

A Post Colonial Perspective of Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

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Abstract: *The Hungry Tide* (2004), one of the master pieces of Amitav Ghosh. It won the 2004 Hutch Crossword Book Award for fiction. This book narrates the story of Piya Roy, an Indo-American cetologist. Piya Roy visits Sundarbans in Bengal to study marine mammals – dolphins, whales, dugongs and so on. She happened to meet Fokir, the local fisherman who is willing to assist in her research to locate marine mammals. She also meets Kanai Dutt, a translator from Delhi, who comes to meet his aunt Nilima. Years before, Nirmal, Nilima's husband and a Marxist ideologist helped the expatriates who have taken their shelter on the Sundarbans, an island of Marichjhapi. Kusum is one of the refugees, who is Fokir's mother. Nirmal, out of love for Kusum, helps refugees on the island. The action of *The Hungry Tide* is set on the Sundarbans, an island of Lusibari. *The Hungry Tide* signifies the frontier territory of the Tide Country where divergent cultures, traditions and languages work together for centuries. The story is narrated in a balanced way involving natural currents. The plot of the novel is structured with the nature's turns and acts logically dividing the book into two sections: *The Ebb and The Flood*.

Keywords —Amitav Ghosh, Cetology, Ecology Marichjhapi, Post-colonial Sundarbans, *The Ebb and The Flood*

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from Delhi, who comes to meet his aunt Nilima. Years before, Nirmal, Nilima's husband and a Marxist ideologist helped the expatriates who have taken their shelter on the Sundarbans, an island of Marichjhapi. Kusum is one of the refugees, who is Fokir's mother. Nirmal, out of love for Kusum, helps refugees on the island. Now, Kanai returns from Delhi to Sundarbans to read the journal left for him by his dead uncle, Nirmal. The refugees are forcibly cleared off the Marichjhapi Island by the military forces. Kusum has been killed in the riots followed. Fokir, while he is guiding Piya remote waterways, is died in a rainstorm. Piya wants to carry on her study in the tide country an odd decision at this juncture. She appeals Nilima to set up a research centre in memory of Fokir. She asks Kanai to be her partner in her research.

The action of *The Hungry Tide* is set on the Sundarbans, an island of Lusibari. Kanai explains to Piya that the name itself is a historical remnant of colonial era:

"... She was on her way here, from the far end of Europe, when her ship capsized. She never got to see the house but because it had been built for her, people used to call it Lusi'rbarry. Then this was shortened to Lusibari and that was how the island took this name" (40)

The book chronicles the confrontation of the refugees with the human make up of the tide country. Sir Daniel Hamilton, a philanthropic colonialist, has bought the land of Lusibari from the forest department and bestows to the poor people of the rural background giving them an opportunity to live and begin their agricultural projects. Nirmal explains to Kanai:

"Everyone who was willing to work was welcome, S'Daniel said, but on one condition. They could not bring all their petty little divisions and differences. Here there would be no Brahmins or untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together" (51)

Lusibari has been inhabited by the poor people who come from remote areas. But these people are forced by the

political affairs present to run off to their home lands and search for their livelihood.

The cultural magnitude of the Morichjhapi Island is clustered by the dispossessed and migrated population. The island remains an eyewitness of the clash between a group of helpless migrants and a vicious political power which turns into the novels major conflict. Kanai enquires Nilima about the importance of the place when he arrives in the tide country and begins reading Nirmal's journal on Morichjhapi: "Tell me exactly what happened there" (118).

The migrants are on the run from political displacement. Nilima explains that they are the people devoid of financial, commercial and political power. Furthermore, arriving in India's terrain, the migrants realize that they are not wholly welcome:

"They could not speak the language of that area and the local people treat them as intruders, attacking them with bows, arrows and other weapons. For many years they put up with these conditions" (118)

In this way, Ghosh's narration is critical of the political cruelty on the island of dark jungle and also depicts that *the Hungry Tide* enacts its penetration into the political brutality. Hence, the prevailing struggle of the week migrants against the tyrannical can be compared to the conflict of the colonial history. Alexa Weik writes:

Ghosh's protagonists represent a brief mapping of the late postcolonial dispersal of ethnic-national identity, and its subsequent crystallization into global and local subjectivities. (121)

The Hungry Tide signifies the frontier territory of the Tide Country where divergent cultures, traditions and languages work together for centuries. This is a form of confrontation of European colonial history. It is observed a historical paradox in Kanai's narrative of how the area has been settled in the Nineteenth Century by the British to serve the then Viceroy Lord Canning, and to search for a fitting location for an eastern port to challenge the western part of Bombay:



“They (British) got it in their heads that they needed a new port, a new capital for Bengal – Kolkatta’s Hoogly River was silting up and its docks, they said, would soon be chocked with mud” (284)

The Hungry Tide is book where in it is reading another book. This is Nirmal’s journal which is kept confidential and for the reference of Kanai, is discovered and read by Kanai. It is a series of events and incidents regarding his relationship with Piya and Fokir. Kanai reads the journal when he is on the river boat with Piya and Fokir while they are in search of Gangetic dolphin. He feels a kind of jealousy towards Piya’s relationship with Fokir. The same kind of context prevails where the journal has been written earlier. During which Nirmal is stranded on Morichjhapi island when a rain storm is about to turn out, nothing to do but to write and also feels slightly envy towards the relationship between Kusum and Horen. Nirmal’s motive for getting trapped on the island is to assist Kusum and her son Fokir. Nirmal writes in his journal:

“I do not know how much time I have; may be not much more than the course of this day. In this time I’ll try to write what I can in the hope that somehow these words will find their way to you. You will be asking, why you? All I need to say, for the time being, is that this is not my story. It concerns, rather, the only friend you made when you were here in Lucibari: Kusum. If not for my sake, then for hers, read on” (69)

Ghosh is intelligent enough to describe the diverse textures of his narration. In order to write, Nirmal must be provided privacy, time and appropriate conditions. This discusses a larger theoretical point about the importance of writing in the political affairs of domination and dispossession. Irrespective of the desperate conditions prevailed on the Morichjhapi Island, Nirmal should be endorsed to compile his account of events and incidents to communicate their history to the outside world. Nirmal writes:

“But I cannot stop. There’s too much to tell” (255)

As it is observed, *The Hungry Tide* has two endings: the storming of Morichjhapi, and the storm that kills Fokir. However, these tragic events happen in a calm manner. These events cannot be narrated is short; rather, Ghosh uses a narrative technique of curtailing from before to after in each and every context, to draw attention to the limitations of what can be narrated and what cannot be narrated. Nirmal’s journal is written since he waits for storming of the island. The carnage occurs shortly after the Nirmal’s narrative reaches its climax and goes on towards outlining it in time and elucidating the geographic and cultural incidents that led to it:

“I have gone on at too great a length – hours have passed, the ink in my ballpoint is running down. 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” (148)

The Hungry Tide attempts to recognize significant events like common territory, common religion, common historical experiences, common language, common customs and morals. This book analyses not only geo-politics but also ecology of islands of Sundarbans, the mangrove forests between the plains of Bengal and the sea. Ghosh tries to narrate the history of the islands in an elaborate story. Nirmal’s narration of the historical events of the 1979 blockade of Morichjhapi in which destitute residents are cruelly evacuated by the Government of India to preserve the wild life. Anshuman A. Mandal writes:

“... a group of refugee settlers who had originally been displaced from the tide country on the other side of the border with Bangladesh by the war for its independence in the early 1970s. They had been forcibly resettled in another part of India but had returned illegally to what they saw as their homeland, and had settled on the island of Morichjhapi, which the government had cleared a wild life conservation area” (19)

Ecological perspectives, issues of land and the relationships of Piyali, Fokir and Kanai are blended by the author. The

hidden relationships are resolved in the climax of the novel where Fokir dies in a cyclone in the pursuit of saving Piya.

CONCLUSION

The most gripping characters of *The Hungry Tide* progress by the name of Sundarbans. The charm of the forests and waters of the Sundarbans and their description in the beginning of the novel proves how important to the setting of the plot of the novel. The story is narrated in a balanced way involving natural currents. The plot of the novel is structured with the nature's turns and acts logically dividing the book into two sections: The Ebb and The Flood.

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