

Post Colonial impact in *The Hungry Tide* - Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract - The post-colonial terminologies are the oppression and the rights of the common people. The major concern is on the internal hierarchies and the divisions among the society. The term post colonialism carries divergent understanding of meaning, globally accepted and understood meaning is that the post-colonial literature reflects the after math of colonialism. Edward Said's Orientalism says that,

The people there being anonymous masses rather than individuals, their actions determined by instinctive emotions rather than by conscious choices or decisions. Their emotions and reactions are always determined by racial considerations rather than by aspects of individual status or circumstances. (186-187)

The impact of colonialism is seen in the political system of the country and in the cultural changes that defaced the society. As a result, the post-colonial writer practices to resist the approach of colonizer in educational, legal, political and social settings. Amitav Ghosh born in Calcutta had ample chance to witness the cultural life of Calcutta, Dhaka (Bangladesh) and Colombo (Sri Lanka). During Emergency period (1975-77) he worked as a journalist with the Indian express group of newspapers. All these helped the author to fictionalize his theme with the historical background. The perception of history can be seen in almost all the works of Amitav Ghosh.

The post-colonial writers attempted to counter act their subsequent alienation from the sources of history and traced the indigenous people and their struggle through their narrative skill. Edward Said views that, "Characteristically, post-colonial writers evoke or create a pre-colonial version of their own nation, rejecting the modern and the contemporary, which is tainted with the colonial status of their country." (187)

The author through his novels narrates the reactions of the people towards the momentous historical events and the changes that followed it. This discontent and disapproval of the masses are reflected through his characters. The post partition caused the increase in number of refugees' migration. The entire story of Sunderbans revolves around the history of Partition and the events that followed its aftermath.

Index Terms - settlement, historical, trespass, refugees, social discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* deals with the dispossession of humankind in the post colonial world. The novel is set in the Sunderbans, which is situated in the lower region of the Ganges delta and extends up to 250 km from the Hugli River estuary in West Bengal, India, to the banks of the Meghan River in Bangladesh. Sunderbans is a place where "Islands are made and unmade in days" (224). The author's imagination explores the intellectual territory and it records the detailed historical account of colonial and postcolonial settlement in the Island, Sunderbans. The novel exposes the historical and contemporary geo-political realities that has almost obviated from the memory. Peter Barry has aptly revealed that, "A simple definition of the new historicism is that it is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period" (166).

Amitav Ghosh has been widely recognized and noted as a post-colonial writer, who writes mainly about the aftermath of colonialism. In *The Hungry Tide* the author deals with the core issue of the settlement in the Island and its setback. In preparation, Ghosh has travelled far and wide along with Annu Jalais, a post-doctoral fellow at the International Institution of social history, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The novel *The Hungry Tide* is a mixture of fictional and factual histories in a particular geographical area. In this novel the author explores the significance of place and expresses the personal and social identities of the dislocated people at the time of partition after the colonial rule.

Through this novel Ghosh intensifies his focus on the historical and contemporary attitude towards the people who live in the island and waterways of the Sunderbans, an area little known outside India. The character Nirmal closely attaches himself to the people of the island and he leaves a note to Kanai, believing him to be the right person to take care of the rest of the

history of the island and Kanai writes in his journal resonate extra textually: “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).

Through this novel Ghosh recollects the forgotten histories of Sunderbans. During the year 1979, the West Bengal Government evicted tens and thousands of refugees from Morichjhapi in the Northern-most Forest region of the Sunderbans. And the settlement in the Morichjhapi has been described as an ill-legal trespass into a state Forest Reserve. The government instead of taking care of their people chased them out of the island stating that they have settled on land designated for tiger preservation. The estimated numbers of 17,000 refugees settled on the island were dead either because of starvation or disease. Many of them were drowned when police scuttled the boats of the refugees, and some were shot by the police. Many were killed by men hired to assist the police with eviction. “The refugees were principally dalits-untouchables- who had fled to India from Bangladesh in waves after partition in 1947 and then, in increasing numbers, after the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence”(Lisa Fletcher, 6).

The main root cause for the dislocation of people in large number is the aftermath of colonialism. The partitions resulted in huge massacre and those people who ran for their life never settled. The number increased after the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence. Enormous number of refugees has been detained in resettlement camps in east central India. The desolated refugees not only faced dangers of the nature, but more acutely by the fellow human beings. The novel *The Hungry Tide* is the echo of unfulfilled hopes and aspiration of the post war and post partition subaltern classes of the sub-continent. The author highlights the post war aesthetics of post-colonial migration and resettlement of refugees.

The Hungry Tide depicts the untenable effort of the settlers against the government. The postcolonial countries like India are under the influence of modernization which resulted in a vast number of people being dispossessed and displaced. As Arundhati Roy puts it, “the millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war” (65). Thus, it is strongly believed that post colonialism has resulted in the loss of home and homeland. The sense of alienation,

identity crisis, rootlessness, cultural and linguistic identity is the often-heard echoes of post colonialism. Through *The Hungry Tide* the author revisits and recollects the events at Morichjhapi in 1979 and the subaltern consciousness that Nirmal visualizes in the novel. The character Nirmal not only sympathizes with the refugees, but also empathies with them and understands the universal yearning of the wretched of the earth.

The Bengali Hindu refugees were not confined to particular geographical area rather they crossed the eastern border in West Bengal and its suburbs. After the Independence in 1947, 40 percent of the mangrove forest region of Sunderbans falls within the East Pakistan territory known as Sylvester and further it has been bi-furcated; Pakistan as Eastern and Western fragments with India in the middle. East Pakistan is occupied by Bengal speaking Muslims which resulted in the influx of Hindus from West Pakistan to India’s West Bengal region. Due to the Impact of the civil war, the number of refugees increased drastically.

Ghosh derived the major theme of concern from the history, entangled with his experience. Miller has stated that

Literary study in the past few years has undergone a sudden, almost universal turn away from theory in the sense of an orientation toward language as such and has made a corresponding turn toward history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context, the material base. (283) In the novel *The Hungry Tide* the Indian government was reluctant to address the crisis of the refugees. An insight of internal social discrimination and the second-class treatment by the Indian government opened up a new state of dispossession, towards the refugees. The central and state government implemented a new resettlement scheme during the year 1960 with a view to set up a resettlement camps at the paucity of vacant land in West Bengal. Refugees, who settled in Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh, found it difficult to cultivate the sparse in the infertile soil. Because of the political influence and under the recommendation of the communist party of India, the refugees started moving towards Sunderbans and other vacant areas in West Bengal. In mid-1975, 16,000 families moved to the uninhabited island of Morichjhapi. When the communist party of India assumed power in 1977, the refugees hoped that their struggle to survive would come to an end and they

thought that they could go back to their homeland. But none of their hope and faith comes true.

In contrary to its policy statement, the government arrested more than 15,000 refugees and sent them back to their original resettlement camps. Most of the refugees escaped from the police action and managed to reach their destination, Morichjhapi, but they have been forced by the left government to return to their camps. The government claimed that the “refugees were in unauthorized occupation of Morichjhapi, which is a part of the Sunderbans Government Reserve Forest, violating there by the Forest Acts” (100) The refugees on the Island have been considered as a disturbance for the existing potential forest wealth, which indirectly resulted in imbalance of ecological system. This reversal of left policy is pre-empting the economic drain on the state. On the other hand, the Government made plan to use the Island for generating revenue. On January 26, 1979, the Left Government launched an economic blockade on the island. During this the huts of the refugees have been torched, the police patrolled the Island, and the refugees have been refrained from obtaining food, water, medicine and other groceries.

People who are brave enough to venture out have been the target of the police bullets. When the refugees formed a group to protest, they all have been tear-gassed and their boats have been sunk. The outcry of these people was unheard by the government; the report on death toll increased every day. It is their death report due to starvation got the attention of the press. On 27th January of 1979, the government prohibited people entering into or going out of Morichjhapi and imposed curfew under section 144 of the Indian penal code.

The report by Mallick in his ‘Refugee Resettlement’ reveals the fact that “On January 31, 1979, 36 people were killed in a police encounter. Prominent Bengali dailies like the *Anand Bazaar Patrika* and *Jungantar* published articles and photographs of the situation in Morichjhapi. The Government slammed the media as “bourgeois” and sensationalistic for supporting the cause of the refugees. The matter was taken up by the Calcutta High Court, which ruled that the ban be lifted for two weeks. The government denied the blockade and ignored the ruling. The police clamp down continued unabated with tacit government approval. The refugees refused to move despite the deaths and the police atrocities. The government stepped up its

efforts and ordered the forcible evacuation of the island between May 14 – 16, 1979” (110).

The report of the interview with Indian Administrative Service officials of West Bengal revealed the fact that police hired Muslim thugs from Bangladesh to assist, so that the Muslims could be merciless towards Hindu refugees. “Most of the young men were arrested and sent to the jails and the police began to rape the helpless young women at random” (23).

The number of casualties increased every day. The number of deaths during evacuation was inconclusive. The pitiable fact is that the government had not made any effort to investigate the reason behind perpetration. Helpless women were raped by the thugs approved by the government. Kusum in her attempt to save her only son Fokir starved for days together. Their huts were torched, and their boats were sunk. Kusum in utter despair lamented that animals are given protection at the cost of human life. The novel revisits the past and revokes the miseries of refugees, through the characters Kusum and Nirmal. The incidents that Kusum come across are horrifying and beyond the canons of civility.

The pride of English man lies in the use of language and dress code. In *The Hungry Tide* Kanai with a Western outlook feels very proud of his appearance, dressing and his extra ordinary skill in using the language. He thinks highly of himself, and he considered others as some meager character and other people like Fokir and his wife Moina were very common people who do not know how to carry themselves. Right from the beginning of the novel in the train, the way he carried himself resembles the Westernization. On one occasion when Kanai meets Moyna he tried to disentangle Moyna from her husband Fokir. This attitude of Kanai reflected the behavior of English people. Kanai becomes the victim of imperial culture. When he tries to impress Piya, she understands his intention. But in spite of all his talent and skills on language, he miserably fails in front of an uneducated Fokir.

Amitav Ghosh through his detailed study of the island clearly pictures the disorder and the violence which is lucidly related to the inner realities of human existence in the novel. The alienated refugees like Kusum under the quest to lead a meaningful and significant life struggled to the core. Every bold effort of the refugees towards advancement leads them backward and further into the abyss of mystery and incomprehension

until the stark realization dawns on them that they have been enmeshed in the great web. The helpless low-class people were not allowed to settle down anywhere in the country, their right to live has been questioned. They have been chased from place to place. The government even reserves forest for the animals but the people in the government could not even sympathize with the refugees. ‘The efforts of the British government to make settlement on the banks of the unpredictable Island proves to be disastrous’ (285-86). Human claims land from water, in turn the river rises up to claim the land and lives of people. Morichjhapi is a home where the sureties of home do not exist. It is a home but still not a home. The refugees discovered this in a violent state sponsored massacre and realized the cruelty of the government towards one sector of people.

The settlements were planned by the British administration with the stated objective of revenue collection. The British started an economic venture, a challenge against nature at the cost of helpless poor Indians. *The Hungry Tide* helps us to comprehend a thorough knowledge about the group of islands and the standard of life lived by the refugees on the island. The human settlement on the island is the legacy of British colonialism. Through the novel the author not only revisits the past history but also refreshes the memory about the mental and physical agony of the deserted people.

The appeal of the refugees to the National untouchable federation proved to be unfruitful as the federation was at its initial stage of growth. The national political parties also knew not what to do and how to respond. The Prime Minister Morarji Desai, for the fear of losing the support of his coalition government refrained himself from this issue. The central government’s schedule castes and tribes commission, knowing all the facts with the file proof and other records of the press claimed that no human rights violation held in Morichjhapi. But ultimately “4,128 families had perished in transit, died of starvation; exhaustion and many were also killed in Kashipur, Kumiramari and Marichjhapi due to police frings”. The political parties justified the eviction stating that the refugees do not deserve shelter under any circumstances. The government used the ecological concerns and conservation in disguise to chase away the refugees.

Ghosh interrogated in one of the interviews that, “If the government care for the environment, did it mean that they didn’t care about the plight of human beings, especially impoverished people” (np).

Ghosh has wonderfully tailored the history and fiction. Through his artistic touch he has created the Hamiltons dream Island. The Sunderban and the Morichjhapi represent the Hamelton’s dream land of Utopia, a land where all work equally and enjoy in the evening. It is through Nirmal’s writing Ghosh expresses the painful hidden but unforgotten facts about the Morichjhapi massacre and the plight of hundreds and thousands of people as refugees. When Kanai realizes that things have gone out of control, he decided to record everything in his notebook, so that the history would be recorded, and it may also find its place in future through Kanai.

The unheard and untold sorrows of the refugees, their struggle for survival and sacrifices to ascertain their rights were all unnoticed in the history and it gets prominent focus in the novel of Amitav Ghosh. The author before he pens this novel has undergone a detailed study about the islands and collected history dates back to partition. The contemporary writers are obsessed with acquiring the hidden history where the powerless, marginalized and subjugated people express themselves, but the dream and voice of the oppressed is unnoticed and unheard, it further indicated silent death. V.Krishnkumar has revealed that “The uncertainties and horrifying apprehensions of the contemporary world generate a psychic trauma that stifles all voices and turns human existence meaningless. (95)

The author has touched upon the cruelty of colonialism and its impact. The English have left their footprint in every aspects of life. They exploited both the natural resources and human resources. Though the present generation is benefitted out of colonial rule, the wound that they caused to our predecessors is perpetual. The reverberation of colonialism is still felt even after centuries. The lifestyle and education of English have become an integral part of Indian standard of living, though our land is freed from the racial and intellectual domination of the English.

From an in-depth study it is evident that the impact of colonialism has uprooted the native people, devastated the life of the underprivileged, evacuated thousands of people from their native land and the landowners were made landless. The impact of imperialism is so strong

that it had not left any stone unturned. Though miraculous and unbelievable changes had happened it has left behind its everlasting scar in every walk of life.

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