is a 43-year-old Bengali man living in New Delhi, where he runs a lucrative business providing translation services to companies, government agencies and individuals. He is wealthy and has inherited his uncle's love of literature, especially for literary translations. His ambition is to be a famous translator of western literature into Bengali but has found that he could only make a living providing services to others. He is highly intelligent, speaks and reads six languages, and highly self-centred. 'He is over-confident and buoyed by a well-grounded belief in his ability to prevail,' but all that is challenged when he brings his elite, urban mentality to the wild jungles and islands of the Sundarbans. He undergoes a minor transformation, in part by reading a manuscript left to him by his deceased uncle, in part through his friendship with Piya, the marine biologist, and in part through a confrontation with himself on an island full of man-eating tigers.

**Activities** During the novel, Kanai lives with his aunt in a large house in an isolated village in the Sundarbans. He spends most of his time reading a manuscript left to him by his uncle and other books of poetry and literature. At the end, he accompanies Piya on a research expedition.

### Illustrative moments

*Self-centred* The self-regarding element of Kanai's character is illustrated in a scene at the beginning of novel. He meets Piya, who is travelling in the same train to the Sundarbans. When he comments on the fact that she is an American, she asks how he guessed, and he answers, 'I didn't guess. I knew.' She asks if it was her accent, and he says, 'Yes. I'm very rarely wrong about accents.' The encounter goes from bad to worse, when the jolting train spills his coffee on his shirt and he blames Piya, when it was, in fact, his fault. He goes on to explain practically everything she already knows about their destination in the Sundarbans. Despite this self-centredness, however, Kanai comes off as a sincere and harmless, rather than insidious and deceitful.

*Fast* This, now out-of-date, term is applied to Kanai by his aunt when speaking to Piya one evening. She means that he will take advantage of a woman sexually if she isn't on her toes. She says, 'Kanai's problem is that he's too clever for his own good...he's one of those men who likes to think of himself as being irresistible to the other sex...it's dangerous in the jungle, and not just because of the animals.' Again, while this is not an admirable trait, in Kanai it is not venal either. He does make advances toward Piya, but they are verbal and non-threatening, which makes Kanai all the more believable.

*Self-discovery* Kanai's moment of self-discovery occurs on an island, where he is within metres of a tiger. Although hundreds of people are killed by tigers every year, the local people believe that anyone with a 'pure heart' will not be harmed. When someone asks Kanai if would like to be tested, he says, 'I think I'm a good man. I think my intentions are good.' Left alone on an island, he sees a tiger: 'It was immense, of a size greater than he could have imagined...his terror was such that he could not move a muscle...he kept his eyes fixed on the animal, the tip of its twitching tail...then he ran and fell down in the mud, waiting for the blow that would snap his neck.' When he is rescued, the others assure him that there was no tiger, but he insists that he saw one about to kill him. It is at this point that we realise that the local culture has changed him, from an educated urban elite who dismissed all the tiger legends of the area to a man shaking with fear.