Chronotopes of "Places" and "Non-places": Ecopoetics of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*[1]

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Abstract

The Hungry Tide (2004) is a unique combination of fiction and cultural-anthropological research. The tidal land or *bhatir desh* is the destination for two travellers in the novel, Piyali Roy and Kanai Dutt, with one aim: to research into the mysteries of the Sunderbans. While Piya intends to study Irrawaddy dolphins, Kanai through the journal of his uncle Nirmal researches into the shifting ghettos of a group of refugees. In this paper we attempt to explore the idea of "ecopoetics" through an analysis of *The Hungry Tide* with the concept of chronotopes and chronotopic motifs proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". We try to understand the novel in terms of the "folkloric" and "idyllic" chronotopes, and also examine "places" and "non-places" as related to each other, especially the chronotope of "non-places" as deeply related to the terrains of the mind.

Abstract in Malay

The Hungry Tide (2004) ialah satu gabungan unik antara penulisan fiksyen dan kajian kebudayaan dan antropologi. Kawasan pasang surut atau bhatir desh merupakan destinasi dua pengembara, Piyali Roy dan Kanai Dutt dengan satu matlamat iaitu mengkaji tentang misteri Sunderban. Semasa Piya mahu mengkaji lumba-lumba, Kanai menerusi jurnal bapa saudaranya Nirmal menjalankan kajian tentang penempatan setinggan yang berubah-ubah sekumpulan pelarian. Dalam artikel ini, kami cuba untuk mengupas idea "*ecopoetics*" melalui analisis *The Hungry Tide* dengan menggunakan konsep

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motif latar masa dan tempat serta seperti yang dikemukakan oleh Mikhail Bakhtin dalam "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." Kami cuba untuk memahami novel tersebut dari segi latar masa dan tempat yang berciri seperti "sastera rakyat" dan "sangat sempurna". Kami juga telah memeriksa konsep "tempat" dan "bukan tempat" yang saling berkaitan, terutamanya latar masa dan tempat bagi "bukan tempat" yang berkait rapat dengan pemikiran.

Keywords
Ecopoetics, chronotopes/chronotopic motifs, places and non-places, landscape writing, Indian novels written in English, migrants, refugees

Keywords in Malay
Sastera ekologi, motif *chronotope*, tempat dan bukan tempat, penulisan landskap, novel India dalam Bahasa Inggeris, migran, pelarian

Ecopoetics and the *Bhatir Desh*

> A new chronotope was needed that would permit one to link real life (history) with real earth. (Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope" 206)

> *I spent my mornings and afternoons there: long swathes of empty time, spent gazing at the mohona as it filled and emptied, filled and emptied, day after day, as untiring as the earth itself.* (Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 275) (Italics in original)

The corpus of Amitav Ghosh's fiction expands while panning through wide-angle lenses of themes. *The Hungry Tide* (2004) by Ghosh is a unique combination of anthropology, migration, travel, environmentalism, ethnography, photography and landscape; wrapped under the cloak of fiction. In this paper we attempt to understand the "ecopoetics" of *The Hungry Tide* in the light of the concept of chronotopes proposed by Bakhtin in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." Bakhtin has studied *chronos* (time) and *topos* (space) as inseparable from each other. There is a constant interplay of time-space aspects when we look at ecological and human perspectives of narratives. In contemporary critical debates, chronotopes have been useful in understanding the delicate balance between temporality and spatiality in the novelistic form.

We first address the problems of the term "ecopoetics" and its implications. The British academic-writer Jonathan Bate used the term "ecopoetics" in his readings of British poetry from the 18th to the 20th century in the book *The Song of the Earth* (2000). The term has not been as frequent in

use as "Ecosophy," "Eco-politics" or "Ecophilosophy."[4] Radical approaches to ecology and environmental concerns have been a part of these movements in literary sensibility. Deriving from Heideggerian philosophy of "dwelling," Bate's arguments in the book focus on issues like aesthetic representation of nature, pastoral themes, art as mediated by human centric values, culture, and landscape in poetry and novels. Bate discusses novels of Thomas Hardy and Jane Austen as eco-sensitive texts. But, compared to novels, he clearly privileges the poetic genre as sensitive to "environment" and nature. Bate defines his theory of "ecopoetics" in terms of poetry:

> I think of this book as an "experiment in ecopoetics." The experiment is this: to see what happens when we regard poems as imaginary parks in which we may breathe an air that is not toxic and accommodate ourselves to a mode of dwelling that is not alienated. (Bate, *The Song of the Earth* 64)

However, unlike Bate who proposes a "non-toxic" atmosphere for poetry through his theory of ecopoetics, we use the term "ecopoetics" not as a "refinement" of nature sans human habitat, but as a complex interaction between man and nature. We seek to appropriate this term in a reading of *The Hungry Tide,* a unique novel in terms of its intense perception of the tidal ecology. The text displays a constant "dialogue" between human habitats and ecological setups that have led to a different kind of ecopoetics. However, whether all human-nature relationships are "harmonious" is a question that *The Hungry Tide* encourages its readers to ask. *The Hungry Tide* reflects an ecological concern that tries to integrate romanticism with realistic elements.

In his paper "Earthsongs: Ecopoetics, Heidegger and Dwelling," Michael Peters asks "whether ecopoetics is sustainable" (2). He traces Bate's use of the term to Heidegger's "ecophilosophy without his [Heidegger's] ecopolitics" ("Earthsongs" 5). By "Heideggerian ecophilosophy," thinkers associate the relationship between "being" and "clearing" or as eco-critics interpret it, "Earth and World." Ecocritics following a Heideggerian line of thought derive inspiration and establish poetry as the primary genre which embodies in its form the ecstasies and agonies of nature.

Heidegger's philosophical concept of "dwelling" especially has attracted comparison with ecological modes of "being" and "dwelling." However, ecology or eco-sensitivity in literature cannot be restricted to the genre of poetry alone. Ecopoetics as a concept is not "non-political" and neither is it limited to the genre of poetry, i.e. it is not "eco-poetry." Ecopoetics can be viewed as a cultural way of looking at ecological and human dynamics, in order

[4] See Arne Naess's classification of "deep ecology," "ecosophy" and "ecophilosophy" in his book *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*.

to understand the creative forces that help in developing a keener perception of the environment. The sustainability of ecopoetics as a concept in literature will depend on its wider application in literary and cultural discourses. We intend to highlight on two major aspects through this reading:

(a) Ecological concerns should not be genre-specific, i.e. it should not be limited to a study of eco-poetry alone. Novels like the Sri Lankan writer Romesh Gunesekara's *Reef* (1994) or Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), project unique ecological concerns that have still not been analysed as a part of literary ecocriticism.

(b) With a study of the chronotopes and chronotopic motifs of the tidal land in *The Hungry Tide*, we intend to underscore the unrecognised role of Bakhtin in literary ecocritical discourses. While in geography and environmental studies[5] Bakhtin has already begun to figure as a major contributor, literary discourses dealing with ecological concerns are yet to discover the Bakhtinian mode of creative understanding of nature cutting through binaries of nature/culture. Bakhtin's dialogical approach towards the existing binaries might help in newer modes of understanding ecological and environmental issues.

The tide country or bhatir desh portrayed in *The Hungry Tide* illustrates a part of the world where both history and geography overlap in a strange interplay:

> To me a townsman, the tide country's jungle was an emptiness, a place where time stood still. I saw now that this was an illusion, that exactly the opposite was true. What was happening here, I realised was that the wheel of time was spinning too fast to be seen. (224)

Compared to his other novels, this novel of Ghosh is limited in terms of its spatial/geographical expanse and intertwines *humanscape* and *landscape*. Unlike *The Shadow Lines* (1989), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) or *The Glass Palace* (2000) which cover huge geographical expanse, the locale of *The Hungry Tide* is fixed – bhatir desh of the Sunderbans. The archipelago is a strip of land sandwiched between the Bay of Bengal, torn between India and Bangladesh. Sunderbans is the natural habitat of many endangered species including the Royal Bengal Tiger and the Irawaddy dolphins and is the home of the mangrove forest or *Sundari* trees. However, it is also a politically problematic zone caught between the tussle of refugees and the state: "there is no prettiness here to invite the stranger

[5] See M. Folch Serra's paper "Place, Voice, Space: Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogical Landscape" in the journal of *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*.

in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as 'the Sunderbans,' which means 'the beautiful forest'" (8).

Space or place determines the movement of time in the novel. The tidal land has not only a power to change the course of the rivers, shape and reshape lands, but has also the power to shape time as per the will of the ebbing and rising tides. Nirmal sums up this idea in his journal when he writes about the tidal land:

> *Now, with the rising of the sun, I have understood what it is: I am afraid because I know that after the storm passes, the events that have preceded its coming will be forgotten. No one knows better than I how skilful the tide country is in silting over its past.* (69)

The Hungry Tide has a text and a subtext strewn in a series of events that occur in the tidal land. Destinies of characters like Piya, Kanai, Fokir, Nilima, Nirmal, and Moyna are entangled with each other and with the natural and socio-cultural geography of the Sunderbans. While the main narration shapes in the present of the protagonists – Piya, Fokir, Kanai, and Nilima, the past keeps surfacing in the form of Nirmal's journal. While the present time in the triangle of Piya, Fokir, and Kanai has more to do with the geographical and conservational aspects of the tidal land, the past in Nirmal and his dialogues with a young Kanai mark the "human-concern" for the lives of refugees. On the one hand, Nirmal is obsessed with larger-than-life Marxist and socialist ideologies and with a "space" for refugees; on the other, his wife Nilima is a practical thinker and an activist who looks into the immediate problems of the settlement colony of Lusibari. Nilima's work revolves around the welfare of women, education for children, and basic health care amenities for the citizens of the tidal land. Nirmal's journal and his ideologies posit themselves as an alternative to the "official" versions of conflict between Bangladeshi migrants and government agencies. Nilima's files provide an alternative perspective on conservation of wildlife and biological species raising a controversial question: *whether human lives should be less valued than the biological and animal species in the Sunderbans?*

Along with the fictional part, the narrative keeps giving meta-fictive commentaries on the number of human beings killed or mauled by the tigers who prowl into human settlements. Nilima explains to Kanai with her records and her "sheaf of files" (240) that, at least a "hundred people are killed by tigers each year" (270). She adds that this figure is only that of the "Indian side" (270) of the Sunderbans and if one observed the Bangladesh side, the number of human lives lost might be much more. The islanders fight against tigers as an "evil force" (292) and Nilima's records, together seem to project a complex geopolitical issue where the landscape of the Sunderbans becomes a

problematic war field between forces of nature and that of the human world. But why do the tigers venture forth into human settlements leaving their own enclosures? The theory proposed by Nilima depicts concerns of territoriality in an ecological setup. She explains her theory to Kanai and reasons with him that tigers venturing into the settlements might have a possible relationship with the:

> … peculiar conditions of the tidal ecology, in which large parts of the forest were subjected to daily submersions. The theory went that this raised the animals' threshold of aggression by washing away their scent markings and confusing their territorial instincts. (241)

Encroaching mutual space and confusion regarding territory and borders in the ecosystem of the Sunderbans have been often debated in the present times. However, the novel seems to project the idea that it is difficult to assess the ecological concerns of the planet without a close survey of the human and cultural issues entwined with natural ecosystems. Thus, the "ecopoetics" projected by *The Hungry Tide* would mean looking deeper into the problems of human-environmental-cultural aspects. The huge amount of economic resources that pour in for the conservation of tigers from different environmental protection groups, enable the forest officials to put their own interest, interest of the forest department and of the Government as their foremost priority. Strangely, deaths of human beings are allowed to continue in the area for centuries. Ghosh provides an interesting *subaltern* perspective with Nilima's records of the human-animal dynamics in the tide country: "Just imagine that!" said Nilima. "They [forest department] were providing water for tigers! In a place where nobody thinks twice about human beings going thirsty!" (241).

Piya and Kanai reveal the ecological and anthropological concerns of Ghosh's own research on the tidal land in the form of their professions: while Piya an American researcher of Bengali origin is a "cetologist" working on the behaviour of a rare species of Gangetic dolphins, Kanai is a Delhi-based linguist who runs his own translation firm. They meet in the train on their way to the tidal land. Piya is headed for Canning to the Forest department office, which would give her the permit to enter the Sunderbans for her research on the marine mammals, and Kanai is headed for Lusibari on a personal visit to his aunt Nilima. The purpose of Kanai's visit is to retrieve a journal of his dead uncle Nirmal that has surfaced after many years and to get it published if possible. Nevertheless, it seems destiny had other plans and Kanai and Piya's paths were to cross. There is another character that comes between Piya and Kanai – Fokir, a poor fisherman from Lusibari. Piya is ill-treated and sexually threatened on her expedition into the river by a boatman and the forest guard accompanying her. She is saved by Fokir and his son Tutul and brought into

their small boat. Fokir is a veteran fisherman and a keen observer and something of a romantic recluse who finds it hard to come to terms with an educated and ambitious wife Moyna (she works as a nurse in Nilima's hospital). He finds solace only in the company of his son and in his silent fishing expeditions. Fokir and Piya share a common love – love for nature and love for the Irawaddy dolphins. They have no communication barrier even though they do not understand each other's language. Piya neither speaks nor understands Bengali and Fokir knows no English. Still they share a creative and aesthetic bond that goes beyond language. Piya spends a few days in her research expedition on the dolphins with Fokir who knows every nook and corner of the dolphins' natural habitat as if it were his own home. Those few days with a series of events in Piya's life and her silent bonding with Fokir and Tutul, remain an unforgettable part of her life.

After spending a few days in the rivers of Sunderbans, Piya and Fokir return to Lusibari to Kanai and his aunt Nilima's (she is called *Mashima* in Lusibari) place, since Piya knows no other person in the tidal land. Then on, start a new series of events in which Piya is faced with conflicting emotions that affect her equations with both Fokir and Kanai. The conflict is not just at the level of human emotions but also at the level of human communication. While Fokir has no words to offer to Piya, Kanai is full of language and linguistic nuances. On the larger scale of the narrative, many events happen that include Kanai's reading through Nirmal's journal in which Nirmal has penned his intense love for Bangladeshi refugees who were trying to establish their own settlement in a small-uninhabited island of Sunderbans called *Morichjhapi*. Nirmal's love for these refugees is triggered partly by the socialist ideologies of his youth and partly by the inspiring life of a girl named Kusum whom once Nilima had given shelter in her trust premises. As the novel progresses, the main text keeps moving with Kanai, Fokir, Piya, Nilima, and Moyna and their encounters with the ecological and cultural layers of the tidal land. The subtext in the journals and commentaries concentrates on the refugees' plight and focuses on Nirmal's utopian idealisms and his love or admiration for Kusum that clash with his wife's pragmatism.

However, there is a deeper force at work – the characters are strongly sensitive to the spatio-temporal dimensions of the tidal land and its landscape, mythologies, and histories. In the following sections, we attempt to understand this unique relationship that the characters have with the Sunderbans, with the help of Bakhtin's chronotopes.

Chronotopes of the Tidal Land

Bakhtin has discussed the formation of various genres in literature based on time-space dialogues in chronotopes and chronotopic motifs. There is a firm sense of location (topos) and history (chronos) in his assessment of the nature

of communication based on the notions of dialogue, differences, plurality, and dependent on time-space alterations.

Chronotopes are often understood as technical categories in literary texts. There are still no systematic theoretical approaches to Bakhtin's chronotopic formulations. The concept of chronotopes apparently seem to be focused on human activities like motifs of meeting, parting, escapes, food, drink, death, etc. Bakhtin has analysed these crossroads of time-space in the slow demarcation of genres and generic distinctions in the novelistic form. He has recounted defining moments that led to creating generic distinctions in narratives from earliest pastoral communities to the time when [hu]mankind started building roads, cities, and towns. Bakhtin's idea of the chronotopes as determining to a "significant degree the image of man in literature" ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 85) implies that the importance of time-space coordinates goes beyond being limited to technical categories and has a relevance as cognitive categories in the study of literature and human consciousness.[6] Bakhtin's chronotopic concepts have been extended into many cultural narratives and are studied in cinema, paintings, novelistic and performing arts covering a wide spectrum of issues. However, when his concept of chronotopes and problems of ecological understanding are analysed, the question obviously arises: where are the ecopoetics in the concept of chronotopes? The other problem related to the concerns of our paper is that even if there is a certain ecological understanding in the concept of chronotopes, how does that help explain *The Hungry Tide*?

Bakhtin's interpretation of time-space interactions in the chronotopes is based on "immediate realities" unlike Kant's "transcendental" interpretation of time-space relations.[7] Drawing upon this line of thought, one might infer that these "immediate realities" may also mean human-ecological/nature interactions. By attempting to understand time-space as an inseparable whole, chronotopes subvert the binaries of culture/nature and human/nature in the novelistic form. Bakhtin has defined the artistic chronotope in these words:

> … spatial and temporal indicators are fused into a carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time as it were thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.
>
> ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 84)

[6] For an analysis of the chronotopes having cognitive significance, see, Bart Keunen's "Bakhtin, Genre Formation, and the Cognitive Turn: Chronotopes as Memory Schemata."

[7] See Footnote 2 of "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" for Bakhtin's understanding of his position on time-space vis-à-vis Kant's understanding of the transcendental nature of time and space.

Of these spatio-temporal fusions expressed through different chronotopic motifs in Bakhtin's analysis, human-nature or human-ecological dialogues are the least explored. M. Folch-Serra argues that the "dialogical landscape" of Bakhtin's thoughts, which would have a long-term impact on the "geography of regions", is in the form of an "ongoing project" (Folch-Serra, "Place, Voice, Space" 256).

Coming to Bakhtin's original project on the chronotopes, he has approached the human-ecology dialogue through the "folkloric" and the "idyllic" chronotopes ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 206). He has explored ideas of the evolution of a class society, personal and public spaces, human labour and *collective time*, as constantly in dialogue with forces of nature in the "folkloric bases" like that of the Rabelais ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 206). Bakhtin has discussed the spatio-temporal relationships in the folkloric chronotope as based on agricultural "acts." However, we limit this analysis to two particular features of the folkloric chronotope that are examined in the context of *The Hungry Tide*: (a) to the scale of events portrayed, and (b) the status of local myths/legends associated with the folkloric motif. According to Bakhtin, the spatial reaches of the folkloric chronotope are limited but ancient, static yet dynamic:

> We see reflected here an enormous event portrayed on a small scale, an event that is enormous by virtue of elements brought into the narrative, which are linked to an origin lying far beyond the boundaries of that small scrap of real life in which they are reflected. ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 223)

Bakhtin's view of a limited geographical world in Rabelais gets expressed in the community life of the tidal land in *The Hungry Tide*. The tidal land too encapsulates enormous events like colonisation and decolonisation in Daniel Hamilton's stories, the mass exodus of labour from Sunderbans to cities like Kolkata in Kusum and her mother's story, the war between silence and language in Kanai and Fokir, the gaps between wildlife conservation and human crisis and between idealism and activism of Nirmal and Nilima. The events captured in the narrative are many and have massive ideological propensities but the locale is limited to Sunderbans. Ghosh designs the placing of these events in the narrative in the form of short contradictory dialogues within various characters. These dialogical conflicts mark the division of spaces into individual spaces or private spaces and public spaces or geographical spaces. The differences between "collective" public spaces and individual "private" spaces are clearly marked out in the folkloric chronotope of this novel. Bakhtin has defined the temporality of folkloric chronotope as based on a "time [that] is collective, that is, it is differentiated and measured only by the events of *collective*

life" (Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 206). This novel also projects a conflict based on geographical "spacing" or "placing" of Sunderbans where there is a constant war between human "space" and animal "space." The text poses an important question of who encroaches on whose space:

> See, he says, people lived here once, but they were driven away by tempests and tides, tigers and crocodiles. *"Tai naki?"* says S'Daniel. Is that so? "But if people lived here once, why shouldn't they again?" This is after all no remote and lonely frontier – this is India's doormat, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent. (50)

Geographical locale becomes a site for geopolitics of the Sunderbans. This strange human-animal intimacy in the novel is enhanced by the chronotopic motif of "fear" – fear of a sudden proximity with the animal (tiger) at a certain moment in time and place and the fear of death. For instance, this human-animal equation based on "fear" is captured in a moment where Fokir explains the animal footprints to Kanai, the silence of *Garjontola* and the "fear" of the unseen animal and its impact on the natives of the tidal land:

> "Those are just burrows," he [Kanai] said smiling. "I saw crabs digging into them. What makes you think they have anything to do with the big cat?"
>
> Fokir turned to flash him a bright, white smile. "Do you want to know how I know?"
>
> "Yes. Tell me."
>
> Leaning over, Fokir took hold of Kanai's hand and placed it on the back of his neck. The unexpected intimacy of this contact sent a shock through Kanai's arm and he snatched his hand back – but not before he had felt the goose bumps bristling on the moist surface of Fokir's skin….
>
> "That's how I know," he said. "It's the fear that tells me." (322)

Fear plays a key role in the ecological setup of the tidal land. However, whether it is an extreme "fear" of facing the unseen forces of nature that have engendered local myths of Bon Bibi (the good) and Dokhin Rai (the territory of the evil) or whether these myths existed as traces of history before any human settlement in the Sunderbans, is a matter left open to debate in the novel. But, one can assert that this chronotopic motif of fear is "rooted" in the public/ collective space of the tidal land.

The other level of the conflict manifests as individual or "personal" spaces in the novel. On the one hand are Piya, Kanai, Nirmal and Nilima who have a strong sense of their "private" spaces, which sometimes conflict with the public space that they inhabit. On the other hand is Fokir who inhabits what Bakhtin would call a "collective space." Piya's individual space often conflicts

with Kanai's, and sometimes with the public space of her being a cetologist who has to exist only in company of animals and with "natives." Piya knows the charm of cityscape and of human interaction and craves for it, but Fokir lives in a time that perhaps Bakhtin would call, "sunk deeply in the earth, implanted in it and ripening in it" ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 208). He lives in the "simple moments" of food, water, fishing, and crabs, yet maintains his individuality. Fokir lives in an organic fusion with the ecosystem of Sunderbans. His knowledge of the waterscape is phenomenal and his keen sense of the interdependence of human and natural ecosystems, as Piya observes matches her own sense of "scientific" eco-conservation (141). Fokir does not use nylon nets; he uses ancient fishing lines with shark bones and broken tiles:

> It was surprising enough that their jobs had not proved to be utterly incompatible – especially considering that one of the tasks required the input of geostationary satellites while the other depended on bits of shark-bone and broken tile. But that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously…. (141)

Fokir's character is closest to what Bakhtin would describe the "folkloric character" of a chronotope. His sense of collective labour does not mean "human labour," i.e. he understands the nuances of not only human labour but also "animal labour." He can accurately *time* the Gangetic dolphins' arrival and departure from the pool near Garjontola as per their foray for food and rest in the pool according to wind directions and forces of tide. The dolphins feel safe near Fokir's boat since they seem to understand that he is not interested in capturing them. They come and play near his small boat and throw up crabs for him. He understands the location of the dolphins and the force of the tides better than the GPS of Piya.

A subtle irony is projected through this eco-friendliness of Fokir. The novelist attempts to compare the concerns of ecologists and environmentalists regarding the disturbance of ecosystems by human interference with the presence of human traces in the natural ecosystem. Through Fokir's character, the novel seems to inquire: *Who is actually the outsider in the ecosystem of the tidal land? Are the "native" fishermen responsible for destroying the natural ecosystem or are the forces of industrialisation, urbanisation, and forms of government and semi-government interference responsible for the actual destruction of the ecological balance?* (Italics added). As seen later in the novel, when Fokir and Piya reach Garjontola to study the dolphins a second time, they observe that the motorboat of the forest department has ruthlessly killed a baby dolphin. Even Piya's life in the Sunderbans and her equations with Fokir create a kind of "ecological imbalance." While for Fokir the tidal land is a part of his very "being" and his existence, for Piya the Sunderbans is a natural ecosystem which she has to

"study" as a part of her research and then return to the cityscape to which she originally belongs. It is not until the end of the novel that Piya realises her own "organic" link to the tidal land after Fokir has lost his life while saving her from the storm.

Nature versus civilisation in *The Hungry Tide* is a relative concept dependent on the spatio-temporal relationships that forces of civilisation in the form of human interference share with the forces of nature. Bakhtin has described this nature of time in the folkloric chronotope as "profoundly spatial and concrete. It is not separated from the earth or from nature" ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 208). The "collective labour" that animals and some human communities share in the folkloric chronotope of the tidal land through centuries is disturbed by the interference of the "civilised spaces" of governmental control and of environmentalists (including Piya herself).

A related motif of the "folkloric" chronotope is that of cults and rituals. Bakhtin has described the "ritualistic" nature of the folkloric chronotope as an important marker in the slow but steady division of primitive societies from "collective" life into community life of a more private nature:

> From another point of view they enter into ritual, acquiring in this new context a magic significance (which is in general highly specific as regards its cultic or ritualistic meaning). Ritual and everyday life are tightly interwoven with each other…. ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 212)

The ritualistic motif in *The Hungry Tide* exists in the Bon Bibi and Dokhin Rai legend. Fishermen in the tidal land worship Bon Bibi as a part of their "everyday" lives. The legend of Bon Bibi appears to cut through anthropological and cultural formulations as it defies space-time limitations. Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli are worshipped as the gods of the tidal land by Fokir, Horen and other fishermen. However, the myths speak of Bon Bibi as of Islamic origin – she comes from the deserts of Middle East. Bon Bibi herself is a chronotopic motif of the tidal land whose existence combines an intense perception of spatiality in the form of geography and of temporality in the form of myths and legends. The ritualistic worship of her shrine as Piya observes, combines both Hindu and Islamic traditions:

> Piya stood by and watched as Fokir and Tutul performed a little ceremony. First they fetched some leaves and flowers and placed them in front of the images. Then, standing before the shrine, Fokir began to recite some kind of chant, with his head bowed and his hands joined in an attitude of prayer. After she had listened for a few minutes, Piya recognised a refrain that occurred over and over again – it contained a word that sounded like

> 'Allah'… But no sooner had she thought this, than it struck her that a Muslim was hardly likely to pray to an image like this one. (152)

Bon Bibi and the rituals associated with her appear to flow seamlessly into the ecological and cultural histories of the tidal land. She is a complex motif of the beliefs and historical traces of the Sunderbans.

Idyllic Chronotopes

Related to the folkloric chronotope is the "idyllic chronotope" which also plays a significant role in the ecopoetics of the tidal land. Bakhtin has identified certain "pure types" of idyllic chronotopes while adding that there might be variations and mixtures of these chronotopes in the novelistic genre. The "pure types" include chronotopes of: "the love idyll, the idyll with focus on agricultural labour; the idyll dealing with craft-work; and the family idyll" (Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 224). There are three unifying features of idyllic chronotopes identified by Bakhtin, which we shall examine in the context of *The Hungry Tide*:

(a) There is a "special" relationship that any idyllic chronotope shares with "folkloric time." There is a "grafting" of this time with certain "familiar territories," i.e. to the landscape – mountains, valleys, rivers, etc. ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 225).

(b) The chronotope of an idyll is grounded on a "few of life's basic realities" like "love, birth, marriage, labour, food, and drink, stages of growth" ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 226).

(c) There is a synchrony of human life with nature in idyllic chronotopes.

Some of these features can be distinctly located in *The Hungry Tide*. The entire novel is set in the tidal land. A strong sense of "place" reverberates throughout the novel. The sense of time is firmly rooted in the description of "concrete" spatiality or *platiality*. The tidal land is described as a treasure-trove of not only nature, but also of histories. The Sunderbans is limited in terms of its geographical expanse, but within these limitations can also be found a complicated human-animal dynamics manifesting through predator-prey relationships. The place expresses the limited nature of an idyllic land, but within this idyllic land there are many separate braids of natural and human histories. Bakhtin has described the possibilities of such a landscape:

> This little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world. But in this little spatially limited world a sequence of generations is localised that is

> potentially without limit. ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 225)

The other two characteristics of the idyllic chronotope can be located in the character of Fokir. Fokir conjoins the human with nature and lives his life in the "simple realities" of *everyday time*. Apart from his silent belonging with Piya, the touching instance of his potential for love is manifested in his care for Tutul. At one point in the story, the image of Fokir and Tutul sleeping on the deck of their boat is captured:

> Their chests were moving in unison as they slept and the rhythm of their breathing reminded her of the pair of dolphins she had been watching earlier. It calmed her to see them sleeping so peacefully – the contrast with her own state of mind could not have been more marked. (138)

The image brings Fokir closer to the cyclic rhythms of nature and primitive life. This image can be called idyllic if the idyllic chronotope has the basic premises of sleep and love as its motifs. This word-picture of Fokir and Tutul show a striking similarity between the behavioural patterns of human beings and animals – that of love, care and compassion for one's progeny. It also presents a romantic contrast between the idyllic nature of Fokir and the city-bred Piya. While, for Fokir and Tutul sleep is just a natural climax of an entire day's labour, for Piya sleep is a matter of effort and a process which is both complex and difficult.

"Places" and "Non-Places"

The "territoriality" of the tidal land in *The Hungry Tide* can be understood with both the chronotopic concepts of "places" and "non-places". While the idea of places in the narrative has landscape writing as its major aspect, by "non-places" the chronotopic motif of "migrants" or "refugees" is implied.

The novel explores landscape and waterscape of the Sunderbans with certain vibrancy. The text looks at the landscape of the tidal land as a "cultural" construct and not limited to a picture postcard. For instance, in the beginning of the novel Kanai inverts the stereotypical notion associated with the idea of the Sunderbans as "no more than a dense forest." He describes the teeming nature of the islands, populated with human presence and economic activities to Piya:

> It's only in films, you know, that jungles are empty of people. Here there are places that are as crowded as any Kolkata bazaar. And on some of the rivers you'll find more boats than there are trucks on the Grand Trunk Road. (17)

The "hospital" of the Bada Bon Trust run by Nilima and the "school" for Tutul in Lusibari are examples of such chronotopic "places" where years of hard work and "collective labour" have gone into their making. They are not just signs of human prosperity; these are also chronotopic markers that bear the notion of cultural changes of the tidal land. These markers raise issues regarding the place of civilisational changes vis-à-vis nature. People travel great "distances" to reach the hospital:

> Such was the hospital's reputation, Moyna said, that people now came there from great distances…. Over the years, a number of tea-shops, guest-houses, and stands for cycle-vans had taken root and flourished. Directly or indirectly the hospital now provided employment to the majority of Lusibari's inhabitants. (132-33)

Whether these cultural changes affect the ecological balance of the Sunderbans is left "open-ended" by the novelist. Moyna wants her son Tutul to be educated and does not want him to take to his father's (Fokir's) profession of fishing. The school bears the chronotopic feature of "future time" for the natives of Sunderbans. Moyna raises this important issue of requirement of urbanisation for future generations of the tidal land so that they are economically as well-off as any other average place in India: "'I don't want him growing up catching crabs. Where's the future in that?'"(133). The school and the hospital thus serve as cultural constructs defining the "new" tidal country. They serve the purpose of bringing the "elsewhere" in the form of education and healthcare to a moment of "here" in the Sunderbans.

Places also manifest in the novel in the form of intense "landscape writing" – an unexplored aspect of the artistic or aesthetic chronotope. The narrative "moments" weave landscape and waterscapes of the Sunderbans with the "real" moments of the tidal country's ever-changing geopolitical panorama. Manual efforts of Fokir rowing his boat,[8] the bustling marine life in Garjontola

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or the final episodes of the storm scenes in the novel; moments seem to be captured through a photographic lens:

> This was the closest she had been to the forest and she felt as though she were facing it for the first time…. Looking into it now, she was struck by the way the greenery worked to confound the eye. It was not just that it was a barrier, like a screen or a wall: it seemed to trick the human gaze, in the manner of a cleverly drawn optical illusion. There was such a profusion of shapes, forms, hues and textures, that even things that were in plain view seemed to disappear, vanishing into the tangle of lines like the hidden objects in children's puzzles. (150)

Ghosh's description of the tidal country leads to an obvious comparison with an earlier landscape writing by Salman Rushdie in his novel *The Midnight's Children* (1981) in the chapter entitled "In the Sunderbans." For Rushdie the tidal land is a representation of the exotic. His visual images are mostly drawn from the "uninhabitable" nature of the Sunderbans and are macroscopic in approach. Rushdie's description of the Sunderbans is from the angle of a magic realist who sees the tidal country as a huge "jungle" hiding alien creatures and mysteries. Saleem calls the Sunderbans a "forest of illusions" (Rushdie, *The Midnight's Children* 440). In Rushdie's novel the tidal land oscillates between the semiotic play of mystery and magic whereas in *The Hungry Tide* the tide country seems to be captured through a microscope and through a photographer or geographer's photo-prints recording the teeming marine ecology. However, both Rushdie and Ghosh use the myths associated with the local goddess of the tidal land. While Ghosh documents the anthropological and historical traces associated with the motif of Bon Bibi, Rushdie on the other hand captures the "magical" nature of a local Goddess (*The Midnight's Children* 438-39).

The process of writing a landscape is not an "innocent" aesthetic act. One has to constantly keep in mind that the landscape of the Sunderbans in *The Hungry Tide* is narrated from the *outsider's* perspective. Piya, Kanai or Nirmal – products of the cosmopolitan process – narrate the panoramic view of the Sunderbans and discuss its marine or human ecosystems whereas, Fokir, Moyna, Horen or Tutul are part of the landscape: they do not narrate the place, they live the landscape. The "representation" of Sunderbans as an eco-sensitive place in the novel is a product of intense research into the geopolitical and

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A photographic image of a local boatman near Orissa-Bengal borders struggling to anchor his boat at a corner of the waterscape. The picture presents a photographic prototype of the character Fokir and his dinghy in *The Hungry Tide*. The boatman uses a long bamboo pole for rowing purposes. Photograph by Bibhujeet Jena. "Meandering Thoughts: Take Me Home." Photograph taken at: Mangal-jodi. 8/02/2009. By: Panasonic Lumix FZ8. The unpublished picture is being reproduced here with permission of the photographer.

cultural aspects by the novelist himself. The protagonists of the novel thus narrate the tidal land from a quasi-scientific position of power and privilege. W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *Landscape and Power* speaks of this complex aspect of "representation" that goes into the description of landscape:

> … landscape is itself a physical and multisensory medium… in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, whether they are *put* there by the physical transformation of a place in landscape, gardening or architecture, or *found* in a place formed, as we say by nature…. Landscape is already artifice in the moment of its beholding, long before it becomes the subject of pictorial representation. (*Landscape and Power* 14)

Some of the vivid descriptions of the landscape in the novel can be noted in Piya's attempt to track the Gangetic dolphin, her observation of Fokir rowing his boat in unison with the forces of nature and the storm scene when Fokir dies while saving Piya for the second time. Kanai's recollections of the tidal land in his dialogues with Piya are also rich in semiotic content. The novel projects Sunderbans as a gigantic chronotope perceived in different ways by people of different professions. Nirmal sums up this picture of multiple tropes of the landscape of the bhatir desh in his journal: *"for a geologist the compilation opens at one page, for a boatman at another and still another for a ship's pilot, a painter and so on"* (224). In his analysis of the text, John Thieme calls the Sunderbans a "metonym for global ecological concerns" ("The Hungry Tide" 2).

The chronotopic motifs of places in the novel are closely connected with "non-places." Non-places manifest in the motif of "refugees" in the narrative. Elements of memories, recollections, blurring of lines between narrative time and real historical time, and the idea of "places" as a desire and a process for gratification of that desire, are the aspects of these "non-places." Their abstract nature and an inversely proportional relationship that they share with concrete spatiality and temporality define these "non-places". They comprise the terrains of mind and life of the migrants in the novel. Bakhtin has tangentially indicated the rise of this chronotopic motif of "non-places" through his analysis of novels of the German writer Goethe ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 234). Though he does not use the phrase "non-place" or "refugees" in Goethe's novels, he prophesies the rise of a new sub-genre in novelistic art where there will be a need to recognise the "*expatriation"* ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 234) of human beings from one land and to observe them in a close relationship with other landscapes and locales:

> It is necessary to find a new relationship to nature, not to the little nature of one's own corner of the world but to the big nature of the great world, to all the phenomena of the solar system, to the wealth excavated from the earth's core, to a variety of geographical locations and continents…. This

> educative process is connected with a severing of all previous ties with the idyllic, that is it has to do with man's *expatriation*. Here the process of a man's re-education is interwoven with the society's breakdown and reconstruction, that is, with historical process. ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 234)

A sense of time and history predominate the chronotopic motif of "non-places." The fictional documentation of the lives of refugees in the Sunderbans in Nirmal's journal can be such a sub-genre, where the "*expatriation*" of human beings and their relationship with a landscape has been explored. However, he can only "imagine" stability for the refugees in the tidal land but is incapable of putting his ideals into action. For Nirmal, the poetry of Rilke, his own revolutionary ideals, his constant engagement with the colonial history of the tidal land, his love of nature, his obsessive love for the refugees of *Morichjhãpi* and his life-long desire to "write" are deeply interconnected. Kanai speaks of Nirmal as: "possessed more by words than by politics" (282), adding that Nirmal would have liked to think of himself as a "historical materialist" even though he is one of the least materialists. Kanai explains this idea of "historical materialism" to Piya stating that: "for him [Nirmal] it meant that everything which existed was interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature" (282-83).

This sense of "non-places" can be located in the refugees' lives, their fears and their longing for a piece of land in the Sunderbans. The refugees physically inhabit these "non-places." For them these "non-places" are marked by an intense perception of their displacement in both time and place and in a perpetual fear of movement through time and place. For these people place is a "moment" of a gratification of desire – a desire to own a piece of land in the geographical "place" as well as a desire for an "acknowledgement" of their presence in the everyday flow of time and life. Nirmal quotes a few lines of Rilke which explain the chronotopic motif of "non-places":

> *"Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited*
> *ones to whom neither the past nor the future belong."* (165)

Conclusion

Within the limited scope of this paper, we have tried to examine the chronotopes and chronotopic motifs that help in constructing an "ecopoetics" of *The Hungry Tide*. Our attempt has been to understand the cultural, environmental and individual factors that make the text an eco-sensitive narrative. Our reading of *The Hungry Tide* further strengthens this conviction that to understand the ecological and geographical dimensions of any narrative one has to take into consideration the various layers of human-nature, human-animal and art-nature dialogues. The ecological perspective of the tidal land

cannot be viewed in isolation from the human and cultural dimensions. A study of chronotopes and chronotopic motifs has helped us to identify such "moments" of encounter between man and nature at points of intersection between time and space in Ghosh's narrative. An analysis of the ecopoetics of *The Hungry Tide* with chronotopes and chronotopic motifs further opens possibilities of studying the human-ecology dialogues in other fictional texts.

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