Hunger for Identity in ‘Total Environment’ in Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

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Man, basically belonging to the ‘total environment’, seeks his space not in dualistic separation from nature but in his monistic identification with the ecosphere, not in the ‘shallow’ ecology where nature is valued only in terms of its usefulness for human purposes (aesthetic or everyday necessity), but in the ‘deep ecology’ where the intrinsic value of nature is recognized. This is a cataclysmic shift from the traditional anthropocentric occidental philosophy to the nature-centric oriental system of values. In *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* George Session opines:

> The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes. (Session 68)

Once this intrinsic value of nature is established, man’s place in the integrated relation between his individual, local or community existence and his existence in terms of his ‘total environment’ gets recognition.

In Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* the characters from different fields of life penetrate into this kind of relationship between community and environment, come into action and counter-action and at last are assimilated into it. On the other hand, individual identity has been defined in the domain of ‘total environment’, becomes its integral part though not necessarily in a peaceful co-existence but giving proper acknowledgement to the existence of different kinds of human beings – rich and poor, educated and illiterate, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, of their community formed by their profession, beliefs, myths and encounter with the same Fate, of their environment consisting of forests, rivers and ferocious animals like tiger and crocodile, and even natural calamities like devastating storm or terrible upsurge in the sea. Ghosh also poses some vital questions on the ethical basis of animal killing for the survival of the human beings and man’s indulgence into activities of violence, revenge and brutality. The reader constantly revolves like a whirlwind from the anthropocentric inherent value to the nature centric intrinsic value and the vice versa. Undoubtedly, the non-human environment is presented here not only to form a structure for his narrative but also to probe into the mystery of human existence even in the terrifying but tempting beauty of nature – the submerged forests, the ebb and flow of the sea water in the area called *mohona*, the deceiving presence of tiger as ‘ghost’. In the light of this ‘total environment’ Ghosh’s novel asserts that the physical environment is not passive, rather it exhibits harmonious workings that binds together the vegetation, the animal and the human worlds that affect one another directly or indirectly and are themselves affected by the environment. The regional topography, settlement pattern, land utilization and professional practices of the people of this tide country affect their social community formation. Ghosh’s novel explores this interwovenness and unseparatedness between the ecological and social organisms.
This kind of harmonious relationship between nature and society opens up another question – man’s space in the geomorphologic pattern of a region and its connection with the culture of that community, their creation of myths and legends such as the Bonbibbi myth, or the place of Nature in the culture of a community. This relates the very fundamental question of the co-evolution of a community culture and the nature in which the community exists. In The Hungry Tide, jangal is the basic correlator. The settlers in the Sunderbans made their own place of living by hacking at the forests with their daas (Ghosh 52), the place which would be called ‘jangala’ in the earlier sense. This ‘Jangala’ suggests a balance between society and nature encompassing the intrinsic value of the ‘total environment’. The people living in ‘jangal’ and treated as ‘janglees’ believe in distinct values, develop a distinct paradigm almost opposite to that of the so-called civilized people who with their colonial hangover are made to believe on the derogatory meaning of ‘jungle’ extinguishing the ancient cultural tradition of India. The Sunderbans is of no exception. But how their cultural values have been developed out of such a concept of jangal and how it creates a distinct paradigm for them is too mysterious a question to answer. Whatever be the reason, the people of the tide country have been facing a cultural displacement along with their diasporic experience. The characters like Piyali, Kanai, Nirmal, Nilima, Fokir, Kusum, Horen and others have gone through such kind of identity crisis because of displacement and diasporas along with ‘cultural appropriation’ based on other values. Since the coming of the first settlers in the 1920s, the natives have been facing the cultural appropriation either by the western people like Piya or by the so-called ‘enlightened’ Indians like Nirmal and Nilima. But they never detach them from their own beliefs, myths, and rituals and customs through which they sustain their local ethnic culture that incorporates a homogeneous population irrespective of their religious boundaries and become cohesive in cultural traits. Rather it is unique in case of the Sunderbans that the tide people have been able to assimilate the foreign cultures and a counter-cultural appropriation takes place in which nobody is left unaffected. It is in the colonial conspiracy that they attempted to tag the encountering culture as rudely ‘savage’ or humbly ‘mystic’ considering their own culture as paradigmatic or ‘authentic’. But Ghosh’s novel emerged as a protest suggesting that a folk culture need not be either savage or mystical in order to create an ‘authentic’ identity for them. It is itself ‘authentic’ and its own cultural identity survives in confrontation with the colonial cultural appropriations. The so-called ‘enlightened’ cultural people like Nirmal with a dream of a Utopian society in the western parameter or Piya with the eye of a cetologist-researcher turn out to be affected by a counter-cultural appropriation and both of them end up as gropers in the archepalago of mystic hearts of the tide people.

Jangal is the epicenter in the cultural map of the tide country. This concept of jangal is almost similar to the idea of jungle as conceived by Zimmermann:

The jungle, like the human body, provides a favored context for a conceptualization of the relations between the outside and the inside, between wildness and culture, and at an even deeper level, for dialectic between the pure and the impure.

(Zimmermann 218)

The Sunderban Jangal itself and its associated myths, customs and rituals have a formative influence, in the formation of a distinct community identity for the tide countrymen. The uniqueness of this jangal has been picturesquely explored by the deft hand of Amitav Ghosh. It is a mangrove forest and is ‘a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles’ (Ghosh 7). The topographical name, ‘Sunderban’ may have been derived from the name of a
common species of mangrove – the Sundari tree, *Heriteria minor*. This dense forest is a safe shelter for tigers, snakes and crocodiles. It is often impenetrable because of its tough and leathery mangrove leaves and gnarled branches. ‘At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy and expel them’ (Ghosh 8). It is the eternal denial of human interference by Nature in its activity. Nature’s playful happiness is evident in this immense archipelago of islands in the region of the *mohona* in the Sunderbans, where five or six rivers interflux and ‘the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumour of land, echoing back from the horizon … The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later.’ (Ghosh 7). It is Nature’s own right to shape or reshape, break or build the islands and the peninsulas at its own will. Human endeavour to deforest or install *badh* for their own habitation is of Nature’s aversion and it often causes Nature’s fury against human beings. Man’s formation of their society, social communities, community folkways, myths and legends depend much on such eternal conflict. Edgell Rickword in his ‘The Cultural Meaning of May Day’ appears with such an opinion:

“The struggle forged by men at work, by men and women joined in harmony in the struggle against Nature … was the basic theme of all the mythologies of human life”.

(Rickward 130-131)

In the very first chapter entitled ‘The Tide Country’ in *The Hungry Tide* such a mythological story has been incorporated in order to reinforce such an endeavour by men with the help of God (symbolically used for science and technology) in dividing an immense flow of water into various channels. This eco-spiritual myth binds together an ethnic group by forming its belief and rituals. This myth is about the Surya dynasty of Manu, in which King Sagar, ambitious to be powerful like Devraj Indra, started one hundred *Aswamedh jajnas* of which ninety nine had been completed without much difficulty. But the hundredth and the last one had been fallen into great trouble by the conspiracy of Indra who hid the horse in Kapil Muni’s Ashram in *Pataldesh* where Sagar with his sixty thousand sons found the horse after a few days and being angry scolded innocent Kapil Muni who, in turn, turned them all into ashes with his fire of anger. Nobody was left to offer *Pindadan* and so the *atmas* of the deceased had been thirsty forever and stayed in *Bena*-root. After a long *Kalpakal* Bhagirath destined to give them *mukti* with the suggestion of Bashistha Rishi, tried to bring Ganga down on the earth to touch the Bena-root. At this, Shiva found his creation, the Earth at a great risk of destruction by Ganga and captured her in the entanglement of his ash-smeared hair (*jata*). At last, on the request of Bhagirath, he set Ganga free in a limited form in hundreds of divisions. In memory of this, the Ganga-Sagar Mela has been arranged every year and millions of pilgrims assemble in the Kapil Muni’s Ashram near the Sunderbans. Ghosh’s plot is set around this myth. The fate of the refugees is like that of the king Sagar and his sons losing their identity. The refugees lost their identity by the fire of the Partition and wanted to regain it after a few decades (as if, a limited *Kalpakal*) by the touch of the hungry tide (substituted for the river Ganga) on the island of Morichjhapi (parallel to Kapil Muni’s Ashram). Their movement is similar to Bhagirath’s prayer to Ganga. But the parallel journey of the myth and the fictional reality in the novel is suddenly stopped when a massacre takes place in Morichjhapi because of political rivalry or ill-will. While Ganga-Sagar Mela (fair) became spiritually important for the resurrection of the deceased, Morichjhapi became historically important as the reminiscence of hundreds of martyrs to attain their identity. Parallel journey
suggested in the very beginning of the novel, with their sudden rupture from one another at the end leaving the question of the identity of the tide people unresolved paves the way of attaining a tragic effect not only thematically but also structurally in a way of bathos mocking the mythical effect.

Moreover, this myth of Ganga creates a combined belief in the people of the tide country about the frailty or transience of their islands and the dominance of the small rivers as the limited form of Ganga. ‘These islands are the rivers’ restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift’ (Ghosh 7). And strangely enough, these new-built islands are covered within two years by an immense and dense mangrove forest. This vicissitude in the fate of the islands is similar to the fate of the tide country people. Their struggle against Nature – natural calamities like devastating storm or flood or ferocious animals like tiger, snake or crocodile in both land and water – form the pattern of their living and simultaneously gives rise to many myths and legends. For instance, the myth of Bonbibi and associated rituals that surpass the boundary of religion, have been shaped. It may sound hackneyed or superstitious or opposed to modern western paradigm of values. But to quote Gianni Vattimo,

“The presence of myth in our culture does not represent an alternative or opposing movement to modernization, but is rather its natural outcome, its destination, at least thus far.”

(Vattimo 42)

This Bonbibi myth is a natural outcome, in this sense, of a society united and consolidated by their everyday struggle, their plight and inevitable fate. In the chapter entitled ‘The Glory of Bon Bibi’, Ghosh tries to explore the different parameters that bring about the conflict between the cultures of two different communities – one living in so-called civilized society and the other born and brought up with assimilating the jangal myths and the associated rituals. The former is represented by Nirmal who tries to convince another urban man, Kanai that the story of Bonbibi is fictitious, unintelligible to the civilized society: ‘It’s just false consciousness; that’s all it is’. (Ghosh 101) Being a sagacious man, he knows the paradigmatic difference, never tries it on the islanders, rather he respects their belief.

Not only does the myth of Bonbibi have an impressing effect to community formation by uniting them through a common belief, but also forms the moral to provide them with an inner force and spirit. To them Bonbibi is the preserver of the rule of jangal which is quite opposite to the rule of jungle traditionally believed by the so-called civilized people. The latter considers jungle as a conceptual thing, an abstract idea where the ‘rule of jungle’ is prevailed, where ‘lawlessness’ is the law. But contradictorily, the fact is that, to these so-called janglees the law of jungle is something else – ‘the rich and the greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous were rewarded’ (Ghosh 105). In fact, these myths have been so assimilated by these peripheral people that the reality oscillates between Amitav’s concept of ‘false consciousness’ and Jung’s concept of ‘collective unconscious’. It breaks the boundary of time and space; rather it moulds and remoulds, codes and decodes itself only to be re-innovated. Through this gap penetrate minor modifications that keep the flow of the myth continuous and bear its contemporariness. Very recently in an interview with Umashankar Mondal the co-editor of the ‘Sudhu Sunderban’, Kalipada Mridha, an octogenarian living in the Sunderbans from his very childhood, exchanges his experience of facing tiger almost in the same fashion as is done by Dukhey of the Bonbibi myth:
Subal Mondal, Horen Mondal, Dhiren Mondal and me went to Khidirkhali in the south of Morichjhapi in order to fell the Garan tree and suddenly found a tiger playing with a dead pig. Having found us, the tiger made a thundering roar. Moreover, to our utter dismay, we found our boat stuck in the mud and we realized that we could not sail it before the coming of high tide. Being in such a danger, we remembered Bonbibi. After a few minutes, we found the tiger to flee away. Then we worked till the cock-crow, but with the blessings of the Bonbibi, we found no difficulty. [Trans. mine] (Jyotirindranarayan Lahiri 23)

Their belief on Bonbibi is so deep that they usually do not go to the jangal on Friday because they believe that she goes back to her own place, Athero-Bhati-Bhurkunda on every Friday and whoever dare go to jangal on Friday put themselves in danger in her absence. Kalipada Mridha shares such kind of an experience as he found Subal, one of his companions to be caught by tiger when he went to jangal for collecting honey on a Friday. This is how a myth continues its unending journey through man’s belief. In the words of Marina Warner:

“Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context – they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they’re not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but – and this is fortunate – never so set hard they cannot be changed again (Qut. in Laurence Coupe 189)

The colloquial nature and the assembly of the linguistic fervours taken from various regions of the world in the chanting or mantra of Bonbibi assert and reflect their values quite distinct and independent from the colonial hangover. This entanglement of culture is really mysterious and unintelligible to the modern mind. Notwithstanding the barriers of linguistic difficulties and religious differences, the socio-cultural space has thus been expanded. These peripheral people seek their own identity, not by being secluded or estranged from the entire world, but by imbibing into their own self all whoever comes there. To others, this is not a temptation, but an all-encompassing allure. This is why Piya-like western people bear the penetrating effect of the tide people’s community culture. Even the difference of language does not appear as an obstacle in the relationship among Piya, Fokir and Horen. This relationship is found to be Nature-made in the manner as is done in Kanka Muni’s Ashram in Kalidasa’s Shakuntala or Manik Bandyopadhyaya’s Padma Nadir Majhi. The ‘total environment’ plays a formative role in the character building of the tide people. They continue to live in the lap of nature as its part and parcel though they always face a cultural appropriation that make some people like Kusum and Fokir to cling more tightly to their culture, some people like Moyna to succumb and people like Horen and Nirmal to forge a balance between the two.

Through his enticing narrative Ghosh dexterously delineates these conflicts in one’s identity-formation, in which nature (geography), fate (history) and human endeavour criss-cross in the life of various characters having a background in the form of cultural landscape based on jangal. The local cultural landscape or the visible imprint of human activity in the jangal reflects their values, norms and the aesthetics of their culture. This also includes how they have shaped the environment to serve their own purposes, and how they themselves become a part of the ‘total environment’ by developing a ‘sense of place’ of their own, grown out of the experience of displacement, diaspora and a dream of a new society.
Works Cited


