

## ***The Hungry Tide* (2004)**

**Story** In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh tells the story of two main characters. Piya is a young, American-born woman of Indian heritage who is a marine biologist. Kanai is a Bengali man who runs a translation business in New Delhi. They meet on a train going to the Sundarbans, the coastal region of Bengal, which is full of menace and beauty. Piya is studying the behaviour of river dolphins and enlists the help of an illiterate fisherman, Fokir. Kanai has returned to this wild, isolated delta region at the request of his aunt in order to read a manuscript left to him by his dead uncle. The aunt runs a hospital and an NGO dedicated to the uplift of local people, but the uncle brought her there because he was fleeing arrest in Calcutta for his leftist activities in the 1970s. Piya and Fokir draw close, despite the absence of a shared language, while Kanai learns about this uncle through the manuscript, which describes a little-known massacre of settlers in the region in 1979. We also meet several minor characters: Fokir's son, his wife and his mother, plus Horen, another fisherman. But most of the action follows Piya and Fokir as they navigate the dangerous tidal flows of the delta. She is determined to understand how a local type of dolphin has adapted to these unique ecological conditions, and he guides her in and out of dangerous encounters with crocodiles and tigers. Their long journeys make Fokir's wife jealous of Piya, but later the two women come to understand each other. Kanai, who is falling in love with Piya, joins them on an expedition, during which he gains even greater admiration for Piya, her work, her intelligence and her bravery. Kanai himself is also tested, left alone on a tiger-infested island, and learns about himself. In the stormy conclusion, Fokir dies while sheltering Piya from danger. Kanai proposes to Piya, but she tells him that she prefers to remain single, and single-minded in her dedication to her science. Kanai returns to New Delhi. Piya raises funds for more research and takes up residence with the aunt in the Sundarbans.

### **Characters**

*Piya* Piya is the central character of this ambitious and sprawling novel. She is the classic insider-outsider, born abroad but choosing to work in India. She speaks little Bengali but is determined to succeed in her research on river dolphins, which she has previously studied in Burma and Thailand. Although warm and sensitive, she has a ruthless dedication to her work that does not countenance a life partner, which means that she rejects Kanai's offer of a lasting relationship.

*Kanai* Kanai, somewhat older than Piya at 42, is a Bengali who lives in New Delhi, where he runs a very successful business providing translation services to foreigners. His unrealised dream was to follow his uncle and translate great works of fiction into Bengali. He is a literary person who knows six languages. He is self-centred but learns some humility in his experiences with Piya and Fokir in the demanding environment of the delta.

*Fokir* Fokir is a local fisherman of unknown age, but probably in his late 20s. He is illiterate and poor, his body thin and almost skeletal. He is not servile, however, not to Piya, who hires him and his boat for her research, or to anyone. He is a good father, but a less good husband. He is Piya's invaluable guide and, in the end, dies while protecting her in a storm.

*Sundarbans* As with R K Narayan, Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner, Ghosh has made the setting a character in this novel. The non-fictional Sundarbans is depicted with qualities—turbulent, dangerous, sensuous, mysterious—that play a major role in the human characters' lives. Although barely fifty miles from the cosmopolitan centre of Calcutta, it is a world apart.

### **Themes**

*Science and tradition* A central theme in this book is the possibility of a compatibility between modern science and traditional knowledge. Piya has all sorts of equipment for measuring her exact geographical position and the depth of the water, but without Fokir's local knowledge she would not have made her exciting discoveries. Even without speaking to her, Fokir realises what she wants and guides her to the exact places where she needs to be. 'It was surprising enough that their jobs had not proved to be utterly incompatible—considering that one task required the input of geostationary satellites, while the other depended on bits of shark-bone and broken tile [Fokir's fishing line]. But that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously—people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another's heads--seemed almost miraculous....They were both amazed by the seamless intertwining of their pleasures and purposes.'

*Syncretism* A related theme is the syncretic mixture of languages and cultures in the setting of the Sundarbans. In this isolated backwater, Hindu and Muslim traditions have melded together to produce a folk culture and religion that defies definition. The best example is the legend of Bon Bibi, the goddess who rules over the forests and waters of the region. Her story is told at great length in the book and described in an all-night performance by an itinerant theatre group. The story of this 'Hindu' goddess begins in Medina, the holy city of Islam, and contains Islamic elements such as fakirs and sheikhs. Ghosh, ever alive to linguistic quirks, also points out the Arabic, Persian and Turkish words that have found their way into this narrative performed for an Indian, largely Bengali-speaking, population.

*Rapport* The tender and non-verbal rapport that develops between Piya and Fokir is the heart of the book. It is, of course, another kind of mixing, of comingling and fusing of opposites, that runs throughout the whole story. Their relationship begins in confusion, when Piya attempts to pay him for something he doesn't feel he deserves payment. It moves on to intense, but non-sexual, physicality, when he rescues her from certain death, dragging her from the water and pumping mud from her chest. He provides for her bodily needs—bathing, toilet, food—without asking or explaining. She shows him respect (born in Seattle, she has not absorbed the caste hierarchy) and treats him like an equal. This novel meanders in many directions, but it comes together in the final sentences (after Fokir has died while protecting her from a storm). 'She recalled the promises she had made to him in the silence of her heart...she remembered how she had tried to find the words [while he was dying] to remind him of how richly he was loved, and, once again, he had seemed to understand her, even without words.'