The Aesthetics of the Tide

The Ecosystem as Matrix for Transculturation in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

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**Introduction: Ecological and Cultural Flows**

First published in 2005, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is a novel that explores the meeting of different cultural attitudes in the Sundarbans, a mangrove and tidal region at the border of India and Bangladesh, where the freshwater of the river Ganges encounters the seawaters of the Gulf of Bengal. The confluence of sea and river currents in the countless channels composing the delta creates a profuse mangrove ecosystem where biological diversity thrives. In this essay, I argue that in Ghosh’s novel the ecosystem works as both a matrix for transculturation and as a chronotope that underlies the narrative structure. In this matrix, rivers flow into the tide to create the ecosystem; foreign cultures flow into the local culture to create the cultural system; and, in their experiencing of the Sundarbans, foreign focalizers – those through which the data of the novel are narratively filtered – create the narrative system.

The analogy between these three systems constitutes an Aesthetics of the Tide that pervades the literary representations of cultures, environments, and human organisms. Because it relies so heavily on the perception of the confluent ecosystem of the Sundarbans, this Aesthetics of the Tide allows the reader to perceive the process of transculturation in original ways: i.e. with the senses rather than purely with the intellect. This peculiarity of the novel – its
transgression of the hermetic categories of ecological world, storyworld,¹ and cultural world – allows one to consider *The Hungry Tide* as self-sufficient in its treatment of transculturation, thereby demonstrating the power of literature to investigate social phenomena.

**The Sundarbans: An Ecosystem of Confluence**

The mangrove region of the Sundarbans, also called the Tide Country, is known particularly for being the habitat of the Bengal tiger. The meeting of river and sea combined to regular flooding fashions the environments and ecologies of the many islands of the delta. Ghosh explains this environmental phenomenon in considerable detail, rendering it an important constituent of his novel:

> there were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe. This proliferation of aquatic life was thought to be the result of the unusually varied composition of the water itself. The waters of river and sea did not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta; rather, they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of fresh water running along the floors of some channels, creating variations of salinity and turbidity [...]. This proliferation of environments was responsible for creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms.²

The remarkable composition of the water resulting from the interpenetration and uneven intermingling of river and sea creates a highly heterogeneous environment that favours diversity of life-forms. This phenomenon of confluence is well represented in a satellite image of the area of the Sundarbans (see Figure 1 overleaf). In this image, the seawaters of the Gulf of Bengal, otherwise called the tide, go inland to meet the river waters of silt. The aesthetic beauty and complexity of this picture illustrate well Ghosh’s description of the Sundarbans as a profuse locus where water currents interpenetrate each other.

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¹ “Storyworlds [...] are more than static containers for the objects mentioned in a story, they are dynamic models of evolving situations [...] mental simulations of the development of the plot”; Marie–Laure Ryan, “Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality,” *Poetics Today* 34.3 (Fall 2013): 362–361–88.