The Views of Amitav Ghosh in His Post-Modern Text the Hungry Tide

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***Abstract*—Because it incorporates several creative and critical works that were previously considered to be binary, Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide is an example of a postmodern text. Because what is myth and what is history depend on the interpreter's subjective position regarding the relationship he shares with the narrative in question regarding time and space, history and myth flow into each other's domain in Ghosh's text, creating a fluid wall in the construction of canonical genres. In order to produce a time-inflected narrative where the "story" is both inside and outside of time, this article aims to examine the various facts of myth construction in terms of historical narratives as well as ethnographic ones. This Article focuses on the cultural politics associated with identity construction and the evident consequences that follow from such an endeavour. The focus is on how history is constructed as a component of one's own lived experiences, which lends history a subjective perspective and a narrative that is reliant on the narrator's desired vision. Lastly, this article suggests investigating ethnic local myth beliefs and the way the insider/outsider dialectic is formed as a result of this diachronic system, where locals are more likely to appropriate myths because they are a part of their local cultural system than outsiders, who take their time to comprehend the given coordinates of the function known as culture.**

***Index Terms*—Epistemology, Ethno-history, Historicality, meta-textuality,**

I. INTRODUCTION

For the simple reason that it examines the spatio-ethical environment of the Sundarbans, where physics and metaphysics are combining, Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide is an important work of literature in the modern day. The setting of the Sundarbans is noteworthy in and of itself because, as the text states, it is a land that lies between the sea and the land—a literary and philosophical metaphor that simultaneously interrupts the human mind's search for the unknown. The Morichjhapi slaughter, the tiger cult, the diaspora, and local realities are just a few of the many topics that Ghosh brings up in the work. When everything blends and flows into a fluid system where nothing appears to be as it truly is, the language almost takes on a mystical momentum. The story begins with Pia's visit to the Sundarbans for her doctoral studies. The entire narrative centres on how she learns about the local cultural psychology, but there are also opposing viewpoints, particularly the one about Kanai's uncle's diary, which connects us to the Morichjhapi slaughter.

At the same time, the Bon Bibir Johuranama creates a story in the book that creates a mythic-ethical realm that is nearly connected to human awareness from the beginning of time. The tale of Bon Bibi is part of the bot-tola literature that originated in the old parts of south Kolkata, particularly in the Kalighat district, which is known locally as potua para, or a place where mud figures were made by artisans. Here, Bon Bibi and Dakhin Ray appeared as local supra-human beings in South 24 Parganas, particularly in the Sundarbans delta region, in pamphlets about folklore and local tales from various parts of Bengal that were published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The tale of Bon Bibir Johuranama and the diary of Nirmal, Kanai's uncle, collide at a similar coordinate in Ghosh's text—the point at which myth takes on the role of the governing principle in human existence. A place where everyone seems to be constantly on the verge of extinction—politically, historically, and mythically—is reflected in Fakir's devotion to the goddess Bon Bibi and Nirmal's horror at the Morichjhapi massacre, which was carried out by the reigning political elite. In the myth, Bon Bibi comes to save Dukhe, the young boy, from Dakhin Ray, the

tiger, but even then, the tiger lurks around as an unspoken atavism that is better feared than challenged. However, there is no one to save Nirmal's family and the numerous others who were surrounded by the police prior to the mass murder. Because identity is stretched to its boundaries in the tide nation, it frequently happens that one's perspective of the local place and the historicised story that defines its culture determine one's identity more so than one's preconceived beliefs or prejudices.

According to Kanai, the Sundarbans are a vast collection of archipelagos that appear to have a transhistorical presence because they appear to have remained unchanged over many generations. The Hungry Tide portrays the reality of such a cultural system, where recorded history, unrecorded human tales, myth, and politics all come together to form a narrative. The mud layers appear to mimic the Sundarbans' complex past, which dates back to the beginning of human history. Ghosh rewrites the history of Morichjhapi for fictitious purposes, reliving the massacre in Bengal under the supervision of the federal and state administrations. Family is reborn in the moment of tragedy and human bond is made to struggle in the time of extreme social pressure, as the refugees from Bangladesh come and form a settler community in Morichjhapi to survive after the formation of Bangladesh, after being forcefully evicted from Dandakaranya. Ghosh writes in the novel:

“In 1978 it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi… But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhapi; it was from a government resettlement camp in central India…They called it resettlement, said Nilima, „but people it was more like a concentration camp, or a prison. They were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave”. (Ghosh, The Hungry Tide, 118)

Since a settler colony, as it were, has its own cultural and ideological forces—the theoretical underpinnings of which can be later invoked—the subject of resettlement becomes significant in this context. The bigger question, though, is where the colony is and who the settlers are. Does the dominant ideology seek to colonise the cultural capital of the settler groups, who appear to have been caught in a hopeless struggle for survival with the power core, or is West Bengal a lesser "Bangladesh"? What would happen to the more general issue of language-based identity development if the dispossessed were to be slaughtered in the way that was intended? According to Ghosh's rewritten history, the evicted were politically labelled as somewhat anti-social and a threat to national stability, but in reality, it was a damning political statement of a state that had gone to war and won. The settlers also speak Bengali, just like the natives do. Given that the Left Front government was sworn into office in Bengal in 1977 and Morichjhapi occurred in 1978, it is surprising that a man like Nirmal, who is so passionate about a proletariat revolution in Bengal, cannot align his ideology with the brutal state power that seeks to subjugate the underprivileged through the state apparatus.

The Hungry Tide as a novel is a historicized account of what happened in those ill-fated days, when a mass massacre was conducted in Marichjhapi, and Kanai becomes the secondary observant in those incidents through the personal diary records of Nirmal. The political siege of the Marichjhapi settler colony created a sociological disaster, as Nirmal notes in his diary:

“The siege went on for many days…food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tubewells…the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out.” (Ghosh, THT, 260)

The history of Bengal was at the cross-roads once again, ant the dominant politics had yet again created a crisis on human rights. Ross Mallick, in his essay “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre” notes:

“At least several hundred men, women, and children were said to have been killed in the operation and their bodies dumped in the river The central government's Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission, which was aware of the massacre, said in its annual report that there were no atrocities against Untouchables in West Bengal, even though their Marichjhapi file contained newspaper clippings, petitions, and a list with the names and ages of 236 men, women, and children killed by police at Marichjhapi prior to the massacre, including some who drowned when their boats were sunk by police.”1 (Mallick, 111)

It is therefore quite interesting to figure out what Ghosh is trying to do in his novel. Is he merely rewriting history or is he trying to construct an artifact from the historicized versions of various narrative accounts? The answer perhaps is not unproblematic, Ricoeur noting in "Narrative Time" that "historicality" is something that has a multi-dimensional construct after taking into its fold the narratives of memory, past and space, and finally "deep temporality" which "elicits a configuration from a succession"(Ricoeur 166, 167, 174). So instead of a chronological construct of history, there is a movement towards a personalized text of myth formation through historical accounts that has more of a quality of a story than a claim for authenticity in facts. Nirmal"s diary is therefore not a history per say, it is a personal record of what Nirmal had been through in Marichjhapi. The space of the novel is reoriented in order to incorporate the individual experiences of Nirmal, Horen and Kusum- all tied together in a moment of history that is so fraught by coercive politics, leading to the ultimate tragedy. Kusum is the symbol of fortitude in the tide country, where the physical and metaphysical forces meet to wreak havoc on the human civilization but even she breaks down at a point when she starts to believe that she will not survive to protect her son Fokir. The identity politics reaches a crescendo of irony when the government issues the notice that the settler's occupancy is against the Forest Acts, but the economically downtrodden is not given any space to settle after their eviction from their native land. "It is debatable whether the CPM placed primacy on ecology or merely feared this might be a precedent for an unmanageable refugee influx with consequent loss of political support" (Ross Mallick, 107). Nirmal in his diary captures this mood of helplessness on the part of the refugees who are dislocated from their socio-cultural space, and worst of all they become migrants, being forcefully made rootless and they suffer the consequence of not belonging to any locale- hungry and helpless, the settlers are left to the mass killing only to get wiped out from the map of inherited values and memories.

The reality of migration not only changes the social structure of the locales from and to which it happens, the psychic effect can at times be devastating. Epistemologically, the cartographic mapping of spaces is done more by perceptions than any concrete values, because the latter does not even exist. It is really then a matter of filling up the vacuum with constructed versions of reality:

"That is the trouble with an infinitely reproducible space; since it does not refer to actual places it cannot be left behind… Eventually the place and the realities that accompany it vanish from the memory and… the place, India, becomes in fact an empty space, mapped purely by words." (Ghosh, Imam 248-9)

The island of Marichjhapi becomes the site for an extended family that has a common case of tragedy, trying to fill up the spaces by mapping out their charter of rights that seems to be perfectly immobilized. Kanai's intellectual urge to write a social history in line with the das capital is received rather naively by Fokir, who has a better understanding of the rules prevalent in the island. In fact, the myth of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai that catches the imagination of Pia later on are not simply rustic myths that are nice bedtime stories for children. Myths reflect the cultural ethos of the space called the Sundarbans that is wrought with the history of the Marichjhapi massacres. If Kanai's connect with the past is his uncle"s diary, Pia"s search for her „self" in her native land takes place through the myth narratives that she hears from Kanai and understands through the mystic actions of Fokir. Bon bibir Johuranama was produced in the bot-tola press in Bengal, in and around the alleys of north Calcutta and it reflects the mythical past of the southern part of Bengal that has a rich cultural heritage of folk literature. In The Hungry Tide, Ghosh does not use the myth simply to make a Diasporic character to find her roots in the folk culture; rather the myths help Pia to come to terms with the metaphysical reality of the Sundarbans. Pia shows an acute awareness about the bodily presence of Fokir, to whom she has an undefined attachment, as mysterious as the impenetrable mangroves, showing an acute sub conscious awareness of his physicality. Pia suffered a near fall in the mud, and then the novelist writes:

"Suddenly she was tipping over…But at just the right moment, Fokir appeared directly in front of her, with his body positioned to block her fall. She landed heavily on his shoulder and once again she found herself soaking in the salty smell of his skin" (Ghosh, THT, 151)

The Fokir cultural psyche is mapped out by the tiger cult in the deepest nooks and crannies of the forest.

Fokir appears to have assimilated the tide country worship in the most advantageous manner. Piya notes that the prayers that Fokir lisps every morning are intended for some reverent forces to gain protection from the tigers, but she is unable to understand them linguistically. Because Piya is so attentive of the ethnographic reality of the tide country, she is able to assess Fokir more than those who have seen him as a boy across spaces. Despite her inability to clearly comprehend the ceremonies that Fokir is conducting, she allows herself to be appropriated within the psycho-ethnic space of the woodlands through Fokir. Fokir prays to both Bon Bibi and the Muslim Pir, suggesting that he is a product of religious syncretism. The Sundarbans are a special place in the southern part of West Bengal where Muslims and Hindus combine their cultural rituals. This is due to a historical tradition where both communities have coexisted and flowed into each other's spaces for centuries, as well as the fact that the terrain's struggles force them to do so. As a protecting goddess for both groups, Bon Bibir Johuranama's book also uses this syncretic concept. According to field anthropologist Annu Jalais, in the forest, Bon Bibi is regarded as a maternal superpower who transcends all religious beliefs and is adored by everyone for her role as Dokkhin Rai's defender. According to legend, Dokkhin Rai prayed to Allah to expel the people who had invaded his land because he did not like it.

Later Bon Bibi came in the form of a savior (like the ultimate symbol of Shakti cult in Hinduism, which is more often than not perceived as feminine, like goddess Durga) and she was called into friendship by Dokkhin Rai‟s mother by invoking Narayani, the divine consort of the Hindu Godhead, Narayan. Jalais hence notes that such a syncretic model was reached because the Johuranama was written around 1800 by a Muslim, maybe Abdur Rahim or Mohammed Khater (Jalais, 71) in an Arabic form but in the Bengali language. Yet, the form of poetry is based on the ancient Vaishnav Padabali, poems based on the Vaishnavite cult of devotion and the cultural syncretism, already present in Bengal, gave rise to such a narrative. Fokir is a product of this ethno-religious syncretism, as she wathches Fokir in Garjontola:

“Piya stood by and watched as Fokir and Tutul performed a little ceremony. First they fetched some leaves and flowers… then standing before the shrine Fokir began to recite some kind of chant… Piya recognized a refrain that occurred over and over again‟Allah‟” (THT, 152)

Piya is indeed confused that a Muslim man like Fokir, chanting out the name of Allah, should perform something like a Hindu „puja‟, and that is where it becomes clear that in the tide country what matters is survival, and the Godhead who can provide with that is Bon Bibi.

Regarding the theme of family construction, Pia's ambiguous relationship with Fokir necessitates a distinct familial bond construction. The fact that Pia cannot understand Bengali, the local language, and that she only communicates with Fokir in silence is, in fact, highly meaningful. In addition to defining Pia's search for Fokir, silence also expresses her desire to discover what "home" truly means. Home necessitates a unique psychological affiliation with the spatial dimension of the location; it is not just the location of cultural roots. Pia travels to the Sundarbans in search of the gangetic dolphins for her studies in the United States, but she finds much more than just Orcaellas. For Fokir, home has a deeper meaning than just the struggle for life because he is the living incarnation of what transpired in Marichjhapi so many years ago. Pia finds it nearly impossible to comprehend Fokir's daily boat ride to the temple of Bon Bimbi to worship, but for Fokir, it is an essential act of devotion to live in a place where tigers and crocodiles are common. By writing about the tale of Bon Bibi in a poetic style that is easy to scan, Ghosh plays with the narrative form of the book. Therefore, Bon Bibir Johuranama's passages are metered, which explains why the myth's world is a result of meta-textuality that permeates texts and cultural impositions. He has no theology in a place where Allah and Bon Bimbi coexist to defend the mortals from Dokkhin Rai's invasion, but he can readily recite the Holy Word of Allah and do pujas, which are more Hindu-dominated cultural ceremonies. Religion is not an act of superstition, it is a signifying cult to outline the struggle that comes with surviving in a land that spares none- it did not spare the settlers from Dandakaranya. While talking about the politics of language, Deleuze and Guattari notes:

"Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has nothing to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come." (Deleuze and Guattari, 1603)

Using Kanai's translation capabilities, Pia also attempts to write the tide country's spatial history. However, translating the Sundarbans' time-space continuum into a language Pia is familiar with is solely a psychological translation. The genuine Sundarbans, with all its untamed beauty, the local mythical reality, and avoiding the risks of tigers and crocodiles that have no clear guidance in tourist pamphlets, are created for Pia by Fokir after she surveys and maps the area in order to find the Gangetic dolphins. The tide country is indeed a blank epistemological space that is given a form and language by Fokir and the trans-national flow of culture is achieve through the psychological mapping of the tide country in Pia, who returns to live permanently there. Fokir's death in the arms of Pia in a stormy night on a lonely island has an apocalyptic vision of a lost world that almost exists in the space of the bon bibi myths, away from the faculties of technological reality of Pia and Kanai's world, and creates a new family- the family of troubled minds that finds it hard to accept certain episteme of reality, certain narratives of tragedy that forces them to reorient their versions of history with which they were in a comfort zone. In a world post the storm, Pia could suddenly spot a tiger- Dokkhin Rai, who ruled the cultural psyche of the tide country, and the storm gave her something else, "…it had fused them together and made them one"(Ghosh, THT, 390). This is the reality of the tide country; Pia's language merges with Fokir"s silence in a distant space where myths are more potent realities than the "rational" mind would like to believe.

II. CONCLUSION

The striking thing about Ghosh's fiction is that myth and history frequently lose their conventional binary reaction and blend into a complicated narrative. Nirmal considers the Marichjhapi massacre to be a part of his "lived history" (a notion that Ghosh elaborates on in The Imam and the Indian), while for someone like Kanai, it becomes a part of a remote memory—or even a mythological creation—found in his uncle's private journal. Time and space separate Kanai and Nirmal; he only returns to the tide country because his aunt wants to give him the diary. Thus, in Ghosh, politics, ethnography, and life experiences all flow and interpellate into one another, possibly establishing him as a postmodern fiction author. Fokir internalises Bon Bimbi's myth ethnologically, praying to her to placate the forest spirit because he understands that in the tide nation, a higher power governs the spirit that is outside of human control. When Pia eventually spots the tiger, the entire sight is an apocalyptic vision of cosmic collapse, and she is nearly paralysed with dread. When Fokir passes away in Pia's arms, it appears that he has passed his soul on to her, as Pia returns to the Sundarbans to live there permanently. It must be acknowledged that identity becomes a negotiable thing in this novel if identity creation is a fluid process in and of itself. When Pia and Kanai first met in the Lakhikantapur area, they both had preconceived ideas about the tide country. However, by the end, they both have a different idea of who they are and what the Sundarban culture is all about. Politics, history, myth and human bonds carve out their niche within a larger web of a metaphysical spirit that seems lurking deep within the human consciousness. In that space it is not human speech that matters, what matters is the awareness of local traditions, beliefs and politics that ensures a place in the topography.

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