

The Hungry Tide



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AMITAV GHOSH

Amitav Ghosh was born in Kolkata, India to a Bengali Hindu family. His father was an officer in the Indian Army prior to Indian independence. Ghosh attended a boys' school in India and then attended college in both India and England at Delhi University, the Delhi School of Economics, Oxford, and St. Stephen's College. He began to write novels during the 1980s, and his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, immediately garnered international acclaim and interest. Several of his novels have won international awards, and he famously withdrew his 2000 novel, *The Glass Palace*, from the Commonwealth Writer's Prize on the grounds that the English language requirement was unfair. Ghosh has taught literature in the United States at several universities and was named a Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellow in 2015. He and his wife, fellow author Deborah Baker, have two children and live in New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the island of Lusibari is a fictional place, many of the historical events that the novel mentions actually happened. Sir Daniel Hamilton was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1859. He was successful in developing a cooperative estate on the Sundarbans island of Gosaba, though the estate fell apart after Hamilton's death in 1939. The 1979 Morichjhāpi massacre was a consequence of the partition of the colony of British India in 1947. During partition, a number of poor Hindu people attempting to enter India from East Pakistan were settled in a refugee camp in central India, rather than allowed to settle in the Indian state of West Bengal. The refugees attempted to settle in West Bengal in 1978, but the new Left Front government declared that the refugees couldn't be considered citizens of West Bengal. About 40,000 refugees then marched south and settled on the island Morichjhāpi in the Sundarbans, which was protected forestland. After several months of blockades and violent police action, the Indian government began to forcibly evacuate the refugees in May 1979. Though the true death count remains unknown, it's possible that up to a thousand people were killed after being brutalized by the police. As Nirmal and Piya both notice and mention in the novel, the Sundarbans suffer ecologically from farming, overfishing, and poaching of native species. Attempts to curb tiger attacks have been overwhelmingly unsuccessful, and as many as fifty people still die every year. However, the Bengal tigers are a protected species, and there's a total ban on killing or capturing wildlife in the Sundarbans, save for some fish and other invertebrates. Despite these attempts, biodiversity continues

to decline. Ghosh himself has also said that while tigers certainly pose a problem for people in the Sundarbans, their true enemy is crushing poverty.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Hungry Tide draws heavily from two literary works: the Bengali folktale *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, and the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's 1923 epic poem, *The Duino Elegies*. *The Duino Elegies* was and still is extremely influential in the literary world; the British poet W.H. Auden makes references to Rilke and *The Duino Elegies* in several of his poems, and Thomas Pinchon's 1973 novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, also draws imagery from the *Elegies*. Several other novels by Indian authors take place in the Sundarbans, including Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and short story author Kunal Basu's "The Japanese Wife." *The Hungry Tide* also mentions the *Mahabharata*, a Sanskrit epic and seminal Hindu text. Ghosh has said in interviews that he's especially interested in the area around the Bay of Bengal and as such, many of his novels take place in the region and explore the consequences of England's colonial rule over India. These novels include [The Shadow Lines](#), which explores the events of the partition of India and their consequences, as well as his *Ibis* trilogy, which explores the earlier colonial history of the area.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Hungry Tide*
- **When Written:** 2002-2004
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Environmental fiction; postcolonial Indian literature
- **Setting:** The Sundarbans, 1950 to the early 2000s
- **Climax:** The cyclone hits Garjontola and Lusibari, killing Fokir in the process.
- **Antagonist:** The Forest Department and Dilip Choudhury ; more broadly, poverty, sexism, the government, and the natural world
- **Point of View:** Third person and first person

EXTRA CREDIT

Tiny Man-Eaters. Though the Bengal tigers of the Sundarbans are considered to be the same species as the Bengal tigers that populate the rest of India, they tend to be much smaller—while Bengal tigers can weigh upwards of 700 pounds, tigers from the Sundarbans have weighed in at a petite 160-330 pounds.

Scientists speculate that their small size has to do with the smaller prey available in the Sundarbans, and might also suggest that they've adapted to the specifics of their mangrove forest habitat.

Symbiotic Relationship. Irrawaddy river dolphins have been known to cooperate with fishermen, driving fish into nets in exchange for some of the fishermen's catch. In some cases, individual dolphins or pods of dolphins work closely with particular fishermen or fishing villages again and again. Legal reports from the late 1800s state that dolphins often jumped ship and helped rival fishermen, leading the dolphin's "regular" fishermen to take their rivals to court in hopes of recovering a share of the fish that "their" dolphin helped to catch.



PLOT SUMMARY

On the train to Canning, Kanai, a wealthy translator from New Delhi, meets Piya, a young cetologist (a biologist who specializes in marine mammals). They're both headed to the Sundarbans: Kanai is going to the island of Lusibari for the first time in thirty years to deal with a long-lost packet of his late uncle Nirmal's writings, while Piya plans to conduct a survey of the Gangetic and Irrawaddy river dolphins that live in the area. Before they get off at Canning, Kanai invites Piya to come visit Lusibari. Kanai meets up with his aunt Nilima in Canning and discovers that Nilima is still very disturbed by Nirmal's death, which happened twenty years ago.

Once on Lusibari, Kanai explores the landmarks he remembers and thinks back to when Nirmal told him about Sir Daniel Hamilton, who successfully set up a cooperative society on the islands in the first part of the twentieth century. He's shocked to learn that Kusum, who was a friend when Kanai was on the island in 1970, died long ago. Her son Fokir, however, now lives on the island and is married to one of the nurse trainees, Moyna. Upstairs in Nirmal's study, Kanai opens the packet. It contains only a notebook that appears to have been filled over the course of a few days in May 1979, on the island of Morichjhāpi. In a letter addressed to Kanai, Nirmal explains that he's with Kusum on the island and simply wants to make sure that what happens isn't forgotten. Nilima is upset that Nirmal didn't leave the notebook for her.

When Kanai met Kusum in 1970, she was in Nilima's care after Kusum's father died, and Kusum's mother was sold into sexual slavery. Kusum and Kanai had become friends and had gone to performances of the local legend *The Glory of Bon Bibi* together. Kanai had found the story, which is about a boy named Dukhey who is saved by the goddess Bon Bibi after being sacrificed to the demon Dokkhin Rai, very affecting. After the performance one night, a fisherman named Horen took Kusum away for her safety, and nobody saw her again for years.

Piya obtains her permits from the Forest Department and begins her survey with a forest guard and a boat pilot named Mejda—both men are unhelpful and condescending. Piya spots a fishing boat and asks them to approach it so she can ask the fisherman about the dolphins. The forest guard does as she asks, but Piya soon realizes the guard just wants to fine and intimidate the fisherman and his son. The fisherman mimes to Piya that he sees dolphins in the area often. As the Forest Department boat pulls away, Piya tries to give the fisherman money and falls into the river. The fisherman saves her and pulls her into his boat, and Piya, afraid of going back with the Forest Department, asks if he'll take her to Lusibari. He agrees, and the forest guard lets Piya go. The fisherman introduces himself as Fokir and his young son as Tutul. He treats Piya with exceptional kindness and respect and the next day, he takes her to a place called Garjontola where a pod of seven Irrawaddy dolphins are swimming. Piya is shocked, as the dolphins don't behave as they're supposed to—she believes the dolphins migrate daily out of the pool instead of twice a year. She spends the next day with Fokir, observing the dolphins and mapping the riverbed. Piya is pleasantly surprised that she and Fokir can communicate so well, and their pursuits are well-matched: mapping the riverbed by rowing in straight lines gives Fokir the opportunity to fish for crabs. After Piya almost loses a hand to a crocodile, she and Fokir row for Lusibari. Once there, Nilima invites Piya to stay in the guesthouse with Kanai, and Kanai agrees to help Piya talk to Fokir the next day.

Over the course of the next several days, Kanai reads Nirmal's notebook. It tells the story of how Nirmal became involved with the settlement on Morichjhāpi after he retired from teaching. In his youth, Nirmal was a renowned Marxist in Calcutta, but he had to leave the city after he was arrested and suffered a mental breakdown. He spent 30 years teaching on Lusibari, and during that time, he wrote nothing. However, he remained a firm believer in Marxist theory, much to Nilima's chagrin—she spent those years developing the Babadon Trust, which provided healthcare and other services to the locals. She also developed a Women's Union to help the many widows on Lusibari, as it's common for men to die while out fishing.

After his retirement, Nirmal began visiting schools with the help of Horen. One evening, Horen and Nirmal were caught in a storm and ended up meeting Kusum on the island of Morichjhāpi. She took them in and told them her story of finding her mother, getting married, having her son, and finally, joining a refugee march from central India all the way to the Sundarbans. Nirmal was thrilled to learn that Morichjhāpi was being developed in a very Marxist way, and he offered to teach the children there. When Nilima found out, she was incensed that Nirmal was involved—she insisted that the refugees were just squatters, and the land was protected forestland. She refused to provide medical services to the island. Nirmal vowed to keep his involvement secret and continued to go to

Morichjhāpi with Horen over the next several months. The police began a siege on the island, which Kusum and Fokir survived, but Kusum was distraught that people wanted to kill the settlers for the sake of animals. Finally, Nirmal heard that the police were going to assault the island. He went with Horen to warn Kusum, and while they were there overnight, he filled the notebook. He decided to stay on the island while Horen took Fokir away, and saved the notebook for Kanai. Weeks later, Nilima found Nirmal in Canning, disoriented and angry. He died months later.

Piya and Kanai negotiate with Fokir and Moyna to go out for a week to survey the dolphins at Garjontola. Fokir helps Piya engage Horen to take them in his bhotbhoti, the *Megha*. Piya is annoyed to discover that Moyna seems to think little of her husband. As Piya makes preparations to leave, Kanai asks to go with her as a translator; Piya accepts. When Kanai tells Nilima he's going with Piya, she's concerned and feels he doesn't understand the risks. She explains that **tigers** kill multiple people every week. When she realizes he's romantically interested in Piya, she insists he's a predator too and tells him to be careful. Later that night, Moyna confides in Kanai that she's worried about a romantic relationship between Piya and Fokir, and she asks Kanai to intervene. Kanai tries to convince Moyna that he'd be a better partner than Fokir, which angers her. The next day, the survey party leaves Lusibari. Kanai becomes very jealous when Piya mentions that she loves working with Fokir despite the language barrier. That afternoon, the *Megha's* engine dies, though Horen is able to float the bhotbhoti to a village where a relative can help fix the boat.

Early that evening, Piya and Kanai hear the sound of a water buffalo giving birth. Later, they hear excited voices on the nearby island, so they go with Horen and Fokir to investigate. They discover that a tiger that previously killed two people got into the building with the water buffalo. Angry villagers surround the structure, poking bamboo poles inside. Piya is incensed and tries to break up the mob, but Fokir pulls her away just as the villagers light the structure on fire to burn the tiger alive. The next day, Piya and Kanai discuss what happened. Piya is horrified, but Kanai insists that things like that happen because environmentalists like Piya try to save tigers at the expense of the people who also share the habitat. He explains that the government doesn't care about the poor people who are the most common victims.

The next day, Piya and Kanai go out with Fokir to observe the dolphins in the Garjontola pool. Piya explains how she became interested in the dolphins, and Kanai translates that Fokir knows of this dolphin pool because Kusum talked about it. He comes here to visit her spirit. He starts to chant, but Kanai insists the chant is too difficult to translate for Piya. Over the next several hours, Piya and Kanai draw closer to each other, and Kanai agrees the next morning to go out in Fokir's boat to

help observe the dolphins. On Fokir's boat, Kanai tries to talk to Fokir with little success. Eventually, Fokir rows to Garjontola and points out fresh tiger tracks. He explains that the island is protected by Bon Bibi, and the goddess will protect anyone who is good of heart. He suggests they go ashore to see if Kanai is good of heart, and Kanai reluctantly agrees. Once they reach the shore, Kanai falls in the mud and loses his temper, sending Fokir away. Suddenly terrified, Kanai crashes inland to get away from the crocodiles he knows are in the water. He finds a tiger in a clearing, backs out, and is rescued by Piya, Fokir and Horen, all of whom don't believe he saw a tiger. After this, Kanai decides to return to Lusibari.

The next morning, Kanai leaves Piya and Fokir on Fokir's boat with a packet for Piya, while Horen takes him to Lusibari on the *Megha*. When the *Megha* reaches a major waterway, they learn that a cyclone is coming and decide to turn around to fetch Piya and Fokir. The boat isn't there when they return to Garjontola, so they decide to wait overnight for them. Meanwhile, Piya and Fokir spend their day tracking the dolphins and finally find them circling a calf that died. They drop anchor that night far away from Garjontola, and Piya reads Kanai's letter. It's a translation of *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, which is what Fokir was chanting the day before.

Early the next morning, Horen admits to Kanai that both he and Nirmal were in love with Kusum, but says that Kusum chose him in the end. They decide hours later that they can't wait for Piya and Fokir, so they head back to Lusibari through the gathering storm. When Kanai wades to shore, he falls and loses Nirmal's notebook in the rushing water. As Kanai and Nilima ride out the storm in the guesthouse, she admits that Nirmal's one lasting contribution was the **cyclone shelter** in the hospital. Kanai says he'd like to transcribe Nirmal's story from memory, and Nilima asks if he'd record her side of the story too.

Fokir and Piya ride out the storm tied to a tree on Garjontola, straddling a branch with Piya squeezed between Fokir and the trunk. After the eye of the storm passes and the wind changes direction, they see a tiger. Fokir dies not long after when he's hit and crushed by something large. Piya manages to take his boat in the direction of Lusibari the next day, and explains what happened to Kanai and Horen when she finds them coming to get her on the *Megha*. She remains in Lusibari for a few weeks and then returns a month later, much to Nilima's surprise. Piya explains she'd like to work with the Babadon Trust to develop a conservation program in the area that would work with local fishermen, and she'd like to name the program after Fokir.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Piya Roy – Piya is a cetologist (a biologist specializing in marine mammals) who comes to the Sundarbans to conduct a survey of

the river dolphins. Though she was born in Calcutta to Bengali parents, Piya grew up in Seattle and never learned Bengali. However, she knows that in her line of work, she doesn't always need spoken language to communicate. This idea comes to the forefront when she meets the fisherman Fokir. Even though the two can't speak to each other, Piya recognizes that she and Fokir can communicate in a way that seems more honest and more meaningful than she believes they'd be able to could they speak to each other. This stands in stark contrast to her relationship with Kanai; even though they can speak to each other, Kanai initially has little interest in getting to know Piya, which keeps Piya from feeling comfortable opening up to him. Piya begins the novel believing wholly in the power and goodness of conservation efforts. As the novel progresses, Piya is forced to recognize that conservation isn't always a force for good—it often happens at the expense of poor people like Fokir. Though Piya and Fokir are clearly attracted to each other and develop a quiet romance throughout the novel, they never act on their feelings for each other. About six weeks after the cyclone, when Piya returns to Lusibari, she suggests that she'd like to name her ongoing project after Fokir. She also wants to work with local fishermen to carry out her project and share funding with the Babadon Trust, which suggests that she learned that conservation efforts are most effective when implemented in a way that actually helps locals.

Kanai Dutt – Kanai is a wealthy middle-aged translator who works in New Delhi. When he was ten, he was sent to the Sundarbans to live with his aunt Nilima and uncle Nirmal as punishment for misbehaving in school. He returns to the Sundarbans as an adult to deal with a notebook left to him by his late uncle Nirmal, which helps Kanai and Nilima unravel some of the mysteries of Nirmal's life. Kanai is self-centered and believes that his way of thinking about the world is far superior to how the locals think. He attempts to make advances towards Piya throughout much of the novel, though he's unable to do so due to his habit of treating Piya like an object to be won. This changes when he's the only one who can explain to her why a village would want to kill a **tiger**—because he doesn't live in the Sundarbans, he has an easier time seeing both sides of the conservation issue. Kanai is forced to confront his own privilege when he and Fokir stop on the remote island of Garjontola, where Fokir finds fresh tiger tracks. There, Kanai falls in the mud, loses his temper, and realizes that people like him are one of the major reasons why poor people like Fokir aren't cared for. After this, he sees a tiger. His terror is so great upon seeing the tiger that he actually loses the ability to form language and instead, feels as though his unspeakable knowledge of how terrifying the tiger is is far more powerful than spoken language. After this, Kanai's self-importance wanes. Nilima explains in the epilogue that following these events on his trip, Kanai decided to restructure his business so he could take more time off and spend time on Lusibari.

Nirmal Bose – Nirmal was Nilima's husband. As a young man, Nirmal was a Marxist intellectual and a promising writer who taught English at a college in Calcutta. He suffered a mental break after being arrested for his politics, and his doctors suggested he leave the city. Though he was initially aghast at the prospect of taking a job at the Hamilton Estate, which was started by a renowned capitalist Sir Daniel Hamilton, Nirmal changes his mind when he learns that Sir Daniel's work was very Marxist in nature. Nirmal this sees as proof that his theories—which he loves more than anything else—can work in practice. However, for the thirty years that Nirmal teaches in Lusibari, he writes nothing and does no reading. When he retires in 1978, he's filled with regret that he's done nothing with his life. Nirmal then reconnects with Kusum, whom he knew when she was a teen in the care of the Women's Union, and is introduced to the settlement on Morichjhāpi. He becomes instantly obsessed with the settlement, which he sees as an even better iteration of what Sir Daniel did years before. Though Nirmal desperately wants to help, he becomes bogged down in theory and thinking about the implications of the settlement. On the night before the final assault, he chooses to stay on the island with Kusum and writes the story of his involvement on Morichjhāpi in a school notebook, which is to be passed onto Kanai. When Kanai talks about Nirmal, he talks mostly about Nirmal's love of stories and his belief that everything can be turned into a story. Though his notebook is lost in the floodwaters of the cyclone, his one lasting contribution to the world is the **cyclone shelter** he insisted Nilima include in the hospital.

Nilima Bose – Nilima, who is known simply as Mashima (Aunt) on Lusibari, is Kanai's aunt and Nirmal's wife. Nilima grew up wealthy in Calcutta and met Nirmal while in college in the late 1940s. She was so taken with him, they married within a year against her family's wishes. Though Nilima appears to have shared Nirmal's love for Communist theory in their youth, she's soon forced to face the consequences of relying so heavily on theory: Nirmal suffers a mental breakdown after being arrested for his involvement in a Socialist International conference and later, she watches Nirmal do nothing with his life except fixate on theory. Nilima, on the other hand, throws herself into helping the local women after discovering that women in the Sundarbans expect to be widowed in their twenties. In a matter of years, Nilima forms a Women's Union and the Babadon Trust, which provides a number of important services to the people of Lusibari and the surrounding islands. Nirmal is dismissive of her work, given that Nilima must compromise her morals in exchange for funding from the government. Then, when Nirmal becomes involved in the Morichjhāpi incident, it is Nilima who is scornful. In the present, Nilima remains extremely disturbed by Nirmal's death twenty years earlier, and she's even more upset as she wonders why Nirmal left his notebook to Kanai instead of to her. Though she loves Kanai, she also views him as a spoiled and self-

centered man who preys on women. At the end of the novel, Nilima accepts Piya's plan to develop a conservation and research plan based in Lusibari because Piya wants to both provide funding for the Babadon Trust and work with the locals.

Fokir – Fokir is a poor fisherman whom Piya meets while still in the care of the forest guard and Mejda. Fokir rescues Piya after she falls into the water, and Piya feels as though she can trust him because he's with his young son, Tutul. Though Fokir doesn't speak English and Piya doesn't speak Bengali, Fokir manages to communicate through his actions that he views Piya as a full person worthy of care and consideration: he makes accommodations for her privacy, offers her food, and even leaves her valuable shampoo with which to bathe. He also knows a great deal about river dolphins and is happy to help her study them. Fokir's wife, Moyna, is dismissive of his profession as a crab fisherman, as she believes there's no future in that line of work. Instead, she wants Tutul to receive an education, something that Fokir never had the opportunity to do. Fokir's mother, Kusum, told Nirmal on several occasions that Fokir had the river in his blood, which may explain some of the comfort he feels out in the dangerous jungle of the Sundarbans. Fokir wants Kanai to feel the consequences of using his power to put poor people down; to do this, he puts Kanai in a situation where he's in close proximity to a **tiger**. During the cyclone, Fokir and Piya aren't able to make it back to the *Megha* in time and so must ride out the cyclone on Garjontola. Fokir ties them to a tree to keep them from blowing away, but after the eye of the storm passes and the wind changes direction, Fokir dies when a flying object hits him. Piya decides to name her project after him, as his data (all the places he saw dolphins) will form the basis of her research project.

Kusum – Kusum was the person who brought the Morichjhāpi conflict to life for Nirmal. Though nobody knows exactly what happened, she died during the conflict in 1979 and never appears directly in the novel; Nirmal only writes about her in his notebook and other characters talk about her. As a young teen in 1970, Kusum was put in the care of the Lusibari Women's Union after Kusum's father was killed by a **tiger** and Kusum's mother was sold into sexual slavery. At the Union, Kusum met ten-year-old Kanai, and the two developed a close friendship. Right before Kanai returned to Calcutta, Horen took Kusum away for her safety. The reader later learns that Horen took her to a train station so she could find her mother. Horen describes Kusum as entirely independent, with no need for male protection at this point. She finds her mother working in a brothel and also meets Rajen, whom she marries and later has Fokir with. After Rajen's death, Kusum learns about the refugee march to Morichjhāpi in the Sundarbans and joins them, where she reconnects with Horen and Nirmal. Kusum believes fully in the settlement project on Morichjhāpi, and believes the people who support evicting the refugees in favor

of the animals on the island are inhumane. She crystallizes many of Nirmal's radical ideas and though Nirmal never admits it himself, Horen later shares that Nirmal was in love with Kusum. In Nirmal's eyes, he saw her as a symbol of revolution. Though Kusum refused to leave the island, she did send Fokir away with Horen. Kusum is the one who impresses upon Fokir the importance of the Irrawaddy river dolphins, as she believes they're messengers of Bon Bibi, the local goddess.

Horen Naskor – Horen is a fisherman who lives on an island that neighbors Lusibari. In his youth, he greatly admires Nirmal and Nilima and often offers to do favors for them, as when he takes Nirmal, Nilima, and Kanai to Lusibari in the absence of any ferries in the right direction. Horen was married at age fourteen and had three children before his twentieth birthday. Kusum was a distant relative of his, and Horen was instrumental in keeping her from harm and specifically, from the predatory landowner Dilip Choudury. In 1978, Horen and Nirmal reconnect with Kusum on Morichjhāpi. Though Horen's emotions seldom factor into Nirmal's writing in his notebook, Horen later confesses to Kanai that both he and Nirmal were in love with Kusum. He admits that he'd been in love with Kusum for some time, and even offered to marry her when she was still a teen and he was already married. Kusum and Horen had sex the night before the assault on the island. In the present, Horen is an older and distinguished man who's an exceptional guide through the Sundarbans. He believes fully in the religious practices of the region and regularly leaves offerings for the goddess Bon Bibi.

Moyna – Moyna is Fokir's wife and a trainee nurse at the Lusibari hospital. Though she loves Fokir, she also finds him difficult and exasperating. She thinks little of his work as a fisherman, as she believes there's no future in it, and she believes he can't keep up with her ambition—she desperately wants to be a nurse. The two married in the first place because Moyna's parents insisted she marry. Moyna has a nuanced grasp of how the world works, which piques Kanai's interest as he recognizes his own drive and outlook on life in her. Moyna fears throughout the novel that Fokir and Piya are engaging in a romantic relationship, but feels as though she's unable to talk to Fokir about it herself. Though Moyna is distraught after Fokir's death, she and Piya form a strange friendship in the weeks following and Piya even plans to employ Moyna as an office employee for her conservation project.

Sir Daniel Hamilton – Sir Daniel Hamilton, or "S'Daniel," was a Scotsman who made his fortune selling tickets for ship passages in British India at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1903, he bought land in the Sundarbans and developed an "ideal society" there based on cooperatives. He called for Indians to settle there, regardless of religion or social caste. He even issued his own currency. The settlement was successful, though it dissolved after his death in 1939. People still celebrate him and his work by treating him like a venerated

ancestor during festivals.

Henry Piddington – Henry Piddington is the man responsible for naming the cyclone storms that ravage the Sundarbans. He was a low-level official in the English government in British India and warned Lord Canning that it was foolish to build a port city on the Matla River, a location that while fairly far inland, still experiences flooding when cyclones strike.

Piddington was called crazy when he staked his reputation on his assessment, but five years later, the city of Canning was swept away by floods.

The Forest Guard – The forest service guard is ordered to accompany Piya on her survey of the Sundarbans. Though he seems reasonable at first (despite his required firearm), he soon shows Piya that he's not to be trusted. Piya watches him prey on local fishermen, and when Piya falls overboard, the guard seems relatively unconcerned. He also forces her to pay him a great sum of money in order to be able to leave.

Mejda – Mejda is the boat pilot who the forest guard insists that Piya hire. He initially piques her interest because he asks if the dolphins on her flashcards are birds, but soon proves dangerous and predatory—he regularly makes obscene gestures at Piya and refuses to listen to where she wants to go. He and the guard put up very little objection when Piya decides to leave with Fokir rather than return to Mejda's boat.

Lord Canning – Lord Canning was the English lord responsible for planning and building Port Canning on the Matla River. He conceived of it as a port city to rival Singapore and Hong Kong and chose not to listen to Henry Piddington, who warned against cyclones and insisted the city would be flooded within fifteen years of its construction.

Rath – Rath was a Cambodian man in the Cambodian Forest Service. Piya worked near him while she was there, and the two eventually formed a romantic relationship. Though they kept in contact initially when Piya left on a longer work trip, Rath married another woman while she was gone. Upon her return, Piya also learned that Rath told the entire Forest Service about her personal life.

Bon Bibi – Bon Bibi is the goddess of the forest, and the residents of the Sundarbans worship her. She and her twin brother, Shah Jongoli, protect the Sundarbans from evil and from **tigers**. In the story *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, Bon Bibi draws a line through the Sundarbans to separate the evil demons from the good spirits, and later rescues a boy named Dukhey from the tiger demon Dokkhin Rai.

Dukhey – Dukhey is one of the main characters in the tale *The Glory of Bon Bibi*. His name means "misery," and he leads a miserable life. He's forced to accompany Dhona on his journey to make a fortune in Dokkhin Rai's part of the Sundarbans, and Dhona promises Dukhey to the demon in exchange for riches. Dukhey, however, does as he's told and calls on Bon Bibi for help, and she saves him.

Piya's Father – Piya describes her father as the perfect immigrant: he did his best to leave his memories of India and Indian customs behind after he and Piya's mother moved to Seattle when Piya was a baby. The one Indian thing he held onto was his **gamchha**, a cotton cleaning cloth. Piya's parents had a strained relationship and forced her to carry messages between them.

Rajen – Kusum met Rajen when she went to find her mother in Dhanbad. He was a kind man who had become disabled after a bus accident. He offered Kusum a place to stay in his shack and later suggested they marry in order to help both Kusum and Kusum's mother. He died five years later, leaving Kusum with nothing but Fokir, who was three years old at the time.

Dokkhin Rai – Dokkhin Rai is a tiger demon who lurks in the Sundarbans. He has an insatiable desire for human flesh. In *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, he strikes a deal with Dhona, a ship captain, to give Dhona an island's natural resources in exchange for the boy Dukhey. Dokkhin Rai is foiled in the end by Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tutul – Tutul is Fokir and Moyna's five-year-old son. He's a precocious and helpful boy who, as far as Piya can tell, loves to be out on the water with his father. Moyna, however, tries her best to keep Tutul home so he can attend school.

Dilip Choudhury – Dilip was a wealthy man in the Sundarbans who preyed on vulnerable women in the 1970s. He offered to "help" them and then sold them into sexual slavery. He did this to Kusum's mother, though Horen and Nilima saved Kusum from the same fate.

Dhona – Dhona is the greedy ship's captain in the story *The Glory of Bon Bibi*. He makes a deal with Dokkhin Rai to give the demon the boy Dukhey in exchange for the riches of the forest.

Shah Jongoli – Shah Jongoli is Bon Bibi's twin brother. Though he's the one to deal the final blow to Dokkhin Rai in the story *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, he's a relatively minor character and isn't worshipped with the same zeal as his twin.

Piya's Mother – Piya's mother was a deeply depressed woman. She spent the last years of her life in Seattle locked in the bedroom away from Piya's father, allowing only Piya into the room. She died of cervical cancer when Piya was twelve.

Kusum's Mother – After the death of Kusum's father, Kusum's mother, having few other options, accepted Dilip Choudhury's offer of "help." He sold her into sexual slavery instead, and she died not long after Kusum married.

Kusum's Father – Kusum's father was killed by a **tiger** when Kusum was a child.

Nogen – Horen's fourteen-year-old grandson.

TERMS

Bādh – The high, mud and silt embankment that protects the island of Lusibari from the high tide. During cyclones, the bādh also keeps the island from flooding too badly.

Bhotbhoti – A large boat with a diesel engine. **Horen's** bhotbhoti, the *Megha*, has several cabins, multiple levels, and is powerful enough to tow Fokir's sixteen-foot rowboat.

Mohona – In the Sundarbans, a mohona is where several waterways that divide the islands meet. They can be quite small during low tide, but can appear never-ending at high tide.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LANGUAGE

The Hungry Tide follows Piya, an American-Indian cetologist (a scientist who studies marine mammals) and Kanai, a Delhi-based translator, as they visit the Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands in the Bay of Bengal. Piya is there to study the endangered Orcaella river dolphin; Kanai is visiting his aunt, Nilima, for the first time in forty years after the unexpected discovery of a packet of what are thought to be writings left to him by his late uncle Nirmal. As Piya and Kanai immerse themselves in their respective pursuits and form relationships with the Sundarbans locals, they both grapple with issues of language and how to form understandings with people who speak an entirely different language (even if in Kanai's case, he also speaks Bengali). Through Piya and Kanai's experiences, the novel ultimately suggests that spoken and written language are insufficient means of communication, especially when compared to a shared visual or emotional language—in this case, the language of fear.

Piya—who speaks no Hindi or Bengali, but works in a remote part of India where few people speak English—must embrace the idea that she doesn't necessarily need a common spoken or written language in order to complete her work. She finds that visual cues are a far more effective means for communicating with others. Though Piya initially begins her work on a Forest Service boat, she abandons the Forest Service as soon as possible—even though she's able to communicate with the forest guard and the boat pilot reasonably well through gestures and mime, they show little interest in listening to her. This is an early example of how sharing a language of some sort

doesn't mean that two people can actually communicate effectively. Rather, understanding other people requires respect and a genuine desire to connect—two things that the Forest Service officials clearly don't care about. When Fokir, a local fisherman who doesn't speak English, rescues Piya from the Forest Service, it soon becomes clear to her that she and Fokir don't need to share a language to communicate. She's able to communicate with Fokir using gestures, drawings, and her laminated flashcards with pictures of the dolphins she's looking for, and he's more than willing to help her achieve her research goals despite the language barrier. The flashcards in particular introduce the idea that sight is a communication method that's far more effective than written or spoken language, as it allows individuals to interpret a common sight in their own language.

Kanai undergoes the most notable transformation as he discovers the limits of spoken and written language. He finds that being able to speak six languages doesn't teach him what the locals insist is the real language of the Sundarbans: the emotional language of fear. Several locals, including Fokir, Nilima, and Horen, another fisherman, explain that, according to local wisdom, to even say the word **tiger** is to call the beast itself—essentially, they suggest that words have the power to create the same kind of visual reality that Piya begins to get at with her flashcards of the dolphins. However, when Kanai does come face to face with a tiger, he confronts a reality that's far more real and terrifying than anything words could ever conjure. He finds that language fails him—both spoken and in his head—and instead, the tiger (which he cannot name at all, even with a euphemism) becomes "an artifact of pure intuition, so real that the thing itself could not have dreamed of existing so intensely." With this experience, Kanai discovers that fear, much like language, is something that one learns, internalizes, and then uses to make sense of one's world.

The novel acknowledges that spoken and written language, while limited, certainly hold an important place in the world—after all, this is how the story is relayed to the reader, how Piya is able to achieve funding to continue her research project after the cyclone, and how Kanai is forced to understand Nirmal's final months of life through reading his notebook. However, the novel also suggests that visual language and emotional language (in this case, the language of fear) are more universal languages, as neither requires the spoken or written word to translate.



MAN VS. NATURE

The Hungry Tide takes place in the Sundarbans, the archipelago of islands that forms the Ganges Delta. The islands of the Sundarbans vary in size from tiny spits of land to landmasses of considerable size, though they're constantly made and remade by the ever-changing tides and regularly occurring cyclones. The islands and rivers are covered

in mangrove forests that shelter man-eating crocodiles, snakes, and Bengal **tigers**, all of which constantly threaten the lives of the Sundarbans' residents. The novel suggests that while outside or human conflicts certainly affect life in the Sundarbans, the struggle to survive in a natural world that seems entirely inhospitable to humans is a far more pressing concern.

For the people who call the Sundarbans their home, the natural world is an essential, respected, and revered part of life. Kusum, a young woman who left the Sundarbans as a teen and returns to the island of Morichjhāpi with Fokir, her son, travels with Bangladeshi refugees who talk about the Sundarbans. Many of these refugees were originally from the Sundarbans and were forcibly removed after the partition of India in 1947, but they affirm that the mud of the Sundarbans still flows through their veins—a sentiment she shares. This shows that for Kusum, Fokir, and Horen, the specific environment of the Sundarbans is as much a part of them as their language, religious beliefs, or indeed, their human biology. This offers some reasoning for shocked outsiders like Piya and Nirmal as to why people want to live there in the first place—the locals see themselves as intrinsically part of nature.

Despite the locals' deep connections to the land and the environment, it's also important to recognize that the residents of the Sundarbans still live in fear of their environment. Upon her arrival on Lusibari in 1950, Nilima is shocked when she learns that wives dress as widows when their husbands go out fishing or to gather honey—at least one woman is guaranteed to be widowed after every outing, given the aggressive and dangerous crocodiles and tigers that attack and kill humans with tragic regularity. To address this, locals rely heavily on the story of the goddess Bon Bibi, whom they believe watches over the islands. According to legend, she long ago drew a line through the islands to separate her "good" realm from the "evil" realm of a tiger demon, Dokkhin Rai, who had an insatiable desire for human flesh. When a greedy captain made a deal with Dokkhin-Rai that promised the demon a boy, Dukhey, in exchange for an island's natural resources, Dukhey called on Bon Bibi to save him from the tiger's jaws—and she did. Because of this, shrines to Bon Bibi pepper the Sundarbans, and locals regularly pray and leave offerings at the shrines. They believe that people who are good at heart can't be harmed (at least by tigers) in places where Bon Bibi is present. Indeed, during the novel's two sightings on an island where a shrine is present, nothing happens. This is especially telling given the local wisdom that if a person sees a tiger, they're already as good as dead and certainly won't live to tell the tale.

Although the prevalence and the apparent power of the Bon Bibi legend certainly offers the illusion that humans are able to gain the upper hand in the fight against nature, the local characters repeatedly affirm (and even demonstrate with their lives) that they live at the mercy of the natural world, which

seems overwhelmingly indifferent to human life. Despite several efforts to curb tiger attacks, local women in the present (the early 2000s) still expect to be widowed in their twenties. Likewise, when cyclones roll through, they destroy boats, kill livestock and people, and submerge entire islands. The novel even offers the historical anecdote of Henry Piddington, the Englishman who coined the term "cyclone," as a cautionary tale to not underestimate the power of the storms—he correctly predicted that a cyclone would lay the carefully planned port city of Canning flat within fifteen years of its construction. In illustrating both the beauty of the Sundarbans and the region's danger, violence, and indifference to human life, *The Hungry Tide* suggests that all humans can do is to hope, pray, and live with respect and reverence for a place that can kill them as easily as it can provide the resources for human life to thrive.



THE HUMAN COST OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

While *The Hungry Tide* grapples primarily with the conflict between man and nature (in which man is relatively helpless in the face of dangerous natural forces), it also explores the conflicts that arise when people with power take it upon themselves to preserve and protect the natural world from overfishing, poaching, and the general spread of civilization on previously wild land. Though Piya, as a cetologist (a scientist who studies marine mammals), begins the novel believing fully that the welfare of the natural world should take precedence over anything else, her time in the Sundarbans begins to show her that conservation efforts aren't necessarily a clear force for good in the world. Although the novel acknowledges that wildlife conservation is an admirable goal, the novel is ultimately wary of how those conservation efforts play out. In exploring how governments can use the name of ecological preservation to justify violence against vulnerable people, the novel asserts that the human toll of wildlife conservation efforts must be taken into consideration first. In other words, conservation efforts must help both the natural environment and the people who make that environment their home.

Kanai explains to Piya how some government and environmental groups try to protect the environment at the expense of the people who live there. Such groups fail to take into account—or care—about the potential human cost of ecological preservation efforts. When Piya and Kanai discuss their experience of encountering a village mob torturing and burning a captured **tiger** that killed two people, Kanai encourages Piya to consider both the reasons why the villagers would want to do so, as well as the ways in which even Seattle-based Piya is complicit in creating the environment where torturing a tiger can even happen. Kanai points out that in the Sundarbans as a whole, tigers kill multiple people every week—so many, he suggests, that if people were to be killed in

such numbers elsewhere, it would be deemed genocide. However, because the residents of the Sundarbans are "the poorest of the poor," the killings aren't reported. He suggests that the government and environmental groups alike care more for the tigers than they do for the tigers' human victims, if only because the victims are so poor—while there's money and political favor to be had in promoting conservation efforts.

The Morichjhāpi conflict of 1978-79 also illustrates how environmental preservation can be a convenient and impactful justification for violence against the people who live in a certain environment. Though the settlement at Morichjhāpi was seen as a threat to the government for a host of other reasons, some of the conflict had to do with the fact that the refugees chose to settle on an island that the government had previously set aside as a wildlife refuge. The reader learns about this conflict through an argument between Nirmal and Nilima. When Nirmal begs Nilima to route some of the Trust's resources to the people on Morichjhāpi, Nilima insists that the people there are just squatters (illegal occupants). She also says that if people are regularly allowed to take land like they've done, the environment will suffer. Nirmal, on the other hand, believes that the people on Morichjhāpi are people in need of medical attention, just like people everywhere, and that the environmental argument is merely a convenient way to justify the group's eviction. Later, Nirmal is struck when Kusum, who lives on Morichjhāpi, recounts when, in the middle of the first siege, she listened to the police announce that the island is a nature reserve funded by people all over the world. She wonders to Nirmal who these people are who "love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?" Kusum comes to believe that her true crime in the government's eyes is being human and poor in a world that privileges people who no longer have to make a living by fishing, farming, and clearing land, as most poor people in the area have to do.

Though the novel ends before any true, large-scale resolution can be reached in regards to the balance between valuing human life and protecting the environment, Piya's proposed ongoing project to study the Orcaella dolphins suggests that she has internalized what she learned from being forced to humanize the locals. She tells Nilima that she'd like to work with local fisherman, rather than attempt to stop their work, and believes that some of the research money she'd receive to study the dolphins could be shared with the Babadon Trust, which provides locals with healthcare and other services. Nilima's apparent endorsement of Piya's plan suggests that environmental conservation can only be truly positive and useful when it seeks to conserve not just the natural world and the animals that live there, but also protect that people who share the environment—no matter how poor they may be.



IDEALISM AND THEORY VS. PRACTICALITY AND ACTION

Upon returning to Lusibari for the first time since he was a child, Kanai receives a packet left to him by his late uncle Nirmal, a dreamy, idealistic Communist who became involved in the 1979 Morichjhāpi conflict, much to his wife Nilima's chagrin. Unlike her husband, Nilima took it upon herself to work with the government to form the Babadon Trust, which sought to provide much-needed services to locals in a way her husband found wholly distasteful. By considering the ways in which idealism bogs Nirmal down and paralyzes him from taking meaningful action, and comparing that paralysis to Nilima's life of action, *The Hungry Tide* makes the case that theory, idealism, and good intentions are relatively meaningless if they're never put into practice.

Upon their arrival in the Sundarbans, Nirmal is simultaneously entranced and repulsed by the history of Sir Daniel Hamilton, a wealthy Scotsman who developed the Hamilton Estate on Gosaba. There, he implemented a cooperative system and did his best to distance Gosaba from India's rigid caste system in the name of creating an ideal society in which everyone could profit. Though Hamilton is frequently described as having been a wealthy capitalist, his estate seems Communist in nature, which is what intrigues Nirmal. For the time that Hamilton was alive, the experiment worked relatively well, which provides Nirmal with proof that his beloved class and political theories can indeed work in the real world.

When faced with the corruption of the landowners and the poverty of the locals upon his and Nilima's arrival in Lusibari, ten years after Hamilton's death, Nirmal is overwhelmed and entirely unable to function. The narrator notes that he turned to his copy of Lenin's pamphlet, which he rereads over and over again in search of answers as to how to help the impoverished locals. Nilima, on the other hand, begins talking to the local women and listening to their stories, and then forms a union to help them and bring services to the island. Though Nirmal is dismissive of Nilima's methods (she works with the government to secure funding and assistance, which he finds unacceptable given his political leanings), Nirmal is forced to recognize that his wife was actually able to orchestrate a great deal of positive change on Lusibari. Through her work, Nilima is able to break up the landholdings, eject the corrupt land managers, and build a hospital capable of serving an extraordinary number of people. Through Nirmal's notebook, it's clear that he believes Nilima is just as dismissive of his politics as he is of hers. However, Nilima tells Kanai on several occasions—and Kanai infers himself—that what actually drove Nilima and Nirmal apart was Nirmal's complete inability to act, write, or work within a system he found distasteful to create any change. For him, his theory was too important to compromise on, even if it meant that nothing got done because of that.

These conflicts between action and inaction finally came to a

head when Nirmal became involved with the Morichjhāpi conflict. His writing in his journal shows clearly that he was entranced by the idea of the perfect, Hamilton-esque society that the refugees on Morichjhāpi sought to create. Further, while he desperately wanted to be of help and felt he *could* help (given his background as a schoolteacher and a once-prominent member of the Marxist academic circles in Calcutta), he again was bogged down in thinking about what should be done. Nirmal died not long after the police invade Morichjhāpi and massacre the refugees in 1979, leaving only his account of the events in one small notebook to Kanai upon his death. In the notebook, Nirmal speaks again and again about how he recognizes that inaction throughout his life has been his undoing, and yet he still finds himself unable to do anything but record his experiences of the conflict through the lens of idealized theory. Essentially, the novel suggests that the notebook, as Nirmal's final contribution, really only serves the purpose of unraveling personal mysteries for his family members and proving that Nirmal was entirely capable of meaningful action. It's telling, then, that Nirmal's notebook doesn't even survive to the end of the novel—it gets swept away in the cyclone's floodwaters. His one lasting contribution, on the other hand, is the **cyclone shelter** he insisted Nilima include in the hospital—something he pushed for because of his interest in storms and meteorological theory. The cyclone shelter stands as proof that Nirmal's idealism and good intentions were impotent until and unless they were joined with action, practicality, and funding.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



CYCLONE SHELTER

The cyclone shelter symbolizes what Nirmal may have been able to accomplish had he been more willing to compromise on his belief in the importance of pure, unadulterated communist theory. Nilima explains that the Babadon Trust never would've built the cyclone shelter in the hospital had Nirmal not insisted they do so. Notably, Nirmal only insisted because he was so interested in the science and the theory behind cyclones and other storms. Thus, the cyclone shelter becomes both the most lasting thing that Nirmal leaves behind and a reminder of all that he was unable to leave behind.



TIGERS

In the Sundarbans, tigers symbolize the extraordinary power of the natural world. Locals know that the tigers are always there and can appear and kill

with no notice, and they overwhelmingly believe that to even say the word "tiger" is to call the beast itself. Though tigers certainly aren't the only animal or natural force capable of killing people, the special reverence afforded to tigers makes them the representative of the deadliness of the Sundarbans as a whole. Like the tigers, the landscape itself must be treated with respect, reverence, and fear.



GAMCHHAS

Gamchhas, which are small pieces of cloth used in India as towels, symbolize one's connection to people, places, and cultures. Piya's father, despite expressing no interest in remaining connected to his Indian roots after moving to Seattle, refuses to throw his away, even though it looks moldy and disgusting after years of use. Thus, holding onto his gamchhas keeps him connected to his home in one small way. As Piya relearns the word itself and uses gamchhas provided to her by Fokir, she becomes more connected to her own Indian roots and to Fokir. Later, gamchhas become very literal means of staying connected to life itself, as Kusum's father uses a gamchha to help tie himself and his uncle to a tree during a cyclone.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner Books edition of *The Hungry Tide* published in 2006.

Part 1: The Launch Quotes

☞ Piya was so startled that she looked at the picture again, with fresh eyes, wondering what he might be thinking of [...] Like an optical illusion, the picture seemed to change shape as she looked at it; she had the feeling that she was looking at it through his eyes.

Related Characters: Mejda, Piya Roy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Piya is perplexed when she shows Mejda her flashcard of the Irrawaddy and Gangetic dolphins and he asks, in English, if the Gangetic dolphin is a bird. Instead of dismissing his comment, Piya takes it upon herself to look closer and try to understand why he might ask that. This shows early on that communication and understanding is predicated not necessarily on having a spoken or written language in common, but on both parties exhibiting a genuine desire to

understand the other. It's telling that Piya doesn't simply brush Mejdā off as crazy or uneducated; her willingness to try to understand where he's coming from shows that her primary desire is to understand, not to feel superior. Her experience of seeing the picture change also begins to suggest that there's a transformative quality to communicating with someone without the help of a common language. When people can rely on a shared visual language (in this case, the flashcards), the novel overwhelmingly suggests that communication is far more effective and can even be magical—something Piya learns in her later interactions with Fokir.

Part 1: S'Daniel Quotes

☞ "It is common knowledge that almost every island in the tide country has been inhabited at some time or another. But to look at them you would never know: the specialty of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts."

Related Characters: Nirmal Bose (speaker), Sir Daniel Hamilton, Kanai Dutt

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

In 1970, Nirmal begins telling Kanai the story of Sir Daniel Hamilton by discussing the overall history of the Sundarbans and specifically, the fact that the natural world of the Sundarbans is especially adept at doing away with traces of human society. This is an early indicator that the natural world—especially in the Sundarbans—demands respect from its human inhabitants, and it has a great deal of power over them. Though Nirmal never says why some of the islands were abandoned, it's possible that some were simply swept away in cyclones or in tidal surges, another indicator of the natural world's sheer power and dominance over humans. When nature doesn't even allow mere traces of humanity to remain, it suggests that within the greater ecosystem of the tide country, humans are at the very bottom of the food chain and can only hope to survive.

☞ "What he wanted was to build a new society, a new kind of country. It would be a country run by cooperatives, he said. Here people wouldn't exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land."

Related Characters: Nirmal Bose (speaker), Sir Daniel Hamilton, Kanai Dutt

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Nirmal continues to tell the story of Sir Daniel Hamilton, the Scotsman who developed a cooperative society in the Sundarbans. Nirmal's tone, which is overwhelmingly one of admiration for Sir Daniel, is significant here. For Nirmal, Sir Daniel's successful experiment is proof that his own deeply held Marxist beliefs can work in the real world. However, it's also worth noting that Sir Daniel was, first and foremost, a man of action. Nirmal, on the other hand, does very little throughout his life because he cares too much for his theories, which he believes must be deployed in totality or not at all. Taken together, this begins to suggest that while Nirmal admires action and those who promote his own precious theories, he himself is unable to implement any of them himself due to an unwillingness to compromise.

Part 1: The Trust Quotes

☞ But these elements of an ordinary rural existence did not entirely conceal the fact that life in Lusibari was lived at the sufferance of a single feature of its topography. This was its bād̄h, the tall embankment that encircled its perimeter, holding back the twice-daily flood.

Related Characters: Kanai Dutt, Nilima Bose

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

When Kanai and Nilima land on Lusibari, the narrator describes the layout of the island and explains that life on Lusibari is possible because of the bād̄h, the high, mud and silt embankment that protects the island from the high tide and keeps it from flooding too badly. This is another early indicator that life in the Sundarbans is lived at the mercy of the natural world, which has the power to destroy its human inhabitants with no warning or thought for their welfare. Throughout the novel, the bād̄h is described as being massive and extremely important, yet exceptionally fragile. In particular, this begins to point at the fact that life in the Sundarbans is precarious. While humans attempt to protect themselves from the natural world, the natural world always

has the power to destroy those efforts and humans with them.

Part 1: The Letter Quotes

☝☝ There is nothing I can do to stop what lies ahead. But I was once a writer; perhaps I can make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world. The thought of this, along with the fear that preceded it, has made it possible for me to do what I have not been able to do for the last thirty years—to put my pen to paper again.

Related Characters: Nirmal Bose (speaker), Nilima Bose, Kanai Dutt

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his letter to Kanai in the notebook, Nirmal explains that what he really wants is to make sure that what happened on Morichjhāpi isn't forgotten. He believes that the only way of doing that is to write down everything he remembers and pass it on. When taken in consideration with the rest of Nirmal's life, this letter is Nirmal's declaration that at last, he's going to try to do something meaningful with his life, rather than wallow in his beloved communist theory. This then becomes a major turning point for Nirmal, given that he spends much of his life consumed by pure theory and refusing to do anything if he cannot implement his Marxist ideas in whole. It's important, however, to recognize that even though Nirmal expresses this sentiment and does indeed complete his tale in the notebook, much of the notebook is filled with passages in which he questions his own ability to do anything of worth, let alone even ask the question of what can or should be done in the first place. With this, the notebook comes to stand as a testament to Nirmal's indecisiveness and inability to act, as it primarily serves to unravel the mysteries surrounding his last few weeks of life. Though Kanai does decide to transcribe the notebook from memory at the end of the novel (after the original notebook is swept away in the tides), it's unclear what purpose the notebook served other than clearing up those mysteries for Kanai and Nilima.

Part 1: The Boat Quotes

☝☝ It was not just that he had thought to create a space for her; it was if he had chosen to include her in some simple, practiced family ritual, found a way to let her know that despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she was a person to him and not, as it were, a representative of a species, a faceless, tongueless foreigner.

Related Characters: Fokir, Piya Roy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

During the course of Piya's first evening on Fokir's boat, she's touched when he provides her a private spot to change clothes. Her interpretation of this as a recognition of her humanity shows that actions can function as their own language with which to communicate without spoken language. Furthermore, this language of action is an overwhelmingly more successful way to communicate complex and meaningful ideas. This continues to show that spoken language is a relatively ineffective means of communication, particularly when compared to shared visual languages, either in the form of actions like this or images like Piya's flashcards.

This moment also signals Piya's personal transformation as she learns to humanize Fokir and view him as a useful and meaningful human in her life, not just a poor fisherman from the Sundarbans. This moment can then be seen as the starting point that eventually leads her to decide to forgive Fokir for his involvement in killing the tiger, as well as her decision to name her final project after him. It's only by learning to humanize him and coming to the understanding that her conservation work needs to take the humanity of people like Fokir into account that Piya is able to come to those conclusions by the end of the novel.

Part 1: Nirmal and Nilima Quotes

☝☝ It shamed them to think that this man—a foreigner, a *burra sahib*, a rich capitalist—had taken it upon himself to address the issue of rural poverty when they themselves, despite all their radical talk, had scarcely any knowledge of life outside the city.

Related Characters: Nilima Bose, Nirmal Bose, Sir Daniel Hamilton

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

On Nilima and Nirmal's first visit to Lusibari, they're shocked to learn about capitalist Sir Daniel Hamilton's success in creating a cooperative society in the Sundarbans, despite their own involvement in the Marxist intellectual circles in Calcutta. This is Nirmal's first indication that there's a major difference between theory for theory's sake and theory in practice; learning about Sir Daniel shows him that theory in practice can be an amazing thing that truly helps people. Nilima comes to the same conclusions, though what the two decide to do with their revelations differs greatly. While Nirmal turns to his theories after the move to Lusibari and never does anything to continue Sir Daniel's work, Nilima founds the Women's Union and the Babadon Trust to try to help some of the people on Lusibari in tangible ways. This ultimately illustrates then how examples like this can spur some to action, while crippling others and leaving them extremely ineffective to create change.

☝ But for these women the imagining of early widowhood was not a wasted effort: the hazards of life in the tide country were so great; so many perished in their youth, men especially, that almost without exception the fate that they had prepared themselves for did indeed befall them.

Related Characters: Nilima Bose, Nirmal Bose

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Upon her arrival in the Sundarbans, Nilima is shocked to discover that wives dress as widows when their husbands go out on their boats, as inevitably, at least one of the men will be killed in the process. The fact that this is so shocking for Nilima is indicative of the fact that she grew up privileged and wealthy in Calcutta and never had to contemplate how difficult life is in a place like the Sundarbans, where the natural world is far more dangerous than anything manmade. This then stands as the moment in which Nilima recognizes the power of the natural world in the Sundarbans and understands that she must channel her efforts into helping the survivors in tangible, meaningful ways. Helping the survivors, she feels, is a far more effective

use of her time, given that so many people die at the hands of the natural world. This shows Nilima making decisions about where to focus her attention, something that Nirmal was overwhelmingly unable to do throughout his lifetime.

Part 1: Words Quotes

☝ How do you lose a word? Does it vanish into your memory like an old toy in a chest, and lie hidden in the cobwebs and dust, waiting to be cleaned out or rediscovered?

Related Characters: Piya's Father, Fokir, Piya Roy

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

As Piya mulls over the fact that she forgot the Bengali word “gamchha,” which is the word for a checked cloth used as a towel, she wonders how one loses words in the first place. When she relearns what the checked cloth is called, Piya begins to form a closer connection both with Fokir and with her father. In this way, the gamchha itself comes to represent a thing that ties people together and in turn, ties people to their pasts—Piya's father's gamchha was the one thing that kept him somewhat connected to India, even as he did his best to integrate in Seattle and forget where he came from.

Part 1: Moyna Quotes

☝ "Why else?" she said. "Because there's a lot of money in prawns and the traders had paid off the politicians. What do they care—or the politicians, for that matter? It's people like us who're going to suffer and it's up to us to think ahead."

Related Characters: Moyna (speaker), Tutul, Nilima Bose, Fokir, Kanai Dutt

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Moyna explains to Kanai why she doesn't want her son, Tutul, to be a fisherman: there's no way for small-time fishermen to make a living when compared to

those state-sponsored fishermen who catch tiger prawns, as those fishermen are in the government's pockets. This illustrates the myriad ways that the poor people who live in Lusibari are disadvantaged in their world. They first fight the natural world itself—remember that many men are killed every time they go out fishing, due to the dangers posed by tigers, crocodiles, other aggressive wildlife, and the weather. Then, those in charge care little for the welfare of poor people who live in the Sundarbans, given that they rejected Nilima's attempts to get the special nets for the prawns banned in order to give small-time fishermen a chance to fish as well. However, it's also important to note that in this case, the option to conserve wildlife and support people appears to be more compatible, while it doesn't through much of the novel. It's possible that by banning the nets, the tiger prawn population would be able to thrive, and locals would be able to continue to make a living fishing at a more sustainable rate.

Part 1: Listening Quotes

☝☝ The two of them, Fokir and she, could have been boulders or trees for all they knew of each other, and wasn't it better in a way, more honest, that they could not speak? For if you compared it to the ways in which dolphins' echoes mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing you could see through the eyes of another being.

Related Characters: Fokir, Piya Roy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

As Piya considers both the limitations of her interactions with Fokir as well as how much they've been able to actually communicate to each other despite not speaking the same language, she begins to feel as though human speech is a comparatively poor means of communication. This shows that Piya has begun to recognize that far more effective is sharing a visual or emotional language, as well as being genuinely willing to listen to the other person. It's important to recognize that if the forest guard and Mejda had been more willing to communicate with Piya, her survey could've gone on uninterrupted with them. Instead, their unwillingness to listen to Piya and take her seriously (and, of course, the way they harass her with obscene gestures) is what encouraged her to remain with Fokir, who is entirely willing to do his best to communicate.

Part 1: Dreams Quotes

☝☝ I felt something change within me: how astonishing it was that I, an aging, bookish schoolmaster, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without!

Related Characters: Nirmal Bose (speaker), Kusum

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Nirmal is extremely excited when he sees what's happening on Morichjhāpi, and he desperately wants to be a part of the action. Most important here is that Nirmal makes it very clear that the settlers on Morichjhāpi, who are uneducated and extremely poor refugees, do not meet his expectations as to who in the world is capable of developing such a settlement and starting a revolution. This points to Nirmal's privilege, which has allowed him to move through life believing himself superior to those without education. Though Nirmal wants to be a part of the revolution he sees unfolding on Morichjhāpi, this shows that he also has a lot in common with those who want to disband the settlement exactly because the settlers are poor and uneducated. Nirmal essentially acts as a bridge between two worlds here, though his disbelief suggests he has a ways to go still before he can truly humanize the settlers on Morichjhāpi and see them as his equals.

Part 2: A Feast Quotes

☝☝ I was tempted to tell him what I thought of him, but it struck me with great force that I had no business to be self-righteous about these matters. Nilima—she had achieved a great deal. What had I done? What was the work of my life? I tried to find an answer but none would come to mind.

Related Characters: Nirmal Bose (speaker), Kusum, Nilima Bose

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

When Nirmal attends a feast on Morichjhāpi and reconnects with a writer he knew when he lived in Calcutta, he's angry when the writer suggests that the violence people predict will take place on Morichjhāpi is welcome.

Nirmal, however, feels unable to refute this, given how little he's done. This marks this as the point in Nirmal's story when he truly recognizes how paralyzed he's been by inaction his entire life, especially when compared to what Nilima did to develop the Babadon Trust and the local hospital.

However, it's also important to recognize that when Nirmal insists he's done nothing with his life, he ignores the fact that he spent thirty years educating children in a place where, before his arrival, children simply didn't have many or any educational opportunities. Nirmal presumably does this because the school is connected to the Trust, and through the Trust, to the government; this means that the school itself and the teaching profession is, in Nirmal's eyes, sullied by its connection to an anti-Communist institution. This reinforces that Nirmal is caught up in insisting that theory must be put into place in the real world in its entirety, not in pieces.

Part 2: Storms Quotes

☝☝ "My friend, not only could it happen again—it will happen again. A storm will come, the waters will rise, and the bādh will succumb, in part or in whole. It is only a matter of time."

Related Characters: Nirmal Bose (speaker), Fokir

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

Nirmal tells Fokir, who is four or five at this point, that the Sundarbans will absolutely suffer another cyclone like the one in 1737, which entirely decimated the tide country. When Nirmal tells Fokir specifically that the bādh will fall, it shows that Nirmal has been in Lusibari long enough to recognize that life there is lived at the mercy of the natural world. The natural world undoubtedly has the power to destroy life and can at any moment. For Fokir, this instills in him an even greater respect for the natural world. Fokir's reverence for nature remains in adulthood, as Piya especially observes that he's very in tune with the tides, the dolphins, and when the cyclone hits, the mechanics of the storm. He's able to come to this kind of agreement with the natural world in part because he learned to see the natural world as Nirmal sees it here: terrifying, and deserving of respect and deference.

Part 2: Habits Quotes

☝☝ "Nirmal, you have no idea of what it takes to do anything practical," she said. "You live in a dream world—a haze of poetry and fuzzy ideas about revolution. To build something is not the same as dreaming it. Building is always a matter of well-chosen compromises."

Related Characters: Nilima Bose (speaker), Kusum, Nirmal Bose

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

When Nirmal asks Nilima to help the settlers on Morichjhāpi, she insists he doesn't know anything about doing the actual work. Though harsh, Nilima can say this after watching her husband spend the last three decades too wrapped up in theory to acknowledge that in doing so, he hasn't been able to do anything meaningful or tangible. Nilima, on the other hand, was better able to actually get things done because she was willing to compromise on her ideals (which in her youth, she shared with Nirmal) in order to remain on the government's good side and secure funding.

It's also worth considering Nilima's words in terms of the cyclone shelter at the hospital, the one thing that Nirmal insisted they build. Though Nirmal insisted they build it based on theoretical knowledge of storms, Nirmal actually had little part in actually building it—as Nilima says, he's entirely divorced from the actual practical matters of putting theory into practice.

☝☝ The sight was almost unbearable for me at the moment; I felt myself torn between my wife and the woman who had become the muse I'd never had; between the quiet persistence of everyday change and the heady excitement of revolution—between prose and poetry.

Most haunting of all, was I overreaching myself even in conceiving of these confusions? What had I ever done to earn the right to address such questions?

Related Characters: Nirmal Bose (speaker), Kusum, Nilima Bose

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

As Nirmal stares at the mohona near Lusibari, he questions whether he's even qualified to so much as think about the implications of the revolution taking place on Morichjhāpi. This is illustrative of Nirmal's general mode of moving through life: he becomes so bogged down in theory (and in this case, can barely get past the act of thinking to even get to the theory itself), he becomes entirely paralyzed. In turn, he's wholly unable to do anything but sit with his own thoughts.

The way he talks about Kusum here as "the woman who had become the muse [he] never had" shows that, as time goes on, Nirmal begins to view Kusum as a symbol of the revolution. However, by shifting his view to look at Kusum in this way, Nirmal in turn becomes unable to recognize her humanity and recognize that she's not the only person involved in the Morichjhāpi conflict. In this situation, he essentially prioritizes people and what they stand for over the actual work that needs to be done.

he's beginning to shift his thinking.

Part 2: Crimes Quotes

☝☝ "Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them [...] it seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil."

Related Characters: Kusum (speaker), Nirmal Bose

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 216-17

Explanation and Analysis

After the first siege on Morichjhāpi, Kusum relates how the police shouted about the people who funded wildlife preservation efforts on the island, and she wonders about who would possibly prioritize animals over vulnerable people. With this, Kusum begins to get at the heart of the issue with wildlife conservation: oftentimes, it takes place at the expense of poor, vulnerable people who share the habitat with endangered animals. Notably, Kusum recognizes that in this particular situation, the people on Morichjhāpi are hit doubly hard because they're overwhelmingly poor and make a living through farming and fishing, while those funding wildlife conservation no longer have to rely on the land to make a living. This in turn reinforces that the issues and questions surrounding wildlife conservation are very much questions about economics and power, not necessarily about the welfare of either animals or people.

Part 2: Transformation Quotes

☝☝ I realized with a sense of shock that this chimerical line was, to her and to Horen, as real as a barbed-wire fence might be to me.

Related Characters: Nirmal Bose (speaker), Dokkhin Rai, Shah Jongoli, Bon Bibi, Fokir, Horen Naskor, Kusum

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

When Nirmal accompanies Horen and Kusum to Garjontola to visit the shrine to Bon Bibi, he's shocked to discover that his friends appear to truly believe that there's an invisible line through the Sundarbans that separates Bon Bibi's side of the region from the demon Dokkhin Rai's. The fact that Nirmal is shocked in the first place shows clearly that he doesn't place a lot of stock in local religious practices and therefore, doesn't take them seriously. This flippancy means that Nirmal has a harder time understanding his friends' and neighbors' motivations, beliefs, and methods of moving through the world. Essentially, because he believes himself superior, he closes himself off to a mode of communication with these people that would allow him to better understand their lives—and this realization suggests that

Part 2: A Post Office on Sunday Quotes

☝☝ "He loved the work of Rainer Maria Rilke [...] Rilke said 'life is lived in transformation,' and I think Nirmal soaked this idea into himself in the way cloth absorbs ink. To him, what Kusum stood for was the embodiment of Rilke's idea of transformation."

Related Characters: Kanai Dutt (speaker), Kusum, Nilima Bose, Nirmal Bose, Piya Roy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

Kanai explains to Piya how Nirmal thought about his existence and his place in the world, specifically in relation to the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. The simple fact that Nirmal was so caught up in the poetry of others illustrates that he certainly understood that surrounding himself with differing perspectives was an effective way to add richness and deeper meaning to his life. This is reinforced through all the times that Nirmal quotes Rilke and in doing so, draws connections between Rilke's poetry and what Nirmal sees through his own eyes. When Nirmal applies these ideas to Kusum, it shows that this can begin to have negative effects when applied like this to one person. Horen later admits that Nirmal was absolutely in love with Kusum and though it's somewhat unclear why he never acted on his desires, it's possible that by thinking of Kusum as a muse and as being associated with his beloved poetry, Nirmal deprived her of some of her humanity. Instead, she became a mere symbol for revolution and the class struggle that Nirmal wanted so much to be part of.

people in favor of involving oneself in conservation. This shows that at least in a theoretical sense, Kanai is able to recognize the humanity of the poor people who live in the Sundarbans, even as he also understands that he's complicit in their dehumanization by supporting conservation.

Part 2: Signs Quotes

☹️ [...] He had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man like Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose value was less than an animal. In seeing himself in this way, it seemed perfectly comprehensible to Kanai why Fokir should want him dead—but he understood also that this was not how it would be. Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged.

Related Characters: Bon Bibi, Fokir, Kanai Dutt

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

When Kanai falls in the mud on Garjontola and loses his temper with Fokir, he has an out-of-body experience that allows him to see himself as a symbol of the social and economic systems that prioritize his own existence over the existence of a poor local like Fokir. In this situation, however, it's important to recognize that Fokir has all of the power, given that he's the one who knows the area and presumably is well aware of whether or not he and Kanai are in any real danger of being attacked by a tiger.

When Kanai says that Fokir wanted him to be judged, he's essentially saying that Fokir wants Kanai to suffer some sort of consequence for living a life that prioritizes everyone but the poor. Though Fokir speaks little throughout the novel, he's likely aware that people like Kanai fund conservation efforts that harm fishermen like him. The judging itself will, in Fokir's understanding, come from the goddess Bon Bibi, given that Garjontola is supposedly a safe haven for all of those who are pure of heart, thanks to her protection. In this way, Fokir also puts Kanai in a situation where he's forced to recognize the power of local religion as well.

Part 2: Interrogations Quotes

☹️ "Because it was people like you," said Kanai, "who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me [...] have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favor with their Western patrons. It's not hard to ignore the people who're dying—after all, they are the poorest of the poor."

Related Characters: Kanai Dutt (speaker), Fokir, Piya Roy

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 248-49

Explanation and Analysis

When Kanai and Piya discuss the mob attacking the tiger from the night before, Kanai attempts to impress upon Piya that even as a conservationist, she's complicit in such violence. Kanai is able to recognize that by supporting conservation efforts, he, Piya, and others like them are choosing to prioritize animals over people who may be harmed by those animals on a regular basis. When he insists that it's a question of economics and currying favor, he also shows that there's political capital to be had by ignoring

☞ Wasn't this why people who lived in close proximity with tigers so often regarded them as being something more than just animals? Because the tiger was the only animal that forgave you for being so ill at ease in your translated world?

Related Characters: Fokir, Kanai Dutt

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

As Kanai crashes through the mangroves to get away from the water, he considers the way that tigers kill people (quickly and mercifully) versus the way that crocodiles kill people (slowly and torturously). When Kanai suggests that tigers kill people quickly to forgive them for being uneasy in a "translated world," Kanai recognizes that for humans, who live very separated from the natural world, the natural world itself is translated. It's something that must constantly be put into relation to the human experience in a form of translation. With this, Kanai also discovers that there are many other forms of communication besides speech—the relationship between man and the natural world is just one of many forms of communication. His mention that humans are uneasy in this world reinforces Piya's earlier suggestion that animals communicate and exist far more easily and truthfully than humans ever can hope to, as animals don't rely on intermediaries (or translations) to communicate.

☞ The words he had been searching for, the euphemisms that were the source of his panic, had been replaced by the thing itself, except that without words it could not be apprehended or understood. It was an artifact of pure intuition, so real that the thing itself could not have dreamed of existing so intensely.

Related Characters: Kanai Dutt

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

Right before Kanai sees the tiger in the clearing on Garjontola, he knows it's there because of the fear he instinctively feels. In this instance, Kanai discovers that far more effective than spoken or thought language is a more common emotional language of fear, which in this case brings the tiger to life more vibrantly than language ever could. In this way, Kanai learns firsthand how language breaks down, as well as how language functions to describe the natural world. Kanai implies that while he feels afraid of the tiger, he can't actually understand or make sense of the tiger or of his fear without language. This suggests that language absolutely has a place in the way that humans understand their world, though it's far more effective when combined with more emotional languages like fear.

Part 2: The Wave Quotes

☞ "Yes," said Nilima. "Making us build it was probably the most important thing he did in his whole life. You can see the proof of that today. But if you'd told him that, he'd have laughed. He'd have said, 'It's just social service—not revolution.'"

Related Characters: Nilima Bose (speaker), Nirmal Bose, Kanai Dutt

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 320

Explanation and Analysis

As Kanai and Nilima watch people in the hospital's cyclone shelter, Nilima explains that the cyclone shelter itself was Nirmal's greatest accomplishment in life. When Nilima mentions that Nirmal wouldn't have admitted such a thing, it illustrates again just how caught up Nirmal was in pure theory, even if it meant that the theory was never put into practice. In the case of the cyclone shelter, even though Nirmal didn't have a hand in the actual building of it, the shelter becomes a testament to what Nirmal could've done with his life had he been more willing to compromise. The shelter is making a major impact in a positive way on Lusibari, as it protects many people from the floods and strong winds. However, Nirmal's insistence on theory meant that he prioritized theory even over the lives of people he could've saved through action and compromise.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: THE TIDE COUNTRY

Immediately upon stepping onto the train platform, Kanai spots a young woman (later revealed as Piya) who looks out of place with her dress, haircut, and stance. Kanai thinks he's a connoisseur of women and is intrigued by Piya, especially when she realizes she's a foreigner. He wonders why she's taking a train to Canning, where tourists never go. As he watches her speak, he's gripped with the desire to listen. He's a translator, so this desire is normal for him, and he discovers that she speaks no Bengali. Kanai is also an outsider on the platform, as he looks reasonably affluent.

Kanai watches Piya board the train, noting that she seems accustomed to traveling like this. He loses sight of her in the crowd as he finds his seat, which he doesn't find to his liking. He wants to read, and his seat isn't next to a window, so Kanai persuades the man with the window seat to swap seats. Settling in, Kanai pulls out some copied pages of Bengali writing.

Kanai's reading materials talk about the Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands in the Bay of Bengal. The writer calls the island the "ragged fringe" of India's sari and explains that the islands vary greatly in size, and the waterways that run between them range from tiny creeks to miles-wide rivers. Where multiple rivers meet, it's called a mohona. Salt and fresh water mingle, and the tides create new islands and destroy others overnight. **Tigers**, snakes, and crocodiles kill dozens every year. "Sundarbans" means "the beautiful forest," though the etymology of the word is questionable. The writer says the area is also known as "tide country," and specifically in Bengali, the country of the ebb tide. The writer ends by quoting a passage from the poet Rilke's *Duino Elegies*.

PART 1: AN INVITATION

Twenty minutes outside of Kolkata, Piya has the opportunity to move to a window seat. The train is stopped, so she summons a tea seller on the platform. As she tries to bring her cup of tea through the bars of the window, the man sitting across from her (Kanai) flips his pages, jostling her hand in the process, and some of her tea spills on his pages. He's the last person she wanted to spill on—he seems wealthy and entitled. Annoyed, Kanai tells her that his pages are replaceable and says that things like this happen with Americans.

That fact that Kanai is a translator immediately brings the issue of language to the foreground. Notice how much more power Kanai has on the platform, just because he's able to speak the language and Piya isn't: he can learn a great deal about her, while she's unable to get the information she needs. Meanwhile, Kanai's belief that he's a "connoisseur of women" suggests that he arrogantly believes he also has power over them.



Kanai's ability to get the man to move is a further indicator that Kanai doesn't just see himself as powerful; he truly is able to create change (at least on this small scale) because of his affluence and appearance. For Kanai, his power is directly tied to his grasp of language, and specifically the spoken word.



It will come to light later that what Kanai is reading here was written by his late uncle Nirmal, a deeply poetic man. This is reinforced by Nirmal's decision to quote Rainer Maria Rilke, an influential German poet. Nirmal quotes Rilke often and by doing so, is able to pull meaning from Rilke's poetry to add meaning and nuance to his own life and writing. This shows that language isn't static; it can function in many ways and have many layers of meaning.



Kanai's language again reinforces the power he believes he has—his comment about Americans suggests he views himself as superior to them and specifically, to Piya. It's worth noting that because Kanai is so entitled, he's never fully able to get to know Piya.



Piya feigns admiration and asks how Kanai knew she's American. He explains that he's a translator, knows six languages, and knew from her accent. Kanai asks how Piya expects to get by with no Bengali or Hindi. She says that her work doesn't require much talk. She's a cetologist and hopes to do a survey of marine mammals in the Sundarbans, which has never been done before due to the difficulty of getting permits. Piya explains that her uncle is important in Kolkata, and his influence will hopefully help.

Piya explains that she was born in Kolkata but moved to Seattle with her parents when she was a year old, which is why she never learned Bengali. Kanai introduces himself formally and says that he's visiting his aunt. Piya pulls out a map, and he shows her where his destination, the island of Lusibari, is. He invites her to visit and explains she'd only need to ask for Mashima. He explains that though "Mashima" just means aunt, his aunt Nilima is so influential on the island, everyone will know who she's talking about.

Kanai says that Nilima's husband, Kanai's late uncle Nirmal, was similarly known just as Saar (sir), but he's been dead a long time. However, Nilima recently found some of his papers that he left for Kanai. Kanai explains that he's been to the Sundarbans once before, when he was ten. He was sent to stay with Nilima and Nirmal as a punishment for misbehaving at school. As he finishes his story, the train arrives in Canning.

PART 1: CANNING

Kanai watches Piya walk away, hoping she'll visit—he's unmarried but has had a long string of sexual relationships with women, the most recent of which ended badly. He hopes Piya will be a grand distraction. When he steps off the train, he remembers being here 30 years ago, and how he had been astonished at how many people lived in Canning.

Kanai also thinks about the last time he saw Nirmal in Calcutta in the late 1970s. Nirmal had been perusing books when Kanai barreled into him on his way to class. Kanai bought Nirmal the book he'd been looking at, and he always thought he'd run into Nirmal again like that. However, Nirmal died two years later after a long illness. He'd mentioned some writings that he wanted Kanai to have, but nobody could find them. Suddenly, two months ago, Nilima had found them and called Kanai, asking him to visit. Kanai had tried to put her off, but finally agreed to come.

Kanai's word choice shows clearly that he prioritizes spoken language and likely doesn't value other forms of communication (like gestures and visual cues, which Piya presumably uses on her surveys where she doesn't speak the local language). In addition, the fact that Piya is a cetologist means that she likely believes fully in conservation efforts, a stance that will be important later on.



The fact that one can get ahold of Nilima by simply asking for Mashima shows again that language isn't something static; it changes depending on the people using it and can mean different things to different communities. Kanai's ability to accept this as fact shows again that he prioritizes spoken language over other forms of communication.



It's worth noting that Kanai has an advantage over Piya because he's been to the Sundarbans before: he already knows just how dangerous the landscape is, and he presumably has some grasp of the culture there. Essentially, he's far more culturally literate than Piya is.



Kanai's astonishment at the population in his youth shows that his sense of superiority started early in life, as it implies that he didn't think Canning was important enough to have a larger population.



This backstory sets Kanai's journey up as being one in which he comes to terms with his past and possibly the way he moves through the world. His unwillingness to come deal with Nirmal's writings again implies Kanai's own sense of superiority, which suggests that he'll have to challenge that sense by returning to Lusibari.



Back on the platform, Kanai spots Nilima sitting, surrounded by admirers and well-wishers. When she spots Kanai, she snaps her fingers, which causes the crowd to disperse, and greets Kanai. As she leads him out of the station, Kanai tells her about meeting Piya on the train and says he invited her to visit. Nilima asks if Kanai read the papers she sent—the papers Kanai read on the train—and Kanai is disappointed that they're not from Nirmal's packet. Nilima asks why Kanai insisted on coming through Canning, and explains that the river has changed.

When Kanai and Nilima reach the river, Kanai sees what she meant—at low tide, the half-mile wide riverbed is mostly mud with a ditch running through the middle. He watches in disbelief as passengers jump off a boat in the middle and wade through the hip-deep mud to shore. Kanai apologizes for insisting on coming through Canning and explains he just wanted to revisit where he arrived in 1970.

Kanai starts to reminisce about Nirmal, but Nilima stops him. She explains that they "found" him in Canning, and he died months later. It was around the time of the Morichjhāpi incident, which she explains was a violent confrontation between police and refugees who had settled on an island. They bused the refugees away, and she believes that Nirmal was let off of one of those buses. Nirmal had been so disoriented, he could never tell them what happened. He'd simply yelled that the Matla would rise.

Kanai says that that was surely a reference to Nirmal's favorite story about Henry Piddington and the port of Canning, but Nilima cuts him off; she insists it's too hard for her to talk about Nirmal. Kanai goes silent and remembers the first time he was in Canning. He and Nilima had waited while Nirmal, a copy of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* clutched to his chest, unsuccessfully watched for a boat. A local named Horen had rescued them. Horen told Nilima that Bon Bibi, the forest goddess, had granted him honey. Kanai had laughed that people believe in such nonsense, but stopped quickly when Nilima suggested Horen could teach Kanai a lesson.

Horen had offered to take them all back to Lusibari, and Nilima accepted. She explained to Kanai that Horen was a fisherman with three children, though he wasn't yet twenty. He was also caring for Kusum, a teenage girl. Kanai didn't understand Nilima's euphemisms as she explained that Kusum may have been forced into prostitution without Horen's help, but Kanai was intrigued regardless.

Nilima's mention that the river has changed shows early on that what Nirmal wrote in the papers Kanai read on the train is absolutely true: the Sundarbans are a place where nature has the power to shape the world to its liking, with little or no concern for the humans who may rely on certain waterways. This situates the natural world as one that's indifferent to its inhabitants.



Because the river is part of a delta, the ocean's tides impact it. These tides are influential in how people in the Sundarbans live their lives, reinforcing the power the natural world has over people in this part of the world. In this case, the passengers simply have to deal with what the natural world has dealt them by wading through the mud.



Nilima's apparent discomfort with talking about the last months of Nirmal's life suggests that she hasn't fully recovered from whatever happened. This suggests either that she simply doesn't have the language to adequately describe what happened, or that what happened was very out of character for Nirmal and was therefore beyond comprehension.



When Nilima reprimanded Kanai when he was young, it shows that she's adjusted to life in the tide country and understands that the local religion and local beliefs must be respected. This is one way that Nilima adjusts to the specific language of the tide country—she essentially insists that Kanai must do the same if he expects to have a reasonable time on Lusibari.



Kanai's interest in Kusum suggests that his interest in women as objects of fancy started early, given that she's the only thing that has thus far piqued his interest since arriving in Canning. Horen's life story suggests that life in tide country is very difficult, given his young marriage.



PART 1: THE LAUNCH

Within four hours of arriving at the Forest Department office, Piya has the necessary permits to conduct her survey. Her triumph feels less sweet when she learns that she'll be forced to accept the accompaniment of an armed forest guard. After they leave the office, the guard becomes very brisk and self-important. He leads her to a man he calls Mejda, and translators explain that Mejda knows the waterways well. The cost for Mejda's boat is exorbitant, but Piya feels she has no choice but to agree. She feels it's worth a shot to show him her flashcards of the Gangetic dolphin and the Irrawaddy dolphin to see what he knows.

Usually, fishermen are able to figure out what Piya wants when confronted with the flashcard. However, Mejda's response is strange: in English, he asks if the creature is a bird. Perplexed, Piya decides that the dolphin could look like a bird and smiles. Her optimism fades when they reach Mejda's boat. It's a large diesel steamer that reeks, and he orders all his helpers but the guard off the boat. He then enacts a strange pantomime that ends with motioning to Piya's mouth and his own crotch, which puts Piya on edge. Piya seldom feels vulnerable on her surveys; people usually leave her alone because she's foreign.

It's worth noting that after this point, Piya overwhelmingly refers to the Irrawaddy dolphins by their Latin name, Orcaella. The fact that she uses both names suggests that she does have some familiarity switching between languages to use one that works better, though in a very different way than Kanai does. The flashcards also represent another way of communicating, and one that doesn't require a shared written or spoken language to understand.



Mejda's response suggests that communicating with him and the forest guard won't be an easy task, and his gesturing to his crotch casts a distinctly predatory glow to their interactions. This begins to show how the lack of a common spoken language can be used to control and intimidate, given how vulnerable this makes Piya feel.



PART 1: LUSIBARI

When Kanai and Nilima arrive in Lusibari, it's low tide. Kanai climbs to the top of the bādh and looks down at the village and the rivers surrounding it. Five waterways join to form an immense mohona on one side. The Trust boat docked at a mud spit on one end of the island, near the village of Lusibari. Surrounding a square, there's a school, a marketplace, and a compound. The building in the compound is raised up on stilts, and when Kanai notices that Nilima is distracted, he goes to inspect the house. He remembers it from his first visit.

Kanai walks around to the back door, which leads into a bathroom. He remembers his offense when Nirmal had explained what the bathtub was as though Kanai had never seen one before. He continues into the house's interior and stops in front of a portrait of a young woman. Nirmal had said that she was Lucy Hamilton, the woman that the island is named after. She died on the journey to Lusibari and now, the house is known as the Hamilton House. Upon explaining this, Nirmal had told Kanai to listen closely to the story of Sir Daniel Hamilton.

The stilts under the building are meant to protect it from being blown away during a cyclone, while the bādh (the high, mud and silt embankment) protects the island of Lusibari from the high tide. Both of these manmade structures show how people in the Sundarbans attempt to protect themselves and their livelihoods from the unpredictable natural world.



Nirmal's stories, like his constant quoting of the Duino Elegies, are a way for him to add deeper meaning to everyday life. For Kanai, he's better able to understand life on the island and why it is the way it is after listening to Nirmal's stories, once again emphasizing the value he places on the spoken word.



PART 1: THE FALL

Late in the day, Piya spots a fishing boat. She's spent hours already standing in the front of Mejda's boat, surveying the water. She hasn't spotted any dolphins, though she did notice a group of four massive crocodiles. Piya is perplexed; she's in the exact region where she should find dolphins. She also hasn't seen any fishing boats, which means she hasn't been able to ask local fisherman for advice. Piya wonders if the area is off-limits for fishing. She pulls out her rangefinder and discovers that the fishing boat is just over a kilometer away. She thinks the fisherman (later revealed as Fokir) looks old and experienced, so she decides to see if Mejda will stop.

When Piya points out the boat and asks for a detour, she notices that the forest guard looks suddenly predatory. Mejda turns his boat towards the fishing boat, and Piya believes they aren't just going because she asked. She watches Fokir through her binoculars and sees the moment he notices her approach. She notices there's a child with him. Looking terrified, Fokir begins to row towards a small creek edged by mangroves. Piya has never seen an escape attempt like this before, but notices that the guard has his rifle out. She angrily tries to wave the guard away, but Mejda pushes the engine of the boat faster. When Piya tries to approach the guard again, he elbows her in the collarbone and sends her reeling.

Fokir finally tethers his boat to Mejda's, and the forest guard points to Fokir and says, "poacher." Piya is shocked to see that Fokir is in his late twenties, and even more shocked when the guard motions for Piya to show him her flashcard. Shocked to see a woman, Fokir wraps himself in a sarong, which Piya finds strangely comforting. When she shows him the card, he points upriver. She motions for him to point to which dolphin he's seen, and is surprised when he points to the rarer Irrawaddy dolphin and holds up six fingers.

Looking up, Piya notices that the forest guard has boarded Fokir's boat and is taking money from the child (Tutul). After the guard climbs back to Mejda's boat and the engine starts, Piya surreptitiously pulls money out of her belt and tries to give it to Fokir. She climbs onto a chair as to throw the money, catching the attention of both the guard and of Fokir, and she falls into the muddy water.

Mentioning the crocodiles makes it clear that the Sundarbans aren't a safe, friendly place to be out on the water, given that massive and aggressive creatures abound. When combined with Mejda's previous predatory behavior, this suggests that Piya is not just going to have to fight the natural world to survive—she'll have to go so far as to fight the humans that populate it, too.



Here, when the guard elbows Piya and sends her flying, his actions speak far louder than any words he could say: he doesn't value Piya's life or her work; he prizes his ability to intimidate others, Fokir included. It's also worth noting that here, the gun is something that Piya reads as a symbol of power and the thing that really raises Fokir's suspicions. This again suggests that visual cues like the gun or Piya's flashcard are far more effective forms of communication than spoken language.



Again, when Fokir's actions convey that he respects Piya and is willing to care about what she cares about (the dolphins), it shows that at least in this instance, these nonverbal forms of communication are far more effective at getting points across than spoken language. It's telling too that Fokir offers more information than he's asked for; that indicates a true desire to communicate.



Here, the money acts as another way for Piya to tell Fokir that she recognizes his humanity and believes he's worth more than the forest guard seems to believe. In this way, it also becomes a symbol for modes of communication that don't require a shared spoken language.



PART 1: S'DANIEL

Going back to when Kanai first visited Lusibari, Nirmal tells Kanai that like in deserts, people often see mirages in the Sundarbans. This is what happened to Sir Daniel Hamilton—he saw value in the mud. Nirmal says that Sir Daniel was educated in Scotland, but he left to seek his fortune in India. He sold tickets for a shipping line, made a fortune, and became entranced by the tide country. He learned that every island has been inhabited at some point, though it's often impossible to tell. Sir Daniel returned to Calcutta and bought 10,000 acres of tide country.

Sir Daniel gave free land to every person willing to come to the tide country to work. He abolished the caste system, and people came by the thousands. The snakes, crocodiles, and **tigers** killed so many people, Sir Daniel started giving out rewards to people who killed them instead. Nirmal explained that Sir Daniel wasn't after money: he was after a new society, based on cooperatives. He kept contact with Gandhi and Rabindranath Thakur. When Kanai expressed disbelief that the tide country is a real country, since there's no electricity or roads, Nirmal pointed to wires intended for phones and electricity.

Nirmal handed young Kanai a banknote, signed by Sir Daniel himself. Nirmal explained that what Sir Daniel wanted was to build a society where nobody would be exploited. At this, Kanai laughed at the fact that Sir Daniel ended up with "rat-eaten islands." Nirmal was shocked by this cynicism, but said simply that the tide country wasn't ready yet.

Note that Nirmal's story begins by placing the natural world in a position of power: it can make people see things that aren't there, and it can erase the human trace quickly and easily. This reinforces how difficult of a place the Sundarbans are to live in, which suggests that Sir Daniel may have been entranced by the struggle between man and nature inherent to life in the tide country.



Sir Daniel's experiment is vaguely communist; it does away with a ruling class and puts people on one level working for the common good, a core tenet of Communism. It's also worth noting that the person able to do this in rural India wasn't an actual Indian person, but a Scotsman. This is mostly indicative of India's colonial past, though it suggests that Sir Daniel had some privilege that Indian people may not have.



Kanai's cynicism comes from his inflated sense of his own importance, which keeps him from recognizing and respecting other people's accomplishments. Nirmal's disappointment shows just how much he admires Sir Daniel; Kanai's negative reaction is unthinkable in Nirmal's worldview.



PART 1: SNELL'S WINDOW

Snell's window is the term for the way that light travels downward through water in a cone shape, ending at a point at the submerged viewer's eye. It doesn't hold true in muddy water like Piya finds herself in. When she can't figure out which way is up and feels mud in her nose and mouth, she panics. Something touches her, and she convulses, knowing it's a crocodile snout. She flails, but something strikes her in the face. Suddenly, she breaks the surface but still can't breathe. She notices arms around her, and someone's mouth meets hers to suck the mud out of her mouth. Piya knows that Fokir saved her.

The simple fact that Snell's window doesn't hold true in the Sundarbans—where the water is extremely muddy—suggests that the Sundarbans are a place where commonly held beliefs (even scientific ones) must be cast aside, and new ways of understanding must be discovered. In this case, Piya has to learn to trust Fokir to save her, given that her own scientific knowledge isn't enough to allow her to save herself.



Piya goes still so that Fokir can swim back to his boat. When he tosses her over the edge she starts choking again, and Fokir sucks more mud out of her mouth and throat. Piya notices the forest guard and Mejda on their boat, gesturing for her to hurry up and come back. Piya doesn't want to go with them if she doesn't have to, so she turns to Fokir and says, "Lusibari, Mashima?" He nods and smiles. Piya then turns to the guard and asks for her backpacks. After asking for a hefty fee, the guard hands them over but keeps her Walkman. Piya doesn't care, especially when the guard mimes masturbating at her.

The lack of concern on the part of Mejda and the forest guard tells Piya everything she needs to know—those men don't have her best interests at heart, and it's possible they wouldn't have even cared if she drowned. Using this information, Piya is able to make a decision to work with someone who is far more willing to treat her with respect, despite the communication difficulties between them.



PART 1: THE TRUST

Lusibari supports several thousand people. Some have lived there since the 1920s, others have come more recently as other islands were set aside for wildlife. Though Lusibari appears like any normal island, life there is dependent on the bādḥ to protect it from the twice-daily floods. Nilima lives in a house owned by the Babadon Trust, which has a guesthouse on the second floor. On their way there, Nilima tells Kanai that dinner will be upstairs for him, courtesy of a nurse trainee named Moyna. Upon hearing her name, the van's driver tells Nilima that Moyna is frantically searching for her husband and son, who are missing.

By making it clear that Lusibari is dependent on its bādḥ to keep it from flooding, the novel again shows that life in the Sundarbans is lived at the mercy of the natural world. The mention that some residents have come from islands that were evacuated to make room for wildlife conservation suggests that the conservation efforts in the Sundarbans don't always take the lives of locals into consideration.



Nilima clicks disapprovingly about Moyna's husband and then tells Kanai that her husband is Fokir, Kusum's son. Nilima sighs as she says that Kusum was killed long ago. She declines to explain how or why, but says that Fokir was brought up by Horen. She points out the hospital, and explains that they have electricity there for a few hours every night. When they finally reach the guesthouse, Nilima directs Kanai to Nirmal's study on the roof, where the packet is stored.

Nilima's unwillingness to speak about how Kusum died tells Kanai and the reader a lot about how she feels about it: it's likely difficult, unknown, or happened in the course of something Nilima doesn't agree with. This begins to show that what's not said in spoken language can be just as important as what is said, adding another layer to the way that language works.



PART 1: FOKIR

As Piya relaxes, she starts experiencing shock. Tutul puts his arms around her to warm her as she shivers. When she finally stops shivering, Fokir introduces himself and Tutul to her. Tutul brings Piya her flashcard and squeezes her fingers as he hands it over. It makes Piya feel aware of her own vulnerability, and she hugs Tutul in thanks for making her feel safer trusting Fokir. Suddenly feeling guilty, Piya begins to count out money to pay Fokir. Both Fokir and Tutul are entranced; Piya thinks they've probably never seen that much money before. Fokir declines the money, but Piya tucks a roll of bills under an arm bracelet he wears. Fokir pulls one note out and gives the rest back, saying "Lusibari" as he does. She understands he'll accept payment there.

Tutul's kind actions in particular show Piya that these people can be trusted to treat her like a person worthy of caring for and communicating with. It's also worth noting that though it takes some time, Piya and Fokir are certainly able to communicate despite not sharing a language. This again shows that a desire to communicate and a desire to recognize someone else's humanity is more than enough to foster effective communication.



PART 1: THE LETTER

Kanai goes up to the guesthouse, noticing that Moyna still left him dinner despite her worries. He goes onto the roof to watch the sunset before entering Nirmal's office. A strangely wrapped package sits on the desk. Kanai has to use a razor blade to cut through layers of plastic and glue and discovers a school notebook inside. It's filled with cramped Bengali writing in Nirmal's hand. The first page begins with the date—May 15, 1979—and seems to be a letter written to Kanai. Nirmal writes that he's filling this notebook on an island called Morichjhāpi.

Nirmal writes that time is passing slowly as he waits, in fear, for some unknown to come. He has only the notebook, some writing utensils, and his copies of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. He's in a small hut that Kusum owns. Nirmal wonders if the beauty of this place makes up for the horrors Kusum and her son, Fokir, have already lived through. Nirmal quotes a *Duino Elegies* passage about beauty being only deadly terror, and he wonders what he's afraid of. Nirmal says he knows that what will happen next will surely be forgotten; the only thing he can do is write everything down so that it might not be.

By addressing the notebook towards Kanai only, Nirmal implies that there's no one else he'd trust with the information in the notebook—not even his own wife. The wrapping around the notebook suggests that someone took great care to preserve it, which adds to the importance of what's inside. Remember that the Morichjhāpi conflict is where Kusum died; this suggests that the notebook will unravel the mystery of her death.



When Nirmal says that what happened on Morichjhāpi will be forgotten, it shows that he recognizes that the conflict privileges those in power (who then have the power to tell the story they want to tell) over the poor refugees who lived on Morichjhāpi. This shows that Nirmal recognizes the ways that privilege and power influence how language is used to communicate, or even which language is used.



PART 1: THE BOAT

Piya notices that Fokir's boat is pieced together out of pieces and bits of various objects and materials. Fokir pulls out an old sari, puts Piya's backpacks under the covered area at the end of the boat, motions her in, and covers the shelter with the sari. Piya realizes he's giving her privacy to change. She's touched and thinks it's a way for him to recognize her humanity, even if they can't speak. After Piya changes, she feels the sari between her fingers; it feels much like the ones Piya's mother wore. She wonders if this sari belongs to Fokir's wife (Moyna).

When Piya comes out from behind the sari, she notices that Fokir has changed, and the sun is setting. When the boat starts to move, Piya scans the water through her binoculars, her GPS monitor recording her every movement. Her binoculars are her most prized possession; she bought them when she was still in grad school. The weight of the binoculars surprised her at first, as did the clarity of the images. It made her wonder how others managed to use heavy binoculars for hours on end. She never understood until she was on her first survey that when the view is interesting enough, the weight doesn't matter.

When Piya thinks of her mother while touching the sari, it begins to show that these textile items like saris are capable of facilitating connections between people and between different times and countries. This will become more prevalent later with the gamchha cloths, but this first instance shows that clothing can connect people.



The GPS monitor is a motif that occurs throughout the novel and shows that there are ways to join earth and science in a way that creates a greater sense of understanding. For Piya in particular, the GPS locates her in space and makes the environment something that she can later read when she retrieves the monitor's information. In this way, it becomes yet another form of communication.



PART 1: NIRMAL AND NILIMA

The narrator goes back in time to 1949, when Nirmal and Nilima met. Born in Dhaka in what became East Bengal, Nirmal chose to stay in Calcutta and India after partition. He was known as a leftist intellectual and a talented writer, and he taught Nilima's college English class. Nilima's family was wealthy and involved in public service. One afternoon, she followed Nirmal onto a bus. They married in less than a year, and Nilima's family refused to attend. Months later, the police came for Nirmal. They objected to his involvement in a Socialist International conference and detained him for a few days.

This had a profoundly negative effect on Nirmal. After Nilima begged her parents' forgiveness and had their doctors out to see Nirmal, they suggested he move out of the city. Nilima's father knew the island of Lusibari was looking for a schoolteacher. Though Nirmal was aghast at the thought of working at the capitalist Hamilton Estate, he and Nilima went for a visit and were astonished by what they saw—major reverence for Sir Daniel, who addressed local poverty far more effectively than even radical Nirmal had imagined possible. They moved months later.

The first few months were hard. Hunger and catastrophe reigned in tide country; the ground was still salty and bore poor crops, which sent people instead to hunt and fish. Doing that, they drowned and were easy prey for **tigers**, sharks, and crocodiles. The school was grossly underfunded; all the money apparently went to the corrupt landowners. Nirmal was entirely overwhelmed and read Lenin's pamphlet. Nilima began to speak to the local women. She was shocked to learn that women in tide country expect to be widows in their twenties, and wives dressed as widows when their husbands went out on their boats. This was unthinkable to Nilima.

Nilima struggled to name this group of women, and Nirmal objected to calling the widows a class—it implied a division incompatible with Communism. Finally, she decided it was more important to help them than name them, which led to the Women's Union and later, to the Babadon Trust. In a few years, the landowners were pushed out, and the Trust provided many services. Nirmal was dismissive of Nilima's efforts, as they were anti-Communist social services, but he did give the Babadon Trust its name.

Nirmal and Nilima's early history situates both of them as intellectuals, while the fact that they met in an English class shows that they're both lovers of language. The fact that it leads to their marriage shows that language and literature have the power to bring people together and transform relationships. Nirmal is also a Communist at a time when the Indian government wasn't thrilled about the rise of alternative government forms, hence detaining him.



When both Nirmal and Nilima are sobered by seeing that someone like Sir Daniel was actually able to put their radical ideas into practice, it reinforces for both of them the importance of taking action over dwelling on theory and just talking about action, which the novel implies is mostly what they did during their time in Calcutta.



What Nilima and Nirmal find is that residents in tide country live in deference to nature, while residents in Calcutta live in a city where nature is, by default, second to manmade structures and systems. The fact that Nirmal is so overwhelmed suggests that he'll struggle with taking action in the future, while Nilima's choices suggest that she took Sir Daniel's actions to heart and will try to do something about what she sees.



When Nilima decides that helping people is more important than naming them, it's a clear indicator that she values taking action over thinking about theory. Nirmal's opposition to this shift suggests that he cares deeply for his theory, and that it will be impossible for him to ever put it into practice.



PART 1: AT ANCHOR

Piya notices a cluster of six fishing boats tied together in the middle of a waterway. She watches the men there smoke and cook, and wonders why they're in the middle of the river instead of on shore. She can tell that Tutul and Fokir recognize the boats and hopes they won't stop. She's surprised when Fokir steers them past the other boats, and after sunset, he drops anchor in a sheltered creek. Fokir seems disappointed; Piya wonders if he'd wanted to go further.

Fokir lights a lamp and shows Piya how to bathe on the boat, bathing Tutul as an example. He rubs Tutul down with a small checked cloth that looks vaguely familiar, and then Tutul bathes Fokir. After, Fokir uses the sari to create a screen again. Piya discovers that Fokir left her shampoo, which seems decadent. She uses it only so she won't offend him. She then dries herself with another checked cloth, which she's certain is what Fokir was wearing when he dove in after her. Finally she remembers why the cloth (later revealed as a **gamchha**) looks familiar: Piya's father had one, and it was the only thing from India he really held onto. She can't remember what it's called.

When Piya can recognize Fokir's disappointment, it shows that emotional forms of communication are also more readily accessible than language. In this case, it's less important to both of them that Piya understands exactly what Fokir is disappointed about; it's more important that she can read his emotions in the first place.



The cloth, called a gamchha, begins to connect Piya more closely with Fokir, as well as connect her to her father and to India as a whole. Again, this shows that clothing and textiles can be major connecting forces in the world, given that Piya's father held onto his gamchha and nothing else. Though Piya is embarrassed by the shampoo, leaving it is a way for Fokir to tell Piya that he recognizes she's different and probably has different standards of cleanliness.



PART 1: KUSUM

Kanai looks to where Nirmal's house once stood. It had been a two-room bungalow, and Kanai had slept in the study when he visited in 1970. He'd spent his nights imagining the roof above his canopy of mosquito netting had come alive, which wasn't far from the truth—Nilima once found a snake in the ceiling while tying up a canopy, and creatures fell to the floor all night long. The Women's Union meetings were held in the courtyard of the bungalow several times per week, and it was there that Kanai first met Kusum. One night, while eavesdropping on the meeting from the study, he listened to a woman tell about being assaulted by her drunk father-in-law. Looking into the courtyard, he met Kusum's eyes.

The next morning, Kusum approached Kanai, angry, and accused him of listening in on the meeting. Kanai was a little afraid, but refused to show Kusum the book he'd been reading on the grounds that she wouldn't understand it. She'd put a grasshopper in her mouth and then made it jump out right at Kanai's face.

Even within an enclosed, manmade structure, the natural world still manages to get in—this reinforces that in tide country, nature reigns supreme, and there's no escaping it. The mosquito netting, however, does appear to keep out most of the wildlife, which suggests that there are some effective ways of protecting oneself from the natural world. The woman's story at the union meeting suggests again that life on Lusibari is extremely difficult, and the women especially struggle to survive.



While Kanai is able to feel powerful here by denying Kusum language, Kusum is able to trump his power play by scaring him with the natural world. This reinforces the power of the natural world in tide country.



PART 1: WORDS

After her shower, Piya crawls to the front of the boat and tries to ask Fokir what the checked towel is called. He seems puzzled, while she's perplexed by the fact that Fokir seems uninterested in sharing any Bengali words with her. Finally, he tells her the cloth is called **gamchha**. Piya thinks that once, Bengali was a violent language for her—her parents fought in Bengali, and she couldn't escape it in their apartment.

Piya's bedroom was the big one with a view of Puget Sound. After five years, Piya's mother decided it was too much to share a room with Piya's father and moved into Piya's bedroom. She was diagnosed with cervical cancer not long after. Piya was the only one allowed in to see her mother in that bedroom. Her mother would tell her about her childhood on the Brahmaputra River. In college, Piya resented being asked whether her interest in river dolphins was rooted in her family history. As far as she was concerned, what her parents told her about India was uninteresting. They never mentioned that the first Orcaella dolphin was discovered in Calcutta.

Fokir begins to prepare a meal from his catch of crabs. Though she knows he'll offer her food, Piya decides she won't eat it—she's had bad experiences in the past eating local cuisine, and prefers the safety of Ovaltine and protein bars. As she watches him cook, she feels as though she's watching her mother cook. Fokir's spices remind her that she loved the smell as a child until she realized her classmates laughed at her because she smelled. She refuses Fokir's offered plate of rice and crab with a charade about having an upset stomach, which makes Fokir laugh.

After dinner, Fokir unrolls two sleeping mats in the middle of the boat and motions for Piya to take one. She unrolls her own mat in the very front of the boat, which seems to alarm Fokir. He makes vague gestures to the shore, and Piya realizes he's concerned about **tigers**. She thinks this is silly and starts to mime claws at him, but he grabs her wrists and shakes his head before she can complete the action. Finally, Piya lies down on her mat to end the discussion. Fokir doesn't argue. He starts to sing, and Piya encourages him. The music doesn't sound like Indian music she's heard before. She begins to wonder if her initial belief that he was somewhat naïve was wrong.

Describing Bengali as a violent language makes it clear that language isn't always a positive way to communicate; for Piya, it trapped her and kept her in a horrible situation at home. Here, learning the word "gamchha" connects Piya to her past, reinforcing the gamchha as a symbol of connection.



The fact that Piya's parents gave her what's presumably the master bedroom in their apartment shows that they certainly prioritized their daughter's comfort over their own, while Piya doesn't appear to see things the same way. Her insistence that her parents never told her anything interesting about India suggests that she feels as though her parents never truly cared about her.



As a child, Piya felt as though the spices conveyed something she didn't want to convey to her classmates: that she was foreign, and that being foreign was a bad thing. This shows that Piya learned early on that communication doesn't just happen through spoken language.



Fokir's fear of the tigers explains why he and the other boats don't spend the night onshore; presumably, being in the water is somewhat safer, though clearly not entirely safe. When Piya begins to question how she initially thought of Fokir, it shows that she's beginning to humanize him and see him truly as a fellow human being, not just as a poor fisherman who knows about dolphins. It's notable that she realizes this when he's singing in Bengali; this shows that Piya can still learn from the language despite not knowing it.



PART 1: THE GLORY OF BON BIBI

In 1970, Kanai learned that Kusum's father died while foraging for firewood in a place off-limits to villagers. This left Kusum's mother in dire poverty, and she accepted an offer of help from a wealthy landowner named Dilip Choudhury. She left Kusum at home and went to Calcutta, and Dilip later told Kusum that her mother was doing housework. At this point, Horen learned the truth: Dilip worked with a gang that trafficked women, and Kusum's mother was probably trapped in a brothel. Knowing that Kusum would be extremely valuable to Dilip, Horen brought Kusum to Lusibari and left her with the Women's Union.

Kanai and Kusum soon became friends. Kusum showed him around, and they told each other stories of their life. Kanai was shocked once when Kusum asked to go to the city with him, knowing she'd be mistaken for a maid. Kusum introduced Kanai to *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, and Nirmal encouraged Kanai to go to a local stage performance of the tale.

Kanai and Kusum sat together to watch the performance. The story began in Arabia, where the Muslim man Ibrahim became the father of blessed twins, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli. The twins were sent to the Sundarbans to make them fit for human habitation. There, they met Dokkhin Rai, a demon king. Bon Bibi drew a line through the tide country delineating his side from theirs, and humans soon settled in her half. Things were good until a man named Dhona assembled a fleet to go into the jungle to make a fortune. He ended up taking a boy named Dukhey with him. Dukhey's mother instructed him to call on Bon Bibi if he needed help.

When the fleet reached an island in Dokkhin Rai's territory, they didn't know that the demon was ready for them. Dhona saw strange things and finally, Dokkhin Rai came to him in a dream. He promised riches in exchange for Dukhey. The forest creatures loaded Dhona's boat with honey and wax. Finally, Dhona sent Dukhey to shore and left without him. Dokkhin Rai, disguised as a **tiger**, stalked the boy, who called out for Bon Bibi. She came immediately to hold Dukhey, while Shah Jongoli punished the demon. Kanai was shocked by how much he loved the performance, and he saw it several times.

For women in tide country especially, life is hard because they not only have to wage a constant war against nature; they also have to watch out for the men around them. This begins to break down the man versus nature dichotomy that the novel sets up and suggests that though the system certainly holds true, fellow humans can also be threatening.



Kanai's shock when Kusum asks to come to the city suggests that just as Piya is learning to humanize Fokir in the present, Kanai learned to humanize Kusum in the past and even decided to look into the local legends he once found silly (remember he laughed at Horen for believing in a goddess).



It's important to keep in mind that in the tide country, this story is a major guiding force and is thought of as being absolutely real. This shows how stories can mean different things to different people; to Kanai, who doesn't believe in the mythology, the story is nothing more than a fun distraction. For locals, however, the stage performance is a way for them to connect to their history and their way of live in the tide country.



Bon Bibi is very much a way for people in the tide country to believe that they have some power over the natural world, given how she protects Dukhey from a tiger. This shows that part of life in tide country rests on relying on stories like this, where it is possible to overcome the natural world with the help of local spirits. This is all rooted in a fear of the natural world, however.



At the final performance, Kanai fell asleep for the first half and awoke to find Kusum next to him, crying. He tried to reach for her hand on the ground, but his hand caught in her dress and then touched her genitals on accident. Kusum cried out and ran away, and Kanai waited before pursuing her. When he caught up, Kusum explained that she called for Bon Bibi when Kusum's father died, but she never came. He'd gone out looking for firewood, and the entire village helplessly watched a **tiger** stalk and kill him across the river. Kanai was gripped with the desire to comfort and defend her, but Horen interrupted them. He explained that Dilip was looking for Kusum and swore Kanai to silence before leading Kusum away.

The fact that Kusum's village was helpless to do anything about the tiger stalking and killing her father reinforces that humans in the Sundarbans live life entirely unable to effectively gain the upper hand against nature. In this situation, even Bon Bibi wasn't enough to help—and given Kusum's emotional reaction here, it's possible she may put less stock in the legend when Bon Bibi was unable to help her. This may make Kusum even less convinced of her ability to live in tide country.



PART 1: STIRRINGS

Piya wakes late at night and realizes the sound that woke her is the sound of the crabs in the boat's hold. She notices that Fokir is up and keeping watch, and it warms her to think that he's looking out for her and is trustworthy. She thinks of her fear earlier and begins to shiver uncontrollably. Fokir approaches, looking anxious, and lies down next to her to warm her. When the shivering stops, they both jump up, uncomfortable at their closeness. Fokir leaves to attend to Tutul, and Piya thinks of the sari she's using as a pillow. She feels as though its owner is with her in the boat, and she wants to tell her that nothing untoward happened.

When Piya wants to tell the owner of the sari (presumably, Fokir's wife) that nothing sexual or romantic happened, it suggests that she may already be developing feelings for Fokir—proof that she's humanized him to a point where she's able to see him as a possible romantic partner. This is a testament to the effectiveness of the ways that Piya and Fokir communicate, given that she's made this switch in about a day.



When Piya wakes up again, the boat is already moving through thick fog. She can barely see, so she stays in bed and dozes. She hears Fokir drop anchor and then jolts upright when she hears a muffled snorting sound. It's the sound of Orcaella dolphins. Piya excitedly calls Fokir to her and points to the water, but he seems unsurprised. She wonders if he knew the dolphins would be here, but thinks that would be impossible given the dolphins' unpredictability. Piya unpacks her equipment as a dolphin surfaces mere feet away. As the fog clears over the next several hours, Piya realizes they're in a boomerang-shaped crook of a river and identifies seven dolphins, including a mother and calf. She's intrigued that they don't leave the crook of the river, as this is abnormal for the species.

Piya's surprise at the dolphins' behavior and at Fokir's apparent ability to lead her to them suggests that she may need to reevaluate more than just her thoughts on Fokir—clearly, these dolphins aren't what she was expecting. This suggests again that the natural world of the Sundarbans is fundamentally unknowable, and it exists and functions with little regard to what humans think about it. Piya's equipment is an attempt to bridge this gap and try to tame and understand the natural world.



PART 1: MORICHJHĀPI

After Kanai wakes in the morning, he goes downstairs and finds Nilima looking very unwell. She insists it's just a cold and is excited to hear about Nirmal's packet, though she's disappointed to hear that the packet contains only a notebook. She's surprised that it was written in 1979, the year of Nirmal's death, as he became erratic, unstable, and did no writing during that time. When Kanai explains that the notebook was written over the course of a few days in May 1979 on Morichjhāpi, Nilima breathes in sharply.

Nilima's clear surprise at the contents of the packet suggests that there was a lot about Nirmal that she didn't know at the end of his life. It begins to situate Nirmal in a position much like the one that nature holds, while Nilima aligns herself with humans. In this setup, Nirmal is unpredictable and untamable, while Nilima is steady and can only hope to survive Nirmal's actions.



Nilima explains that Morichjhāpi was an island set aside for **tiger** conservation, but refugees began to settle there in 1978. They came from a resettlement camp in central India that was supposedly more of a prison. The refugees thought the new Left Front government in West Bengal wouldn't object to them, but they were wrong: authorities confronted the refugees several times, and the final clash happened in May of 1979. Nilima doesn't know if Nirmal was on Morichjhāpi during that final clash, as he hid things from her during that time. Close to tears, Nilima explains that Nirmal was obsessed with the island because he was in love with the idea of revolution. The settlers' willingness to stand up to the government was intoxicating for Nirmal.

Nilima explains that Nirmal accused her of "joining the rulers" when she tried to talk him out of it. In a pained voice, Nilima wonders why Nirmal left the notebook to Kanai instead of her. Kanai thinks that it's possible Nirmal wanted to hurt Nilima, and realizes their marriage certainly wasn't perfect. He guiltily suggests he'll just leave the notebook with Nilima, but she insists that they have to honor Nirmal's last wishes.

Kanai asks if Kusum had anything to do with Nirmal's obsession with Morichjhāpi, noticing that Nilima flinches. Nilima isn't sure how Kusum ended up on the island but once, in 1978, Kusum came to Nilima in her office. She introduced her son, five-year-old Fokir, and asked Nilima for medical help on Morichjhāpi. Nilima insisted she couldn't help. It was the last time she saw Kusum; she later died in the massacre at Morichjhāpi.

PART 1: AN EPIPHANY

In the rising tide of the afternoon, Piya starts seeing less of the dolphins. She wonders if the dolphins weren't migrating, as she initially thought. The narrator explains that some Orcaella dolphins like coastal saltwater, while others like fresh rivers. The freshwater ones tend to be territorial and return to the same spots year after year. Piya came to the Sundarbans expecting coastal Orcaella, which don't behave like the dolphins she spent the morning observing—though the water is too salty for freshwater ones as well. She wonders if the Sundarbans Orcaella migrate daily instead of twice per year, a hypothesis with profound implications for conservation.

For Nirmal, Morichjhāpi represented his deeply held communist beliefs come alive. Nilima's interpretation that he was especially taken by the settlers' willingness to stand up to the government shows again just how much Nirmal clung to his theory and his belief that working with the government, as Nilima does, is bad. Notice too that the island was meant for conservation efforts; this again suggests that, for the government, protecting the people there wasn't as high of a priority as protecting the natural world.



Nilima's insistence on honoring Nirmal's last wishes shows that she places a great deal of importance on honoring one's word; for her, part of effectively honoring her husband is making sure that his words are heard, years after his death.



When Nilima flinches, it suggests that there may have been some sort of a relationship between Nirmal and Kusum. This suggests that there may have been more than just Nirmal's love of Marxist theory fueling his interest in the island, further complicating Nirmal's character.



Piya's background in science means that she's been raised knowing that part of science is being willing to rethink hypotheses in light of new data, something that she's also doing as she learns to humanize Fokir. This shows that science is also yet another form of communication.



Piya thinks about the unique water quality of the Sundarbans: the mix of salt and freshwater creates microenvironments of differing salinity. She thinks about all the questions she has and all she'd need to do to properly study the dolphins of the Sundarbans. It would be decades' worth of work. Piya thinks of her own lack of ambition and the fact that she was drawn to field biology for the untethered lifestyle. This discovery won't change that, but she feels strangely satisfied to feel as though her future is resolved.

While Nirmal and Nilima represent two ends of a spectrum between inaction and action, Piya shows here that she sits in the middle: though unambitious by nature, Piya is perfectly happy to take the difficult path when it presents itself. However, it's also worth noting that in Piya's case, science naturally combines theory and practicality, while Nirmal's pursuits made that far more difficult.



PART 1: MOYNA

Kanai goes back to Nilima after noon, at which point she looks alert and happier. She tells Kanai that Moyna is going to show him around the hospital. It took Nilima years to realize that Moyna was the wife of Fokir, Kusum's son. Nilima was thrilled to learn that Fokir survived the massacre. She explains that Moyna is ambitious and very interested in education. She married because her parents insisted, and though Fokir is fine, he's also illiterate and nothing more than a crab fisherman. Nilima has heard that she and Fokir are having problems and that Fokir isn't happy in Lusibari, which may be why he disappears.

Notice the way that Nilima talks about Fokir: she clearly doesn't value what he does and instead, believes that education and ambition are far better than making a living as a fisherman. This shows that tone is just as important as what's actually said, as Nilima doesn't outright say that Fokir is an awful partner or a bad person.



Moyna knocks on the door and enters. Kanai can tell she's been crying, and Nilima tells him in English to be careful. Kanai is shocked when Nilima says "righty-o" as she sends them off. He thinks that while her Bengali has adapted to the tide country dialect, her English—which she never uses—is English that hasn't been spoken in India since before partition.

Kanai's observation about Nilima's English shows that language can convey a point in time as well as the ideas the words themselves describe. This offers one more facet to how language works, showing again that it's far more complex than Kanai initially thought.



As Kanai and Moyna walk, Kanai mentions that he knew Kusum. When Kanai mentions Fokir, Moyna's face falls. Kanai admires the scale of the hospital and thinks that Nilima did an amazing thing building it. Moyna is clearly proud as she shows Kanai through the wards and explains that people who could more easily reach Canning or Kolkata come to Lusibari instead. She points out the **cyclone shelter**, Nirmal's one contribution to the hospital.

The fact that Nirmal contributed something to the hospital suggests that he wasn't totally ineffective throughout his life, though it's likely that Nilima facilitated the building of the shelter and it was just Nirmal's idea. This introduces the possibility that Nirmal could've been effective had he been willing to work with Nilima or the government.



Kanai asks if Moyna has ever brought Fokir to the hospital, and she explains he doesn't like it here. She says that on Lusibari, Tutul goes to school instead of spending his days fishing with Fokir. She doesn't want him to grow up to be a fisherman, as the fish and crabs will supposedly be gone in fifteen years with the introduction of nylon nets to catch tiger prawns. Nilima tried to get the nets banned, but the traders paid off the politicians. Moyna insists that she's tried to tell Fokir that Tutul needs an education, but he's illiterate and doesn't understand.

Moyna very clearly doesn't see the natural world as something that can help a person survive or provide someone's livelihood; for her, the natural world is something that needs to be set aside in favor of more human-centric pursuits like medicine or education. Her mention of the prawn nets and the politics surrounding that suggests again that the people of the tide country aren't at all represented in government.



Kanai thinks that Moyna has a nuanced grasp of how the world works and thinks it's unfortunate that she's married to someone who can't keep up. He listens to her talk about wanting to work in the operating room and sees his own passion for language in her desire to be a nurse. Kanai assures her she'll make it, using a familiar pronoun instead of a formal one. It feels too intimate, but he chooses to say nothing.

Notice how Kanai starts to think of Moyna; this kind of admiration will show up again between Nirmal and Kusum. This begins to suggest that women can, for the men in their lives, come to stand in for symbols of those men's ideals—in Nirmal's case Kusum represented revolution, while Moyna represents ambition for Kanai.



PART 1: CRABS

The dolphins begin to disperse around midday. Piya takes up her place in the front of the boat to watch the water while Fokir and Tutul sit in the back and tend fishing lines. The lines initially worried Piya until she realized how flimsy they were. She wonders when Fokir will decide to leave, thinking she desperately wants to stay here to see if the dolphins will come back. She offers Tutul a nutrition bar to hopefully make it more worthwhile to stay, though he and his father make no moves to leave.

Piya's concern about the fishing lines demonstrates a shocking lack of understanding of Fokir and his way of life—he's a fisherman, and his fishing lines are how he makes a living. Her initial desire to stop him from using them shows that she cares much more for the welfare of the dolphins than the very people helping her study them.



Piya decides to map the riverbed in the hopes of discovering an underwater pool where the Orcaella gather. Doing so requires taking depth soundings along a grid, and she wonders how to explain this to Fokir. She wakes him from his nap and is able to communicate her desires by drawing a simple picture. Surprisingly, Fokir seems thrilled about rowing the boat in straight lines, and Piya realizes he wants to fish. She thinks the fishing line, which has weights and cartilage tied to it at intervals, cannot possibly attract fish, but doesn't object since it seems unlikely to harm a dolphin.

Drawing the picture is an extremely effective mode of nonverbal communication, once again showing how Piya and Fokir don't have to share a common language to communicate. Again, Piya's concern about the welfare of dolphins around Fokir's fishing line shows that she's willing to help the dolphins at the expense of Fokir's livelihood. It's worth considering that Fokir would probably be far less inclined to help her were she to make a fuss about it.



As the boat makes its first run across the river, Tutul spools out the line in a straight line. They retrace their course, pulling the line back in, and Piya realizes the line is meant to catch crabs. As they continue, Piya discovers she was right to suspect an underwater pool, and Fokir's catch grows. Their respective lines of work seem strangely compatible, which Piya finds satisfying. As Piya dumps a pot of crabs into the hold, she wishes she knew more about them. There's one species that cleans the mud, and Piya thinks that they may be far more important than she's ever given them credit for.

It's notable that Piya becomes far more interested in things that Fokir is interested in as she realizes how compatible her work is with his. This shows that in this situation, Fokir has a great deal of power to shape how Piya interacts with the natural world. It's also worth noting that Piya doesn't seem at all concerned about the crabs' welfare or overfishing; her attention is limited to the dolphins and doesn't extend to the rest of the ecosystem.



PART 1: TRAVELS

Kanai eats his lunch and then returns to Nirmal's study. He opens the notebook and begins to read. Nirmal explains that Kanai was one of the last people to see Kusum in 1970; she disappeared without a trace. As Nirmal's retirement approaches, he begins to think of how much life he wasted. He admits that he lied to Nilima—he's written nothing in the thirty years they've been in Lusibari and has also read very little. He's filled with regret and remorse.

Other schools invite Nirmal to visit, and he accepts an invitation in Kumirmari. He misses his ferry for the long journey, but soon spots Horen and asks him to take him to Kumirmari. As they travel, Nirmal reads aloud from a book about the tide country by a Christian priest. The priest and his party first see a rainbow made by the moon. At this, Horen blurts that they must have been at Gerafitola, as he's seen the moon's rainbow there. Nirmal is dismissive and resumes reading. The party comes across Portuguese making salt, and again Horen adds where the priest must've been to see such a sight.

The next night, the party is treated to an amazing sight as glowworms light up the mangroves. They wonder if they're seeing "devils," and Horen is perplexed that they'd question it at all—he believes the sight is clearly the work of devils. Finally, the party is hit by a storm that came out of nowhere. Horen cries that they must have crossed "the line" into Dokkhin Rai's territory. Nirmal snaps that that's nonsense, and Horen suggests they agree to disagree. Nirmal addresses Kanai directly again to explain that he's sitting with young Fokir, while Horen and Kusum are out trying to discover if Morichjhāpi will actually be attacked.

PART 1: GARJONTOLA

For the final run of the depth soundings, Fokir's boat enters the shallows near the shore. Piya puts down her binoculars and studies the shore. She notices bits of brick and points to them. Fokir answers "Garjontola." Finally, he steers the boat to shore and jumps into the mud. He lifts Tutul out and motions for Piya to follow, pointing into the forest. She agrees to follow and promptly starts to fall upon hitting the mud, as it's deeper than she expected. Fokir catches her and Piya feels embarrassed by their closeness, but feels better seeing Tutul laugh at her.

The reader can hope that Kusum's disappearance without a trace means that she was safe from men like Dilip as well as the difficulties posed by life in the Sundarbans. Nirmal's regrets show that he's spent most of his life bogged down by theory and still feels unable to do anything about it.



Horen's ability to pinpoint each location in the priest's story suggests that he's found a way to understand and learn about nature in a way that no other characters thus far have been able to. This situates Horen as someone who represents a middle ground in the fight between man and nature, given that he clearly knows his home very well and likely treats it with a great deal of respect.



While Nirmal means to engage with the book as a form of entertainment, it's clearly more than that for Horen—for him, it's simply more proof that the spirit world of the gods and the human world are connected, as local religion dictates is the case. Nirmal's unwillingness to go along with this is extremely disrespectful, and illustrates that simply sharing a language doesn't mean that Nirmal is fully willing to interact with Horen as an equal.



Fokir leads Piya out of the mud to the forest, cutting through the brush with a machete. He and Tutul approach a small alter with unfamiliar figures on it, though she notices a **tiger**. She watches Fokir perform a ceremony and notices a word that sounds like "Allah," which perplexes her. She has no idea what she's seen, but follows Fokir and Tutul back to the boat. She approaches Fokir when he waves her over to point to a paw print in the mud. Piya knows it's from a tiger, but thinks that Fokir wouldn't be so nonchalant if there were a tiger around. Piya's reverie is broken when she hears the Orcaella return with the tide.

Fokir's nonchalance will be explained later, but it's important to recognize that finding tracks in the mud makes it undeniably clear that people in the Sundarbans live in very close proximity to very dangerous predators. The tiger then acts as a reminder that the natural world is always somewhat sinister and can pounce at a moment's notice, while the Orcaella represent a calmer and more nonthreatening aspect of the natural world.



PART 1: A DISTURBANCE

At night, Kanai is still in Nirmal's study when the generator goes out, and the room goes dark. He steps out onto the roof and admires the moonlit landscape. Some strange echo reaches Kanai, and dogs start to bark. Moyna appears in the doorway and asks if he heard "it"—the sound was a **tiger**, though Kanai recognizes he cannot say the word. He recognizes that Moyna looks anxious because Fokir is still out there with the tiger, so he assures her that he knows what to do. Angrily, she spits that Fokir is like a child and doesn't take any precautions.

Moyna sounds a lot like Nirmal here; Nirmal also appears to despise local wisdom that seeks to come to some sort of agreement with nature in favor of more modern (and way less religiously focused) pursuits, like education. The fact that Kanai cannot say the word "tiger" suggests that there's power in speaking the word—language can make things real, in essence.



Kanai asks in a teasing tone if Moyna didn't know Fokir before they married. She says she did, but insists that Kanai wouldn't understand why she married him. This offends Kanai. He insists he'd certainly understand, given that he speaks six languages, but Moyna insists he's not a woman and doesn't know Fokir. Moyna leaves in a huff.

Kanai's insistence that he'd understand confirms that he believes fully in his own ability, as a man and a translator, to understand the world. However, he doesn't recognize that his experience and understanding of a situation isn't necessarily the same as everyone else's.



PART 1: LISTENING

Piya wakes from a doze to a loud booming sound. She makes her way to Fokir and asks in mime what the sound was, but he only points vaguely and continues to watch Garjontola. When he starts to hum, Piya again encourages him to sing. Piya thinks this night feels perfect and magical. She wonders what kind of a life Fokir has led—if he saw his wife's face before the wedding, and if he grew up one of many children. Finally, Piya returns to her bed and listens to the dolphins in the water. She thinks of how they use sound to map their surroundings and talk to each other, and thinks of it in contrast to how she interacts from Fokir. She thinks that human speech is worthless compared to how dolphins communicate.

The booming sound is presumably the tiger that Moyna and Kanai heard, which again illustrates just how close the dangerous parts of the natural world are in the Sundarbans. When Piya compares human speech to dolphin echolocation, it shows that she's learned that nonverbal communication is far more effective than actual words.



PART 1: BLOWN ASHORE

Nirmal resumes his account in the notebook. At Kumirmari, he first hears about Morichjhāpi. People suggest that things won't end well, and Nirmal puts it out of his mind. He and Horen begin their journey back to Lusibari, but are held up when a storm suddenly picks up. Horen steers them to the nearest island—Morichjhāpi—and they approach the nearest dwelling and ask for shelter. A young woman opens the door and recognizes Nirmal, though she has to explain that she's Kusum before he recognizes her. Nirmal calls Horen inside and they make small talk about her son, Fokir, and about Horen's children. Finally, Nirmal asks Kusum to tell him her story.

Kusum's mother was in a town called Dhanbad, so Kusum boarded a train and went there. Fortunately, she met a man at the station from tide country named Rajen. He'd been disabled after being hit by a bus, and he invited her to stay in his shack. He proved himself good and kind, and helped Kusum find her mother. When Kusum and her mother finally met, her mother was thin and drawn. She told Kusum to come see her once more, but then to go home.

When Kusum and Rajen went back, Rajen suggested that he and Kusum marry so that they could care for Kusum's mother. Both Kusum and her mother were thrilled, though Kusum's mother died months later. They had Fokir, but three years later, Rajen fell from a train and died. Kusum felt that Bon Bibi was with her when she heard not long after of a "great march to the east." The march came through Dhanbad, and Kusum took a few marching women into her house to care for them. The women told Kusum of being moved to a horrific settlement and spending years longing for the tide country mud that runs through their veins. Now, they're on their way to an island called Morichjhāpi. Kusum decided to go with them.

PART 1: A HUNT

The dolphins stay in the Garjontola pool until midmorning the next day and then vanish. Piya tries to ask Fokir where the dolphins go when they leave, and he eagerly starts to follow them. He points out crocodiles, and then Tutul points to where the dolphins are catching fish. She remembers watching dolphins fish on the Irrawaddy River, though then, they'd actually fished *with* the fishermen accompanying Piya. She'd been shocked to see the symbiosis between the dolphins and the humans.

It becomes clear very soon that being washed up on Morichjhāpi is a major defining moment for both Nirmal and Horen. It's notable, then, that what brings them to the island in the first place is a storm—something that reinforces the power of the natural world. However, given the way that the novel suggests that nature will always triumph over humans, it foreshadows that the human events that take place on Morichjhāpi are very much out of anyone's control.



The fate of Kusum's mother reinforces that women in this society are at the mercy of both the natural world and the predatory men around them. It's luck, then, that Kusum meets someone as good and kind as Rajen, as the power of the natural world would otherwise suggest that things are out of Kusum's control.



When the marching women state that the tide country mud runs through their veins, it shows that locals of the Sundarbans view themselves as intrinsically part of nature, even as they do their best to keep themselves safe from nature's violent outbursts. This suggests that seeing themselves as part of the natural world is one way to deal with the intense anxiety they surely experience living in such a dangerous environment, and that belief makes living there seem more palatable.



The dolphins here show that it's not just a fantasy for the Sundarbans residents to feel connected to the land: in this case, the fishermen have a very close relationship with the dolphins that benefits both parties. This offers an example of a middle ground in the conflict, though the novel still makes it clear that this is temporary and not something that can last long-term.



PART 1: DREAMS

Back in Nirmal's notebook, Horen and Nirmal decide to stay the night in Kusum's hut. Late at night, Kusum wakes Nirmal from a feverish dream. In the morning, Nirmal admires the beautiful landscape. He looks around the settlement, which is surprisingly organized. He's in awe and is thrilled; he thinks he's watching the birth of something amazing, especially given that the settlers aren't educated radicals. Nirmal has to sit and gather himself for a moment and then races back to Kusum's hut. He asks her to take him to the settlement's leaders—he wants to help.

The settlement's leader shows Nirmal around. Nirmal is still amazed by the organization and the industry of the settlers. When the leader mentions they'll need help, Nirmal offers his services. The leader says that they really need someone who can put pressure on the government to leave the settlement alone, and he becomes annoyed when Nirmal admits he can't help with that. Nirmal suggests he could teach the children of Morichjhāpi, which doesn't interest the leader at first. Finally, he agrees. Nirmal returns to tell Kusum the news. She's perplexed and asks what Nirmal intends to teach the illiterate children who need to help their families survive, and he says he'll teach them to dream.

Nirmal's surprise betrays his own belief in the superiority of education and of people like him—it's fairly clear that he didn't believe before seeing it that uneducated refugees could come up with a system that so closely mirrors what Nirmal has read about in Marxist theory. This begins to suggest that political ideas don't need to stem from education, something that will help Nirmal humanize the refugees.



When Kusum is just as perplexed by Nirmal's interest as Nirmal is by the settlers' successes, it shows that both of them have deeply held ideas about how different groups function—Kusum suggests here that illiterate children have little need for the kind of education she'd expect Nirmal to want to bestow upon them. Teaching those children to dream implies that Nirmal may teach them more about the theory behind their settlement, which in turn suggests he'd like the children to follow him in his desire to promote pure theory.



PART 1: PURSUED

As Fokir struggles to keep the boat steady in the fast-moving water, Piya decides to check the water's depth. As she puts her hand into the water to lower the sound, Fokir yells, races for her, and pulls her back into the boat. Two pairs of crocodile jaws immediately shoot up out of the water where Piya's hand was. The crocodiles slam themselves into the boat, and Fokir hits them on the head with an oar. Finally, the crocodiles disperse, and Fokir rows away. After twenty minutes, Fokir stops to rest and says, "Lusibari?" Piya agrees it's time to go.

Fokir's quick action indicates that he definitely knew that the crocodiles were around, suggesting that he's far more connected to the natural world (like Horen is) than an outsider like Piya is. In turn, this is certainly how Fokir manages to so successfully survive out in the jungle, even despite not spending nights in groups that help insure safety.



PART 2: BEGINNING AGAIN

Kanai resumes reading Nirmal's notebook. On the way back to Lusibari, Nirmal feels invigorated and refreshed. He laughs that the storm that led him and Horen to Morichjhāpi has transformed him. Horen asks what Nirmal plans to teach his students, and Nirmal suddenly deflates. Nirmal sits down and thinks. He decides to begin by making connections between the mythical tales the children will be familiar with and geology. He imagines what questions the children will ask and how he'll lead the conversation.

While Nirmal's imaginings are charming, his conceptions of the students are also extremely idealistic. This, combined with Nirmal's insistence that theory must be applied in its entirety, suggests that even if Nirmal is able to actually move forward with establishing a school on Morichjhāpi, he may get hung up on the fact that children don't always behave as expected, especially in idealized imaginings.



Nirmal wants to show them how the Ganga riverbed continues into the ocean, and how the Indian subcontinent moved in prehistoric times. He'll mention the river dolphins that prove that the Indus and the Ganges rivers came from the same sea before two continents collided. He decides he'll tell them a love story about the Ganges river that forms part of the *Mahabharata*. Nirmal quotes Rilke, saying that singing about love is one thing, but the bloody rivers within people are "something else."

For all of Nirmal's faults, what he wants to impart to his students is essentially that humans and the natural world are intrinsically connected—and that both are also connected through stories. This represents a major meeting of some of the novel's guiding ideas and suggests that when it comes to theory, Nirmal can formulate some complex ideas, even if he cannot actually implement them.



PART 2: LANDFALL

Fokir struggles to row against the current and finally, Piya motions and asks if he has another set of oars. He pulls a set out from the bottom of the boat. Piya rows for hours and finally asks, "Lusibari?" Fokir points to a faraway sliver of land and they arrive by nightfall. He leads her to a door, says, "Mashima," and then turns to leave. Suddenly the generator kicks on and the lights come on, blinding Piya. When she opens her eyes again, Fokir is gone. She panics, wondering how she'll ever find and pay Fokir.

Some of Piya's panic comes from the fact that she's been in an environment where the natural world takes precedence, while Lusibari is a place that attempts to seem as though humans are the one in charge. Her discomfort suggests that while people like Fokir may exist more easily in an in-between place, the struggle between man and nature is still fraught.



Piya yells for Fokir and an old woman comes out of the house. Piya hastily introduces herself to the woman, whom she assumes is Nilima. Kanai comes downstairs just as Piya begins to explain how she got to Lusibari. He seems very pleased to see her, and Piya gives a short account of what happened after they parted ways at the train station. She says the man she's been with is Fokir. Nilima explains that Fokir's wife, Moyna, has been worried sick, and she seems impressed that Fokir and Piya were able to communicate about the dolphins. Nilima invites Piya to stay in the guesthouse, and Piya accepts. Kanai leads her upstairs, shows her around, and comments about feeling lonely by himself. Piya ignores this, and Kanai returns to Nirmal's study.

Kanai's interest in Piya comes across as a desire to conquer her and impose his own ways of thinking and acting on her. In this way of thinking, Kanai doesn't actually want to communicate with her; he wants her to confirm his own thoughts and desires. Nilima's surprise that Piya and Fokir could communicate suggests that Fokir may come across very differently to those in Lusibari, and possibly indicates that in their eyes, he's uncomfortably connected to the natural world.



PART 2: A FEAST

Resuming his reading, Kanai reads that Horen invites Nirmal to Morichjhāpi for a feast where there will be journalists and intellectuals. Finally, Nirmal tells Nilima about what he's been up to. As he expected, she's unenthusiastic. She already knew about the settlers and tells Nirmal not to go back—he could get hurt. Nirmal decides to keep his involvement a secret from his wife. The next day, Nirmal packs a bag to go and tells Nilima he's going out with Horen. He recognizes that this moment is when their relationship began to crumble.

When Nirmal pinpoints this moment as the one that begins to destroy his marriage, it shows that he recognizes that the absence of language and the genuine desire to communication can have dire consequences. Getting intellectuals in particular involved in Morichjhāpi suggests that the settlement recognizes how interesting it is to people like Nirmal. Those people also have the power in government.



The feast is strange; Nirmal sees what he could've been had he not left Kolkata. He recognizes some of his old friends, though they don't recognize him, and Nirmal feels more aware than ever of his regrets. Nirmal refuses to eat like a guest; he merely sits and watches. Finally, he approaches a writer he once knew and modestly explains he's no longer writing and is about to retire from being a schoolteacher.

When Nirmal mentions teaching on Morichjhāpi, the writer notes that the settlers may not be able to stay. Nirmal insists that the settlers couldn't be evicted without bloodshed, but the writer reminds Nirmal that they used to support violent revolution. Nirmal thinks about speaking his mind, but decides he has no right to be self-righteous. He recognizes that Nilima spent her life doing important things while he cannot think of what his life's work even is. Nirmal thinks of all the things he'll never get to say or write, and mentions that Rilke wrote nothing for years before producing the *Duino Elegies* in a matter of weeks.

PART 2: CATCHING UP

After showering, Piya collapses into a chair. She suddenly remembers the crocodiles that morning and feels the sense of terror she felt then. She imagines being killed by crocodiles, but makes herself look out the window. When she hears a woman's voice and Kanai's, she goes downstairs to investigate. There, she finds Kanai with a woman who looks her over before leaving their dinner and walking away. Kanai explains that she's Moyna, Fokir's wife. Piya feels briefly jealous that Moyna gets to go home to Fokir.

Kanai insists that Moyna is a truly remarkable woman: she's struggled to educate herself and is becoming a nurse. Piya thinks Kanai must find her soft and spoiled in comparison. He explains that Moyna and Fokir came from far away so Moyna could learn at the hospital, and mentions that Moyna knows all about Piya—Tutul told her everything. Piya wonders if Fokir said nothing.

Kanai begins to dish up the food, but Piya only accepts white rice. Kanai talks about Lusibari and its history during dinner. He tries to object when Piya washes dishes, but agrees to talk about himself when she asks. He explains that he provides translators for all kinds of organizations. Piya is amazed to hear that language can be used like currency, and is fascinated when Kanai admits that in addition to Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and English, he also speaks French and Arabic. He says he wanted to translate poetry as a young man, but soon discovered that there's no money in that.

Though the narration made it clear that Nirmal's health absolutely depended on leaving Kolkata, his regret here suggests that he may even value theory and the influence he could've had over his own life and health. This suggests he may be driven to sacrifice later in the novel in an attempt to make up for leaving Kolkata in the first place.



Remember that the settlers on Morichjhāpi are extremely poor; given the way the novel has already treated the poor people of the Sundarbans, it's clear that Nirmal's belief that the settlers won't be evicted is idealistic and unrealistic. Exactly because the settlers are poor, they're at a much greater risk of being exploited or taken advantage of, as they have fewer means with which to fight back.



The fear that Piya still feels reinforces the idea that nature, while beautiful and interesting at times, is also a deadly force. However, Piya's jealousy suggests that she'll become more interested in human conflicts than the ones posed by the natural world, at least for a while. This in turn can leave her vulnerable to be surprised by something in nature.



When Piya continues to undervalue her work in comparison to nursing work, it suggests that she believes in a distinct hierarchy of work and believes that her work is easier or less impactful than Moyna's work.



The way that Kanai talks about what kinds of language are more valuable shows that just as Piya creates a hierarchy of different jobs, Kanai recognizes that there's a hierarchy of different forms of language. His discovery that there was no money (and by extension, value) in poetry suggests that Nirmal, who loved poetry, was fighting a losing battle as he sought to teach and promote language that wasn't perceived as valuable.



Kanai says that while he might want to translate literature at some point, he likes running an office, having money, and meeting interesting women. Piya doesn't quite know what to do with his comment about meeting women and escapes upstairs.

It's worth noting that Kanai seems overly comfortable in his position; this sets him up to rediscover that there may be more to translating literature than just money.



PART 2: STORMS

Nirmal's writing picks up after his retirement. One day, Horen brings Kusum to Lusibari to speak with Nilima and ask for help. Nirmal says it won't do any good and Horen concurs. He leaves Fokir with Nirmal and then leaves. Nirmal takes the wide-eyed Fokir out, points to the mohona, and asks what Fokir sees. He says he sees the bādh. Nirmal promises Fokir a story for every repair he can see in the embankment. He proceeds to explain why certain families don't live in certain places anymore, how contractors stole money, and how others used the bādh to settle scores with each other.

Through Nirmal's stories, the bādh becomes a way for him to trace human history on Lusibari. This shows another way that the natural world and the manmade world collide and work together, as the repairs are overwhelmingly carried out on places where the natural world began to eat away at the bādh.



He tells Fokir that before the bādh was fully constructed, people lived in fear of the rising tide and the storms. He mentions the worst storm of all, in 1737, which coincided with an earthquake. It even killed people in Calcutta. One French ship was driven onto shore, and a crocodile took up residence inside. Fokir looks apprehensive and asks if it could happen again. Nirmal says that it will absolutely happen again and when it does, the bādh will fall. Nirmal leads Fokir to the bādh and instructs him to listen at the wall. They can hear the scratching of crabs inside, and Nirmal explains they're in cahoots with the tides to bring down the bādh.

This event suggests that there may be more to Fokir's job as a crab fisherman in the present, as it's possible to read his job as a way for him to help support the health and welfare of the bādh. In this way, the novel suggests that Fokir is more connected (or at least more respectful) of the manmade world than Moyna and Kanai have thus far let on. Nirmal, however, shows here that it's futile for humans to expect to come out on top every time.



PART 2: NEGOTIATIONS

Moyna is waiting outside her home when Kanai and Piya arrive in the morning. Piya asks after Tutul, who is in school, and Fokir, who she finally notices squatting sullenly inside. Piya thinks he looks scared, but decides it would make things worse to speak to him directly. Through Kanai, she thanks Moyna for Fokir's protection and pulls out banknotes. Moyna looks expectant, but Piya thinks it's unfair to not give it to Fokir directly. Moyna intercepts Piya's attempt, and Fokir insists it's bad to take money like this.

Fokir's sullenness suggests that even if he's respectful of the manmade world, he's far more comfortable out in nature. Especially when considering that Fokir is essentially caught between his dismissive wife and dangerous tigers, this shows that Fokir would likely rather take on the dangers of the natural world than his wife's unwillingness to see him as a valuable person.



Piya asks Kanai if he could pull Fokir into the conversation. Kanai's attempt doesn't go over well; Piya detects a condescending tone in Kanai's speech despite not understanding the words. Piya finally asks Kanai to say that she wants to go back out to track the dolphins at Garjontola on a larger boat for five days. She'd pay about 300 dollars. Moyna gasps and Fokir agrees to arrange for Horen to go with them with his bhotbhoti. Piya agrees.

Kanai's condescension suggests that he, like Moyna, sees Fokir as unworthy of respect, at least in part because of his desire to be out on the water. This shows how Kanai's preconceptions directly influence the tone and the kind of language he uses, which in turn makes Fokir feel attacked and disliked.



Kanai tells Piya that Moyna wants to know why a scientist like her needs Fokir's help. Piya is puzzled at the dismissiveness that this implies, but answers that Fokir's knowledge of the river is really valuable. Moyna makes a play on words that means her life would be easier if he were educated.

Moyna's question shows that she doesn't believe Fokir is capable of anything but catching crabs—she doesn't recognize that he may know more about the natural world, which in turn is valuable for someone like Piya who knows little about it.



PART 2: HABITS

Kanai reads in Nirmal's journal that Nilima was very upset by Kusum's visit. She insists there's nothing they can do—the settlers are squatters on government property. Nirmal argues that Sir Daniel Hamilton did exactly the same thing on Gosaba and asks if these settlers' dreams are less valuable than Sir Daniel's. Nilima says that if people are allowed to take land like that, the forest will disappear. Regardless, she says, she can't take the chance of getting on the wrong side of the government; there's too much at stake. When Nirmal takes offense, Nilima insists that he lives in his head and doesn't understand that actually building something requires compromise.

While Nirmal certainly has a point in bringing up Sir Daniel's settlement, he also ignores the fact that Sir Daniel did buy his land and was on the English colonial government's good side, two things that the settlers absolutely do not have going for them. Nilima's insistence that the forest will disappear suggests she aligns herself with viewpoints similar to Piya's, in that it's worth conserving the land even if it does mean that people suffer for it.



Nilima reminds Nirmal that she came to Lusibari for him and has managed to make the best of it. She asks him to stay away from Morichjhāpi, if only to not jeopardize her life's work with the Trust. Nirmal feels deflated and knows that Nilima is right. He tries to forget about Morichjhāpi as the new year arrives. Nilima goes away to New Delhi, leaving Nirmal home alone for days. He toys with the idea of writing a book about the tide country but spends days staring at the mohona. He notices that there's not nearly as much wildlife as there used to be, and recognizes that this is a sign of death. He thinks it won't take much to submerge the tide country for good.

When Nilima refers to the Trust as her life's work, it likely drives home for Nirmal that he doesn't have a "life's work" of his own, given that he's loathe to actually value his teaching career. When Nirmal notices that the wildlife is declining, it suggests that he'd be sympathetic to conservation efforts—though his previous comments suggest that he'd promote a middle ground, where both wildlife and humans benefit from efforts.



Nirmal wonders if it might not be a bad thing for the tide country to disappear, but then thinks of Morichjhāpi and Kusum's tale. He wonders what he could write that might do justice to the settlers' hopes and dreams. Nirmal gazes at the water, feeling torn between Nilima and Kusum, whom he speaks of as a muse he never had. He feels unqualified to even think he could do the settlers' stories justice.

Nirmal's insistence that he's unqualified to even think he could properly tell the story of Morichjhāpi is further evidence that his one fault is getting too bogged down in theory. He could probably be a major asset if he could be driven to action, but here, his paralysis keeps him from doing anything useful.



PART 2: A SUNSET

As the sun begins to set, Piya goes up to the study and knocks on the door. Kanai comes out to watch the sunset and point out the sights of Lusibari. Piya comments that their meeting went well that morning. Kanai mentions that Fokir was sullen and is surprised when Piya says he's not like that on the water. She asks Kanai to tell her about Kusum and is shocked to hear that she died in a conflict with police. Kanai briefly sums up the Morichjhāpi conflict and says that Horen raised Fokir.

Piya notes that she and Fokir both grew up without mothers. Piya's mother died of cancer when she was twelve, and was depressed and isolated long before that. Piya is surprised when Kanai seems to feel genuine sympathy for her but not for Fokir. Kanai explains he's sympathetic instead to Moyna, who's ambitious but feels held back by her husband. Piya teases Kanai about liking Moyna too much, but he admits that he'd rather have someone like Piya for a life partner. They awkwardly flirt for a moment but are interrupted by Fokir down below. Kanai translates that Horen will bring the bhotbhoti tomorrow, and they can leave the day after. Piya excitedly rushes away to gather her things and Kanai, annoyed by her departure, returns to Nirmal's notebook.

When Kanai fixates on Fokir's poor attitude earlier, it shows that Fokir's unwillingness to make an effort with Kanai can cause Kanai to, in turn, think less of Fokir. This again shows how tone and elements of communication that aren't strictly verbal can be far more consequential than the actual words exchanged.



It's telling that the people that Kanai feels sympathy towards are people who are willing to actually communicate with him, unlike Fokir. Again, this shows how a simple desire to communicate and share information can improve even the most superficial of exchanges and help more information flow. Kanai's annoyance when Piya leaves reinforces that despite his sympathy, he still sees her as a conquest—and her departure tells him that she doesn't necessarily share his enthusiasm for a potential romantic relationship.



PART 2: TRANSFORMATION

Kanai resumes his reading. In mid-January, Horen invites Nirmal to accompany himself and Kusum to Garjontola, where there's a shrine to Bon Bibi. Nirmal had been careful throughout his life to not associate with religion at all as to not compromise his professional reputation, but feels as though he can experiment now that he's retired. Nirmal and Horen leave at dawn for Morichjhāpi and Nirmal is surprised to discover that the island is gripped by fear and doubt. Kusum explains that the government has been threatening the settlers, and everyone is nervous.

Everyone piles into Horen's boat with clay figurines of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli. As they cross a mohona, Horen and Kusum act as though they're entering a temple. Kusum explains that they crossed over the dividing line between Bon Bibi's realm and Dokkhin Rai's realm. Nirmal is shocked to discover that to Kusum and Horen, the line is very real.

It's possible that Nirmal's unwillingness throughout his life to associate or learn about local religion has a lot to do with his own sense of superiority over other Sundarbans residents, as not engaging in that part of local culture keeps him from truly understanding the lives of the people he lives alongside of.



Nirmal's shock shows that he has a long way to go to truly be able to humanize people like Horen and Kusum, given that he clearly doesn't understand how much of an influence religion plays in their day-to-day lives and actions.



Nirmal begins to think that landscapes are like books in that people derive different things from books and the land depending on their training or interests. Nirmal notes that he, as a townsman, sees the jungle as timeless and static when in fact, the exact opposite is true—time goes faster in the Sundarbans thanks to the tide. He thinks of all the shipwrecks at the bottom of other oceans and remembers that in the Sundarbans, ships are gone within a few years. He breaks from his story to write that the attack on Morichjhāpi will start tomorrow.

With this revelation, Nirmal recognizes that Sundarbans locals see the land differently than he does—and further, their way of seeing things is a better way. This shows that he's beginning to see Kusum and Horen as humans that are just as real as he is. When Nirmal mentions the tide destroying shipwrecks, it again illustrates how much power the landscape has to control human life.



PART 2: A PILGRIMAGE

Piya is touched when Moyna brings her dinner that's plain. When Kanai asks about dolphins, Piya insists that he should be interested in river dolphins because the first specimens were discovered in Calcutta. Piya mentions the Englishman who "discovered" the Gangetic dolphin in 1801, and then a man fifty years later who caught wind that a flood had brought "giant sea creatures" into a wetland area that's now a Kolkata suburb. The man found twenty dolphins in an evaporating pond. He thought they were pilot whales, and asked that the locals who had been trying to evacuate the whales keep two for him. That man decided they were a new species of pilot whale.

The locals who try to evacuate and save the dolphins indicates again that there's certainly a symbiotic relationship between the dolphins and the humans that live in close proximity. Their desire to save the animals suggests that they view them as creatures just as worthy of care and consideration as other humans, illustrating a balance between man and nature. The Englishmen, however, represent a relationship with nature in which man must discover and in doing so, triumph.



Twenty-five years later, a skeleton made its way to the British Museum, where scientists realized it didn't belong to a pilot whale at all. They discovered that this new species was a relative of the killer whale and called it *Orcaella brevirostris*. It became known as the Irrawaddy dolphin when someone found slight differences between the river and coastal dolphins. Though there's actually no difference, the name stuck.

As Piya describes the naming process, it shows that there are definitely times when language becomes somewhat nonsensical and doesn't actually communicate something true, given that the name Irrawaddy dolphin doesn't actually appropriately describe the animal.



Kanai feels tender towards Piya and asks if he can accompany her as a translator. She's not convinced it's a good idea, but Kanai insists he could be useful. Finally, Piya agrees.

Kanai's tenderness suggests that he's beginning to humanize Piya more as she talks about things she loves.



PART 2: DESTINY

Kanai returns to the notebook. Nirmal asks why the island they're going to is called Garjontola—he wants to know if it comes from the Bengali word for "roar," *garjon*. Kusum explains that long ago, Kusum's father was caught in a storm. He tied himself to a tree with his **gamchha** on Garjontola. After the storm passed, he *did* hear a **tiger's** roar, but he dreamed of Bon Bibi telling him she'd keep him safe if he was good at heart. Kusum's father later returned to build the shrine. Nirmal is incredulous at the fantastical nature of the story, so he keeps an eye out for opportunities to poke holes in Kusum's fantasy.

Nirmal's question implies that in his eyes, pure and unadulterated language is unparalleled; his dismissiveness of Kusum's story suggests he believes that naming things because of experience is a less valid way of doing things than naming things based on language alone. Again here, the gamchha is a way for Kusum's father to connect with life and in this case, with his religion as well.



Suddenly, Nirmal hears the sound like someone blowing their nose. Fokir points to dolphin backs in the water, and Kusum smiles and says she calls them "Bon Bibi's messengers." One looks right at Nirmal, and he feels as though Rilke himself is looking right at him, saying that animals see right through humans.

When Nirmal sees Rilke in the dolphin, it shows how he's using texts important to him to add more meaning to things he's confronted with in his real life. In doing so, he's better able to understand himself and the people he's with.



PART 2: THE MEGHA

In the morning, Kanai notices that Horen looks just like he remembers, though he's older and looks distinguished now. He and Kanai greet each other, and Horen gestures to his grandson, Nogen, who will accompany them. Horen leads Piya to the bhotbhoti, which is called the *Megha*. Horen extols the boat's virtues and reliability. Piya is willing to engage Horen, but asks how the *Megha* will do tracking dolphins through narrow creeks. Horen replies that Fokir's boat will come too. They quickly agree on payment and make preparations to leave.

The necessity of taking two boats in order to successfully carry out Piya's survey shows again how difficult it is for humans to appropriately navigate the natural world. In addition, even with the proper transportation, the group is still extremely vulnerable to natural events.



Kanai goes to Nilima and tells her that he's going away with Piya. He promises to keep Nirmal's notebook safe and explains that they'll be going into the jungle. Nilima seems somewhat alarmed. She stands up and tells him that it's extremely dangerous out there—**tigers** pick off several people weekly. She shows Kanai her unofficial records of tiger attacks, which record about 100 deaths per year on the Indian side of the Sundarbans. Kanai was unaware, and Nilima says that's exactly the problem since the authorities won't admit that there's a problem.

Despite living entirely on Lusibari, Nilima's concern shows that she still understands how dangerous the world outside of the island is. Her records indicate that she clearly cares for the people of the Sundarbans, and recognizes that one of the ways to possibly make things better is to record that there's a problem. In this way, her record keeping mirrors Nirmal's notebook.



Nilima pulls a file down and reads that between 1860 and 1866, 4,218 people were killed by **tigers**. Kanai wants to know why, but Nilima can't answer. She says that the tigers in tide country are possibly more aggressive than those in mainland India, but none of the proposed ways of curbing attacks have been successful. Nilima admits she's never seen one in 50 years and doesn't want to, and she says that being on a bhotbhoti won't help—tigers regularly attack boats midstream and can swim eight miles nonstop. Kanai insists he has an actual reason to go, but when Nilima realizes he's interested in Piya, she bitterly accuses him of being a predator worse than a tiger. She tells him to be careful and shows him out.

Nilima's accusation again drives home that in the fight between man and nature, women must fight both men and nature. When she unearths old records, it shows that she's not the first person to recognize the power of recording such a thing so that people in power understand the magnitude of the problem. However, the fact that nothing has happened points again to the fact that the people in the Sundarbans are poor and therefore, less valuable in the eyes of powerful politicians.



PART 2: MEMORY

Nirmal writes in the notebook that as Horen approaches the shore, he asks Nirmal if he feels "the fear." Nirmal doesn't, but he does notice that Horen looks afraid. Soon, Nirmal feels the same way. 50 feet from shore, Horen stops and mumbles mantras to "shut the mouths of the big cats." Nirmal says nothing but feels surprisingly comforted. When Horen is done, he tells Nirmal that on shore, he can't leave anything of himself behind—he can't spit, he can't urinate. Nirmal agrees and is shocked to see young Fokir jump out to push the boat to shore. With pride, Kusum says that the river is in Fokir's veins. Nirmal feels uncomfortably like an outsider.

Nirmal follows Horen, Kusum, and Fokir to the shrine, knowing he'd be the first one dead if a **tiger** came. They place the figures on the shrine, and Nirmal is surprised to hear Horen's recitation. It's in Bengali that's influenced deeply by Persian and Arabic. The invocations are Arabic, while the rhythm is Hindu, and it tells Dukhey's story of being rescued by Bon Bibi. When they're back in the boat, Horen explains that he's always known the recitation by heart, though there is a book. He offers it to Nirmal.

The book opens like an Arabic book and was written by a Muslim man. The story is written in a strange combination of verse and prose, and Nirmal reasons that it was probably written in the late nineteenth century, when there was a great deal of Bengali and Arabic influences in the area. Nirmal thinks that the tide country's faith system is like a mohona, as it joins many different people and beliefs. Nirmal gives the book to Fokir and asks him to read it aloud so he can copy passages. He's shocked when, despite Fokir's perfect recitation, Nirmal remembers that the child cannot read—he already has the story memorized. Nirmal steps out of his story and says that Horen wants to leave with Fokir, but Nirmal wants to write more first. Kusum invites Horen down to his boat.

PART 2: INTERMEDIARIES

Piya finishes her preparations just after dark and decides to go to bed before dinner. She makes herself some Ovaltine and then goes downstairs, where she finds Nilima. Nilima greets her in Bengali and then apologizes. Piya explains why she never learned Bengali: Piya's father believed Indians don't travel well because they remain fixated on home, so he always spoke English to her. She says her parents spoke Bengali to each other. When they fought, Piya made them translate their messages to English or she refused to act as a go-between. Nilima is silent for a moment before remarking on how sad Piya's parents' marriage sounds.

Fokir's behavior here shows that he's grown up feeling extremely connected to nature and learned to navigate the specific environment of the Sundarbans at a young age, which surely helps him survive in it as an adult. When Nirmal feels comforted by Horen's mantras, it shows that he's beginning to place more value in the specifics of local culture and language, which in turn indicates that he's growing more willing to treat such things as real and important.



The many influences in Horen's recitation show that the Sundarbans aren't just a place where humans and the natural world collide; it's also a place heavily influenced by many different people groups. The power that the Bon Bibi legend clearly holds in the Sundarbans suggests that there's great value in this kind of merging of cultures and voices.



Fokir's recitation drives home the importance of the Bon Bibi legend to people in the Sundarbans—it's so important, even a five-year-old can recite it from memory. It's also important to remember that Bon Bibi's legend is a tool the locals use to feel safer in their dangerous environment, which again provides more evidence for why Fokir in the present is so comfortable out in the jungle. He's clearly taken the legend and its teachings to heart, and that makes him feel more competent taking on nature.



The reasons why Piya never learned Bengali show again that tone and intent are just as important—if not more so—than the words themselves. As a child, asking her parents to use English was a way for Piya to feel as though she had some degree of power in her own home. Piya's father's insistence that Indians abroad fixate on India again brings up the power of his gamchha to keep him connected to his roots, given that he never got rid of that one item that tied him to home.



Nilima says that when Kanai came to stay, it meant a lot to Nirmal to have someone to pass on his words to. Kanai never returned after that one visit. Nilima shrewdly says that Kanai is very selfish and it manifests as being driven and often alone, though she warns Piya that Kanai likes women, is "fast," and she should be careful.

Nilima's comment about how much Kanai's visit meant to Nirmal offers some explanation of why Nirmal left his notebook to Kanai. He possibly felt that as a fellow lover of language, Kanai may be more interested.



PART 2: BESIEGED

Returning to the notebook, Kanai reads that Nilima returns from her trip with news that the government plans to take action against Morichjhāpi. Nirmal wonders if he can pass information to Kusum. Soon, the government announces that nobody may go in or out of Morichjhāpi. Rumors of violence abound. The next day, a group of schoolmasters invites Nirmal to go with them to Morichjhāpi to see if they can help. As their bhotbhoti gets close, they see smoke and patrol boats circling. They approach a neighboring island and watch people load a frail boat with food and then cram two-dozen people in it. A police boat intercepts it within moments, and the passengers yell, "who are we? We are the dispossessed." Nirmal feels as though this is the most profound thing he's ever heard.

It's telling that for Nirmal, the most powerful thing about his visit is hearing the people in the boat name themselves and specifically, name their underprivileged lot in life—they're at the mercy of the police boat and, by extension, the government that controls the police and has the power to dispossess these people in the first place. However, it's also important that Nirmal fixates on the question and not necessarily on what it even means—it again illustrates his habit of getting caught up in theory and not necessarily considering how these things translate into the real world.



The police boat rams into the smaller boat right in the middle, destroying the boat and flinging the passengers into the water. Nirmal and the schoolmasters try to pull people onto their bhotbhoti, and one man tells Nirmal that Kusum and Fokir weren't on the boat. When the police tell the schoolmasters to leave, they have no choice but to comply.

The horrific action of the police boat shows that simply fixating on questions and theory won't be enough to save these people; it will take actual action in order to facilitate any change in this situation.



PART 2: WORDS

Kanai forgets about dinner as he reads. He's suddenly plunged into darkness when the generator goes out, but Moyna promptly arrives with a candle. As she tries to light the kerosene lamp, her hand slips, and she drops her candle and breaks the lamp. As they clean up, Moyna says she's glad that Kanai is going on the expedition so that Piya and Fokir won't be alone. She asks Kanai to talk to Fokir about Piya, and make sure he knows that she's leaving soon. Kanai doesn't quite understand what Moyna is getting at, but Moyna reminds him that he has the power to shape what they say to each other as a translator. Moyna implies she's worried about a sexual relationship, but Kanai suggests that Piya would choose him over Fokir.

Moyna clearly understands that as someone who can bridge the gap between languages, Kanai can shape words to mean and say what he wants them to and not what they actually mean. This does, however, ignore the fact that Fokir and Piya have thus far been able to communicate just fine without a shared language, suggesting that Kanai may have less power to actually do anything about their budding romance than Moyna would clearly like.



Kanai asks who Moyna would choose—him or Fokir—but Moyna just insists that she cannot talk to Fokir herself, even if she is his wife. She insists that only an outsider can talk to him. Kanai tries to provoke Moyna and asks if she'd be interested in being with a different kind of man, which angers Moyna; she says that she's sure Kanai does this with every woman he meets. As she leaves, she wishes him luck with Piya.

When Kanai provokes Moyna, it shows again that he doesn't necessarily see women as independent beings, especially given that he repeatedly ignores her signals that she's uninterested in pursuing this line of questioning.



PART 2: CRIMES

In Nirmal's notebook, he writes that rumors circulate about rationing, police destroying drinking water, and a cholera outbreak on Morichjhāpi. One settler snuck out and made it to Calcutta, where he spoke to the papers. This resulted in pressure to lift the siege. The next day, Nirmal and Horen head for the island. They expect to find celebrating settlers but instead, they find Kusum looking malnourished and weak. She explains that she came down with dysentery, though Fokir managed to stay well during the siege.

The settler's words to the paper clearly had the power to create actual change, which suggests again that Nirmal's private musings won't be enough to do anything of note on Morichjhāpi. The horrific scene that Nirmal and Horen find on the island also reminds Nirmal that in practice, theory isn't always good and easy—it comes at a cost much of the time.



Kusum refuses the food that Nirmal brought, insisting that it needs to be divided up among those in her neighborhood. As Nirmal measures out some food for Kusum to keep, Kusum starts to cry. She explains that the hunger wasn't the worst part of the siege; the worst part was listening to the police talk about the necessity of preserving the island for wildlife, and the fact that people worldwide pay for the preservation of the island. Kusum wonders who those people are who care more for the wildlife than they do for people, and if they condone killing people for the animals' sake. She thinks that her only crime is being human and trying to live off the land.

Kusum very succinctly voices one of the novel's main ideas here: that conservation efforts often unfold in such a way as to disregard or even harm local people and their way of life. Kusum also recognizes that it's her poverty that means she has to live off the land, in turn getting at the idea that the settlers are also at a disadvantage because they don't have the economic capital to bring about change in the government.



PART 2: LEAVING LUSIBARI

Kanai and Piya take their bags down to the embankment on a rickshaw, but are held up when the driver points to something happening at the bādh. They go to inspect and find Fokir and Tutul on their boat, reeling in a stingray. They haul it into the boat, where Fokir kills it in front of a cheering crowd. He cuts off the tail to give to Tutul and then sells the ray to a fish seller. As Tutul admires his toy, Moyna angrily pushes her way through the crowd and begins to yell at Fokir about the importance of sending Tutul to school. She wrenches the tail from Tutul, throws it out into the river, and leads him crying to school. Moyna catches Kanai's eyes on her way past, and Fokir notices.

Tutul is clearly having a great time with Fokir working as a fisherman; this suggests that he, like his father, has the river in his veins already and doesn't have much interest in pursuing a way of life more in line with Moyna's priorities. Though it's important to consider Moyna's assertion that fishermen won't have jobs in fifteen years, it's also worth noting that Fokir stands to earn far more from working with Piya than in any other line of work. This suggests that there can indeed be economic gain to locals through conservation efforts.



The *Megha* pulls away a little later, towing Fokir in his boat behind. Kanai sits on deck, watching Piya watch the water despite the wind and blinding glare. They sight a Gangetic dolphin around midmorning, and Piya happily explains to Kanai that there are certainly fewer dolphins now than there used to be. Kanai mentions that Nirmal felt the same way. Later, Kanai remarks that he'd be bored to tears doing what Piya does. She agrees with him and says that meeting Fokir was amazing, as he somehow seems able to watch the water all the time. Piya says she hopes to work with him again and is actually thinking she may stay in the Sundarbans for years. Kanai is shocked she'd want to stay, but Piya insists that working with Fokir is extraordinary.

Envious, Kanai notes that Fokir and Piya can't even talk to each other, and he reminds Piya flatly that there's nothing in common between them. He laughs at the thought of Fokir boarding a plane. In Bengali, Fokir yells that he saw a crocodile. Kanai translates and points out that Piya wouldn't have understood without him there to translate, but she coldly walks away. Later, Kanai watches her work again and is struck by her attention. It reminds him of his own youthful desire to learn language, and he thinks that that desire is now made flesh in Piya.

PART 2: AN INTERRUPTION

In the afternoon, Kanai tries to talk to Horen about Nirmal's notebook. Horen isn't interested in chatting, but does explain how the notebook got lost in his home and how he found it years later. An hour later, the engine of the *Megha* dies. Kanai tells a disappointed Piya that Horen plans to float on the currents to a nearby village where someone can fix the engine, and they can be back on their way tomorrow morning. When they get near the muddy shore, one of Horen's relatives and a mechanic row out to the *Megha* and disappear below deck to work on the engine.

As night falls, Piya and Kanai hear the sound of an animal in pain on the shore. Kanai asks Horen about it, and apparently it's the sound of his relative's water buffalo giving birth. Kanai and Piya laugh. Piya decides to go to bed early, and Kanai decides to return to Nirmal's notebook.

Though Piya thinks of herself as unambitious, it's interesting to compare her to Nirmal in this situation. While Nirmal simply noticed there was less wildlife and made note of it, Piya—despite her professed lack of ambition—notes the same thing and through her work, is taking active steps to do something about it.



Kanai's envy and tone here reveals clearly that he's uninterested in viewing Fokir as a full person worthy of someone's affections. On the other hand, he also sees himself as the only man on board worthy of female affection, though he seems unaware that his self-importance is exactly what makes Piya feel entirely uninterested in him.



The engine dying and the amount of time it takes to fix it is a very symbolic reminder that humans in the Sundarbans are very much at the mercy of the whims of the natural world, especially when their own manmade tools fail. The presence of one of Horen's relatives on this presumably remote island shows that there's a strong sense of community among the islands.



Piya and Kanai's concern reinforces their outsider status, a status that will become extremely important soon. They aren't aware of the rhythms of life in the Sundarbans, and that lack of awareness is a detriment for them.



PART 2: ALIVE

Nirmal comes home sick from Morichjhāpi, struck by Kusum's insight. He spends days experiencing visions and reading Rilke. Nilima is angry with Horen, but gentler with Nirmal. She does ask if the rumors are true that he's involved with Kusum, which Nirmal denies. Nilima asks Nirmal to help Kusum by bringing her to Lusibari to work for the Trust, but Nirmal doesn't say that he doesn't think he can do anything of worth for the Trust. On Morichjhāpi, however, he knows he can do something.

One afternoon when Nirmal is feeling better, he starts to go downstairs but stops when he hears Nilima talking with the doctor. They discuss Morichjhāpi and Nirmal's interest in the island, and decide it's best to sedate Nirmal and not tell him that there's going to be an attack on Morichjhāpi. Nirmal packs a bag and sneaks out to go find Horen. Horen has more information—the government has bused in criminals and gangsters to attack Morichjhāpi. They decide to try to make it to Morichjhāpi that night. Horen skillfully avoids police boats and steers his boat into the mud on Morichjhāpi.

When Horen and Nirmal find Kusum, they find her happy and entirely unwilling to leave the island. She agrees to let Horen take Fokir away. Horen decides he'll leave the next night and is shocked when Nirmal announces that he's going to stay. He spends the next day filling this notebook and finally, runs out of time. Addressing Kanai directly, he suggests that maybe he'll know what to do with the notebook.

Kanai's hands are shaking when he finishes. He finds Horen sitting outside and sits down with him. When Kanai mentions finishing the notebook, Horen matter-of-factly says that he should've left Morichjhāpi with Fokir earlier. He explains that what happened next is just rumors: the gangsters burned dwellings, sank boats, and did unimaginable things. Kusum was possibly taken away with a group of women, raped, and then thrown into the river. Nirmal was put on a bus to central India, but he was presumably let off in Canning. When Kanai asks why Nirmal was so interested in Morichjhāpi, Horen says that Nirmal was a bit mad. He brushes Kanai off when he asks if Nirmal was in love with Kusum.

Despite Nirmal's insistence that he couldn't be of use to the Trust, it's worth noting that in spite of his habit of getting bogged down in theory, he clearly has a lot to offer the Trust—if only he'd compromise and accept that the theories he loves so much won't be able to be implemented in full. This then shows Nirmal actively turning away from a life of action.



Though Nirmal's narration mostly treats Horen as a means of transportation and a guide, it's worth considering why exactly Horen is so interested in going to Morichjhāpi in the first place. It could be that he's just as interested in the Marxist theory in play as Nirmal is, though it's also possible that he believes that his assistance is a way for him to make an impact on people even less fortunate than he is.



Kusum's unwillingness to leave suggests that she took some of Nirmal's love of theory to heart and was willing to die for the principle of what she was doing. The novel, however, overwhelmingly suggests that this kind of action is less valuable than other kinds, given that nobody even knows what happened or will talk about it.



Again, even though Nirmal's notebook recorded much of what happened in the lead-up to the massacre, it's clear that she was one of many faceless individuals who were killed to make a point about the power of the government. Remember too that the government clearly prioritized Morichjhāpi's use as a nature reserve over its use as a refuge for poor settlers, which shows again how the world's poor are often the ones to suffer the consequences of conservation efforts.



PART 2: A POST OFFICE ON SUNDAY

Piya wakes up around midnight and goes on deck, where she finds Kanai still reading. She sits with him and asks about the notebook, inspecting the tiny Bengali writing. Kanai explains that it's partially about Fokir and Kusum, whom he believes Nirmal was in love with—though he'd never admit it. Kanai explains that Nirmal was a Marxist radical, and Nilima believes that Nirmal involved himself on Morichjhāpi because he couldn't let go of the idea of revolution. Kanai says that he believes that Nirmal just lived through poetry, and took Rainer Maria Rilke's words that "life is lived in transformation" to heart. Kanai believes that Nirmal saw that transformation embodied in Kusum.

Kanai says that Nirmal was a historical materialist, which he defines as a belief that everything is interconnected and can then become stories. As an example, he tells the story of Canning, the city on the Matla River. Lord Canning decided that Bengal needed a new port city, and his planners decided on the banks of the Matla river. "Matla" means "mad" in Bangali, but the Englishmen took no notice of the river's apt name. They began work on the city.

In Kolkata at the time, however, there was a shipping inspector named Henry Piddington. He'd fallen in love with storms while in the Caribbean, and he understood that the Matla river was truly mad. Piddington wrote letters to everyone he could, telling them that a city so far out in tide country would be dangerously exposed to cyclones, waves, and tidal surges. He even staked his reputation on his belief that a cyclone would flatten the city within fifteen years. Nobody listened, and people sniggered behind Piddington's back and called him crazy. The river, however, only made Piddington wait five years before proving him right and flattening the city with a tidal surge. Kanai said that Nirmal always closed with a Rilke quote, using it to compare Canning to "a post office on Sunday."

Kanai essentially suggests that Kusum was Nirmal's muse in much the same way that Piya is becoming Kanai's muse: to the men, both women represent an ideal and a drive that they've lost in their own lives. The assertion that Nirmal was so caught up in the idea of life being lived in transformation adds some explanation to his life of inaction, as it suggests that he may have believed on some level that he was acting—just in a slower, more day-to-day manner than the life Kusum led.



It's worth noting that Lord Canning and his planners ignored an Indian name for a river, which illustrates how different languages are given priority—even when the message in one language may be more important than the other language gives it credit for.



By comparing Canning to a post office on Sunday, Nirmal acknowledges that Canning was a great idea, but the particulars of the city made it something wholly worthless—just as a post office on Sunday is worthless if one wants to send or receive mail. Henry Piddington himself illustrates that it's not just locals that can feel an intense connection to the natural world, and it's not just poor Indian people who aren't afforded a listening ear. When nobody listens to him, it suggests that the hierarchy itself harms many people.



PART 2: A KILLING

Kanai wakes at three in the morning to excited voices. He finds Horen and Nogen on deck, looking towards shore. They can see what looks like flames. Horen, Kanai, Piya, and Fokir decide to go ashore and see what's going on. The voices sound angrier as they get close, and Kanai suggests they not go—it sounds like an angry mob. When they reach shore, Horen shines his flashlight onto **tiger** prints leading towards the village. Horen anxiously tracks the animal's movements until they top the embankment and see a group gathered around a mud structure with sharpened bamboo poles, plunging the poles through the structure. People scream, "Kill! Kill!"

The fever pitch of the mob and the presence of tiger prints—and presumably, a real tiger inside the structure—suggests that the power dynamic between man and nature can flip when the natural world enters the manmade realm. The fury suggests that this event has been a long time coming, and shows that people's fear of the natural world can very quickly turn to violence when given the chance.



Horen explains that the **tiger** probably heard the buffalo giving birth and had then fallen through the thatch roof of the structure, in with the buffalo. This tiger has killed two people in the village, Horen says, and is now vulnerable in the structure. Piya is shocked to learn that there's a tiger in the structure and decides they need to do something. Kanai and Horen try to lead her away and explain that the tiger is a known killer, but she won't listen. She plunges into the crowd, which Fokir has joined.

Piya grabs a man's spear and breaks it in two, and the man falls silent in shock before starting to yell at Piya. Piya feels hopeful when Fokir takes her arm, but he carries her out of the crowd as people begin to throw torches onto the thatch. Piya feels angry and betrayed when Kanai translates Fokir's words: that **tigers** only go into settlements when they want to die.

When Piya disregards the fact that this tiger has killed two people and presumably killed the water buffalo and her calf, it shows again that her first thought is for the wildlife and not the people who suffer daily because of the wildlife. The fact that Fokir joined the mob suggests that he shares the mob's desire to get back at nature, even as he feels comfortable out in the jungle.



Given how locals have described tigers' intelligence, Fokir's statement possibly has some weight and truth behind it—it's unlikely that the tigers that live in such close proximity to humans don't understand that humans pose a major threat when they make up the majority.



PART 2: INTERROGATIONS

Horen, Fokir, Kanai, and Piya make it back to the *Megha* by dawn and start off immediately—Horen doesn't want to get caught up in the police action that's sure to follow a **tiger** killing. A while later, Kanai finds Piya leaning on the rail. It's clear she's been crying, and he tries to tell her that they couldn't have done anything. Piya tells Kanai that he was right; she and Fokir have nothing in common. She expected him to be different, even though she understands why he participated in the tiger killing.

An hour later, a boat of forest guards pulls up by the *Megha*. Kanai sends Piya to her cabin for safety, as she's foreign and doesn't have the correct permit. Piya doesn't argue and lies there for more than an hour. After the guards leave, Kanai tells Piya that the forest service heard that a foreigner was at the village where the **tiger** was killed, and they likely don't want the news to get out. He even had to pay off the guards when they recognized Fokir as being associated with Piya. Kanai encourages Piya to turn back, but she insists she has to stay as long as she can.

Though the novel doesn't say outright, there's a total ban on killing tigers in the Sundarbans in an effort to try to preserve the species, which is endangered. When Piya decides that she and Fokir have nothing at all in common, she does choose to ignore the fact that he seems just as interested and knowledgeable about the dolphins as she is.



The forest department's desire to not have the news of the tiger killing get out suggests that they're well aware of the fear and anger that the locals feel in regards to the tigers, but they don't want to have to acknowledge that there's a problem—again, likely because the victims aren't wealthy.



At midday, Piya sits next to Kanai, looking troubled. She explains that she's still horrified by the **tiger** killing, but she recognizes that it's probably a normal part of life for people like Horen and Fokir. She suggests that those two are part of the horror, which makes Kanai sit up. He says that he and Piya are part of the horror as well—tigers kill people with such frequency, it would be called genocide if it happened anywhere else. In the Sundarbans, however, the residents are too poor to garner interest or sympathy. He says that people like himself and Piya want to protect wildlife at the cost of poor people affected by those efforts.

Piya insists it's important to preserve animals in their natural habitats, as deciding it's fine to kill them will only lead to killing certain groups of people. Kanai retorts that Piya's not the one dying for animal conservation, though she insists she would. When Kanai declares that saying such a thing is easy, Piya insists her life isn't at all easy. Kanai apologizes.

PART 2: MR. SLOANE

The *Megha* reaches Garjontola late in the afternoon. Kanai, Piya, and Fokir take Fokir's boat closer. Piya is delighted to see the mother and calf again, but Kanai is perplexed by how boring the dolphins look. She tells him how she became interested in the Orcaella while in Cambodia. She took a motorcycle to a remote village outside of Phnom Penh, where one dolphin had been stranded in a tiny reservoir. Piya went back with coolers of fish. After six days of feeding the dolphin, which she named Mr. Sloane, it mysteriously disappeared. Though Piya heard it died, it was probably sold to an aquarium.

Piya was then invited to survey Orcaella along the Mekong. She's been studying Orcaella ever since. When she finishes, Piya asks Kanai to ask Fokir how he knows the dolphins so well. Kanai translates that he heard about the dolphins in Kusum's stories, where they figured as Bon Bibi's messengers. Fokir came to Garjontola for the first time weeks before Kusum died, and he's been coming back ever since. When Piya met him, Fokir was taking Tutul to see Kusum's spirit on Garjontola. Kusum's spirit told Fokir to take Tutul home and then return so they can be together again, which worries Piya. Fokir begins to chant part of the Bon Bibi legend, but Kanai insists he can't translate it for Piya.

When Kanai forces Piya to at least hear that she's part of the problem, he asks her to recognize that conservation efforts aren't a clear force for good. In the Sundarbans, those conservation efforts are part of the reason the Morichjhāpi massacre happened in the first place, and it's the reason too why the forest guard in the beginning sought to fine and intimidate Fokir.



While Piya's logic makes some pretty significant leaps, it does suggest that she'll struggle to reconcile Kanai's explanation with her own beliefs. It also suggests that she does care for people, but only when caring for humans doesn't impede conservation efforts.



Piya's suggestion that Mr. Sloane was sold to an aquarium recognizes that there's money in what she characterizes as the exact opposite of wildlife conservation. When placed in juxtaposition with Kanai's assertion that there's money in conservation efforts, this adds even more nuance to the question of what should be done with endangered wildlife, and shows that money motivates both sides far more than care for the animals.



For Fokir, the dolphins are a way for him to connect to his mother and to local religious practices, as well as to the natural world. This shows how he uses these stories to unite various different parts of his life and of his identity to in turn, come to a more nuanced understanding of where he exists in the world. His insistence that Kusum's spirit believes they'll be together again is ominous foreshadowing; the fact that Piya is concerned by it shows that she's learning to accept the local culture as powerful.



PART 2: KRATIE

As the tide rises, the dolphins leave the pool and Fokir rows back to the *Megha*. Piya showers and then sits by the rail to watch the landscape. Kanai joins her, and they begin talking about their past romances. Piya says that being alone is part of her job, but she did have one serious relationship in Kratie, Cambodia. She was studying Orcaella and often ended up in the same café as a Fisheries Department officer named Rath, who spoke English. They slowly began spending time together, and they shared their stories of difficult childhoods. Piya thought she was going to be the lucky biologist who found love.

Rath took Piya to the airport for a conference in Hong Kong, and they emailed daily for several weeks. Then, the messages stopped. When Piya got back to Kratie, she learned that Rath hadn't just married another woman, but he'd also told all the other officers all her personal secrets. Piya packed up a week later. Upon talking to some female friends a bit later, they all laughed—apparently, that sort of thing is common. They counseled Piya to be happy being alone. Kanai feels as though Piya is truly extraordinary, and he suggests she doesn't have to be alone.

PART 2: SIGNS

Kanai has nightmares all night. At dawn, Piya approaches him and asks if he'd be willing to help her keep watch for when and where the dolphins are leaving the pool. She'll take the upstream entrance on the *Megha*, while Fokir and Kanai will take the downstream one in Fokir's boat. Kanai agrees. He feels miles apart from Fokir, especially since Fokir is entirely uninterested in conversation. Around noon, Fokir spots a dolphin, and Kanai takes the opportunity to try to talk to him. He asks if Fokir remembers Nirmal and if he remembers Kusum. Fokir doesn't remember Nirmal, but says he sees his mother's face everywhere. Kanai understands that Moyna loves Fokir because he seems somehow unformed.

Kanai asks Fokir if he'd ever like to visit a city, noticing only after he says it that he used the informal address instead of the formal. Fokir takes no notice but says he has no interest. As he starts to row back to the *Megha*, Kanai sees mirages in the water of Fokir boarding a plane for Seattle with Piya and feels very unsettled. Suddenly, as the boat passes close to Garjontola, Fokir stands and points to what he says are **tiger** tracks in the mud. Kanai can't quite make out the tracks, but Fokir says the tiger probably came down to the water to look at them.

With this story, Piya shows how she uses her interest in nature to actively separate herself from men and even other people. However, her interest in Rath suggests that she doesn't necessarily want to be alone; being alone is more a matter of comfort and safety than anything else. When she and Rath used the stories of their childhoods to connect, it again shows how language and storytelling can create better and more complex means of knowing someone.



Notice that Kanai is becoming far more interested in engaging with Piya as a person and sharing in her emotions, rather than thinking of her as an object to be won. This shows that his ideas of what constitutes language and communication is beginning to shift and change to a more nuanced and varied way of looking at it.



The way that Fokir speaks in such simple terms tells Kanai that there's more that Fokir could learn or do—essentially, he sees the lack of more complex language as a signal that Fokir is uneducated and therefore, teachable. However, this does ignore the fact that Fokir communicates in a number of other ways, many of them far more effective, than simple spoken language. He's the character who's the most comfortable in the jungle, and he and Piya communicated very well without language.



When Kanai starts seeing mirages, it again reinforces the power of the natural world to shape how humans interact with it. The tiger tracks that Fokir notices reinforce this again, while the fact that Kanai can't really see them allows Fokir to gain the upper hand in this power play going on between them.



Kanai finds this idea far-fetched, but Fokir says that the **tigers** tend to like to watch strangers. Kanai is fairly certain that Fokir is playing a game—it's one that he himself plays often when working as a translator, as it's easy to dramatize threats to in turn build up one's importance as a translator. Fokir asks if Kanai wants to know how he knows it was a tiger, and he places Kanai's hand on the back of his neck. Kanai feels goose bumps and jerks away as Fokir asks if Kanai can also feel "the fear." Kanai thinks for a moment and believes that fear is something learned, not an instinct—and he doesn't feel it.

Fokir leans forward and suggests they go take a closer look. Kanai reluctantly agrees, and Fokir explains that Kusum always told him that Garjontola is a place to learn to not be afraid. He asks Kanai if he's a "clean man" and says that on Garjontola, Bon Bibi will protect everyone who's good at heart. Kanai feels unsettled but follows Fokir through the mud to the line of tracks. Fokir fetches his machete to head into the mangroves, but Kanai refuses to go. Suddenly, he feels something around his ankle falls face first into the mud. Fokir tries to help him, but Kanai angrily and uncontrollably curses at Fokir.

Fokir offers Kanai a hand, but Kanai insults him and sends him away. Fokir goes to the boat and leaves Kanai in the mud. Kanai, gripped with fear, thinks of how animals kill people in tide country: crocodiles drown people before eating them, while **tigers** mercifully kill people instantly. Kanai pulls himself up and wades into the mangroves, trying to get far away from the water. When he breaks through to a clearing, he sinks to his knees. He can't even remember the word "tiger" as he sits there, feeling as though the cat itself isn't as real as the fear in his head. Kanai opens his eyes and sees a tiger sitting across the clearing.

Slowly, Kanai backs into the mangroves and then crashes back out to the mud. Piya, Fokir, and Horen run to him and haul him into the boat. He babbles about seeing the **tiger**, though Horen and Fokir insist there isn't one around.

PART 2: LIGHTS

That evening, Piya goes to the rail and sees flashing lights in the mangroves. She races to knock on Kanai's door and is shocked to see him dressed in a lungi (a sarong-like garment) and vest, looking nothing like himself. Regardless, she invites him to the rail and points to the light show. She says they're glowworms. After a minute, Kanai tells her that he's leaving tomorrow to return to New Delhi. He insists that Fokir didn't maliciously leave him on the island.

When Kanai doesn't feel "the fear," it suggests that he and Fokir are, in many ways, speaking two very different languages. Essentially, they're both having to translate right now, given that Kanai doesn't believe there's a tiger nearby, and Fokir is in charge of interpreting the natural world. Especially because it makes Kanai feel vulnerable, this reinforces Fokir's connection to the natural world.



The text never mentions exactly what Kanai feels around his ankle, which gives the effect that the natural world is coming alive to conspire against him. This again reinforces that humans exist in the Sundarbans at the mercy of the natural world, and their only way of feeling more secure in their existence is to lean on legends like that of Bon Bibi for protection.



Kanai's belief that his fear is more real than the tiger represents a major turning point in his development, as this shows him that emotional languages and shared emotional experiences are far more effective forms of communication than spoken language. When the tiger does nothing to attack Kanai, it offers some credence to the Bon Bibi legend and supports the ways that the locals move through the natural world with deference and respect.



The fact that Fokir and Horen insist that there's no tiger suggests that it may also have been a mirage, but regardless, Kanai's mental break shows clearly that the natural world is far superior to humans.



Because this light show directly follows Kanai's terrifying experience with the tiger, it drives home the idea that nature is unpredictable: one minute it can be terrifying and in the next, it can be magnificent. Remember that a light show occurred in Nirmal's book by the Christian priest; this foreshadows that some of the other things the priest experienced may come to pass.



Haltingly, Kanai invites Piya to visit him in New Delhi after her survey ends. Piya finds Kanai's tone unsettling; she can't quite reconcile the confident man she met on the train with this one. He admits that he'd like to see her again someplace he's more comfortable. Piya thinks she can't possibly take Kanai's lifestyle in New Delhi seriously, so she says simply that she's not the woman for Kanai.

Kanai nods and says that he can't put his thoughts into words, just like Moyna can't truly articulate her feelings about Fokir. He explains that Moyna fears that Fokir will leave her for Piya, which annoys Piya. She refuses to answer if she's in love with Fokir and ends the conversation. Looking at the glowworms, she says it was beautiful while it lasted. Kanai says that Nirmal would've called it a tide country mirage.

PART 2: A SEARCH

In the morning, the fog is so thick that Piya nearly trips over Kanai. He's busy writing something for Piya, so Piya makes preparations to spend the day with Fokir in his boat tracking the dolphins while Horen takes Kanai to Lusibari on the *Megha*. After breakfast, Kanai hands Piya a manila envelope.

Piya finds the quiet and the familiarity of Fokir's boat comforting. She asks him for another set of oars so she can help row. After a while, Fokir stops as though they've reached their destination, so they sit quietly and watch the water. Piya takes a GPS reading. After a few hours, when no dolphins appear, Fokir looks bemused and begins to row into a smaller channel. He rows away, and Piya tracks it on her GPS system.

On the *Megha*, Kanai and Horen see no boats until they reach a major channel. There, there's a great deal of boat traffic, all heading inland. Horen confirms that this is unusual and after speaking to some fishermen, he returns to the front of the boat with a scowl. He says there's a storm coming, and it's possibly a cyclone. It won't arrive until tomorrow, so they have time to go back to Garjontola to find Fokir and Piya.

They reach the island by one o'clock in the afternoon and wait. Kanai feels as though the low tide looks especially low, and there are no dolphins in the pool despite their habit of swimming there during low tide. Horen agrees, but isn't alarmed. Kanai suggests they go look for Fokir's boat and finally, Horen agrees.

Though Kanai's tone is never described outright, it's likely that he's simply still unsettled after his run-in with the tiger—again, this shows that being forced to reevaluate how he deals with language has made Kanai far more willing to treat others' languages and modes of communication as worthy of consideration.



Piya never defines what "it" is; by leaving this ambiguous, it shows again how spoken language is an often incomplete and unsatisfactory way to describe the world. When Kanai links it then to "tide country mirages," it suggests that this is the work of the natural world and not humans themselves.



The fog here is somewhat ominous in its thickness; because it deprives Piya of her sight, it suggests that there may be more that she cannot see or interpret due to a cover-up on the part of nature.



Piya has no real idea where Fokir is taking her; she simply has to trust that he knows where they're going. When she can read his expression, it again shows that these nonverbal forms of communication are more than enough to know what's going on.



The mass movement of all the fishing boats makes it clear to the reader how serious this storm can be—it's unsafe for anyone to be out on the water, and all of these fishermen appear well aware of that. This reaction, in short, suggests that the fishermen are being reminded of their own vulnerability.



For Kanai, who's likely very concerned about Piya's safety, the lack of dolphins surely appears like a sign from the natural world that there's more amiss than just a storm. This suggests he's learning to read the landscape like Fokir.



PART 2: CASUALTIES

As the tide starts to turn, Piya spots several dolphins close to shore, twelve miles southeast of Garjontola. She wonders if this is a different pod of dolphins than the ones she observed at Garjontola, but she feels that something isn't right. When they get closer, she notices the calf's body on the mud and reasons that the dolphins don't want to leave until the water reclaims the body. She and Fokir climb out of the boat and she takes measurements and samples of the calf's body before heaving it into the water. Fokir mimes that the calf was probably hit by a Forest Department boat. Fokir gestures that he sees sights like this often.

Horen has had enough of the search after three hours and insists they need to turn back to conserve fuel. Kanai asks Horen what will happen when the cyclone hits and asks about the cyclone Horen lived through in 1970. Horen says he was out at sea in his uncle's boat, and the storm caught them by surprise. They had no compass, though the wind was so strong they wouldn't have been able to steer effectively even with one. Finally, the boat drifted towards land and hit a tree trunk on the flooded shore. Horen pulled himself and his uncle into the tree and tied them to it with their **gamchhas** to ride out the storm.

In the morning, the sky was clear, but the land was still flooded. There were others in trees, and Horen learned that they'd made land 30 miles away in Bangladesh. They were there for two days and saw the land littered with human and animal corpses. Finally, they snuck back to India. As Horen and Kanai reenter the Garjontola pool, it's clear that Fokir and Piya aren't there.

PART 2: A GIFT

By sunset, Piya checks her GPS and sees they're about seven miles from Garjontola. She figures that Horen won't be worried, and she and Fokir find a spot to stop for the night. The moon rises not long after, and Fokir points out a faint halo of colored light around the moon. He gestures that it was a moon rainbow. Piya studies the water and wonders if Fokir understands how inspiring and constant he is, and she wonders if she'd ever be able to offer him anything close to what he has with Moyna.

It's especially chilling that the calf was probably hit by a Forest Department boat, as that means that the very people installed in the Sundarbans to protect wildlife are actively doing the exact opposite. This in turn supports the novel's suggestion that entities like the Forest Department are misguided attempts at conservation, and it's better to work with fishermen like Fokir, whose boat cannot hurt a dolphin without a motor.



When Horen and his uncle use a gamchha again to keep themselves from blowing away, it again reinforces the gamchhas' symbolism as items that connect people. The cyclone that Horen talks about reinforces that nature can strike with absolutely no notice, and the results can be devastating. Further, notice that Horen and his uncle weren't even able to control their boat; nature was the one dominating.



Horen's account of the cyclone illustrates that the dangerous part of the cyclone isn't necessarily the cyclone itself; it's the fact that the cyclone creates lasting damage. It very clearly has little regard for human life given the bodies Horen observed.



Because the reader is well aware that there's a cyclone coming and Piya and Fokir don't know this, the next chapter works to build anxiety and tension given that it's clear that Piya will be surprised by what's to come. It is strange, however, that Fokir apparently has no sense of what's to come, given his intimate connection to nature. This suggests that there may be more to this than Fokir simply not knowing what's to come.



Piya and Fokir sit unmoving for a while. Finally, he takes her hand for a moment and then goes to prepare dinner. Piya accepts the food and feels as though the rainbow brought something in their relationship to an end. After dinner, she pulls out Kanai's letter and begins to read. He begins with a question of what it means for a man to give a woman something that only she will ever value, and says he's currently struggling with the question. He writes that he learned at Garjontola what it means to want to give someone else happiness at the cost of his own, and admits he lied when he said he couldn't translate Fokir's chanting. It was part of *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, which Fokir has had memorized since he was a child. Kanai explains that this story is the one that brought the Sundarbans to life long ago.

Kanai begins the story at the part where Dhona sacrifices Dukhey to Dokkhin Rai. Dokkhin Rai comes to Dhona in a dream and instructs Dhona to return to the island, say his name, and not touch the beehives in the jungle. The next day, Dhona leaves Dukhey and takes his men to the forest. When Dhona does as he's told, the bees swarm and demons load Dhona's boats with honey. Then, Dokkhin Rai unloads the honey and instead, loads the boats with valuable wax. With this, the demon disappears.

Dukhey, meanwhile, struggles to cook a meal and asks Bon Bibi for help. She arrives, and with a pass of her hand, creates a sizzling feast. When Dhona and the crew arrive, Dhona begins to wonder if Bon Bibi had a hand in the meal, but ultimately thinks little of it. In the morning, Dhona sends Dukhey to gather firewood on the shore. Dukhey tries to refuse, but finally complies. Dokkhin Rai assumes his tiger form and stalks the boy. As the demon pounces, Dukhey calls on Bon Bibi. She arrives with Shah Jongoli, who hits the tiger and sends it racing away into the forest.

When Piya finishes reading, Fokir joins her in the middle of the boat. She touches him and asks him to sing for her. He does, and Piya feels as though she's surrounded by Fokir's voice and the meaning that Kanai gave it. She turns over the final page, where Kanai left a Rilke quote about love being rooted in the past and in the natural world.

*With Fokir's touch, Piya and Fokir are able to acknowledge the fact that they do indeed have feelings for each other. Notably, this single touch says more than Fokir and Piya would've been able to verbally discuss. When Kanai suggests that translating *The Glory of Bon Bibi* for Piya is a selfless act, it suggests that Fokir's trick with the tiger had a profound effect on Kanai: now, Kanai truly sees Piya as a person, not just a conquest.*



Dokkhin Rai is a tiger demon, making him a stand-in for the dangerous nature of the natural world as a whole. This whole tale then becomes a cautionary story to not trust the apparent generosity of the natural world, as it will inevitably come at a price—often, a human price.



The legend of Bon Bibi helps the residents of the Sundarbans feel slightly more at home in a world that, to an outsider, seems as though it's out to get them at every turn. With this, the novel shows how stories have the power to make people feel more comfortable with themselves and their homes by giving them the tools to communicate with the natural world.



The emotions that Piya feels here are the product of being able to rely on a number of different languages and forms of communication to understand the world around her. With this, the novel shows that the more modes someone has to communicate and understand, the better and richer life can be.



PART 2: FRESH WATER AND SALT

Kanai barely sleeps again that night. Early in the morning, he gets up and finds that Horen is also awake, watching the water. Kanai asks if there's enough light for Fokir to navigate by, and Horen says with a smile that Fokir just might not want to come back. Horen suggests that Fokir and Piya are in love. Noticing Kanai's surprised reaction, Horen asks if Kanai thinks that someone like Fokir can't fall in love. Horen says that Nirmal was the same way—he was absolutely in love with Kusum but wouldn't admit it.

Horen says he's five or six years older than Kusum. He comforted her when Kusum's father was killed, and he tried his best to protect her. When he took her to Canning to find Kusum's mother, Horen realized she didn't need protecting—she refused his offer to leave his wife and marry her instead. Eight years later, he stumbled onto Morichjhāpi with Nirmal, reconnected with Kusum, and couldn't stay away. Both he and Nirmal used each other as excuses for going to see her. In the end, Kusum chose Horen—she led him to his boat on that last night, and they had sex.

Horen's insight and questions about Piya and Fokir being in love suggests he's fully aware that outsiders like Kanai and Nirmal don't view the poor people of the tide country as being capable of love. This again shows how the tide country people are at a disadvantage and are thought of as being less than human.



The fact that Kusum chose Horen rather than Nirmal does suggest that Piya and Fokir's relationship likely won't go any further than it already has, given the parallels between the two relationships. Horen's undying love for Kusum, however, also stands in contrast to Nirmal's love of her as a symbol: again, Nirmal's inaction meant he ultimately got nothing.



PART 2: HORIZONS

Piya wakes in the morning and sits in the boat, listening to the water. She hears a sound like a breathy sigh and realizes they're surrounded by a pod of Gangetic dolphins, though they're not behaving normally. As she watches, Piya thinks about a Swiss cetologist who, in the 1970s, captured two Gangetic dolphins from the Indus River and carefully transported them to Switzerland. There, the scientist realized that the dolphins are sensitive to atmospheric pressure and behave strangely in inclement weather. Piya catches a glimpse of the sky, which has a strange glow, and yells at Fokir that a storm is coming.

Horen points to a dark spot in the sky and says they can only wait for thirty minutes more or they won't make it back to Lusibari. Kanai protests, but Horen says they'll go down with bhotbhoti if they stay. He motions to the island and says there's no shelter and it'll all flood anyway. He assures Kanai that Fokir knows what to do.

When Piya figures out how to read the dolphins using previous knowledge, it again shows that other forms of communication and "reading" are immensely valuable—figuring out now that there's a storm coming may give them a chance to find cover. It's also worth noting that though Fokir certainly can't understand what Piya yelled at him, he'll absolutely understand the meaning, reinforcing again that their ability to communicate isn't predicated on a shared language.



Horen's assurance that Fokir can take care of himself shows that Horen is well aware of Fokir's connection and close relationship with nature, and he sees this relationship as something positive. Kanai, as an outsider, struggles with this as he's seen and is terrified of the violence of the area.



PART 2: LOSSES

When Piya and Fokir set off at 5:30 in the morning, the going is easy. The currents are in their favor, and Piya estimates they could be back to Garjontola in a few hours. However, before long, the winds start to turn and slow them to a snail's pace. The waves grow taller as well. When the boat lurches, Piya's backpack with her equipment and data logs almost flies out. Fokir helps her tie it to the covered part of the boat. Piya wonders if she might have cell service, but doesn't know who she'd call. Finally, they reach Garjontola and see the *Megha* isn't there. The wind suddenly catches the roof of the boat's shelter, tearing it off entirely and taking Piya's backpack with it.

Kanai notices that the water almost glows as they approach Lusibari. As they enter the huge mohona near Lusibari, Horen sends Kanai downstairs to the engine room to bail out water with Nogen. After a bit, Nogen points to the shore of Lusibari and sends Kanai back upstairs to work out how he's getting off the bhotbhoti. Horen gives Kanai a plastic bag in which to put Nirmal's notebook and then explains that he'll have to wade to shore. He asks Kanai to tell Moyna that they'll go back for Fokir as soon as the storm dies, and Kanai asks to go too.

Kanai climbs backwards down the gangplank into the hip-deep water, clutching the notebook to his chest. He turns to look back and as he does, the wind catches him and knocks him into the water. Kanai finds his feet, but the notebook is immediately carried away.

PART 2: GOING ASHORE

Fokir manages to steer his boat into the mangroves, and Piya helps him lodge it between trees. Fokir pulls out the sari, rolls it into a rope, and instructs Piya to tie it around her waist. Then, they use the crab fishing line to tie the boat to the trees. Fokir takes Piya inland to an unusually tall mangrove and motions for her to climb it. When they're eight feet up, Fokir gestures for Piya to sit on a branch facing the tree. He sits behind her and uses the sari to tie them to the tree. The wind rumbles, and Piya can barely believe it will get worse.

Kanai makes it over the embankment and slowly walks towards the island's compound. There, he sees people heading for the hospital's **cyclone shelter**. He notices Tutul and asks about Moyna, who suddenly appears. He tells her that Fokir is still at Garjontola and assures her that he'll be fine, and then passes Horen's message about rescuing Fokir to her. Kanai then heads to the guesthouse to find Nilima.

The quickness with which the storm rolls in (and in particular, the fact that things begin in Piya and Fokir's favor) reinforces how untrustworthy the natural world can be. When Piya loses her data and her instruments, it means that she'll need to reconstruct that data if she hopes to do anything with it.



The glowing water is a sinister image that reinforces the power of the storm to make things look strange and alien for its human inhabitants. When Kanai has to wade to shore, it represents a breakdown in how humans take control over the natural world. In this situation, he'll have to pass through the dangerous waters, rather than bypass them as he'd be able to other times.



When the notebook is lost, it reinforces Nirmal's assertion that he did little with his life—even his love for theory and the stories he had to tell are carried away in the currents.



By tying them to a tree, Fokir places a bet that the natural world has the power to save them, just as other parts of nature have the power to destroy them. This reinforces Fokir's relationship with nature and reminds the reader that many speak of him as having an uncanny connection to the natural world. Though Fokir is certainly afraid, Piya's fear and lack of knowledge as to what to do situates her as an outsider.



The cyclone shelter is one way for humans to actually make some progress in the fight for life against nature, and it's telling that Nirmal is the one who suggested it. Because of this, the shelter comes to represent a marriage of theory and practicality, given that Nilima's funding built it.



PART 2: THE WAVE

As the wind's intensity increases, the flying objects grow larger. Piya sees an entire clump of mangroves and the shrine to Bon Bibi flying through the air. She's thankful for the trunk in front of her, as it blocks the flying objects from hitting her. She tries to match Fokir's breathing behind her. Hearing a deep noise, Piya glances around the tree and sees a wall of water coming at them. She freezes in fear as Fokir holds her tightly against the tree, and they both take a huge breath right before the wave hits them. The water pushes the tree almost to the ground, and Piya knows the water is deep. She tries to untie the sari knot to free herself, but Fokir won't let her. As Piya struggles, the pressure lessens and the tree straightens above the water.

Kanai races for the guesthouse and knocks on the door. As soon as Nilima unlatches it, the wind whips it back and wrenches her wrist. After they both ascertain that the other is well, Kanai insists they gather essential things from downstairs and then move upstairs to escape the coming floods. They fill two suitcases with files and food and then make their way up. Once upstairs, the wind seems quieter. Kanai explains that he and Horen had to leave Piya and Fokir outside, and admits that he lost the notebook.

Nilima is horrified, but composes herself and asks if Kanai read it. Kanai says it was mostly about Morichjhāpi and what Nirmal experienced in the lead-up to the assault on the island. Nilima asks why Nirmal didn't leave it to her, and Kanai carefully says that Nirmal seemed to think that she wouldn't be sympathetic. Angry, Nilima insists she *was* sympathetic, but she was willing to focus her attention on making Lusibari better while Nirmal wanted to either fix the whole world or nothing. She insists he ended up with nothing, which Kanai refutes. He insists the notebook was something, and explains that he's going to rewrite it from memory. Nilima asks that Kanai write her side of the story too, as her story never gets told.

Kanai hears the tidal surge coming and peeks out the window. He sees people at the hospital looking at the floodwaters, and Nilima admits that they never would've built the **cyclone shelter** if Nirmal hadn't insisted. She says it's the most important thing he ever did, though he'd surely insist it wasn't revolution and therefore, wasn't important.

Again, it's clear here that Fokir knows what to do and doesn't let panic get the best of him. When the shrine to Bon Bibi flies away, it suggests that Piya and Fokir are truly on their own, without even local divine figures to save them. In turn, this reinforces that while locals can certainly pray and put faith in divine intervention, these efforts may be insufficient in the face of the violent, unpredictable natural world.



When the storm is even able to harm Nilima from the safety of her own home, it shows again that nature cares little for its human inhabitants—and further, that manmade objects and dwellings are ineffective means of fighting back successfully.



By asking Kanai to write her story, Nilima recognizes that there's power in the kind of writing that Nirmal did and Kanai can now do. Written language has the power to spread her life story, which she seems to think is boring and uninteresting in comparison to Nirmal's. By doing this, Nilima essentially forces Nirmal to compromise on his principles in death—their stories combined will hopefully shed light on the Sundarbans and the Morichjhāpi conflict that he'd find possibly distasteful, but will be able to help people.



Nilima's admission that Nirmal was responsible for the cyclone shelter shows that she did admire her husband for some things, as long as she was actually able to put his ideas or suggestions into practice with Trust funding.



As the eye of the storm hits Garjotola, Piya looks around. Fokir stands and appears to be searching for another branch to move to. He crouches and points into the distance, where Piya sees a **tiger** pulling itself out of the water. The tiger watches Piya and Fokir for a few minutes before slipping back into the water to follow the eye of the storm. Piya and Fokir tie themselves back to the tree, and the other side of the storm hits them. Piya realizes that the wind is now coming from the opposite direction—the flying objects are hitting Fokir. He holds her so closely, she feels as though they're one.

Cyclones are composed of winds that circle the eye of the storm, hence the change in the wind's direction when the other half hits them. The fact that the tiger does nothing to Piya and Fokir suggests that Bon Bibi is still present on the island, and it also implies that in times like this, the tigers are just as beholden to the whims and violence of the natural world as humans are.



PART 2: THE DAY AFTER

The day after the storm passes, the *Megha* is most of the way to Garjontola when Kanai and Horen see Fokir's boat in the distance. The boats slowly approach each other and soon, those on the *Megha* realize there's only one person in the boat. Moyna watches, transfixed, as they realize it's Piya. Moyna sits and begins to break her marital bangles, making herself bleed. Horen and Kanai carry Moyna into a cabin and by the time they return to the deck, Piya is alongside the *Megha*. Kanai catches her as she stumbles onto the deck. She says that Fokir died when something heavy hit him and crushed him. He said Moyna and Tutul's names as he died.

Moyna's reaction to the news of her husband's death makes it clear that on some level, she did genuinely care for and love Fokir, no matter how frustrating she found his love of the natural world and his disdain for education. When Fokir spoke Moyna and Tutul's names with his last breath, it in turn shows that he was loyal to his family to the very end, regardless of the way that Moyna treated him and his feelings for Piya.



Fokir's body is cremated that evening. He's one of only a few casualties. Over the next few days, Piya stays with Moyna and Tutul. As Piya holds Tutul, she thinks of the impact that killed Fokir. She'd felt rather than heard him say Moyna and Tutul's names, and remembers the promises she'd made to him as he died. She'd tried to tell him how loved he was, and felt as though he understood.

Piya's musings about Fokir's last moments suggests that during that time, she truly understood that verbal communication is nowhere near as effective as a shared emotional language like love. With this, love takes its place with fear as one of the most effective communication methods.



HOME: AN EPILOGUE

A month after the cyclone, Nilima sits at her desk when a nurse races in to say that she saw Piya come off the last ferry. Piya had left Lusibari two weeks ago, and Nilima didn't expect to see her again. While Piya was still in the guesthouse, she was an unnerving presence and had made a strange friendship with Moyna. She'd even begun wearing Moyna's old saris, and the two women looked uncannily alike after Moyna cut her hair. Kanai had tried to talk Piya into going home, but she wouldn't budge. Kanai returned to New Delhi, and Piya left days later. Nilima didn't believe her when she said she'd be back.

Nilima's observations of the relationship between Piya and Moyna suggests that the two were bonded in part by Fokir's death and their relationships to him. Again, this reinforces that there are more modes of communication and forming relationships than just verbal communication; in this case, the two women are able to become close due to their shared experiences of loving the same person, albeit in different ways.



Piya knocks on Nilima's office and explains that she's been at her aunt's house at Kolkata, writing letters about what happened during the cyclone. She started a chain letter to raise money, which raised enough to buy Moyna and Tutul a house and pay for Tutul's education. In addition, Piya says she wrote about her work with the dolphins and has had offers of funding. However, she wanted to talk to Nilima before accepting them, as she wants the Babadon Trust behind any project. Nilima perks up at the mention of funding.

Piya asks if she could rent the guesthouse and set up an office upstairs. Indulgently, Nilima points out that Piya would need a staff, and Piya says she'd like to hire Moyna part-time. Nilima tries to think of anything that might complicate this. Piya explains that she's eligible for a visa that would allow her to stay indefinitely, and her uncle can deal with the rest. Nilima laughs and asks if Piya has a name for the project. Piya says she'd like to name it after Fokir, since his data is what will be the foundation of the project—her GPS is all that survived, and it recorded the route she took with Fokir. That route represents years of his observations of the dolphins.

Nilima quietly ponders this and then declares it will be a fitting memorial to Fokir. She invites Piya to have a cup of tea, and Piya asks about Kanai. Nilima explains that Kanai is restructuring his business so he can take time off. He wants to live in Kolkata for a while so he can write Nirmal's notebook, and he's coming to visit in a few days. Piya smiles and says it'll be good to have Kanai home. Nilima is surprised to hear Piya refer to the guesthouse as home and asks about it. Piya explains that her home is where the Orcaella are, and Nilima laughs and says her home is wherever she can brew tea.

Unlike Nirmal, Piya uses her experiences and her writing as forces for good and a catalyst to take action. This shows again what Nirmal may have been able to do had he been willing or able to actually publish his notebook and act on his ideas. Further, her mention that she wants the Babadon Trust's permission before beginning this project shows that she now recognizes the importance of working with local people instead of against them.



By deciding to name the project after Fokir, the novel brings the idea of language back around to explore the importance and the power of written language. By naming the project after Fokir, it means that he and his work won't be forgotten, even though he himself was illiterate. It suggests that the written word can be a powerful way to remember people.



What Nilima has to say about Kanai suggests that after his experience on Lusibari, he's come to the understanding that he needs to reconnect with the people he loves and cares about in Lusibari. This shows that he's taken Fokir's lesson with the tiger to heart, and now sees these people as actual people worthy of consideration, respect, and love. By transcribing Nirmal's journal, Kanai will also memorialize Nirmal in the same way that Fokir will be through Piya's project—again, showing the power of the written word to preserve someone's life story and memories.





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