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The Hungry Tide: Exploring Diasporic Identity

Dr. Md Naushad Alam

Assistant Professor,

P G Department of English,

MMH Arabic & Persian University, Patna.

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Abstract:

The article delves into the intricate layers of diaspora consciousness as depicted in Amitav Ghosh's novel "The Hungry Tide." It illuminates the multifaceted essence of diaspora, embodying displaced identities seeking belonging across regions, religions, races, and social recognitions. Ghosh's work showcases the complexities faced by individuals grappling with the dichotomy of belonging and alienation in the transnational discourse. The narrative unfolds within the Sundarbans, a setting symbolizing constant change, reflecting the ebb and flow of history and population displacement.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Displacement, Transnationalism, Cultural Heterogeneity, Hybridity.

Diaspora signifies an identity that's displaced and scattered, occasionally residing within specific communities or often finding itself on the fringes amidst total rejection. The overarching idea of diaspora encapsulates a theoretical framework, encompassing a tangible progression from isolation to assimilation within the dynamic landscape of diverse cultures. Within scholarly discussions, fresh avenues of inquiry are emerging, particularly in the realm of postcolonial literary works. Writers' geographical displacements lead to numerous shifts in language, culture, and societal norms, intricately shaping different facets of human existence.

Diaspora consciousness deals with and dwells in a multifaceted plurality of regions, religions, races and recognitions to achieve and acquire the emoluments of their concerns, which has resulted in making them the members of a theoretical construct. They strive to evolve from a practical journey from alienation to acceptance, proceeding to view and map out the space of

different cultural modes in the transnational discourse. They at times convert into metaphors of cultural and postcolonial heterogeneity to offer various new scopes of deliberations on the encoded message of reference. As part of a facet of Diaspora in the context of theoretical construct, the article highlights the simmering diaspora consciousness in *The Hungry Tide*, the fifth novel and the sixth substantial book in the list of literary achievements gained and earned by Amitav Ghosh. He is the prominent one amongst the host of many like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahari, Vikram Seth and with more to add in an ever increasing list. All mentioned are the expatriate writers who belong to this genre of 'Diaspora' with expressions in their works of the sufferings and agonies faced by the displaced people, particularly those of the Asian continent as units of the third world countries.

In his novels as discourses and narratives, Ghosh has contributed detailed information about the complex situation of the diaspora in the acquired geographical zones of mostly developed countries. With the support of various authentic situational segmentations, he has formalized the different and new shades of diaspora in statements of their own opinion. 'Opinion', as one observes, is a new feature in diasporic imagination and human space to find a new conversion, to engage in intellectual energy to find a new utterance in a new territory, or allegiance to replace a lost one, which would do away with difference and contradiction. He further adds that with globalization and the proliferation of the Internet, the people of diaspora have forced their native countries to extend the area of national belongings, such as the grant of dual citizenship. In fact, the Third World Countries are now developing frameworks on how the best diaspora can be re-incorporated, whereas the First World countries are formulating policies to check immigration. Literature presents the yearnings, anxieties, confusion, and aspirations of diasporic people in the shape of a voice of representation, and a revolt to be heard gives a separate recognition. Ghosh writes that:

The modern Indian diaspora . . . now represents an important force in world culture [and] is increasingly a factor within the culture of the Indian subcontinent. To my mind there are no finer writers writing in the English language today than V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, and A. K. Ramanujan (Ghosh: 1990:243)

These are the comments that should be kept in mind when we consider Ghosh's placement as an Indian writer writing in English. He marvels at '*the state's sensitivity to the writing of the Diaspora*' (ibid, 244) and asserts that 'the links between India and her diaspora live within the imagination.' He is clearly vexed by the role of the migrant intellectual in envisioning the nation, as well as the image of the writer conceived by the nation. On the one hand, '*the institutional relationships between modern India and its diasporic population when they exist at all, are all mediated through Britain*' (Ibid, 245). On the other hand, the opinions of the diaspora are so significant to India: it is that part of itself that is both hostage and representative in the world outside; it is the mirror in which modern India seeks to know itself.

"After 'The Glass Palace's complex family structure stretching over several generations, The Hungry Tide seems almost intimate. Nonetheless, it shares Ghosh's concern for the individual against a broader historical- or even, in this case, geographical- backdrop. The book is divided into two sections- The Ebb and The Flood- and is set in the Sunderbans. Measuring over ten thousand square kilometre, this delta is the world's largest mangrove ecosystem. The name means "beautiful forest" and is located in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal. It stretches across coastal India and Bangladesh, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. It is the home of the Bengal tiger, which has killed tens of thousands of people. Because the 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 history behind this novel. The tide comes in twice daily, resulting in constant reshaping of the land and an uprooting of anything permanent. Such a setting makes an apt symbol for the ebb and flow of history and the uprooting of

populations, both of which have come to be seen as “Ghosh-ian” themes.”(Hawley: 2008:132)

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is the story of many individuals. It is the story of an itinerant cetologist, Piya; of Kanai, a proprietor of a translation firm; of Nirmal; of Mashima or Nilima, Nirmal's wife; of Fokir, a fisherman of the Sundarbans, and his mother Kusum and wife, Moyna; as well as of the other residents of the Sundarbans. Amidst these criss-crossing trajectories, these diverse characters are interspersed in the narrative of the Morichjhapi episode, here narrated through Nirmal's pen. The novel is awash with hunger, a human craving for home, and an urge to figure out one's '*own place in the great scheme of things*' (HT: 35).

This urge has led men to try to build up their homes in perhaps one of the most uninhabitable places in the world, the Sundarbans. People, uprooted by political upheavals as well as those forced to disperse due to personal turbulence, have tried to inhabit and build homes in the Sundarbans. These people inhabit the fictional universe of *The Hungry Tide*.

Ghosh's narrative in “The Hungry Tide” rather than encompassing vast swathes of South and South-East Asia here prefers, then, to focus a magnifying lens on what might be called a micro-culture within the region, namely the Sunder bans or “*tide-country, the islets of the Ganges delta that lie south of Kolkata and just east of the West Bengal/Bangladesh frontier.*”(Rollason: 2006: 11) The structural setting, in the form of a story base, includes two pivotal characters. Piyali Roy (Piya), an American-Indian Cetologist and Kannai Dutt, a Delhi businessman in his forties, are the visitors to the Sundarban community. Even though the purpose has different plans to carry on, they are made to sail through the complexities arising out of their sense of diasporic consciousness. The issues of language, translation, and interpretation raised by Ghosh in the course of the novel's thematic concern add new facets to the awareness of the unfamiliar, due to which consciousness aggravates further complications. Language, in the wake of discourse, gains centre-stage relevance, making diasporans feel the need to negotiate with the originals of the land. In ‘Hungry Tide’, Piyali's purpose to visit the Sundarbans is entirely based on professional reasons, not a bit to reconnect with the place of her birth, a ‘home’ in any way to presume the least. There is no trace in her of Indian diasporic identity because “*...neither her father nor her mother had ever thought to tell her about any aspect of her Indian ‘heritage’ that would have held her interest*” (HT: 95). Therefore, the new phenomenon can

presumably state that the generation migrated adapts to leave least traces of the diasporic identity to the one born and with time brought up to feel any sense of consciousness. In the novel, Moyna always refers to her as ‘the American’ while at the first meeting, it occurred to Kanai that “...*she was not an Indian except by descent...she was a foreigner; it was stamped in her posture*”(HT: 3).

Caught between the two worlds- one unacceptable, the other unaccepting, they become outsiders to themselves. This is the unique predicament of the second-generation Diaspora. It is not brought about by an idea of the superiority of the modern west over the rustic east as is commonly portrayed through the stereotyped ABCDs (American-Born-Confused-Deshis) Who are making alarmingly frequent occurrences in popular culture” (Lahiri: 2004:69). In the context of Piyali as an expatriate, the hegemonies of acquired sensibilities have sunk deep, leaving no room for any further scope to land her in the juxtaposition of diasporic consciousness and the callings of the native semblances of an Indian. Abiding by the notions of diaspora and its community members, Piyali has been on transit since the time she took up the project to research the Irrawaddy dolphin. Her constant travels to various parts of the globe did not deter her from retaining “*the monolithic American identity and resisting hyphenated diasporic hybridity*” (Konar: 2007: 132).

This resistance can be traced back to her days when she stayed at Kratie in eastern Cambodia. “*Her relationship there with Rath failed and her analysis of that situation made her withdraw herself from ‘encountered communitie.’*” (Barker: 2000:196).

“*You’re always going to find yourself in some small town where there’s never anyone to talk to but this guy who knows English. And everything you tell him will be all over the town before you’ve said it.*”(HT: 314)

Her travel is like a carriage of memories of her home back in Seattle. Her memories about the places she has travelled are mostly comprised of her work on dolphins and have the least space for the people and societies of those places. When she is with Fokir and does not have any language to communicate, she rescues herself from loneliness by returning to memories. At the end of the novel, she proposes to stay in the Sundarbans to start a dolphin project and thus gives faint hints of becoming a part of this encountered community. However, her concept of ‘home’ brushes out any possibility of the Sundarbans becoming even her adopted home. Home is

where the orcaella are: *'so there's no reason why (the Sundarbans) couldn't be it'* (HT: 400). Here, she is not guided by any instinct to connect herself with her lost heritage, but by purely professional purpose. She exemplifies that only cross-country travels added with a diasporic heritage do not always hyphenate one's identity. Hybridity can be accommodated or resisted – and Piya's workaholic nature and monolithic American-ness have always done the latter. Thus, the dilemma of rootlessness has been the ever faced emotional trauma in the psyche of all the diasporans.

In contrast to Piya's professional zeal, Kanai bears many traits of diasporic identity as Stuart Hall explains the concept: *"...an endless desire to return to 'lost origins', to be one with the mother, to go back to the beginning...[It is] the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery"* (HT: 120).

Kanai bears these features, though his displacement is not a cross-country one. It does not conform to the notion of diaspora in general, but I would like to refer to Stuart Hall, as he too opines that the diaspora experience is defined not by essence or purity but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' that lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diasporic identities are those that are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference.

In a country like India, which is full of diversity in language, culture, religion, and myths, it is not difficult to find 'differences' leading to diasporic identity in people who are dispersed even within this country. Kanai spent his early days mainly in Calcutta and also in the Sundarbans. Later, he migrated to Delhi to set up his own enterprises. Opposite to Piya's coming to her Sundarbans, which swells in her no feeling of her Indian heritage, Kanai is swayed by memories of home as he reaches the tide country. On this point of emphasizing memory and home along with topography, Bill Ashcroft believes *'diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces'* (Ashcroft: 2002:217-18). In the same vein, Paul Gilroy opines: *"The value of the term 'diaspora' increases as its essential symbolic character is understood"* (HT: 309). This essential symbolic nature of diaspora is a displacement into an 'encountered community' carrying along identity and memory of home.

Kanai's adaptation of cosmopolitan culture is stated when he is described as an 'outsider' at Dhakuria railway station. "*Kanai was carrying a wheeled airline bag with a telescopic handle. To the vendors and travelling salesman... this piece of luggage was just one of the many details of Kanai's appearance- along with his sunglasses, corduroy trousers and suede shoes- that suggested...metropolitan affluence*"(HT: 4-5). At the same time, his association with Bengalee culture is revealed when he translates for Piya the story of Bon Bibi, a local myth that has an epical stature for the inhabitants of the tide country. This translation, though written in prose format, has a clear rhythm of poetry.

The tension between 'home' and adopted home works in him when he hastily decides to go back to Delhi in the middle of his tour, but very soon, in the last chapter, it is reported that he would come back and write the story of Nirmal's notebook – "*how it came into his hands what was in it, and how it was lost*" (HT: 399). What is interesting here is that his aunt Nilima always wanted him to come back, and he does so only when he holds himself accountable for his community.

Andrew Milner says on the point of black ethnicity that the blacks are '*inheritors of a particular tribal history and cultural context and this is the reason they resist their absorption into a fabricated and dominant national ethnicity.*' (Milner: 2003:156). An analysis of the myth of Bon Bibi would show its relevance for this ethnic group. The myth goes like:

'Bon Bibi... decided that one half of the tide country would remain a wilderness; this part of the forest she left to DokkhinRai and his demon hordes. The rest she claimed for herself and under her rule this once-forested domain was soon made safe for human settlement... the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order.'(HT: 103). This passage displays at least three points of resistance against authority. Firstly, the local people create their own concept of 'off-limit' territory and thus nullify the forest department's imposition of that rule upon them. The positive aspect of the rule of Bon Bibi is that if a fisherman enters DokkhinRai's territory by mistake (that is off-limit' for the authority), Bon Bibi would save him, instead of taking bribes like the forest guards. Secondly, this myth negotiates wilderness and civilization, the wild and the sown in careful balance and creates their own slogan parallel to the governmental hue and cry of forest preservation or reservation. Here, the myth created by them becomes a script of responsibility for

the inhabitants. Thirdly, the mythification of human settlement in this wilderness tries to de-recognize the colonial history of Sir Daniel Mackinnon Hamilton's initiative in creating a human settlement in the islands.

The purpose of their immigration was to (re)locating themselves in the same ecological environment as they had prior to immigration. For them, the Sundarbans are all the same on both sides of the border, in spite of a political borderline dividing it into two. In the Indian part of the forest, they are very much at 'home'—even after cross border migration except for the authoritarian guardianship of the Government, which destroys this feeling. The ethnic identity (eco-ethnic to be more precise) of the Morichjhapi people once again unsettles the traditional relationship between diaspora and cross-country migration. It shows that after the partition of a country, which is not common in today's world, groups migrate mainly with the purpose of relocating themselves in an atmosphere that is the nearest to that they belonged to. In this way, they try to retain their identity, almost uncontaminated or non-hyphenated.

What we have seen in the book discussed in this paper is Ghosh's abiding interest in crossing borders and, in this novel, his ironic obliteration of them. As he has, Nirmal tells the five-year-old Fokir, rather ominously: the crabs are eating away at the dikes, and sooner or later the tides will cover the land – "*because the animals [quoting Rilke] 'already know by instinct / we're not comfortably at home / in our translated world'*" (HT: 206). 'From the book's opening, we already know why Ghosh has chosen such an unusual setting for this novel: the Sundarbans are presented as being borderless, a 'utopia' in its original meaning of no-place, where one's familiar markers for identity are constantly shifting. First, according to Hamilton's rules "it was impossible to tell who was who, and what their castes and religions and beliefs were" (HT 79). Then, from a natural point of view, "There [were] no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea" (HT: 7). Ghosh is interested in what might be called imaginary geographies - his preoccupation in *The Shadow Lines* comes to the fore here - when Piyaremarks that she "could tell that the world Kanai inhabited was as distant from the India of her father's memories as it was from Lusibari and the tide country" (HT: 200).

Diasporans always have a quest coupled with nostalgia to reach places that give them the feeling of their homeland, as places of displacement soon become an alienated domain of mechanical monetary supplies. But there are multiple engagements still which motivate,

persuade, and transport them, resulting in various forms, such as cultural, geographical, and lexical, adding facets to the experience of exile.

“Dislocation, after all, is the condition of post-modernity to which we have all responded with excitement as well as fear, both reactions perfectly justifiable in the contemporary contexts of our lives” (Bose Brinda:2005:13). Thus, through this novel Amitav Ghosh too has reflected the diasporic dilemmas which the migrants encounter when they leave their homeland. *“Almost all the people in the world are prone to emotional dilemmas and confusions. Especially in this modern world, people are facing several problems along with the problems of migrations and diaspora. They are becoming the victims of alienation in their surroundings as well as from the ‘self’, losing themselves in the complexities and contradictions of life and emotions. As a result, they are in a total mental and physical imbalance. Their acceptance and adjustment with the surrounding environment and with their own emotions is the only way to re-connect and link with life.”* (Sarangi: 2010: 96) In fact, *“The novel shows that, in love as in nature, the maladjusted are rejected, while the adjusted are accepted”* (Mahanta: 2007:103).

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