The Hungry Tide: Deconstructing Modernity, Progress and History

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Amitav Ghosh employs distinctive narrative strategies to weave a typical Ghoshian world, which even tends to defy established notions of fictionality. It is not only the content of his works which exemplifies his political position, even the narrative techniques employed by him act as subversive devices to articulate his political concerns. He uses atypical settings, engages with marginalized histories, empathises with subaltern people and cultures, puts dense ethnographic details, employs double-helix pattern of plotting, disregards conventional handling of time and so forth. These narrative techniques, complemented by an awesome intellectually captivating diction, demonstrate his consciously attained political position on contemporary issues of identity, history, ethnicity, migration, power/knowledge relations, subalternity, environmentalism and hybridity.

The narrative discourse of Ghosh espouses the denial of metanarratives. A metanarrative pretends to know the absolutes and transcends the boundaries of space, history, human finitude and so forth. Ghosh’s narrative substantiates that there is no absolute ground of intelligibility or making sense of anything. The ground of intelligibility is correlative with the contingent historical background practices of our society. Therefore, the idea that a metanarrative mirrors an outside reality collapses; we are interpreting beings and our understanding moves within a historical context. Hence, the edifices of all modes and methods of knowledge are contingent. The modes and methods, which were products of Enlightenment, found their antithesis in the postwar world. Human subject found himself, as it were, divested of any faith in the humanist ideals of reason, progress and modernity. This crisis reflects in the radical ideas of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida and others. In the works of these thinkers, the human subject ceases to be a rational, discrete, transcendent self having a universal human nature. It comes to be rather a site of conflict, hybridity and contingent historicality. This paradigmatic shift blatantly hit the narcissistic image of pure reason and led to the collapse of metanarratives.
In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh applies various narrative techniques that help him to posit an intriguing and lyrical tale which is an indictment of the Enlightenment ideals of modernity, progress, reason, history, and polarised categories of nature/culture, science/myth, vice/virtue etc. He deconstructs these ideals in a Derridean sense. Derridean deconstruction aims at challenging the monolithic and homogeneous western philosophical tradition and criticises Platonism, which is defined by belief in structures of oppositional hierarchies. If one were to describe Ghosh’s deconstructive endeavour, one could easily use John Phillip’s words – the words he has used when he talks about deconstruction in his *Contested Knowledge* (2000) – to say that Ghosh attempts to expose “the consolidation that occurs with systems of thought. But this is not simply with the aim of destroying the systems or ensembles in question. Rather, deconstruction implies reconstituting them according to the conditions of their institution” (166).

Ghosh’s foremost narrative technique is his choice of atypical setting. He has a very strong sense of place. He has set this novel in mysterious, enigmatic and remote ecospaces of Sunderbans, a vast archipelago of islands:

> There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. They reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily…. at no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (7-8)

This setting has its significance in historical upheavals and geographical peculiarity that essentially minglees with his thematic interests. Nilima’s scolding remark to Kanai “Don’t act like you know everything. You’re not in Calcutta now” (28) sets the tone of the novel. To draw and blend his engagements with porosity, fluidity and hybridity of established concepts and binary oppositions, he brings together Piyali Roy, an Indo-American Cetologist, Kanai, a multilingual cosmopolitan modern middle class Indian and Fokir, an illiterate native. The porosity, fluidity and hybridity of Sunderbans’ geographical and cultural features runs parallel to the interaction of the above-mentioned characters which strips off their social and cultural accoutrements and reconfigures their world-views:
In the tide country transformation is rule of life, rivers stray from week to week and islands are made and unmade in days. In other places forests take centuries to regenerate ‘but mangroves recolonize a denuded island in ten to fifteen years. Could it be that the very rhythms of earth were quickened here so that they unfolded at an accelerated pace? (224)

Ghosh has a fundamental interest in history. He embeds human experentiality in collision with historical contingencies. In the novel, Ghosh foregrounds the Morichjhapi incident which took place in 1978-79, when the newly elected CPI (M) government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island. It is an episode which escaped the textbooks for it being an evident instance of state oppression. Brinda Bose rightly remarks on Ghosh’s engagement with history as a theme: "Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of re-assessing its troubled antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of - or at least come to terms with - our troubling present" (2002: 235). As Rilke’s lines capture in Nirmal’s letters: “Each slow turn of the world carries such disinheritd ones to whom neither the past nor the future belong” (165). The opening lines of Nirmal’s letters indicate Ghosh’s engagement with marginalized history of Morichjhapi: “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 Morichjhapi” (67).

To use Genette’s term from his book, Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (1980), Ghosh is an ‘extradiegetic’ third person omniscient narrator. His narrative has an open perspective structure as he does not aim for a monolithic conclusion. In fact, the separate and confronting truths of his characters cannot be reduced to a common denominator. His political ambivalence is purposeful. He leaves the threads open for the readers. Through his reflector figures like Piya, Kanai, Fokir, Nirmal, Nilima and Kusum, he depicts different and conflicting views on ecology, politics, history and myths. This is best exemplified by the argument Kanai and Piya have after the villagers kill a tiger, an incident in which Fokir was actively involved: “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 have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their western patrons ” (301). On Fokir’s part in the killing, Kanai says, “But what did you expect, Piya? Did you think he was some kind of grass-root ecologist? He’s not. He is fisherman – he kills animals for a living ” (297).
The plot of the novel has a double-helix like pattern. There is a looping of the past story of Nirmal, Nilima, Kusum and Horen with the present story of Piya, Kanai and Fokir with an axial basis of Nirmal’s letters and Nilima as a domain of meeting of the past and the present. The setting is contemporary but the history is recalled through Nirmal’s letters. This amalgamation of the present and the past helps Ghosh keep the chapters of The Hungry Tide rather small. This keeps the reader into shifting, transient and dissolving spatial-temporal realms. Ghosh discards the conventional mode of sequencing and rejects chronological or cosmological conception of time. The novel is replete with human experience of temporality which is of phenomenological nature. He dexterously employs the analeptic (flashback) and proleptic (foreshadowing) mode of telling. In this novel he uses the analeptic mode predominantly to articulate the thematic interests.

His anthropological training enriches his novel with description for ascribing features to the objects of the setting and characters such as the micro details of the tide country, dolphins, crabs, mangroves etc. His attention to ethnographic and argumentative passages like his delving into external incidents of Mr. Piddington or on technological and research areas of Cetology does sometimes seem to hamper the pace of the story but its critical examination reveals it to be his characteristic narrative style to disengage and engage his reader in an organized manner. He makes a deliberate attempt to blur the boundaries between factual and fictional worlds through his narrative strategy.

His treatment of nature is an exquisite effort to depose the established conception of nature as an anthropocentric non-human thing. He deconstructs the Eurocentric notion of nature as an object to be studied, controlled and conquered, a notion which has its roots in the postulates of Enlightenment. There are natives of tide country like Fokir, who have an instinctive understanding of the rhythms of nature. It is a sort of Heideggarian relationship, unmediated and pre-theoretical as opposed to idealist approach of Piya and pragmatic /realist one of Kanai. Piya reflects on Fokir’s ability to sense the phenomena of nature: “How could he have known that they would run into a group of Oracaella, right then and right in that place?” (113). Kusum once remarks on Fokir’s extraordinary ability when she says, “… the river is in his veins” (245). On this Heideggarian attunement with nature which is hitherto unknown to her, the narrator comments: “Piya was awestruck. Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals? She could not think of one” (169).
Notwithstanding the fact that science may not admit and acknowledge such primordial relationship with nature, there are instances in the novel where Ghosh, through his reflector figures, seems to challenge the methods of knowledge, instrumental and exploitative discourses of science and global capitalism. Piya tells Kanai about the hunting of dolphins and the commercial use of their carcasses, to which his question is: “Do you mean to tell me that they were melted and used as diesel fuel?” Piya’s reply to Kanai is, “Irrawaddy dolphins had been known to fetch as much as one hundred thousand US dollars in the market” (306). Ghosh even mocks at the pious looking Environmentalist campaign to preserve the ecology at the cost of the marginalized, destitute and subaltern. In Kusum’s words:

This island has to be saved for trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is part of reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world” 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 name? 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 had 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. (216)

Ghosh has an inherent tendency to question and disregard naturalized binaries. In his endeavour, he seems to convey an ambivalence which is apparently inconclusive, but it is intentional and invites a dialogic approach. He not only portrays the predicament of individuals like Fokir, Piya, Kanai and others, rather a micro-culture like that of the tide country is pitted against macro-cultural domains. He interweaves the myth of Bonbibi, an integral part of this micro-culture, as an inseparable part of the novel to assert that the mythical discourse is in no ways inferior to scientific discourse. He renders the binary oppositions meaningless by cross-fertilising them, as narrating a mythical genesis of Sunderbans supplementing with geological appendage: “In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga’s descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story … May be thousands of tangled strands….from the Hooghly River in west Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh” (6). Nirmal, a Marxist revolutionary of frail temperament, comes across as an overwhelming focaliser of Ghosh’s position. Despite being a rationalist, he
lets himself be swayed by mythical and irrational elements of this culture. He says, when he watches Horen praying:

His (Horen’s) manner was not that of a magician weaving a spell: he was more like a mechanic, giving spanner an extra turn, in order to leave nothing undone. This reassured me. (245)

Ghosh, through Nirmal, advocates a hybrid and holistic model, juxtaposes myth and science, unfolding their similar deep structures made opaque in their narratives. According to him:

There is a lot more in common between myths and geology. Look at the size of their heroes, how immense they are – heavenly deities on the one hand, the titanic stirrings of the earth itself- both equally otherworldly, equally remote from us. Then there is the way in which the plots go round and round in both kinds of story …telling of a story. (180)

Kanai describes Nirmal as a historical materialist, who is a critic of all rigid boundaries:

For him it meant that everything which existed was connected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry science, nature He hunted down facts in the way a magpie collects shiny things. Yet when he strung them all together, somehow they did become stories- of a kind. (282)

Hence, the narrative strategies Ghosh employs in this novel reveal his political stance to question and discard the myths surrounding the discourses of modernity, progress and history. Through his atypical setting of Sunderbans and its metaphorical significance, a clash of characters with polarised cultural differences, a treatment of nature which is neither romantic nor Eurocentric environmentalist, and use of local words, he raises important issues. He does not offer solutions, in fact, his ambivalence asks for a dialogical orientation. As an absent narrator, Ghosh presents heterogeneous perspectives through his characters. This in itself is a manifestation of a subject in flux.

Works Cited


