

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

April 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- II

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

The Idea of the Nation State and It's Disconnect with the Subaltern in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Richa Joshi Pandey

Research Scholar in Department of English,
Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University,
Srinagar, Garhwal.
Uttarakhand.

Abstract:

The current paper deals with the idea of what is it that constitutes a nation state. Different theorists like Smith and Anderson are briefly discussed and so are their theoretical shortcomings in explaining the cultural plethora that serves the tide country, a region so evanescent and transformative, that it defies the creation of clear cut boundaries. This is done in the context of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh's 1994 novel. If boundaries do exist here, they do so in terms of the disconnect between India's own positionality as a nation state and the people who really belong to the Sunderbans. I use Foucault's concept of Power and Knowledge to elicit the peculiar application of it in the region. No particular Western epistemology is single-handedly and unproblematically capable of claiming applicability to this unique region.

Key Words: Nation, Ecology, Primitivism, Power, Knowledge.

The idea of what it is that constitutes a nation and the ethics and rigour of nationalism as a definitive structure has been variously expounded and debated by theorists like Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Walker Connor, Hans Kohn, Hugh Seton-Watson, John Breuilly, Michael Hechter, Anthony Smith amongst others.

Anthony Smith, defines a modern nation as a "human population which shares myths and memories, a mass public culture, a designated homeland, economic unity and equal rights and duties for all members." As per him, nations have their roots in "ethnies," those "named units of population with common ancestry myths and historical memories, elements of shared culture, some link with a historic territory and some measure of solidarity at least among their elites." (Smith 56-7)

Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an 'imagined political community': "It is imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson 6) According to Thomas Janoski, "Anderson is typically identified as a "constructivist," meaning that he allegedly takes nations to be historically contingent products of human cultural construction." (Janoski 249)

This then is the particular paradox of the Indian subcontinent hacked into the three countries- India, Pakistan and Bangladesh- that are so incredibly invested in each other in history and culture that it is impossible for them to invent points of disjuncture at the level of 'common ancestry myths and historical memories' as per Smith's conception of what it would take to fit in as a nation.

Anderson's definition too falls flat in the definition of the nation with respect to the Indian subcontinent since most of India's south has more in common with Sri Lanka than its own east or north or west. India's east has more in common with Bangladesh in terms of culture and history, even as people to people contact between the two areas is smoother than the sentinels of nationalism would have us believe.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh describes the narrator in his personal quest for roots, drawing circles on his old Bartholomew's Atlas that had once belonged to his hero and self-defining

mirror- Tridib. He finds that *Khulna* in East *Pakistan* is less than one hundred *miles* away from *Calcutta* on the other side of the border, but a full 1,200 *miles* away from the state capital of Kashmir, *Srinagar*, in the Indian territory. Likewise, he finds that placing the point of the compass on *Khulna* and extending the circle from *Srinagar*, places as *Phnom Penh* in Thailand and Inner *Mongolia* are of an equal distance from *Khulna*. Thus nations are not discreet identities within the “tidy orderings of Euclidean space” (Ghosh, SL 255) as Anderson conceived of it.

This paper talks about Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh’s 1994 novel and its debunking of the nationalism myth. *The Hungry Tide*, is located in the Sunderban delta, an archipelago of many islands. The novel begins with Piyali Roy, a Bengali cetologist from Seattle, USA meeting Kanai Dutt, the owner of a Delhi based translation business. Piya is a very driven researcher who wishes to explore the cetological wealth of the tide waters: specifically to study a rare freshwater dolphin- the Gangetic dolphin. Kanai, on the other hand, is off to meet his Mashima who lives in Lusibari; he is to receive his deceased Uncle, Nirmal’s posthumously discovered diary.

Soon Piya has a disastrous encounter with the forest officials whose help she seeks in her research and also a near fatal encounter of drowning while on the boat. Piya is saved from drowning by Fokir, an illiterate crab fisherman, and she switches over on to his boat. From here on, Fokir becomes her guide through the labyrinthine waterways and gives her a glimpse of the most astounding and uncanny insights on dolphin behaviour and the tide country. Piya develops a romantic fascination with Fokir even though they are unable to speak a word of each other’s language. Fokir is married to the ambitious and hardworking Moyna and is almost always, much against Moyna’s wishes who wishes for Tutul to have a school education.

The tide country is rife with tigers and crocodiles and also an abundance of myths, stories, and legends. The religious following in these parts is that of the Bonbibi legend, a syncretic mix of Hinduism and Islam that has emerged as a way to propitiate the unknown dangers of the tide country. Through Nirmal’s diary, Kanai and the reader gets a glimpse of the dehumanising state policies that had led to the Morichjhapi massacre.

The novel ends with Fokir’s death in trying to save Piya’s life while they are out on Piya’s one of many research excursions. Piya and Fokir have been caught in a storm and have battled hard, but in vain. Piya suffers the guilt of being responsible for Fokir’s death. She goes back to Calcutta and manages to procure a fellowship that will help her pursue her research in the area, while use the banner of the Badabon Trust, aiding its activities at the same time. She hopes to employ Moyna as an assistant and has also procured scholarship for Tutul’s education. Kanai too has restructured his work so as to work part- time from Lusibari, for some time of the year.

The case in point is the particular evanescent topography of the tide country, a region where as per Nirmal’s Rilkeism, “life is lived in transformation”. (Ghosh, HT 233)

When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. 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 the air still and fetid. 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 or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (7)

The received ideas of a proliferating wild, of ‘a universe unto itself’ without the telltale ‘towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering, monkeys or cockatoos’

are absent. In this sense, the landscape itself forms an oppositional discourse to the arid forest of Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh, where the natives of the tide country from the other side of the border were transported, their only fault being that that they were refugees with limited political currency. The paragraph is amply suggestive of the tide country as an evanescent, primitivistic cultural space defined by its geography and ecology that has an acute kinship with the organicity of a character like Fokir. Comparing Fokir to Piya, Ghosh writes, “There was something about him that was utterly unformed, and it was this very quality that drew her to him: she craved it in the same way that potter’s hand might crave the resistance of unshaped clay.” (263)

According to Dalibur, “The 'proceeding outwards from within' shows that primitivism is not a return to origins but an attempt to *be* original (emphasis added) a search for the primordial, essential and original mode of creativity.(Dalibur 25)”

In his 1982 book, *The Ecology of Freedom*, Murray Bookchin, as part of his ecological commitment, defines the “organic society” (Bookchin; qtd. in Biehl 58).” found on the egalitarian principles of “complimentarity, the irreducible minimum (Radin; qtd. in Biehl 59) and usufruct (Bookchin; qtd. in Biehl 59).” (Biehl 59) In his later work, Bookchin cannot help overstate the fact that he does not wish to romanticize the naive, magical and mythical culture of these societies. His attempt is not to posit individuals from these societies as “ecological mentors” (Bookchin; qtd. in Biehl 59). He believed that since they failed to distinguish between nature and culture, their attitudes towards nature were neither of harmony nor dominance, in the absence of a consciously cultivated attitude towards nature, per se. In fact, he expositis that their necessity to share the ecological resources with the wild, made it necessary for them to kill animals for food, clothing and shelter; something that often led them to overdo the kill and hunt.(59-60)

Ghosh’s aesthetic of an unformed ideal in Fokir is not valorized as a monochromatic view of the pliant organic man of evolutionary innocence and beginnings. The encounter of the tiger burning episode is the case in point that stresses the tide country’s exclusive cultural capital, its very own *structures of feeling* that Fokir is an inseparable part of. Piya is completely enamored of Fokir’s native intelligence, his eco- sensitivity and eco- empathy that makes him a contributive component of an animistic culture. Such a culture thrives on the fear and dread of the tide country’s unfathomable lurking sense of danger; on the one hand it finds expression in the syncretic cult of Bon- Bibi worship while on the other hand it is manifested in the rather ritualistic celebration of the tiger- burning. Ghosh has presented the debate on tiger – burning in a rationalized and unsentimental manner, a matter specific to the tide country that is destined to remain elusive to the west- inspired ideas of justice or reason, ideals that have long been appropriated by both the colonial masters and the modern day Indian nation state. However well meaning and arduous in her quest to revive research on the Gangetic dolphin(*Oracella Brevirostris*) , “Piya understood too that this was a looking-glass in which a man like Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence”.(Ghosh, HT 183)

In *The Hungry Tide*, Fokir emerges as a symbol of the “ecological mentor” whose engagement with the dangers and bounty of the Sunderbans is that of an impassioned soul. Notwithstanding the fact that he takes active part in the hacking and burning of the tiger in a sort of group orgy; he has an innate sense of communicating with the dolphins, sensing their movement patterns in the pools they create.

The tiger, in the novel, is an important synecdoche for the environment/ human, nature/ culture debate. While the tiger conservation policies have been variously appropriated by politicians for leverage in an essentially vote bank politics, a glamorous movement (the tiger conservation) with a romantic revolutionary appeal; in the tide country, in particular, it’s nemesis has hunted down many a human lives, and has tremendous adaptability proffered by

the peculiar habitat that makes it an invincible being worthy of appeasement through ceremonial worship.

There are several metaphors in the novel that depict the human cost of the expedient World Wildlife Fund sponsored Tiger conservation schemes that are an asset to state and central politics. The Morichjhapi massacre of the refugees, a matter critically discussed in another of my essays entitled, "Excavating culture and history of the Sunderbans in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*", lives on in the collective memory of a people as also a symbolically doomed reality, that manages to remain an irritant to thought even though it is not often given even lip service. Nirmal's diary, his memoir, is the symbol in the novel that articulates this painful reality but the fact that it is lost in the waters by Kanai who has tried his best to retrieve it, is an illustration of the fact that the hapless lot of refugees who have perished unmourned due to state violence are yet not afforded a journalistic or even archival space for enunciation. The brief glimpse that is yet allotted to it is only in literary or fictive terms.

While this is true of the human lot, the several ecological concerns of the tide country have been conveniently overlooked by the same nation states and their instruments of state apparatus. Nirmal's anecdote about the prediction of the Matla's rise, the crabs eating away at the mangrove islands as also the real threat to fishermen like Fokir, whose livelihood is endangered with the fast depleting quantities of fish, inadequate drinking water for the locals are some concerns that the novel enlists.

In the Garjontola incident, Kanai finds himself stripped of his assurances of his education, his understanding of the world in six languages. While he has all along adopted an attitude of condescension towards the unlettered Fokir, here all his defences fall off. This is his moment of alienation, the epiphanic moment that is similar to a Conradian white man's ineptitude in the heart of darkness.

... his own vision were being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes, and he were seeing not himself, Kanai, but a great host of people – a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men who had destroyed Fokir's village, burnt his home and killed his mother; he had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose value was less than that of an animal. In seeing himself in this way it seemed perfectly comprehensible to Kanai why Fokir should want him to be dead. (270)

And herein lie the faultlines through which seeps the repressed guilt of a city bred Kanai in the consciousness of being complicit with the same colonialism- inspired state rhetoric of the nation state. He realizes that this is essentially a discordant dichotomy- where a state of 'in-betweenness' that Piya or even Nirmal dream of, remains a utopian venture.

The fear that he has been warned of is now tactile. He knows it cannot be expressed or articulated in language; for Kanai, any fear to be confronted or faced, has to be first succinctly framed in linguistic terms. It is only Fokir, who has the instinctive connect with such a diffuse but pounding sense of danger and fear, and in his idiom, such a fear is determinedly to be not spelt aloud. Kanai's predicament is penned empathetically by Ghosh, "The words he had been searching for, the euphemisms that were the source of his panic, had been replaced by the thing itself, except that without words it could not be apprehended or understood." (267)

According to Foucault's concept of Power and Knowledge:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and

procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault qtd. in Naugle 183)

The relation between Knowledge and Power as posited by Foucault is explained by Stuart Hall. According to Hall's exposition, Knowledge when linked to power, not only assumes the authority of truth, but has the power to *make itself true*. All power when applied to the real world has real effects and in that sense, becomes true. Knowledge when used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and disciplining of practices. "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute, at the same time, power relations." (Foucault; qtd. in Hall 49)

Here in the Sunderbans, a microcosm of its own, language and discourse itself is created in a non-verbal manner. The "general politics" of truth, here, unlike in Foucault is not constructed through the necessity of reclaiming alterity with the Other. In the tide country, truth is innate and personal, transmitted not through the transmission of a wilfully maintained academic or ideological structure, but in a spiritual connect that is passed down as a collective memory of a people. In the midst of the delta's lurking sense of danger, Horen, who has brought up Kanai like a father figure, tells Nirmal, "You cannot spit or urinate; you cannot sit down to relieve yourself; you cannot leave behind your morning's meal. If you do, then harm will come to all of us." (Ghosh, HT 203) A generation down, Fokir's words to Kanai echo the same kindered spirit when he talks about the palpability of fear and its interpretative value.

Moyna, Fokir's wife, has trained to be a nurse so that she can earn enough to support her family, is adamant that Tutul attend school, and though she is undeniably charmed by her husband, and is concerned about his loyalty, she also is acutely aware that the tide country's resources are getting leached, that with rising urban demands, the fish and crabs are dwindling and that Fokir's profession are not likely to sustain them for long. While Kanai can identify with Moyna, who, in a sense like him, believes in ambition, the need to grow, rise above her station and achieve more than what was simply in the offing; it is Fokir who becomes his dialectic twin, his alter-ego, who opens up the window to Kanai's own sense of lack. Here, the master-slave dialectic receives a dizzying spin as the gaze of the slave disrupts the so far stable identity of the master.

There was something about Fokir's expression that convinced Kanai he was playing a game with him ... He understood all too well how the dynamics of their situation might induce Fokir to exaggerate the menace of their surroundings. He himself had often stood in Fokir's pace, serving as some hapless traveler's window on a unfamiliar world. He remembered how, in those circumstances, he too had often been tempted to heighten the inscrutability of the surroundings through subtly slanted glosses. To do this required no particularly malicious intent; it was just a way of underscoring the insider's indispensability; every new peril was proof of his importance; each new threat evidence of his worth. These temptations were all too readily available to every guide and translator – not to succumb was to make yourself dispensable; to give in was to destroy the value of your word, and thus your work. It was precisely because of his awareness of this dilemma that he knew too that there were times when a translator's bluff had to be called. (265)

No particular malicious intent meant, Fokir's knowledge is the key to his power. While the urbane, suave, Kanai can get on in the urban world in a way that Fokir cannot, here it is the former who's very training as a translator (and just that) leaves him with the gnawing realization of his own inadequacy in the specific temporal and spatial situated-ness, that is the tide country. Kanai is forced to admit, "I had always prided myself on the breadth and comprehensiveness of my experience of the world: I had loved, I once liked to say, in six

languages. That seems now like the boast of a time very long past: at Garjontola I learnt how little I know of myself and of the world.” (291) In his colourful imprecation follow, it is his own weakness that finds expression.

As shown by Benedict Anderson, the received standard colonial understanding of nationalism in all once colonized nations and the concept of anti-colonial nationalism leans heavily on its European models. Two important points in this are- One, that the ideals of nationalism were ‘modular’ as a ‘legacy of imperialist official nationalism’. The other, that in forging nationalist consciousness, the native intelligentsia could play a vital role because being bilingual, they had access “modern Western culture in the broadest sense, and, in particular, to the models of nationalism, nation-ness, and nation- state produced elsewhere in the course of the nineteenth century.” (Chatterjee 21)

As further explained by Ania Loomba, “English historians had often suggested that Indians learnt their ideas of freedom and self- determination from English books, including the plays of Shakespeare! Nationalism is thus a ‘derivative discourse’, a Calibanistic model of revolt which is dependent upon the coloniser’s gift of language/ ideas.” (Loomba 158) Partha Chatterjee challenges Anderson, suggesting the dual nature of the relationship between anti-colonial and metropolitan nationalism, in that of both borrowing and difference.

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh does not outright reject the doings of the colonial masters as outright self- serving and degrading. In fact, in the figure of Sir Daniel Hamilton, Ghosh describes a truly altruistic vision. Sir Daniel Hamilton had a grand project planned out and acquired at his personal cost, a number of islands in the region that he wanted to call Andrewpur after the exalted St. Andrew of Scotland. The many names that he supplied to islands in the region lived on but not Andrewpur. Andrewpur became Hamilton-abad.

As insightful a man as he was ahead of his times, Sir Hamilton had envisioned what his contemporaries could not – that the islands of the tide country had been an enduring symbol of historical sedimentation – “the threshold of a teeming subcontinent” of “the Arakanese, the Khmer, the Javanese, the Dutch, the Malays, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the English” that they “do not merely recolonize land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts.” (43) His Utopian project is an altruistic transference of western Marxism and Enlightenment ideals to the tide country where nature strikes both terror and exuberant beauty in its bounty.

Early on in the sixties, Murray Bookchin had said, “The future of the anarchist movement will depend upon its ability to apply basic libertarian principles to new historical situations.” (Bookchin; qtd. in Biehl 4). While Sir Daniel’s has remained an unfinished project after his death; even Nirmal, once a romantic believer in the communist cause, has faced utter disillusionment in the death of his ideology in Bengal. He has found an inconsistent refuge in Rilke’s poetry while Nilima has been the brand of change in the region. Nilima’s is the voice of a practical and grounded application of ‘basic libertarian principles to new historical situations’. She has an acute understanding of pragmatically bringing about the development activities of the Badabon Trust, grappling with its day to day exigencies. As much as she has motherly affection towards Kusum, at the time of the Morichjhapi massacre, Nilima knew she must not meddle with the eviction for she had a project of her own- the Badabon Trust activities that have brought basic infrastructural facilities to the hinterland- that would be jeopardized if she took cudgels against the government.

While romanticising either Fokir or the tide country would have been a likely flaw in the hands of a lesser writer, Ghosh’s novel puts unpalatable facts on the table in a fictional avatar that puts the truth about nations and their myths in perspective. The novel also illustrates that Western epistemology cannot be uncritically and unproblematically transferred on to the Indian context, which itself exists as a ‘tissue of quotations’ that is build up in a process involving a historical sedimentation of a confluence of culture and travel.

Works Cited:

- Bookchin, Murray, and Janet Biehl. "Organic Society" *The Murray Bookchin Reader*. Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1999. Print.
- "Introduction" *The Murray Bookchin Reader*. Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1999. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Nationalism as a problem in the history of Political Ideas." *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* London, U.K: Zed Books for the United Nations University, 1986. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Shadow Lines*. Toronto: Penguin Books Canada, 2011. Print.
- Hall, Stuart "The Work of Representation." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London [u.a.: Sage Publ. [u.a., 1997. Print.
- Liah, Greenfield and Eastwood, Jonathan. "Nationalism in comparative perspective." *The Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies, and Globalization*. Edited by Thomas Janoski. Cambridge [u.a.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005. Print.
- Loomba, Ania. "Challenging Colonialism." *Colonialism, Postcolonialism*. London [u.a.: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Naugle, David K. "A Philosophical History of 'Worldview': The Twentieth Century II" *Worldview: The History of a Concept*. Grand Rapids, Mich. [u.a.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002. Print.
- Smith, Anthony D. *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*. Cambridge [u.a.: Politiy Press, 1996. Print.
- Vesely, Dalibur "The Primitive as Modern Problem: Invention and Crisis" *Primitive: Original Matters in Architecture*. Edited by Odgers, Jo, Flora Samuel, and Adam Sharr. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.