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Exploring the Ethnographic Encounter

An Anthropological Approach to World Literature in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract Through a reading of Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*, the article proposes a preliminary attempt to combine anthropology with world literature, a concept that has recently attracted significant attention from the fields of postcolonial studies and comparative literature alike. Firstly, I argue that world literature is best seen as a number of overlapping and/or divergent projects, and that it thrives if tackled through a plurality of approaches. Secondly, I suggest one possible approach to world literature, employing John Comaroff's definition of anthropology as a discipline characterised by a few closely interrelated epistemic operations that qualify ethnographic fieldwork. Lastly, I map Comaroff's epistemic operations onto *The Hungry Tide* to unpack the levels of anthropological sophistication of this novel. I advocate the revised concept of ethnographic novel that results from this reading – the idea of a novel of the ethnographic encounter – as a useful point of departure for a project of world literature.

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Keywords World Literature. Anthropology. Amitav Ghosh. *The Hungry Tide*.

1 World Literature: Points of Departure

The aim of this article is to attempt to combine anthropology with world literature through a reading of a Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Before approaching the novel, it will be necessary to introduce both the current debate around world literature and the anthropological framework I refer to.

The widespread interest for world literature is a recent phenomenon, triggered by a number of key texts such as Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (1999, translated into English in 2004), Franco Moretti's «Conjectures on World Literature» (2000) and David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* (2003). World literature today, in very general terms, can be described as the attempt to tackle literature within a wider glob-

al context, employing broad comparative approaches to overcome the boundaries of individual national traditions. It has found particular resonance in the fields of comparative literature and postcolonial studies (see Prendergast 2004, vii) and, as a matter of fact, it could also be defined as the encounter between these areas of studies and the social, political, historical, aesthetic and literary issues connected to globalisation (see Deckard et al. 2015, 4).

These general definitions are useful to introduce the field, but the current exchange is actually the last (and most visible) stage of a complex and somehow convoluted history. Starting from Goethe, who popularized the concept in 1827, world literature was variously addressed by figures such as Marx, Tagore, Auerbach and several comparatists. These interventions were rarely consistent with each other, which explains, together with the different approaches to the discipline within American and European institutions (see D'Haen 2012), why the concept of world literature has historically been a contested one. This tendency has inevitably been inherited and intensified by the recent debate. Jérôme David, as a matter of fact, argues that the major contemporary contributions to world literature variously draw from at least four genealogies of the concept, and the different concerns that they investigate bring them "in different directions - so different, in fact, that the misunderstandings in the debates are more numerous at this point than real exchanges" (David 2013, 13-14).

Take Moretti and Damrosch, two of the most influential contemporary practitioners of world literature. Moretti is an excellent example of a 'systemic' approach. Taking as a model Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis, Moretti attempts a study of the world-literary system, which he defines as "one, and unequal" (Moretti 2000, 56), because the relationship between its centre, periphery and semiperiphery are dominated by asymmetrical literary exchanges. Moretti is interested in studying the dynamics within the system in its entirety, focusing units that are "much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes - or genres and systems" (Moretti 2000, 57). He therefore advocates the strategy of distant reading, aiming at a 'collaborative' literary history that is made up of "a patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading*" (Moretti 2000, 57) [Author's emphasis].

On the other hand, Damrosch's work is a way to organize a practice of extensive close reading that takes materials from a variety of times, places, cultures and languages. Consequently, one of the definitions of world literature he gives is "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch 2003, 4). Damrosch proposes to tackle this subset of literary works with a particular mode of reading, "a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (Damrosch 2003, 297), whose ethical purpose is to promote tolerance and mutual understanding.

With their different aims and methodologies, Moretti and Damrosch effectively promote different projects of world literature. However, the fact that diverse projects are being carried out under the same label is not necessarily a bad sign. One must be aware of the risk that David points out – that debate may generate essentially misunderstanding instead of exchange. But it is arguably a risk worth taking. Paraphrasing Clifford Geertz, we should be less interested in “a perfection of consensus” than in “a refinement of debate”, with the awareness that “what gets better is the precision with which we vex each other” (Geertz 2000, 29). We need to turn existing divergences into a productive interplay, trying to incorporate and integrate a vast number of perspectives. One is of course entitled to reject the validity of specific projects, or, alternatively, screen valuable insights while refusing some of the implications. However, as a general rule, it is sensible to conceive world literature precisely as a number of divergent or overlapping projects that discuss, clash and interact with each other.

In this sense, Erich Auerbach’s classic definition of *Ansatzpunkt* (point of departure) is particularly useful. According to Auerbach, whoever wants to create a synthesis of a vast section of human culture should first find an appropriate *Ansatzpunkt*. This is defined as a “firmly circumscribed, easily comprehensible set of phenomena whose interpretation is a radiation out from them and which orders and interprets a greater region than they themselves occupy” (Auerbach 1969, 14). Auerbach conceives successful attempts to map world literature as a radiation out of one or more well-chosen points of departure.

Although Auerbach’s *Ansatzpunkt* was conceived within an eminent philological conception of world literature, the general methodology sketched by his definition can legitimately be employed by a variety of approaches. Most interestingly, a compelling point of departure is able to **accommodate** a number of *divergent* models – facilitating the kind of exchange between different projects of world literature I mentioned earlier. In a sense the *Ansatzpunkt* represents how the individual practitioner decides to interpret the meaning of ‘world’ in world literature. And, indeed, there are many ways of seeing the ‘world’ that we can simultaneously tackle, as well as many ways to explore a specific conception of the ‘world’. The basic premise of this essay is that one of these ways is to be found through anthropological paradigms.

2 An Anthropological Approach to World Literature

The conversation between anthropology and literature has been a very productive field of inquiry at least since Clifford Geertz’s *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), and most definitely after James Clifford and George E. Marcus’s *Writing Cultures* (1986) and Geertz’s *Work and Lives* (1988).

The question of whether anthropology can offer an interesting *Ansatzpunkt* for world literature, however, is another matter. Sure enough, the two disciplines – in their various declinations – have several points in common. Both originate in the nineteenth century and are historically connected to the development of capitalist modernity and imperialism. Both oscillate between the attempt to map the diversity of human experience and the attempt to create a unitary model out of that diversity. Both are involved in a cosmopolitan, cross-cultural enterprise, but run the risk of being complicit with imperialist agendas if undertaken under certain approaches. Both must face theoretical complications connected to the limits of the comparative method. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect at least a certain degree of insight from a convergence between world literature and anthropological approaches.

Nevertheless, finding a point of departure for a project of world literature within anthropology can be somehow tricky. For instance, if we take the definition of ethnographic novel as “one that conveys significant information about the culture or cultures from which the novel originates” (Tallman 2002, 12), this sub-genre can easily fit into one possible approach to world literature, which Damrosch defines as the search for “windows into foreign worlds” (Damrosch 2003, 15). This strategy, however, flirts dangerously with naive exoticism. The interesting aspect of anthropology for world literature is not the fact that it is a repository of exotica. What I suggest is to focus on how anthropology can offer a critical approach to the exploration of encounters between subjects in the globalised world.

A possible *Ansatzpunkt* for world literature is hence the *ethnographic encounter* – the coming together of ethnographer (or a comparable figure) and native during fieldwork, and the dialogue they establish – with the role of the ethnographer, from a narratological point of view, being played by the narrator or by a character, depending on the text in question. This is not a point of departure in the strict philological sense Auerbach had in mind, but is indeed, consistently with Auerbach’s general definition, a concrete phenomenon from which a synthesis can organically emerge. With the term ethnographic I stress two aspects of this kind of encounter. One is the existence of cultural differences between the subjects involved. The other is the presence of a political and epistemological density that, however, is not necessarily bent towards manipulation and control as an encounter driven by (neo)colonial dynamics. This combination makes ethnographic encounters particularly interesting, because 1) they are projected towards a global, transcultural and transnational dimension and hence offer an entry point for a world perspective, but they are necessarily influenced by local specificities dictated by their participants; and 2) they are riddled in contradictions as they are inherently uneven, but they imply the opportunity of a dialogue.

Which anthropological framework, however, can we use to tackle ethnographic encounters? One particularly compelling model that this point of

departure allows us to employ is offered by John Comaroff in "The End of Anthropology, Again: On the Future of an In/Discipline" (2010). Anthropology, according to Comaroff, "ought to be understood as a praxis: a mode of producing knowledge based on a few closely interrelated epistemic operations that lay the foundation for its diverse forms of theory work, mandate its research techniques, and chart its empirical coordinates" (Comaroff 2010, 530). In other words, an anthropologist, beside adopting ethnographic fieldwork as primary research technique, is primarily defined by the fact that he or she approaches problems in a certain manner, guided by specific epistemic operations. These are: 1) the critical estrangement of the lived world; 2) the mapping of processes of being-and-becoming; 3) the use of the contradiction, the counterintuitive, the paradox and the rupture as a source of methodological revelation; 4) spatiotemporalization; 5) the adoption of grounded theory. It is worth noting that these epistemic operations are not necessarily found exclusively in anthropology. I would argue, however, that they acquire particular salience within the experiential dimension of the ethnographic practice they qualify - in the context of ethnographic encounters.

Let us examine Comaroff's epistemic operations one by one. An anthropological approach, as Comaroff views it, must first of all carry out a relativisation of familiar discourses and concepts through their juxtaposition with defamiliarising perspectives (Comaroff 2010, 530). A concept that we usually understand in one sense may benefit from insights taken from seemingly unrelated ethnographic material. This is critical estrangement. Simultaneously, an anthropologist must reconstruct how social abstractions and realities are created out of a variety of concrete, individual social actions and gestures. This is the mapping of the processes of being-and-becoming, and implies that an abstract concept does not exist a-priori, but emerges from the sedimentation of innumerable individual acts (Comaroff 2010, 530-531). Both critical estrangement and the mapping of being-and-becoming benefit from an attentiveness to the contradiction, the counterintuitive, the paradox and the rupture, which become a prime source of methodological revelation. In other words, unexpected, apparently unexplainable situations are ideal starting points to "lay bare worlds both familiar and strange" (Comaroff 2010, 531), enabling the first two epistemic operations described above.

Anthropological work, moreover, must necessarily be involved in a process of spatiotemporalization, which, for Comaroff, is contextualization taken in a profoundly theoretical sense. This means that anthropology should not locate its ethnographic narratives within a context that is given empirically or is an a priori. Instead, it must always *construct* its context "in proportion [...] to its analytical object" (Comaroff 2010, 531), situating it in multiple, intersecting spaces and temporalities. The adoption of grounded theory, lastly, is the unescapable premise of all the other epis-

temic operations. Grounded theory refers to a methodology in social research that enables to create analytical categories starting from empirical data – a theory that emerges out of the field instead of being superimposed on it (see Tarozzi 2008). For Comaroff grounded theory is

an imaginative counterpoint between the inductive and the deductive, the concrete and the concept, ethnographic observation and critical ideation; also, in a different register, between the epic and the everyday, the meaningful and the material. (Comaroff 2010, 532)

What emerges from the adoption of all these epistemic operations is an understanding of anthropology as a powerfully deconstructive discipline, which bases its work on an exploration of local, material reality – from which theory must emerge – and focuses in particular on the contradictions and idiosyncrasies of life. The ethnographic experience is used to estrange, question and de-essentialise familiar concepts. All of this within a spatiotemporal framework that is at the same time complex and situation-specific.

To Comaroff’s model we should add reflexivity, arguably the most important contribution of ‘critical’ anthropology of the 80s. It involves the awareness of the inherent bias of every position from which knowledge is constructed, and of the fact that all (ethnographic) texts, to use James Clifford’s words, are “systems, or economies, of truth”, requiring the use of a “rigorous sense of partiality” (Clifford 2009, 7). This means working towards the “*specification of discourses in ethnography: who speaks? Who writes? When and where? With or to whom? Under what institutional and historical constraints?*” (Clifford 2009, 13) [Author’s emphasis]. Comaroff does not discuss reflexivity in detail, but his model makes sense only within a self-critical – and not only critical – perspective.

My point is that such an anthropological praxis would provide us with a useful model to identify that subset of literature that undertakes a critical deconstruction of the ethnographic encounter. This, in turn, would allow us to chart different literary representations of the ethnographic encounter in a variety of global contexts. Before doing that, however, it is necessary to test the viability of this model. In the rest of this essay, therefore, I will discuss a work of fiction that suits this approach particularly well–Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*.

3 Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

Before dedicating himself to creative writing, Amitav Ghosh was educated as an anthropologist. Unsurprisingly, an overall anthropological sensitivity characterises his entire work, with the travelogue/experimental eth-

nography *In an Antique Land* (1992) being perhaps the most prominent example. Differently from *In an Antique Land*, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is a novel. Its most distinguishing feature, within Ghosh's work, is precisely the convergence between a novelistic form and an anthropological approach. The novel is set in the region of the Sundarbans, Bengal, at the very end of the Ganges' delta. The area is made up of an archipelago covered in mangrove forests, whose inhabitants survive mostly out of the resources offered by the forest and the rivers, constantly threatened by tigers, crocodiles and storms.

Two characters enter the so-called tide country: Piya, an American cetologist of Indian origin, and Kanai, a Kolkata-born, Delhi-based businessman that runs a company of professional translators. Piya is coming to the Sundarbans to study the fluvial dolphin *orcaella brevirostris*, while Kanai is coming to read the recently discovered notebook of his late uncle Nirmal. He has been requested to do so by his aunt Nilima, the head of the Badabon Trust, a local non-profit organisation supporting the island of Lusibari. The notebook will turn out to contain the account of Nirmal's involvement with a group of refugees that, after settling on the island of Morichjhāpi, were brutally evicted by the government in 1979. The other crucial character in the novel is Fokir, a local fisherman whose mother Kusum died in the Morichjhāpi massacre and that Piya decides to recruit as a guide for her expedition. Kanai, who is attracted to Piya - in the same way as Piya and Fokir are to each other - decides to join them. The expedition, however, is struck by a terrible storm, during which Fokir dies to save Piya's life. In the end both Piya and Kanai decide to relocate themselves closer to the Sundarbans - Kanai moves to Kolkata, while Piya sets her working base in Lusibari, to collaborate with Nilima's Trust.

The Hungry Tide offers an anatomy of the meeting of metropolitan, cosmopolitan subjects and local inhabitants and environment. The encounter is a transformative one that exposes ideologies and prejudices, as well as unfolding spatiotemporal layers, in a thorough exploration that is self-aware of its position within a world-literary system. In the following sections I will use Comaroff's model to show how Ghosh unpacks the complexities of the ethnographic encounters he sets in motion.

3.1 Grounded Theory

The idea of grounded theory effectively describes the overall epistemic strategy of *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh presents us with a number of characters who arrive to the Sundarbans with a specific ideology or theoretical framework, characterised by a form of idealised abstraction. Nirmal cultivates a universal idea of revolution that is detached from the specificities of the tide country. Piya unwittingly endorses a conservationist agenda that

is not equipped with an awareness of the implications of such a practice for the local subalterns. Kanai, besides being a representative of arrogant regional upper-classes, equates knowledge with linguistic comprehension, and is convinced that his language skills are enough for him to grasp the subtleties of the tide country life.

The beliefs of these characters, however, will be 'grounded' to material reality through the encounter with the tide country and its inhabitants. Pablo Mukherjee argues that the novel works as a form of re-education of the "new and old elites" that must "absorb lessons of belonging from their encounter with the subalterns" (Mukherjee 2010, 116). Crucially, all these lessons are not simply epiphanies emerging from abstract philosophical, political or scientific speculation. They are epistemological breakthroughs generated by grounding the characters' interpretative schemes. The new schemes they forge are based, this time, on their empirical experience of the Sundarbans, on their encounter with local reality. As we will discuss more extensively in the following sections, it is Fokir that frequently acts as catalyst for these breakthroughs.

This does not mean that all knowledge these characters possess in the first place is pointless – Piya's scientific training, Kanai's linguistic expertise and Nirmal's ethical, poetical and historical insights are often extremely valuable. However, Ghosh does argue for a *Weltanschauung* that is based, in significant part, on an experience of reality. This is particularly relevant in a perspective of world literature, haunted by the ghost of a superficial engagement with a variety of cultural realities from a safe, hegemonic perspective. Which brings us to the more specifically self-reflective aspect of *The Hungry Tide*.

3.2 Reflexivity

Ghosh is aware of the implications of writing about the Sundarbans as an anglophone, metropolitan author, and weaves this awareness into the very texture of the novel. We are constantly reminded that we are observing the tide country primarily from a metropolitan perspective. Piya and Kanai are called outsiders since their earliest apparition (4), and indeed they are: Piya is a rootless, cosmopolitan scientist from the USA, Kanai, in spite of being Bengali, is separated from the inhabitants of the Sundarbans by class and caste. Ghosh constructs his rigorous sense of partiality by exploring the tide country with all the limitations that their position entails. He does manage to convey to his readers a gargantuan amount of information about the Sundarbans, but information is always dispensed in an indirect and believable way – typically through more insightful 'informants' with different degrees of insider knowledge – Nirmal, Nilima, Moyna (Fokir's wife) or Horen (Fokir's adoptive father). As mentioned above, Piya and

Kanai can also rely on their specialist expertise, but this only illuminates specific aspects of the tide country - they need to tap into local knowledge to seriously start to gain a wider understanding of the Sundarbans (see Vescovi 2011, 93-96).

Ghosh's concerns can be summed up in the terms used by Tabish Khair in *Babu Fictions* (2001). Khair stresses the importance of the basic dichotomy between anglicised middle class and subalterns - *Babus* and *Coolies* - that largely corresponds to the more specifically Bengali categories of *bhadralok* (gentlemen) and *gramer lok* (village people), a particularly strongly felt division in the tide country (see Jalais 2010, 28-29). Since, according to Khair, "Indian English fiction is Babu fiction", then "how [...] is it possible to write Indian fiction in English and fiction about Indians in English [...] without appropriating from a position of power or occluding Coolie/non-Babu realities and discourses?" (Khair 2001, x) [Author's emphasis]. Ghosh's solution here is to present a narrative where the perspective is clearly *babu/bhadralok/metropolitan*, and where the *coolie/gramer lok/subaltern* is neither unknowable nor invisible, but rather opaque, at least in some respects that change according to the narrative viewpoint. This is particularly clear in relation to Fokir, whom Piya and Kanai interpret in different ways according to their necessarily biased perspective. Fokir is significantly silent for most of the novel, and the relationship between him, Piya and Kanai is used by Ghosh to epitomise the difficulty that a metropolitan subject must face in trying to grasp a subaltern perspective.

The novel's insistence on the difficulties of translation is the consequential counterpoint of this strategy. In a sense, Kanai's translation of the *Bon Bibi Jahuranama* - a central text in the Sundarbans religious culture - epitomises this whole set of concerns. Kanai gives his translation to Piya as a parting gift towards the end of the novel. In the letter he attaches to the translation, he claims that the poem, which they both heard sung by Fokir, "lives in [Fokir] and, in some way, perhaps, it still plays a part in making him the person he is" (354). The poem, in other words, does provide an insight into Fokir's subjectivity. At the same time, however, Kanai notes that "such flaws as there are in my rendition of [the poem] I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading from sight as a good translator should" (354). Kanai's position regarding the flaws of his translation signals a major moral development for the character, but also illustrates the whole ethical and aesthetic approach of the novel regarding subaltern subjectivity observed from a metropolitan perspective - it is to be grasped in fragments and in a visibly mediated form, through an ethnographically rigorous, self-reflective sense of partiality. In this way, the aspiring work of (anglophone) world literature can try to counter the hegemonic forces inherent in its practice.

3.3 Spatiotemporalisation

A novel where two outsiders visit a remote region of India might be summarily described as an encounter between global and local forces. Ghosh, however, goes a step forward – he inscribes the tide country into multiple spatial and temporal networks that are highly specific for the region and cannot be reduced to a simplistic global-local dynamic.

As for space, Ghosh manages to embed into his novel the complexities of what Annu Jalais calls “the social geography of ‘up’ and ‘down’” (Jalais 2010, 5):

These are the terms [...] that the Sundarbans islanders use to navigate a geography comprising far more than the natural environment. The Sundarbans region as a whole is considered ‘down’ because it is infamously one of the poorest and least well-connected regions of WB [West Bengal]. Following this logic, the most ‘top up’ places [...] are the areas nearest Kolkata; living on the island nearer the mainland rather than on those further south, and living in Kolkata or even in the towns of the Sundarbans [...] is more prestigious than living in villages. (Jalais 2010, 5)

Ghosh lets the reader experience this multi-layered geography through Kanai’s trip from Kolkata to Lusibari, passing through Canning, each step representing a new passage in the scale of prestige and power. Once the ‘regional’ geography is established, Ghosh introduces a further spatial dialectic, that between the Sundarbans and the larger world, whose influence is mainly felt through the pressure for environmental preservation.

The spatial localisation intersects with a network of temporal dimensions, connecting the present with historical episodes such as Sir Daniel Hamilton’s experiment and the Morichjhãpi massacre. The former – the attempt carried out by a Scottish businessman, in the early twentieth century, to establish a communal and egalitarian society in a set of islands in the Sundarbans – historicises the struggle of the tide country inhabitants with the harsh environment they live in and represents a possible standpoint to elaborate ideas of social justice in the region. The latter epitomises the power struggle between the Sundarbans and the metropolis.

Ultimately, Morichjhãpi can be seen as the chronotope that brings these geographies and temporalities together. The settlement created by the refugees is seen by Nirmal as the next step in Hamilton’s dream, a passage from individual to collective society-building. With the massacre, however, Morichjhãpi ends up representing also the inequalities embedded in the geography of ‘up’ and ‘down’. The crucial point is Kusum’s speech before the massacre. After listening repeatedly to the forest guards telling the refugees that Morichjhãpi is “part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the

world" (261), she cannot help but ask herself: "who are these people [...] who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people?" (261-262). These questions have an immediate ethical and universal urgency, but they actually capture, in a nutshell, the very specific geography of power that starts from the refugees and ends with first-world ecologists, for whom the Kolkata people act as spokesmen. Ghosh's spatiotemporalisation is highly specific to the environment of his choice, creating a network of global connections in space and time from a local understanding of these relations.

3.4 Rupture

The most insightful moments of the novel are those where some form of rupture and paradoxical divergence between the metropolitan and local perspectives emerge. Ghosh manages to turn these moments not simply into instances of intensified drama, but also in anthropologically revealing moments that allow him to lay bare the fault lines between these contrasting world-views - a first step towards a more informed and complete world-view.

The key episode in this case is the tiger killing scene. Around the middle of the novel, Piya, Kanai, Fokir and Horen are forced to spend a night close to a village that is subsequently attacked by a tiger. A mob gathers to kill the tiger, trapped in a cowshed. For everyone, including Kanai and the reader, who have learnt of the tense relationship between humans and tigers in the Sundarbans, the reaction of the villagers makes sense. Piya, instead, is shocked, having conflated, up to that point, her own view of nature with that of the locals - in particular with that of Fokir, who is now eagerly joining the mob. She rushes to stop them, and only the fact that Fokir carries her back to the their boat prevents the villagers from turning on her.

Piya and Kanai voice an apparently unsolvable ethical dilemma that, in turn, is offered to the reader:

Kanai spat into the dust. "Piya, you have to understand - that animal's been preying on this village for years. It's killed two people and any number of cows and goats -".

"This is an animal, Kanai", Piya said. "You can't take revenge on an animal". (293-294)

The paradox stays in the fact that both Piya's conservationist instinct and the crowd's anger are justified in the context of that specific occasion. The aporia encapsulated in the episode enables, later on, the deconstruction of the preservationist discourse as Piya has understood it thus far. Piya sees the problem essentially as an ethical choice, disconnected from the practi-

cal implications for the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. What Piya needs is to complicate her position with what Rob Nixon calls a “transnational ethics of place” (Nixon 2005, 239) – an attachment to a specific environment that, at the same time, is aware of those global dynamics of domination and power that an abstract preservationism might choose to ignore. The process of acquisition of this form of ethics is obtained through what we have previously called critical estrangement.

3.5 Critical Estrangement

As it was mentioned before, critical estrangement involves looking for juxtapositions between familiar and unfamiliar concepts or situations to look at them under a new light. One clear case in *The Hungry Tide* is how Ghosh juxtaposes metropolitan preservationism, the *bhadralok-gramer lok* conflict and the struggle of the locals with their environment.

Throughout the novel, Piya gradually understands the convergence between preservationist discourse and *bhadralok* caste and class violence. The earliest intimations of this overlapping are in her first encounter with Fokir. The forest guard she is travelling with insists that he is a “poacher” (45). Piya understands that Fokir is fishing in an off-limits area and now that he has been caught he will have “to pay either a bribe or a fine” (46). The guard uses the power that derives from the metropolitan anxiety for conservation to rob a poor fisherman of his earnings. In this case, however, Piya can simply blame the guard’s opportunism, thinking that compensating Fokir for his losses from her own pocket will balance the scales. She is not forced to revise her own position.

Things change after the tiger killing episode. It is Kanai – who has just finished reading Nirmal’s notebook and knows the details of the Morichjhāpi massacre – that voices out the connections between first-world ecology, *bhadralok* ideology and the suffering of the tide country people. He tells Piya that they are both complicit in maintaining the existence of the violent relationship between men and animals in the Sundarbans. As for Piya, she is complicit because:

It was people like you [...] who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human cost. And I’m complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons. (301)

Although Piya is ferociously on the defensive in this episode, Kanai’s point ultimately strikes home. When Piya discusses again the matter of environmental preservation with Nilima at the very end of the novel, she is adamant about the fact that she does not want to “do the kind of work that

places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it" (397), and this is why she wants to involve the Badabon Trust in her large-scale project on the *orcaella brevirostris*.

The crucial point is that Piya's change of perspective is possible only through a critical estrangement of her original notion of preservationism. It is only by testing the logic of Western preservationism in the Sundarbans – and by experiencing both the *bhadralok* abuse of that logic and the local, tormented relationship with ecology under international pressure – that she manages to change her perspective and acquire a transnational ethics of place.

3.6 Being-and-becoming

Kanai, in turn, offers an example of Ghosh's exploration of Comaroff's being-and-becoming, the movement from concrete actions to abstract systems or conceptions. The point in question, in this case, is the emergence of a structured *bhadralok* class ideology out of a seemingly urbane and cosmopolitan behaviour. For most part of the novel, Kanai acts according to what we could call his *bhadralok habitus*. In Bourdieu's classical definition, *habitus* is a set of internalised behaviours connected with "a particular class of conditions of existence», which operates «without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (Bourdieu 1990, 53). Since *habitus* does not require the conscious obedience to a set of rules, Kanai is able to behave with an astonishing sense of self-importance and class arrogance, and simultaneously to believe he has overcome the limitations of an upper-caste worldview through his cosmopolitan background. He does not consciously act according to a class and caste ideology.

For instance, at the beginning of the novel, he asks "an elderly and somewhat subdued-looking person" (5) to change places on the train to Canning. He thinks of this as a test of his charisma and persuasion skills. The man complies, but actually because he is scared by Kanai's upper-class appearance. Similarly, when Kanai first encounters Fokir, he is barely able to breach into the wall of silence that the man constructs around himself. He later puts all the blame on the fact that Fokir is allegedly "a peculiar, sulky fellow" (217). He never realizes that talking to Fokir, as Piya puts it, with "the kind of tone in which someone might address a dimwitted waiter, at once jocular and hectoring" (210), may have played a significant role in increasing Fokir's hostility.

In one of the novel central episodes, however, Fokir brings Kanai ashore, to show him some tiger tracks. As soon as he lands, Kanai slips and falls spectacularly into the mud. When Fokir tries to help him, Kanai attempts to re-establish his authority with verbal violence and starts hurling ob-

scenities at Fokir. This brings him to realise something deeply disturbing about himself:

His anger came welling up with an atavistic explosiveness, rising from sources whose very existence he would have denied: the master's suspicion of the menial; the pride of caste; the townsman's mistrust of the rustic; the city's antagonism towards the village. He had thought he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past, but the violence with which they spewed out of him now suggested that they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve. (326)

Interestingly, Kanai is particularly lucid about the origins of his actions in this circumstance. For once, he does understand precisely what is going on—an explosion of a class- and caste-based violence. The latent violence of his everyday actions emerges suddenly into a set of beliefs that Kanai himself is able to identify.

Bhadralok class ideology, in short, is seemingly overcome by the adoption of urbane cosmopolitanism, but instead it simply lies in Kanai as a number of internalized attitudes – a *habitus*. These, however, can harden into more structured formations at specific points in time – in this case, as a defence mechanism – and provide Kanai, during the episode described above, with an ideological basis for his assault on Fokir. Of course, Kanai can tap into such an ideological formation because that very system of beliefs is echoed in his everyday gestures and attitudes, although he would normally deny its persistence. Being able to understand the back-and-forth between these two states is extremely valuable for a scholar of world literature that faces ethnographic encounters, especially when it is the friction between local and global systems of values that complicates such passages between everyday actions and ideological formations.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I tried to show how Ghosh stages a number of ethnographic encounters in *The Hungry Tide*, and approaches them employing strategies that closely recall Comaroff's epistemic operations. This mode of engagement with the world features variously in most part of Ghosh's works. We have already mentioned *In an Antique Land* (1992). In this work the encounter between an Indian anthropologist (Ghosh himself) and Egyptian villagers—intertwined with the reconstruction of the life story of a twelfth century Jewish merchant and his Indian slave—becomes the springboard for an attempt to narrate the history of a significant fraction of the (pre-modern, pre-capitalist) world-system, the Indian Ocean. Once again, we are presented with a global picture that is not superimposed

on, but is rather constructed through, an ethnographical engagement with local realities. Variations of this strategy can be found also in Ghosh's more recent production, both in fiction – with the *Ibis* trilogy – and in non-fiction – with the recently published *The Great Derangement*, whose environmental focus echoes, on many points, *The Hungry Tide*.

If Ghosh's work is suited to converse with Comaroff's model (and arguably with anthropology in general), the next step in an anthropologically-informed project of world literature is to connect him with other writers from different times and places that employ similar techniques. Take, for instance, Robert Louis Stevenson's complex engagement with the Polynesian world; Rebecca West's critical exploration of the Balkans; or Mahasweta Devi's registration of the tense relationship between metropolitan Indians and tribals. The list could go on. In spite of differences in poetics and spatiotemporal coordinates, also these authors relied, at a certain point of their career, on an exploration of ethnographic encounters that allowed them to address local specificities while constructing a global network of interactions and power struggles. Moreover, they employed the clash between these two dimensions not only to deconstruct and estrange familiar realities, but also to question their own position as observers and writers – not unlike Ghosh. In short, the ethnographic encounter seems to provide a ground of comparison between seemingly unrelated writers though the recurrence of similar modes and aims. That is why it may work as a *point of departure* for a project of world literature that both relies on and values the specificities of anthropological paradigms.

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