

## The Hunger Motif: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Literary depictions of hunger had been a powerful motif in the writings of many writers across the world. Because the act of eating takes such an essential place in the day-to-day life of the humans as well as in the universal struggle for survival, the motif of hunger becomes a powerful force that drives the action and plot of many works of art. Indian writers in English are also no exception in this regard. The Europeans' hunger for territories made them to colonise various parts of the world and to exploit the resources of the colonies both human and material. This phase of history was exploited by the writers of the colonies and they gave vent to their anger against colonialism in their works.

In Indian English literature in the field of fiction, novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya expressed their resentment against the economic and social evils wrought by imperialism. Also they had expressed their concern for the poor, the hungry and the destitutes in their novels. Anand in *Untouchable* (1933) and *Coolie* (1936), R. K. Narayan in *The Guide* (1958), Bhattacharya in *So Many Hungers* (1947) and *He who Rides a Tiger* (1956) and Kamala Markandaya in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and *A Handful of Rice* (1966) have raised their powerful voice against the problem of hunger and starvation. Paul Verghese rightly remarks that "Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanises man. That is why hunger is the theme of a large number of Indo-Anglian novels" (qtd. in Rai 6). Though the motif of hunger used by the novelists is not a new one, Amitav Ghosh has attempted to use it in a different manner. This paper is an attempt to illustrate how Ghosh has used the motif of hunger in the literal sense of the word as well as in the suggestive sense in his novel *The Hungry Tide*.

The motif of hunger gets an elaborate and comprehensive coverage in Bhattacharya's and Markandaya's novels. The protagonists of their novels suffer from a common predicament like that of the millions of destitutes and starvelings who lived under similar wretched conditions. However it is not the horror of hunger that keeps the readers' interest in these novels but the characters' sustained struggle to recover from their misfortune. Sanjiv Kumar in his article "Transforming Realities vis-à-vis Postmodern Indian English Fiction" argues that while "the towering figures...had a strong commitment to expose the harsh realities of life to effect the desired transformation in society", the Postmodern Indian English novelists seemed "to have buried down the erstwhile fundamental issues" (1). For he feels that the present generation of novelists have concentrated on issues such as globalization and multiculturalism and so have excluded the darker realities of life in their novels: "They might have failed to achieve the stature of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan or Mulk Raj Anand but they have the propensity for the depiction of emerging issues, though by excluding certain dark sides of multiple realities of 'new India'-poverty, hunger, displacement on the name of development and denotified tribes" (5).

Sanjiv Kumar's testimony regarding the writings of Postmodern Indian English novelists may be true to denote certain writers and not all. Amitav Ghosh, one of the foremost Indian English writers condemns all kinds of tyranny and oppression especially of colonial and political

through his literary output. Though Ghosh writes his works in tune with the global changes, multicultural environs and cosmopolitanism, he has not failed to portray the darker sides of the real India in his novels. His 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* tells the sad tale of the agonies of the low class refugees and the harsh realities of the life of the Sundarbans islanders. First the novel explores the plight of the doubly displaced people. A group of Bangladesh refugees who escaped from the concentration camp like situation reached one of the islands of Sundarbans to create a niche for themselves; when they confronted the West Bengal Communist government which was in no mood to tolerate their presence, they were ruthlessly wiped out from their loved soil in an incident called 'Morichjhapi massacre' of 1979. Secondly the novel brings to light the dire condition of the everyday life of the Sundarbans islanders who share a complex and dangerous ecosystem infested with predators such as tigers and crocodiles.

Regarding the motif of hunger, Ghosh has used it both in the literal sense and in the suggestive sense in *The Hungry Tide*. C. L. Khatri distinguishes between two kinds of hunger: "the hunger of the rich, black-marketeers, the oppressors for sexual pleasure and the hunger of the poor to meet the bare needs of life" (61). While the novels of Bhattacharya and Markandaya deals with the theme of hunger in the more literal sense of the term, the Decadent poets have exemplified unrequited love as a kind of starvation. In Swinburne's "Laus Veneris", the speaker refers to his sensual love in terms of hunger. He describes his physical craving as "a feverish famine in my veins". Though Ghosh does not associate hunger for sexual cravings, he suggestively refers hunger in terms of love. For the novel *The Hungry Tide* presents two sets of triangle love; first is that of Nirmal – Kusum – Horen and secondly it is that of Kanai – Piya – Fokir. Ghosh portrays hunger in the literal sense of the word as he shows how the poor islanders fight with the calamitous environment to get their daily single meal.

When Nirmal and Nilima first came from Calcutta to get settled in Lucibari - one of the islands of the Sundarbans – in 1950, they were astounded by the poverty-stricken condition of the tide country. The soil bore poor crops; the floods and storms rendered the land infertile. Most of the families subsided on a single day meal. "The destitution of the tide country was such as to remind them of the terrible famine that had devastated Bengal in 1942 – except that in Lucibari hunger and catastrophe were a way of life" (HT 79). The settlers of Lucibari were drawn to Lusibari in the beginning of twentieth century by the promise of free farmland by a Scottish visionary Sir Daniel Hamilton. The settlers were mainly farmers but hunger drove them to hunting, fishing and honey collecting. The result was disastrous – many died of drowning; many were killed by tigers and crocodiles: "No day seemed to pass without the news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile" (HT 79).

For the sake of a handful of rice, the men had to risk their lives in the process of foraging for food. As a result so many young men perished leaving their young wives widowed and their children fatherless who spent "a lifetime of dependence and years of abuse and exploitation" (HT 81). One of the central characters of the novel Kusum lost her father when she was just five years old. Her father was killed by a tiger when he went to forage for firewood in the reserve forest. Her mother was cheated by a man called Dilip Choudhury and was sold at a brothel. When Kusum was sought after by the same man who pushed her mother into a lifetime of abuse, she was helped to escape by the good offices of her fellow islander Horen.

Another major protagonist of the novel Fokir, Kusum's son in the present is in his late twenties. Ghosh makes it a point that hunger and poverty had given his "skeletal frame a look of utter destitution" (HT 46). Being a poor fisherman he could scarcely satisfy the needs of his family. He got rebukes from his wife Moyna when he returned from his fishing expedition with

nothing except a few crabs; because “there was no food in the house and no money either”(HT 209).

Ghosh compares and contrasts the act of eating of the two characters who have come from different background – Fokir, an illiterate fisherman and Piya, a cetologist from the US. As a scientist working in the field Piya had to be double cautious in her eating habit to keep her physically fit. For her surveys, she used to equip herself with mineral water, high-protein nutrition bar and a jar of Ovaltine, powder for making malted milk. During her first expedition in search of the river dolphins, she happened to stay in Fokir’s boat. When Fokir was cooking the night meal with spices, the “smells were harsh on Piya’s nose” (HT 96) which were like “phantoms... clawing at her throat and her eyes” (HT 97) and so she tried to recoil from the smells. When Fokir gave her a plateful of rice and cooked crab, she refused his offer. For that she expected protests and exclamations from him. But he “accepted her refusal with a readiness that surprised her... and gave the plate to Tutul [Fokir’s five year old son] who devoured it greedily” (HT 97). Tutul’s greedy devouring of meal may be contrasted with the affluent children’s habit of eluding from their meal.

While Bhattacharya paints a gruesome picture of starvation and death in *So Many Hungers!* which portrays the Bengal famine of 1942, Ghosh’s rendition of the scene of starvation is comparatively mild. He makes it mild by presenting it through second hand information. The Morichjhapi massacre that happened in 1979 unfolds through Nirmal’s diary. In it he described how the refugees were wiped out from the island of Morichjhapi. The Bengal government that viewed them as squatters was adamant in evacuating them from the island. So the government decided to use police force in the process.

The police first used the weapon of hunger against the poor refugees. They believed that if the refugees were pushed into starvation, they would give up their fight. But the sheer irony is that the hunger made them all the more strong in their firm conviction. Previously the government had imposed a ban on Morichjhapi under section 144, the law used to quell civil disturbances. The refugee settlers were forcibly prevented from bringing rice or drinking water to Morichjhapi. Many boats were sunk and the men who tried to escape through police cordon were killed in the police firing. Moreover due to the siege, many people died of hunger and starvation: “*despite careful rationing, food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tubewells and there was no potable water left; the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out*” (HT 260).

Kusum and her son Fokir (who was five at that time) happened to live with the refugee settlers in Morichjhapi. During the siege, she had fed her son Fokir “*while she had subsisted on a kind of wild green known as jadu-palong. Palatable enough at first, these leaves had proved deadly in the end, for they had caused severe dysentery*” (HT 261). But hunger did not leave her a weak person. She decided to protest the government until the last moment. Her anger at the government’s hunger for acquiring fund for its Project Tiger and at the environmentalists who are mindless of the poor people are explicitly stated in her words to Nirmal and Horen:

*The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world”. Every day sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered,*

*who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? ... As I thought of these things it seemed to me that 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. (HT 261-62)*

The government's hunger for money that pours from the world wide funding agencies which try to protect the endangered Bengal tigers and which make the poor islanders to be scapegoats can be symbolically compared with the popular legend of the tide country. According to the legend, the twins Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli of Medina were chosen by the archangel Gabriel "for a divine mission: they were to travel from Arabia to 'the country of eighteen tides' – *athhero bhatir desh* – in order to make it fit for human habitation" (HT 103). The tide country was then under the control of Dokkin Rai, a powerful demon king. When they reached the tide country, the demon fought with them and was defeated by them. But Bon Bibi was merciful in victory. She left one part of the wilderness to Dokkin Rai; the rest she claimed for herself, and made it safe for human settlement. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order. A man called Dhona entered the domain of Dokkin Rai who proposed a pact to him – Dhona had to offer a young lad named Dukhey as food to Dokkin Rai who sometimes takes the form of a tiger; in exchange he would give Dhona a great cargo of honey and wax. Dhona agreed to the bargain. But Bon Bibi came and saved Dukhey at the last minute. Thus Bon Bibi became the protectress of the islands.

Here Dhona's greediness can be compared with that of the government. But the sad irony is that while Bon Bibi came and rescued Dukhey from the impending mishap, nothing and no one saved the unfortunate refugees from the tragedy. In the massacre at Morichjhapi thousands of people were ruthlessly murdered by the police force. Ross Mallick estimates that "as many as 17,000 people died" (114) in the massacre including those who "perished of cholera, starvation, disease, exhaustion, in transit while sent back to their camps, by drowning when their boats were scuttled by the police or shot to death in Kashipur, Kumirmari and Morichjhanpi by police firings" (Jalais 6). No one knows for sure the number of deaths during the eviction. No investigation or enquiry was conducted to find the culprits who were involved in the violence.

Bengal tigers, the much feared predators are zealously protected by various international environmental groups (who apply economic pressure on the Indian and Bangladeshi governments to maintain the tiger habitats by military force). But in the name of tiger preservation, human lives are threatened by the state. The tigers routinely maul and often kill the islanders. Though there are obvious modern devices that might be used to protect the islanders, the state allows the deaths to continue. In the Sunderbans, Ghosh argues, human lives are valued somewhat lower than those of tigers.

The tigers of the tide country have developed a peculiar habit of man-eating. There are so many theories to prove how they had developed a taste for human flesh. Encroachment of people that led to the loss of habitat and the tigers' confusion regarding territory due to the tide's washing away of tigers' scent markings are said to be the primary reasons for the attack of tigers. Nilima admitted that the tigers of the tide country were different from those that lived on the other parts of the world:

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. Some said that this propensity came from the peculiar conditions of the tidal ecology, in which large

parts of the forest were subjected to daily submersions. The theory went that this raised the animals' threshold of aggression by washing away their scent markings and confusing their territorial instincts. (HT 241)

During her meeting with the Sundarbans villagers, the researcher Annu Jalais was often told that the main reason why the tigers had become man-eaters could be traced to the violent events of Morichjhapi. Many islanders explained to her that they and the tigers had lived in a sort of idyllic relationship prior to the events of Morichjhapi; after the incident the tigers had started preying on humans. "The villagers explained that tigers, annoyed at the disturbances caused by the unleashed violence in the forest had started attacking people and that this was how they ended up getting a taste for human flesh. Others argued that it was the corpses of killed refugees that had floated through the forest that had given them the taste. Morichjhanpi was a turning point after which man-eating became part of the tiger's 'nature' or 'behaviour' " (Jalais 9).

If the tiger's hunger makes it enter the human habitat, it is the human's hunger that forces him to look for food in the animal's territory. Divya Anand is right in her observation that, "if it is the tiger's hunger that keeps encroachers at bay and protects the forests, it is hunger that drives men into illegally entering the forests" (35). If a man gets killed by a tiger in the reserve area, there won't be any compensation for his bereaved family; instead the forest officials would exhort a heavy penalty for the dead trespasser's family. At the same time, if a tiger preyed on a village and got killed, the punishment meted out by the government authorities to the villagers would be very severe.

Just like the animal's hunger, nature's hunger is mentioned in the novel at various places. The treatment of nature in the novel is quite unlike Wordsworth's adoration of the same. Sometimes nature may be as disastrous and heinous as a violent beast that is hungry to devour human lives. The inhabitants of the Sundarbans often encounter the life-threatening dangers, posed by nature in the form of storms and cyclones. Ghosh's depiction of nature appears to be complete and it does not contain any false sentimentalism or illusory romanticization of the same. The novel's title 'Hungry tide' stands for all the disastrous aspects of nature.

The 'hunger' in the novel's title has several layers of meaning. On the external or primary level, it is indicative of the hunger of people as well as of nature in the form of tigers and storms. Metaphorically, the title of the novel refers to the emotional tide, in which almost all the characters of the novel are caught. The experiences and relations of the characters with one another are highly tempestuous and tumultuous, reminding the readers of the furious storms of the tide country. For the major issue significantly touched by Ghosh in the novel is the man-woman relationship. Almost all the major characters of the novel are engulfed by their hunger or passion to establish a relationship with one another.

Beyond the stereotyped spoken romance, Ghosh displays the bond between Piya and Fokir that does not require speech or language. Love is an irresistible force that had consumed both Fokir and Piya, even though they were kept apart by language, class, literacy and by the social institution of marriage. At the same time, they are aware that their love would be considered as a taboo by the society. In the silence of their heart they cherished their love and admiration for each other. Kanai became jealous towards the kind of relationship between Piya and Fokir. "The three main characters [Piya, Fokir and Kanai] are immensely memorable, with their edgy exchanges, attraction, involvement, even hunger – for each other" (Roy 69).

Kanai who always "liked to think that he had the true connoisseur's ability to both praise and appraise women" (HT 3), considers himself to be the natural choice of Piya. On account of this illusory notion about himself, he makes attempts to establish a relationship with Piya; but

fails. He is envious of Fokir, who is able to establish an emotional contact with Piya despite the communication barrier between the two. Kanai, about whom the novelist had said “Language was both his livelihood and his addiction (HT 4)”, is unable to create an emotional communication with Piya, while the illiterate fisherman is able to enter her heart.

Fokir’s warmth and child like naive simplicity bind him spontaneously to the women. That is why Piya falls in love with him. Moyna, his wife, grows anxious, when she finds the proximity of Piya and Fokir. Moyna knows well that Fokir’s innocence is sure to create emotional ripples in Piya. She is afraid that she might lose Fokir to Piya. Both Kanai and Moyna became jealous due to their possessive nature and their love towards Piya and Fokir respectively. Rakhi Nara and Ghanshyam rightly point out, “Love when not responded in equal measure develops insecurity in relations and there arises a negative emotion of jealousy. This contrast of love-jealousy emotion goes side by side in man’s psyche” (93).

The love triangle of Kanai –Piya –Fokir is similar to that of Nirmal –Kusum –Horen. Just like Kanai who with all his learning could not enter the heart of Piya, Nirmal could not enter Kusum’s heart. Kusum chose the illiterate Horen over the educated Nirmal. Nirmal on the other hand finds himself to be torn between his wife Nilima and Kusum: “*I felt myself torn between my wife and the woman who had become the muse I’d never had; between the quiet persistence of everyday change and the heady excitement of revolution – between prose and poetry*” (HT 216). The emotional entanglements between the characters show that the hunger of love is present in every human heart.

Though jealous at first, Kanai in the end realises his true love for Piya and expressed it in his parting letter. After reading the letter Piya knows that in the depths of her heart “she would always be torn between the one[Fokir] and the other[Kanai]” (HT 360). As the storm approached, Kanai returns to Garjantola to rescue Piya and Fokir. It shows that he has become a transformed man. Nature in the form of a mighty storm gave Piya and Fokir a single chance to get united:

Their bodies were so close, so finely merged that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one. (HT 390)

The storm resulted with the death of Fokir who had saved Piya’s life. He was hit heavily by an uprooted stump and died while shielding Piya with his own body. As the novel’s title *The Hungry Tide* indicates, the tide’s hunger had eaten up the potentially rich love of Piya and Fokir.

Ghosh’s portrayal of hunger and starvation of the poor people of the tide country and his metaphorical use of hunger in terms of love constitute the ‘hunger motif’ a predominant feature of *The Hungry Tide*.

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