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4/28/20 J. Santa Ana

Disinherited Ones: Human Understandings and Misunderstandings in Piya’s Natural World

In *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, the natural world of the Indian Sundarbans

retaliates against those who disturb its balance due to misunderstanding the local human

population’s conflicts and desires. Piyali Roy, an Indian American marine biologist drawn

toward the scientific field for its objectivity, embodies the folly of encroaching upon a foreign

land without heed for the needs and desires of its residents. As a cetologist studying the species

*Orcaella*, Piya believes that her work is disinherited from the conflicts of the human world,

emphasized by her identity as a returning immigrant and her subsequent naivety about the culture

and customs of the people of the Sundarbans. Despite her good intentions in furthering scientific

knowledge, Piya overlooks the power of her presence to disturb the Sundarbans’ human and

nonhuman communities. Piya’s decision to maintain a liminal position throughout the novel,

positioned on the outskirts of her American home as well as India and the Sundarbans, leads to

her failure to truly understand the rich culture and desperate economic and environmental

conflicts of the humans around her. Ultimately, Piya’s careless estrangement from the human

world threatens the stability of human-nonhuman relationships in the Sundarbans, and the natural

world retaliates with climatic moments of conflict and violence.

Piya’s position as an outsider in appearance and behavior introduces the novel, as Kanai

Dutt, a translator, immediately notices her on a Kolkata train station platform, “deceived neither

by her close-cropped black hair nor by her clothes, which were those of a teenage boy…she was

a foreigner; it was stamped in her posture” (1). Piya’s androgynous style is shown as proudly

different, but it is immediately apparent as a deception to others such as Kanai, who can perceive

her true identity as a woman and foreigner. Throughout the novel, Piya’s appearance continues to

mark her as individualistic and disassociated from human concerns such as standing out amongst

a crowd. Despite being hyperaware of the maverick nature of her appearance, as she

acknowledges that in graduate school “She was used to being dwarfed by her contemporaries.

Through her childhood and adolescence she had always been among the smallest in her age

group...She had become a kind of departmental mascot -- “the little East Indian girl” (63), she

distances herself from others’ expectations. Piya’s conscious decision to overcome this sense of

physical difference by focusing on her work, where “the glasses fetched you the water with such

vividness and particularity that you could not think of anything else” (63), grants her mental

strength and freedom from subjective human concerns. Piya’s disengagement with the opinions

of the human world is seen as strong and admirable, suited for the taxing work of a marine

biologist as well as praise from other comparatively economically privileged outsiders in the

Sundarbans, as when Kanai later accompanies her on her cetology survey and calls her “a brave

woman” (250). However, her ability to embrace physical nonconformity also foreshadows her

dangerous carelessness when it comes to human relationships and perspectives within the

Sundarbans. Though Piya initially overlooks the impact of her own appearance on others, her

focus on the objectivity of her work at the expense of understanding humans causes her to

misread dangerous situations. Upon first embarking on her survey in the Sundarbans, Piya is

harassed by armed guards, who immediately recognize her social naivety and make obscene

gestures toward her, despite her confidence in her objective scientific abilities:

“she had always felt herself to be protected by the sheer matter-of-factness of what she

did…her appearance had robbed her of that protection…she had no more idea of what her

own place was in the great scheme of things than she did of theirs – and it was exactly

this, she knew, that had occasioned their behavior” (31).

Piya’s presence disrupts the delicate balance of human relationships in the Sundarbans, and the

human world retaliates against her with crude gestures that mark her position as an outsider.

While previously Piya’s appearance and individuality has granted her both admiration and a

strong mindset, it marginalizes her in the Sundarbans. The establishment of Piya as a character

who has both endured a lifelong sense of physical apartness and who is accepting of this distance

illustrates her naïvety when immersed in the human world of the Sundarbans. Her independent

appearance, shown as a positive quality in academia and in the world outside the Sundarbans,

fosters a dangerous illiteracy when it comes to human relationships and foreshadows her future

difficulties engaging with the Sundarbans on a human level.

Just as her unique appearance marks her as an outsider, and thus disengaged with human

opinions of her, Piya selects her line of work in marine biology for her perception of its objective

nature and freedom from the obligations of the human world. As Piya continues her journey, her

scientific objectivity continues to be undermined as unsuitable for the human and nonhuman

needs of the Sundarbans. Piya’s immigrant background is marked by familial strife:

“a door was no defense against her parents’ voices…the sounds of their quarrels would

always find ways of trickling in…she would dream of washing her head of those sounds;

she wanted words with the heft of stainless steel, sounds that had been boiled clean, like a

surgeon’s instruments, tools with nothing attached except meanings that could be looked

up in a dictionary – empty of pain and memory and inwardness” (78).

Piya’s motivations for studying marine biology are defined by her desire to be detached from the

human world, and this becomes her downfall when it comes to understanding the complex

human and nonhuman interests of the Sundarbans. Piya intentionally chooses her field for its

lack of subjectivity, absent of human words laden with emotion, yet it is only through words that

the desperate human-nonhuman conflicts of the Sundarbans can be communicated. Though she

believes herself to be an objective scientist and “[resents] the implication that her interests had

been determined by her parentage” (79), her willing lack of knowledge concerning the local

community’s needs and perspectives in prior to traveling to the Sundarbans undermines her

conservation efforts. Due to Piya’s focus on scientific facts at the expense of interpersonal

human knowledge, she is further emphasized as an outsider inept at solving the true human and

nonhuman problems of the Sundarbans. Her chosen study of river dolphins continues to highlight

her removal from the local community’s needs, appears comparatively frivolous in a location

where the animals that make the most impact on the human population are shown to be crabs,

which are the fisherman Fokir’s “livelihood” (119), and tigers, which have killed “tens of

thousands” of human beings for over a century” (199). Piya’s failure to obtain sufficient

historical and contextual knowledge of the local population beforehand, due to her aversion to

the human conflict of her youth and anything similar, puts her at the mercy of the natural world.

In a climatic, violent scene where a tiger is trapped inside a village hut, tortured and burned alive

by human villagers eager for revenge on their daily predator, Piya’s objective career motivations

cause her to embrace an ill-informed American conservation ideal when she states that “you

can’t take revenge on an animal” (242), ignoring the perspectives of the local human population

with dangerous consequences. The human locals angrily retaliate against Piya when she

intervenes and Fokir drags her away from the scene. Just as Piya’s appearance marks her as an

outsider and disturbs the delicate balance of the human-nonhuman world in ways she is naïve to,

her devotion to “meanings that could be looked up in a dictionary” (78) and the scientific logic

of never enacting vengeance on an animal causes a violent backlash from the humans of the

natural world. Piya has chosen field biology “for the life it offered as for its intellectual content –

because it allowed her to be on her own” (106), but her estrangement from the human world

means that she intermingles with locals while ignoring the importance of the language barrier in

silencing the needs of the humans of the Sundarbans, at her own peril. It is only through words

that humans can express their true needs and perspectives. As such, Piya’s decision to study

science in order to abandon the emotion-laden words of her immigrant past becomes dangerous

when it furthers her willful ignorance of the human world in favor of animal needs. She is again

marked as an outsider to the world of human perspectives, where her careless involvement in the

Sundarbans invokes violence in the human-nonhuman natural world.

Piya’s estrangement from the human world through appearance and career motivations is

further emphasized through her complex relationship with the impoverished fisherman Fokir.

When they first encounter each other, Piya attempts to help Fokir financially when her boat

guards violently target him and his son for off-limits fishing by returning his stolen income with

her own money. However, as Piya defies the guard and tosses Fokir her banknotes, “one of [the

guard’s] feet crashed into the chair, throwing her forward, tipping her weight over the gunwale.

Suddenly she was falling and the muddy brown water was rushing up to meet her face” (41). The

natural world retaliates against Piya as she falls into the water, impacted by the conflict she has

unintentionally caused through her interference in the Sundarbans. Despite her naïve

benevolence, Piya’s dangerous fall symbolizes how she unbalances the Sundarbans’ delicate

human relationships, with the later revelation that her aid is mismatched to Fokir’s customs.

Fokir only accepts “one note as compensation for the money that had been taken from him” (56),

and later when Piya attempts to reimburse him again for their journey, he tells his wife Moyna

that “it [doesn’t] bode well to take money for something like this” (174). It is a burden on Fokir

to accept an ill-fitting gift, brought on by Piya’s ignorance of the human world of the

Sundarbans. Fokir’s generosity, demonstrated when he aids Piya along her journey and refuses to

accept more money than he deems fit as an individual, later costs him his life as Piya continues

to misunderstand him throughout the novel. Piya fantasizes that she truly understands Fokir

despite a language barrier, imagining for him a large family where “although they were poor

their lives did not lack for warmth or companionship” (131). However, Piya is “shamed for her

lack of insight” when she discovers the tragic fate of Fokir’s mother, who was killed in the

Marichjhapi massacre with a group of refugees (182). Piya’s failure to deduce the complex

human history and perspective of Fokir underscores her estrangement from the human world

and foreshadows her dangerous ignorance of the Sundarbans’ tenuous human-nonhuman

relationships. Piya hires Fokir for a research expedition because he “knows the river well” (177)

and has valuable knowledge due to his lifelong experience along the waterways of the

Sundarbans. However, Piya has committed the folly of using Fokir for his objective knowledge

on a mission to survey river dolphins, prioritizing American conservation work over the

desperate historical and economic needs and conflicts of his family lineage and his people. The

natural world retaliates in the ultimate way of taking Fokir’s life in a violent cyclone, when all

his knowledge of the Sundarbans is only enough to protect Piya and not himself: “an uprooted

stump…had hit him so hard that she too had been crushed against the trunk of the tree they were

sitting on. The sari had kept them attached to the trunk even as he was dying” (323).

Piya’s involvement in the Sundarbans for scientific research becomes deadly when she fails to

consider the impact of her detachment from human concerns on the humans of the Sundarbans,

equally interconnected to the natural world as the animals she studies. The ignored needs of the

local population is symbolized by the death of the man she has used, for research on an animal

species that will not directly impact his people. Ultimately, Piya’s lack of initiative in fully

understanding human perspectives is emphasized by her unbalanced relationship with Fokir, with

violent consequences from the natural world.

Piya’s physical appearance, motivations for pursuing marine biology, and

misunderstandings of Fokir emphasize her naivety as to the impact of her presence and actions in

the Sundarbans, and invite retaliation from the natural world. Unmoored from the human world

and its opinions through acceptance of her individualistic appearance in multiple environments,

Piya nevertheless encounters those for which her appearance disturbs the balance of the

Sundarbans’ intricate human relationships, inviting harassment. Piya’s decision to study marine

biology for its objectivity, shunning the emotional human world of her immigrant youth,

overlooks the essential human concerns behind conservation in the Sundarbans. Piya’s scientific

objectivity and ignorance of human perspectives leads her to carelessly enter dangerous conflicts

between humans and nonhumans, with backlash from the natural world as she puts herself in

harm’s way. Piya’s misunderstandings of Fokir continue to mark her as an outsider to the realm

of the historical, economic, and human needs of the Sundarbans, where her interference is

harshly punished by the natural world with the danger and trauma of surviving Fokir’s death. As

such, Piya’s disinheritance of human concerns is demonstrated through her individualistic

appearance, career motivation, and engagements with Fokir. Her removal from the reality of

human-nonhuman relationships in the Sundarbans proves to be a dangerous endeavor, when

nature rises to defend the needs of those she overlooks.

Works Cited

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.