

## Theme of Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide*: an Eco Critical Approach



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### Abstract:

Displacement or dislocation is a very prominent theme in the post colonial writings, and Amitav Ghosh is often rendered to be a post colonial writer. His stories often reflect the traits of post colonial writings like diaspora, use of history, marginalization, quest for identity and feminism. His novel *Hungry Tide* is no exception in this matter. This work portrays struggle of the migrated people and their sense of displacement and rootlessness, which are very widely opted diasporic themes in literature.

Displacement or migration of a people from one place to another is a very big deal to them, as it snatches their identity completely and they need to struggle hard to make their own place in the society again, that too in a place that is so unfamiliar and sometimes hostile to them. *Hungry Tide* is a novel that gives the reader a picture of the adversity of displaced people. Set against the backdrop of the 1979 Morichjhapi struggle in Sundarban, *Hungry Tide* is a story of the journey of Piyali Roy a marine biologist, the struggle of the migrated people like Fokir and an endeavor of Neelam and Nirmal Bose to find a home for marginalized and dislocated people like Kusum (Fokir's Mother), and a rather different experience of Kanai, who feels a little out of place in Sundarban. One chief characteristic that makes this novel so interesting is that nature plays a major role in it. Every character and every incident in this novel is deeply affected or influenced by the natural surroundings. This paper will make an attempt to explore the reasons and aftermath of dislocation with an eco critic outlook.

**Key words:** Dislocation, Marginalized people, Sense of Belonging, Quest for Identity

Amitav Ghosh is an eminent writer of today's age, who's writing often deal with the theme of magical realism. Whether be his *Shadow Lines* or *Sea Of Poppies* or *River Of Smoke*, all of his works of fiction some way or other portrays the quality of magical realism. Magical realism is a genre of fiction writing in which some magical or fictionist elements are weaved together with the realistic atmosphere to such an extent that sometimes it is difficult to understand where the reality ended and where the fictionist part started. In accordance with the

other works of Ghosh, *Hungry Tide* too portrays a story that is a mixture of reality and a fictionary world.

The story starts with the meeting of Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy in the train to Canning. They both are headed to Sundarban, a Southeastern island in Bengal. Piyali Roy is a marine biologist, who is Indian by birth and American by personality. She has come to Sundarban to study a rare species of Dolphin, which is presumably abundant in the backwaters of Sundarban. And Kanai is a businessman, who is going there to peruse the notebook of his late uncle Nirmal Bose, died some thirty years back. After when they part, the story starts to develop in two parallel plots. One plot portrays how Piyali meets Fokir, an Islander, who is very much familiar with the labyrinth of Sundarban and the species of dolphins that Piyali is looking for. So despite the language barrier between them she chooses to go with him. In the second parallel plot Kanai starts to read the notebook of Nirmal that was attributed to him. Through the notebook of Nirmal the reader is reminded of the migration of people from Bangladesh to Indian Continent in the year 1971. These people were given shelter by the Indian Government at Dandakaranya, situated deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh. But in the search for home they came to Sundarban, a labyrinth of small islands. Sundarban is situated in the Southeastern part of Bengal, which is full of Mangrove trees and jungle. This part is declared as tiger reserved area by Indian government, and this becomes the major obstacle for those migrated people as government is against them for living in an area which is reserved for tigers.

The novel starts to depict the story of Kusum, a childhood friend of Kanai, who somehow reaches to Calcutta and gets married there. But after the death of her husband she comes back to Sundarban with the group of people migrated from Bangladesh. At first this migrated mass was settled in a refugee camp in central India near Madhya Pradesh. But the condition of these refugees there, was not good. In the words of Nilima, "They called it 'Resettlement', but people say it was more like a concentration camp, or a prison. They were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down." (HT 118) In search of their own place they took their way to Sundarban. Kusum joins this group along with his son Fokir and comes to Morichjhapi, a Mangroved covered island in Sundarban.

Sundarban proves to be a hostile place for the migrated people both politically and environmentally. It seems like they had to walk on a sword that was sharp from both sides. First the environment was so much against them, as the place was not in living condition. The place was also called as Tide Country (Bhatir Desh), by the locals as tides and storms were so frequent in that place. No matter how many times they build their living place, they always have to be uncertain about how long that would last. They already were facing these hurdles, and along with that came a political attack that made their lives even more miserable.

The government passed an order to inflict an eviction of the people from that place. Here again the predicament of dislocation comes into light. The government was trying every way to evict the refugees from Morichjhapi. When Nirmal reached Kusum's house in Morichjhapi, he was told that "...In recent weeks, the government had been stepping up the pressure on the

settlers: policemen and officials had visited and offered inducement for them to leave. When these proved ineffective, they had made threats.” (HT 223)

It is clear here that these migrated people had to fight a lot and suffer a lot in search of their own identity. And when they chose to fight and stand against the order a massacre took place between the police and refugees. This clash took the life of hundreds of refugees including Kusum. In the parallel running plot, the author portrays the present through Piyali and Fokir. The sense of dislocation is also highlighted through Piyali and Fokir.

Piyali and Fokir are searching for the rare Irrawady dolphins but they both are unacquainted with the language of each other. Though they manage to understand each other through signs, but still it gives the reader a sense of dislocation on the part of Piyali.

Piyali also feels dislocated when it comes to food. At one point in the novel Fokir and Piyali both are in his boat. Fokir serves food to Piyali. Piyali watch Fokir and his son Tutul eat their food but she herself could not eat it, as she never had that kind of food. So she puts out the energy bar from her bag and starts to eat it...”... When he followed her there, with a plate full of rice and cooked crab, she fended him off with her protein bars and her bottled water, smiling and bobbing her head in apology, to show she meant no offence.” (HT 97)

Despite these differences both Piyali and Fokir liked each other a lot. When Kanai sensed it he tried to separate them.

When Piyali decided to go with Fokir to the island of Bon Bibi in search of Irrawady dolphins, Kanai volunteered to go with them to work as an interpreter between Fokir and Piyali. During the journey he somehow offended Fokir and to take a revenge on him Fokir left Kanai alone in the isolated jungle area. That time Kanai got frightened to death. Here again the theme of dislocation is evident and Amitav Gosh has presented it, connecting it with the environment so beautifully.

When challenged by Fokir, Kanai goes with him in the dangerous jungle, but as soon as Fokir left him, he was so scared that he lost his senses. At one hand there was Fokir, who was so much in harmony with the jungle environment that he was not scared a bit. And on the other hand there was Kanai, who lost his senses once left by Fokir, because he was not acquainted with the place. Quote.

The reader can grasp the theme of dislocation in the novel in yet another incident. While looking for the dolphins, Piyali, Fokir and Kanai reached to another village, where a tiger had entered the village premise and the villagers caught him and killed him. Piyali was against the killing that enraged the villagers. Somehow Piyali, Fokir and Kanai escaped the village. Here the theme of dislocation can be placed in two ways. First the novel portrays the condition of the villagers living in Sundarban. It was so very frequent for the tiger to come in the village and kill their children. Government could have helped them, but chose not to. Here the life of the tiger became more important than that of human being.

Here the feeling of dislocation was felt by Piyali too, as she comes from a place where she was always taught that the preservation of the animals is very important. So she was against the killing of the tiger. When she asked Fokir, whom she trusted a lot, to help her rescue the tiger, he denied. That hurt Piyali to the core. Quote.

Here one can see the barrier of the difference of opinion between Piyali and the villagers and Fokir. Piyali could not understand the predicament of the villagers and the villagers could not understand the point of Piyali. That made Piyali feel so out of place.

Dislocation is a very frequent theme in the works of Amitav Ghosh, and he always skillfully connects the theme of the novel to the environment. Amitav Ghosh can be called a nature writer as his stories often depict nature as a major character in the novel. In the novel *Hungry Tide* there are so many characters but nature can be rendered as the lead character of the novel. First the refugees are treated badly in the camp, when they are dislocated from their native place. Then they tried to make their homes in Sundarban, but here again nature stood against them. Government and nature both became their enemy. Amitav Ghosh has woven so beautifully a portrayal of two incidents that took place in two different places and at two different times. A lot of people died in massacre in Morichjhapi, and after few years Fokir died in a hurricane near the Bon Bibi Jungle. Through these incidents Amitav Ghosh has represented the pain of dislocation, giving nature a major role in it.

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