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Language, History and Society: Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

Most of Amitav Ghosh's work contemplates on the arbitrary nature of national borders, subalterns etc. *The Hungry Tide* is preoccupied with individual divisions between men and women. One of the major aspects of the novel's plot is the story of Kanai's growing affection with Piya. Another is Piya's budding understanding of Fokir. And the third is Kanai's renovation through the reading of his uncle's letters which were in relation of the 'Morichjhāpi incident'. The novel shares Ghosh's concern for the individual against a large historical and geographical backdrop. The book is divided into two segments – The Ebb: Bhata and The Flood: Jowar. The locale belongs to Sundarbans, West Bengal. Each section consists of several numbers of small chapters, dealing with a particular incident.

Keywords: *The Hungry Tide*, National Borders, Subaltern, Morichjhāpi incident, Sundarbans.

The Hungry Tide (2004), Amitav Ghosh's fifth novel, is a contemporary story of dislocations, disjunctions and destabilization. It has been well-acknowledged as an ecological novel. It is a unique novel with the amalgamation of anthropology, environmentalism, migration, travel, ethnography, photography and landscape wrapped under the veil of fiction. It is similar in style and tone to Ghosh's previous masterpiece, *The Glass Palace* (2000). Its smaller design and limited range of characters make it more reachable in contrast to the earlier book. Sunita Sinha rightly observes:

Following his internationally acclaimed historical saga, *The Glass Palace*, the next novel, *The Hungry Tide*, narrow in scope but masterfully conceived, is an admirable book. Whereas in *The Glass Palace*, a time span of almost a hundred years from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, and a landscape stretching across more than five thousand kilometers forms the mega canvas on which Amitav Ghosh maps the personal stories of men and women along with the political history of the whole of south and southeast Asia in his novel, *The Hungry Tide* focuses on one region - Sundarbans - a vast archipelago of islands lying below Calcutta on the gulf between India and Bangladesh. (Sinha 119)

Ghosh raises serious uneasiness about perish and dilapidation of the rich environment of the Sunderbans by careless activities of the humans. Morichjhapi is the name of an island in the Sunderbans. Apart from raising issues of environment, atmosphere and ecology, the novel strongly takes up the issues of the subaltern settlers and migrants. At the center of the story is the dilemma of the poor people living in the most uninhabitable forests of the Sunderbans in West Bengal, particularly the island of Morichjhapi. "The novel demonstrates

how environmentalism and conservation, nevertheless, has its own costs, and it explores the ethical dilemmas that result from this". (Rahman 94)

The novel has only two plots: first, where it investigates the dilemma of displaced people – a group of refugees from Bangladesh, and the other one is related to the question as to how humans share a complex and dangerous ecosystem with animals:

In between the sea and the plains of Bengal, on the easternmost coast of India, lies an immense archipelago of islands. Some of these islands are vast and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others have just washed into being. These are the Sundarbans - the beautiful lands. Here there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. The tides reach more than two hundred miles inland, and every day thousands of acres of mangrove forests disappear only to re-emerge hours later. For hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed and the hopeless dreamers of the world have braved the man eaters and the crocodiles who rule there, to eke a precarious existence from the unyielding mud. (Harper Collins 2004)

Most of Amitav Ghosh's work contemplates on the arbitrary nature of national borders, subalterns etc. *The Hungry Tide* is preoccupied with individual divisions between men and women. One of the major aspects of the novel's plot is the story of Kanai's growing affection with Piya. Another is Piya's budding understanding of Fokir. And the third is Kanai's renovation through the reading of his uncle's letters which were in relation of the 'Morichjhāpi incident'. The novel shares Ghosh's concern for the individual against a large historical and geographical backdrop. The book is divided into two segments – The Ebb: Bhata and The Flood: Jowar. The locale belongs to Sundarbans, West Bengal. Each section consists of several numbers of small chapters, dealing with a particular incident.

On the easternmost coast of Indian subcontinent, between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies a group of islands measuring over ten thousand square kilometers. Some of them are vast and others no larger than sandbars, some are recorded in history while others have just washed into being. These are Sundarbans which means, 'the beautiful forest' which are fully covered with mangrove jungles. As described by Amitav Ghosh in the very first chapter of the first section of the novel:

Yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as "the Sundarban", which means, "the beautiful forest". There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove – the *sundari* tree, *Heriteria minor*. But the word's origin is no easier to account for than is its present prevalence, for in the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but a tide – *bhati*. And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as *bhatir desh* – the tide country – except that *bhati* is not just the "tide" but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the bhata. This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in *falling* that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwived by

moon, is to know why the name “tide country” is not just right but necessary.
(Ghosh 2004: 8)

Sundarban is situated in the northern part of The Bay of Bengal and stretches across the coastal Indian subcontinent and Bangladesh. Along with its beauty, splendor and diversity it is also the home of the Bengal Tiger. As Tiger is an endangered species, the government has taken steps to preserve its natural environment. This, however, has resulted in confrontations with the local populace, and that conflict is part of the novel. The story begins with forty-two-years-old Kanai Dutt. He works in an office of translators in New Delhi and is owner of a successful translation business. Kanai is proud and arrogant and tries to be always in control of the relationships of his life. When the narrative starts he is standing on a railway platform observing Piyali Roy, an American scientist and cetologist. Kanai spotted her at a platform and was deceived by her looks. They both ended up in the same train compartment and Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy get involved in conversation. They were both going from Calcutta to Canning in the Sundarbans. In between their conversation Kanai invited Piyali to visit Canning. Piyali Roy was born in Calcutta, but had moved to the United States when she was just one year old. She did not know Bengali. She studied cetology at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California. On this trip to India, she came to study oceanic mammals like dolphins, whales, dugongs etc. that she thinks are unique to the Sundarbans.

The Badabon Trust that Nilima Bose, Kanai’s aunt, now runs, and the high school that her husband Nirmal had run until his death, were built over the location of a community established by a British idealist named Sir Daniel Hamilton. The house is called ‘Lusibari,’ a pidgin version of “Lucy’s House.” Hamilton was a utopian thinker, and he had bought ten thousand acres of the Sundarbans and invited deprived people to come and populate the place free to them on one condition that there would be no caste system and no tribal self-rules. Despite the crocodiles, tigers, snakes and dangerous tides, despite the fact that they were farmers and would now have to become fishermen, many desperately poor people noticed his call and arrived. They moved to this commune in three waves: descended from the first settlers who came in the 1920, in 1947 after partition and in 1971 after the Bangladesh war and they helped Hamilton establish a semi- communist region where the inhabitants shared their possessions.

During his first visit in Lusibari, as a school boy Kanai heard about The Glory of Bon Bibi. The story was about Bon Bibi which is a good spirit deity and who fights with the evil spirit Dokkhin Rai for control over the forests and water ways. But Kusum, Kanai’s childhood friend, tells him that Bon Bibi had not helped her years before, from a tiger that killed her father.

On the other hand, the package that was left to Kanai by his uncle Nirmal contains an account of the events at the end of his life. Nirmal wrote his journal in the village of Morichjhāpi, the year after his retirement as headmaster. Although during the years of establishing the Badabon Trust his wife Nilima had thought that he was a writer. But in reality the journal was the first and the last thing that he ever wrote since his coming to Lusibari. In it, he is re-evaluating his marriage, which he believes has been overshadowed by his wife’s dedication to the Badabon Trust and her dismissal of his leftist idealism in favour of her own

pragmatism. Rest of his journal revolves around Kusum, her son Fokir, and their struggle to form a new society on the island of Morichjhāpi.

The events of the journal have taken place many years before the events of the immediate narrative in the novel. Like most of Amitav Ghosh's earlier works, here also the story keeps on moving back and forth. In the present time, Kusum's son Fokir is an adult, and is married to Moyna. Moyna was a very determined young woman who has managed to give herself an education. Fokir was a well-informed fisherman. He very well knew about fresh water and salt water dolphins along with other species of water animals and about where they can be an easy sight to have a look. Fokir brings Piya to Lusibari, where the paths of Piya, Kanai, and Fokir, the three main characters, merged together.

Horen and Kanai accompanied together to went off on their own for a while. They found that a cyclone is approaching. They also learn that Piya and Fokir have gone out in Fokir's small boat as the storm approaches. The storm was soon upon them, followed by a massive tidal wave. When the storm subsided, Piya found that Fokir was dead. Kanai and Horen brought his body to Lusibari where he was cremated. Kanai later returned to New Delhi, and then Piya found the letter he has left for her. He leaves her a full translation of the Bon Bibi's legend to understand Fokir's spirituality and his struggles in his short life in a better way. In a way she was loved by both men differently. She knows very well that she had been drawn towards both of them, as human relations have been reflected in the ebb and tide, the mix of fresh water and salt water of the Sundarbans.

Setting of *The Hungry Tide* in the Sundarbans allows Amitav Ghosh to create a pattern where everyone is on an even footing. This hostile environment has erased all societal strata and places everyone at equal level in the struggle to survive. This theme runs continuously throughout the novel. Nirmal approaches retirement with the thought that his life was poorly spent because he never lived up to his revolutionary ideals. Nilima is the practical side of their marriage, building a cooperative trust which brings hope to many lives.

The Hungry Tide is a novel full of ideas, none of them found to have an easy answer. In Kanai's and Piya's world, they prefer the structure of science or business where they can view everything as black or white. In the Sundarbans where the tide changes the environment daily, nothing is certain and everything in life is a shade of gray. Amitav Ghosh lets the tide country break down the barriers of both society and his characters.

The novel is about the struggle of person to find their place in the world; it's not a novel of constant action and suspense. Amitav Ghosh keeps the pages turning with the history of the tide country, the stories of the local deities, scientific information, the back stories for each character, but the explanation of the exotic, whether scientific, geographic, or historical, can be as engaging as the lives of the characters. *The Hungry Tide* is a compelling book about ordinary people bound together in an exotic place that can consume them all. It is about the human emotions of love, jealousy, pride, and trust.

The Morichjhapi incident in which thousands of migrants came from Bangladesh and got settled in Central India, and then relocated in the Sunderbans, and later had been massacred by the state police in 1979, formulates the nucleus of the storyline of this novel. This almost forgotten incident, which is a historical fact, motivated Ghosh to write his novel

about the trauma and struggle of these migrants. Kailash Nath and Madhumita Pati rightly observe:

Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie and the recent Booker Prize winner, Arvind Adiga and several others are considered postmodern in the sense that they have tried to portray the tension between the indigenous/marginal people's stakes and the impositions of the all-powerful State. (Nath and Pati 13)

Like his earlier novels, Ghosh focuses more on the marginal figures to restore their pride and dignity. As the novel ends, characters like Fokir, Kusum and Moyna and their plight, struggle, earthiness and sincerity capture out reader's imagination demolishing the notion of the superiority of the affluent, English – speaking and westernized class. It can, therefore, be said that Amitav Ghosh has elevated the subaltern and subordinate elite in *The Hungry Tide*.

Ghosh chose the setting of *The Hungry Tide* in the Sundarbans for numerous reasons. The tide country is not simply a remote and hostile environment where nature can be studied in the raw. It is also a substantial human environment, where natural phenomena develop through interaction with mankind. It is in fact a region of several diverse interactions, a zone of contact between various cultural, national, ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. It is, in short, a border zone. The importance of tide country is that it is a frontier terrain, where different cultures have interacted together for centuries.

The Hungry Tide is a book of reading a book/journal. Nirmal's secret journal is discovered and read by Kanai, which incorporates a larger sequence of events in the main narrative, during his relationship with Piya and Fokir. "All I need say for the time being", he reads on first opening the journal, "is that this is not my story. It concerns, rather, the only friend you made when you were here in Lusibari: Kusum. If not for my sake, then for hers, read on." (69)

The journal soon reverts from this reported speech to Nirmal's own non-dialogic words: "My pen is out of ink and I must switch to pencil stub. Every footstep I hear is a reminder that Kusum and Horen will soon be back, and that Horen will want to leave at once. But I cannot stop. There's too much to tell." (255) In this way, Ghosh is able to draw attention to the different textures of this overall narrative. Nirmal must be left alone to write, must be given time and suitable condition for writing. This opens a larger theoretical point about the significance of the writing in the politics of dispossession.

The Hungry Tide has two climaxes: the storming of migrants in Morachjhāpi, and the storm which destroys Fokir. Yet these main catastrophic events exist in elision and in silence. Ghosh employs a narrative technique of cutting from 'before' to 'after' in each case, as if to draw attention to the human limits of what can be narrated and what is unspeakable.

Ghosh emphasizes upon the possibility of creating a 'deep communication' in his novel, *The Hungry Tide*. Probably, in the setting of the novel, the mangrove forests of the

Sundarbans, a deep communication is plausible and pragmatic between its inhabitants and nature. More importantly, deep communication is enacted out through interaction between the urban and rural characters in the novel. Ironically, the ecological communication in the Sundarbans is so deep-rooted that it almost always supersedes human communications.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* reflects the concern of anthropologists with the porosity of cultural boundaries. The novel reveals that there can be no simplistic response to the notion of Indian 'nationality'. The articulation of political and economic demands assumes a critical role in this context. In fact, Indian nationalities vary in size and are at varying stages of development. National identity itself is an abstract concept that subsumes the collective expression of a subjective individual sense of belonging to a socio-political unit: the nation state. It is a cultural construct, not affixed objective reality, but an ongoing journey and changeable process, dependent on and deriving from social relations and hence not exclusive of other identities.

In the representation of 'multinationalities,' *The Hungry Tide* attempts to identify significant elements like common country, common roots, common chronological experiences, common language, common faith and morals, and common rituals and conventions. However, the novel also cautions that these objective elements cannot possibly be juxtaposed but can only be understood in terms of interdependence.

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