Postcolonial societies like India in their quest for development often create vast numbers of dispossessed and displaced. Modernization, set in motion from around the 1950s in the form of dams, industrial projects and economic planning, has also, concomitantly, shifted large numbers of people from their habitat, professions and cultural roots. The Narmada dam alone has affected 120,000 people, while the arrival of multinational industries has resulted in a water famine affecting 300,000 people in Karnataka, to cite just two instances (Chowdhury and Chowdhury 1997, 132, 158). As Arundhati Roy puts it, “the millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war” (2001, 65). Postcolonial modernization thus results in the loss of home and homelands (India
does not have a national rehabilitation policy). Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004, hereafter *HT*) offers a humanist critique of dispossession in the postcolonial world. It deals with people who are “out of place” and seeking a “home.” It is in a postcolonial India, with its colonial past and continued claims for social justice from the displaced, the Dalits, the minorities and women that refugees are “created.” Morichjhãpi’s spectral refugee is emblematic of the inadequacy of the postcolonial state to provide a safe “home,” Dalits, minorities and other marginalized occupy an “unhomely” space in the postcolonial nation—in fact, many of the refugees in the Sunderbans are Dalits. They are “unhomely” not only in the sense that they are “out of place,” without a place on the land or in history, but that the land itself is “unhomely,” by virtue of being inhospitable.¹ This essay argues that Ghosh’s critique of the politics of possession/dispossession is worked out effectively through a postcolonial uncanny.²

Ghosh sketches the history of the Sunderbans as a history of failed colonization by humans: Europeans, other Asians (Khmer, Javanese) but also poor Indians, “so desperate for land that they were willing to sell themselves in exchange for a bigha or two” (2004, 51). But, Ghosh notes, no human settlement could flourish because of the predators and the very nature of the land. Ghosh has here foregrounded the impossibility of inhabiting the Sunderbans: the islands could never really be “home” because home implies stability, security and freedom from fear. It is in a sense of the home and homelessness in the now-land, now-water Sunderbans that the postcolonial uncanny emerges.

The uncanny, as theorized by Freud (1919) is about the human “sense” of house and home. It is a perception of a space where the perceiver finds herself simultaneously “at home” and “not at home.” The uncanny is the name of this experience of double perception of any space which is at once familiar and strange, safe and threatening, “mine” and “not mine.” The “home” is a sensate condition, and the uncanny, being a matter of perception, is different for different people. Maria Tatar suggests, following the work of Tzvetan Todorov, that the ambiguity in the uncanny event “generates the hesitation that defines the fantastic” (1981, 169). What is significant in Tatar’s reading of the uncanny is the emphasis on “hesitation” as the state of mind of the perceiving subject. This also shifts the uncanny out of the realm of the purely psycho-sexual (Bhabha 1990) into a more “worldly” state of location, topoi, place and perceptions of place. The sight of a particular place or event invokes uncanny dread because the perceiver hesitates to classify, define and identify the ambiguity in the place or event.

Bhabha argues that Freud mixes “repression” with “surmounting,” though the former refers to a psychic reality and the latter to the “repressive
workings of the cultural unconscious” (2006, 194). If “repression” is the term for the psychic reality of Fokir’s cannyness, then “surmounting” would be the erasure and rejection of such an indigenous canny in the discourses—the cultural unconscious—of the postcolonial nation. In the case of the colonial set up (reproduced, I would think, in the postcolonial colonization through development and technologization that results in displacement) culture is “heimlich, with its disciplinary generalizations, its mimetic narratives, its customs and coherence.” But, Bhabha notes, “cultural authority is also unheimlich, for to be distinctive, significatory, influential and identifiable, it has to be translated, disseminated, differentiated, interdisciplinary, intertextual, international, inter-racial” (195). Bhabha’s double movement of authority and non-sense, of the heimlich and the unheimlich in colonial contexts, is reproduced towards the end of HT. The double movement is one of knowledge, textuality and acculturation—a specific condition of the postcolonial uncanny that I term “the indigenous canny.” This moves the “uncanny” beyond the realm of the merely psychic into cultural and geographical contexts, where dispossession-repossession, locational perceptions and epistemology inform the uncanny.

Ghosh’s novel appropriates the “condition” of the uncanny in order to speak of dispossession and of those who lose their sense of home. The dispossessed seek a new home that resembles—doubles—the search for familiarity is an uncanny doubling—their old home (2004, 165). When the refugees arrive from Bangladesh, they encounter a very different sort of land. These are, as one of the refugees informs Kusum, “tide country people,” and yet the government shifts them to “a dry emptiness.” All they want to do is to “plunge their hands once again in our soft, yielding tide country mud,” to return to a place that recalls their home-land (164–65).

The uncanny is, in Ghosh, that of the open landscape, of the agora of the Sunderbans for “guests” like Kanai and Piya. My claim is that Ghosh’s uncanny works at several levels, from ecology to land reclamation, from homelands to local knowledge in order to propose a more emancipatory and inclusive postcoloniality. Such a postcoloniality approximates to what Emily Johansen terms “territorialized cosmopolitanism,” whose inhabitants—and Piya at the conclusion of the novel is an instance—“exhibit cosmopolitan world views” but also “see themselves as having ethical and moral responsibilities to the world and a specific local place” (2008, 2–3). In HT the uncanny becomes the source of Ghosh’s great politics of postcolonial dispossession, a politics that derives its strength from a spectropoetics. It marks a particular politics of homes, homelessness and at-home-ness and emerges as the rendering—ghostly of the dispossessed, in the “doubling” of land and water, but most of all in the theme of knowledge. As Kanai and Piya, the embodiments
of a Westernized, metropolitan and technology-reliant culture, discover, it is not data or codified knowledge that ultimately renders the Sunderbans familiar, homely and secure. The uncanny was once the domain of the sacred and the religious, and later entered the domain of scientific rationality in the form of ghosts, vampires and the undead (Dolar 1991, 7). In HT the uncanny results from the contest (and defeat) of the Westernized-technologized gaze of Kanai-Piya with/by Fokir’s indigenous canny. Thus while the uncanny incorporates the spectre, it is not limited to it. If in the colonial period visualism dominated the frames of exploration, discovery and conquest over new spaces and territories (see, for instance, Pratt 1995, Ghose 1998, Landau and Kaspin 2002) but sometimes failed the postcolonial too, as Kanai and Piya discover, is unequal to the task of a discerning gaze. Like the Hamiltons, who sought to establish a civilization in the shifting land (and failed), Piya and Kanai find themselves ill-equipped for the task of “settling” a gaze on the terrain. In the Sunderbans they perceive the land as familiar and strange, part-land and part water: in short, the uncanny.

The modulation of this uncanny into the “indigenous canny” is driven by the local, folkloric, mystical and ungraspable forms of knowing embodied in Fokir’s life and death. The dispossessed and their mystic, mythic knowledge, the constituents of what I am calling the “indigenous canny,” are what make the frightening uncanny of the Sunderbans a home. This trajectory, from the frightening uncanny perceived by the visitors to the “land” of the postcolonial dispossessed, to the relatively secure indigenous canny that renders the same land “home,” is what I explore in this essay. It is a trajectory that marks a shift from the perception of the landscape as a scene or setting to an experience of it as an environment, a shift, I argue, from the uncanny to the indigenous canny. I move, therefore, from the postcolonial uncanny’s ghostly, shifting, uncertain and doubling (uncanny) topoi to its repressed, and finally to a sense of security and “home” through the politics of canny knowledge. This canny knowledge, clearly, has its economic, social and political inflections: Piya sets up a database, networks with NGOs and organizations worldwide (another instance of a “territorialized cosmopolitanism”) and enable the building of storm shelters. The canny is this new secure environment built upon the remains of Fokir’s life and work.

The Uncanny Agora

The “story” of the novel is inseparable, in what is surely a brilliant narrative strategy in Ghosh, from the shape, form, texture and history of the Sunderbans land. The very opening description of the landscape suggests both a setting and a metaphor:
The rivers’ channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. . . . When these channels meet . . . at these confluences, the water stretches back to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumour of land, echoing back from the horizon. In the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a *mohona*—a strangely seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement.

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea . . . some say the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before.

When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate . . .

(Ghosh 2004, 6-7)

Ghosh’s landscape is between land and water, is both land and water. The form of the land, its topography, is never stable and is therefore beyond the map and “reliable” knowledge for those like Kanai (it does *not* represent the unknowable for Fokir though, and this differential knowability marks the uncanny perceptions of the land in Kanai and the easy canniness of Fokir). The wetland is indeed the uncanny because, like the uncanny, it has no definite form (Giblett 1996, 32-34). Adding to the sense of the uncanny is the tide country’s atmosphere (Freud argued that the uncanny is almost entirely “atmosphere”). The land is “unpredictable,” suggesting uncertainty and unreliable knowledge for the perceiver:

The freshly laid silt that bordered the water glistened in the sun like dunes of melted chocolate. From time to time, bubbles of air rose from the depths and burst through to the top, leaving rings upon the burnished surface. The sounds seemed almost to form articulate patterns, as if to suggest they were giving voice to the depths of the earth itself. (Ghosh 2004, 24)

It is clearly *not* a mappable land. The situation of intellectual uncertainty—hesitation—about the land is reinforced by numerous images and metaphors: “rumour,” “seductive word,” “many layers of beguilement,” all suggesting not only false/uncertain knowledge but also illusion and secrecy. Secrecy and uncertainty are, in Freud, integral to the uncanny (1971, 370, 373-75). Further, there is a sense of the primeval (the voice of the earth), a secret buried in the earth itself:

At low tide, when the embankment was riding high on the water, Lusibari looked like some gigantic earthen ark, floating serenely above its surroundings, only at high tide was it evident that the interior of the island lay well below the level of the water. At such times the unsinkable ship of a few
hours before took on the appearance of a flimsy saucer that could tip over at any moment and go circling down into the depths. (Ghosh 2004, 37)

Nirmal too uses the concealment and secrecy trope when he speaks of “how skilful the tide country is in silting over its past” (Ghosh 2004, 69. Also 229).

It is crucial for the narrative’s purposes to have the land disappear and appear. The land, with its concomitant stability—the very notion of *terra firma*—is an illusion. The land does not offer itself up to clear vision. It lies partially secreted, and the images of “beguilement,” “rumour” and the disappearing land point to a condition of secrecy. There is a sense in the uncanny of the “secret encounter,” an “apprehension . . . of something that should have remained secret and hidden has come to light” (Royle 2003, 2). In *HT* the land is what does not readily give itself up to interpretation—it is encountered yet disappears, sensed but not always seen, like a secret glimpsed at but not fully revealed. Secrecy is at the heart of both the novel—the secrets of the dolphins’ movements that Piya hopes to uncover and the secret of what happened at Morichjhãpi in 1978 (the secret lies buried in Nirmal’s notebooks)—and the uncanny. The uncanny is the “problem” of secrecy—whether it is of secret habitations of the tigers, the illegal, “invisible” (and therefore “secret,” perhaps?) citizenry of Morichjhãpi and of secret knowledges all linked to the terrain, which itself is only partially revealed.

Not only is it a landscape where at “high tide most of the land vanished under water,” it is also full of zoological threats: “everywhere you looked there were predators—tigers, crocodiles, sharks, leopards” (Ghosh 2004, 51). Crocodiles, Piya discovers, are always close by to take off the unsuspecting hand (174–5). Kanai, trapped in the slimy mud, begins to hallucinate: “there was something there, beneath the water’s surface: obscured by the darkness of the silt, it was making for the shore, coming towards him” (327). He then proceeds to recall the kinds of death he is likely to face: from the tiger, or from the crocodile. He “realizes” that death from a crocodile came very slowly because it will “drag you into the water while you’re still breathing” (328). Crocodiles, especially as Kanai perceives them, constitute the ultimate swamp monster. It transforms the country for Kanai, and forecloses any more participation in the events that occur there. It must be noted that crocodile(s)—which move equally well between land and water—could well be in Kanai’s imagination. Like the uncanny that blurs the boundaries between imagination and reality (Freud), slime’s very ambivalent texture—between land and water, both land and water—makes it uncanny (Giblett 1996, 32–34). Hence Kanai’s immersion in this eerie substance of ambiguous consistency dissolves dreams, memories and reality. Slime’s primordial nature (Rushdie 2002, 407) is incidentally what alters Kanai’s perception of himself. It blurs the signifier (the *stories* Kanai has heard) and the signified (his
present context). The return of the primordial—another component of the uncanny for Freud (1971, 393)—is the moment of uncertainty where present and future actions are decided, as Kanai’s decision to go back to the metropolis reveals.4

In sharp contrast to the traditional uncanny which is about spaces of the home/house (the architectural uncanny), Ghosh’s postcolonial uncanny eschews the built environment. The uncanny here is the great agora—the vast, labyrinthine tide country. As we shall see, it shares with the traditional uncanny (of the house) several common features: the apparent disturbances, the residue of family history and nostalgia, and finally, as the last refuge and intimate space that contrasts with invasive forces (Vidler 1987, 7). Space, geography and topography are, in the tide country, central to the sense of the uncanny—and it is to this I turn in my next section.

Sensuous Geographies

This uncanny topos also generates a very different geography of the senses. The place possesses a “fetid air,” we are told at the very beginning (Ghosh 2004, 8). Falling into the silted water, Piya experiences a “smell” in her head (54). In another crucial sign of the uncanny Piya picks up a “piece of chequered cloth” on the boat:

When she put it to her nose she had the impression that she could smell, along with the tartness of the sun and the metallic muddiness of the river, also the salty scent of his sweat.

Now, suddenly she recalled where it was that she had seen a towel like this before: it was tied to the doorknob of her father’s wardrobe... It had been with him for many years... it was almost a part of his body (Ghosh 2004, 86-87)

Here Piya smells Fokir on his bit of cloth, smells that recall and double a similar cloth belonging to her father, a cloth that was “almost a part of his [Piya’s father’s] body.” We have an uncanny doubling here, one that is produced by memories of smells. Now the uncanny is closely linked to smell (Giblett 1996, 32-34) because it “can in a split-second drop us out of the erstwhile familiarity of our present into the strange, painful and/or pleasurable, impossible country of the past (Royle 2003, 140). Here Piya’s perception of her present landscape modulates into a very “strong” recall of her childhood and home through the sense of smell. Then, when Fokir cooks on the small boat, “the acrid odour of burning chillies” work(s) as “phantoms... clawing at her throat and her eyes, attacking her as though she were an enemy who had crossed over undetected” (97). This later incident in fact doubles her earlier one of choking—through water and smells when she falls into the water (56).5
But most central to the tide country are its visual effects. HT relies heavily upon the discourse of visibility and sight. It is a country of mirrors and reflecting surfaces that compound problems of clear vision. The woodlands themselves, with their light-shade effects, the strange undergrowth and the mangroves make clear vision difficult for Kanai and Piya—representatives of a postcolonial condition. Wetlands, Rod Giblett informs us, are inimical to sight, and lack a “view” (Ghosh 2004, 6–7). In fact, HT does map “views,” but they are of the sea and the waterways, and are often confusing, illusory and not productive of reliable knowledge (seeing, here, is not believing). The tide country, says Nirmal, “trick[s] the eye with mirages” (49). Nirmal claims that the first attempt to colonize the land—Sir Daniel Hamilton’s—was the effect of such a mirage (49). From the very practical attempts to “sight” dolphins and their routes (Piya) to the efforts of the occupiers to get the world to see the reality of Morichjhãpi (172) and the numerous references to the visual, HT relies heavily on the theme of seeing.

The very first “event” on the train to Canning inaugurates the theme of seeing. It opens with Kanai first beholding Piya against a “sooty” background (Ghosh 2004, 3), his attempt to read and finding the light inadequate (5–6). Other visual effects approximate to the surreal (mirages, ghostly lights, reflections). The hospital seems to possess a “halo” (62). In the guest rooms of his aunt’s home Kanai finds “clouds of dust” hanging as if “frozen,” with “angled shafts of light” (39). It becomes symbolic because it is the locus of his uncanny: here he will meet the story of his uncle, Nirmal’s, romance with a land (Morichjhãpi) where he thought he had “come home,” a romance that doubles his (Kanai’s) feeling of being at home in the language of the land. Both, Nirmal’s romance and Kanai’s illusion are shattered by the brute reality of postcolonial nature and politics. I shall return to this point later.

Instances of unilluminating light scattered through the novel are symptomatic of the uncanny—which, we must remember is unclear—and the inadequacy of knowledge. Here the key moment of the epistemological uncanny is the question of reading and knowledge. Kanai first finds it difficult to read on the train (Ghosh 2004, 5–6) and later, Piya spills tea over the manuscript (10). And finally, he loses Nirmal’s great chronicle of the Morichjhãpi massacre.

Piya sees the crocodiles first and upsets the forest personnel, and eventually pays for being better at it than they (Ghosh 2004, 41–42). It is also significant that she first “does not see the fisherman clearly” (42), but it seemed to her that his frame was almost “skeletal,” having “yield[ed] his skin and flesh to the wind and the sun” (43). When Piya falls into the water everything changes for her: “It was the disorientation caused by the peculiar condition of light in the silted water that made her panic . . . [the mud] entered her eyes—it had become a shroud closing in on her” (54–55). The inability to see
is what frightens her. Slime, already identified as the uncanny, prevents clear visibility—itself a mark of the uncanny, according to Susan Bernstein (2004, 1112). Piya uses advanced technology—binoculars, the Global Positioning System (GPS)—to see clearly: “the glasses fetched you the water with such vividness and particularity” (75). In the first suggestion of romance in the book, Kanai and Kusum “held each other’s gaze . . . as though they were staring across the most primeval divide in creation” (91). Fokir himself is described as “utterly unformed,” a primeval quality, Kanai thinks, that attracts Piya (319).

Occasionally, the discourse of the visual serves up a metaphor for the changing landscape that is tide country. Piya finds that the greenery of the tide country “worked to confound the eye . . . it seemed to trick the human gaze, in the manner of a cleverly drawn optical illusion.” And immediately afterward: “There was such a profusion of shapes, forms, hues and textures, that even things that were in plain view seemed to disappear, vanishing into the tangle of lines like the hidden objects in children’s puzzles” (Ghosh 2004, 150). The landscape, which possesses an “epic mutability,” undergoes “another transformation” in the moonlight, when it becomes “a silvery negative of its daytime image.” The effect is startling: “It was the darkened islands that looked like a lake of liquid, while the water lay spread across the earth like a vast slick of solid metal” (154), an image that is prefigured in an earlier one (“the wood . . . like a skin of mirrored metal,” 39). Later too the sky serves as a reflecting surface, “a dark-tinted mirror for the waters of the tide country” (379). After the near-disaster with the crocodile, Piya is in a state of shock. This is her “experience” of the after-shock: “The water bubbled again as the reptile sank out of sight: for a moment after its submersion a ghostly outline of its shape remained imprinted on the surface and Piya saw that it was almost as large as the boat” (175). Here the uncanny reveals its extraordinary powers to shock and confuse. The crocodile appears to linger on, the atmosphere (water) seems to take its shape long after it has disappeared—the uncanny is the continued perception of something ghostly. More importantly, this encounter reveals something else: the animal is almost the same size of the refuge—the boat—and is its dangerous double. The double engendered by the tide country confounds mapping, geological accuracy and even vision. This is why, towards the end of the novel Kanai tells Piya he would like her to see him on his own terrain, not in tide country’s “uncharted ground” (353, I shall return to this later). The “uncharted” refers to the uncanny perception engendered by the amorphous, shifting land and water. It also refers directly, it seems to me, to the inability to comprehend the tide country. “Unchartered” gestures not only at the lack of clear vision to map the place but also to the frightening epistemological uncanny of being in the
tide country. Politically this suggests an absence of regulated, bounded territory and, since citizenship is territorial, a questionable citizenship for the inhabitants there: does Piya “belong” to the Sunderbans? When Kanai asks her to meet him in his “own” territory, does he gesture at a legitimate belonging, a clear-cut right to territorialized citizenship?

There is an “invisible Ganga,” the geologically enthused Nirmal informs the young Fokir (Ghosh 2004, 181). The optics of the landscape create illusions: “As the sun mounted in the sky, the glare off the water increased in intensity until it had all but erased the seam that separated the water from the sky” (265–66). Kanai sees “vistas” in other languages (269), in what is an ironic comment, for when he encounters a crisis he discovers that only primeval, even uncouth language serves him. There are other, later images of optical illusions, lack of clear sights and the inability to distinguish between reality and illusion (320, 327, 332–3, 379). Later, Kanai, trapped in silt and in the mangrove finds it difficult to see clearly (328–29), but believes that he saw a tiger (330–31). Colonization by humans of the land, Ghosh seems to suggest, is the consequence of a mirage where man (it is of course a gendered process) assumes he can control any land. During the colonial period, for instance, Hamilton had sought to domesticate a land, which, on occasion, was not land at all (49). This misplaced over-reliance on the visual in a land where nothing is what it appears to be continues in the form of the postcolonial uncanny.

The question of clear vision is a question, essentially and traditionally, of epistemology, and the postcolonial uncanny in Ghosh is a working-out of the question of knowledge and power. There is a great deal of uncertainty about what Piya or Kanai see in the tide country. The reference to “children’s puzzles” quoted above is only one direct reference to puzzles and accurate knowledge. Sight, and the knowledge predicated upon it, become unreliable in their encounter with uncanny doubles, reflections and the ghostly, and they hesitate (as pointed out earlier, hesitation is a marker of the uncanny) in their cognition and recognition. The uncanny unsettles what they see. Armed with texts, data and equipment, Kanai and Piya still find it difficult to really “see” the tide country. In sharp contrast, equipped with nothing other than a deep sensitivity and inherited knowledge, Fokir navigates the country better. It is the imbrication of seeing, reflection and knowledge that is at the heart of HT’s portraits of Kanai and Piya. If they have “vision,” then Fokir with his indigenous canny is the visionary towards the end of the novel. Characters like Kanai and Piya constantly seek accurate information and reliable knowledge in a land where there is none. Instead, what is available is a fund of apocryphal stories and a collection of myths. The uncanny is located in a mass of entangled detail, and generates its own mythic anthropology.
The Uncanny and its Mythic Anthropology

The ecology and visual instability of the tide country is complicated by a strange mix of its history with local myth and story. Central to the uncanny is what Freud identifies as a return to unformed primitivism (Freud 1971, 393-97), and what Hélène Cixous refers to as its “mythic anthropology,” a “foundation of gods and demons” (1976, 539). The uncanny is also connected, Cixous adds, to a series of anecdotal examples, literary and biographical mini stories (539)—the manner in which the link between narrative and land is made explicit in HT. Here the uncanny applies to more than the psychic economy of the protagonists, or even the simple matter of perception. It is also about the belief systems of the local population, rooted in history, geography and myth, that inform and inflect the present lives of the people—what I see as the link between narrative and land.

“This was the story that gave the land its life,” writes Ghosh (2004, 354) of the Bon Bibi legend. This is the story which gives the land its history, character and even philosophy (102-05). The narrative, Nirmal discovers, is a curious metaphor for the tide country itself. The narrative had been created “from elements of legend and scripture, from the near and the far, Bangla and Arabic.” It has Arabic invocations at what looks like a Hindu puja (246-47).

The mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else... the tide country’s faith is something like one of its great mohonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a circular round-about people can use to pass in many directions. (Ghosh 2004, 247)

This cultural context is a linguistic double of the land itself, Ghosh suggests. The Bon Bibi legend demonstrates a supernatural intervention in human affairs, the triumph of innocence, and the power of the tide country gods. The “social order” in the tide country is, Nirmal and years later Piya discover, based on the strengths of the myth itself.

The uncanny is the space of an uncertainty and the moment of hesitation resulting partly from the confused narratives that generate both familiarity and strangeness. Thus, Nirmal assumes the rituals for Bon Bibi are Hindu rituals, and he discovers that they are accompanied by Arabic chants, thus merging the strange and the familiar. The tide country is itself made of confluences: there are no identifiable individual strands, no points of origins and certainly no borders. Like the legend, the land too is open-ended, multi-originary and unstable, evolving and changing. What adds to the place’s mythic anthropology is this very unstable legend and the impossibility of translating it “perfectly,” as Kanai admits to Piya (Ghosh 2004, 309, 354).

The legend is called into question by Kusum herself. Her father is killed by a tiger, as the rest of the community watches. Kusum remarks that she never
stopped praying to Bon Bibi throughout the incident, but the goddess did not come and her father died (Ghosh 2004, 107-09). The people who come to tide country assimilate the local legends and history—Nirmal, Nilima, Piya and Kanai, even though they set out to be rational metropolitans. What is fascinating is the way anecdotes and local histories seem to double back upon them.

Kanai’s experience and vision of a tiger and a crocodile (something that comes close to destroying his very sanity) is an experience of the primeval. As noted earlier, when trapped in the silt, Kanai recalls all that he has heard about crocodiles, their hunting habits and kinds of death that are possible (Ghosh 2004, 328). The mangroves are harsh and unwelcoming. Yet it is to the mangroves that Kanai retreats when he is in the slime: “The barrier of mangrove, which had looked so tangled and forbidding from the boat, now seemed a refuge” (328). Rushing into the mangroves—and the river, where the crocodiles have “disappeared from view” (329)—Kanai then has his second traumatic experience: he sees a tiger (329-30). He has crossed the line that Nirmal had discovered years before: “the border that separates the realm of human beings from the domain of Dokkhin Rai and his demons” (223-24). Kanai too discovers that such a border-crossing is not an illusion at all: the terrors are very real. He realizes the truth of Nirmal’s statement: “this chimerical line was, to her [Kusum] and Horen, as real as a barbed-wire fence might be to me” (224). In tide country, the myth becomes the reality for Kanai.

What is significant is that Kanai, having decided to return to Delhi and his “regular,” metropolitan existence, utilizes this same mythic anthropology as his parting gift to Piya. His letter to Piya opens thus: “What does it mean when a man wants to give a woman something that is beyond price—a gift that she, and perhaps only she, will ever truly value?” (Ghosh 2004, 353). What he gives her is a translation of Fokir’s song about Bon Bibi, the forest’s protectress, and the “story that gave this land its life” (354). Thus Kanai’s parting gift to Piya is a local legend. This return of the local myth is, I believe, crucial, for Kanai resorts to it in order to underline his feelings for Piya. A man who had in his own words “loved in six languages” (353), takes recourse to a local myth in order to express his love. Piya recognizes the importance of the gift, which, when Fokir sings the song, “flow[s] around her like a river” (360). The uncanny of experience presupposes, Samuel Weber argues, only a partial surmounting of the archaic modes of thought (Weber 1973, 1108). Piya and Kanai are unable to overcome their “basic” forms of thinking, language and memories. Thus what the metropolitan man gives a Westernized non-local Indian is a local legend that appeals to the primeval in Piya (Piya having discovered that there is some intrinsic connection between her and Fokir, a connection that exists beyond language). In the circumstances, it seems the most appropriate gift. I suggest that in the context of the post-
colonial uncanny, the myths of the place teach the metropolitan human the inadequacy of knowledge, while at the same time proposing an alternative belief system. In the age of globalization—the story is set in the post-9/11 era (371)—the local, vernacular myth remains central to the tide country, and to its tourists (Piya and Kanai). The myth makes the uncanny a home-like space, even before “new” local knowledges make it a “home.” As the novel proceeds, therefore, Ghosh foregrounds the theme of knowledge, especially of the need for previously marginalized knowledge to alter the nature of the postcolonial.

The Return of the (Postcolonial) Repressed

The uncanny is a space that is vaguely like home but is not home: it is the strange rendered vaguely familiar. Ghosh’s postcolonial uncanny is essentially about home and homelessness. Versions of this theme—which folds into related themes of knowledge and belonging—are scattered throughout the text, each cathexed via the figure of the uncanny. This theme has two components in HT: (a) the question of home, homelessness and the doubling of homes and (b) the spectre of home/lessness.

(a) Home/Homelessness:

Kanai perceives Piya at a railway station, and his first impression is that that she looked “exotic” (Ghosh 2004, 3). Now “exotic,” as the OED informs us, originally referred to a plant transplanted in foreign soil. The term is appropriate and prophetic, keeping the later course of the narrative that involves plant life, planting and plantations. Later Piya discovers that her foreignness is a protection in some contexts, and a danger in others (34).

Kanai himself first sees and experiences Lusibari and the tide country when he is sent down from Calcutta. He has been “rusticated” from school and sent to live with Nilima and Nirmal (Ghosh 2004, 14–15). Nilima and Nirmal themselves came to Lusibari in search of a “safe haven” (76). They wished to “escape” the political and professional troubles in Calcutta, and make a new home in Lusibari (77–79). Here “nothing was familiar; everything was new” (79). Piya travels the seas looking for cetaceans, and is one of those permanently displaced. Her own home in the USA, with her increasingly withdrawn mother, is an odd space (94).

But there is a still greater alienation. Refugees from Bangladesh come “home” to tide country. Kusum, who has suffered severe misfortune and narrowly escaped a degraded existence, comes down to tide country to settle down. At one point, when she expresses a wish to come to Calcutta, Kanai tells her: “You wouldn’t like Calcutta. . . . You wouldn’t feel at home” (Ghosh 2004, 101). This turns out to be prophetic too—because Kusum does not ever
get a “proper” home. The British had hoped to make Canning a thriving town, where many homes and hopes could be built (52). Yet, years later, “catastrophe . . . [is still] . . . a way of life” here (79). There was no gold to be had from the tide country’s mud (79).

Ghosh details Daniel Hamilton and the colonial government’s attempts to create settlements (Ghosh 2004, 49-53). While Hamilton’s is a successful one, the British government’s efforts at settling Canning on the banks of the unpredictable Matla river prove disastrous (285-86). In both cases the humans claim land from water, and the river rises up to claim the land, people and civilization. The river here emblematizes the restless repressed—attempts are made to hold it check by the construction of embankments (286)—which returns. The dispossessed re-claim Morichjhāpi, and the government claims it right back, on behalf of the area’s animals.

However, and this is the key point, nobody makes a home in the tide country, not on any long-term basis. The rivers and the sea claim lives, homes, futures and identities. It is a home where the sureties of home do not exist. It is home and yet not-home. The refugees in Morichjhāpi discover this in a violent state-sponsored massacre: to them is denied the right to (re)claim the tide country as home. In order to emphasize the unhomely nature of this home/land Ghosh traces the history of human colonization of this strange land: the “Araknese, the Khmer, the Javanese . . . . It is common knowledge that almost every island in the tide country has been inhabited at some time or the other” (Ghosh 2004, 50). He then proceeds to show how no human home could flourish here. The mangroves that grow in the tide country are special, writes Ghosh: for these not only “recolonize the land; they erase time” (50). Once the humans have colonized the land, altered it, the mangroves re-colonize it, marking the vegetal-botanical return of the repressed. It is not home/land for any form of life except the mangroves.

It is also significant that the tide country’s most brutal history is of the massacre. As Rod Giblett points out, the wetlands and marshes have been seen as places of refuge for the rebel, the runaway and as sites of resistance for the rebel or revolutionary (1996, 205). In the case of Sundarbans, the Morichjhāpi incident is about the dispossessed who attain the status of rebels and revolutionaries. Nilima says of them:

They just wanted a little land to settle on. But for that they were willing to pit themselves against the government. They were prepared to resist until the end. That was enough. This was the closest Nirmal would ever come to a revolutionary movement. (Ghosh 2004, 119)

The new home, therefore is a doubling, where the old comes back as an (uncanny) echo. The tide country is a space of refuge, resistance and disturbance. However, the refugees are not allowed to stay in this new home after
they are brutally evicted and massacred, the land is once more reclaimed for
the animals (as the public announcements reveal, and which Kusum bitterly
criticizes, [Ghosh 2004, 261-62]). Kanai discovers that the tide country’s
history of disturbances involves his own family. The history and question of
home is clearly one that recalls the link between violence and the “home-
ly”: the human setting up a home in the tide country is an act of violence
upon the land. Further, the law legitimizes particular kinds of violent “pos-
session” of the land (those who therefore are “at home”), and criminalizes
some others (the “unhomely”).

There is yet another twist to the politics of dispossession and homeles-
ness. There is no hospitality in the tide country, and the settlers cannot offer
hospitality to anyone, for hospitality implies sovereignty over the space
(Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 55). The tide country is not hospitable
because sometimes the land is not land at all—it lacks a coherent, sovereign
state of existence. The tide country settlers—as Nirmal discovers (Ghosh
2004, 172-73)—have little patience with poetry or dreams—because they are
not sovereign over their space either. Piya herself is a guest in the Sunderbans
and when Fokir gives up his life for her he has offered her the ultimate act
of knowing hospitality. Towards the end of the novel, it is Fokir’s wisdom and
knowledge that not only saves her, but enables her to embark on the project
that could eventually make the tide country a safe home. Indeed, she does
call it “home,” and this shift in her role from guest to “native” or “resident”
(and eventual host?) is mediated and made possible by Fokir’s crucial act of
hospitality. The uncanny place has become a home through the arrival of the
indigenous canny. This sense of home, of its inhabitants and exclusions is
Ghosh’s main theme.

(b) Spectres of Homelessness

A key element in the spectropoetics of HT and the postcolonial uncanny
is, I believe, the attention to justice. The ghostly in HT is not about the
terror of haunting but the social and political structures that render some
people ghostly. “Reading” the ghosts of Ghosh’s uncanny enables us to cri-
tique a postcoloniality that creates ghosts for, as Nicholas Rand reminds us,
the phantom has “the potential to illuminate the genesis of social institutions”
(169, my emphasis).

The return of the dead to haunt the living that Kanai’s description sug-
gests inaugurates the spectropoetics of HT. Ghosts, returning revenants and
spectral visions populate the tide country, its inhabitants and even the visi-
tors. Kanai tells Piya: “he’s [Nirmal] arisen from his ashes to summon” (Ghosh
2004, 14). For Piya the space of home in the USA alters itself from the
“homely” to the uncomfortable uncanny:
There was a time when those were the smells of home; she would sniff them on her mother, on the way back from school; they would fill the lift on its journey up to their floor. When she stepped inside they had greeted her, like domesticated animals, creatures with lives of their own, sustaining themselves on the close, hot air of the apartment. She had imagined the kitchen as a cage from which they never ventured out. (Ghosh 2004, 96–97)

But, Piya finds out, they did. They “followed her everywhere” until she is forced to shut them away. And now, on the waters in tide country, she remembers these smells, in a version of the uncanny: “But here, the ghosts of these creatures seemed to be quieted by their surroundings” (Ghosh 2004, 97). Immediately after this Piya describes the smells as having a curious effect on her: they work like “phantoms . . . clawing at her throat” (97). The uncanny is the terrifying that leads us back to the familiar, as Freud theorized. Here the familiar smells that recall her childhood trouble Piya in tide country, and constitute her “new” uncanny. The image of smells as animals, and subsequently as ghosts, is a version of the uncanny—it returns to haunt her several years later in a way that reminds her of home in a strange place, but also emphasizes that it is not home at all. It is significant that at a later moment in the narrative the predators on the tide country islands are described in terms of, among other things, smells: “The great cats of the tide country were like ghosts, never revealing their presence except through marks, sounds and smells. They were so rarely seen that to behold one, it was said, was to be as good as dead” (108). This curious doubling of the animal-smell-atmosphere in the case of Piya and the tide country is an excellent example of Ghosh’s spectropoetics. Piya’s childhood smells and animals are ghosts that live within her, and are at a curious abeyance here, in tide country. Piya’s ghosts are of animals that never were: they exist only as memories of particular smells that had taken on a certain animal nature for her. However, the people who live in the tide country are persecuted by very real animals that are, paradoxically, perceived only as smells and marks. The shift is fascinating, and adds to the tide country’s uncanny where nothing is as it seems. Piya’s very real fears of smells that are animal-like are ghosts reduced to nothing in tide country. For the dwellers in that place, the animals are manifest as smells which render them ghostly. The repetition—a central feature of the uncanny (Cixous 1976, 539)—is a new “hauntology” (Derrida’s term from Specters of Marx 1994, 51). Even the song Fokir sings is full of grief and “unsettles” Piya (Ghosh 2004, 98–99, 308–09). If soft speech, as David Punter suggests, is a sign of the phantom, then Fokir’s song adds to the specters of the post-colonial uncanny (Punter 2000, 76).

People alienated from each other and the “site” of life are also ghostly. When Nirmal begins to get interested in Morichjhâpi and its problems,
Nilima tries to warn him off. Years later, she describes the situation thus: “we were like two ghosts living in the same house” (Ghosh 2004, 120). This image of ghosts inhabiting houses, or rather of inhabitants reduced to ghosts in their own home, will repeat in a different way in the case of Fokir as we shall see. Like Nilima and Nirmal, and Fokir the entire tide country is peopled by ghosts. *HT* is, one could argue, a ghost story: about ghosts who seek a home or a place to haunt and about people who remain ghostly and invisible to structures of seeing. At the heart of *HT* is, of course, the crisis at Morichjhāpi. Describing the long march of the refugees who end up in Morichjhāpi, Ghosh uses a telling term. Kusum is reporting her encounter with the refugees: “They passed us the next day—like *ghosts*, covered in dust, strung out in a line, shuffling beside the railtracks” (164; my emphasis). The refugees are ghostly, unreal people. What is disturbing about the massacre of the refugees is that the state kills those who are essentially state-less. They are *persona non grata* by virtue of being homeless. Described as ‘squatters’ by Nilima (213), they lack all rights. What is also important is that these people who have been made ghostly are *Dalits* (118). Their presence points to a particular history in the subcontinent. If Avery Gordon (1997) is accurate in her reading of the spectral, ghosts represent the haunting reminders of modernity’s violence—in this case a postcolonial condition of exclusion and exploitation. But they also represent an uncertain, unfair present where the state (the one they adopt as a possible new home). Bishnupriya Ghosh, in a perceptive reading of *The Calcutta Chromosome* (Ghosh 1997), argues that ghosts in Amitav Ghosh’s fiction occupy a “redemptive place” and force us to ask certain “questions of political justice and hope” (2004, 205). Reading the ghostly in Amitav Ghosh, Bishnupriya Ghosh proposes that specters “collapse the boundaries of present, past and future” (2004, 206). They are redemptive because they are witnesses to the erasure of certain people in the present. Some people simply do not count in the imagining of communities and nations (207–08). “Every generation creates its own population of ghosts,” declares Amitav Ghosh in *HT* (50). The ghosts of the massacred refugees and Morichjhāpi will continue to haunt future generations. Such a reading of the ghostly—and the ghostly is, of course, a feature of the uncanny—is a useful mode of tackling the politics of dispossession in *HT*. Ghosh’s novel can therefore be profitably read as embodying a politics of the spectre in order to deal with the politics of dispossession.

Jacques Derrida—on whose work Bishnupriya Ghosh builds—points out that revenants are those who begin by coming back (1994, 11). The uncanny of tide country is precisely this spectrology. The land is what begins by coming back from the water as the tide retreats. The dispossessed are described as ghosts—but they are ghosts who begin by coming back to the
place that is closest in texture to their home (a point I made at the beginning of this essay). The ghostly refugees, therefore, constitute the uncanny because they begin their ghostly existence by returning to old haunts. Amitav Ghosh’s postcolonial uncanny is a spectropoetics of dispossession itself—the refugees haunt a place which is familiar as home, but which remains unfamiliar. Crucial to this sense of the uncanny is the state’s refusal to validate their claims to the “home/land.” It is this refusal that generates the ghosts of the Sunderbans.

The ghosts, *HT* suggests, are those living in the aftermath of the collapse of emancipatory moments/projects such as Independence and postcoloniality and, as Leela Gandhi points out, the skepticism over nationalism as the “only legitimate end of decolonization” (1999, 111). What does it mean to be dispossessed by a war? (“when the war broke out our village was burned to ash,” 165). What does it mean to be further dispossessed in/by a (postcolonial) nation-state that one has chosen as a haven, a “home”? Does the refugee have a right to refuge? Does the refugee have a choice of refuge? Can the people from the Bangladesh side of Sundarbans seek refuge and homes in the tide country (which is most like their original home) on the Indian side? Or will they be reduced to ghosts? Ghosh, I believe, proposes a deeply humanist critique of the postcolonial condition here. The refugees are what come after (like ghosts, who come *after*) such emancipatory moves, the creation of welfare states and social mechanisms of charity and development. The spectral refugee is a comment on the inadequacy of the postcolonial state. The Indian state is an inhospitable one, for it does not want to offer a home (hospitality) to the (foreign) refugee: he or she is denied any (home)land in order to keep the lands of the state inviolable, for the “locals” and for the animals. The Dalits remain outside the nation even as they constitute a nation *within* a nation. Piya realizes the sheer indifference of the (postcolonial) Kanai to places like Lusibari and people like Fokir, where her realization has recourse to the spectral theme: “Piya understood too that this was a looking-glass in which a man like Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was Lusibari” (Ghosh 2004, 220). The Fokirs and Lusibaris will forever be just that—diminishing and ghostly.

What is highly symbolic is Ghosh’s relentless logic of the uncanny: the ghostly refugees are refused (home)lands in a land that is itself foundationless, shifting and unmapped. Like the land itself, which cannot be mapped or perceived clearly because it is constantly shifting and changing shape, the dispossessed cannot be mapped because they have no locus or locale: the tide country is at once home and not-home. Like the tide that washes away any signs of human existence the state washes away “intruders.” The tide in *HT*
is both natural and political: it is an effect of natural wind-water rhythms and
the consequence of politics. The dispossessed are, of course, merely the object
of such transformative politics and waves. The ethics of the spectre call upon
us to ask questions about land rights and the rights of refugees. In the post-
colonial context, people have been alienated from the land they sought as
home, they have been doubly dispossessed by state actions (first through war
and then through evictions). The dispossessed are ghosts because they cannot
lead an embodied existence anywhere and Kusum, for instance, is reduced to
a skeletal frame (Ghosh 2004, 260–61). And, in an uncanny doubling, after the
trauma of Fokir’s death in the storm, Piya herself is reduced to a “strangely
unnerving presence . . . a kind of human wraith” (394). The tide country
makes ghosts of the living.

Often, those truly at home in tide country are themselves not-at-home.
Take for instance, Fokir’s own home. The staff quarters where Fokir, his wife,
Moyna and son Tutul live is “close to the island’s embankment . . . on the
periphery of the Trust’s compound” (Ghosh 2004, 207). When Piya and Kanai
visit their home she seeks Fokir. This is the incident:

Fokir was squatting in the dwelling’s doorway, half-hidden by a grimy blue
curtain. He did not look up and offered no greeting nor any sign of recogn-
ition. . . . He was wearing, as usual, a T-shirt and a lungi, but somehow in
the setting of his own home, his clothes looked frayed and seedy. . . . There
was a fugitive sullenness about his posture that suggested he would rather
be anywhere but where he was. (Ghosh 2004, 207)

Fokir is himself not clearly visible in his own home—another instance of the
uncanny’s visual problematic that runs through the novel. He does not
engage in the visual exchange of looking at his visitors. And finally, in his
own home, Fokir is a wraith, an absent presence who refuses to acknowledge
his visitors. He would like to be elsewhere, for he is not “at home” in the
built environment. In the space of his “home” Fokir has only a limited pres-
ence, almost ghostly.

If Fokir’s “own” house is home to a wraith-like individual, the tide coun-
try is home to several such ghosts. The tide country’s history is itself a history
of ghosts and refugees seeking places to haunt and home in. In such a context,
the metropolitan Kanai and the cosmopolitan Piya arrive in the tide country.
These “foreigners” discover the country’s history while unconsciously shaping
the future. This transformation, which hinges upon the discovery of personal,
topographical and historical ghosts, is achieved through a significant change in
the texture of the uncanny. The change relies, as we shall see, heavily on the
knowledge some of these “ghosts” possess about the tide country.
If, as Samuel Weber suggests, the uncanny is rooted in undecidability, it also implies and involves a second moment or movement: the “defence against this crisis of perception and phenomenality” (1973, 1132). This second moment is marked by the desire to conserve the “integrity of perception” (1133). The effort to devise a defence against the collapse of perception and against epistemological uncertainty and hesitance is, I argue, the drive to knowledge, a drive that makes the uncanny a more equitable and just canny. The arrival of the ghost, Avery Gordon proposes, is the arrival of a “social figure.” It calls attention, Gordon continues, to “modernity’s violence and wounds . . . about systematic injury in the social world” (1997, 24–25). In HT, the ghosts of the Sunderbans, to which Fokir is added in a different way, as we shall see, constitute the arrival of those wounded. These ghosts, as Gordon correctly points out, are “haunting reminders” of the making of the social world.

The tide country, as we have seen, is the ultimate uncanny for the “guests” who come to observe, to colonize or simply as tourists. It corresponds to the uncanny’s “dynamic structure of coming forth unbidden and being covered again” (Bernstein 2004, 1118). The refugees, whose ghostly presence in the tide country’s uncanny adds to its history and present, seek to make a home here because it is the closest they find to their original homeland. The land’s shape-shifting renders any knowledge of the place unreliable and perhaps impossible, unless one has a particular canniness. It is the place where the repressed in/of history seeks to return and assert itself. The numerous instances of imimical vision demonstrate the uncanny of the undecidable tide country. In such a context what renders the uncanny a space of “home/land,” or the “canny,” is knowledge.

In the topographical description that I quoted at the beginning of the essay, Ghosh uses two crucial, semantically loaded terms: “beguilement” and “seductive.” Together, I believe, they provide a key theme in the novel: the illusion of knowledge and the reality of ignorance. My argument here is that knowledge defines not only the boundary between the homely and the unhomely, it also determines the very construction of the homely.

Piya arrives in the tide country armed with an enormous amount of theoretical knowledge about cetaceans and mammals. Kanai is a man full of confidence, one who is at home in any language, as noted before. And yet Nilima warns him: “don’t act like you know everything” (Ghosh 2004, 11), thus inaugurating the theme of reliable knowledge in a land where no knowledge is adequate. What happens to the both of them is central to the uncanny. Despite her theoretical data, technological devices and determination, Piya discovers herself trapped, first in a postcolonial bureaucracy and then in the
tide country. Fokir, Piya discovers, has an intimate knowledge of the waters of the tide country and its animals, despite his obvious lack of “education” and technology. Kanai discovers that Fokir is better adapted to the local conditions than he is. In what is a defining moment in the novel, Kanai finds himself trapped in silt. Angry at his impotence to escape and, at what he perceives as Fokir’s insolence, he abuses Fokir. What follows is an epiphany, one that is cast in novel’s characteristic descriptive vocabulary of the visual:

It was exactly this feeling that came upon him [Kanai] as he looked at Fokir: it was as though his own vision were being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes, and he were seeing not himself, Kanai, but a great host of people—a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men who had destroyed Fokir’s village, burnt his home and killed his mother; he had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing. (Ghosh 2004, 327)

Later Kanai admits: “I had always prided myself on the breadth and comprehensiveness of my experience of the world . . . at Garjontola I learnt how little I know of myself and of the world” (353).

Kanai suddenly becomes a symbol for a particular kind of humanity: the colonizers who oppress land, animal and humans alike. He represents a post-coloniality that is confident, predominantly metropolitan, clever and ruthless, one that constructs itself and thrives on dispossession of others. Kanai is prefigured in a small way in the forest guards who accompany Piya. The guard, writes Ghosh, “had a predatory look” in his eye (2004, 43). He then proceeds to demonstrate state power and corruption, bullying the child, abusing Fokir and being rude to Piya (45–47). But, face to face with raw nature, such a sophisticated postcolonial condition crumbles, at least temporarily. Fokir, especially in this context, symbolizes the return of the repressed-oppressed. Fokir feels and is at home on the river (211), and feels “out of place” on land (133). Kanai recognizes that this difference in feelings of at “home-ness” is also a question of authority: “it was as though in stepping on the island, the authority of their positions had been suddenly reversed” (325). This incident, in conjunction with Piya’s experience of the storm during which Fokir dies and enables her to survive, represents, in addition to the romanticization of the “primitive” native, the politics of the postcolonial uncanny.

The failure of metropolitan knowledge is evidenced in many ways. Nirmal had gone to Morichjhâpi because of his dreams of revolution and ideology. He quickly discovers that he can teach nothing and that he is of no practical use, despite his knowledge of Marx and Rilke. As the ward leader asks him: “Then what can you do for us? . . . Of what use can you be?” (Ghosh 2004, 172–73).
Piya is unable to come to terms with the way the locals hunt and kill a tiger. Fokir informs them “when a tiger comes into a human settlement, its because it wants to die” (Ghosh 2004, 295). At this moment, Piya covers her ears and refuses to hear any more. Later, engaged in a debate with Kanai, she discovers the flaws in her pro-animal stance. This stance, Kanai points out, is driven by Western, metropolitan ways of thinking, where they made a “push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs” (301). The animism of the tide country has a refracted double here where the animal is killed. It is also at the moment of this incident when Piya realizes that the people in tide country live by the myths they have been brought up on. And this knowledge, and the perception it engenders, is what distinguishes her from Fokir (297).

The distinction between Piya and Fokir is in a sense exacerbated by the storm. It is significant that both key documents and sources of information are lost in the storm: Piya’s data sheets (Ghosh 2004, 371-72) and Nirmal’s diary (376), although the GPS monitor survives. India’s postcolonial modernization project—which inherits modes of documentation and knowledge-gathering from a European modernity—is literally erased by the waters of the Sundarbans. The uncanny not only destroys the illusion of any stable subject position but also the possibility of any stable meaning, since sometimes the land is not stable at all (Bernstein 2004, 1135). What this means in the case of Ghosh’s novel is that neither Piya nor Kanai will ever regain their confidence in their respective knowledges (Kanai and language, Piya as a cetologist). Their very self has been destroyed by the uncanny which is the tide country. Kanai loses his self-confidence completely, as Piya notes (Ghosh 2004, 335). He tells her, in what seems to be a nod at the question of the uncanny (the un-homely): “I want you to see me—on my own ground, in the place where I live” (335). Here he is on “unchartered ground” (353). The term “unchartered” of course gestures at both unmapped and unknowable ground but also an unlegislated and ungoverned space. If knowledge is about power and control, then, as we have seen, the tide country does not allow either. This is what makes the tide country truly uncanny: beyond comprehension and knowledge for those like Kanai and Piya until such time as they appropriate the indigenous. The domain that lies beyond comprehension and knowledge is that of the other, standing in opposition to empirical, rational and “modernized” knowledge systems. Conversely, one cannot fully “know” the other, as David Punter has argued, because it is incommensurable (2000, 74). Such a state of ignorance about the other and the other’s knowledge is precisely what Piya discovers. Piya realizes how much Fokir actually knew when they are on the tree: “Had he known, right from the start that his own body would have to become her shield when the eye had passed?” (Ghosh
Fokir’s kind of knowledge cannot be empirically established, but this canniness is what makes even the tide country’s uncanny a safe place for some: the instinctive or even vernacular knowledge—an “other” archive, as Bishnupriya Ghosh terms it (202) that helps people survive. Fokir’s secret knowledge—the indigenous canny—alters how Piya experiences the land hereafter. Fokir of course takes his secret knowledge with him to the grave, but not before he has rendered the place “home” for Piya. The uncanny, in its connotative significance gestures at a house’s many secrets, concealed, exclusive (Tatar 1981, 169). It requires a wholly different order of knowledge to unravel and reveal the secret. Fokir possesses the kind of knowledge a host must possess to be truly hospitable (Fokir’s radical hospitality entails that he give up his life for his—and the tide country’s—guest). Piya recognizes this: it is Fokir’s canny hospitality that makes a home for her eventually; it helps transform her relationship with the country. Thus, when the novel ends, Piya is able to don the role, at least partially but with enough to suggest a more permanent and intense involvement later, of the local expert and host. Saved by Fokir, she is now the source of authentic information about the tide country to the world, a role embodied in her Fokir project.

Piya’s attempts to gather support for her project, focusing on the mangroves and its people are, I argue, the postcolonial’s attempt to retrieve the land using native knowledge. In what is a striking example of what Sandra Harding, following Donna Haraway, calls “standpoint epistemology” where resources for the production of knowledge work backwards from lives to concepts/theories (Harding 1998, 153), Piya decides that the project “could be done in consultation with the fishermen who live in these parts” (Ghosh 2004, 397). Here Piya has situated the researcher’s knowledge alongside that of Fokir’s unsystematic and incommensurable one, and finds herself wanting. If she represents the modernized postcolonial with her GPS and rationalized data, Fokir represents the mystic version of the postcolonial. When the novel concludes, Ghosh has made a significant move: he integrates the “rational” postcolonial with the “mystic” one and proposes a newer humanist vision. When Piya proposes a database, a cyclone warning system and a greater commitment to local knowledge in Fokir’s honour, we see a new postcolonial paradigm emerging, an indigenous canny that incorporates the spiritual-mystic within the technological modern. Piya’s plans for the area are worth examining for this emergent postcolonial. Piya tells Nilima:

All the routes Fokir showed me are stored here... Fokir took the boat into every little creek and gully where he’d ever seen a dolphin. That one map represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge. It’s going to be the foundation of my own project. That's why I think it should be named after him. (Ghosh 2004, 398)
Nilima responds: “It would be good to have a memorial for Fokir, on earth as well as in the heavens” (399). Fokir is also, therefore, a ghost, he continues to exist in the form of his data (in fact Piya uses the phrase “his data,” much to Nilima’s surprise, 398). The haunting continues in a different fashion here, because Fokir’s database is a memorial, an act of mourning that will last a long time (“decades of work,” as Piya puts it). Memorials are built so that we do not forget (Stuken 1991, 120) and therefore function as modes of telling history. They have a pedagogic imperative (120) where private memories—such as Piya’s—are translated into a collective experience (128). It requires both “concentration”—dwelling upon, contemplate—and “specification,” with the names of the dead and an account of the reason or occasion of their death (Simpson 2006, 67–70). Here Piya memorializes Fokir, his death and his knowledge with a specific pedagogic project in mind. Fokir’s death must not be in vain, and his memorial is both the physical storm shelters she plans as well (where people will “concentrate”) as well as the data. Piya inherits his data, and inheritance, intimately linked to the spectre, as Derrida demonstrates, is never a given; it is always a task (1994, 54). What I want to emphasize here is that Fokir is also reduced to (or is it elevated to?) a ghost, but a ghost who facilitates the task of better understanding, and perhaps social transformation—since Piya mentions that a large-scale conservation movement and an organization might be possible with international funding, all part of the Fokir project. In fact, specters survive only through incorporations in the form of a body of ideas, an “artifactual body” or even a “technical body or an institutional body” (126–27). Fokir then is the ghostly data that will be, in Piya’s words, the “foundation” of her project. In a sense, then, Fokir is the spectre that returns to the body of data as incorporation. Both the uncanny and the tide country, unstable, uncertain, unreliable, and therefore, lacking in strong “foundations,” suddenly move towards a foundation. The textual ghost of Fokir translates into the indigenous canny to be built upon by Piya and others. Textuality here enables the very material basis of the tide country’s (new) world.

This is, in fact, the logic of the ghost. Phantomatic memories are a memorial to terror. And yet, as David Punter suggests (2000, 70), if we were to abandon these terrifying memorials—in this case the flood, Bon Bibi, the dolphins, Morichjhâpi, or Fokir—then what else remains? Fokir lives on as a ghost that recalls the floods, and as a ghost in the “host” body of Piya’s data, of Lusibari. The logic of the uncanny guest, Susan Bernstein reminds us, is the reminder of the absence of true knowledge, of what we know and what we ignore (2004, 1118). Fokir looks out through the data like a guest in the files of dolphin movements and maps of the tide country, reminding people of the need to know the tide country well, and of the fact that they have
ignored the danger from storms. Fokir is perhaps the guest in the “modern” gadget, his wisdom a guest in the different order of knowledge that the GPS records. But he represents a guest who redefines the role for Piya: she is now the host in the tide country, thanks to his canniness in helping her survive and acquire knowledge of the tide country. Her own rapidly expanding canniness and knowledge about the country (which makes her a host to the world) is made possible by his death. Knowledge is the incorporation and inversion of the host/guest theme when Fokir is rendered a ghost in her machine.

Knowledge makes the landscape secure, and marginally more like home. The refugees at Morichjhāpi settle in the island because they have some knowledge of tide country conditions and they hope to make a new life here. The dispossessed are engaged in the task of staking possession through acts driven by knowledge. The new postcolonial cannot afford to ignore the ghostly refugees’ knowledge of the tide country. The uncanny tide country has to be transformed not through the ignorant and stupid actions of the colonial rulers (as happens with Canning) but through real knowledge. With knowledge, as Maria Tatar reminds us, “the intellectual uncertainty created by an uncanny event yields to conviction . . . the once hostile world becomes habitable again” (1981, 182). It is significant that this knowledge that could render the uncanny a more home-like space rests with the local and the native. By utilizing Fokir’s data, by incorporating his ghost, Piya hopes to stop the crisis of perception that the uncanny engenders, even as Kanai hopes to alter the perception of the history of tide country by narrating the story of Morichjhāpi. Narration, then, is the defence against the uncanny, and simultaneously a move towards a more knowledgeable, and just postcoloniality.

Then, Piya’s dependence on Fokir, despite their language barrier is another sign of the return of repressed knowledges. Not all the technology in the world can help Piya during the storm. It is Fokir’s sacrifice alone that saves her. While this does suggest that the native is doomed to sacrifice for the sake of either the colonial white master or the newly empowered global Indians, it also marks an indigenous canny. The novel, I suggest moves from the postcolonial uncanny to an indigenous canny, where local knowledge and expertise finally triumph, and renders the place more like home. The tide country is more hospitable when canniness refigures Piya’s relationship with the land, and when Kanai sets out to tell the truth about Morichjhāpi. Justice, safety, security, emancipation and the homely are all linked to the projects Piya and Kanai envisage, suggesting a new postcoloniality of the tide country. Piya’s return to the tide country seems to suggest a “home coming.” Nilima had expressed her opinion during the period of Piya’s trauma that “it would be easier for her [Piya] to recover if she was in some familiar place” (Ghosh 2004, 395; my emphasis). What Piya proves is that the tide country is
her familiar place. The last chapter, significantly titled “Home: An Epilogue,” concludes with Piya’s reference to Kanai thus: “It’ll be good to have him home.” A surprised Nilima asks: “Did you say ‘home’?” The conversation ends with their respective ideas of home: the presence of Orcaella for Piya and the space to make some good tea for Nilima (399–400).

Finally, Kanai wants to write the “story of Nirmal’s notebook” (Ghosh 2004, 399) which would give Morichjhâpi to the world. It returns the repressed to the surface, a moment of rupture and violence in postcolonial history that will emerge from silences. The narrative is the “performative” of the repressed that gives the lie, and generates a counter-narrative, to the “pedagogy” of national identity and development, to invoke Homi Bhabha’s distinction in “DissemiNation” (1995, 299, 303). It gives voice to what was suppressed. The emphasis on textualization is, I believe, a clear act of memorialization, but one which has interesting (and problematic) aspects to which I shall turn in a minute. Leela Gandhi points out that postcolonial theory “seeks its anti-colonial counter-narrative in the written word” (1999, 159), and Kanai’s textualization and archivisation of Morichjhâpi is this counter-narrative. Kanai has inherited a story, and he wants to tell the story to the world. Considering it is Morichjhâpi that he will narrate, the uncanny persistence of the ghosts of the refugees and state violence in the postcolonial age is significant. The postcolonial uncanny in Ghosh is working-out of the question of knowledge and power. The knowledge of the tide country, dolphins and its bloody history is now “open source,” to adopt a contemporary idiom: it will be made available through public databases and narratives. The uncanny agora’s past—of repeated floods, massacres and predators—has to be uncovered, not through sophisticated technologies alone, but with the help of local knowledge. This local and indigenous knowledge is what Homi Bhabha terms the “uncanny lesson of the double” (2006, 195), and is represented in and as Fokir’s “ghost.”

The “biodegradable” organic Fokir returns as archived data, in a wholly new ecosystem. Just as the Sunderbans land merges and disappears into water—where water and land become uncanny doubles of each other—the organic human (Fokir) and the cultural milieu to which “his” data contributes also merge. Jacques Derrida has this to say of “biodegradability”: “to be (bio)degradable means . . . on the one hand, the annihilation of identity; on the other hand, the chance to pass into the general milieu of culture, into the “life” of “culture” while enriching it with anonymous and enriching substances” (1989, 837–38). The materiality of Fokir slides into the “immateriality” of information which then becomes the grounds for a wholly new culture. In a significant shift Piya tells Nilima: “I wrote up a report on my dolphin sightings in this area. It was very impressionistic, of course, since I’d lost
all my data, but it sparked a lot of interest” (Ghosh 2004, 396-97). “Impressionistic” reportage does not quite acquire the same significance in scientific communities without “hard data”. And yet Piya is signaling something here—a postcolonial revitalizing of other forms of knowledge perhaps? Does Piya’s new epistemological uncanny partake of—inherit—Fokir’s indigenous canny? Ghosh leaves us undecided, but with enough to indicate that this might be so. If that is the case, then the “annihilation of identity” and the “the chance to pass into the general milieu of culture, into the “life” of “culture” while enriching it with anonymous and enriching substances” that Derrida associates with “biodegradability” is what Ghosh is indicating. Fokir’s indigenous canny is the “anonymous and enriching substances” that reorganize the culture of knowledge, remaindered, as he is, in Piya’s “text,”

The question of surviving, remainder texts and biodegradable bodies is worth exploring in some detail here because Ghosh seems to suggest yet another uncanny doubling. Piya and Kanai’s (Western) knowledge is doubled but in significantly different ways in Fokir’s canny. For Fokir’s canny to be distinctive as indigenous knowledge it must be made available (legitimized?) as datasets—texts—in Piya’s GPS. Piya’s statement that “all the routes Fokir showed me are stored here” suggests a double movement, between the homing device of the GPS and the unheimlich of the indigenous, between the “non-sense” of Fokir’s mystic knowledge born of folklore and native intelligence and the “hard” data (texts) of the computer. Forms of technological and cultural authority—mapping, exploration, mining, conservation, digitization are authorial–authoritative epistemological acts on the land (Arundhati Roy, writing about the politics of big dams pointed out, “Big Dams . . . are a Government’s way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where” [2001, 57]). Here power over the terrain, which would make it Piya’s “home” is the uneasy negotiation between the caniness of Fokir, now distilled as a ghostly presence—a subtext? a vocabulary?—in the machine, and its dissemination, internationalization and intertextualization. Fokir’s indigenous canny is in its transformed, translated and textualized state, the route to the power of the “homely.” I see in this process of the textualization of the indigenous canny a transcoding, where the unquantifiable and indescribable (Fokir’s name is derived from “fakir,” a term used to describe mendicants, sages and itinerant preachers who are believed, in both Islam and Hinduism, to possess mystic knowledge) becomes digitized into numbers. In the case of the digital, Lev Manovich informs us (2001), the transcoding is often between the computer “layer” and the cultural “layer.” Here, I see transcoding that results in the uncanny double as the one between the “routine” cultural knowledge Fokir possesses and the textualization through digitization of the GPS (Piya’s state–
ment regarding Fokir’s “residence”—home—in the data indicates, perhaps, a
digital uncanny).

Power over the past comes, Ghosh seems to suggest through the dual
modes of knowledge and understanding—of what happened at Morichjhâpi
(the return of the specters of Morichjhâpi, one could say after Avery Gordon,
marks the arrival of the haunting reminders of modernity’s violence), of the
sacrifices of Fokir and countless others, of the vision of Nirmal. The uncanny
plays itself out and demands of the Kanais and Piya’s a radical displacement of
their forms of seeing and thinking. The uncanny is at once what is generated
and dislodged in the Sunderbans through the intrusion of the indigenous
canny. When the indigenous canny enters the frame as local knowledge and
the spectral–immortal data that Fokir has become in Piya’s database, it
demands a recognition. This demand is the new postcolonial, the demand for
a new postcolonial humanism, articulated via the spectral. The ethical demand
of the spectre—Fokir, Kusum, Morichjhâpi itself—is, therefore: bring back
the body of the ghosts (Bishnupriya Ghosh 2004, 207) so that the tide coun-
try can be transformed into a more just place. It is this transformation into a
just place that brings me to the final move in Ghosh’s uncanny.

The uncanny, as I have indicated at the beginning of this essay, is a mat-
ter of perception and sensing. What Kanai and Piya see, without insight or
deep knowledge, in the land is the uncanny. This also means the uncanny
is a sensing of the place as a scene: to be perceived, described or drawn. Fokir’s
indigenous canny, on the other hand, is less about seeing than insights into
the way the land shifts, the weather changes and the storm blows. It is about
the experience of the land rather than simply perceiving it as a scene. The
indigenous canny is not about the “scene” which is the Sunderbans. Rather,
it is about the experience of an environment.11 When Piya emerges after
the storm she is indiscernible from the land. Here is Ghosh recreating a new, per-
haps more material spectre in his revision of the postcolonial uncanny (we
need to remind ourselves that both Kanai and Piya have had problems with
seeing the horizon, of distinguishing between land and water, and with the
land disappearing beneath the waters): “In a while Kanai realized that there
was only one person on the boat: it was impossible to tell who it was, man
or woman, for the figure was caked from head to toe in mud” (Ghosh 2004,
391). Piya has become the material land. That she becomes indistinguishable
from the mud of the tide country serves as a potent metaphor for experi-
ence. This shift from seeing the landscape to the tactile, sensory experience
of the environment is Ghosh’s final metaphor of what the tide country must
be. From a visual field it is now an experiential environment, and Piya real-
izes what Fokir knew and meant. Piya will never experience the uncertain-
ty of the uncanny again because she has a new vision, a new way of seeing.
I propose that just as the uncanny modulates into the canny, the land moves from being a mere scene into becoming an environment, a more just one perhaps, and one which will not make ghosts of its inhabitants.

Ghosh’s postcolonial uncanny is about the politics of dispossession and the question of home/lands. The uncanny of tide country, in which refugees and the poor are reduced to apparitions that point to an unjust past and present, generates its own mythic anthropology and geography. Such an uncanny also treats the globalized Indian with disdain: in a land that is sometimes not land at all, the colonial master (in Canning) and the global Indian are also rendered wraith-like (Piya), or deeply scarred (Kanai). What makes the space canny, a marginally secure home, is knowledge. Such a knowledge acquired through native intervention—what I have called the indigenous canny—appears to be the solution to a world increasingly indifferent to refugees, poverty and suffering. Kanai’s experience of mystic visions and Piya’s final “discovery” of home and hospitality are less about “seeing” the land than inhabiting and experiencing it. In both cases the land is an environment that demands not gazing but participating, not “touristy” observation but native inhabiting. The uncanny becomes subsumed under the indigenous canny when Fokir’s mystic and folkloric knowledge becomes translated into a programme of action in the tide country. The turn to the indigenous canny constitutes, _The Hungry Tide_ suggests, the ethical postcolonial.

Notes

1 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that monsters “can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place” (1996, 20).


3 I am grateful to K. Narayana Chandran for his enthusiastic “notes” on the uncanny and for drawing my attention to the connection of slime and primordial nature in Salman Rushdie.

4 Now it is perhaps mere coincidence that one of the examples Freud provides to speak of the uncanny uses crocodiles too. Freud recounts reading a story of a young couple who move into a flat with a carved table depicting crocodiles. The couple towards evening began to smell, Freud tells us, “an intolerable and very typical odour . . . they seem to see a vague form gliding up the stairs” (1971, 398). The echo of Freud in Ghosh’s imagery is, to put it mildly, uncanny.
The uncanny, as Freud points out, relies heavily on doubling and repetition (1971, 386–92). Repetition, in fact, is the very structure of the uncanny. Ghosh’s uncanny works through the theme of repetition in very unusual ways, ways that connect to the discourse of the visual. To begin with, Ghosh describes the forest that “dwindles into a distant rumour of land, echoing back from the horizon.” “Echoing” is a phenomenon that is both doubling and repetition. Ghosts and revenants begin by coming back, another instance of repetition. The numerous references to mirrors and reflecting surfaces also gesture at an uncanny doubling, where reflections are doubles of the “real” thing. Smells seem to repeat for Piya, as noted above. After the death of Fokir, Moyna and Piya, both distraught at the disaster wore similar clothes, and Nilima had “even mistaken the one for the other” (2004, 394). The flood itself is a repetition of earlier ones. Its an event that Piya and Kanai experience, and repeats in actuality what they had only heard of before—a kind of doubling characteristic of the uncanny (Bernstein 2004, 1125).

Dipesh Chakrabarty writing about Hindu-Muslim interactions in the 18th century, especially the translation of Hindu gods into expressions of Islamic divinity, argues that their model of exchange in these transactions was “barter.” There is no appeal to universals, and are very local, one-for-one exchanges (2001, 83–86). This perhaps explains Kanai’s inability to translate Fokir’s song and the pure local atmosphere of the myth.

Incidentally, there is an intrinsic link between repetitive walking and the uncanny, as Susan Bernstein has pointed out (2004). Nirmal himself is caught aimlessly wandering after the Morichjhāpi incident (Ghosh 2004, 26). Ghosh’s previous novel, The Glass Palace (2000) also thematized walking, once more of refugees seeking safe homes and a new identity (467-74).

The term “Dalit” refers to the so-called untouchable castes in the Indian social hierarchy. It comes from the Marathi word, “dala” which literally means “ground into the earth.”

In an earlier essay Amitav Ghosh refers to the violence of the past as a haunting, in the symbolically titled “The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi” (1995), a theme and idiom that leads to the spectropoetics of The Hungry Tide.

Maria Tatar has pointed out that the “canny” refers to the ability to do (“can”), where knowledge and the ability to do leads to a secure and easy space. “Canny” originally referred to special knowledge and was used to describe domestic comfort (Tatar 1981, 170).

I am adapting here Malcolm Andrews’s work on the picturesque (1999).

Works Cited


Johansen, Emily. 2008. “Imagining the Global and the Rural: Rural Cosmopolitanism in Sharon Butala’s The Garden of Eden and Amitav Ghosh’s


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