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Focalization: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Narratology is related to different narrative strategies used by a writer. A writer uses various narrative strategies like typologies of narrators, focalization, stream of consciousness, interior monologues, memory, delay ,gap, repetition ,analepsis, prolepsis etc. The narratologists like Mieka Bal, Gerard Genette, Gerald Prince, Todorov and others have written on various aspects of narratology, but the main focus of this paper is on focalization – which is of course one of the major aspect of narratology.

One of the basic rule to analyse the text is to understand the distinction between narration and focalization. Genette like other narratologists observes that most studies of point of view or narrative perspective do not clarify two related but different questions – the question of “who speaks?” and the question of “who sees? (who focalizes?)”. The major issue here is that if an event is presented to reader, it is always presented from a certain perspective which is not necessarily the voice of the narrator whether it is concerned with “real” historical fact or some fictitious event, it is always seen from certain angle. It becomes important that when a reader reads, he should attempt to see “from where” he is viewing the text or in narratological terms, he may be able to determine the focalization as well as the narration of the text, to find clear difference between the vision through which the events of the story are presented and the narrating voice that is merely verbalizing that event. Sholomith Rimmon – Kenan talk about narration and focalization as follows:

1. In principle, focalization and narration are distinct activities.
2. In so-called “third person centre of consciousness” (James's *The Ambassadors*, *Joyce's Portrait*), the centre of consciousness (Or “reflector”) is the focalizer, while the user of the third person is the narrator.
3. Focalization and narration are also separate in first-person retrospective narratives.
4. As far as focalization is concerned, there is no difference between third-person centre of consciousness and first-person retrospective narration. In both, the focalizer is a character within the represented world. The only difference between the two is the identity of the narrator.
5. However, focalization and narration may sometimes be combined ... (75)

Focalization is done not only by someone but also on someone or something. It has thus both subject and object. The subject is the focalizer and the agent whose perception forms the presentation . The object or the focalized is what the focalizer perceives.

Genette observes that there are different types of focalization due to slight variation in the typologies of narrators. Focalization and its types has been discussed in details in the works of Uspensky ,Bal , Genette and Rimmon-Kenan along with other narratologists .Types of focalization according to Genette is related to two criteria—position relative to the story and degree of persistence. As far as the position of narrator in the story is concerned focalization may be either external or internal. As the vantage point of external focalization brings itself close to the narrating agent, its vehicle is generally called the narrator-focalizer. External focalization is generally found in third-person narratives, but it may also appear in first-person narratives “either when the temporal and psychological distance between narrator and character is minimal

(as in Camus's *L' étranger*) or when the perception through which the story is presented is that of the narrating self rather than that of the experiencing self" (Rimmon-Kenan 74). On the contrary, internal focalization is located inside the represented events. It generally appears in the form of a character-focalizer. Barthes and Genette have indicated that a test for differentiating between external and internal focalization is to attempt to "rewrite" the given passage in the first person (Barthes 20; Genette 210). If this is possible, the passage is internally focalized and if not, then the focalization is external.

The opening second paragraph of *The Hungry Tide* is a clear example of this: Kanai liked to think that he had the true connoisseur's ability to both praise and appraise women, by the way she held herself, by the unaccustomed delineation of her stance. It occurred to him suddenly that perhaps, despite her silver nose-stud and tint of her skin, she was not Indian, except by descent. (THT3)

It is evident here that the focalization is internal with Kanai as character focalizer. Although Kanai and Piya are usually the internal focalizers within the narrative, there are occasions when there is shift in focalization .

If the focalizer can be external or internal the focalized can also be viewed either from within or without as Rimmon Kenan holds. But the two parallel classifications do not necessarily coincide (hence Rimmon-Kenan's division of focalizers is into "external" or "internal" and the focalized into "without" or "within" (75). The external focalizer may perceive an object either from without or from within in an external focalization. The perception that comes from without, presents nothing but the outward manifestations of the focalized person or thing. An example of external focalization occurs in *The Hungry Tide* :

Nirmal was originally from Dhaka but had come to Calcutta as a student. The events of Partition had cut him off from his family and he had electric to stay on in Calcutta where he had made a name for himself as a leftist intellectual and a writer of promise. He was teaching English literature at Ashutosh College when his path crossed Nilima's; she happened to be a student in one of his classes. (THT76)

In the perception that comes from within ,the narrator – focalizer presents the focalized object ,person or thing by presenting the feelings and thoughts . In *The Hungry Tide*, for example, the third person narrator focalizer allows the reader to peep deep into the mind of Nirmal when he was detained and later released by the police.

Although his detainment lasted only a day or two, the experience had a profoundly unsettling effect on Nirmal, following as it did on his rejection by Nilima's family and his separation from his own. He could not bring himself to go to the college and there were the days when he would not even get out of bed. Recognizing that something had snapped, Nilima threw himself upon her family's mercies and went to see her mother. (77)

The same duality of within/without perception is related to internal focalizers also who can perceive the object from within especially as it mostly happens in *The Hungry Tide* when Kanai and Piya are both focalizer and focalized – or from without, where their observations and visualization is limited only to the outward appearance and manifestation of the focalized object.

After discussing position relative to the story, Rimmon Kenan moves to degree of persistence as a means of classifying focalizations. During reading the text it is found that focalization may remain fixed throughout the narrative, it may be consistently external or internal and attached to a single character, alternate between different focalizers or shift among several. The difference between fixed, variable, and multiple focalization applies as well to the focalized also.

In *The Hungry Tide*, focalization shifts mainly among Kanai, Piya, Nilima and Nirmal. Nirmal's point of view has been given through his packet which is left for Kanai to read. There are, however, shifts to the occasional external narrator focalizer or even to different other internal characters – focalizer. The focalization shifts to Moyna, Horane and even to Kusum. The mind of Moyna has been revealed in the following lines in her conversation with Kanai as she is afraid of growing relationship between Fokir and Piya.

'She's a woman, Kanai-babu.' Moyna's voice sank to a whisper. 'And he's a man.'....
Because words are just air, Kanai- babu,' Moyana said. 'When the wind blows on water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath unseen and unheard. You can't blow on the water's surface from below, Kanai babu .Only who's outside can do that, someone like you.'(THT258)

Rimmon-Kenan agrees with Uspensky and asserts that the purely visual sense of the term is quite limited. He asserts that at least three other facets are also important in focalization analysis: the perceptual facet, which is determined by the two co-ordinates of space and time, the psychological facet, which is determined by the cognitive and the emotive orientation of the focalizer toward the focalized and the third is ideological facet .

Kanai and Piya as the main character focalizers and are present in the story, so they have only limited views because they are related to only those people who surround them in a particular period . Theoretically it is feasible that within any text, there may be a change in spatial focalization from bird's eye view to one limited observer or a shift from limited observer to another. In Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*, we find both the panoramic views of narrator focalizer and simultaneous focalization through few shifts from one limited observer to another. So in *The Hungry Tide* there is no limited vision and there is continuous shift in focalization .

Time is the second aspect of the perceptual facet. In external focalization, it is panchronic for an unpersonified character, focalizing his or her own past. Internal focalization is logically synchronous with the information related by the focalizer. Thus the internal focalizer is limited to the 'present' of the characters while the external focalizer has access to all the temporal dimensions of the story ie, present,past and future.

The psychological facet of focalization is related to the focalizer's mind and emotions that is of great importance. The external or narrator-focalizer has an unrestricted knowledge about the represented world but if this focalizer conceals some information from the reader it is simply for rhetorical effect. The knowledge of the internal focalizer is not the same as that of the external focalizer and is necessarily restricted. Being the part of the represented world, an internal focalizer cannot know everything about it. This particular aspect of focalization makes the reader understand better the relationship between Kanai, Piya and Fokir.

As far as emotive aspect is concerned the difference between external and internal focalization further corresponds to the difference between objective, neutral or uninvolved focalization on one hand and on the other hand subjective ,coloured or involved focalization . In *The Hungry Tide*, for example, the passages which tell about mangrove forests, are externally focalized:

When the tide creates new land, overnight mangrove begin to gestate, and if the condition are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe there are no towering, vine – looped trees, no ferns, no wild flowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.(THT7)

But, the same mangrove jungles in the chapter – ‘Signs’, are internally focalized by Kanai when he was left alone by Fokir in these jungles.

Kanai’s head filled suddenly with vision of the ways in which the tide country dealt out death. The tiger, people said, killed you instantly with a swipe of its forepaw, breaking the joint between your shoulder and neck. You felt no pain when it happened; you were dead already of the shock induced by the tiger’s roar. the mangrove branches were pliable and sinuous; they bent without breaking and snapped back like whips. . . .it was as if he had passed into the embrace of hundreds of scaly limbs. (329).

Here the same place is focalized in an entirely different colour. There is no doubt that perception of the focalized from without also limits observation to external manifestations, leaving the emotions to be inferred from them. In contrast, perception of the focalized from within makes the reader share the inner life of the focalized, either by making the focalizer and focalized identical as in the interior monologue of which there are many examples in *The Hungry Tide* or by granting to the external narrator-focalizer the total knowledge to penetrate into the inner life of the focalized as in the passage mentioned above. If the focalized is seen from within, mainly by an external focalizer, indicators such as “she thought,” “she felt,” “it seemed to her,” “she knew,” “she recognized” etc. often appear in the text as there so many in the present text.

She had noticed him while waiting on the platform Calcutta and she had been struck by the self – satisfied tilt of his head. . . . she had noticed the casual self importance with which he had evicted the man who’d been sitting next to the window.(THT10)

The third facet of focalization is that of ideology . Uspensky finds that this facet (sometimes simply referred to as the “norms of the text”) is related to “a general system of viewing the world conceptually,” in accordance with which the events and characters of the story are analysed (8). These norms, generally presented through a single dominant perspective mostly a narrator-focalizer, are usually taken as authoritative. All the other ideologies in the text are evaluated from this “higher” position. But in more complex examples, however, the unitary authoritative external focalizer may give way to a plurality of ideological positions, the interplay among them provoking, according to Bakhtin, a nonunitary or “polyphonic” reading of the text.

This aspect of ideological focalization in *The Hungry Tide* is very interesting. The ideologies related to duplicacy of government policies, national boundaries, preservation of animals at the cost of human beings etc. This certainly allows the reader to see in its hypocrisy. So many questions comes in the mind of the reader as - how difficult these norms are to live by and follow. At the same time there is Piya’s own ideology as one of the main character focalizer when she shows her resentment on killing of a tiger.

Kanai spat into the dust. ‘Piya, you have to understand – that animal’s been preying on this village for years. It’s killed two people and any number of cows and goats-’

‘This is an animal , Kanai,’ Piya’ said. you can’t take revenge
on animal.’(THT294)

The reader is also bound to question himself as who is more important under the circumstances presented in the text – the citizens of a country or its national animals – the tiger?

Rimmon-Kenan also opines that although focalization is in itself nonverbal (“seeing” as opposed to narration’s “speaking”), like everything else in the text it can only be expressed by language (82). Throughout the language of *The Hungry Tide* is of course mainly that of the narrator, but sometimes it is of character focalizer’s also as in the case of Nirmal but focalization certainly colours the novel in such a way as to make it appear as the bouquet of perceptions and

voices of a separate agents. Both the presence of a focalizer other than the narrator and the shift from one focalizer to another may be indicated by language.

Thus, the present paper discusses the concept of focalization and the ways it can help initiate readers to understand the text. In discussing *The Hungry Tide* as a model text, it is clear that the narrative function is performed here not by single narrator but by multiple narrators with many point of views. Along with omnipresent narrator there are the character focalizers – male female, literate, illiterate, old, young, professionals, non-professionl ,rural and urban. There are different voices- the voices of the author, the omnipresent narrator, the character focalizers, Nirmal'diary, the collective voices of community people, translations of Rilke and even the voices of flora and fauna of Sunderbans. Thus the varied voices, variety of genres, the open endedness of novel, position and possibilities hinted at the end, the multiplicity of equally valid views certainly make clear that Amitav Ghosh emerges to be an artist par excellence. The narrative structure of *The Hungry Tide* is very well integrated and Amitav Ghosh is greatly divergent in presenting his narratives.

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