

Place and Displacement: Search for Eco-Cultural Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract:

Place and Displacement is a vibrant and much sought-after issue in the realm of postcolonial ecocriticism. Place, Displacement, re-settlement and eco-identity have received much critical attention in postcolonial literature. Displacement occurs in two stages: physical and psychological. The postcolonial ecocriticism foregrounds both the stages in to highlight the struggle of postcolonial subjects. The territorial displacement forces people to move to unknown places which results in psychological alienation or displacement. In the *Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh raises the issues and problems of displacement and re-settlement. Place and identity are interrelated concepts and disruption in place results in disruption in identity. In both the novels, there is disruption of place and identity of the subaltern subjects.

The objective of this paper is to understand how the colonial and neocolonial forces operated in Amitav Ghosh's the *Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide* to displace the colonized and the marginalized and how in the process of displacement, the displaced lost their ecological and cultural identity. The emphasis is to understand Ghosh' construction of identity in relation to the place from postcolonial ecocritical perspectives. Here my focus is to examine place, displacement, re-settlement and identity as a notion and process in *Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide*. The paper also highlights the issues and problems of the displaced ethnic minority from Bangladesh and their struggle for eco- cultural identity in India. All these issues are proposed to be examined in the light of postcolonial ecocritical insights and frameworks.

Keywords: Displacement, Colonial, Postcolonial, Eco-identity, Re-settlement, Poppies, Symbiotic, Subsistence farming .

Introduction

The representation of place in literature is one of the main concerns in ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment"(Glotfelty, xviii). She contends that like class, race, and gender, 'place' should become a critical category in literature. Postcolonial ecocriticism foregrounds the concept of place to question the narrative of progress imposed by colonial and imperial powers. Aldo Leopold in his book *The Land Ethic* postulates that reconnecting human being's relations with place at a local or bioregional level, which was damaged by modernism and unscientific progress, could reduce the environmental damage. When human beings feel attachment with a place, they would protect the place, because the place provides them an identity. It is the place which determines the identity of not only an individual, but also of a community or a nation. The attachment to a local place within a national border is a fundamental part of identity.

Western colonialism explored and exploited not only the men and markets of the colonized, but also devastated the environment and ecology to suit their commercial interests. Even in the postcolonial period, the exploitation of man and nature continued to fulfill the needs of vested interests. Though historically colonial era is over, yet its influence can be felt in varied aspects in postcolonial societies. The means and strategies adopted by colonial powers to dominate men and resources of the colonies are still functional and effective in postcolonial societies, albeit in a slightly different way. The hierarchy of power structure created during the colonial days to exploit and dominate the subaltern is still relevant and practiced in postcolonial societies. Postcolonial works deal with the issues of race, class, gender and culture, but in recent times, it has included geographical place because the relationship between social injustice and environmental problems are interrelated. Both place and identity are related and when there is forced dislocation and displacement, the ecological and cultural identity of the displaced is also dismantled.

Amitav Ghosh in the *Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide* recreates the experience of detachment from place and the consequent loss of identity-both cultural and ecological. Displacement and forced migration alienate people from their socio-ecological contexts and this loss of socio-ecological context is a very painful experience for the individual as well as the community. Instead of being part of a specific place, community and nation, the displaced individual or the displaced community is forced to negotiate with new places, locations, cultures and regions in order to survive. During the process of negotiation, the individual or the community may remain

emotionally attached to their previous place and culture or they may develop a new identity compatible with the newly acquired place. The newly acquired socio-cultural and ecological consciousness in a foreign land provides them diasporic identity, a much sought-after concept in postcolonialism.

It is argued that the aim of colonialism was to establish an “ecological imperialism” over the native environments. Alfred W. Crosby argues that “ecological imperialism” was instrumental in the success of colonialism and the establishment of hegemonic power over the colonies. The colonial powers established a ‘master-slave’ relationship with the native environment-- its flora and fauna, its land and water and its human population. The hegemonic relationship was not just aimed at establishing political domination but also at economic exploitation. The economic exploitation was accompanied by plundering and exploiting both human and natural resources of the colonies.

European imperialism evidently led to mechanization of agricultural practices and introduction of new variety of crops. The introduction of commercial crops like tea, coffee, rubber, teak etc. and large-scale deforestation carried out to built colonial infrastructure projects like railways, roads and factories devastated the ecology of the colonies which consequently resulted in multiple disasters like famines, epidemics, flashfloods and landslides. The forced substitution of the native agro practices with mechanized plantation culture was responsible for mass impoverishment, hunger and displacement of millions of “ecosystem people”. For the imperial powers, the colonies functioned both as providers of natural resources and markets for finished goods. The land was thus redefined as a passive background for profit earning. The profit-making motives of the European empires led to unrestrained plundering of natural resources in the sub-continent.

Another important aspect of the colonial expansion was the intervention by the Church. The colonial expansion was given a religious colour when it became a religious duty to convert and civilize the “uncouth barbarians” and change their pagan and pantheistic ways to Christian ones. The spread of the empire was hailed as the march of Christendom. It became “white men’s burden” to civilize and educate the “uncouth” natives of the colonies. Lynn White Jr. remarks, “The victory of Christianity over paganism was the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture” (White, Lynn.7). In this way the domination, suppression and persecution of ‘other’ land, and ‘other’ people was justified and validated on religious grounds too. Thus colonialism, capitalism, and Christianity collaborated to cause a large-scale destruction, dislocation and damage in the Indian sub-continent.

Sea of Poppies

Sea of Poppies is a powerful portrayal of the devastating effects of British colonial projects on India's rural economy. It portrays how the commercial motives of the British led to forced migration and impoverishment of the native population. Here Ghosh has succeeded in establishing the fact that mass dislodging and displacement in the Indian sub-continent took place due to colonial intervention and the fracturing of symbiotic relations between man and nature. The central concern of the novel is the forced displacement of the natives because of the monopolization of land, air, and water. The profit-centric motives of the British encouraged plantation crops like opium, rubber and indigo which brought huge profits for the British mercantile but led to shortage of food grains and poverty among the indigenous natives. In search of livelihood and better living conditions, the impoverished natives had the options of either to work in opium factories or to migrate to other 'colonies' like Mauritius to work as indentured labourers in sugar plantations, where they would end up as 'environmental refugees'. Through the portrayal of rustic characters like Deeti, her *afeemkhor* (opium addicted) husband Hukum Singh, Kabutri, Muniya and Kalua, Ghosh points out the eco-cultural effects of opium plantation on the rural folk. As a consequence of opium plantations, the traditional cropping pattern was disrupted. The disruption of traditional subsistence farming practices enhanced the process of forced migration and displacement thereby causing immense misery and suffering for the natives,

“Many of these people had been driven from their homes by the flood of the flowers that had washed the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped in the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at the temples” (Ghosh, 202).

The British imperial masters forced the Indian peasantry to cultivate poppy on their arable lands, where regular food grains were generally produced. The introduction of large-scale poppy cultivation in India resulted in the devastation of not only the farmers but also it degraded the land and the crop pattern of the region. It disrupted the economic, social and cultural life of the people in the nineteenth century India. One of the effects of poppy cultivation was that it replaced edible crop cultivation which has been the tradition in region since time immemorial. The traditional crop pattern provided the locals not only food grains but also fodder for domestic animals, fuels for domestic cooking and raw materials for making roof of the houses. But the introduction of opium

cultivation dismantled the food security of the farmers and they had to suffer poverty and hunger. To escape poverty and hunger, they had the option of migrating to Mauritius as indentured labourers or *girmitiyas*, as they were popularly called.

The three sections of the novel- land, river and sea- symbolize the elements of nature that shape and determine human lives and their sensibilities. The novel reveals how the domination of land, rivers and sea by the colonial masters enabled them to exploit both nature and natives of the colonies. The “Land” section symbolises the subsistent and symbiotic relationships of the natives with the land. The life of the people is profoundly intertwined with land and rivers. The people were closely connected with both land and river and these relations had a kind of reverent and holy connotations. Ghosh reveals how this reverential relationship was disrupted because of colonial greed for natural resources and cheap human labor. But the natives failed to understand the subtle and sophisticated means adopted by the colonialists to exploit both men and nature of the colonies. The degradation of the land due to opium cultivation was interpreted by the locals as the result of some curse of the river, *karamnasa*, “destroyer of karma”. The *Sea of Poppies* is, thus, “ a poignant tale of the destabilization of the settled, pastoral existence of Indian masses as a result of the nexus of Colonialism and capitalism and the accompanying civilizing-Christianizing mission” (Mehta,87).

The novel also depicts the life of the *girmitiyas* or indentured workers on the *Ibis*, the former slave ship. An indenture is a formal legal agreement that allowed migrants to work in British colonies. The coolies who had gathered on the ship belonged to places far away from the sea and were connected to their land and culture very strongly. It was not at all easy to make one’s mind strong enough to withstand the cutting away from one’s roots. The *kala pani* taboo and eating all kinds of things on the ship were strong factors that prevented Indians to migrate across the sea. Another factor was a strong longing for one’s *Janmabhoomi*. When the coolies in the novel reach Ganga Sagar, they feel the pull of their land most. It is the point of no return that forces them to act irrationally and even risk their lives in their attempt to return. But return was not going to be easy. Although the term of their agreement was five to seven years, many of them would perish before the completion of the agreement, as the Subedar tells Deeti that her *jora* (lover) was destined for a farm on which his death was certain. Those who survived the contract period were free, at least theoretically, to return home but even for them it was not easy to do so. Their return did not benefit the imperial plantation economy. So, the managers of the plantation estates contrived many effective ways to prevent the return of the workers. The indentured workers had no option but to renegotiate

with the new 'place' and the new environment which would ultimately lead towards the creation of a new eco-cultural identity. It was this re-negotiation with 'place' on an alien land that siblinghood developed among the indentured workers on reaching their destinations.

The Slave Ship

All the people onboard Ibis develop a sort of attachment for each other because they are all destined to an unknown and strange place. The ship binds them in a 'Jahaj-Nata'. The 'Jahaj-Nata' was a very strong kind of bond between the people of the same boat. The newly developed bond and attachment among the displaced characters is evident when Deeti becomes Dabusa's 'Bhauji' (sister-in-law) as the time passes. People accept her willingly on a position of familial authority and gives her respectful title of 'Bhauji' that means elder brother's wife. It happens naturally, as she takes responsibility and speaks for truth and justice. She takes Munia under her protection and extends the same caring attitude towards other women on the boat. Their caste, class or origin is washed away by the very black water that they have dared to cross. The 'kala-pani' wipes away their pasts and gives them a new slate of life, to be written upon on the Mauritius island.

The people on board Ibis have left their home. They are no longer bound by social conventions and traditions. They are now free to act as per their own whims and fancies, disregarding social bonds and conventions. But they are not willing to give up their socio-cultural identity. They negotiate their identity to suit the circumstances. This is evident the way Heeru's marriage was proposed. Ecka Naik kept the social decorum by seeking permission from 'Bhauji'. Once the permission is granted, the 'Jahazis' arrange everything. Kalua performs the function of the Head of the bride's side. Men on the groom's side arrange the traditional songs and dances and they improvise and innovate in order to make their life an image of the same back home.

They were to do the same negotiation with their identity once they would reach the island of Mauritius. The newly arrived workers faced many physical, social and psychological problems, but the biggest problem was of reviving and maintaining the old structure and functions of the fundamental unity of any society: the family. The male female ratio was overwhelmingly in favour of men and "they say in Mareech, a woman on her own will be torn apart.... devoured.....so many men and so few women...can you think what it would be like, Bhauji, to be alone there" (Ghosh, 244). Deeti assented the proposal of Heeru's marriage on practical grounds as the survival of a single woman on an alien and hostile land would be impossible without a protector. Deeti, the main

character in the novel, gives up everything and elopes with a low caste man Kalua and crosses the sea to negotiate a new identity so that she could live and peaceful and happy life with her lover.

The Hungry Tide

Homeland or the quest for homeland is one of the focal areas of many of Ghosh's novels, but nowhere this quest is so strongly portrayed as it is done in *The Hungry Tide*. The novel depicts a strong desire for home, an urge to figure out one's place in the great scheme of things. People uprooted by political and social upheaval as well those displaced by personal and economic turbulences have tried to inhabit and build a home in the Sunderbans. Ghosh highlights precisely this issue of displacement and settlement in the Sunderban regions, one of the most dangerous and ecologically fragile regions in the world. In this novel, Ghosh a attempt to throw light on the plight of the refugees who were damned to a life of destitution, starvation, eviction and massacre in a ecologically sensitive region famous for its exotic tigers. Postcolonial ecocriticism deals with the interplay between human beings and the environment, including issues concerning habitat, migration, state, society and conflict. *The Hungry Tide* is preoccupied with the issues of displacement, forced migration, and environmental concerns. The uprooted migrants in the novel are in search of a new home/homeland, but national boundaries act as barriers in the search of their homeland.

To understand the importance of place in determining the eco-cultural identity of an individual, it is necessary to have an understanding of the consequences of the partition of the sub-continent in 1947 and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh out of Pakistan in 1971. The issues of migration and refugees in Bengal assumed serious dimensions after formation of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1972. In the year 1978, a trickle of Bangladeshi refugees started arriving on an hitherto uninhabited island named Morichjhapi. There was nothing new in the migration of people from Bangladesh to the deltaic region of West Bengal. The interesting aspect of this migration was that these people were not migrating from Bangladesh but they were coming from central India, after many days of painful and desperate journey,

“In 1978 it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in the Morichjhapi.....It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to

be learnt that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh”.

(Ghosh, 118)

Who were these refugees and why had they migrated? These refugees, who had moved from Bangladesh to West Bengal, from West Bengal to Chhattisgarh in central India and then again from central India to the Sunderbans in search of ‘place’ where they could find ‘eco-cultural identity’, had settled down in one of these islands as they had nowhere to go where they could identify themselves with the land, people and the environment. These refugees selected Morichjhapi island of the Sunderbans, as they found their vast tracts of free land and thought that in Morichjhapi they would be free from the government as well as local interference. But to their utter disbelief they found that the newly elected Left Front government of West Bengal was not in favour of their settling down in the Sunderbans and so wanted to evict them from the Sunderbans. It is in this context that the notorious Morichjhapi massacre took place.

The Bangladeshi refugees who were transported to different settlement camps in Central India could not identify themselves with the new place because of its harsh environmental and climatic conditions. Also, they were unable to negotiate with the culture and custom of central India. Once the left front came to power in West Bengal, the refugees started trekking en masse from their far-flung and wretched central Indian camps, to the Sunderbans. The refugees reached Morichjhapi so that they could live in a familiar socio-cultural and ecological environment. They came into the islands “with their lives bundled on their heads” (Ghosh, 165) and they did not want anything except “. . . to plunge their hands once again in our soft, yielding tide country mud” (Ghosh, 165). They organized themselves into groups and worked hard so that they could earn their livelihood. Farming and fishing was the only viable option for them in the tide country so they cleaned the land and worked hard to make it suitable for farming and fishing. For them the muddy land and hostile environment of the Sunderbans was more valuable and important than gold, “A single acre of Bengal’s mud yields fifteen *maunds* of rice. What does a square mile of gold yield? Nothing” (Ghosh, 49).

But the newly elected Left Front government of West Bengal was averse to the idea of old refugees returning to the state and was deeply unhappy with this development. It wanted a permanent solution to the vexed refugee problem. So, it declared the Morichjhapi settlement an illegal encroachment by the ‘deserters’ on forest land in an area marked for the protection of the endangered tiger species. The refugees were given ultimatum to vacate the island. When this

proved futile, the government started ‘economic blockade’ that severely affected the day today life of the settlers; and finally, the police force was mobilized to intervene in the situation. Official estimates claimed that only 36 refugees were killed in the police action, but the actual number ran in thousands.

It is true that the refugees were hardly any threat to the environment and ecology of Morichjhappi islands and in the few short months of their existence they had added to the island’s potential and value by building dams, digging fishing ponds, carving out some vegetable plots and farming land. The new refugees were also supported by the earlier settlers for personal and cultural reasons. But the authorities were against the new wave of settlement. The government’s official response was that the settlers had violated forest conservation laws and had encroached into the habitat of endangered species of tigers. So, the government, without any prior notice, started the ruthless eviction where no person-men, women or children were spared.

The Morichjhapi massacre is reported by Nirmal, the headmaster, in a notebook that is passed onto his nephew, Kanai decades after the incident. The perseverance with which the settlers strive towards transforming Morichjhapi is awe-inspiring to Nirmal, who witnesses the “... experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without!” (Ghosh, 171). Through Nirmal we come to know that the refugees worked hard to reclaim lands with which they clearly had a social, cultural and environmental relationship. In other words, the ecologically sensitive rain forests of the Sundarbans is not just a place; it is their partner in their struggle for survival. In course of time, they develop a symbiotic relationship with different living and non-living elements of the tide country. They are well aware of the scarcity of natural resources. They have their own understandings of human-nature relationship and their environmentalism refuses to separate ecological issues from social and cultural considerations. They continued their struggle against oppressions and brutalities till their last breath. When the government had found that the refugees were becoming obstinate and uncontrollable, supplies of food, transport, drinking water and other necessary items were cut from Morichjhapi. This was done to compel the settlers to leave Morichjhapi or die there. In the last phase of their struggle, when they were being forcibly evicted by police, their battle cry became: “*amrakara? Bastuhara. Morichjhappi chharbo na*”, Who are we? We are the dispossessed. We will not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may. Hearing this, Nirmal remarks, “standing on the deck of the

bhotbhoti, I was struck by the beauty of this. Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave” (Ghosh, 254).

The settlers of Morichjhapi are made to suffer not only physically but they also experience emotional alienation. Kusum fails to understand why humans are persecuted and displaced to protect animals. She wonders why their status is inferior to that of animals,

“I wondered who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?...as I thought of these it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime was that we were just human beings” (Ghosh, 261).

Kusum has strong determination to face the brutality of the authority. She revolted against the system and refused to leave the place. The administration tried to convince the people to leave the island and insisted that the Morichjhapi was a part of the Project Tiger and that it must be depopulated to preserve the ecology of the region. But Kusum has her own perspective. She argues that the main intention of the government was to evict the inhabitants and to justify their eviction, the government was raising the issues of ecological and tiger conservation. Tiger protection was a ploy to evict the settlers from Morichjhapi, “What’s been said about the danger to the environment is just a sham, in order to evict these people who have nowhere to go” (Ghosh, 214).

It is not too difficult find out the causes of displacement and the subsequent loss of eco-cultural identity. When there are so much environmental and ecological concerns, we must contemplate on the real reasons for the ecological degradation and displacement. We must realize that the indigenous people, who have been living in perfect harmony with various elements of nature, cannot be held responsible for the environmental devastations. There is no reason to punish the local inhabitants on the pretext of encroachment on forest and reserved areas. It is the faulty policy decisions of the government and myopic visions of environmental experts which is responsible for much of environmental distress that the world is experiencing today.

The importance of eco-identities comes here as the characters recognize themselves with their local environment. Their ecological identities seem to emerge from direct experiences in nature that reframe their experiences in light of their connection to a natural world that is exogenous to culture or society. Identity evolved on a particular place can be acquired through

by sharing the values, beliefs and interests of the people. These are built over time through collective experiences. A 'sense of place' and the development of an 'ecological identity' can be a strong motivator for generating emotional attachment with the flora and fauna of the place. This attachment to place is certainly an important motivator for many of the characters in the novel. The sense of place can be very strong such that it leads to the building of local knowledge around an area. In *The Hungry Tide*, ecology stands as a strong medium of communication between the space and identity.

The irony of ecological conservation policy is that on the one hand indigenous people are evicted so that reserved areas could be constituted to preserve tiger and other endangered species, on the other hand people kill animals for commercial and entertainment purposes. Also, it must be kept in mind that no wild life preservation policy can succeed without the active support and co-operation of indigenous and local people. Ghosh exposes the myopic and unscientific vision of biologists who fail to recognize the importance of local people in forest and wildlife management. In the novel the villagers are stunned when they learn that they are being displaced so that endangered species of wildlife can be preserved and protected. They fail to understand how they are threat to wild animals and they rightly contend "who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?" (Ghosh, 262). Ignoring and overlooking the indigenous people's traditional knowledge in ecological conservation projects result not only in the failure of the conservation policy but also in dislocation, dispossession and exploitation of the local population. We can overcome the ecological crisis only by adopting and implementing inclusive developmental and ecological policies based on the protection of both the indigenous people and the local ecology.

Conclusion

Thus, an ecocritical analysis of *Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide* reveals that the novels depict important themes of displacement, re-settlement, identity and environment. They skillfully delineate issues and problems of forced displacement and subaltern identity. The characters are destined to move on a perpetual journey in search self-actualization and a longing for home to return. As a postcolonial ecocritical novel, *Sea of Poppies* has recreated the experiences of colonial history of domination and exploitation of the natives-both place and people. Ghosh has succeeded in reviving the forgotten histories of India's indentured workers who migrated to unknown and hostile

islands in Atlantic oceans and who negotiated with the 'place' to create a new 'eco-cultural' identity, thus projecting a postcolonial ecocritical perception of place.

In *The Hungry Tide*, too, Ghosh skillfully mingles fact and fiction to create a narrative of ecological preservation and the plight and suffering of socially and ecologically displaced people. Here he raises the issues of ecological and environment concerns in the Sunderbans as well as the plight and suffering of the ecologically displaced people. He is also critical of the various forest laws and wild life protection acts which are biased in favour of non-humans. These laws and acts legislated in postcolonial era do not take into account the suffering and loss of eco-cultural identity arising as a consequence of displacement and forced migration of local inhabitants. The Morichjhapi incident clearly shows that ecology and environment is prioritized over human beings. It also shows how bloody can the politics of resettlement can get. The novel portrays the clash between the state interest and displaced people's longing for home. When such clash takes place, the state can even use ecological and environmental concerns as their weapon against the displaced and the homeless. But very few records of such conflicts remain.

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