

From Hamilton to Piya in Ghosh's the Hungry Tide: Can Collaborative Community Save Sundarbans?

Abstract

This paper is an endeavor to problematize and analyze the fate and predicament of the marginals – here the most displaced refugees of Sundarban. In the process, I deconstruct some complex dilemmas of ecology (nature) and development (human displacements). The novel chosen for the purpose is Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and attempt will be made to explore possibilities of ethical evaluation of human responsibility towards our environment. In the process I will highlight the tension between different human communities, and provide a pointer towards the possible ways of co-existence.

Keywords: Ecosystem, Ecolitics, Human Responsibility, Sundarban, Subalternity, Royal Bengal Tiger; Refugees, Collaborative Community.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's fictional oeuvre encompasses *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *Shadow Lines* (1990), *In an Antique Land* (1994), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Sea of Poppies and the River of Smoke*. All these works are infused by an underlying consciousness of the subaltern and a narrativization of the subaltern experience. *The Hungry Tide* however is a very profound voice of the subaltern experience. The novel raises national and global awareness about the history of aggression etched on the Sundarbans, throwing into respite the long-abiding misuse of the archipelago. Lawrence Buell argues, ecocritics explore literary texts as "refractions of physical environments and human interactions with those environments, notwithstanding the artifactual properties of textual representation and their mediation by ideological and other socio-historical factors" (30). In this vein, Ghosh's novel reveals the interactions between the state, the marginals, the fauna and flora, and the physical environment, and in doing so focuses on both the tragedy and the two-facedness that are innate in the conservation policies of the nation. This paper will discuss Amitav Ghosh's *the Hungry Tide* in the light of the environmental issues of Sundarban and its ecosystem and explore possibilities of ethical evaluation of human responsibility towards our environment and suggest a possible ways of Co-existence. In the process the paper will highlight the tension between different human communities, their relation with the environment and suggest the possible ways of co-existence.

The Hungry Tide is centered on three characters: Piyali ("Piya") Roy, an Indian American cetologist whose particular field of expertise among marine mammals is in the habitat and behaviour of freshwater river dolphins of the great waterways of Asia – the Indus, the Mekong, the Irawaddy, and the Ganges; Kanai, the very epitome of a Modernized India, a translator and expert in six languages whom Piya employs for her work in the Sundarbans; and Fokir, an illiterate boatman who earns his living by fishing for crabs, and is the subaltern figure whose native knowledge of the tide country contrasts with Piya's scientific, technology-driven ways, and whose own misfit life and tragedies are testament to "his place – or lack of place – in the scheme of things as determined by state authorities in Calcutta and New Delhi" (Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh* 18). Kanai is visiting his aunt Nilima, a social worker, who has set up an NGO named *Badoban* and runs a hospital in one of the Sundarban islands—Lusibari. He is there to collect and read a diary left for him by his late uncle Nirmal, an idealistic, Marxist intellectual in the Bengali tradition.

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The central character of the novel it would not be wrong to say is the Sundarban:

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later. . . . When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself. . . . Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. . . . Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (7-8)

Nirmal's diary take Kanai deeper into the history of the colonial and the postcolonial setting of the Tide country, the Sundarban. Sir Daniel Hamilton, an English businessman in Bengal and a close associate of Rabindra Nath Tagore shared latter's vision of village reconstruction and cooperative societies and set up the first embankment estate in the Sundarban – a society where people would shed their atavistic baggage of custom and prejudice and avail the blessings of modernity. The attempt by Hamilton to set up a socialist society in rural Bengal, however, crumbled down with decolonization. The postcolonial Sundarban turns out to be so much against the grain of original Hamiltonian colonial socialist impulse. The indigenous locals who flocked from a contiguous 'tide country' environment of Bangladesh to similar 'tide country' environment of India found themselves marginalized, rootless and helpless victims of an arbitrary line of partition drawn in 1947 between India and Pakistan/East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The West Bengal State Government refused to host these remnants of Partition which prodded the Central (Federal) Government of India to intervene and relocate these marginalized refugees in land-locked tribal belts of India like Dandakarnya, Koraput and Dhanbad. Coming from the "tide-country" and accustomed to "water and mud" they found it extremely difficult to acclimatize to the dry and arid land (*HT*, 165).

The experience of the visitors, Kanai and Piya, is interlaced with an historical episode of the 1979, the episode which is central to the novel's discussion of the "tide country's" history. In this episode, the Marginals living in Morichjhāpi, Kashipur and Kurimari were evicted and pillaged because they attempted to settle in the protected forest reserves on Bengal's uninhabited island. Nirmal's diary further encapsulates the narration of this popular revolt, which serves as the symbiotic meeting point between the past colonial histories with the present postcolonial era.

These subaltern locals could co-exist with predators in the wilderness because of the cult of *Bon Bibi*: the local myth which ran through the generations of oral tradition of story and song as "told by Abdur Rahim" (*HT*, P. 354). Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongli were sent to "*atthero bhattir desh*"—the

"country of eighteen tides"—in order to make it inhabitable. She came, defeated the demon spirit Dokshin Rai, and made possible human habitation there. Henceforth, Bon Bibi became the protector-goddess of the islands and a representative of Hindu-Islam syncretism. Bon Bibi divided the archipelago by an imaginary line separating human habitat from that of animals and humans were instructed to curtail greed and not to venture into the wilderness for profiteering. Bon Bibi's legend reinstated in the wilderness and human habitat around it and this institutionalized control over human need and greed: *Whenever human greed overtakes the equitable compensation, it leads to ecological imbalance in the "tide country."* In the instance where Fokir offers prayers to the Hindu Goddess Bon Bibi, Piya discovers invocations to Allah—the Muslim God (*HT*, P. 152). Piya, researching in these islets of Ganges delta is a representative voice of the Climatologists of The West. So Piya embodies the 'global'. And Fokir is an apt representative of the 'local.' Kanai, the quasi-modern global entrepreneur stands as a conciliator, as a translator between Piya who does not know Bengali and Fokir, who does not understand English. The Royal Bengal Tiger stands as a romanticized and glorified species of the Sundarban's wilderness and is at the center of the clash of the local and the global narratives.

Ghosh has interwoven the legends, experiences, myth and history of the archipelago so as to reveal the intricacies of human interaction with the non-human world revealing that the "tide country" is not simply a remote and hostile environment, but is a site for cultural interactions for centuries. In Kanai's words:

This is, after all, no remote and lonely frontier – this is India's doormat, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent. Everyone who has ever taken the eastern route into the Gangetic heartland has had to pass through it – the Arakanese, the Khmer, the Javanese, the Dutch, the Malays, the Chinese, the Portuguese, and the English. It is common knowledge that almost every island in the tide country has been inhabited at some time or other. But to look at them you would never know: the specialty of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize that land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts. (*HT* 50)

Nirmal's words further resonates the extratextuality of the archipelago: "I am writing these words in a place that you will probably never have heard of: an island on the southern edge of the tide country, a place called *Morichjhāpi* ..." (Ghosh, 2005: 67). The novel deals with compassion to the specificity of a place which involves envisioning them in spatial and temporal terms and explores the significance of place to the formation and expression of personal and social identities in India and the Indian Diaspora.

Ghosh said: "The Hungry Tide is at bottom a story about a relationship between a girl and two men.....one of the major characters in the book, actually, is the landscape in which it's set" (*In*

Brisbane Writers' festival, 2004, Australia. Source: readersvoice.com. Nov 7, 2007). Ghosh's statement supports the central theme of *The Hungry Tide*, that is, to unravel the issues relating to the politics of wildlife conservation, urban-rural conflicts, and class and caste politics in postcolonial India against the backdrop of the policies adopted by the Communist-led Left Front government of West Bengal towards a community of refugees occupying parts of Sundarban, during the late 1970s.

The Morichjhāpi massacre is intrinsically linked with the broader power relations that characterize postcolonial Indian society. As part fiction and part its relation to reality, Ghosh has interpreted the facts, simulated the reality and woven the incidents of Morichjhāpi to present the experience of the marginal who were displaced thrice in the name of tiger conservation—from Bangladesh to Sundarban, Sundarban to Rehabilitation Camps in Central India and from there to Sundarban. Collaborative strategies of these refugees helps them to come up with an organized settlement within a span of one year only to be silenced and suppressed from time to time by the diktats of the State:

. . . the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. "This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, and it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world." Every day, sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things 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, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human beings could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land, by planting the soil' (*HT*, PP. 261-262).

Thus, the State of West Bengal, in an attempt to operationalize the policies of conservation of ecology, adopted coercive mechanism against the marginalized refugees. However, neither the intimidation of State authorities nor the Royal Bengal predators barging into human habitat made the people abandon the land. The myth of *Bob Bibi* bound these marginal to the land. The narrative is a curious metaphor that emerged from the *tide_country* itself and as both Nirmal and Piya observe, the social order is based on the strength of this myth. The narrative had been created "from elements of legend and scripture, from the near and the far, Bangla and Arabic." It has Arabic invocations at what looks like a

Hindu puja (*HT*, PP. 246-47). This myth served as a collaborative agency to bring the Hindus, the Moslems, the Indians, the refugees together.

Through Nirmal's diary, Ghosh gives us a graphic description of the collaborative resistance that the refugees tried to put up. Kanai asks Horen, a local boatman, about the incidents in Morichjhāpi. Horen replies, "I know no more than anyone else knows. It was all just rumor" (*HT* 278). Nothing concrete was ever known about the brutal assault on the settlers. Morichjhāpi was declared out of bounds for everyone including the journalists by the then Chief Minister. Horen recalls, "They burnt the settlers' huts, they sank their boats, they laid waste to their fields. Women were used and then thrown into the rivers, so that, they would be washed away by the tides" (*HT*: 279). A whole bustling settlement was razed to the ground within a few weeks.

Ghosh's rendition of the Morichjhāpi massacre reflects on the perilous outcome of the British colonial erection of borders on the subcontinent, a policy that led to the displacement of millions during the Partition and that continues to plague India in the form of highly combustible communal divisions. However, the Morichjhāpi massacre: an historical event present at the heart of Nirmal's diary, is only one of the histories – part fact, part fiction – that the Sundarban of Ghosh's novel unfolds. The archipelago is storehouse of archipelago of narratives : life cycle of the Orcella, the story of its identification and the aquatic history of which it is part, the building up of the port town of Canning; the *ghor*, which ravaged the region with irresistible ferocity, Sir Daniel Hamilton, who bought ten thousand acres of land in the Sundarban and set out to build an ideal community; the tale of Bon Bibi and her worship, recounted in many folk epics, syncretism of Muslim and Hindu faith; and then Kanai, Nilima, Piya, Fokir, Fokir's wife Moyna and their son Tutul, are among others.

The social and economical impact of wildlife preservation policies raise an ethical question, about the human victims being equally disempowered as the endangered species. The conservation ethic is further misappropriated by Climatologists of postcolonial nations who usually tippy toe the Western Climatologists. This one-directional conservation policy negates the function of the indigenous populace who has co-existed with the endangered species ever since ages.

Piya during her expeditions through the crisscross waterways of the tide- country is exposed to the crisis. Her encounter with the mother and calf duo of Gangetic dolphins culminate in the tragic sight of the calf's body bobbing on the water, revealing to her the plight of these helpless creatures robbed of their habitat. Piya's trauma is further worsened when she stumbles upon the tiger wedged in the livestock pen, which is trapped, blinded, incapacitated and brutally murdered by the villagers plunging their staves into the pen setting fire to it, "screaming in a maddened bloodlust, *Maar Maar !*" (*HT*: 295). It is paradoxical that the same lethal is worshipped in awe and reverence, with the villagers even refraining from even giving voice to its name. Also, Fokir consenting and approving the killing presents a radical shift from

his preceding positioning in the novel as a villager-ecologist, his justification being, "when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die" (HT 295). Kanai also sees the inhumanity of the government's endeavour, when he tells Piya: 'Because it was people like you,' said Kanai, 'who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to carry favour with their Western patrons. It's not hard to ignore the people who're dying – after all they are the poorest of the poor....' (301). Kusum mother of Fokir, deciding to fight on the grounds of injustice towards the refugees, feels aghast at the irrationality of the Nation-State, which does not hesitate to exterminate community to save animals. Discontented, she wonders: '...Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things 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, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil....' (261-262).

The emphasis on wilderness is essentially a Western perspective that aims for a bio-centric world, which Piya represents. Indiscriminate implementation of conservation policies in societies that have scarce population to those that are highly populated becomes oppressive and detrimental to natural world and society, in places like Sundarban. Protecting the conservation of the tiger at the cost of the extermination of its human settlers poses a moral question on the conservation. Ghosh has, thus, brought to light the environmental crisis which is mutually inclusive of the poor and the natural world.

The tide and the storm towards the end of the novel take in its sweep of the island and the moment of solidarity. Piya shares with the tiger the fury of the 'jhor'—an instance that forces both man and animal together against nature. In terms of denouement, the storm, Fokir's death, the loss of all data on the dolphins collected, motivates Piya to remain in Lusibari and start a conservation project in collaboration with the villagers.

Conclusion

Ghosh's vision of a collaborative community, very similar to that of Gandhi and Tagore, emerges through several frontiers in this novel: through solidarity between two very different people – Piya and Fokir; through the community that forms when people organize their life and labour together— as in the village Lusibari created by Nirmal, Nilima and the local people's efforts. Such collectivity becomes the space that critiques the ways in which the Indian Nation-state has failed to be an egalitarian and free place, as its founders had promised. And the predicament of the tidal people of Sundarban, plant and animal species, points towards the distinct situation of the poor, powerless and voiceless marginal in a postcolonial nation like India where policies of conservation are implemented with guns and guards, disregarding the human cost. The human cost and the

cost of conservation are certainly complex issues that find no easy solution and Ghosh seems to be suggesting that the claims of the climatologists and human right activists should go hand in hand without one negotiating the other.

Nirmal's utopian dream (who in many ways embodied Hamilton's colonial utopian vision) is adopted by Piya: she plans to involve the Badabon Trust, Nilima, and the people of Lusibari to save the dolphins and their common island habitat is what Ghosh suggests as an agenda: an agenda that involved civic and ecological responsibility. In other words she points towards collaborative community to fight against the subalternity of Sundarban.

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