

***The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh**  
**Notes from the Zukunftskolleg- FMS Book Club**  
**Konstanz 29.10.2015**

**Participants:** 4 (1 neurobiologist, 1 astrophysicist, 1 law scholar, 1 literature/theatre scholar)

- General attitude: Most “literary” novel of those read so far by the book club. One member states that it is almost like prose in poetry. Not so strongly impressed by the science.
- The female protagonist grew up outside India (her parents use Bengali as a barrier). The novel also encompasses a strong scent of mythology. How important is mythology for the connection with natives (→ link to ZuKo’s Jour Fixe)
- The novel encompasses a large variety of characters; it is a lot about finding your place in a changing world. Interestingly, it also refers to Communism – and thus brings together a lot of things that actually don't seem to be compatible at all.
- Most of what one scientist did, is part of this novel – it aims at being very realistic, a genuine observation.
- Ghosh’s research: a research based on what he knows from his family; oral transmission of knowledge; hard to come across proper accounts because of the historical background of the area
- The novel is marked by an interestingly stark contrast: beautiful prose; but the author lacks the capability of writing characters well (cf. the frequent clichés, of which Fokir as the ‘noble savage’ is the most prominent). The world, however, is well-described.
- For most members, plot and characters didn't come together well. There is some disagreement about the question whether certain characters are in love with each other or not. Kanai, for example, obviously sees Kusum as his muse, but not as a person.
- In one scene, the rhythm is a completely different to the rest of the novel, reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon poetry in rhythm (one third into Nirmal’s account of his trip, when he relays what Kusum told him had happened in the years before they reconnected)
- A very constructed atmosphere; same thing with the characters: especially the way women are portrayed (but also other characters) is very annoying.
- Kanai is not immediately a likeable character: he talks down on people (→ Train

scene: He makes people leave the seat he wants to occupy himself)

- Development of Piya and Kanai = constructed: she tries to be an ambitious scientist – also the way people come together is typical for the novel. It is obvious that the author brings people together because he needs them to be at a certain place in a certain time to serve the plot. We can see that this novel is trying to be realistic, but the characters behave in an out-of-character or otherwise illogical way if what they do serves the plot
- Some discussion of whether the technical equipment seems dispositioned in time: Walkman on the one hand, a cell phone on the other (2004 vs. 1990s).
- There seem to be some plot holes (→ Piya's possibly lost equipment) that, upon double-checking, reveal themselves to not be plot holes after all. The suspicion, however, that certain small actions were inserted in hindsight, to avoid a plot hole, emphasizes the artificiality and narrative construction even more
- Fokir seems not to be a complete person (→ classism, maybe even racism?). Description of Fokir annoyed members of book club (→ a bit like the ending in *Titanic*, where one figure's function is fulfilled and he drowns)
- One member of the book club read the novel a bit differently. She very much appreciates the prose and puts a strong emphasis on the style of writing; not so much the plot.
- Other members agree: with regards to the story, there always is a very clichéd explanation of the events. The prose, however, is beautifully done.
- Shows pretty well how stratified Indian society is; how certain lives are considered worthless and expandable
- Confrontation of Nirmal the Communist with other Communists 20 years later. Interesting to see the development of the Left in India – though a few more details about Kanai would have been interesting.
- Characterisation: personality-wise, it is not that obvious that Piya and Kanai should be together at the end. Plotwise, however (the novel as romance), it is rather predictable.
- Kanai and Piya seem to fulfill different functions. Both are set up as “floating” (Piya, however, is looking for roots in a more obvious way than Kanai is), Kanai especially is dissatisfied with his current life style.
- Science Literature: not clear how Piya gets her funding for her fieldwork, she describes herself as unambitious; she must, however, be driven; she is also depicted as naive; the author has to conceal her real mindset to make sure that she does not

lose her function for the narrative, so that she does not seem ambitious (and thus, as a female character, unlikeable)

- Novel = very melancholy. Underneath it all, there is a fading, dying world
- Not only the characters but also their way of speaking is at times highly artificial
- Novel may contain a meta-level, a consistent reminder of the fact that this is wholly constructed (not a proper account). There are different voices telling the same story and these stories are told by the author.
- In a way, it almost seems like a parody: Kanai is a satire of what a somewhat pompous and self-satisfied male middle-class business-man might be like.