

*Flight Behaviour and The Hungry Tide on Environmental Crisis and the Retelling of Place*

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### Abstract

The environmental crisis is not necessarily a new concern in literature. Pre-modern writings have responded to the crisis in a variety of ways, from the anthropomorphic deification of environmental phenomena to Romantic escapism. In the face of current environmental crisis, contemporary writings that are environmentally conscious are showing a reemergence of the uncertainty that comes with questioning place. One of the struggles with this is the limits of imagining story independent of place. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* do not so much stretch those boundaries as assess them. They tell their stories on multiple levels: the relationships between environment and community, narrative voice and structure and reader expectations. This paper intends to assess how representation of environment and its associated ideas is changing the narrative order, the issue of class and entitlement, how the content of the story is affected by the inclusion of non-human entities in a human social construct; and the upset of the status quo with regard to how plot, character and setting relate to each other.

## Introduction

One encounters a strange sense of déjà vu when reading Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. This is not entirely from the fact that both stories use similar characters, or that they incorporate settings of real-world environmental interest- the Appalachians and the Sundarbans. Nor is it from the observation that both invoke local religion, scientific inquiry and inconclusive discussions among human and non human agencies. In fact, one could identify numerous similarities between the two and still be left with a niggling incompleteness. For the familiarity does not stem solely from within the novels themselves but from the phenomenon of finding two stories of a kind, set in very different cultures, emerging around the same time in reaction to a major environmental event. While other thematic and structuralist movements in literature and culture such as postcolonialism, feminism and Modernism have also been reactionary and have sparked certain tropes in writing, the stories in question depict the human experience as having to contend not just with cultural readjustment but with questions aimed at the reality of losing physical place— with very interesting effects on both the type of stories being told and the structure of storytelling.

The occurrence of these works against the backdrop of 21<sup>st</sup> century environmental consciousness in literature is of interest since, for the greater part of this contemporary trend, literature and film has responded to the implications of environmental crisis in very specific ways: through the imagining of natural calamities, the creation of post-apocalyptic alternative futures and a generally fatalistic or combative attitude. Interestingly, while fiction such as James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*, Ian MacEwan's *Solar* and Kevin Reynolds' *Waterworld* entertain the idea of environmental crisis as a genre and a theme, they stop short of exploring it as part of

the narrative form— of going beyond depicting natural features and questioning the nature of nature in literature.

This has been one of the key limitations of early ecocritical thought. Even in the face of ecological change, the only major alteration to the nature meme has been from a Romantic, idealized, sometimes deified 'other' to an uncontrollable, threatening 'other' that then returns to its primary function of being a reflective backdrop, a physical and ideological resource. That being said, the fact that the idea of place, even as resource, has been threatened by scientific and media representations cannot be ignored. That is where *Flight Behavior* and *The Hungry Tide* have come in: texts that are self-aware in their explorations of the ecocritical reaction to literature. They ask the questions that do not take environment, however warped and unfamiliar, for granted; and portray the effect that these questions have on the structure of storytelling. While their stories adhere to the genre of 'environmental' fiction in terms of plot and setting, they do so only to take apart the traditional functions of these narrative components and to engage in one multilayered dialogue between human and non-human entities, between reader expectations of story structure and the elements of story structure alike. The events of Feathertown and Lusibari do not play out sensationally from a distance; they compel the reader to interact, to question the sides that they are on and ultimately, to face the reality that 'place', 'nature' and 'environment' are no longer synonyms of 'setting.' Moreover, by doing so for cultures that are geographically distinct, the combination of these two novels homes in on the fact that these questions of place are not merely regional. Through both reality and representation, they are being imposed upon the collective human experience and, within a very short time, are giving rise to a culturally standardized fear of losing 'place, and a struggle to understand its new parameters.

Ultimately, what these stories hint at is not so much a tale of apocalypse as the recurrence of a tale of origin — a movement in literary history that has not been experienced since humankind's first attempts at explaining the phenomenon of environment as both deity and resource in order to secure their place in it.

In order to understand how these texts respond to the environmental crisis and its significance to storytelling, this paper intends to analyze their various narrative voices, the use of archetypes present in both eco-fiction and pre-crisis nature writing, and the role of natural elements as motifs for human constructs. Scientific authority, corrupt, anti-environmental institutions and localized climate-change and animal conservation skepticism are combined with older ideas of nature as divine mascot, the rural-urban divide and the 'noble savage.'

What these voices have to say about the environment is the second subject of discussion. The newly active element of place is bringing changes to the themes of class, entitlement and faith for, while the natural setting acts as context for the interpersonal conflicts presented in both stories, it is also shown to the reader as the quintessential subaltern presence as both writers contend with the limitations of using non-anthropocentric agencies that spend the duration of the stories overshadowing the human ones. The introduction of characters such as the monarch, the tiger, the mountain and the bay into the human conflict asks the reader to rethink class and place-entitlement.

In reference to these explorations of voice and theme, this essay will finally look at the three key components of narrative — plot, setting and character— and try to identify how the representation of environment and its components in *Flight Behavior* and *The Hungry Tide* subverts their functions. It will evaluate how environment's new role, as depicted by these books, demands a retelling of 'place' in literature.



One does not necessarily need to be familiar with the Sundarbans and Appalachian valleys to appreciate the issues that arise with understanding place; whether or not the writers have been successful in the accurate portrayal of these real-world settings is, for this research, a secondary concern. What does matter—for both characters in the story and the ecocritical reader—is representation of the human response and human confusion; and what these stories have achieved is representing, and then dissecting, the stereotype that has resulted from the anthropocentric branding of the environmental ideal.

## Chapter One: The Motifs and Voices of Environmental Crisis

At first glance, the stories in question appear to follow a relatively straightforward linear timeline; however, progressive readings show this becoming more confused and implicitly stretching over a wider temporal scale. Disguised by the immediacy and regional flavors of family drama in an Appalachian village and intercultural clashes in the Sundarbans is a series of motifs that span generations of attempting to understand and reign in the natural environment, beginning with the Old Testament and the Rig Veda and working their way back, forth and sideways toward a question of how it is being perceived after millennia of defining nature's relationship with human constructs.

We also meet a collection of characters that are not only alien to these settings but are also part of a list that grows with closer and closer readings; one that causes the reader to continually update the definition of 'character' and raises the question of who the players are in these stories, whose voices and which agencies and interactions we have to consider as active in the formation and progress of these plotlines-- which roles become vital to the point of becoming an archetype of eco-fiction.

In this chapter, we will look at both the images and the voices depicted in *The Hungry Tide* and *Flight Behavior*, and establish what they symbolize in terms of both pre-crisis literature and crisis literature. This is key to the next steps of this research, which will then see how these characters interact with each other and the understanding place within the story, thus developing certain themes that may be seen as particular to environmental<sup>1</sup> crisis fiction.

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<sup>1</sup>I use environment to include human society and 'nature' to represent only the non-human in this paper for the latter still holds too many non-anthropocentric connotations.

## Deification

Perhaps the strongest recurrent motifs in *The Hungry Tide* and *Flight Behavior* are nature-derived religious imagery. *Flight Behavior* opens with an awe-inspiring burning bush vision that sends Dellarobia back down her family mountain with an epiphany and a message to let old notions of stability and routine go. In a community as centered on its church as Feathertown-- for both religious and social purposes-- this image is not simply a reference to the historicity of the nature-religion connection but its current relevance-- the fact that, in the face of the super-natural phenomenon of the butterflies, the default reaction some thousand years later continues to be a reversion to religion or the adaptation of religion to incorporate and make sense of the unknown or threatening, even for a '911 Christian' such as Dellarobia. *The Hungry Tide* opens with a similar interweaving of religion and the natural environment. The visual stimuli here are even stronger with the presence of Fokir's family shrine on the banks of the river and the prevalence of a hybrid, local religion that combines Islam, Hinduism and nature-worship.

One observes that neither nature nor religion is a distant concept, confined to sacred ground or specific reserves. While they have made the Turnbow mountain their home, the King Billies passing by kitchen windows soon becomes an everyday phenomenon in Feathertown; in Lusibari, the tide country flora, fauna and weather are already integral to the everyday workings of the community. Similarly, social dynamics that begin in church carry through to shearing season and everyday neighborly interactions; and the legend of Bonbibi and Dokkhin Rai is woven into the conversation of the residents.

With these stories set in two very different environmental niches, the parallel issues that they address regarding religion and 'natural' elements mirror the historical trend of adapting the religion of a region according to its geography. Despite the obvious presence and influence of

scripture-based religion in both Feathertown and Lusibari, the reader can see an equally apparent prevalence of the priority of sheep-shearing over marriage vows, and the custom of Lusibari's women to assume widowhood every time their husbands go out to the Bay as something borrowed from Hinduism but dictated by the tides. One only needs to compare these instances with ancient myths themselves, a point that R. Whitbeck surveys in "The Influence of Geographical Environment on Religious Beliefs." He addresses "religion in the middle stages of human culture," most of which "have left a literature, hymns or sacred books.(Whitbeck, p. 316)" He analyses the wars of Odin and Thor against the Frost Giants, and their relevance to the mountainous topography and icy climes of Scandinavia. He notes the "influence of the monsoon climate in modifying the religion that the Aryan invaders of India brought with them": the eventual reprioritization of the god Dyaus (Sky) from a region of "little and uncertain rain" and Indra, the rain-giver and "his son of minor rank" who eventually gained more importance by virtue of providing the "essential thing in [India's] existence—rain. (p. 323)" Of Christianity he writes: "The founder of Christianity says, 'I am the vine, ye are the branches.' He probably would not have chosen that phraseology in England or Norway.(p. 321)." Of Islam: "Even the Mohammedan's belief in the resurrection of the dead seems to be based upon what he saw about him in his arid environment. He saw the annual death of the sparse vegetation, but later saw this spring into life when the rain came.(p. 320)" Together, these myths and images depict a standardized (if not universal) inclination to mold religion according to environment, something that is shared by the two very contemporary stories being explored in this paper. One might ask why that should be the case after the development of religious literature and other socio-cultural parameters, where, in other contexts, religious doctrines have compartmentalized natural, non-human environs as a subject of scientific or cultural enquiry. As such doctrine is active in both

stories, it is tempting to simplify the situation by noting that these settings communicate with and rely more on nature.

However, numerous contradictions that emerge from these stories show that the nature-religion dynamic in these modern (and in no way developmentally isolated) environments is more complex. These will be discussed in detail in the following chapters; for now, the underlying concern to keep in mind is this: in both the Biblical representations and the Bonbibli myth, it is specifically environmental threat or crisis that forms key events and turning points in the development of faith. Anomalies of nature are harbingers of doom; natural disasters are its instruments. Yet, for all the uncertainty and capriciousness of nature as presented in religious scripture, a retrospective reading reduces these events to predetermined tests of faith, and building blocks of belief in something stable and constant.

*Flight Behavior* and *The Hungry Tide* address both this tendency and its irony: the land and its resources are viewed as constants, strong enough to hold the foundations of a society. It is taken for granted even as religious mythos contradicts this with an ever-evolving stream of plague, flood and storm stories. This discrepancy between the physical and social-cultural realities is more stark in *The Hungry Tide* where the land is in daily flux and exposed to the meteorological elements. It is less obvious in *Flight Behavior*; the mountain appears to be stable and unmoving, downplaying the changes that the butterflies foreshadow.

### **Commodification**

Even as symbols of nature are being deified, we find —often by privilege of the same authorities—that both of these stories are engaged in the equally old understanding of nature as resource. As in their depiction of religion, they juxtapose pre-crisis exploitation—shearing, logging, fishing, scientific enquiry and romanticisation—with post-crisis exploitation—

encroachment, ecological enquiry and climate change romanticisation. There are also instances where deification and exploitation overlap, and many of the characters fall into this juncture: Dellarobia is labeled as ‘Our Lady Of The Butterflies’ by local media channels; the orcaella are described simultaneously as Bonbibi’s messengers and the objects of Piya’s academic ambition; the monarchs are seen as divine light, media fodder and tourist trap. Lusibari itself is an example of land as a resource through the ages.

Both of these stories take the stereotype that is associated with these places of natural interest—that they are peripheral in terms of urbanization and political and cultural priority—and turn it inside out within the story. The narrative of toxification that is generally connected to exclusively urban spaces is intermingled with these apparently nature-driven settlements, showing up these environments as the new centers of intrigue and interest.

A simple reading of this condition might be that literature is responding to the fact that ‘toxification’ has spread from the cities to the ‘country.’ The boundary between human habitat and the overall natural ecosystem that encompasses human and non-human entities has been erased, thus highlighting that no place is free from the effects of ‘civilization.’ This analysis, of course, builds on the pre-crisis analogy of nature to the untainted and human to the tainted. From a crisis angle, however, the writers question this assumption by depicting the human presence as integral (though not indisposible) to these natural settings. Dellarobia and her kin, and Moyna and Fokir are indigenous to these environments but they do not allow outsiders to romanticize them. Alien characters such as Ovid, Leighton Akins, Kanai and Piya struggle to understand and translate their experiences, and they are surprised or disappointed when basic survival instinct overrides the illusion of oneness with nature.

Therefore, alongside deification, commodification is the other function of the 'nature' motif. However, this commodification is not so much an issue of toxification of nature as it is of redefining the parameters of this toxification by external players both within and outside the pages of these novels. The existing assumptions of the characters and readers are that the Appalachians and Sundarbans are primarily places of ecological interest; the writers force these assumptions to interact with the human presence in a natural environment as something more than a threat. In *The Hungry Tide*, for example, the reader is made to share Kanai's initial surprise in finding Port Canning to be a hub of activity. Ghosh also wastes no time in informing the reader of the history of the seemingly indigenous community of Lusibari, which is a reminder of colonial systems of land ownership and David Hamilton's creation of a community, later taken over by Nilima's public service efforts. Like the fresh and salt water of the Sundarban *mohonas*, the intermingling of unlikely systems is emphasized again and again. Indeed, all of *The Hungry Tide* is about unlikely partnerships that, in retrospect, make perfect sense in a land defined by constant flux. It is in the resistance to these anomalies, the efforts against adaptation and the attempts to play by mainland rules that create toxicity, be it in Nirmal's idealistic support of Morichjhapi refugees, the government's attempt to draw boundaries between human settlement and animal preservation in a land where the two have been seen to coexist, and in Kanai's prejudices until he is made to confront his own limitations in the quicksand on the banks of the river.

*Flight Behavior* is also driven by unlikely pairings that begin by establishing stereotypes, which the characters themselves are aware of--Dellarobia's distaste of the hillbilly label, Hester's and Bear's skepticism of government-sanctioned scientists and 'tree-huggers,'-- and then slowly breaking them down to expose and evaluate the crisis-centric adaptations of deification and

commodification. Again, the toxic element is not simple commodification of nature; sheep-shearing, the Delgados' former profession as mountain guides and Hester's attempt to capitalize on the monarch's tourist value can be seen as commodification for adaptive purposes. It is when external, pre-crisis guidelines are imposed on Feathertown that conflict ensues. Tina Ultner's doctoring of Dellarobia's story, the well-meant but pointless activism of the Womyn who Knit the Earth, and Akin's idealized sustainability pledge are examples of resistant and destructive human exploitation. Thus the recurrence of nature as resource continually makes the reader question how this motif is defined.

### **Overlapping Imagery**

It is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about nature as religious motif and nature as socio-economic motif separately; both writers make a point of making the two overlap so that each incidence of the nature motif can be read both ways. The divine butterfly image quickly becomes an object of exploitation by the media, 'environmentalist' groups, religion, science and Dellarobia's individual desire to "own something beautiful for once, with no downside." Conversely, the story of Bonbibbi is shipped from the urban centre of Medina across the trade-routes to the Bay of Bengal to intermingle with local mythos and form an independent religion. This overlap is not new to literature; the image of 'untainted nature' as deified by Romantic writing can easily be seen as the forbearer of the nature-as-holiday-retreat or spiritual sanctuary meme. Looking further back, the nature-based archetypes present in the mythos and theology of world literatures are largely of flora, fauna as deity and instrument to be channeled for human use. As R. Whitbeck asserts,

"Why should it not be so? Would anyone expect a people's religion, or philosophy, or literature to grow up without being influenced by the physical environment amid which it



unfolded? In the very nature of things any system of religious belief, in order to grow into acceptance as a belief, must be in some sort of harmony with the mode of life, the economic interests, and the geographical environment of the people. It is obvious that if a tribe or group of tribes came to believe in the existence of certain deities, they must have had experiences which engendered these beliefs...”(Whitbeck, p. 317)

Thus, one can agree that both deification and commodification of nature—interchangeable to some degree—are age-old, persistent practices in human culture, to the extent that Karl Marx observes:

“There it is a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Section 4)”

“Fetishism” is another term that springs to mind repeatedly in the readings of *The Hungry Tide* and *Flight Behavior*, for both explore varying individual and institutional fixations with the transcendental image of ‘nature’ that may have been threatened over generations by the contrasting images of Philistine human exploitation but has not itself been challenged. Dilip Jhaveri goes as far back as the *Mahabharata* to emphasize this in his reading of the epic as centering on a ‘defiled earth’ and “a self contained, peaceful, sylvan civilization in harmony with Nature, ruthlessly invaded by expansionist, urban, technologically advanced power.(Jhaveri, p.

163)” Fast forward to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Romantic preoccupation with the non-urban repeats the use of the human habitat-vs.-nature motif, where Emerson glorifies the “occult relation between man and the vegetable.”(Emerson, p. 4). Though he asserts that ‘nature’ is “not tricked in holiday attire” the fact that ‘in the wilderness [he finds] something more connate than in streets or villages” indicates otherwise. The commodification of the divinity of ‘nature’ is repeatedly both emphasised and ignored in traditional, pre-crisis readings.

While the overlap of these motifs is not new, what is different in these stories is the friction that has arisen between the representations of nature as religion and as resource: friction in the form of a new reality to be reckoned with, one that challenges the characters’ and the readers’ expectations and faith in the natural environment-- in both of these cases, the fixed human habitat and the fixed ideal of harmonious non-human retreat, reliable even in its most terrible moods.

This need not be explained in *Flight Behavior* where the crisis comes in the form of palpable effects of climate change; in *The Hungry Tide*, this friction varies from character to character, foreshadowed by Kanai’s telling of the story of Canning and the Matla storm-- of the communication gap between personal ambitions and the constant yet ignored reminder that the tide country refuses to be governed by the mainland rules. While *Flight Behavior* shows the destabilization of space on a community or institutional scale, the storm that takes Fokir-- something so common in Lusibari that the fishermen’s wives preemptively prepare for widowhood-- and the revelations in Nirmal’s notebook pull the rug under individual notions of space, emphasizing not the protection of Bonbibbi but destruction at her hand; not the success of Kanai’s efforts to translate tide country language and lore to his urbanite awareness, but its failure; not the ability of the likes of Nilima and Piya to find footing on this uneven ground but to

return to definitions of home that, to the reader, no longer bear the validity and strength they had at the beginning of the story. This third, indefinable role of nature can only be identified once the environment exploits and has been exploited enough to undermine the initial readings of nature as resource and deity.

### **Voices**

The eventual loss of faith in the nature motif will feature prominently in my later discussion on the evolving structure of storytelling; in order to reach it, one must also look at the myriad voices that form these stories and identify which of these are pre-crisis character archetypes of nature writing and which are archetypes in progress, emerging to accommodate crisis-oriented literature.

The human voices in *The Hungry Tide* include the voice of the ‘natives’ such as Moyna and Fokir, those of the leaders or colonizers such as Nilima and the government, and those of the travelers, Kanai and Piya, all of whom try, in some way, to lay claim on the land. Add to this the refugees and poets and you have a variety that has been present in place-based literature for millennia, whether in then non-fictional travel accounts of Marco Polo or Ibn Battuta, or in place-based mythology or fiction as old as the *Mahabharata* or as recent as John Wyndham’s *The Chrysalids*; in something as vast as the tale of Noah and the Ark, or as small as Beauty and the Beast, where multiple archetypes overlap in a character. The natives, travelers, leaders and poets are the archetypal components of any setting, from which one can then branch into subcategories of the rural-urban divide, of class and other cultural strata. These categories apply to *Flight Behavior*, with Feathertown residents as the natives, the scientists and media representatives as travelers and invaders, the church head, matriarchs and patriarchs as leaders

and colonizers-- again with similar differentiation between the rural and urban, traditional and new

Of course, in fiction so heavily dependent on the non-human, the human characters are not the only active players in these stories. Can we discount the butterflies and the ruckus that they cause in Feathertown? Are they refugees or colonizers, finding a new home after the floods and landslides in Mexico but inviting a deluge of strangers into an apparently arbitrary little valley settlement? What of the diverse non-human community present in the Sundarban town, the tiger that rules in fear, occasionally invading; the orcaella that have survived the *mohonas* longer than any human settlement, the crabs scuttling across the floor of Fokir's boat, that form such a large part of the forest biomass? While neither writer can go as far as representing the non-anthropocentric voice, the presence of the animals is at least comparable to the expressive silences of Fokir. Occasionally bursting into song that is incomprehensible by language alone, the non-human players make their marks in the silences of their human counterparts. It is in the continual struggle to translate their roles and places into human understanding that the writers have chosen to address and explore the element of the non-anthropocentric voice that, hitherto in literature, has been simply a part of setting and environment. Historically, and even in these stories to a point, the butterfly, the tiger and the dolphin have served as reference points of the human plotlines, symbols and reflections of human aspirations, fears and desires. One will also note that they are far more prominent in the human dialogue than they are as physical presences, which, again, are the writers' comments on the obstacles in outlining the non-anthropocentric. However, as the stories are propelled towards increasing disorder, these animals become less and less part of the scenery of these human lives, and the roles that they play, once out of human definition, become blurry. In the final scene of

*Flight Behavior*, where Dellarobia watches her home become submerged as the butterflies defy all predicted odds and fly away, we are left with the question of what literary purpose these butterflies served-- a question that must quickly be revised to see the animals as characters in their own right, to question how this was a story of their survival as much as Feathertown's. Where is the explanation for that if their voices are represented only as far as human understanding? Similarly, in the climax of *The Hungry Tide*, we do not see the 'messengers of Bonbibi' but the terrible visage of Dokkhin Rai's tiger avatar: one that shows itself to both Kanai and Piya in moments of personal crisis, instigating not fear or despair but epiphany that all the orcaella could not bring them. At one point, these characters stop being motifs of religion or resource relevant to the setting, and start being independent characters contributing to the plot, with their interactions having just as much weight as human interactions. To see them as such adds completely new dimensions to both of these stories; and it is because of this realization that the ending of *The Hungry Tide* feels inadequate-- that the story of the orcaella still remains a loose end, and that of the butterflies ends in destruction beyond which one can see no new beginning. These are the questions that *The Hungry Tide* and *Flight Behavior* pose: how to imagine non-anthropocentric agency beyond the human gaze, if that is at all possible. If nothing else, the animals in these stories must be seen simultaneously as traditional motifs and as characters that are part of the ecosystems of these human-natural habitats; as such, the human social constructs and establishments have been modified for the non-human characters. Reader assumption must also be modified to begin to appreciate how the events play out, and the things that are left implied, unsaid or simply beyond imagination.

And of course, if we are to extrapolate on the presence of non-human characters, we find that even the non-sentient entities of the mountain, trees, weather, tides and rivers have been

given agency. It is difficult to classify their presence as voice; however, their actions in determining the choices of the animal and human characters alike raise them above the status of reflective backdrop, above simple setting and bring them closer to being characters that invite dialogue. One only needs to see the many stories that Nirmal tells of the terrible beauty of the *jowar bhata*, to imagine Fokir's riversong, to see the contention that the mountain and its farcical Christmas Tree farm invites among the Turnbows and the deceptively othered stories of avalanches in Mexico-- of which the butterfly migration is a mere symptom-- to appreciate that the land on which these ecosystems are both receptacles of history and tradition, cultural imagery and symbolism, while being active participants in crisis and evolution.

Hence, as we can see by the treatment of motifs and voices in these two stories, the writers are essentially taking stock of the historical and traditional treatment of environment in literature and re-presenting them in a modern-day, crisis-oriented geographical context. It is the interaction of these unlikely characters that creates the meat of these stories; and the positions of faith in the symbolic value of nature, from which they tell said stories, that creates the framework. Both of these angles are to be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

## Chapter Two: Talking about Place

In both *Flight Behavior* and *The Hungry Tide*, certain themes of interaction emerge between the characters aforementioned. Most obvious in the human dialogue, they can be extended to non-human and non-sentient participants through the agency offered by a crisis-oriented reading.

### Class

The most prominent of these themes is class-- a term that is particularly pregnant in the context of an environment in which the rural and urban, the human and the non-human intermingle. To begin with, the stories address a class assignment of place itself, by centralizing regions traditionally thought of as peripheral in socioeconomic terms. The diversity of flora and fauna has an inverse relationship with levels of development, infrastructure, education and refinement; or so the characters from exclusively urban environs such as Kanai and Tina Ultner believe or attempt to create categories for. Even Nilima is confronted by the question of 'sreni' when faced with the attitude that the Lusibari residents have to widows and widowhood, which is what encourages her to establish the Badabon Trust and her hospital.

Yet, Kanai is surprised by the progress of Canning and Lusibari, and of Moyna's ambition and education; and Tina Ultner has to doctor her interview of Dellarobia just to adhere to the tortured-saint-in-a-backward-world image that will sell. This shows the discrepancy between reality and representation that outlines the class distinctions in the stories, only to have them subverted by the conflict and communications among the sheer variety of characters.

Conflicts of social class are represented as an institutional problem by the recounting of the Morichjhapi massacre of refugees and, with a more satirical slant, in Dellarobia's encounter with Leighton Akins' sustainability pledge. Even Kanai's condescension towards both Fokir and

Moyna is a comment on the urban superiority complex caused by ignorance. By pitting the 'innocent' 'native or refugee against the environmentally 'aware' colonizer or authority, both books address that, by becoming areas of ecological interest, the 'untainted nature' meme is actually perpetuating a class-bound privilege of access to and understanding of natural landscapes. As with most externally imposed definitions in these stories, this privilege is eventually lost through the blurring of lines between classes, species and even the living and non-living.

This anthropocentric class distinction is offset by the inclusion of the non-human characters into the class debate. While they start off as subject to the interpretation of human parties, be they religious, scientific, domestic or political, it soon becomes clear that the butterflies are not merely resource or symbol of divine beauty. What are they, then? Refugees? Travellers? They are most certainly survivors-- something that cannot necessarily be said of the Feathertown populace at the end of the story. If we could incorporate them into the anthropological model of class stratification, it would be interesting to note the evolution of people's perception of them-- one that reflects Dellarobia's own transition from her place at the bottom of the family food chain to her evolving place in the social one to someone completely detached from her surroundings by virtue of her associations with Ovid Byron, very close to flying away herself. So are the butterflies symbolic of Dellarobia or is Dellarobia symbolic of the butterflies? Or do the two interact to create a new, flexible social hierarchy that is a more accurate representation of the frailty of both the human and the non-human habitat?

In *The Hungry Tide*, there is in fact more objectification of people by people than there is of animals by people. Both Nirmal and Nilima, in their different ways, objectify the classes that they hope to improve; their move to Lusibari allows them to retain the class distinctions brought



over from their urban roots as patrons of education and development-- their initial adaptation is only in their forms of expression. The tide country, of course, is not designed for this kind of fixed hierarchy and we see that his adherence to ideology and rejection of the inherent conflict of the region is what costs Nirmal his happiness and his life. Nilima, Along with Piya and Kanai, must also undergo a readjustment of perceptions of the tide country -- all three initially view the place and its inhabitants as objects of study and improvement-- not unlike Daniel Hamilton's own aspirations of development that Nirmal derides before witnessing the actual good they have done to Lusibari. For Piya, the tide country is just about the orcaella, for Kanai, it is just about familial obligation and for Nilima, it is, as aforementioned, about being an agent of improvement.

All three either forget are or unaware that this place is not purely rural or purely urban, but an amalgamation of both, at constant risk of the elements and the non-human residents. In order to realize this, both Piya and Kanai have to encounter their helplessness against tigers and have to be thrown off-course where the unlettered Horen and the silent Fokir are their authorities and guides. Both Fokir and Horen's classification shifts from authority to subject depending on who they are with; as more permanent residents of the tide country, they have a greater awareness and more respect for the entities with which they share their habitat. The shrine in the woods, which is Kusum's legacy, is not just a reminder of the benevolence of the forest but also its malevolence-- an environment where, however developed, the human is not the apex predator-- and where being so is simply another step in the cycle of life and death, and submission to the true apex predator— the tides. As with Feathertown, the events that transpire in Lusibari and along the *mohonas* of the Sundarbans depict a shift from fixed social

classification to a more flexible socio-taxonomic classification that is a work in progress beyond the endings of both stories.

To return to Marx,

“The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was. (Section 4)”

The treatment of class alone portrays a subversion of the commodification perspective mentioned in the previous chapter. As with Marx’s ‘wooden table,’ it can easily appear, from an anthropocentric perspective that the commodities themselves are making their own social space, even though the reader is aware that these roles of the non-human characters have been determined only by how they are treated by human constructs.

So, in both the Appalachians and the Sundarbans, we see that representatives of different economic, social and even taxonomic groups congregate in these places for various reasons and in the process create a social hierarchy independent of what their origins are. The reader is presented with, if not an entirely clean slate, at least one with fewer traditional associations with such conglomerations of class. The geography itself—one with its daily cleansing by the *jowar-bhata* and the other with its erratic rainfall patterns and rogue fallen trees— is a constant reminder that situations, expectations and entitlement here are in flux. Alien or indigenous, the characters cannot simply assume a status quo and any attempt to do so is a short-lived illusion.

### **Entitlement**

The issue of class is tightly linked with that of ownership, something that we see contested in both stories on various levels. The conflict in *Flight Behavior* rises over the ownership of the mountain and its trees. Bear Turnbow is challenged by the butterflies suddenly making 'his' land public property. For Dellarobia, the discovery of the butterflies and being associated with them strengthens her attempt to hold on to something that is both beautiful and hers. In turn, the symbolism of the butterflies and of Dellarobia is something that various media representatives try to own, from the Womyn who Knit the Earth to the TV channels and internet art. Even the scientists' work is an attempt to lay some claim to the butterflies as research that is their intellectual property

Parallel to this in *The Hungry Tide* is Piya's work with the dolphins, something that she is so excited about that she is willing to devote the next decade or so of her life to it just to make a contribution to ecological studies that will be exclusively hers. Land ownership, historically established by Daniel Hamilton, is translated to the government's claim on the waterways, attempting to catch and fine Fokir for poaching on conserved territory-- even though Fokir's connections to the region far outweigh that of the leering coastguards that initially accompany Piya.

The irony here is that the very entities being argued over for entitlement are those that claim the lives and homes of the characters involved in these dialogues. The mountain flood that drowns first the Delgado hometown and then Feathertown; the monsoon storm that claims Fokir; and the dolphin search that leads him and Piya to that tragedy are all examples of the roles that the non-anthropocentric play beyond mere symbolism and exploitation-- roles that they play in the history and continuation of these stories.

In the comparison between non-human and human place entitlement, the human claim is eventually portrayed as the weaker of the two. Upon hearing Piya's decision to follow in Nilima's footsteps and establish a trust, one cannot help but feel that the characters have somehow missed the point of the tide country's nature; that they are limited in their ability to make sense of a land that is in flux. Possibly out of guilt, she cannot embrace the death of Fokir as part of tide country dynamics and instead takes the urban way out by institutionalizing his memory. Her assertion that 'home is where the orcaella are' sounds hollow since it is the abandonment by the orcaella of their usual waterhole that foreshadows the storm that takes Fokir. If orcaella are symbols of faith, of Piya's *raison d'être*, they have been upstaged by the much greater forces of the tide country that she is yet to understand but which prevent her from returning to the much simpler view of life where orcaella tracking was independent of the personal repercussions of vacillations of environment. Though she does not acknowledge it within the story, her return to Lusibari is proof that home is no longer where the orcaella are. As with the ending of *Flight Behavior*, there is no convincing closure, just a sense of uprooting beyond which neither writer has ventured.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the concepts of place attachment and ownership are supplemented by the colonial history and the post-colonial cultural remnants present in the land, allowing for the questions of entitlement and place in political terms. *Flight Behavior* takes this further in depicting the colonization of spaces by both social and taxonomic classes, constantly revising the rights to place attachment. Underlying all of this tension over entitlement is the reality that colonization is unsustainable in either environment; the flooding of Canning by the Matla is a prime historical example; the survival of the butterflies by their mobility, juxtaposed against the immobility of Feathertown is another. Both Canning and the butterflies are anomalies and

temporary illusions of prosperity, erased by greater forces of nature acknowledged too late. As with class stratification, place entitlement is an illusion; a mainland, urban idea that is trying to be imposed on these dynamic, transitional areas.

## **Faith**

Finally, though both stories start off by establishing certain points of view and definitions by which they interpret the environment and their situation in it, these personal and regional religions and class or place-based ideologies, upon coming into contact with opposing ones, and with a generally unfavorable climate, eventually give way to a culturally standardized fear-- one that erases the geographical distinctions between the books themselves, and creates the impression that they are telling the same story. Reiterating the statements made in Chapter 1, this is also ironic because the images recalled in *Flight Behaviour* from the Bible are built upon exile and exodus-- from the environment's refusal to accommodate beyond a certain point of no return, incorporating lessons of moral blame into these natural calamities-- something that is mirrored by the blame and responsibility game played by the inhabitants and invaders of Feathertown. However, where the historical accounts of environmental instability serve to strengthen faith, the experience of crisis begins to destabilize it. It is on the basis of this that family secrets are uncovered, tensions are exposed and, ultimately, the structure of community, shaky to begin with, is abandoned altogether by the narrating protagonist.

In *The Hungry Tide*, loss of faith in pre-established ideals also comes to individuals through specific experiences; however, unlike in *Flight Behavior* where the story ends with the presence of the non-sentient voice physically, overpowering the others, the characters in *The Hungry Tide* are left to grapple with the implications that the aftermath of such disaster has for

them. Their inadequacy in doing so does not necessarily indicate Ghosh's failure in imagining said aftermath but his portrayal of the reality that the crisis discussion has gone only so far, and still requires building upon this insufficient conclusion until some decision on the reimagining of environment beyond the deification/ commodification dichotomy is reached.

Again, the gap between historical account and faith-induced perception is present in Fokir's personal history. His lineage from his maternal grandfather's death at the hands of a tiger, to his mother's abandonment of him in Morichjhapi to his own succumbing to the Sundarban climate identifies with abandonment by the Bonbibi-- the exposure and victimization to the conflict innate to the boundary lands of sea and forest, the dispossessed and the absent authorities. Yet this history has served to simply make his faith in the Bonbibi more concrete. Whether or not this faith will be transferred to Tutul to continue the legacy has not been cleared. However, Fokir and Moyna's family dynamics might imply that he too, as with our other characters exposed to the tide country crises, is to find himself at a crossroads, with Fokir's values and faith and visions of Kusum on one hand, and Moyna's lifelong effort to extricate herself from those values on the other-- to the point that she stands out from the fishermen's wives in her wardrobe refusal to submit to the possible taking of her husband by the bay. On top of that, she explicitly opposes her husband's values through her anger in his choice of taking their son fishing and hunting instead of to school. The aftermath of his death is not a strengthening of faith but a loss of it-- a loss of stability, of faith in the orcaella, of faith in urbanite knowledge, of faith in the sanctity of a union and the combined effort to carve out a niche in Lusibari.

Yet even as the sense of loss and disorientation prevails, the reader can just as easily imagine the role these stories would play should the anthropocentric voice emerge triumphant--

stripped to their basic elements, the representation of Dellarobia by her own community and external media is of a visionary, an ethereal prophetess who received the message of the butterflies as fiery as her hair, yet failed to save the people who refused to see; similarly, the story of Fokir's death in the heart of his home, in search of the orcaella with an envoy from a strange land could easily find its way into his son Tutul's family history-- a story that he tells with reverence of his fathers' return to the Bonbibí. These events could easily revert to regional mythos, to deification parallel to that of ancient tales of Dyaus and Indra, Isis and Osiris.

However, that is exactly the point: the anthropocentric voice does not emerge triumphant - or at least has not emerged triumphant in either case. One story truncates it and the other weakens it; and we are left trying to imagine what this means for the butterflies or the orcaella because that is the environmental crisis reading of these stories: faced with the decentralization of the importance of the human experience we are making fumbled attempts to latch on to something else-- something that resembles the historical folklorisation, mythologisation, or anthropomorphization of the environmental elements but goes beyond that by token of the reality-- or at least the representation of the limits of anthropocentric agency. These stories could resemble regional mythos in form and content; yet that is not enough to convince the new ecocritical reader who no longer has faith in the old stories but is yet to finish a new one.

Therefore, the concerns voiced by the characters reflect the fundamental questions of reading a story in the light of environmental crisis. While it is not new, it has been deviated from over the course of millennia; and the return to ideas of taxonomic class over social class, the fluidity of place-entitlement and the uncertainty that underpins structures of belief are now complicated by the inclusion of a far more diverse range of perspectives, most of which we are still in the dark about. The addition of multilayered storytelling by scientific enquiry and media

representation do not allow simple mythologisation to be the end-all of this crisis, as myth and lore must assume that there is a future in which to tell these stories. Rather, the discussion of these issues in this light of uncertainty begs a reevaluation of the structure in which such stories are presented, which is what will be detailed in the next chapter.

### **Chapter Three: The Confusions of Retelling Place**

More noticeable in the cacophony of discussion that takes place in both stories is the nature of things left unsaid, conclusions not reached and roles not defined. Whether or not we consider a human or non-human agency, the inability of traditional storytelling to tie up the loose ends and-- for all their attempts at adherence to a simple, linear storyline--- the lack of form indicates that the very structure of storytelling is being put under duress. The reassignment of place, fluidity of space and loss of faith in both, translate to how the stories deviate from the traditional structure that they initially appear to use, in the forms of reassignment and fluidity of narrative components and the lack of closure that a traditional, self-contained story is meant to provide. However, far from being a weakness, this uncertainty of structure is exactly what both *Flight Behavior* and *The Hungry Tide* use to drive home the essential concern that, in the face of losing place, one can no longer simply assume that a story using this crisis as a backdrop will employ pre-crisis forms, just like they cannot employ pre-crisis definitions of environment.

To explain how Kingsolver and Ghosh are able to make this point, it will help to look at a few contemporary works: those which have embraced the crisis as a new setting or even genre but have not necessarily discussed it beyond symbolic value. James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* employs the popular post-apocalyptic trope, placing its main characters at the heart of a maze that actively protects and endangers them. The use of place as an active component is



reminiscent of how place is portrayed in the two primary texts of this paper, albeit as a more sensational, fantastical representation. However, the eventual discovery that the maze is itself controlled by humans and the eventual conclusion in which the human emerges triumphant evades the central concern of looking beyond the anthropocentric voice. Similarly, Ian MacEwan's *Solar* may use a real-world setting and the deromanticize natural landscapes; however, the overarching theme is of the unheroic tendencies of man in the face of crisis, both social and natural, using climate change as a resource in otherwise ordinary human exploitation.

Since *Flight Behavior* and *The Hungry Tide* are not just stories but explorations of the treatment of nature by literature, they progress primarily in discussions and arguments. The conflicts, as addressed in Chapter Two do not build up to a specific climax and resolution; rather, individual experiences have their own moments of climax and resolution-- or lack thereof-- that, in an inversion of roles, serve to reflect upon and act as symbols for the overarching narrative of the place or setting itself.

In this light, it is the place itself that emerges as the plot; even though elements of environment serve as characters, it is the amalgamation of their voices and interactions that shapes their environment and vice versa-- in historical, geographical and social terms. By using much-publicized real-world settings, the novels force the limitations of imagination that a crisis-centered reading places on the reader; by removing the romanticized or simplified symbolism of nature as motif of deity or commodity, they continually challenge a purely human-centered reading. After abandoning these pre-crisis connotations of place, Piya's story of chasing river dolphins, Kanai's and Nilima's discovery of family secrets are in themselves not substantial enough to drive the novel, but it is the erosion of those stories by their interactions that sustain's the reader's interest. As Divya Anand notes in "Words on Water," "Situated in the face of the

threatening topography of the Sundarbans, social differences between both the urban and rural sets of characters are gradually elided, resulting in an increasing tension between their cultural and social identities.... social barriers [are] broken down and overcome, and nature serves as the agent to level all social and cultural hierarchies (p. 25).” By that same token, the significance of these individual tales is “broken down” and place representation serves to level narrative hierarchies. Interestingly, the silent movements of Fokir serve to mirror the subtle but pervasive workings of the Sundarbans as the overarching story.

*Flight Behavior* is driven by the combination of the butterflies, mountain, Feathertown and the avalanche that occurs outside the pages of the story in Mexico. As far as the human narrative for the Turnbows is concerned, the imminent manifestations of climate change are less pressing than the central practical argument-- to log or not to log. If this seems to be too insubstantial a storyline, it is again because the human experience is chiefly the place for discussion of ecology-related ideologies and theories-- the only platform for characters in both stories once nature ceases to be so.

As mentioned earlier, the reader eventually notes that the very definitions of setting or place, plot and character begin to blend into one another. Not only do they begin to merge, they also cease to maintain the storytelling structure of exposition working towards climax unraveling to resolution. The arrival of the butterflies in *Flight Behavior* could very easily be interpreted as the climax of a story which the next 600 pages unsuccessfully attempt to resolve. In *The Hungry Tide*, the reader is made to rethink the extent of the calamity that is the storm that kills Fokir-- a common occurrence and an accepted hazard of living in the Sundarbans, which is sad but not necessarily tragic or unjust.

Marrku Lehtimaki writes that “it can be argued that narratives are a central means of making sense and surviving in the natural environment, and some literary texts powerfully simulate this idea.” However, *Flight Behavior* and *The Hungry Tide* are not those texts. Nothing depicts this as clearly as the fact that, after so much discussion and effort on the part of the characters to make sense of why their places in their environments no longer make sense, there is no satisfactory ending. Along with the characters, the reader who has gone through each novel hopping from perspective to perspective, being forced to empathize with environmentally ‘indifferent’ characters such as Bear Turnbow and Nirmal Bose, to caricatures of the environmental devotee such as Leighton Akins, is left with no place to stand and end the stories with finality, even by extrapolation. How, then, is the function of story being performed if not in narrating a complete series of events, providing the reader with a beginning a middle and an end? The flight of the butterflies from Feathertown, and the inability of the characters in Lusibari to acknowledge the position of the tides at the top of the socio-ecological hierarchy are the points at which, like the characters losing faith in their definitions of place, the reader is forced to rethink the effectiveness of the traditional story in a crisis-centered context. Combined with the destabilization of expectations about character, plot, and setting, the effect these stories have on the reader is a confrontation of just how dependant on place appreciation literature has been-- and how little it has evolved since the establishment of regional mythologies, for one to notice only in the face of actual environmental crisis.

That being said, one must also acknowledge the inevitability of this loss of stability and faith in place. As Dana Phillips points out,

“Without environmental crisis, in other words, there might be no "environmental imagination." At best, there would be only a very attenuated one. Nor might there be ecologists

struggling to understand and repair the mechanisms of a damaged natural world. We would still be living in the era of "natural history." There is considerable irony in the fact that in order to begin to understand nature, we had first to alter it for the worse.(598)"

As far as literature and fiction are concerned, therefore, the environmental crisis is not really about the demolition of a narrative structure, but the beginnings of a new one that has been a long time coming. As much as these stories show how the threat of environmental collapse invokes a fascinated fear in human experience, it can just as easily be the depiction of origin stories for new, crisis-centred storytelling forms. There may be some validity in the mythologisation attempts noted in *Flight Behaviour* and *The Hungry Tide* after all— however, discarding the anthropocentric narrative and incorporating the many voices and roles of the storytelling components will require discussion beyond the many questions these stories ask together.

**Conclusion: Imagining a New Order**

The emergence of a new literary movement, such as ecocriticism, is inevitably met with the fascination and fear that one feels through the readings of these two novels. Even as they herald something as dire as losing the ground under one's feet, one feels compelled to join in the discussion about environment and narrative that both stories show to be simultaneously alien and intimate. This is probably one of the most remarkable features of *Flight Behaviour* and *The Hungry Tide*: that they have taken a deeply academic discussion—the evolution of narrative structure—and let it play out in the everyday reader's mind among the people, plants and animals at the foot of a mountain and by the shores of a bay.

Perhaps the incidence of these two stories within such a short time of each other was unavoidable because of the personal nature of environmental criticism. It is, after all, forcing the human to redefine the human habitat and the human wilderness and to say that our home is not our home anymore. It is full of questions that we cannot imagine to answer, for this is not merely a case of saying no to gender or race stereotypes, or of reading and rereading social constructs. This is about the physicality of place.

The difficulty we face with an eco-literary approach, as Ursula Heise notes and as has been emphasised in this paper, is that it is not anthropocentric. We can imagine the absence or

evolution of the aforementioned social constructs; however, is it possible to imagine the absence of environment, the “far, far away” of even the simplest childhood tales?

The major environmental event mentioned in the introduction, therefore, is not climate change. It is the human reception of this crisis of place by the human experience-- the understanding of climate change is but a manifestation. That is why these stories are so difficult to conclude; neither Kingsolver nor Ghosh provides the reader with resolution. Dellarobia's fate is one extreme that imagines the complete destruction of the human element by the crisis, while the butterflies survive and abandon the forest in hordes. The Sundarbans drama peters out with each character's inability to appreciate this crisis. That is also what makes them fascinating because we are no longer in a position to expect old stories from environment, but are in the process of identifying the new rules that apply to the process of creating them. It is impossible to categorize the narrative and thematic aspects of these stories according to the old conventions of plot, setting and character because the entire point of these stories is that they are beginning to blend into one another. At the very end, the stories in *Flight Behavior* and *The Hungry Tide* revert to a natural pecking order where the human experience is but a step in the growth and decay cycle of any ecosystem. Structurally, they hint at the beginning of a new order where, in the absence of simple definitions of 'place', the teller must develop new devices that do not make presumptions on 'environment.'

Environmental crisis may not a new trope in literature but it is of a significance that not only goes beyond the boundaries of literature for the contemporary reader. However, to end questions of crisis at simply its destructive implications does not do justice to the implications of ecocriticism for literature. As *Flight Behavior* and *The Hungry Tide* refuse to ignore, and refuse to let the reader ignore, this goes beyond issues of genre, theme or ideology. What the narrative

is witnessing is contemporary English literature's loss of faith in place, and the beginning of a tectonic shift in its very foundations of storytelling.

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