

# REPRESENTATION OF THE HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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**Abstract :** This paper tries to bring out the historical factors and sociological connotations found in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sunderbans, a labyrinth of rivers and islands, often subjected to catastrophic floods and storms and famine. The paper begins with explaining the particularity of the word Sunderbans and how does the word Lusibari came to the particular island 'Lusisbari'. The historical aspects behind Morichjhapi massacre is brought out in detail and how this tragedy affected the people and its after effects to the dispossessed and the displaced. Major threat to the people living in this island is the presence of man eating tigers there. The tigers found there are quite different from the ones found elsewhere. Always they are dangerous the reasons for that are brought forth and are explained. This article also exposes certain factors related to the naming of the particular kind of dolphins found only in that costal area and the naming of the word 'cyclone' and the connotations of this to the society as a whole.

**Key Words:** Morichjhapi massacre, nimnobarano community, Sunderbans, Sundari tree, Gangetic dolphin, cyclone.

## Introduction

*The Hungry Tide* is centered on one place, which is a part of the coast of India that is Sunderbans. The region is named after the Sundari tree, as the mangrove is locally called Sunderbans, it also means beautiful forest. It is an area of islands that appear and disappear, sometimes overnight, sometimes over many years. It stretches across coastal India and Bangladesh, from the Hoogly in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. The present article explores the representations of the historically marginalized that are found in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.

In this novel, Ghosh blends historical factors with the life of individuals. It speaks about the Utopian community founded in the Sunderbans at the beginning of the 20th century by the visionary Scot Daniel Hamilton. Hamilton's "schooling was in Scotland, a harsh cold and rocky place. His teachers taught him that life's most important lesson is labour conquers everything" (49). Then in future Daniel Hamilton with his countrymen had to leave his native land to seek his fortune and he chose India. Hamilton was not the first man to set foot in the Sunderbans. The islands showed signs of previous habitation by humans who had abandoned them due to the combined threat of weather and predators. "When this Scotsman looked upon the crab-covered shores of the tide country, he saw not mud, but something that shone brighter than gold" (49). Hamilton invited people to this region based on one condition that there people have to live irrespective of their caste, religion, language, or any other forms of social discriminations. In that time the Sunderbans was not fit for human inhabitation for it had been inhabited by crocodiles and tigers. So he encouraged people to return and harness the natural resources and gave rewards to those who killed crocodiles and tigers.

The events in the novel *The Hungry Tide* is set on the Sundarban islands of Lusibari. When Kanai first invites Piya to visit his Aunt's hostel on Lusibari, he explains that the name itself is a memory of a colonial era; Lusibari just means Lucy's house. The Lucy here is the Lucy Hamilton, in the first half of the twentieth century. "She was on her way here, from the far end of Europe, when her ship capsized. She never got to see the house but because it had been built for her, people used to call it *Lusi'r-bari*. Then this was shortened to Lusibari and that was how the island took this name" (40). The story of the Sunderbans, including its human and wildlife populations, is related to the history of partition, and the events related to it. India's independence in 1947 resulted in the division of the Sunderbans, with 40 percent of the mangrove forests falling in East Pakistan territory. Anand in her article "Words on Water: Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" observes; "The Partition of India in 1947 geographically divided Pakistan into Eastern and Western fragments with India in the middle. East Pakistan was created for the Bangla-speaking Muslim majority, which led to the influx of Hindus from East Pakistan into India's West Bengal region. The refugees fleeing the civil war included both Hindus and Muslims fighting for Bangladeshi sovereignty" (29).

In order to prevent the economic drain from the West Bengal with the increasing number of refugees, the central and state governments together implemented a new resettlement scheme in the 1960s. Citing the shortage of vacant land in West Bengal, refugee resettlement camps were set up in regions far away from Bengal in Bettiah in Bihar, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh. Finding a way for living in Dandakaranya proved to be difficult for the refugees. Only familiar with the paddy cultivation in Bengal, the majority of the refugees found it extremely difficult to cultivate the sparse and the soil was infertile.

Then the state government adopted certain plans for solving the issues of the migrants but then these were consistently opposed by the Communist Party of India CPI (M), which called for refugee resettlement within Bengal. The CPI (M)

recommended mainly the Sundarbans and other unoccupied areas in West Bengal as appropriate areas for resettlement. Refugees were also comfortable with this proposal. As a result, people began to move to the Sundarbans on their own. By mid-1975 a large number of refugees – an estimated 16,000 families – had moved to the uninhabited island of Morichjhapi. In 1977, when the CPI (M) assumed power, the refugees hoped their struggle to go back to their homeland would finally end. The Left gaining power led to an increase in the refugee flow into the Sundarbans. In May 1977 about 30,000 refugees under the leadership of Sathish Mandal, a former supporter of the Communist Party's refugee programme started their journey to Morichjhapi. Mallick in her article "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre" remarks; "Quite opposite to the policy statement till then, the government arrested the 15,000 or so refugees and returned them to their original resettlement camps" (107). The Left government demanded that the refugees return to their camps. According to Mallick, the dictum: "refugees were in unauthorized occupation of Morichjhapi, which is a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest, violating thereby the Forest Acts" (107). The refugees' presence on the island was portrayed by Anand in the following manner; "disturbing the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance" (31).

On January 26, 1979, the Left government launched an economic blockade on the island. As a result of it, huts were burnt into fire, and thirty police launches patrolled the island, preventing the refugees from obtaining supplies including food, water, and medicine. Hungry and helpless, those who ventured out had to brave the police bullets. Groups were tear-gassed, boats were sunk, and several people were arrested. In this novel the plight of the refugees is presented through the words of Kusum. As days rolled on dozens of police boats encircled the island. They used tear gas and rubber bullet and the settlers were forcibly prevented from bringing basic necessities like rice or water to Morichjhapi. In addition to that boats were sunk and people were killed. A state of confusion and chaos prevailed in the tide country. According to Kusum the worst part of the struggle was the announcements by policemen that the existence of the refugees was less worth than dust.

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, 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? ... As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place for 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. (261-62)

The number of deaths during the eviction remains inconclusive. No investigation or enquiry was ever conducted to find the culprits who perpetrated the violence. Joya Chatterjee asserts that the plight of East Bengali refugees and, more importantly, the Morichjhapi incident as a whole, has been sidelined in Indian historiography. There are various reasons for this indifferent attitude. Anand once again notices;

novel. Although the nimnobar community formed more than 23 percent of the electorate, they were illiterate and too poor to matter, unlike the middle-class, urban, and educated refugees, a viewpoint mentioned by Ghosh in the novel. The refugees had appealed to the National Untouchable Federation, which was not at the time powerful enough to come to their rescue. None of the national parties responded to their plight. The then Prime Minister Morarji Desai also refrained from pursuing the matter for fear of losing the support of the Left in his coalition government. (32)

Through the above mentioned event we could understand that the novel is a testimony to the historically unresolved sufferings of the rural poor. The novel exposes the plight of the tide country's marginalized people. Here Marxism fails at many situations. For example the NGO established by Nilima – Badabon trust shows the practical way to make donations through institutions and community building. As a result the success of the trust is limited. Since Nilima gets funds through governmental support, she has to compromise with the government. She is not bothered about the massacre in Morichjhapi.

In a way Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* is so timely; for Ghosh published it at a time when the corporate house Sahara India Parivar was about to take over large areas of the Sundarbans to convert into an ecotourism village. Sahara's five-star ecotourism project was supported by the ruling Left Front Government of West Bengal, and a Memorandum of Understanding was also signed to the effect. There were no comprehensive environmental impact assessments done by an independent body prior to sanctioning the takeover. The project involved constructing floatels, restaurants, shops, business centres, cinemas and theatres, setting up activities such as excursions to the interiors on motorboats, which was likely to disturb the fragile ecosystem and thus threaten the already endangered biodiversity of the region. Several environmental agencies and individuals opposed the move, and after extensive protests the central government intervened and canceled the proposal. At the time, Ghosh was one of the prominent intellectuals campaigning against this move. The aborted Sahara takeover can be located against the historical backdrop of the Morichjhapi incident in the Sundarbans, which is fictionalized in the novel. The thread of the tiger to a peaceful living is one other major problem of the people there. Bengal tigers, the much feared predators are protected by various international environmental groups. Under the banner of tiger preservation, human lives are threatened by the state. The tigers regularly attacked and often killed the islanders. The state maintained an indifferent attitude towards this issue. In this novel Ghosh also argues, in Sunderbans human lives are valued somewhat lower than those of tigers.

The tigers of the tide country have developed a particular habit of man-eating. There are various theories to prove how they had developed a taste for human flesh. Encroachment of people that led to the loss of habitat and the tigers' confusion regarding territory due to the tide's washing away of tigers' scent markings are said to be the primary reasons for the attack of tigers. Nilima admitted that the tigers of the tide country were different from those that lived on the other parts of the world;

In other habitats, tigers only attacked human beings in abnormal circumstances: if they happened to be crippled or were otherwise unable to hunt down any other kind of prey. But this was not true of the tide country's tigers;

even young and healthy animals were known to attack human beings. Some said that this propensity came from the peculiar conditions of the tidal ecology, in which large parts of the forest were subjected to daily submersions. The theory went that this raised the animals' threshold of aggression by washing away their scent markings and confusing their territorial instincts. (241)

During her meeting with the Sundarbans villagers, the researcher Annu Jalais was often told that the main reason why the tigers had become man-eaters could be traced to the violent events of Morichjhapi. Many islanders explained to her that they and the tigers had lived in a sort of idyllic relationship prior to the events of Morichjhapi; after the incident the tigers had started preying on humans. The villagers explained that tigers, annoyed at the disturbances caused by the unleashed violence in the forest had started attacking people and that this was how they ended up getting a taste for human flesh. Others argued that it was the corpses of killed refugees that had floated through the forest that had given them the taste. Morichjhanpi was a turning point after which man eating became part of the tiger's natural reaction.

The colonizer's inherent desire for the documentation and classification of non human subject is another historical fact found in *The Hungry Tide*. The Irrawaddy dolphin, *Orcellabrevirostris*, the subject of Piya's research work, was discovered and named in India. To follow in the footsteps of the men of science who had written the earliest scientific records of the river dolphin, is something akin to a pilgrimage for her. She visited Kolkata's Botanical Gardens where naturalist William Roxburgh wrote his famous article on the 'discovery' of the world's first river dolphin and where Roxburgh's assistant John Anderson adopted an infant Gangetic dolphin that he kept in his bathtub for several weeks. Prabhu in her article "Retelling Nature: Realism and the Postcolonial-Environmental Imaginary in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" remarks; "As Piya narrates the story of the race between different naturalists to identify and study the two kinds of dolphins, those that live in fresh water and those that live in sea water, both found to be anatomically similar even though they did not mix, the deeply embedded colonial motive to name in order to claim is fore grounded" (8).

Several nineteenth-century zoologists had testified the presence of large numbers of dolphins here. Kanai also shares a similar story of scientific discovery with Piya, that of Henry Piddington, a shipping inspector who invented the word 'cyclone'. He was the first to insist that the mangroves were protecting Bengal from the fury of the sea by absorbing tidal waves. His prediction that denuding the forests would endanger the whole ecosystem was proven right in a few years when a tidal wave destroyed the British administration's plans to build a great port in the Sundarbans.

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