

Amitav Ghosh's entwining of threads from History, Facts and Myths in *The Hungry Tide*

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ABSTRACT

Owing to the outcry of the eco-critical literary movements, the issues of deterioration of environment at the hands of modernization gained momentum. Many writers and poets became eco-conscious, expressing about environment and its importance to human life, and further how it is being disturbed by the man himself for his selfish needs. This paper aims to outline eco-critical examination of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. He has shown the alienation of man from his environment by bringing together the characters, history and myths prevalent in the area of Sundarbans.

KEYWORDS

Environment; History; Literature; Narrative.

Issues like interpretation of culture, uprooting, relocation, exile, and history have remained an essential part of the cosmopolitan Indian writer, Amitav Ghosh's writings. He reignites the interest in the native cultures he has highlighted through his novels. His novels are a mingling together of fiction and non-fiction so as to reshape the different areas of human knowledge. The novel taken up for study in this paper is Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005), a yet another compelling exploration of unnoticed histories out of his *oeuvre*.

He is the winner of many awards. His fiction is enriched in a variety of themes mostly identified with history. The purpose is basically to have a better understanding of the dilemmas of human existence. In an interview, he states, "For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life-history, natural history,

rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality."

The Hungry Tide is a sixth literary accomplishment of Amitav Ghosh. This novel is about the meeting of Piya and Kanai in Canning in a train; both travelling towards Sundarbans. Piya, a cetologist from Seattle in New York, is here for her research on the rare fresh water dolphins, namely *Oracella*. Kanai Dutt, forty two years old and single, is from Delhi. He has been invited by his aunt Nilima, who has to hand over him a document written by her husband Nirmal, meant to be read only by Kanai. Both eventually put up in Nilima's Guest house in Lusibari. Later they go on a journey to the sea with Fokir and Horen, in search of *Oracella*. The whole action takes place in the national backdrop of historical refugee camps in India after the Bangladesh partition and the Left Front Government in West Bengal.

This novel presents two narratives moving parallel: one depicting Nirmal's life before his death recounting the Morichjhapi incidents, happened about twenty eight years ago, and the other is Piya's expedition, her journey into the lives of people, the flora and fauna of Sundarban islands and forests. Ghosh has divided the novel into two parts- "The Ebb: Bhata" and "The Flood: Jowar", presenting the readers with the world's largest mangrove ecosystem, located near the northern part of the Bay of Bengal. Basically, the bringing together of these two narratives suggests the changing nature of relationship of man and environment. Man is to some extent becoming alien to his environment.

It is about an area which is mysterious, less known and less visited. The setting is the famous Tiger reserve, Sundarbans in mangrove islands on the north of Bay of Bengal, in the text referred to as tide country. It forms the delta of Irrawaddy river, a habitat of rarest fresh water Irrawaddy dolphins. It is because of the mixing together of fresh and sea water, creating an ecological niche for *Oracella*. This species is a cousin of the Killer whale, which swims on its side and has an appearance similar to a pig. These dolphins have, according to Piya, received little attention earlier. We are surprised to find dolphins in the forests and canals of Sunderbans where earlier only Tigers, snakes and crocodiles used to exist.

Other major geographically actual existing areas under detailed scrutiny are nearby places like Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhapi, and Emilybari, with little reference to America, Mekong, New Delhi, and Calcutta. The principal settings like Lusibari and Garjontola are fictitious like its characters. The basis of these places and people are real personalities, real places and well-conducted research by Amitav Ghosh. In his *Author Note*, Ghosh states that Nirmal and Nilima are impressions of his uncle Shri Chandra Ghosh,

who was like Nirmal and Nilima, the headmaster and Manager of the Rural Reconstruction Institute, in Gosaba. Ghosh has himself travelled to these real places like Canning, Gosaba, etc. along with Annu Jalais. He stayed with his uncle Shri Chandra Ghosh to have an authentic authority on the culture and society of these places.

For the details provided by Piyali Roy, a cetologist in the novel, Ghosh depended on Professor Helene Marsh of James Cook University, who responded through emails and referred to her student, Isabel Beasley, a specialist in the study of *Oracella brevirostris* and Irrawaddy dolphins.

The narrative is although meandering, long, slow moving, and yet it keeps the reader glued to it. It is a perfect combination of worlds of language and silence unfolding different perspectives of the characters who also become narrators. The characters are very few, but selected like Piya, Kanai, Nilima, Nirmal, Fokir, Kusum, Moyna, and Horen. Some more characters are minor, who just serve the purpose of providing certain details.

Nilima is also an ideological, strong, hardworking and ambitious character, who in any case, won't let anything affect the peaceful functioning in her hospital and Badabon Trust. She is sensitive to the cause of people in Lusibari as well as Morichjhapi. But she refuses to provide help for people of Morichjhapi because this would mean acting against the government. She also warns Nirmal to stay away from Morichjhapi, but he pays no heed to her.

Nirmal is revolutionary and humanist, ready to retort against the discrimination against the settlers of Morichjhapi. After the attack by the policemen on the island of Morichjhapi, he is found stranded and unconscious in Canning. He succumbs to the trauma and torture he is subjected to. He was also believed to be in love with Kusum, whom he only loved for her spirit of freedom and

liberation from oppression that she signified and fought for. Through Kusum, Ghosh's humanistic concerns are reflected when she says, " ...this whole world has become a place for animals and our fault, our crime was that we were just human beings trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil' (216).

Nirmal in a journal writes about these Sundarbans: 'an archipelago of islands, stretching for almost three hundred kilometres, from the Hooghly river in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh' (6). He elaborates about these forests:

A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and air still and fetid...every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes, and crocodiles. (7-8)

Further, the information about the Tide country is provided by Annu Jalais, a research scholar. Morichjhapi incident was also real and based on information from different newspaper articles and journals of Calcutta Press. So this novel is a nonfiction in the disguise of a fiction. We get a close picture of the life of people on these scattered 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' (HT 6-7). The vegetation, man, flora and fauna on these islands always live under the constant threat of unexpected natural disasters like cyclones, floods, tsunamis, and famines. People are also fearful about the attacks from animals like

tigers, snakes and crocodiles. Hundreds of people die because of these attacks, leaving behind orphans and widows. The married women in these places change their dresses and wear white saree and remove vermilion whenever their husbands go on to the sea for fishing. It is because they are apprehensive about their returning alive and prepare themselves beforehand. This is quite shocking. The nature and environment are unpredictable in Sundarbans and cannot be moulded. People and places are now and then washed away by the tidal waves. Tigers are very hostile to man in this area as told by Nilima to Kanai.

In the Morichjhapi incident, the unwanted refugee settlers of Morichjhapi revolt against the Bengal government, which is killing and torturing the settlers just for the sake of animals. Human beings are treated even worse than animals. Kusum, one of the revolutionaries states, "who are these people," she adds, "I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them" (262). In the massacre of inhabitants of the Morichjhapi, we are presented with a theme of increasing alienation between man and nature. Man is ranked below trees and animals by the government.

Since the times of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, sea and nature has been thought to be hostile to man, and so had been considered as abandoned area, only to be visited by hermits, recluse, woodcutters, and fishermen. But man in the recent past has been interfering with the activities of the nature, thus disturbing the natural cycles and its uniqueness. Due to the modernization, everything, even the natural resources, has been commodified and the result is, as mentioned by Anand in an article, "the bionetwork of Sundarbans has witnessed the shift from a threatening ecosystem to a threatened ecosystem' (29). Here, Kanai and Piya are new to the Sundarbans' environment

and so are unaware of the threats in the jungle. They both want to go on a research tour to the sea with Horen and Fokir, to know more about the dolphins. But it is Nilima who is concerned and makes them aware of the dangers which they may face on the sea as well as on land in Sundarbans. She tries to persuade Kanai to drop the idea of going. She provides Kanai with a data of number of people killed by tigers almost every day. She also explains about the unimagined strength of tigers in the area. She says, "My belief is that over hundred people are killed by tigers here each year. And, mind you, I am just talking about the Indian part of the Sundarbans. If you include the Bangladesh side, the figure is probably twice that". She adds:

'...the tide country's tigers were different from those elsewhere. In other habitats, tigers only attacked human beings in abnormal circumstances: if they happened to be crippled or were otherwise unable to hunt down any other kind of prey. But this was not true of the tide country's tigers; even young and healthy animals were known to attack human beings'. (241)

She also told about some theories proposed from time to time by the experts to control these killings, but unfortunately all theories fail as 'They (tigers) refused to cooperate' (242 HT). That's why the boats of the Forest Department were like floating fortresses, with steel bar windows, and they carried arms with them.

This novel has characteristics of a polyphonic novel. To express varying views, Ghosh introduces the voices of Kanai, Fokir, and Piyali. Piyali, a cetologist and main protagonist in *The Hungry Tide*, has a deep concern for the animals and ecology. She is deeply moved when she witnesses a ferocious tiger being blinded, tortured and burnt alive by the aggressive villagers. She helplessly

watches the brutal killing. Nobody supports her views. Even Kanai justifies this act of killing by saying, 'when a tiger comes in a human settlement, it's because it wants to die' (295). Kanai, Fokir, and Piya have differing ideologies. Piya being an ecologist wants to protect animals at any cost, but Kanai and Fokir are practical and can kill any animal that proves a threat to human beings. For them, human life is a priority.

Kanai, who has least interest in *Oracella*, says, "I just can't believe we have come all the way to look at these ridiculous porcine little things". He adds, "If you are going to risk jail for an animal, couldn't you have picked something with a little more sex appeal" (399). On the other hand, Piya has a different notion about it. She has a passion for *Oracella* so much so that for her, 'home is where *Oracella* is' (400).

The different perspectives are inserted using different genres like letters, diary, and manuscripts to show that "the boundaries between fictions and non-fiction, between literature and non-literature are constantly changing as the novel is a developing genre" (Bakhtin 1981: 33). Many chapters in the novels are printed in Italics which is actually a diary written by Nirmal and addressed to Kanai. It gives an insight into some months spent by Nirmal before his death in Morichjhapi islands, during the days of the massacre. Through the novel and extended letters, Ghosh narrates the story of the Sundarban islands. It provides detailed description of the place's geography, origin, landscape and waterscape. We get an inside picture of the tale of nature of human life as entwined with the ecology of the area.

Ghosh makes an attempt to provide a record of his contemporary world, culture, customs, and people, to be remembered by the future generations when they become history. People living in the lap of these forests are in the constant danger of attack by the snakes,

tigers, and crocodiles, and of course floods, storms, tsunamis, and famines. There is unannounced rise in the tidal waves of the river and sea that sometimes the miles of land and thousands of mangroves disappear to remerge again. Each day of their life is unexpected, so it is referred to as 'tide country'.

Such texts prove that with the passage of time the essential features of the conventional writings like chronology, coherence, and linearity have been replaced by incoherent, fragmented and non-linear narration. Techniques like flashback and flash forwards have become indispensable parts of the present age narratives. For instance, through his letter to Piya, Kanai moves in the past to tell the story of Bon Bibi.

Like Amitav Ghosh's other books, *The Hungry Tide* also reverberates with his sense of history. Ghosh has a great sense for history as he states in an interview with Hasan Ferdous:

I find history completely absorbing and fascinating. I am always interested to discover aspects of history; it adds a kind of richness to one's experience of place. Speaking about history, one of the very important things in a text is that it becomes a place where those cultural interactions are performed in the most difficult possible ways.

About the details Ghosh has provided about the attack on Morichjhapi, Annu Jalais, in her documentation reads:

Thirty police launches circled the island, thereby depriving the settlers of food and water; they were also tear-gassed, their huts razed, their boats sunk, their fish and tube wells destroyed, those who tried to cross the river were shot at ... several hundred men and women and children were believed to have died during that time and their bodies thrown into the river.

Annu Jalais is of the view that no one will ever know how many lost their lives but what we know is that no charge was laid against the policemen and the politicians who launched the attack.

We are provided with glimpses of political as well as cultural history, while living in the present, of a geographical landscape. Through Piya, on one hand, the reader is also made to think about the future of the environment, impending disasters and the endangering of the marine animals. On the other hand, we see how she is actually the child of modern science and technology. Except her name, Piya is fully influenced by American culture. She makes use of all modern equipment like Global Positioning System, a range finder and depth finder. She is also internet and email savvy, as she manages financial help for the family of Fokir and some major projects to protect the vanishing *Oracella*, through emails and connection with her knowns on internet.

In his letter to Kanai, Nirmal writes about Sundarbans. Ghosh has presented some myths and many facts which have 'never been told and thus never imagined' (6), especially about the Puranic tradition of Shiva taming the ferocious Ganga. Ghosh gives an insight into many culturally prevalent details like the story of Bon Bibi, the Goddess of protection, worshipped by the fishermen and other inhabitants in the Tide country. We are, through Kusum, able to know about the story of Bon Bibi, a good spirit who fights with spirit of Dokkhin Rai. In this story, there is a man named Dhona who is seduced by the evil spirit into offering a young lad named Dukhey as food to Dokkhin Rai, who sometimes takes the form of a tiger. But Bon Bibi saves Dukhey at the last minute. Kusum remembers this legend from her childhood memories. Her father had built a little temple in Bon Bibi's honour on the island of Garjontola, and her son Fokir – and later, he and his son Tutul – often visit there.

The story has a strong and lasting effect, therefore, on her, on her child Fokir, and on her grandson Tutul, but Kusum sadly admits that Bon Bibi had not helped her years before. Kanai, in the end, also gifts this story of Bon Bibi to Piya through a letter. Regarding these legends, Kanai states, "In those words, there was a history that is not just his (Fokir's) own but also of this place, the tide country" (354). These cultural narratives and legends are orally transmitted from one generation to another.

Further, Ghosh describes the experience of being through a flood and a cyclone. In the second half of the section "The Flood: Jowar", we find Piya and Fokir to be travelling alone on his small boat, after being separated by Kanai and Horen. They have lost their way and are caught up in a storm near Gorjontola. They climb the largest mangrove tree and tie them with the tree trunk using a saree. The storm hits them hard followed by a massive tidal wave, which eventually subsides. Fokir, in the fight with the nature, to protect them from flying objects and lashing water, dies. He becomes the messenger of Bon Bibi to protect Piya twice, first from the two forest guides and crocodiles' jaws and secondly, now. He is a simple and down to earth character, who takes the form of a knight in the novel. Even being an illiterate, he had the mastery of the knowledge of the river and the wild life. It was he who helped Piya most in her research in the Sundarbans. Piya believes that Fokir embodies the dominant spirit of Lusibari and forgotten places like it- countries "full of these ghosts, these unseen presences whose murmurings could never quite to silenced no matter how loud you spoke" (220).

There is a development in the character of Piya. She is different in the beginning before she meets Fokir and others. She always wanted 'to be on her own, to have no fixed address, to be far from the familiar, while still being a part of aloyal but loose-knit country'

(126). She transforms as she experiences her relationship with others by the end of the novel. As the story develops, the reader feels that Kanai and Piya are having an experience of a quest for their souls. But it seems that they are no longer adequate in the face of Sundarbans. Kanai, even being an interpreter and a translator, who lets people understand each other, fails to understand himself.

Kanai is also transformed after his experience on an island when he is left behind alone by Fokir. Kanai panics and runs directly into the mangroves hurting himself physically. He even imagines to have confronted a tiger. He is so shaken that he immediately returns to Lusibari and then to New Delhi. But later he couldn't resist the pull of Sundarbans and returns after few days. He is an altered man now.

In Ghosh's novels the characters move between the gyre of timelessness while having universal experiences. The recreation of these historical events, Ghosh makes an attempt to imagine and create the situation from the history and experience what actually happens when one is a part of such event. His writings are an effort to bring together past and present, fiction and reality, history and literature. Through Nirmal we are able to know the history of Lusibari, and nearby places developed by Sir Daniel Hamilton.

Ghosh has a skill for fictionalizing out of facts and historical events. He acknowledges through the list of documents and archives, which are proofs of the texts' authentication. He tries to recreate and give voices to those who would have otherwise remained unnoticed. Like he does in the case of the slave, in *In The Antique Land*, by presenting and highlighting the 'The Slave of MSH6' from the medieval times. He brings the pieces of his life and world together on the basis of letters and documents available in library. Similarly, he conducts enough research before putting facts into words in *The Hungry Tide*, and his

other pieces of writing. He prefers to meet people who are marginalized and brings them to centre. He narrates their history after visiting places. He conducts a marriage of past and present which is an essential element of fiction as well as non-fiction.

Similar is the idea of *Duno Elegies* (1923) by Rainer Maria Rilke, which finds a lot of citation in the diary written by Nirmal. Rilke also writes about the alienation of human beings from the nature and animals. In *The Hungry Tide*, people's hostilities towards nature and animals are visible through their acts of killing animals for money and cutting down rain forests. We are shown that dolphins are being killed for the oil extracted from its skin and used to replace petrol and diesel.

Till now much was heard about the ferocious stories of the tigers of Sundarbans. But this cultural, environmental, social and linguistic confrontation with some other aspects of Sundarbans is quite welcoming.

This writing is essentially about the relationship between man and nature and animals written in a straightforward narration, with a central theme of man becoming alien to nature. This novel, Shampa Chatterjee states in a book review, 'is all about the dichotomy- wild life versus human

suffering or destruction of the ecosystem versus human survival'.

Ghosh is successful in portraying the spirit of humanity and that humans are bonded not just by their similar backgrounds but also through their similar experiences shared and struggled, as in the case of Piya and Fokir, and Nirmal and Kusum. Piya and Fokir's relationship never depended on speech, yet they had an eternal understanding.

The powerful cyclones have been described perfectly well and bring a shiver through the spine of the reader. These detailed descriptions arouse the feeling of concern and empathy for the other human being in the face of nature. We must understand that we are just like the character of Fokir in the novel that passes away without rippling the waves of history. We must love and protect all human beings in the need of the hour.

As are the ending of real life based novels, *The Hungry Tide*, leaves the reader with a number of choices. Piya decides to stay in Lusibari with Nilima, for the rest of her life for the proposed project on the endangered species of marine animals. Kanai is also back for spending some more time in Lusibari. The purpose of writing about relationship of man and nature is perhaps contemplation.

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