

## Marginalised Voices in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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### ABSTRACT

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh focuses on the marginalization of people of the country who live in the borders and the plights of the refugees. It questions the importance of human habitation in Sunderbans and the government's attitude of evicting the human settlements for the sake of protecting tigers in it. Ghosh subtly fabricates the story around the Morichjhapii massacre that happened in the 1970s. The marginalized people are treated as the other by the metropolitans negating the fact that the benefits are being prevented by them. Fokir, Moyna, and Kusum represent the marginalized others for whom, people from the metropolis such as Nilima, Kanai and Piyali work for their upliftment. However, the elite sect shows their indifference towards the Bangladeshi refugees who got trapped in the hands of the West Bengal government. Ghosh recounts this double suppression of the refugees through Nirmal's diary which imprints their sorry states.

### KEYWORDS

Ambiguous state of the nation; Marginalization; Exploitation; Ethical responsibility

A Nation is not simply a geographical area with its proper borders or maps that are seen in the atlas but it is a macrocosmic unit of a home that gives a sense of belonging and identity to its citizens. In the opinion of John McLeod, it is a well-constructed setup and it is a "social and political organisation" (68) of the modern society. A nation cannot be without its people because; the people and their way of living give an identity to it. In this sense, the idea of nation incorporates the group of people who are brought together with "a deep horizontal comradeship" (McLeod 68). According to Benedict Anderson, a nation is nothing but "an imagined political community" because,

The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members meet them or even hear of them, yet in minds of each lives the image of their communion... the members of the nation think they are part of a greater collective that shares "a deep horizontal comradeship" (qtd in McLeod 68)

The critics believe that this concept of nation is western in origin which is emerged at the fall of feudalism and rise of capitalism. It helps them to build their nation with greater strength by following a methodology of invading territories in the eastern parts of the world and making use of their men and

wealth. Whereas in the East, it is because of the imperialist attitude of the west awakes them to a self-realisation that they should form a nation for them. Further, it initiates them to redefine their self-images and enables them to conceive of and construct themselves as a united political and social organization from social inequality and democratic and political rights.

In the colonised countries, the concept of nation has helped the native people to nurture anti-imperial sentiments in the minds of people as nationalism. It initiates them to fight against the oppressive state of their country and paves way for social liberation. But in the postcolonial period, these nations face a serious problem of internal division. McLeod reasons out that these countries accept the national territorial borders (75) drawn by their colonial masters when they fight against their oppressed state and even after gaining independence. While administrating it, it is found that the benefits are not shared by all the citizens. Some are marginalized in the due course especially the people who live in the borders and the tribes. In the opinion of Fanon, the governing bodies are “the national bourgeoisie who steps into the shoes of the former European settlement” (qtd in Mclead89). They do not alter anything but sincerely follows the footsteps of their erstwhile colonizers in ruling their nations.

The educated elites assume the role of masters which is once taken up by the colonisers and treats their underprivileged brothers who are living in the villages as “the other”. The existence of this sort of binary division among the fellow citizens is well echoed in the writings of Amitav Ghosh. His *The Hungry Tide* (2004) voices the plights of the villagers who live in the Sunderbans islands. It also addresses the unequal stand followed by the Indian government towards the displaced Bangladeshi refugees. As Bhagabat Nayak puts it, “*The Hungry Tide* is a

subcontinental narrative on divisibility, displacement and disputed aspects of the colonial past and the present postcolonial and pan-Indian socio-political condition” (198).

The novel is set in Sunderbans, an archipelago which is a delta region in the Gangetic plain. In Bengali, this word can be interpreted as “the beautiful forest” (8) wherein one can find the mangrove tree as the major vegetation. The island can also be called as Bhatir Desh which means a geographical area that is surrounded by “the diurnal process of tide and ebb of the sea” (Nayak 196). It is a place which is known for tiger conservation yet the boundaries between land and water are always mutable and predictable.

Bhagabat Nayak traces the history of this archipelago. It is a tide country of six islands which is first discovered by the Portuguese during the time of Chaitanya Mahapatra and Emperor Jahangir on the Mughal throne. The British captured it during the death of Aurangazeb. Only during this time people from East Bengal, North Orissa, and Santhal Parganas settle down in these islands. They accept the islands with its hard reality and learn to live accordingly. But in the novel, Amitav Ghosh presents the postcolonial scenario of these villages and traces the history of it from the time of the advent of Daniel Hamilton.

In the twentieth century, Daniel Hamilton buys ten thousand acres of land with the visionary to build a new society free of all discrimination. He sets up a utopian society in the name of his wife Lucy Hamilton who dies on her way to Lusibari. In Pidgin English, “Lucy” is the name of his wife and “bari” is a dwelling place. The islands have several names which have been named in this way. They are Shobnomaskar, Emilybari, Canning, Satjelia. Hamilton even plans Lusibari to have a proper infrastructure with facilities such as electricity and telephone cables. There is even a bank named Central Bank of Gosaba and

transaction of business is done with Gosaba Currencies. Even there is a school for the children in this island. According to Bhagabat Nayak, Hamilton's idea behind these provisions has a civilizing motif. Yet it is his "benevolent outlook" (202) to buy some acres of land and make it conducive for human habitation and live without having any inequality in the name of religion, caste, race, and other dividing elements. The people in these islands have one god and she is Bon Bibi, the goddess Tigress. She is a daughter of Ibrahim who sends Bon Bibi and her brother to save these people.

As for as, their occupation is concerned they are all farmers and fishermen. Until 1940's these people indulge in farming but the storm in this year has left them in the wilderness. Since the farming lands are salinated. It is the period when the nephew of Daniel Hamilton inherits the property. The management treats the estate as yet another property and shows no concern for the visionary of Hamilton. Ghosh presents the sorry states of the settlers in these lines, "the rumour was that this money went to estate's managers and the overseers' henchmen savagely beat settlers who protested or attempted to resist. The methods were those of a penal colony and the atmosphere that of a prison camp" (80).

After this incident, the people adapt themselves to fishing and hunting for their livelihood. But they fall prey to tigers, snakes, and crocodiles. It has been a custom that the married women would wear a white sari if their husbands go for fishing. They feel destitute and it has become a cultural activity on their part.

It is proved that in the postcolonial era, the country negates the existence of this kind of villages. These people are again viewed as "the other" and uncivilised lots of independent India. Amitav Ghosh captures the existence of this binary opposition in the one of the

incidents where Kanai, the nephew of Nilima and Nirmal is sent to Sunderbans to spend some time to "rusticate" him. As a boy, Kanai teases his teacher who pronounces the English words wrongly; the annoyed teacher advises Kanai's father to rusticate his behaviour for his betterment.

Further, these people are considered as poachers who tend to hunt any animal illegally. When Fokir, the fisherman fishes crabs in one of the off limits area, the forest guards try to shoot him but Piya, the Cetologist saves his life. But the guards harass him and forcibly get his money from his boat. Amitav Ghosh implicitly conveys the truth that these people are the sons of the soil who knows every corner of Sunderbans. But these people are treated with hostility.

It is the Bodabon trust of Nirmal and Nilima gives a ray of hope to these people. Nilima and Nirmal represent the educated elites who settle in Sunderbans. Nirmal is appointed as a headmaster to the school which is founded by Daniel Hamilton. It is usual on the part of any educated people from the metropolitan city to discriminate such people but these elites feel ashamed of being ignorant of these people's lifestyle and their repressed state. On seeing these people Nilima is shocked and felt,

Nothing was familiar... what little they knew of rural life was derived from the villages of the plains: ... how was it possible that these islands were a mere ninety-seven kilometers from home and yet so little was known about them? How was it possible that people spoke so much about the immemorial traditions of village India and yet no one knows about this other world, where it was impossible to tell who was who, and what their castes and religion and beliefs were? (79)

Although this couple sees the difference between these people and them, they want to

improve their conditions. The plights of these women motivate Nilima to begin a trust for their betterment. While Nirmal helps them in eradicating the darkness of ignorance through his teaching, their trust enhances the earning capacity of women encouraging them to weave and craft. The trust also provides the service in Paramedicine, agriculture, and paralegal advice.

Even though their services could not reach the heights of Hamilton in making the Sunder bans a utopia, both are revered by the locals. Nirmal is fondly remembered as "saar" (14) and Nilima is called "mashima" (14) by these people. Yet they fail to extend their helping hands to yet another sect of people in Morichjhapii. All Nirmal could do is to sympathize the pitiable state of these helpless Bangladeshi refugees and imprint the massacre of Morichjhapii in a diary (which is to be read by Kanai).

Amitav Ghosh presents the migration of refugees as a crucial issue that postcolonial country like India encounters in the postcolonial era. Migration of refugees from Bangladesh is a common phenomenon in these islands despite its precarious nature. In the opinion of Bhagabat Nayak, the refugees want to revive their umbilical tie with the motherland. But what they experience in Sunderbans is brutality. It is because of the callous indifferent attitude of the government. It uses them as a source to get their political power. But after gaining power, it neither cares to locate the real problem that these people encounter nor attempts to find a solution to it.

According to Neena Jain, Some of the Bengalis from Bangladesh take refuge in West Bengal in the year between 1950 and 1970. But the government sent them to an inhospitable place named Dandkaranya in Madhya Pradesh which is a semi and rocky one. The then opposition party of West Bengal has voiced their concern for them and promised them to

settle them in Sunderbans if they come to power. When it comes to power, these refugees start to settle in Morichjhapii but it evicts forcibly and kills them saying the Sunderbans is meant for Tiger conservation.

The government projects these refugees as "squatters and land grabbers" (190) but these refugees blindly believe these politicians and begin to settle in Morichjhapii. They even build the village as a habitable zone within a month. At the same time, they wish to have support from the government. That is why they have invited dignitaries and given them a feast, "Speeches were made, extolling the achievements of the settlers. It was universally agreed ... beyond the island itself." (191).

In spite of the lofty promises which are given by the dignitaries, the government takes "strong measures" (252). Nilima gives an account of it to Kanai, "On Jan 26, 1979, the government started on an economic blockade of the settlement with thirty police launches. The community was tear gassed, huts were razed, fisheries and tube wells were destroyed" (252).

Further, the police prevent the people from Morichjhapii to go out of it and people from the other villages to meet them. Consequently, the refugees are left to starve and get affected by Cholera. The voice of the voiceless is echoed through Kusum, one of the Lucibarian who settles in Morichjhapii, "The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless with hunger gnawing at our bellies... this island has to be saved for tigers ... kill us for them?" (262). On May 14, 1979, the police force forcibly evicts these refugees. While evicting them, they brutally massacre hundreds of men, women, and children and throw them in the river. Hence these refugees are brutally displaced and doubly suppress in the hands of the neighbouring country.

Amitav Ghosh does not miss the voices of the Indians of educated class for these people. Initially, the journalists help them in filing lawsuits against the government but their voice is curbed saying these people are simply infiltrators. Nobody cares about these people until the incident is revisited by Nilima to help Kanai in reading the diary of her husband. As far as Kanai is concerned, in the beginning, he too assumes them to be rustics but he changes his opinion after reading the diary. He even has a plan to write on the last days of Nirmal in Morichjahapii. In a way, it voices his concern for these refugees and victims such as Kusum. Further, the author's

concern for rural India is reflected through the metropolitan Piya who has planned to settle in Lucibari with Mashima. She works for the trust and she takes steps to conserve the rare dolphins in these Gangetic Plain.

Thus Amitav Ghosh has presented one of the crucial issues that the postcolonial society faces in this era. He presents these issues as a double-edged sword that questions the integrity of the nation. He also recovers the voices of the marginalised people in this novel. It is apt to say that through his attempt of recovering the voice of these underprivileged lots, he helps them to get the denied rights of equity that the people in the mainland enjoy.

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