

## FLOWS OF FEELING

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**Abstract:** Postcolonial studies has often figured colonialism as trauma and the “post” as an unresolved spectral remainder of that initial violence. In what ways does the critical turn to affect reshape this analysis of colonialism and open up alternative archives for the reading of postcolonial sensations, emotions, and memories? Affect is notoriously undefinable. The question of measure punctuates the critical debate on the category, surfacing in questions such as whether affect and emotion are equivalent; whether affect is or is not “in” language, whether affect is characterised by the speed of movement or the fixity of instantaneous response in the form of a visceral “shock.” Tracing several genealogies of affect in conjunction with a reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, this essay suggests that affect offers a critical alternative to the haunted temporality and melancholic work often associated with the postcolonial novel.

**Keywords:** affect, consciousness, trauma, psychoanalysis poststructuralism, melancholy, postcolonial novel, posthuman subject, topography affect

### 1. *What Do We Know About Affect? And What Does Affect Know About Us?*

I wrote parts of this paper at 30,000 feet up, in that improbably banal limbo of a world shrunk to the span of one’s folded arms and bent knees, you in your space, your seatmates in theirs, seats in their upright position, row after row, like pharaonic royals as they appear in on ancient papyrus and stone, in a timeless instant of waiting to command. I too am waiting, suspended on a flight path from San Francisco to Abu Dhabi to Trivandrum, with world enough and time in my little sarcophagus of space to think, not commanding but demanding, *asking*. I look at the questions I’ve typed (the epigraph above). And I wait. Nothing. Epigraph, epitaph, cenotaph. My thoughts make the relay: the letters in a question, letters on a tombstone, a tomb without a body. Death is in the air and I forget about affect. But affect doesn’t forget about me; indeed, affect knows me before I know it.

I am landing in the monsoon wet, three-o'clock-in-the morning night of Trivandrum in November and checking into the hotel across from the grounds (how green they will be in daylight) of the Kerala University College, Trivandrum, Kerala. I am crossing the cold white marble tiles aglow with the moonlight coming in through the curtains to open the tall dark cupboards with their slight smell of wet, wood into which air heavy with rain has seeped. I am showering off 24 hours of travel and, without really thinking, rubbing in the hotel's *neem* body lotion and then dusting my body with the sandalwood talcum powder. And then it hits, this is the smell of Amma, my father's mother, in whose sari folds that scent sweetly lingered; and it's the smell of myself in my late teens and early twenties, when I too used Mysore talc every day; and it's the smell of first loves, the white American boys to whom that sweet scent was so exotic, so *different*, so synecdochal of me; and it's the smell of this here and now.

An affective instant brings times and sensations and whole states of being together; it's a moment in which you're yourself but also other things, a moment in which something that "properly" belongs to a particular place and time and context slides into another, a moment in which you know without knowing. Roland Barthes (2005) reminds us to pay close attention to 'the shimmer' of 'an affective minimum,' that is, to the sparkling instant when a minor, microscopic apprehension suddenly pierces us right through and opens the world inside us to the world outside us. 'An inventory of shimmers' is what Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth title their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, which has come with me to Kerala. I admire the formulations I reread on the plane: the insistence on affect's lack of an originary state, affect as that which is 'born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulate *besideness*, affect as what moves as intensities and forces pass from body to body, body to world', affect's 'persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations' (Gregg and Seigworth 1-2). Affect is a dimension of the body's capacity to be affected (or, better, the body's incapacity *not* to be affected) by all the forces pulsing through matter, the matter of the body (skin, cell, tissue, pore, gut), the matter of the material world, the matter of the inorganic (the machine, the cyborg, the chip, the code, the image), and, in Gregg's and Seigworth's words, 'the vaporous evanescences of the incorporeal (events, atmospheres, feeling-tones) (Gregg and Seigworth 2). 'Bindings and unbindings, becomings and unbecomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements' (Gregg and Seigworth 2) All of these are affect's terrain and I know their description well enough. But what I think of, what I feel, in that predawn moment in Trivandrum are actually the shimmers themselves. The Mysore talc's white glow on the brown of my skin (did it really, as I'd read somewhere, contain stray bits of ground glass?).

Diamonds on skin, moonlight on marble tiles, hints of gold thread lighting up the saris I have hung in the tall cupboards. I have no saris that are not a little bit *fancy*. In my diasporic Indianness, saris are for graduations and weddings and births and deaths, for prayers and rituals and ceremonies and parties. As I rise to wrap and pleat and drape my sari (it is the first time I am wearing one in an academic setting) I wonder what it will be like if a sari is for thinking.

“Did you tie it yourself?” asks the generous hostess at the hotel restaurant over breakfast. Yes, I say, yes I did. Yes, I say again, yes, I love wearing them. Yes, I say (this time only to myself), there’s some feeling in the thinking today, something binding and unbinding, winding and unwinding, something that I don’t know if I can quite unravel, something not quite ready for display. I’m not wearing Draupadi’s mythological sari, which lengthened itself magically to resist exposing her nakedness to the demon who unraveled it. My skin in the sari is exposed, the skin I think in, the skin I think. It’s the tantalising offer affect theory holds out, to put one’s body into one’s head (I shudder at my own lingering Cartesianism), to think as feminism once said “from the body,” to risk *embodiment* as an intellectual style, that draws me in. In the rustle of the sari’s folds as I walk, on the glimmer of my talcum-dusted skin, something is flitting, something coming into, falling out of, my grasp; this body doesn’t feel like the one I usually think in. What’s happening is softer, more tactile, as if I were thinking the way I sweat, leaching out and taking in moisture, thinking at the level of the pores. Something is definitely on the run, running down. Rivulets are how I see my thinking leaving me as I start to explain what affect is.

Affects are instances of shimmering apprehension that can’t be named in language or fully charted in taxonomies of particular states of feeling, whether the five primary emotions (joy, fear, disgust, anger, sadness) popularised by the 2015 children’s film *Inside Out* or Silvan Tompkins’ nine (joy, excitement, surprise, anger, disgust, dissmell, distress, fear, shame, each linked to a biological gesture expression) (Tompkins, 1995). Indian theories of the *rasas* and the *bhavas*, I learn over the next few days of *Decolonizing the Emotions*, are more enumerated still, indexing dozens of states of feeling to verbal descriptors, sensations captured by a musician or dancer in sound or gesture, and subsequently registered in an audience. Such philosophies of emotion seem in part to turn on recognisability, a performer’s verisimilitudinous performance of a feeling that in turn causes the listener or viewer to re-recognise the feeling as that which now exists in herself. By contrast, many philosophies of affect insist on its break with all kind of cognition, including recognition. It’s This sense of affect as a knowledge one cannot quite hold, knows without knowing, has without owning, that draws my interest to the field. Affect

is *felt knowledge*, knowledge that happens not at the level of cognition or language or belief or proof or trueness-to-life but rather at the sensate level of the body and what it remembers, retains, houses, takes in.

Affects are experiences of intensity, registrations of stimuli that press in, fold in, and presage some action: a grimace, a shudder, a turning up of the nose, a turning down of the lips, some burst of bodily being or (more abstractly) of pure potentiality, for which the entire apparatus of the knowing self is neither necessary nor adequate. Lawrence Grossberg calls affect ‘the most difficult plane of human life to define and describe.’ Unlike desire (which we know through its objects, its satisfactions, its privations), and unlike subjective feeling (which we recognise readily as the self’s “own”), affect is for Grossberg something like ‘the “feeling” of life (Grossberg 80-81). *Where* that feeling is precisely housed, *what* causes that feeling to burst out or plunge down (how hard it is to give up Freudian topography), and *whom* affect constitutes are, confusingly for post-psychoanalytic understanding, not questions affect theory demands. Or, if it does demand them, it does so without relying on the topography and temporality of psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious. Affect theory points to something that the Freudian model of the subject does not, with its lurking developmentalism, its teleology of desire, and its identificatory fixes (child to parent, lover to beloved, subject to object). In contrast to these linearities and symmetries, lines and twos, affect describe a world of sensation that resists typology. Affect, in the Deleuzean tradition that represents a break with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, names the radical excess of those aspects of sensate life that *are* but cannot be readily or completely *named*, that exist but are housed at the preconscious level, that happen but surface without the doing, the knowing or unknowing, the acknowledgement or repression, of the subject. Affect is for this reason *nonhermeneutic*, beyond interpretation (‘Psychoanalysis,’ writes Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ‘was first and foremost an art of interpreting’ (Freud, 1989: 18). Affects resist not only interpretation but even naming: as Grossberg notes, ‘unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organised in response to our interpretations of situations’ (Grossberg 81). Is then, my vignette of the hotel room in Trivandrum an account of an affective state? Perhaps not technically, embedded as it in the plots of loss and remembrance, love and longing. But the scene for me is also one of radical unknowing, of coming through a particular “feeling of life” in such a way as to feel myself on the verge of knowing something I don’t know. That hesitancy, that unreadiness of affect, that precipice-like sensation of being *about* to know, to feel, to be *differently* is one of its most *opening* attributes, not only as a way to think about the self but also about the world.

Brian Massumi, writing in *Parables of the Virtual* (2002), explains how in registering certain stimuli the body ‘infolds contexts . . . the trace of past actions, including a trace of their contexts’ even as it opens to that realm of potentiality that he calls the *virtual* (Massumi 30). In the virtual, ‘past and future brush shoulders with no mediating present’ (Masumi 30), suggesting that affective intensity exists according to its own nonlinear temporal structure and that it furthermore works by accumulation, the carrying forward of the raw perceptual experience of the past and the contexts that inform a given affect. For Massumi, affects operate in nonlinear, nonhermeneutic, nonsignifying, and visceral ways. Affects also exist on a kind of temporal precipice, a state always in excess of being completed. It is for this reason that affect points to potential liberation, escape, freedom, or to use the Deleuzian term, becoming. Massumi’s mapping of affect emphasises its *indeterminacy*, its constant state of excess, a trembling potential before the state of taking form. It is indeed precisely not affect’s *form* that interests Massumi but its *remainder*, its “virtual remainder,” that “never-to-be-conscious and autonomic remainder” of some conscious experience, a remainder through which ‘past action and contexts are conserved and repeated, begun but not completed’ (Massumi 30).

In its reminder of the remainder, Massumi’s Deleuzian account of affect has some resonances with Freud’s account. Freud’s psychic topography houses affects *within*, indeed *beneath* consciousness. Consciousness is the liminal zone, the contact point between ‘perceptions of excitations coming from the external world and . . . feelings of pleasure and unpleasure which can only arise from within the mental apparatus’ (Freud, 1989: 26). Lying on ‘the borderline between outside and inside’, ‘turned towards the external world and “envelop[ing] the other psychical systems,” consciousness is figured as an in-between zone but one that is far less fluid than affect’s skin-surface’ (Freud, 1989: 28). Consciousness envelops or holds within it the unconscious. It is there that ‘repressed instinctual impulses’ reside, impulses that find their satisfaction in repetition compulsion (21). ‘More primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides’ repetition compulsion gratifies the unconscious by restaging the conditions for its instinctual impulses again and again, effectively writing an affective subtext to conscious life’s dreary drama of accommodation, resignation, and giving up of old desires (Freud, 1989: 25). Freud goes on to figure consciousness as a hardened, deadened ‘crust’, a ‘protective shield’ against the stimuli of ‘an external world charged with the most powerful energies’, energies that could overwhelm or kill the psychic system (Freud, 1989: 29). In describing consciousness’s function ‘as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli’ Freud’s topography reassigns the domain of affective response to a deeper layer of unconscious life. ‘By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a

similar fate – unless, that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield’ (Freud, 1989: 30). Trauma is one such event, of shattering proportions, but ordinary sensations also penetrate the shield, entering in ‘very small quantities’, often as mere ‘*samples* of the external world’ rather than its full energetic, potentially destructive, force (Freud, 1989: 31). Where affect studies turns to the energetic possibilities of “ordinary sensations” psychoanalysis has more often privileged trauma.

In Carthy Caruth’s reading of Freud, trauma, the wound inflected upon the mind, is notable less for its topography than for its temporality. ‘Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on’ (Caruth 4). Trauma’s “truth,” furthermore, ‘in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language’. Language in Caruth’s deconstructive reading of Freud, as Ruth Leys critically observes, is the zone of unknowability *par excellence*. Trauma’s aporias of knowledge become the mirror image of the constitutive gap that perpetually severs language from meaning. Because of what Leys calls ‘assumptions about the constitutive failure of linguistic representation in the post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Vietnam era’, it becomes possible to take the Holocaust As an event that ‘radically exceeds our capacity to grasp and understand it’ (Leys 267-8). As an instance of what we might call the traumatic sublime, this event refuses knowledge even as, in its repeated retelling, it opens itself to an encounter with difference. ‘Trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound’ (Caruth 8). For Leys, this encounter, negotiated at the level of language, is more properly an appropriation, a dangerous assumption of some *exchangeability* between the subject who has suffered a trauma and the subject who listens to that suffering, as well as of some *transmissibility* of the trauma across generations.

Affect theory has in common with Caruth’s rereading of Freud a concern with transmission. However, because affect theory understands affect not only as unspeakable and unnameable (like trauma), but also indeed *beyond*, even *independent* of, language, affect theory grounds transmission elsewhere. It is not the exchange of a tale, a passage of (and in) representation that transmits affect but rather the viral virtual contagion of one body being affected by what pulses through, hits, shimmers on another body. As Teresa Brennan explains ‘the transmission of affect means that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the “individual” and the

“environment” (Brennan 11). Affects are not the purview of individuals alone, that is, individuals understood as autonomous entities.

In Massumi’s model affect is marked by an ‘autonomous’ capacity to remain unattached to the body that registers it and is animated by it (Massumi 26). What Massumi calls the ‘autonomy’ of affect also refers to affect’s housing in autonomic bodily responses for which the individual subject is neither origin, referent, nor master. Because affects are not in this sense ‘personal’, because they exist in excess of conscious perception, they enable a thinking of the interpersonal, the transpersonal, of what passes between bodies and worlds, what links them, connects them, even imbricates them. Affects do allow us to describe a particular kind of subject, one in several ways familiar to us. As Patricia Clough points out, ‘affect and emotion, after all, point just as well as poststructuralism and deconstruction do to the subject’s discontinuity with itself, a discontinuity of the subject’s conscious experience with the non intentionality of emotion and affect’ (Clough 206). Affect’s subject is however differently, one might say *more*, embodied than poststructuralism’s and deconstruction’s. Affect’s subject is material yet also porous, open to that which is not it, say, the domain of the technological (the biomediated body, the body shot through with information). This is also the subject who experiences affect as the shock of an apprehension that puts her in contact with something she cannot *already* have known and will not ever *completely* know – in other words, the subject open to what lies outside her consciousness, beginning with her own autonomic responses but extending from there to the world of others and the otherness of the world.

The *network* is a key metaphor for this aspect of affect. Not only does the network in affect theory refer to the circulatory economy along which affects move, sometimes “stick,” and generally engage the sociocultural production of identities (Sara Ahmed, Lawrence Grossberg), but the network also describes the topography of the subject itself, a recognizably posthuman subject whose “interior” is no center and whose “exterior” is no boundary. Recall Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s influential description in *A Thousand Plateaus* of a system that is ‘reducible neither to the One nor the multiple . . . [that] has neither beginning nor end . . . system without a General and without an organising memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states’ (Deleuze and Guattari 21). This system is a *rhizome*, that is a nonlinear, network-like structure of multiple branching, a counterpoint and alternative to the root-based philosophy of origin, singularity, and teleological development. Other theorists speak of the ways in which affects, with their location in the senses, return us to the body itself as a networked entity: in Ben Highmore’s phrase, ‘a body [that] would be understood as a nexus of finely interlaced force fields’

(Highmore 119). ‘Cultural experience’, he adds (and to this we might append historical experience) ‘is often a densely woven entanglement of all these aspects . . . the sticky entanglements of substances and feelings, of matter and affect are central to our contact with the world’ (Highmore 119).

Affects, as theory from Freudian psychoanalysis to Deleuzean post structuralism to new media studies and posthumanism tells us, do not exist *in themselves alone*. Each and every affect emerges against the backdrop of some set of circumstances and relations – being in the material world, or perhaps being in relation to one’s own history, or even being in and under a particular regime of the political, say new nationalism or late capitalism or that curious state of contemporary cosmopolitical existence that Bruce Robbins (1999) has dubbed ‘feeling global’. Affects are a map through which we can discern a set of spatial and temporal emplacements – in the body, in history, in culture, in nature. Affect, these days, is also a critical map, a shape shifting topic of inquiry that emerges at the intersections of other philosophical discourses on the subject. These are recognizably the subjects proposed by psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, from which affect theory inherits a preoccupation with the non-coincidence of the subject with its identity, the intransigent unknowability of *all* of the self to some myth or mode or means of selfnarration, what we might call the aporias of being. But affect theory also dialogues with posthuman accounts of the subject as it is mediated by not only mind and body but also by technology, nature, and the inorganic, in others words, the subject as it is *made* (more than *known*), the subject as a byproduct of life in the material world. For affect’s posthuman theorists, including Massumi, Clough, Nigel Thrift, Katherine Stewart, Elizabeth Grosz and others, affect emerges untethered from the Enlightenment fantasy who is the subject of all he surveys, the subject constituted through scopic mastery of a world *out there*. Rather, the posthuman subject of affect is shot through by the world *out there*’s penetration into the world *in here*. Indeed, such topographies of surface and depth, of externality and interiority, the micro and the macro, are precisely what affect theory interrogates, proposing instead a sense of how these scales oscillate, even flow (the liquid metaphor is important), into one another. This posthuman subject of affect often *touches*, to use another of affect theory’s privileged metaphors, the ecological and environmental world, the world of a nature not entirely distinct from culture, an organicism not altogether separated from technology, an animal deeply intimate with the human.

And yet, the question of what we are to call human subjectivity is, however, still taken up with some urgency by other affect theorists who wish to think political charges and attachments. In the psychological and social sciences, affect describes what John Campbell



and Alan Pew call ‘the powerful charge of emotions that lies at the centre of the process of identification’ (Campbell and Pew 11). Affects thus bind individuals to such shared social identities as family, ethnicity, religion, culture, nation, and region. Sara Ahmed uses the figure of “stickiness” to describe the process by which affect is transferred from one object, subject, or entity to another (Ahmed 8). Thus something like fear, precisely because it ‘does not reside positively in a particular object or sign’, is able to “slide across signs and between bodies . . . [and] becomes stuck only temporarily, in the very attachment of a sign to a body, an attachment that is taken on by the body’ (Ahmed 64). ‘[W]hat sticks “shows us” where the object has traveled through what it has gathered onto its surface, gatherings that become a part of the object, and call into question its integrity as an object’ (Ahmed 91). Emotions in this sense ‘work as form of capital’ (Ahmed 8); they acquire their value through circulation and exchange.

Affect is notoriously undefinable. The question of measure punctuates the critical debate, surfacing in questions such as whether affect and emotion are equivalent; whether affect is or is not “in” language, whether affect is characterised by the speed of movement or the fixity of instantaneous response in the form of a visceral “shock.” In contrast to Deleuzian critics’ insistence on affect’s existence in excess of signification or narrativisation, others insist on the need to locate affect *within* the fields of the social, cultural, and political, exploring affect as a particular language of politics. So, for example, Ben Anderson argues that ‘cultural theories of affect promise sociopolitical insight by simultaneously naming a new object of power and the unassimilable limit or outside to power. Perhaps once we begin from the conjunction of affects and power, rather than their a priori separation, affect will itself come to operate in the promissory mode as an endlessly deferred horizon for inquiry rather than a stable ground’ (Anderson 183). Affect works not only in and as the future, but also against separation. In affect, the distinctions between subject and world, the material and the cultural, the past and the future, unfix.

Affect’s unmeasurability, like its undefinability, opens the field to individual genealogies and deployments of the term, situating affect’s critics in a host of critical microworlds – Deleuzian/Spinozan, feminist-materialist, sociopolitical, psychoanalytic. These worlds also include disciplinary worlds. The question of affect in these latter seems to me to catalyze or shock a renewed focus on what might be called the primal scenes of various disciplines: the *encounter* between a particular analytic method (literary hermeneutics, anthropological fieldwork, sociological study) and their particular objects (text, culture, group, other, self). The problematic of affect intensifies the relational nature of these fraught disciplinary encounters, illuminating or, to use a less “enlightening” metaphor that

better honors affect's radical unknowability, lighting up like a string of lights, on-off, on-off, with the inevitable broken light to break the continuity, a familiar chain of subjects and objects and methods. Critic, text, reading. Anthropologist, culture, fieldwork. Historian, archive, narrative. And so on. These triangulated chains, like their philosophical original (subject, object, knowing), are themselves affective circuits. What might these mean for our understanding of disciplines in themselves and in transformative contact with one another?

## 2. Reading through Flows, Touching (on) Language

Now, I think, a return. A critic reading a text. A critic in a sari reading a text in which a sari figures. A critic pondering the affective intensities at play in her reading/the text's figuring. A critic wondering if language after all does transmit affect. A postcolonial critic of postcolonial novels wondering if there is such a thing as postcolonial affect and if, so, how one might go about talking about it. Affect as I am exploring it is not interchangeable with the passions and emotions housed in particular characters, plots, and settings, such as the 'melancholy' that Geörgy Lukács famously attributed to the genre in *The Theory of the Novel* (Lukács 123). Such formal melancholy, like the trauma to which it is tied, has indeed become something of a hallmark of a certain subgenre of postcolonial fiction: the novel of disillusionment, of failed independence, of neocolonial inequities, of intractable war, of diasporic dispossession as, for example, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. To speak of the melancholy animating these novels is for a critic like Massumito subject their more free-floating affects to emotional description (emotion's terminology "captures" affects). It is also to subject affects to narrativisable meaning as it emerges from the technologies of novelist form (the teleology of plot, the interiority of character, the backdrop proscenium of the historical real). How else and why else should we attempt to read affect in the postcolonial novel? Grossberg, a reader of popular culture texts, offers a possible answer in his reminder that first, that 'it is affective investment which enables ideological relations to be internalised and, consequently, naturalised', and secondly, that 'if affect cannot be "found" in the text or read off its surfaces (any more than meaning can), it is also the case that affect is not simply something that individuals put into it' (Grossberg 83). 'Too often, critics assume that affect – as pure intensity – is without form or structure' (Grossberg 82). For Grossberg, these forms and structures are those through which social struggles, 'people's investments in and into the world', are formed. But such forms and structures can also be thought of in generic terms, as part of the work – the affective work – that the postcolonial novel does.

Affect might attune us ever more the complexities, the uneven-ness, the perpetually unachieved, even inexpressible, nature of the process by which, Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* long ago reminded us, the traces of history are sedimented into forms (Jameson 31). Affect in this sense could be a pulsing map of the postcolonial novel's micro and macro states of feeling through which, in which, as which, politics are lived. If the novel in its Jamesonian model comes back to history, comes down to history, *is* in a sense history, then affect's network of forces and intensities spread wide across a social, cultural, historical, and emotional field offers quite another snapshot of generic form. In this alternative picture of novelistic form there also emerges another portrait of that subject with which the European novel has been entwined. Affect's posthuman subject rejects the Enlightenment fantasy who is the "master of all he surveys," to use Robinson Crusoe's terms for himself on the island. In contrast to this subject constituted through scopic mastery of a world *out there*, the posthuman subject of affect is shot through by the world *out there's* penetration into the world *in here*. Michel de Certeau has proposed a theory of "the Freudian novel" that, like the affective theory of the postcolonial novel I am suggesting, positions itself against literary histories of the sort occasioned by and summed up by Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. For de Certeau, *Robinson Crusoe* is 'a "mythic novel" of postulate that takes individualism as the historical trope for occidental modernity' (de Certeau 24). Working on the assumption that 'Freudianism dismantles individualism, destroys its truth-seemingness', de Certeau's theory of the novel turns instead to the realm of affects. Freud's assumption, de Certeau explains, 'is that the speaking subject's place is decisive in a conflicting network of abreactions and that it is specified by the affect. This allows reintroduction of that which the objective utterance hides: its historicity – that which structured relationships, and that which changes them. To make this historicity reappear is the condition of analytic elucidation and of its operativeness' (de Certeau 26). Like Freud, and like Grossberg or Jameson, de Certeau emphasises the *historicity* of affect. This is not the presumed life history of a novelistic character or author (the subject of speculation in earlier Freudian theories of the novel) nor the history of the novel (the historicity implied in genre's constant oscillating revision of its own codes) but the history sedimented into form, the history of the larger movements, events, and ideas that structured relationships among subjects and systems and changed them, all within some larger network of exchange. Finally, if to read affect in the postcolonial novel will require a sense of this macropolitical stage, it will equally demand the most loving of grammatological attention to what happens in, and beyond, language.

Ghosh's writings are undoubtedly melancholy, even strictly speaking melancholic, attached as they are to losses of the past. Readers will know Ghosh's preoccupation with

the supplementation of official History with fragments and traces of lost records and various histories of feeling that subtend and transcend the history of the state spans the period from his first mixed-genre work, *In an Antique Land*, through his elegy for postcolonial nationalism, *The Shadow Lines* and his historical detective fiction *Chromosome*, and on to the recent *Ibis* trilogy, set against more than one century in the Indian Ocean World. The novel I wish to take up, *The Hungry Tide*, is one composed, like Ghosh's others, of a *feeling history*, that is, a history registered at the level of the affects, and often through markedly melancholic affect. Recall Freud's distinction in "Mourning and Melancholia" between holding on to a past loss ("swallowing the loss," becoming one with it) and, instead, mourning the loss, laying it to rest, substituting for it, moving on (Freud, 1963). Melancholia's loop, mourning's progression; a circle and a line, neither of which, it turns out, are sufficient to delineate the different topography of affect. Topography, in fact, is the topic on which I want to focus my reading of *The Hungry Tide*: the sense of land, river, and sea whose metamorphic mobility houses all manner of postcolonial affect for Ghosh, including the ecocritical affect explored by readers such as ShivaniJha.

*The Hungry Tide* considers the contemporary diasporic negotiations of a homeland (the India to which a young Seattle-raised South Asian cetologist or dolphin researcher travels). That bounded national imaginary is supplemented, even supplanted, by the liminal zones of river, ocean, and mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, the remote island archipelago off the eastern coast of Bengal.

In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga's descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way; as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirst plain. That there is a further twist to the tale becomes apparent only in the final stages of the river's journey – and this part of the story always comes as a surprise, because it is never told and thus never imagined. It is this: there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. One past that point the river throws off its bindings and separated into hundreds, maybe thousands, of tangled strands (6).

These are the words of a now dead teacher with poetic inclinations who went to the region decades earlier, inspired to teach revolutionary youth, but whose fervor was broken by witnessing a brutal local massacre of itinerant migrants seeking refuge. The teacher chronicled the events in a notebook whose fragmentary record unfolds history as memory

in the text as his nephew, a professional translator, reads it. From this initial description of them mythological origin of the Sundarban islands in ‘Shiva’s matted hair . . . washed apart in a vast, knotted tangle’, the description mutates form like the mangrove islands themselves, to propose ‘this immense archipelago of islands’ as ‘the trailing threads of India’s fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the *achol* that follows her, half wetted by the sea’.

Male, then female, ultimately networked, the islands are described as being connected by the channels of countless rivers, ‘spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable’. The tides that reach inland, sometimes two hundred miles, and recede, cause ‘every day thousands of acres of forest [to] disappear underwater, only to reemerge hours later’. The mangroves created overnight are capable of covering an entire island in a few years. In this metamorphic geography space and time are condensed and dilated. ‘A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself’ (7). Mangroves are also, of course rhizomatic, networks of branching roots that in a later description ‘colonis[e]’ the banks, ‘breath[ing] through spear-like “ventilators” connected by subterranean root systems’. ‘The surface of the bank was pierced by so many of these upthrust organs that it was impossible to distinguish between one mark and another’ (264). With its anthropomorphised organicism, its indeterminate multiplicity, and the impossibility of distinction it instantiates, the mangrove here offers an affective topography that is mirrored in the opening description of how mangroves emerge in dynamic relation to many river channels that flow into the Sundarban’s sea.

The clustering of a few channels creates “confluences [where] the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumor of land, echoing back from the horizon. In the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a ‘mohona – an oddly seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement’ (6). Here, as throughout the novel, the word that seems most to catalyse affect, *mohona* is left untranslated, as if to point simultaneously to how language captures affect and remains uncapturable, perpetually lost in the fog of translation. Ghosh’s monolingual novel is shot through with multilingualism. The presence of foreign words, etymological speculations, and large-scale reflections on the transmissibility of meaning from one system layer together producing a networked sense of language. If affect pulses through this network, it happens at the level of language, thanks to a kind of flowing, mobile, tactile inhabiting of language, almost a wearing of it. *Mohona* ‘wrapped in many layers of beguilement’, the sari that is India with the flowing, trailing *achol* of the Sundarban archipelago, these

feminised expressions of a condition of *in-betweenness*, affect in/as a sari. I am wearing it and thinking it, thinking what it is to wear it, not just at the level of me, my body, myself, but as a figure for the ways affect slides across the surfaces of things; skin, word, sea.

Nirmal, the teacher whose notebook records these images, worked in a school while his wife Nilima turned her attention to the women of Luisbari. The womens' disproportionate dressing in borderless white saris reveals 'an assumption [that] was woven, like a skein of dark wool, into the fabric of their lives: when the menfolk went fishing it was the custom for their wives to change into the garments of widowhood . . . as though they were trying to hold misfortune at bay by living it over and over again. Or was it merely a way of preparing themselves for that which they knew to be inevitable?' (67-8). Appalled by the 'enormity in these acts' Nilima devotes herself to a smaller scale of historical being and feeling. In hoping to organise the women she puzzles over the choice of 'a collective noun for them'. *Sreni*, class, is not right, the Marxist-minded Nirmal says (widows are not workers). But Nirmala's "epiphany" takes her beyond language: 'It did not matter what they were; what mattered was that they should not remain what they were'. And so the Mohila Sangothon – the Women's Union – and ultimately the Badabon Development Trust (named by Nirmal after the Bengali word for mangrove) are established, leading, in the wake of the abolishment of the zamindaris, to a range of social services. *Badabon*, it turns out, 'was a word Nirmal loved' (this is a novel all about how words inspire love and how love is experienced in words). 'Our Bangla word joins Arabic to Sanskrit – *bada* to *bon*, or "forest". It is as though the word itself were an island, born of the meeting of two great rivers of language – just as the tide country is begotten of the Ganga's union with the Brahmaputra' (69). Island words, it turns out, make no man (and no woman) an island in *The Hungry Tide*.

The mutating, metamorphic geography of the Sundarbans registers at the level of language and also unfolds multiple modalities of memory. Hindu mythology and local oral legends of forest deities and dangers like Bon-Bibi, the man-eating tiger, are intercut with long fragments from Nirmal's academic notebook that Kanai translates, Kanai's own philological speculations, cetological information relayed by Piya as she researches the supposed disappearance of a rare species of river dolphin from the archipelagic waters, and the larger colonial and anticolonial history sedimented into the place itself. The very house that once belonged to a Scottish officer of British imperialism who founded an utopian Marxist community was subsequently inhabited by Nirmal and Nilima, then by Kanai and Piya, whose connection to one another, mediated by Nirmal's notebook, extends into linkages with many others who live in the community. As so frequently in Ghosh's writing,

the available record of the historical past, the record recorded in and as information, is supplemented by the flows of feeling, flows indistinguishable from language and story with all their ‘many layers of beguilement’.

The introductory fragment from Kanai’s uncle’s notebook concludes with a speculation about the elusive origin of the Sundarbans’ name. Are they the “beautiful forest” of the name’s literal meaning, or derived from the name of a common mangrove, ‘the Sundari tree, *Heriteria minor*’, or are ‘the record books of the Mughal emperors’ correct to claim the region is named not for a tree but the tide (*bhati*)? *Bhatirdesh*, tide country, is how the locals name it, referring specifically to the ebb tide (*bhata*). This piece of comparative etymology concludes with a telling return to, and displacement within, language, here the German lyric poetry of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* imported to adduce the affective sensation of being in the Sundarbans.

This is a land half submerged at high tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwifed by the moon, is to know why the name ‘tide country’ is not just right but necessary. For as with Rilke’s catkins hanging from the hazel and the spring rain upon the dark earth, when we behold the lowering tide

we, who have always thought of joy  
as rising . . . feel the emotion  
that almost amazes us  
when a happy thing falls. (Ghosh, 2006: 7)

Unlike the untranslated *mohona*, ‘an oddly seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement’, *joy* here is not itself a carrier of affect, of sensations, of what Nigel Thrift has called ‘sensed-sensing knowledge’ (Thrift 18). It is not the clearly named ‘joy’ and ‘emotion’ in Rilke’s lines that evoke the soft, wet, slippery sensorium of the Sundarbans or the amazed awe they inspire, but rather the curious process by which such words (joy, emotion) come to change their meanings. Though we have ‘always thought of joy as rising’, the poem describes how affect can short circuit thought so that the reader does not think through definition (joy rises) but rather ‘feel[s] the emotion/ that almost amazes us/when a happy thing falls’. It’s the feeling here that matters, the peripatetic encounter with a knowledge we did not have, nor could not, in the language available to us (joy rises), but instead a feeling knowledge, a knowing feeling (the emotion ‘when a happy thing falls’) that if it makes no sense, nonetheless amazes, affects, by exceeding sense.

This is affect in language. If, as Deleuzean affect theory insists, affect exists *beyond* the point of linguistic capture, outside the capacity of any naming (for to name an affect is to tame it into emotion), then can Ghosh's novel in fact be said to traffic in affect? The question is even larger than this. Can literature produce affect? Can the reading of novels affect us? Is there indeed still such a project in the novel (and other generic forms too) as a "sentimental education"? These are old fashioned questions but *The Hungry Tide* brings them back again. The affect that Ghosh's novel manages to wrap or wear at the level of the word is different from the traumatic sensation that Caruth and other trauma theorists understand to be inaccessible to language. Affect can touch us in language, as language, and it is in that very zone that we can sometimes touch it.

In a powerful final scene it is language again that catalyzes affect as Kanai curses the local fisherman and friend to Piya who is taking him through the dense mangrove where a tiger has been spotted. Himself a guide and translator, the cosmopolitan Kanai finds himself unmoored in response to the fisherman Fokir's question 'Can you feel the fear?' (265). Kanai declares himself unafraid only to, later, stumbling through the mud and noticing the fisherman's switch from 'respectful *apni*' to 'the same familiar *tui* Kanai had used in addressing him' as he mocks the former's fear, burst out in obscenities (268-69).

'*Shala, banchod, shuorerbachcha.*' His anger came welling up with an atavistic explosiveness, rising from sources whose very existence he would have denied: the master's suspicion of the menial: the pride of caste; the townsman's mistrust of the rustic; the city's antagonism toward the village. He had thought he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past, but the violence with which they spewed out of him now suggested they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve.

There had been occasions in the past – too many of the them – when Kanai had seen his clients losing their temper in like fashion: when rage had made them cross the boundaries of selfhood, transporting them to a state in which they were literally beside themselves. The phrase was apt: their emotions were so intense as almost to spill outside the physical boundaries of their skin . . . In Kanai's professional life there had been a few instances in which the act of interpretation had given him the momentary sensation of being transported out of his body and into another. In each instance it was as if the instrument of language had metamorphosed – instead of being a barrier, a curtain that divided, it had become a transparent film, a prism that allowed him to look through another set of eyes, to filter the world through a mind other than his own (269-70).



If in its description of a *named* emotion – rage – rising, this passage seems not to be strictly speaking affective, it might nonetheless be understood to offer a series of metaphors, like the mangrove topography, for affect's movements, sensations, and effects. Hence the images of bursting beyond body and skin, of entering the other, the world, via the 'transparent film' and 'prism' of language, a shimmering membrane at once diamond and silk, like that glistening of the Mysore talc on my sari-wrapped skin. What surges up is largely and specifically historical: rural- cosmopolitan difference, caste hierarchy, class privilege. But the passage does far more than render history the content of affect's form, precisely because of its insistence on language as yet another of affect's surfaces: as porous and precarious as skin to being pierced through by what is not oneself. Perhaps to say that affect is present in language, in the dancing play of metaphor, in the haunting remainder of the untranslatable, in the deep difference it enfolds, is not in the end to domesticate or tame affect (is affect itself the tiger in that mangrove forest?) but to free up an interpretation from seeking meaning.

In the conclusion to his notebook's account, Nirmal pauses to apologise. 'I have gone on at too great a length . . . this is what happens when you have not written for years; every moment takes on a startling clarity; small things become the world in microcosm' (124). Small things become the world; as Nirmal himself writes in his notebook's opening, 'a mangrove forest is a universe unto itself' (7); and, as Massumi says, 'affect is the whole world' (Massumi 43). This passionate condensation, this collapsing in of the large into the small, with the intense shocks it produces, and the narrative pleasures it yields, makes a case for the extent to which affect does indeed find a home in the world, specifically in the novelistic world. Novelistic representation of affect, as I have described it in *The Hungry Tide*, where it serves to describe the feeling flows of history *and* language, is not ultimately a capture of affect, a character or plot based correlation of emotion to happenings, but rather something with a flood-life of its own; surging and receding, mutating and merging, producing in the end not only a topoi of feeling but a style of reading that cannot help but itself be moved. Affects such as these registered in language don't give us history as the content of the novel but rather engage affect as its *form*. The melancholy of the novel, to recall Lukács's description, is precisely not the melancholic kernel of a particular loss (of God, for Lukács, reading the novel as a secular chronic, of anticolonialism's promise for the postcolonial novel of disillusionment). Rather the melancholy of the novel, its inwardturning, backward looking, orientation becomes, in *The Hungry Tide* at least, the opening to something much larger, a worldly feeling, a state of compassionate co-being with what is not oneself.

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