

Hungry Tide by Amitov Ghosh
Notes from the FMS Book Club Discussion
Thursday, 20 October, 2016, Bremen

Group members present: Betty, Dorothea, Uwe, Alice, Manfred, Jana, Susan
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These notes were generated by circulating a list of points discussed, which we all added to, with the following directions:

First, a personal statement can be made. Then we can add anything we think is missing from the list of points made: either elaborate on a given point, or add to the list. If there are conflicting opinions that are missing on a given point, be sure to add them. There is no need to specify who exactly said what, but if it seems relevant and you want to add a name or perspective, that's also okay.

General impressions:

- In general the book was well received. Everyone liked the book and enjoyed reading it. The prose is beautiful and made the reading easy and enjoyable.
- The traditional knowledge of the author is appreciated.
- The happy end is quite unbelievable.
- The way the ecology and the habitat are explained is great and very interesting for the biologists in the group.
- The description of the place creates a detailed picture of the Sundarbans, the river systems, the mangroves – of this tidal landscape always in motion.
- The science was disappointing, the characters not always realistic.
- The structure of the novels feels like tides, up and down. Some people felt like more information about the dolphins was missing; however we did learn some interesting facts about these animals, the mangrove and the tigers.

Discussion:

From the beginning of the book clichés about India appear: the rich business man from the city, opposed to the poor illiterate fishermen. The brave poor woman who tries to get an education.

The scientific character is very naïve. The female scientists in the group did not identify with the main protagonist (female scientist) in the book. She is meant to have spent at least 3 years in the field on her own but somehow gets very quickly in trouble at the beginning of the book. I also thought that someone who spends 3 years in a remote country develops a stomach and can handle at least some local type of food; however, Piya fed herself only with cereal bars and refused to eat anything else than rice – this is in my opinion not believable (Alice).

The personal development of the character Kanai didn't seem very realistic.

The characters have a very clear role: Piya who returns to India; the uncle, a revolutionary; Kanai an Indian from the city; the rest village people; the science, a vehicle to understand the social differences among these characters.

Piya had clearly some identity problems as a person and as a scientist. She was looking for herself as well as for the dolphins. She is not obsessed with her research topic as many other scientists are (especially those ready to spend such a long period of time in the field and be so affected in their personal life by their work as she does). She tries to figure out who she is and this question affects her scientific career as well.

Some people did not understand how she could be doing her science alone, without a team of scientists helping. We discussed that there are some scientists who work completely alone, but these are normally very strong characters and that is something we did not find in Piya.

The author is interested in her science.

Although the people from the island do not have as much access to information as Piya, they do know the ecosystem very well and have a very deep knowledge of the place where they live.

Fokir is almost a mythological character. Everything he does seems to be almost supernatural, attempting a glorification of the native Indian. A very nice idea is the transfer of traditional knowledge into a scientific data set: in the end Fokir's (a man who cannot read or write) knowledge about the dolphin places is logged in Piya's GPS data.

We discussed how the "CV" of a writer or the personal experiences of a writer somehow gives him or her the "permission" to write about certain topics, and it somehow affects the way we read the book. For example, if we know that the author of this book is Indian, we might find the book more authentic and that he is somehow allowed to write about Indians, even with a lot of stereotypes.

We all agreed that the main character of the book is the place, the habitat as an ecosystem.

The metaphors in the book are nice. In some cases Piya used her science to understand the feelings of Fokir, trying to get over the language barrier. It is somehow opposite of what we would normally do, using everyday situations as metaphors to explain our science. However it is probably not uncommon for scientists to do it like Piya.

An interesting topic was how well we can as scientists understand our subject of study, especially when they are animals. How far are we from reality when we study something? How far can we go to really understand the animal? Asking questions like "How does it feel to be a bat?" If I were a dolphin? Etc...

The structure of the book in two parts, “ebb” and “flood” did not seem to be profoundly rooted in the book. In other books like for example Mendel’s Dwarf the chapter headers were somehow related to the content of the section. In the case of Hungry Tides we had the feeling it was only to have the ebb and flood, because it makes sense to have both to represent a full tidal cycle but they were not really felt strongly as ebb and flood (falling and rising tides) in the narrative.

The fact that there were Bengali words in the text was not a problem because most of the times they could be understood through the context. Interestingly, the German translation has a glossary of Bengali words at the end of the book, which the original English book does not have.

Further Comments

Dorotheas comments: It is most remarkable that an Indian author who writes about the ecosystem of the Sundabans includes poems of a German poet into his novel. Why did the author include Rilke poems? Did he like them more than any Indian poems? Did he want to make these poems more widely known to his American /British readership? It is not clear to me why he included these poems and I would like to ask him personally one day about his motivation to do so.

Uwe’s comments: The tide-metaphor of the title seems to structure the whole text (the two parts of it, e.g.) and the whole narration of the story (but I couldn’t understand how this works yet). Most impressive is, for me, that this tide-metaphor makes the reader to have a sort of tide-feeling of up and down, in and out, which is, for me as a western reader, perhaps the Indian of this novel. It could be interesting to find out how all this correlates with the Rilke poems cited and translated (from Rilke’s German to fictive-and-real Bengali to the English of the author and then back to the German of my translation).

Manfred’s Comments: I liked the book very much. The writer seems to like self reflection and irony, as she refers on page 160 :” Writers, how they love flattery.” This is also on page 132, where she writes: “.....speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you can see through the eyes of another being.”