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Ecological Region Causes Migration as in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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The Hungry Tide is a unique combination of anthropology, travel, ethnography, environmentalism and migration wrapped in the cloak of fiction. Between the sea and the plain of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands. Here for hundreds of years, only the truly disposed braved the man, eating tigers and the crocodiles who rule there. At the beginning of the last century, a visionary Scotsman founded a utopian settlement where people of all races, classes and religions could live together. Sundarbans is the natural habitat of many endangered species including the Royal Bengal Tiger and the Irrawaddy Dolphins. It is a politically problematic zone caught between tussle of refugees from the East Bengal and the state government of West Bengal: "There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in: yet to the world at large this archipelago is known 'as the Sundarbans', which means the beautiful forest" (Sarkar 26).

Kanai's uncle's notebook reveals the shocking story of the Morichjhapi incident, where tens of thousands of displaced refugees, who had tried to settle on one of the uninhabited islands, but were violently evicted by the government in the name of conservation. The political system in contemporary West Bengal does not allow the refugees to settle in the Sundarbans. The government whether of India or of Bangladesh has no sympathy for these poor people. Ghosh says in the voice of Nilima, Kanai's aunt:

In 1978 a great number of people suddenly appeared on Morichjhapi. In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight. Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built badhs and put up huts. It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to be learned that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh. Some had come to India after Partition, while others had trickled over later. In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes. Most of them were Dalits, as we say now, said Nilima Harijans, as we used to say then. But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhapi; it was from a government resettlement camp in central India. In the years after Partition the authorities had removed the refugees to a place called Dandakaranya, deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of kilometers from Bengal. (*The Hungry Tide* 118)

The Morichjhapi episode presents the picture of a forced migration in which migrants are cornered by both ends and denied of their fundamental and basic rights even after their migration to place for a better living. Skillfully Ghosh has interpreted the facts of late 1970, simulated the reality and has woven it into a narrative to present the experience of these marginal's who have been displaced some three times from Bangladesh to Sundarbans, from Sundarbans to Rehabilitation Camps in Central India and from these land-locked Rehab Camps back to Sundarbans and are still looking for their place. In the words of Kusum, a refugee in the camp:

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, were worthless 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? Do they know what is being done in their name? Where do they live, these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things, it seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of 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. No one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (*The Hungry Tide* 261-262)

Piya a cetologist hires an illiterate boatman Fokir, to guide her through the backwaters in her search for the dolphins and Kanai comes along to translate. The tension between the three grows as they are thrown against each other and are drawn unawares into the hidden undercurrents of this isolated world and the tide begins to turn for them. Kanai lives in a translated world and is not at ease while journeying through the socio-cultural hinterlands. He rushes into this place of perpetual change and transformation but his return to the lingo centric world is an indirect comment on those who prefer cozy spaces of habitat at home for Kanai is in a temporarily adopted place and resides in the culture being studied or as Clifford says: "The field is a home away from home, a place of dwelling..." (Jain 166). However Piya is a homebody abroad; it is journey that regulates most of her life. She says "home is where the orcellas are". Thus Piya redefines home as a shifting domain, a place that can be created anywhere in this world. For Kanai's aunt Nilima "Home is wherever I can brew a pot of good tea" (Jain 166). These two expressions dissolve borderlines because while Nilima is rooted in Lusibari and is completely dedicated to this re-invented space, a place she had moved to in 1950 first from Dhaka to Calcutta and then to this place. Piya is a free spirit and the law of transgression doesn't hold her, as her 'self' is at home where she can pursue her desire and re-

discover her own imagined space. Home for Nilima also means commitment not merely the contours of a geographical location, but for Piyali Roy it means absence of an anchorage. Moving or travelling for them may not mean homelessness but it would be finding a new place for sheltering their desires. For Moyna, home means deprivation. To move across specific locales may mean betrayal for some. The dichotomy between home and homeless is reflected in Nirmal's character who displays a duality that propels him to fight for Bangladeshi refugees by forsaking the comfort of his home. Fokir's love for life across the frontiers towards which the river flows, sustains him. Thus home becomes a site of conflict as well as a metaphor of unity and harmony. Ironically home and travel also become synonymous an unending quest or as Neil Bissoondath sums it up: "For many, the journey is inevitable...cast the new land in a sharper and more compelling light...but they must make it before they can truly move on with their lives" (Jain 167).

The river journey in open space which Piya and Fokir undertake together may offer them a metaphor of home that never was and never can be. Piya chases dolphin that carry her across fixed boundaries and Fokir remains trapped in the river, caught between its ebb and tide. Secular criticism, places home and homeless in a binary opposition. While home comes to be associated with culture as an environment process and hegemony that determine individuals through complicated mechanism, homelessness cannot be achieved without multiple border crossings, indeed without a constant, keen awareness of the politics of borders. The idea of home is sustained through fixity and ceaseless negotiation in space. A specific location can be called home as long as one lives there but when the location is made to cast its shadow on its inhabitants, dogging their steps and compelling them to return to its fold, it becomes a tyranny endorsed by those who see locations as inalienable and integrated wholes of their consciousness from which escape proves futile.

Nirmal, Nilima's husband discovers in the island people a space for his dormant activism and self-expression in working for a cause. The consciousness of home as a fixed destination and homelessness as state of up-rootedness makes Ghosh explore the plight of displaced people, the Bangladeshi's who found themselves in a confrontation with the Indian state in 1979. The ruthless suppression and massacre in East Pakistan had made the refugees run away from Dandkaranya refugee camps to Morichjhapi as they felt that the later regions would provide them with familiar environs and therefore a better life. The theme of immigration, sometimes voluntarily sometimes forced, runs through Ghosh's work. "Ghosh fits in a different category as he is neither an exile nor an immigrant and able to develop out of his border status, a theory of exile as an ascetic code of willed homelessness and debates in his writings how ideas and theories are transformed when borders are crossed" (Jain 167-168).

One of Ghosh's most persistent themes in the novel is of the ephemerality of concepts of national and ethnic identity. The multiplicity of names for the Sundarbans, bhatirdesh is itself a

metaphor for that ephemerality. As the late, Nirmal recounts in his journal: “In this place that I had lived in for almost thirty years. The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take to submerge the tide country? Not much a minuscule change in the level of the sea would be enough” (*The Hungry Tide* 215). Nirmal had realized years back that in the tide country: “The wheel of time was spinning too fast to be seen. In other places it took decades, even centuries, for a river to change course; it took an epoch for an island to appear. But here in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days” (*The Hungry Tide* 224). Again Nirmal’s diary recounts:

The great storm of 1737 more than two dozen ships had foundered in these waters? And didn’t it happen that in the year 1885 the British India Steam Navigation Company lost two proud steamers here, the Arcot and the Mahratta? And wasn’t the City of Canterbury added to that list in 1897? But today on these sites nothing is to be seen; nothing escapes the maw of the tides; everything is ground to fine silt, becomes something else. It was as if the whole tide country were speaking in the voice of the Poet: life is lived in transformation. (*The Hungry Tide* 224-225)

The novel is divided into two parts: the ebb-bhatta, the flood-jowar. For the inhabitant of this island, instead of this land is known as bhatidesh, the tide country, except that bhatta is not just the tide but one tide in particular, the ebb tide, it is only through receding that the water gives birth to the forest. The idea of home in the river country is nothing short of the gift of the river, for what the hungry tide does not devour is home and what remains like silt under the raging waters is Bon Bibi’s mythical kingdom, who is the reigning deity of the tide country and the power of rivers, tides, winds, storms and all the elements that transcend kingdom. The element factor is very powerful and overwhelms all the characters but nature is not always malevolent, for though Fokir dies, the storm brings Piya and Fokir very close, something that man-made society never had. Even Kanai, who seems a little frivolous, is changed after this experience. Fokir’s death can be taken also as the catalytic agent that changes perceptions considerably. In Ghosh’s vision, “A plural syncretic local cult presides over this flood a Goddess of hope and vengeance is the chief protagonist in the book and she is not a person, but the ocean tide. It is also the tide of history, emotions and rediscovering” (Jain 168). So we find that how people’s ecological condition of region causes migration or forced migration for them.

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