

Tides of Change Breaking against the World of Sundarbans: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

In his novel *The Hungry Tide* Amitav Ghosh takes his readers into the journey of human mind and makes us rediscover our benumbed selves. This article will be essentially in two parts, the first part will focus on Ghosh's treatment of the process of globalisation and how it has impacted the world of Sundarbans—a landscape steeped in beauty, change, myth, and enigma. The article will further analyze how the global world exerts its hegemonic powers over this already fragile world and further breeds a sense of distrust for the traditional way of life. But what remains to be fathomed is whether the global world will remain unaffected or will it also be transformed in this act of reaching out?

The second part of the article will be dealing with the idea of nationhood and how it is problematized in the novel. *The Hungry Tide* puts forth many complex issues which need to be pondered over--in today's worldview when identities are shaped by nationalities then the question and complexity that arises out of this supposition is; that when nations are reconstructed or redefined can identities be redefined as well? Does one cease to exist with redrawing of maps or boundaries of states or nations?

Keywords: Globalization, hegemony, homogenisation, nationhood, identity, subaltern.

Introduction

...Rilke himself had shown me what I could do. Hidden in a verse I had found a message written for my eyes only, filled with hidden meaning. It remained only for the time to come when I would receive a sign and then I would know what I had to do.

For the Poet himself had told me:

'This is the time for what can be said. Here is its country. Speak and testify...' (Ghosh: 298)

Amitav Ghosh with his remarkable writing speaks and testifies not only the plight of displaced East Bengali refugees but also gets his readers acquainted with the world of Sundarbans; a perfect setting to unravel the inner recesses of human mind. Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* spreads itself like a beautiful painting with different hues and colours. Ghosh like an expert artist gives different strokes of varying degrees in order to make his piece more interesting and vibrant. Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands and home to many rare species like the Royal Bengal tiger and Irrawaddy dolphins, unfolds itself with its myriad legends, folktales and myths. These legends and myths achieve an added dimension because of the very nature of Sundarbans which are in a constant state of flux with Bhata and Jowar—the ebb and flood of waters:

The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the achol that follows her, half wetted by the sea. They number in the thousands, these islands; some are immense and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago. (7)

I

There is an inherent stability within the fragile and changing world of Sundarbans which gets disturbed by the arrival of global cosmopolitans Piyali Roy and Kanai Dutta. Piyali Roy or Piya is a young Bengali American from Seattle, a cetologist by profession, and it is her work which has brought her to this part of the world. On her chance meeting with Kanai Dutta on

the train to Canning, she gets an invitation to visit Lusibari. Piya and Kanai are established as the 'outsiders' at the very beginning of the novel: "Kanai was the one other 'outsider' on the platform and he quickly attracted his own share of attention."(4)

Kanai and Piya are not the only outsiders in the novel; the tide country has always attracted people who have kept pouring in from time to time. The couple Nirmal and Nilima who also happen to be Kanai's uncle and aunt, came and settled in Lusibari in search of health, peace and solace. Nilima is a social worker and runs Badabon Trust and thus is engaged in her own small way to empower the women of the region. Nilima through her trust has helped women like Moyna to acquire skills for employment. Moyna has been trained to be a nurse, but this new found knowledge also breeds distrust and disrespect for the older way of life, she is unable to appreciate the kind of work Fokir; her husband is involved in and hence does not want her son Tutul to do the same. The social work of Nilima is taking people away from their own identities and drifting them away towards complete subjugation. She is helping people but on her own terms and thus resists from extending any help to Kusum, she completely dissociates herself from the uprising of Morichjhapi. In the novel Nirmal documents a conversation between his wife and a doctor from Calcutta who called these refugees as 'nuisance' (298). Nirmal's story is narrated through the readings of his own diary by Kanai. Nirmal with all his sympathies and concerns for the refugees living in Morichjhapi was in fact trying to live his own dreams through their cause. Nirmal also fails to understand Kusum's true feelings for Horen. One must not forget the very fact that Nirmal was no naïveté but was a well read man, a Marxist who had spent a long time living on the island of Lusibari. Surprisingly enough as we go through his diary reading along with Kanai, we find that Nirmal never even had a vague idea about Horen nursing love for Kusum and therefore Horen's revelation about their relationship (i.e. Kusum and Horen's) comes as a surprise to the readers. But Horen's ability to understand the minds of Nirmal and Kanai shows his capacity for acute observation and his understanding of human nature. Horen is also able to look through the frivolity of claims made by the all knowing privileged educated class who are incapacitated to fathom the needs and desires of the marginalised, in spite of all their claims of social equality:

Horen laughed again. 'Kanai-babu---are you just pretending to be blind? Or is it just that you cannot believe that an unlettered man like Fokir could be in love?'

Kanai bridled at this. 'Why should you say that, Horen-da? And why should I believe any such thing?'

'Because you wouldn't be the first,' Horen said quietly. 'It was the same with your uncle, you know.' (388)

Fokir is depicted as the innocent native, the son of the soil who toils his time fishing and catching crabs in the lap of nature. He has deep knowledge about his surroundings and like Wordsworth's Lucy; nature has been his guide and mentor. He proves to be of great help for Piya in locating the movement of Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sundarban area. Although very reticent and of shy nature; Fokir shows his rebellious streak against the globalised educated elite only twice in the novel. First when he holds Piya back when the villagers are attempting to kill the tiger, second when he takes Kanai on a lonely island and ultimately leaves him there for few minutes, thus exposing Kanai to the devastations of fear and how it can affect the human mind. In the wilderness Fokir it seems is empowered as he overcomes class and social barriers and addresses Kanai in an informal manner. Contrary to this the ugly animal raises its head in Kanai and all the acquired grace and civility evaporates in that moment of self destructive anger and abuses pour forth for Fokir:

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 to the village. He had thought that he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past, but the violence with which they came spewing out of him now suggested that they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve. (350-351)

Fokir holds the mirror of truth and reality and brings forth the real ugly self of Kanai which is still prejudiced, unforgiving and feudal in its mindset. Piya comes out as a woman of firm

determination and grit; paving her way in a world of predators--- human as well as animal. Living her life literally out of the bag and surviving on nutrition bars and Ovaltine and not having any family or friends to rely on she has adapted herself to live by her profession, observing marine mammals and globetrotting the world. In this complex world of Sunderbans; Piya is the agent of hegemonic global powers and also its victim. While researching and looking for marine mammals she herself is threatened and chased by the forest guard. It is here in the Sunderbans that she fathoms her vulnerability without realising her own role in making others vulnerable by her kind of research which will evoke global interest in this fragile world.

It seems that language does not matter between Fokir and Piya and that they have complete understanding of each other. But the fact remains that it is Fokir who understands the needs and requirements of Piya and with his rich knowledge of tide country is able to guide her through meandering waterways to look for Irrawaddy dolphins. From the beginning to the end he is her saviour and guide who unfolded nature's wonders and beauties for her.

Piya on the other hand fails to reciprocate the same concern and understanding for Fokir and his people. When Piya is on her expedition accompanied by Fokir, Kanai and Horen then they come across an island where a tiger having been entrapped is burnt alive by the villagers. Horrified by this killing of the tiger Piya tries to register her resentment but is forcibly removed from the sight by Fokir. For Piya this very incident is the heart of darkness and both Kanai and Piya refer to this incident as "the horror", (324) the phrase which brings to mind some unfathomable, abominable activity. For Piya the act of burning the tiger is an act of horror. The reason of her outcry lies deep in her psyche; tiger for her and for many world over; is the romanticised symbol of power, beauty and grace. Particularly from an environmentalist's point of view a Royal Bengal Tiger is a species to be preserved. On the other side of the picture are hundreds of villagers who are either killed or mauled by the tiger but off course they are the weak and marginalised species --- de glam and voiceless --- and therefore Piya is unable to empathise with their suffering and plight but is significantly horrified at the sight of a burning tiger, being a dedicated environmentalist that she is. It seems that for people like her man's tired and shrivelled brown skin full of sweat and dirt is

no comparison to the golden glossy fur of the tiger. The sad part of it all is that Kanai, the global cosmopolitan understands that the horror does not lie in the burning of the tiger by the villagers but in fact lies with the people and the policies which give importance to animals over humans, and turn a blind eye to the plight of the subalterns:

We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror to---that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?'... 'Because it was people like you,' said Kanai, 'who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for human costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons. It's not hard to ignore the people who are dying---after all they are the poorest of the poor.... (325)

Piya is not the one who will accept the allegations levelled by Kanai against her clan and gives her own reasoning that "there's a big difference between preserving a species in captivity and keeping it in its habitat." (325) Through her logic she tries to establish that in preservation of wildlife lies the future of mankind. Her one sided world view has no place for the views and concerns of the marginalised. The subaltern voices are muted by the intellect of the capitalists.

Piya's knowledge has chained her down to fixed perceptions about people as she sees them in different categories or compartments. Opposed to this is the world of Sundarbans which has come to epitomise syncretic culture where the legend of Bon Bibi is imbued with both Muslim and Hindu influences. Piya realises that the refrain uttered by Fokir and his son sounded like 'Allah' and before she could make up her mind regarding the religion of Fokir she soon observes that they were praying the deities in a manner which a Muslim was unlikely to do.

II

India's Independence brought with itself the baggage of partition which revisited Pakistan and led to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Ghosh's prowess not only lies in his skills to capture history but in his ability to impart emotional dimension to it by giving the historical event a human face. Brinda Bose writes:

Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of reassessing its troubled antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of – or at least come to terms with – our troubling present. Corollarily, he provides, through his imaginative rendering of this reassessment in fiction, a vital and energising footnote to the documentation of South Asian history. (Bose: 16)

Indeed *The Hungry Tide* revisits history and makes a strong statement on all such ideas of nation and nationhood which are exclusionary and divisive. The failure of any such imposed nationhood lies in the very tales of immigrants/refugees. The refugees that we encounter in Morichjhapi---a small island in Sundarbans which was envisioned by its settlers of having the possibility of being a safe haven for the dalits and the tribals--- are the people who have been plucked away from their lands and sown in hostile conditions, where there are no chances of their survival and hence they clandestinely move to their familiar surroundings finally landing in Morichjhapi. It is through Kanai's reading of Nirmal's diary that the readers encounter the translated world of Morichjhapi and the events which led to the resistance and the massacre of hundreds of settlers. The heartrending account of Morichjhapi massacre has been given by Ross Mallick in his essay "Refugee Resettlement in forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre":

At least several hundred men, women, and children were said to have been killed in the operation and their bodies dumped in the river. Photographs were published in the *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*, and the opposition members in the State Assembly staged a walkout in protest....The central government's Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission, which was aware of the massacre, said in its annual report that there were no atrocities against Untouchables in West Bengal, even though their Marichjhapi file contained newspaper clippings, petitions, and a list with the names and ages of 236 men, women and children killed by police at Marichjhapi prior to the massacre, including some who were drowned when their boats were sunk by police. (Mallick: 111)

Horen recounts to Kanai that Kusum and many other women on the island were raped and thrown into the waters. Their only crime being that they returned to the place where their

heart resided and had to bear the punishment for transgressing the man made boundaries and asserting human will. In this scenario of real horror; Horen was able to save little Fokir and brought him up as his own child. This is the same Fokir who helped Piya in locating the Irrawaddy dolphins in most difficult navigable places and dies bearing the furies of nature in order to save Piya from the cyclone. Towards the end of the novel Piya informs Nilima that she is going to name the project after Fokir as all the routes that they took on that fateful day in order to see the dolphins were recorded in her hand held monitor which in turn was “connected to the satellites of the Global Positioning System”. (426) Today Fokir is being posthumously rewarded for his knowledge and contribution, but years ago he and his mother were considered to be refugees, having no right to live on this land.

No name is yours until you speak it; somebody returns your call and suddenly, the circuit of signs, gestures, and gesticulations are established and you enter the territory of the right to narrate. You are part of a dialogue that may not, at first, be heard or heralded—you may be ignored—but your personhood cannot be denied. In another’s country that is also your own, your person divides, and in following the forked path you encounter yourself in a double movement... once as stranger, and then as friend. (Bhabha: xxv)

Bhabha’s conviction regarding the final acceptance of “personhood” arguably seems convincing but the amount of sacrifice, trauma, suffering—both mental and physical—that goes into one being finally accepted is something which problematizes the whole discourse. Bhabha is quite vocal in registering his concern regarding refugees and immigrants, he says in “the ever expanding boundaries and territories of the global world, we must not fail to see how our own intimate, indigenous landscapes should be remapped to include those who are its new citizens; or those whose citizenly presence has been annihilated or marginalized. (Bhabha: xxii)

Here it is important to observe that in *The Hungry Tide* Amitav Ghosh effortlessly weaves history with fiction and quite unambiguously tries to convey about the lessons we can learn from history. He registers his anger and discomfort regarding all such concepts of nationhood which take away people from their own land. The novel succeeds in questioning the very

premise of boundaries—are they created for human convenience and identity or does it give the licence to subjugate and massacre millions.

Conclusion:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* can be described as a “mohona”, (7) a confluence where different strands trickle down to form one sweeping, forceful whole. It is here the insider and the outsider, global and the local, man and woman, land and water, human and animal, powerful and the dispossessed, practical and the idealist and all possible binaries meet and each gets transformed as transformation is the ultimate reality of the tide country. The process of homogenisation is a double edged weapon where it is not only the Moyna's who are losing their identities but also the Piya's who are ultimately trying to establish an emotional connection with the tide country. Bill Ashcroft observes that the “encounter” of the global with the local leads to the emergence of “two dynamic patterns...the transformation of the global by the local and the circulation of the local in the global.” (Ashcroft: 128)

The novel ends with new possibilities as Kanai and Piya embark upon new beginnings professing for a better understanding for the local. Kanai has moved nearer home as he has shifted from Delhi to Calcutta and Piya has started learning Bengali---something which she has always avoided---and is also learning to regard the Sundarbans as her home. The scales it seems are finally shifting from the global to the local but the final outcome is yet to be seen as the future will unfold itself on the vast canvas of history.

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