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(Re) Mapping Memories and Boundaries of Bengali Refugees through Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

Literature has the power and ability to construct and reconstruct cultural space of a group/community/ nation. It plays an indisputable role in self discovery by weaving details, both cultural and historical. The paper endeavors to address the issue of Diaspora in the postcolonial context. It intends to deal with concerns like the authenticity of portrayal of India in the writings of Indian Diaspora Writers. It also focuses on the relevance of this literature in the hybrid cosmopolitan world with blurred state boundaries. The research identifies that the reason for its existence and relevance rests in the discriminatory nature of the First World Nations which has been discussed elaborately in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The paper intends to discuss the problem of refugees with focus on the Bengali refugees. It discusses the specifically the Morichjhapi incident which deals with the refugees as depicted by Amitav Ghosh in his novel *The Hungry Tide*. As the boundaries of nature and human world blur, the real and unreal merge to create a unique world.

Keywords: Refugees, nostalgia, Morichjhapi.

Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited

Ones to whom neither the past nor the future belongs

Rilke

Diaspora refers to the spatial movement, both voluntary and involuntary of people from their homelands to new territories. Europeans explored the world and established their colonies in different parts and to facilitate their economic purposes moved the people of their colonies. This

can be traced in the works of African and Indian writers. These movements were initiated in the colonial era as a result of the colonial need for labor. Others migrated for greener pastures, in terms of better opportunities. The Diaspora literature has come to signify the writers of the Third World nations now living in the world cities. Such writings are also known as 'expatriate writings' or 'immigrant writings'. 'Immigrant' indicates a physical/ geographical location or a physical movement, while exile evokes a series of other connotations like relationship with the mother- country- alienation, forced exile, self imposed exile, political exile. A refugee refers to a person taking refuge in a foreign land for safety. The Diaspora writings combine all these features and attributes in their craft. Migrations are of two types, i.e., willful and forced. Expatriates and immigrants in the former category while exiles and refugees in the second category. It is the second category that is the refugees that the paper intends to deal with.

In the context of a plural and hybrid cultures the writings of Diaspora writers raise some issues which have been discussed in the paper. Their allegiance which is to their native culture or the new culture or to a third imagined place. The authenticity of their representation is an issue that needs to be addressed. They belong to the first culture as their identities are shaped by their homeland while the inevitable process of exchange of ideas in the new country influences them. Thus a diasporic person lives in two places simultaneously at a cultural level, one in geographical.

The main theorists of Diaspora are Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha are also main theorists of Postcolonialism. When observed closely postcolonial is a wider political and historical context and diaspora deals with hybridity, centrality and tranculturation. Most of the experiences of these diasporic writers map out two phenomenon: Analepsis (past) and looking forward to the future (prolepsis). The works of most of the writers dwell on Analepsis which is characterized by nostalgia and the glorification of the past. It can be traced in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, whose first generation in *The Namesake* lives in the past. It is more evident in the first generation or wave who find it difficult to adapt to the new culture. Ashima is never comfortable in the home or even in the hospital where she delivers the baby. The second generation is more at home, though they suffer from the strain where they are unable to place themselves. They do not have a home, symbolically which the earlier generation had, in their

heart where they do not live physically. Gogol and Aashima are more forward looking in their approach.

The question is, in the emerging world which is more cosmopolitan and open, do we really have a diaspora? If the people are willing to move for better career prospects and the people who stay back are more cosmopolitan in their outlook, what culture are we referring to? What is culture?

Culture is a wide and a difficult notion to comprehensively put in a few words. It would be apt to say that it is a ‘the way of life’. It is an umbrella phrase that includes our language, history, festivals and religion. Culture is defined by Watson as, “a common language, a shared history, a shared set of religious beliefs and moral values, and a shared geographical origin, all of which taken together define a sense of belonging to a specific group” (1). Though modern anthropology challenges the idea of different cultures, the desire of men to prove themselves superior has kept this notion alive. In this case then, diaspora becomes irrelevant. It is only in the discriminatory nature of the First World Nations that has kept it alive. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) envisages that the ‘Orient’ as the other dominated by the Occident in the power-game. This then accrues a subordinate or inferior status to the Third world countries. We might have moved towards a ‘hybrid’ cultural notion of Bhabha but discrimination cannot be denied. The harrowing experience of the heroine, Saba where she claims that as she belongs to Pakistan the frisking at airport was harrowing is the reason why people still do not feel accepted.

Another important concern is that how much of the depiction of India should be entrusted on a person who no longer lives here. There can be two alternatives: glorification and humiliation. The works of Naipaul have a condescending tone which cannot be overlooked by a native (*An Area of Darkness*, which is a travelogue by him which describes his first visit to India in sixties, has a mocking tone) and overemphasis of customs and traditions which might choke a native in the name of ritual is also not acceptable (extreme interference of parents in most of the movies that deal with the NRI life). It depends a lot on the perception of the individual writer, how then can they be symbolic of the consciousness of all.

Within the larger gamut of Diaspora writing, there are other important strains which need to be discussed like that of asylum seekers, illegal immigrants, job seekers, and refugees.

Refugees in the modern times have emerged as a major concern, the problem more severe than the Second World War. The world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from home by conflict and persecution at the end of 2016. Among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. There are also 10 million stateless people, who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement.

The lack of an easy disciplinary fit combined with the common view that refugee problems are unique, atypical, and non-recurring problems has produced scholarly neglect of refugee research possibilities. For most disciplinary specialists or area experts refugee problems are too isolated, atypical, and unpromising to distract their interest from normal, mainstream research topics. Refugee research is not a ready-made field of study. It lacks standards textbooks, a theoretical structure, a systematic body of data, and even a firm definition of the subject of the field. The problem is that not many survive to tell the tale; few have the resources, time, energy or inclination.

With regard to the Indian subcontinent, the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 received the attention of the writers and poet but the partition of Bengal was different. Firstly, it was not a single wave of migration, it actually took place for over half a century, there was movement only was one side and it was never treated as a national emergency. According to the research by Talbot and Singh, the migrants from East Bengal came in three waves, the first those entering West Bengal between October 1946 and March 1958 were classified as "old migrants" and were eligible for minimal government dole and assistance. This comprised the upper-caste and upper-class elite Hindu migrants, who were seen to hardly impose any economic burden on the government. They had no dearth of social and financial capital and were thus the most preferred (Talbot and Singh 115). To them, even as property was immovable it was exchangeable or saleable. Many from this level had assets or/and economically and socially influential relatives in the metropolises or smaller towns of what was carved out as "West Bengal." The second group consisted of migrants arriving between April 1958 and December

1963. The government euphemistically called them “in-between migrants.” This group was not recognized as “displaced persons” and was not given financial benefits, as the government treated it as a group of economic migrants motivated by the doles offered by the government. In fact, by 1958, the Central government was urging West Bengal to wind up its Rehabilitation Ministry. Finally, the government identified “new migrants” as those who were Dalit refugees and who entered India between 1 January 1964 and 25 March 1971, mainly from the peasantry and artisan sections of East Pakistan. This stream of migrants continued to infiltrate into India until the late 1970s. The Dalit migrants were entitled to rehabilitation only if they sought to resettle outside of West Bengal (“Engendered Freedom” 66-67) because they were seen as an economic burden.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in July 1956, the son of a diplomat and a housewife and though his family had hailed from eastern Bengal and migrated to Calcutta before the Partition cataclysms of 1947, the idea of ‘refugee’ continue to haunt his fiction like the *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*. His early life accompanying his parents to countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Iran exposed his mind to perspective which an ordinary writer might lack. Calcutta is another influence that is palpable in his works which forms the locale of most of his works.

The Hungry Tide

The Hungry Tide is set amongst the small, impoverished and isolated communities of the Sunderbans, the mangrove swamps and that congregate at the mouth of the huge Ganges Delta. It deals with the waves of refugees that came from East Bengal. Nirmal came in the first wave from Dhaka to Calcutta where he made a name for himself as an intellectual and left wing thinker. Kusum and Fokir belong to the third wave. They came to West Bengal but because of the poor status and economic conditions relocated only to return back to Sunderbans. The novel begins with a cetologist (who study marine mammals), Piyali Roy who is the daughter of an Indian emigrant to the US, who is in little contact with her past but is attracted to it. She comes to India to conduct a survey of the marine mammals in the Gangetic delta where she meets Kanai, who is a translator by profession. He sets for Sunderbans to examine a newly recovered notebook by his uncle (Nirmal), who was a poet and scholar whose dreams of a ‘socialist nation’ had been thwarted in 1979 during Morichjhapi massacre. This has been woven through the diary of Nirmal

where he records this incidence. The incidence is a reference to the terrible violence unleashed on the refugees who had been forced to settle in other parts of India as Morichjhapi was declared a wildlife conservation zone. The incident has a past that has been conveniently overlooked by history. After Partition, the rich Hindus from Bangladesh came to India, but the poor came in waves and were considered a liability by the government. In 1978, a group of refugees originally from the Khulna district of East Bengal, started marching to Morichjhapi, an uninhabited island in Sundarbans with the hope that the new Communist government would fulfill its promise, having supported their cause earlier. Kudaisya points out how the “political ascendency of the Left owed a great deal to the refugees” who were encouraged to seek shelter within Bengal (32). Later, the Basu government retraced its policy and refused to entertain their demands. The state imposed an economic blockade and sunk the boats of the islanders thereby reducing Morichjhapi to a panopticon-like structure. Ross Mallick writes :

the West Bengal Government started on January 26, 1979 an economic blockade of the settlement with thirty police launches. The community was tear-gassed, huts were razed and fisheries and tube wells were destroyed in an attempt to deprive refugees of food and water”(108).

The people died of diseases like cholera and of hunger, the others became targets of police firing. Ross Mallick writes that some Muslim thugs were hired from Bangladesh to execute the mass killings (110). The Jyoti Basu government considered it a violation of the Forest Acts as it was an area which was not meant for habitation. Thus, started the debate which questioned if the tigers had become more privileged than the refugees. When Nirmal tries to rescue Kusum with Horen, moments before the massacre she says, “Where will we go? There is no other place I want to be.” Kusum who survives the attack of the policemen breaks down in front of Nirmal and says:

the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It is to sit here, helpless and listen the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence was worth less than dirt. (Ghosh 284).

Amitav Ghosh has discussed the events with accuracy and used Nirmal as a wheel to project his sympathy towards the refugees, his wife Nilima remains more practical. When Nirmal wonders how he would pen down the story of these refugees, the dilemma of a writer comes into light:

In what way could I ever do justice to this place? What could I write of it that would equal the power of their longing and their dreams? What indeed would be the form of the lines? Even this I could not resolve: would they flow, as the rivers did, or would they follow rhythms, as did the tides? (216)

The novel juxtaposes environmentalism and conservation, each of them with their own costs and their effects. All these dimensions have been explored through: Piya, Kanai and Fokir (fisherman and the illiterate son of the tidal areas). In the final storm, that claims the life of Fokir, nature establishes its absolute control. The cyclone levels all: the tiger, the bird and the humans. Unfortunately, it also kills Fokir who sacrifices himself for Piya. Piya loses most of her research data and Nirmal's diary is reclaimed by the river. However the death of Fokir doesn't go to waste as Piya decides to return back with her project for fishermen.

The novel ends where Piya comes back to start a project and help the family of Fokir thus bringing the novel to a full circle where Piya eventually returns to her roots. The urge of human being to explore greener pastures has caused dislocation, even in Ulysses but the experience of refugees is a forced one which makes it a little different in Diaspora

Conclusion

One of my professors told me, great works of literature will haunt/ leave you with questions and as a student when I set out to seek questions I found that in between they have answered embedded and encoded. The answer was not in Piyal returning back but when Kanai discusses why Nirmal got involved in the Marichjhapi incident, he says that some people 'who live their life through poetry' and he was one. He stood for the ideals and fought for it, little difference did it make. We need more people who believe as Kanai says 'live and believe that life is lived in transformation'. He is ridiculed by the leader of the refugees who questions what he would teach the children and he adds, "I will teach them to dream".

We need more dreamers, poets and transformers.

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