Representation of History in *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh’s novels attempt to rewrite History with a view to give a new perspective of reality about India and its History. Ghosh has an anti-colonial stance in his approach as he recreates those obliterated, occluded, obscured accounts and people and gives them voice and representation. In his novel *The Hungry Tide* an expulsion of a group of people as a result of the Partition is elaborated by Ghosh. The Morichjhapi incident in which thousands of migrants from Bangladesh has settled in Central India, and then resettled in the Sundarbans, and had been massacred by the state police in 1979, formulates the core of the narrative in 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. The novel presents mangroves of Sundarbans as the central character and the story of Piya, Kanai and Fokir revolves around the colonial way of handling the Sundarbans.

English writings before 1935 were especially concerned with the Euro-centric ideologies which in other words, could be studied as the colonial writing but literature written after 70s and 80s decolonized the issues of language and social norms. The novels of Amitav Ghosh deal with the major events that have shaped the History of South East Asia. In his widespread focus on the events that have shaped the subcontinent, Ghosh traverses a vast landscape of time and places, unfolding a broad spectrum of socio-political, cultural and historical changes that result in the individual’s peculiar predicament. As the Partition of India in 1947 and its related themes are the major concern of the post colonial writers Ghosh refers to the history of the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and the separation of east Bengal, a major event that shaped his insights into history.
History in the context of literature can no longer be approached as a subject that documents only
great events and great figures of history. Modern historiography demands a re-examination in the form of
new thoughts, new perceptions and an altogether new interpretation of the past. It is a contemporary
trend of reading the past from the point of view and the perspective of marginalized people rather than
studying history of only great and powerful people of antiquity.

History in Amitav Ghosh’s works is not only a narrative of historical events but also it talks about the
connection between the people to that particular event. The individual is hit by a historical impact and his
story needs narration as much as the nation’s. The individual is not to be relegated to the background and
pushed to oblivion. In doing so Amitav Ghosh first of all attempts a rejection of conventional historiography
and secondly presents largely a re-reading and a re-examination of history. Therefore it is important for us to
understand how Ghosh treats history with imagination in his fiction.

In his novel, The Hungry Tide, Ghosh takes up the remote Sunderbans Islands as the setting for his
novel. With its thick mangroves, the man eating tigers, snakes, sharks, crocodiles and huge tidal waves, rising
in the ebb and flow of water, rocking the Islands, makes the setting enigmatic, foreboding death. Nirmal’s
journal says:

Interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands... the
trailing threads of Indian’s fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the anchal that follows her, half-wetted
by the sea...Some of these channels are mighty waterways, so wide across that one shore is invisible
from the other...

Ghosh brings up the past and simultaneously the colonial history of India and forcibly reminds us of
the Morichjhapi massacre of 1978-79. Ever since the partition in 1947, refugees have flooded into the tiny
state of West Bengal, easily trickling in through the porous borders and the Bangladesh war of 1971 triggered
an even greater migration. Ghosh weaves his story around this forgotten incident of suppression of
unimportant people. He brings three persons from totally different spheres to one place, the Sundarbans.
The three characters are Kanai, a translator by profession from Delhi who bounds to Lusibari in Sunderbans
on his aunt’s request to claim a document handed down to him by her husband, Nirmal at the time of his
death twenty years back. Piya, a cetologist from Seattle, whose quest to know the information about the rare
dolphins and Fokir, a local fisherman who accompanies Piyali down the treacherous rivers of Sunderbans.
The other thread entwined with this main story-line is the anecdote of an older generation comprising of Nirmal, who lived an unfulfilling life as ahead master of school in Lusibari. When he retires from school, he comes face to face with a strange reality. Nilima, who runs a hospital and a trust in Lusibari is a wife of Nirmal and also known as ‘mashima’ or aunt to all. Horen and Kusum whose story forms the subtext of the novel and which is recounted in Nirmal’s journal is instrumental in retrieving the history of Morichjhapi. It is through Kusum’s involvement in the refugee movement and her tragic death that the Morichjhapi massacre is unveiled to us.

Ghosh recounts the revolt of a group of resettled refugees were the events leading up to Morichjhapi turmoil through Nilima. Nilima tells her nephew, kanai of the events leading up to the massacre and her husband’s involvement in it.

‘He(Nirmal) started writing it on the morning of 15 May 1979. In a place called Morichjhapi.’

‘Morichjhapi!’ There was a sudden intake of breath as Nilima said the word.

‘Yes’ said kanai. ‘Tell me exactly what happened there.’

Morichjhapi, was a tide country island, a couple of hours from Lusibari by boat said Nilima. If fell within a part of the Sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation but unlike many such islands it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland... In this place were 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 learnt that they were refugees, originally from Banlgadesh. 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 (118).

The refugees there were trebly displaced people- they had moved from East Pakistan to West Bengal (1947- late 50s), then from West Bengal to Dandkaranya (Madhya Pradesh 1961) and then again from Madhya Pradesh to the Sunderbans (1978). They had found a place where they were no longer at the mercy of the local people or even the government, initially. They found vast tracts of free land in the Sunderbans and created a world of their own. People often expressed their awe the way East Bengali refugees rapidly established Morichjhapi, as one of the best developed islands of the Sunderbans within a few months. The
refugees showed their interest in building a new life. There is a flash moment Nirmal first encounters the settlers in the mangrove forests and is completely disarmed by their ability to reorganize their lives.

What had I expected? ... But what I saw was quite different from the picture in my mind’s eyes. Paths have been laid... little plots of land had been enclosed with fences; fishing nets had been hung up to dry. There were men and women sitting outside their huts, repairing their nets and stringing their crablines with bits of bait and bone.

Such industry! Such Diligence! Yet it was only a few weeks since they had come. (171)

Nirmal goes on to file his thrill at seeing “the birth of something new” — the creation of a world not by a single visionary but one that was dreamt up... (171). He further gives us an account of an astonishing spectacle of the attempts of refugees to transform a barren island into a bustling locality in his diary:

Saltpans had been created, tubewells had been planted, water had been dammed for the rearing of fish, a bakery had started up, boat-builders had set up workshops, a pottery had been founded as well as an ironsmith’s shop; there were people making boats while others were fashioning nets and crablines; little marketplaces, where all kinds of goods were being sold.

Ever since the Partition in 1947, the refugees have flooded into the tiny state of West Bengal, easily trickling in through the porous borders and the Bangladesh war of 1971 triggered an even greater migration. The Dalit refugees, being penniless and backward, threatened to be a bigger burden on Bengal’s meagre resources, and were, therefore dealt with severity. They are said to have been stopped at the frontiers and sent off to Dandakaranya. The Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) initially kept them in the Manatransit camp, near Raipur.

‘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 kilometres from Bengal. (118)
The conditions were far from congenial and the refugees chiefly suffered from shortage drinking water and food, which led to large-scale deaths from epidemics and starvation. The unknown language and culture of local people amid dense forests, along with mounting pressures and threats from unsympathetic DDA officials only added to their misery and sense of alienation.

In 1977, then the Left Government first came to power in Calcutta, the refugees sold their belongings and land and decided to move back to West Bengal. Fearing that the influx of refugees might jeopardize the prospects of the state’s economic recovery, the government started to forcibly send them back. An approximately 1,50,000 almost all of Dandakaranya refugees arrived to West Bengal in 1972. A few hundred refugees made their way to Morichjhapi and started settling down there. An approximately 40,000 refugees went south and camped for few months in Hansabad who then settled in Morichjhapi, a protected place under Reserve Forest Act. The government considered it as an unauthorized occupation of reserved forest land. As Nilima says, ‘The government...saw these people as squatters and land grabbers; there was going to be trouble; they would not be allowed to remain.(190)

On 24 January 1979, the government of West Bengal clamped some prohibitory orders under section 144 of the CRPC around the island of Morichjhapi.

The government announced that all movements in and out of Morichjhapi was banned under the provisions of the Forest Reservation Act...What was more section 144. The law used to quell civil disturbances, was imposed on the whole one: this meant it was a criminal offence for five people or more to gather in one place. As the days wore on dozens of police boats had encircled the island, tear gas and rubber bullet had been used, the settlers had been forcibly prevented from rice and water to Morichjhapi, boats had been sunk, people had been killed(252). The seize went on for many days...food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tubewells and there was no potable water left; the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out.(260)

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh creates a space for a dialogic discourse on the conflict between environmentalists and the refugee settlers who fight against eviction. Ghosh uses Kusum’s voice to apprise the readers how the government had stepped up pressure on the settlers.

...She explained that in recent weeks the government had been stepping up the pressure on the settlers: policeman and officials had visited and offered inducements for them to leave. When these proved
ineffective, they had made threats. Although the settlers were unmoved in their resolve, a kind of nervousness had set in: no one knew what was going to happen next (223).

Kusum also tells about the fierce steadfastness of the settlers, braving thirst and hunger, brushing, brushing aside the threats of police violence, as they listened to the callous, dehumanizing announcements thrust at them through loudspeakers.

Many years later Horen tells Kanai how the soldiers came in boats and “burnt the settlers’ huts and sank their boats and laid waste to their fields[…]”(279). Kanai then asked about Kusum and his uncle and Horen replied that ‘No one knows for sure, but what I’ve heard is that a group of women were taken away by force, Kusum among them. People say they were used and then thrown into the rivers, so that they would be washed by the tides. Dozens of settlers were killed that day. The sea claimed them all.’ After the chaos Nirmal was found stranded and unconscious in Canning. Along with the refugees he was also sent back to Madhya Pradesh from where they had come. But he cannot withstand the trauma of physical and mental defeat (279).

Though Kusum and Nirmal are destroyed in their fight for justice; their story has opened up a debate for posterity. Ghosh points out how the presence of the ‘environmental unconscious’ within the lives of those who are perceived to be living directly off the environment- has to constantly contend with articulated notion of ‘Nature’ as if it lies above human life. Pitting the conversation of the tiger at the cost of the extermination of its human settlers highlights several paradoxes that find no easy answers even in the real world.

By referring to Morichjhapi and aftermath of partition Ghosh has shown openness, factual authenticity, and compassion that instigate us to look into certain matters of post partition politics. This particular incident of Morichjhapi would have lapsed into total oblivion and we would have forgotten some very remarkable acts of courage and resistance by the people who were poor, helpless, deprived and dispossessed. Ghosh triumphs as an author who has successfully upheld the cause of settlers in Morichjhapi.
Works Cited


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