

A Postcolonial Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, a narrative set in tide country of Sundarbans, reveals the porosity of the newly formed national boundaries. The novel, in different time frames, shows the destruction of ecology by the settlements of the white colonisers, the egalitarian views of the educated and privileged (Nirmal, Nilima, Kanai, Piya), the struggle and suffering of the local people, the forced uprooting of a mass population due to partition. This paper is set to have a postcolonial reading of the novel. The novel delivers a complex notion about the newly formed nation-state with porous border and common ethno-lingual and cultural identities. It also serves glimpses of the marginalized classes and groups in "post-colonial" India who got no place in the mainstream history, which shows how the newly independent country got the evils from its colonizers. The civic, educated, and powerful society of the newly formed country learnt to erase the history of the powerless marginalized.

Keywords: postcolonial, colonial, partition, Sundarbans, colonisers, ecology, migration

Introduction:

Postcolonial writings often deal with the aftermath of the colonial rule, that left scars on the colonized countries. After 200 years of colonial rule, India got its Independence in 1947 but the deep wound the country got from its colonizer in the form of partition left a very long-lasting legacy of suffering. According to P. K. Nayar, "postcoloniality" refers to the "economic and political conditions in countries such as India after the European ruler handed over political power to the native population" (7):

'Postcoloniality' also captures the strategies of resistance, negotiation, and cultural assertion that countries such as India adopt to deal with increasing neocolonial interference and control exerted by the 'developed first world' nations. (8)

Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide*, set in Sundarban, chronicles the pain and sufferings of people after the partition of Bengal. It records the people who became rootless and homeless due to partition and struggled immensely to get back their identity and to get back a shelter. The novel narrates how in the tide country the history of those deprived people got washed away by the ebb and tide of information and knowledge. It reflects the silence of the civic society over the incident where thousands of settler people were forcefully evicted and killed in Morichjhapi island. This work is a comment on the so-called independent society that has acquired all the evil forms from its rulers. It suggests a continuation between colonial and postcolonial, where they are linked by exploitation, cruelty, immorality, and corruption.

Destruction of natural resources by the colonisers:

The novel alludes to the vicious exploitation of the colonial landscapes and resources by the foreign colonizers. Colonial rulers viewed the Sundarbans as a resource-rich area and

exploited its natural wealth, including timber, fish, and other valuable resources, to fuel the industries and economies of the colonial metropolises. This brutal and unmerciful act of misuse disrupts the ecological and geographical equilibrium of this distinctive region. The clearing of mangrove forests, for example, altered the natural flood and tidal patterns, affecting the breeding and survival of various species.

As we learn in the novel, Sir Daniel Hamilton, a rich Scottish man bought land in Sundarbans and started to build construction. He built a house for his niece Lucy in an island. That island later came to be known as Lusibari (Lucy's house). He summoned Indians to come and settle there, regardless of religion and caste. He wanted to build a utopian society where "no one would exploit anyone and people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences. He dreamed of a place where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening." However, it is ironic, as the white colonisers' history is always written in blood and violence. The colonisers always had the conception (or misconception?) that they must bring education, civilization, and enlightenment to the native country. To achieve this agenda, they built constructions to show their superiority.

Sir Hamilton's way of building settlements in a country that changes with the ebb and flow of tide, shows a meticulous and systemic pattern of imperialism. This large-scale colonisation later shatters the vast and varied ecology of Sundarbans and establishes the grim impact of European colonialism on the ecology of the native country. Revival of this large biosphere proved to be difficult for the natives after ages. But it is not easy to enslave nature. The desire to subjugate nature was not very profitable for the settlers. As Ghosh describes, "life in Lusibari was lived at the sufferance of a single feature of its topography. This was its badh, the tall embankment that encircled its perimeter, holding back the twice-daily flood." The ruthless destruction of the natural resources shows how the dream of utopian society became the sword to demolish Sundarbans' ecology.

The Hungry Tide shows the lingering power dynamics that operates between the government, corporates, and the inhabitants of the islands. The legacy of colonialism is reflected in the control exerted by external factors, such as the Indian government and multinational corporations, over the resources and lives of the indigenous communities.

Partition and displacement:

Decolonisation of India came at the cost of partition of the country. Partition of British India in 1947 witnessed unexpected range of violence, genocide, and migration, in which nearly one million people were killed and fifteen to twenty million people deserted their home and crossed the newly formed international borders. In waves refugees came to India from East and West Pakistan. In 1970s, when East Pakistan got independence, clashes between Hindus and Muslims forced many Bangladeshi Hindus to leave their homeland. Partition has always remained a recurrent theme in Indian English novels. It shows the immense influence of Partition on the socio-cultural and political history of this country, as nearly 10-20 million refugees poured into India.

Ghosh's novel displays the problems of Partition and displacement of millions of people. Refugees from Bangladesh lost their home and were not welcomed in India. The refugees were sent to Dandakaranya, a concentration camp in central India. Ghosh illustrates the concentration camp as a prison where the "refugees were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down." The refugees, the

people of mud country, couldn't cope up with the harsh and dry atmosphere of central India: "The soil was rocky and the environment was nothing like they had ever known." So, they decided to come back to an island in Sundarbans called Morichjhapi. But govt. of West Bengal refused to let them built any settlement. When those people established their own settlements, they were forcefully evicted and many refugees were killed ruthlessly. This incident remains as a blemish in West Bengal's postcolonial history. These settlements by the refugees also bore an uncanny similarity with those of Sir Daniel Hamilton.

The people who settled in Morichjhapi desired an accommodation that will be topographically like their "desh", their homeland. The memory of the homeland, the aspiration to return to their birthplace and the feeling of being unwanted gradually landed them on the island of the tide country. The loss of home, possession, family, and identity is vividly displayed in *The Hungry Tide*. The representation of the government in "The Hungry Tide" reflects broader critiques of government institutions in postcolonial contexts. It sheds light on the complexities of governance in remote and marginalized regions. To draw parallels between the oppression of colonial rulers and postcolonial government Nayar writes:

If the native was the subaltern during colonial rule, postcolonialism created its own subalterns. Women, 'lower' castes, and classes, ethnic minorities rapidly became the 'others' within the postcolonial nation-state. The new elite was as oppressive and exclusive as the colonial master. (100)

"Orient" and the tide country:

In his groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, Edward Said defines orientalism as creating an epistemological difference between the "orient" and the "occident". Orientalism is a term coined by Edward Said to describe the Western representations and perceptions of the "Orient" (usually the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa) as exotic, backward, and inferior to the Western world. To the European counties, the East is represented as strange, secretive, dangerous, savage and steeped in mysticism. Orientalism legitimized the supremacy of the West and became a weapon to oppress the colonized counties. Although Said's work primarily focused on the Middle East, the concept of Orientalism can be applied to other regions as well, including the Indian subcontinent, which includes the setting of the novel.

Sundarbans with its unique topography, unexplored areas, unsettled lands, and vast ecosystem remain mysterious and hidden to its outsiders. "The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the achol that follows her, half wetted by the sea." The inhabitants of the island called it the "bhatir desh," the tide country. At the station, Kanai's feeling of being an "outsider" and Piya's lack of knowledge about the language made them foreigner in this tide country. Piya and Kanai offer an outsider's view of the vast mangrove area, where they were unable to reciprocate their language, myth, and fear. For Kanai Sundarbans becomes the image of an exotic, uncivilized and dangerous with its altering borders of sea and land. Piya and Fokir conquered their language barrier to a certain extent, as they both shared immense interest in marine life. It is also noticeable, how Kanai with his access to languages and knowledge remains vocal throughout the novel but Fokir remains mostly silent.

The novel with its unsettling and myriad levels of meanings is set in the tide country. A place exquisitely balanced against the daily flow of ebb and tide, the labyrinth of mangroves, ever-emerging islands, and bloodthirsty man-eaters. Here people believe in

“bonbibí” and “shah jongoli” for their rescue and safety, live with uncertainty of life and livelihood, as if they are separated from the outside world by the flux of the rivers. The bloodcurdling memory of Morichjhapi massacre was erased from its topographical and cultural history and the civic society of the outer world remains silent.

In the novel, Fakir, and the other member of the communities of Sundarbans possess a deeper knowledge about the local myths, tides, topology, and navigation than the characters like Kanai, Piya, Nilima, and Nirmal, who represents the western scientific perspective. However, the portrayal of this traditional knowledge can sometimes be viewed through an Orientalist lens. While the novel acknowledges the practical significance of this knowledge, there is also an undertone of mysticism or romanticism associated with it. But Ghosh’s novel remains as a critique of this orientalist perception about the local communities. As the narrative progresses, Piya begins to appreciate the value of the locals' knowledge and its practicality in the Sundarbans' ecosystem. She learns that traditional knowledge is not merely mystical but grounded in a deep understanding of the natural world, acquired through lived experiences and observation.

Conclusion:

Ghosh portrayed an extraordinary history of Sundarbans through factual accounts and fictional characters. Sir Hamilton started the colonization of the tide country. After ages, the displaced Bangladeshi migrants also tried to leash the labyrinth of the mangroves. Ghosh’s novel displays the endangered ecology of these fragile islands. Thousands of islands in the delta of the Ganga are captured by the settlements of modernity and civilization. Ecology, biodiversity and the hierarchies of flora and fauna are disfigured through ages. In the other hand, human life is also harmed and threatened by the fierce animals and calamities of nature. The unsettling nature of the islands resonates the unsteady and hectic life of the homeless migrants, who got no firm place to build “home”. Through its portrayal of colonial exploitation and its environmental repercussions, "The Hungry Tide" highlights the long-lasting impact of historical colonial practices on the Sundarbans and its inhabitants.

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