

Lucio De Capitani
lucio.decapitani@unive.it
(Ca' Foscari University, Venice)

Weaving Cross-cultural Narratives: Hybrid Forms and Historico-political Discourse of the Anglophone Indian Novel

SUMMARY: As the anglophone Indian novel exists in the in-between space between transnational and local cultures, it has repeatedly staged the encounter between a variety of cultural dimensions while remaining acutely aware of the way they interact with historical and political discourse. This essay examines four novels—Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Anita Desai's *In Custody* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*—that have conceived their narratives as a site of encounter between cultures in response to articulations of Indian national identity. The essay stresses the authors' shared concerns but also the different formal solutions and ideological positions they adopt. Rao—a pre-Partition author—deals with otherness within a nationalist paradigm. Rushdie, Desai and Ghosh, on the other hand, tackle otherness in different modes that are dependent on their writing after Partition and in a climate of growing violence and fundamentalism.

KEYWORDS: anglophone Indian novel, cross-cultural encounter, historico-political discourse, national identity, Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh.

The status of anglophone Indian literature nowadays is quite controversial. Originally a marginal part of the literary culture of the subcontinent, this tradition has gained relevance from the 1980s onwards, becoming one of the most appreciated postcolonial literatures in English. Paradoxically, now that the position of anglophone writing has been consolidated, its accessibility and visibility set a formidable intellectual trap. It is easy, in the present-day globalised scenario, to look at anglophone literature as *the* representative of India in the world literary system and disregard the plurality of vernacular literary traditions.

Such a conclusion is understandably dangerous, because, as Sharmila Sen argues, ‘an English-only reading practice results in a skewed and misleading perception of Indian literary culture’ (Sen 2001: 57).

A crucial step to prevent anglophone literature from taking a hegemonic turn is to approach it in terms that are not antagonistic or oppositional towards local literary traditions. One possibility is to focus on how the anglophone novelists have offered us an articulate reflection on the encounter between cultural selves, a consistent hybridization of English with a variety of linguistic others and an inclusive platform for the transmigration of literary forms—in short, how anglophone authors have attempted to promote literature as a site of encounter between cultures. This is a good starting point, as cross-cultural encounters of various kinds are indeed a significant presence in anglophone Indian novels. However, they are hardly a unique characteristic of Indian writing in English, since also vernacular traditions are involved in a process of cross-contamination of literary culture. If the creation of a transnational and transcultural literary space and the staging of cross-cultural encounters are features from which anglophone Indian writing can be fruitfully defined, its distinguishing modes of representation need to be pinpointed more exactly.

It seems to me that the reflections carried out by anglophone authors as regards cross-cultural encounters assume a particular relevance when they are framed by the critical categories of history and nation. Priyamvada Gopal claims that the anglophone Indian novel is ‘a genre that has been distinguished from its inception by a preoccupation with both history and nation as these come together to shape what political scientist, Sunil Khilnani (1997) terms, after Nehru, “the idea of India”’ (Gopal 2009, 5). Gopal’s statement can help us define one particularly valuable mode in which anglophone writing approaches the representation of cross-cultural encounters. Possibly due to the fact that anglophone literature in India exists in the in-between space between transnational and local cultures, this tradition has repeatedly staged the encounter between a variety of cultural dimensions while remaining acutely aware of the way they interact with historical and

political discourse. Consistently, anglophone Indian literature provides some of its best insights when it approaches the way in which cross-cultural encounters are framed within and by a number of historical and political discourses connected to the definition of Indian national identity—such as those emerging from pre- and post-independence nationalism, Partition or Hindutva.

As a case in point, in this paper I deal with four major works of anglophone Indian literature, ranging from the inception of this tradition in the 1930s to the 2000s: Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Anita Desai's *In Custody*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. On the one hand, all these works foster the role of anglophone literature in the creation of a transnational horizon for literary studies precisely by representing cross-cultural encounters in response to different articulations of Indian identity. On the other hand, this engagement with historical and political discourse ultimately determines a gap between a pre-independence, pre-Partition author like Rao, and later writers such as Rushdie, Desai and Ghosh. The former sees both the multicultural character of India and its interaction with other literary cultures in relation to a nationalist project he embraces. The latter employ more heterogeneous and fragmented conceptions of multiculturalism to counter unitary and often oppressive articulations of Indian identity such as post-independence nationalist and fundamentalist ideologies. All these novels, at any rate, use different formal devices—in terms of language, sources and overall aesthetics—to tackle cross-cultural encounters within their respective historical and political background. My aim is, therefore, to point out both the deep divergences between these four authors and a common thread in their dealing with cross-cultural encounters, history and politics.

After the 19th century experiments with writing in English carried out by the *bhadralok* intellectuals of the Bengali Renaissance, anglophone literature in India came powerfully to prominence in the '30s with the work of R.K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. The latter—a philosopher and political activist as well as a writer—is mostly

known for *Kanthapura* (1938). This novel tells the story of how the eponymous village, a small community in the south of India, is transformed by the arrival of Gandhian ideology, becoming involved into the nationalist struggle. Rao is arguably the first anglophone author that combines an inherently political reflection with the tension towards an explicitly transnational and cross-cultural conception of literature.

Rao's work is conceived as a *sthala-purana*, a local legend taken from a tradition of oral storytelling in which 'the past mingles with the present, the gods mingle with the men' (*Kanthapura*: foreword), narrated by an old Brahmin widow, Achakka. History and myth are indeed strongly intertwined in the tale. Gandhi himself, the spiritual and political core of the novel, is presented to villagers and readers alike through a *harikatha*, a religious form of storytelling, in which he is identified as an incarnation of Shiva and compared to young Krishna, set off from an early age to 'fight the enemies of the country' (*Kanthapura* 13).

Just as political and religious discourse overlap in the narration, so the language and style of the novel are composite. Rao tries to represent 'the tempo of Indian life' infused into 'our English expression' (*Kanthapura*: foreword). The narration is conceived as a never-ending flux of paratactic sentences, constellated by digressions, invocations to the gods and colloquial vocabulary, representing Achakka dignified but distinguishingly oral form of storytelling. Transposing the language of the *sthala-purana* in English, however, has both ethical and epistemological implications. As Rao argues:

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is in one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us (*Kanthapura*: foreword).

Rao defines writing in English as a complex attempt at cultural translation—although mediated by the status of English as the language of the Indian colonial intelligentsia—decades before Rushdie talked of the postcolonial author as a translated man (Rushdie 2010a: 17). However, such attempt is necessary to claim ‘the large world as a part of us’. Anglophone writing, in this sense, is defined as the site of encounter between identity and otherness, while at the same time interacting with a political discourse—Gandhian nationalism—deeply connected to the fashioning of an Indian national identity.

It is congruous with this conception that the structure of *Kanthapura* is imported—or perhaps we should say translated—from a foreign model, the Italian novel *Fontamara* (1933) by Ignazio Silone. Silone’s novel tells the tale of the oppressed inhabitants of a village in the Abruzzi countryside—Fontamara—and of their final revolt against the privileged country elites and fascist authorities—a plotline that Rao adapted to the colonial setting. Both novels recount the awakening of political consciousness in the villages, and in both the uprising is inspired by the prophetic vision of a young man—Moorthy in *Kanthapura*, the charismatic but tormented farmer Bernardo Viola in *Fontamara*. Also the outcome of both novels is the same: the village is destroyed by the fascist squads and by the colonial masters respectively, and the memory of the events is preserved by the survivors of the repression—in *Fontamara* the narrators, the counterparts of Rao’s Achakka, are the members of a family from the village in exile, who alternate in recollecting the sad tale of the village.

The structural similarities between the two novels draw attention to deeper stylistic and ideological parallelisms. Rao’s style is inspired by Silone’s use of a narrative voice that reproduces the spoken language, in the attempt to capture a distinguishing local form of storytelling (*Fontamara* 10). The idea of translation was already present in *Fontamara*, this time from the dialect to standard Italian, although Silone sees his Italian as a clumsy and inadequate rendition of dialect’s vivacity (*Fontamara* 10), in opposition to Rao’s enthusiasm at the chance of transforming the local language into a non-standard

English. Lastly, also *Fontamara* is characterized by strong religious overtones that contribute to articulate the discourse of social and political revolution. Silone is clearly a formal and ethical point of reference for Rao, and *Kanthapura*, in this sense, establishes a transnational connection with a foreign reality in the name of social kinship and political justice.

The implications of Rao's nationalist, pre-Partition framework, however, must be taken into consideration. Historically, nationalists of all sorts struggled to portray India as if it were 'an undivided subject, that is, [as if it] possessed a unitary self and a singular will that arose from its essence and was capable of autonomy and sovereignty' (Prakash 1990: 389). Rao consistently portrays a homogeneous, uniform conception of India, conceiving his village as relevant to the whole Indian experience during the freedom struggle, 'a lively community animated by its inner capacity to transform itself in the pursuit of human freedom, and legitimately, *of its country at large*' (Mercanti 2009: 70, emphasis mine). This tension towards unity and totality within a nationalist framework results in an articulation of Indian diversity that is quite different from what we would expect in later anglophone works. Rao's primary concern in terms of encounter with otherness within the Indian space is to discuss and promote the crossing of boundaries between castes—the episode in which Moorthy enters a Dalit household for the first time is one of the defining moments of *Kanthapura*. On the other hand, categories of difference such as language, ethnicity or religion remain largely in the background. Arguably, while caste appears to Rao as an inherently problematic and pressing issue that deserves significant intellectual energies, he has trust in the capacity of nationalist ideology—the expression of 'a unitary self and a singular will'—to harmoniously include the other instances of diversity into the would-be Indian nation.

After the 1930s, anglophone writing temporarily left the stage/disappeared from view, until Salman Rushdie, with *Midnight's Children* (1981), established English as a prominent literary language in India. Rao or the other writers of the '30s were not actual models for

the writers of the new literary phase, but an ideal continuity with Rao may be found in the fact that also authors like Rushdie, Anita Desai or Amitav Ghosh voiced the need for the Indian writer in English to open up Indian writing to a cross-cultural and global dimension, and they did so by articulating their works within a political and historical debate focused on national identity. Rao's novel, in this sense, anticipated the concerns of the anglophone writers to come.

However, the perspective adopted by these writers differs radically from Rao's. Instead of the political platform of pre-independence nationalism, which Rao's work supplemented and supported, their understanding of India cannot do without the experience of Partition and the communalisation of Indian politics from the '70s onwards—the latter including the Congress party's tendency to embrace majoritarian deviations of his traditional ideology and the rise of the Hindutva movements. In this set of circumstances, cultural otherness—especially if connected with religious and linguistic differences—became a more ambivalent, controversial and at the same time a necessary critical concept. It was not acceptable anymore to assimilate otherness within a universalist nationalist discourse, because such an approach overlapped with the straightforward rejection of otherness and with communal violence. Reflecting on otherness and weaving cross-cultural narratives in all their controversial multiplicity became an ethical as well as political urgency. The literary projects developed by Rushdie, Desai and Ghosh are unified by the lack of stable standpoints from which cross-cultural encounters can be observed, in favour of fragmentation, unsettling intermingling of the self and the other, and epistemological uncertainty in the relationship between the two.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* combines the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez's family saga *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with the never-ending narrative intricacy of the *Mahabharata* into a postmodern allegory of contemporary India. In the novel, Saleem Sinai, the narrator and protagonist, tells the tale of his family and of his own troubled existence in a bizarre and humorous style. Saleem, born on the stroke of midnight of 15th August 1947, is 'handcuffed'

(*Midnight's Children* 3) to the history of his country, so that the events of his own life reflect—or, according to Saleem, directly influence—the destiny of India as a whole. This connection is demonstrated by Saleem's telepathy, which allows him to communicate with the other Children of Midnight, born within the first hour of independence. The allegorical core of the book is constructed in the midst of countless minor episodes, most of them strange or supernatural, so that the book results in a grand, weird, heterogeneous exploration of the different facets of Indian reality, culture and history.

The novel is at least in part conceived as a protest against Indira Gandhi's Emergency, with Indira herself being represented as the great betrayer of Indian democracy. In this sense, Rushdie's project reacts to the regimentation of cultural otherness implied by nationalist and fundamentalist ideologies by mocking, in a postmodern move, any attempt to reach a satisfying, objective representation of the nation. Saleem can only try to voice an inordinate plurality of stories—'there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane!' (*Midnight's Children* 4)—from his ex-centric and unreliable viewpoint. India as the unified subject of nationalism must face the singularity of everyone's India. Most importantly, this 'excess of intertwined lives' is in no sense an access to some form of truth. In his essay 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie comments on the writing process of *Midnight's Children*, stating how the initial 'Proustian ambition' to reclaim his own history as an Indian by 'unlocking the gates of lost time so that the past reappeared as it had actually been, unaffected by the distortions of memory' (Rushdie 2010a: 10) was proved delusional. Rushdie realized that the operation he was undertaking was actually quite different:

What I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions possible versions. [...] I knew that my India may only have been one to which I [...] was, let us say, willing to admit I belonged. (Rushdie 2010a: 10)

Rushdie's national allegory, therefore, admits its partiality, renouncing to the ambition of providing a key to understand Indian reality—a failed *Mahabharata*, so to say, whose encyclopaedic vocation is ultimately frustrated—and simultaneously pointing out the partiality of other, similar projects.

Rushdie's language consistently reflects the need to multiply—as in an enhanced version of Bakhtin's heteroglossia—the voices inhabiting his fiction. His position on the issue of the language resembles Rao's, as also Rushdie argues for the exploration of the middle ground between cultures precisely through a peculiar use of the English language:

We can't simply use the language in the way the British did; [...] it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of the ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. (Rushdie 2010a: 17)

Rushdie's English is indeed the depository of multiple cultural, social and linguistic struggles that Saleem's narrative tries to incorporate. One of the central images of the novel—the telepathic Babel playing out in Saleem's head—epitomizes this attempt, with the awareness, however, that the result will ultimately be—to quote once again from Rushdie's essay—a broken mirror, 'some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost' (Rushdie 2010a: 11).

If Rushdie can be compared to Marquez, Anita Desai has instead placed her work beside modernist authors like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce or T.S. Eliot, focusing her attention on the inner life of her characters and presenting her reader with psychological subtleties, refined imagery and complex narrative structures. In her novels of the '80s, these formal characteristics are embedded within a recognizable political and historical background focused on the status of minorities and minority culture in India, creating a clash between private and public sphere that is at the heart of Desai's political insights. Most notably, *In Custody* (1984) deals with the destitute state of the Urdu language

in India through the eyes of Deven, a young scholar whose mission is to interview an aging Urdu poet, Nur. Deven teaches Hindi for a living, but in spite of his career and of the fact that he is a Hindu, his only love is Urdu poetry. Through Deven and to an extent Nur, Desai questions the politically and religiously charged Hindi-Urdu conflict and the discourse of chauvinist politics in contemporary India. Desai forces the reader to acknowledge the irreducible singularity of individual existences against the generalisations of collective entities such as religious groups, political organisations and nations. One of Desai's points is that if we look at individuals—those, at least, that have not willingly cleansed themselves from “foreign” corruption—some form of cross-cultural intertwining is the norm, rather than the exception.

If Rushdie works on an explicitly allegorical level, Desai's perspective looks for a political dimension within the idiosyncrasies of individuals. Consistently, while Rushdie's political and cultural agenda is explicitly foregrounded in *Midnight's Children*, *In Custody* is more subtle and indirect, in accordance with Desai's modernist approach. It comes as no surprise that some of the most significant passages of the novel from a political-cultural viewpoint are not explicitly political passages at all. One such passage is the first encounter between Nur and Deven, where the young scholar has to defend himself against the charge of betraying Urdu to teach Hindi. Deven can only tell his personal story:

I studied Urdu, sir, as a boy, in Lucknow. My father, he was a schoolteacher, a scholar, and a lover of Urdu poetry. He taught me the language. But he died. He died and my mother brought me to Delhi to live with her relations here. I was sent to the nearest school, a Hindi-medium school, sir,' Deven stumbled through the explanation. 'I took my degree in Hindi, sir, and now I am temporary lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College at Mirpore. It is my living, sir. You see I am a married man, a family man. But I still remember my lesson in Urdu, how my father taught me, how he used to read poetry to me. If it were not for the need to earn a living, I would – I would –' (*In Custody* 46)

Nur's predictable answer is to mock Deven's attachment to material needs. However, Deven's defence cannot be dismissed so easily. His explanation appears inadequate, but actually offers the reader

the complexity of an individual destiny, opposed to the purity of idealism on which most dichotomies are based. There is a form of modest dignity in his speech—unlike Nur, who interprets the combination of Hindi and Urdu in Deven's life as a betrayal, the reader knows that Deven's love for Urdu is sincere and the fact that he 'remember[s] [his] lesson in Urdu' is absolutely true.

Nur, the poet, is mostly depicted as a decadent character, whose position on the Hindi-Urdu question is a nostalgic remembrance of the glorious times of his language and an utter spite of Hindi. However, on some occasions, he too is able to problematize the historical positioning of Urdu, suggesting a more dynamic view of culture. When, at a certain point, he starts rambling on his favourite biryani, he voices a subterranean form of wisdom, for the recipe is inextricably connected with the peculiar history of the cook:

There is a man, a refugee from Peshawar, at the back of the Mosque, who makes [biryani] the way I like—with real saffron, the kind that gives rice not only colour but fragrance as well, and of course the rice must be the long fine kind from Dehra Dun. Do you know, he left Peshawar and came here because he could no longer get that kind of rice there? He said he couldn't make his biryani without it so he came and settled down here. (*In Custody* 175)

The two toponyms presented in Nur's story—Peshawar and Dehra Dun—suggest a very specific personal history of migration connected to the disruptions of Partition. As Claire Omhovère states,

the city of Peshawar in today's Northwest Pakistan is a location that obliquely refers to the period preceding Partition when rice grown in Uttar Pradesh was still available in the regions turned over to the Muslim state after 1947. [...] The cook's gastronomic exile is significant insofar as it runs counter to the flow of Muslims who left India that same year to settle in 'the Land of the Pure'. Contrary to them, this refugee opted for the profane rather than for the sacred (Omhovère 2009: 111).

The tale highlights the possibility of personal choices as a form of resistance against cultural imposition and impoverishment. Instead of adapting his recipe to the mutated condition of history, the cook decides

to migrate to Delhi, ignoring the call of religion and answering that of gastronomic—and artistic—integrity.

Biryani is one of the tastiest examples of the syncretism of the Mughal culture. Its origin lays in the encounter between Persian and Hindustani cuisine, when ‘the delicately flavoured Persian pilau met the pungent and spicy rice dishes of Hindustan to create the classic Mughalai dish, biryani’ (Collingham 2006: 27). Nur, insisting on that particular dish, describes a cultural object that is sensuous and syncretic and that cannot preserve its unique, peculiar and seductive flavour if it is cut off from the regional sources of its diverse ingredients. Needless to say, he creates a metaphor for Urdu culture, which is, therefore, defined in a much more lively, transnational and secular fashion than in the rest of the novel.

Between Rushdie’s allegorical enterprise and Desai’s modernist focus on the individual, a third, different way to tackle the issue of the cross-cultural encounter is represented by Amitav Ghosh’s research novel. One of the recurring aspects in his diversified production is the interest for suppressed histories that official historiography has discarded, ‘the little stories of personal lives supplementing as well as giving the lie to official facts’ (Roy 2000: 44). The majority of Ghosh’s novels start from extensive historical and anthropological research, which he shapes into fictional form though a disciplined use of poetic imagination that integrates incomplete and silenced historical data, in order to reconstruct transnational and cross-cultural networks. If, on the one hand, this operation of discovery represents by itself a political stance against official historical discourse, equally relevant is Ghosh’s problematising the possibility of the knowledge of cultural otherness. One of Ghosh’s most significant works in this sense is *The Hungry Tide*, published in 2004 and set in the Sundarbans, the labyrinthine archipelago of mangrove forests located at the delta of the Ganges.

The narration is focused on three characters: Piya, an American cetologist of Indian heritage coming in the Sundarbans to study the river dolphin known as *orcaella brevirostris*; Kanai, a Kolkata businessman

and translator who comes in the region in response to a request of his aunt Nilima; and Nirmal, Kanai's uncle and Nilima's husband, whose diary, read by Kanai, reveals the half-forgotten story of a massacre perpetrated against political refugees by the government forces. The destiny of these characters will be entangled with that of a local fisherman, Fokir. As is typical of Ghosh's later works, the amount of factual knowledge condensed in fictional form is considerable: as we read on, we discover information about the local folklore and fishing techniques; about the history of the region, from the first attempts of the British to establish settlements in the area to the recent tensions between the postcolonial government and the inhabitants; and about its flora, fauna and climate.

The Hungry Tide, however, does not explore the Sundarbans in an unproblematic fashion, but benefits from a refined epistemological framework in its approach to cultural otherness, and is in this sense the most subtle of the four novels discussed in this paper. Ghosh employs a number of strategies to prevent his representation to take any kind of hegemonic turn. Most notably, as Alessandro Vescovi states, all of the main viewpoints of the narration are informed 'outsider' perspectives—knowledgeable, easier to grasp for the metropolitan reader, but inevitably partial (Vescovi 2011: 89). Every character is able to provide some specific insight: Piya brings her understanding of the ecosystem, Kanai his linguistic expertise, Nirmal his political and poetic wisdom (Vescovi 2011: 93). Shifting throughout the different perspectives, the reader is able to acquire a diversified knowledge of the Sundarbans, but the fragmented mode in which information is acquired points out that no ultimate representation can be claimed—the reader's knowledge remains, as for the characters, incomplete.

Most importantly, there is no attempt to provide the reader with the inner voice of the subaltern. Fokir, the fisherman, is largely an impenetrable figure, separated by the point-of-view characters either by the language or by class and caste, representing the other we cannot fully understand. However, differently from other works that use the trope of an unknowable other—*Heart of Darkness* comes

to mind—the fact that the gap between other and self is not entirely bridgeable does not prevent Ghosh and his characters to reach out for otherness. Ghosh's aim is to embrace as much as possible the world of the Sundarbans, even though the awareness at the core of the novel is that the knowledge of the other is not a fully feasible enterprise—it is something the complexity of which one can only grasp in bit and pieces.

Ghosh's caution is reminiscent of the epistemological framework of contemporary anthropology, which is hardly surprising considering Ghosh's anthropological training and the ethnographic vocation of *The Hungry Tide*. In particular, his representation strategy in this specific novel may be juxtaposed with Clifford Geertz's understanding of anthropological descriptions. Geertz argues that anthropological descriptions must be actor-oriented, namely 'cast in terms of the constructions we imagine [natives] to place upon what they live through'; that, however, does not mean that they are actually 'part of the reality they are ostensibly describing' (Geertz 2000: 15), as they are ultimately a product of the anthropologists themselves. The gap between the imaginative world of natives and the anthropologist's rendition in textual form is vast, but, at the same time, Geertz states that 'we [anthropologists] are not [...] seeking either to become natives [...] or to mimic them. [...] We are seeking, in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them [...]' (Geertz 2000: 13). Ghosh's narrative structure suggests a similar standpoint: it constantly reminds the reader that the narrative voice is not, at no point, that of the natives, thus preventing an assimilating move that an "internal" description may imply, but simultaneously attempts in as many possible directions to explore the Sundarbans and establish a contact with its inhabitants—in Geertz's words, to converse with them. This move, of course, is deliberately at odds with the authoritarian and oppressive practices of official policies.

Ghosh's complex epistemology of the cultural encounter is further enriched by the fact that he tends to focus on areas and cultural networks characterized by syncretism and hybridity. The Sundarbans are

no exception. The symbol of this hybridity is *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, the poem that tells the tale of the local forest goddess. The poem is written in a mixture of languages, mirroring the Indo-Arabic origins of the goddess herself. When Nirmal, in his diary, reports to have listened to the boatman Horen chanting a part of the poem, he describes it as ‘a strange variety of Bangla, deeply interpenetrated by Arabic and Persian’ (*The Hungry Tide* 246). He concludes that such a poem is not, after all, a surprising presence in a region whose mudbanks ‘are shaped not only by the rivers of slit, but also by the rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else?’ (*The Hungry Tide* 247).

Ghosh superimposes another, seemingly anomalous presence to the inherent hybridity of the Sundarbans: the *Duino Elegies* by Reiner Maria Rilke. Nirmal uses Rilke’s verses—in English translation—to describe the reality of the Sundarbans, establishing an unexpected bridge between distant worlds. An example is the stanza he quotes when he states that it is the ebb-tide that is viewed as the bringer of life in the region, because it signals the end of the flood and allows the previously submerged mangroves to grow:

We, who have always thought of joy
as rising [...] feel the emotion
that almost amazes us
when a happy thing falls. (*The Hungry Tide* 8)

A few verses from a German poet are able to capture one essential feature of the Sundarbans life: the relief and joy brought by the lowering tide. It is clearly, once again, a voice that cannot profess any internal understanding of the native’s point of view, but that is still able to provide valuable insight of the world it is brought in contact with. Paired with Bon Bibi’s Indo-Arabic narrative, these poetic moments suggest a vision of culture that generates vital and significant experiences within a collective or individual encounter with otherness. In spite of a political and historical discourse that decrees the lack of relevance of such local worlds, and therefore connives with the plight

of their inhabitants, Ghosh allows the Sundarbans to claim their place within a global network of exchanges.

The Hungry Tide embodies possibly in the most complex way the twin preoccupation at the core of anglophone Indian writing—for cross-cultural encounters on the one hand, and their framing in a political discourse on the other—that I have tried to sketch in this essay. This concern results in a tension towards a critical cosmopolitanism that has consistently reflected on and creatively employed the intermingling of cultures, languages and literary traditions of South Asia as a way to intervene in a political and cultural debate with the “idea of India” at its core. In this sense, the experiments carried out in these novels seem to me increasingly valuable as the perspective in literary studies gradually shifts from the national to the global. If we are to deal, in David Damrosch’s words, with an ‘unprecedented, even vertiginous variety of authors and countries’ (Damrosch 2014: 1) that emerge from the world literary system today, anglophone literature offers excellent starting point. This tradition has always hung in balance between English and vernacular languages, between a global and local understanding of reality, between Indian and non-Indian esthetical possibilities, and, most importantly, has systematically tried to find a place for cross-cultural encounters within the Indian political space. Anglophone Indian writing does not represent a new pan-Indian canon, but, as Rao suggested, can help us to start looking at the large world as a part of us.

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