

# Echoes of Marichjhapi: Refugee Trauma in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*

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**Abstract-** *The Hungry Tide*, written by Amitav Ghosh in 2004, is a notable literary contribution to the historical and political debate in post-colonial India on ecological justice, state authority, and forced migration. This paper contends that Ghosh excavates, commemorates, and critiques the 1979 Marichjhapi massacre—an incident that has been virtually omitted from official state narratives—by using the fictional story as a potent historiographic tool. The novel examines the complex predicament of the Bengali refugee settlers of Marichjhapi using a multifaceted approach focused on the characters of Piya Roy, Kanai Dutt, and Fokir. This study looks at how Ghosh portrays their predicament as a complicated continuity that includes displacement, the fight for *desh* (homeland), the conflict between subaltern ecology and statist modernity, and the eventual erasure of their tale rather than as a single violent occurrence. This paper illustrates how literature functions as an essential repository for subaltern histories by examining the novel's structure, characterization, and symbolic use of the Sundarbans landscape. It does this by providing a voice to the marginalized and raising timeless issues regarding citizenship, human rights, and what it means to belong in the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** *The Hungry Tide*, Marichjhapi Massacre, Refugees, Subaltern Studies, Displacement.

## INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE AS A MEMORY SITE

The tragedy of 1947's Partition, which resulted in millions of refugees and reshaped borders, identities, and ideas of citizenship, has left a lasting effect on the history of the Indian subcontinent in the 20th century. The suffering of Punjabi refugees who cross the western border is widely known, but the stories of the later migratory surges from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) into West Bengal are more nuanced and frequently ignored. Among these, the tale of the Marichjhapi island community and its bloody extermination in 1979 is a sombre and divisive period in post-colonial India's history.

In the historical Marichjhapi incident, thousands of lower-caste Bengali immigrants, primarily *Namashudras*, were resettled on the island of Marichjhapi in West Bengal's Sundarbans. These refugees, who had first been sent to the desolate areas of *Dandakaranya* in central India, came back to West Bengal, longing for a place where their language and culture would be recognized. They started an amazing self-settlement and development initiative on the island's delicate ecosystem. The Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led West Bengal government, on the other hand, viewed this as a danger to state power, a breach of forest conservation regulations, and a possible source of demographic instability. Following a protracted blockage, hundreds, probably thousands, of men, women, and children were killed in a final, savage police action that included eviction, starvation, and claimed gunshots. The tale was effectively repressed by the state, and it eventually vanished from the public consciousness.

*The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh brings this forgotten past back to life. The event serves as the moral and historical centre of the novel, which is a profound literary inquiry rather than a simple documentary. The travels of an American cetologist named Piya Roy, a translator named Kanai Dutt who lives in Delhi, and an uneducated local fisherman named Fokir are all woven into the tragedy by Ghosh. The novel examines the refugees' predicament from a number of perspectives, including ecological, political, cultural, and intensely personal ones, through their intertwined tales.

Understanding the shadow of the actual incident that hangs over the book is essential to appreciating Ghosh's literary endeavour. A fresh wave of Hindu refugees arrived in West Bengal after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Many of them had already been relocated in *Dandakaranya*, which includes portions of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, after being displaced once by Partition.

The terrain was unproductive, the conditions were harsh, and there was a significant degree of cultural and linguistic estrangement.

In the late 1970s, thousands of people embarked on a protracted and difficult trip back to West Bengal, motivated by the desire to return to a country that speaks Bengali. They chose Marichjhapi, an island in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest, as the location of their fresh start despite the lack of official approval or state backing. They removed mangroves, constructed embankments, set up schools, and produced a self-sufficient, functional society through tremendous teamwork. *Apna gaon, apna desh* (Our own village, our own nation) was their mantra, which is repeated throughout the book.

Ironically, the Left Front government, which was elected on a platform that supported the poor, saw this independent settlement as a direct challenge. Official justifications included preventing illegal encroachment and safeguarding a restricted forest area. Their eviction was ordered by the authorities. A humanitarian disaster resulted from what started out as a bureaucratic order. Food, water, and medication could not reach the island due to a devastating economic embargo enforced by government and police forces. Armed activity ensued, resulting in the destruction of boats and cottages as well as police shootings. Although the official death toll is still disputed and understated, reports from journalists and activists at the time described extensive violence, rape, and mass fatalities.

This sliver of historical reality is turned into the tale of Kusum, her father, and the betrayed, besieged, and eventually massacred group of refugees by Ghosh. Although the event is not explicitly told in the book, it is revealed through Kanai's reading of his uncle's journal and the survivors' recollections, making the historical finding a major plot point.

#### A NOVEL OF VIEWPOINTS: BROKEN TRUTHS AND DISPUTED RECOLLECTIONS

Ghosh skilfully steers clear of a rigid, authoritative account of the carnage. Rather, he approaches the truth of Marichjhapi by using a triangulation of viewpoints, each of which represents a distinct worldview.

Piya is an American scientist of Indian descent who embodies the apolitical, empirical, and objective viewpoint. First, data, species, and conservation objectives define her world. She does not know the

tide country's human history. Her voyage is one of exploration, not only of the Irrawaddy dolphins but also of the region's tragic past. She teaches the reader to see beyond the ecological to the human, seeing that the environment is a palimpsest of human struggle rather than a pristine wilderness. Her viewpoint shifts from being purely ecocentric to becoming more complex and taking human justice into account.

Kanai Dutt, an urban, smart translator from Delhi, is a symbol of the thinker who reads history. The main source from which the reader receives the Marichjhapi narrative is his uncle Nirmal's journal. As Kanai interacts with the unvarnished, impassioned narrative of the catastrophe, his initial conceit and disinterest are destroyed. He represents the urban elite Bengali's journey to confront a buried aspect of his own community's past. His viewpoint is one of historical investigation, mediated guilt, and the dismantling of stereotypes.

The son of a victim named Kusum, Fokir is an illiterate fisherman who is the direct legacy of the slaughter. He stands for the underprivileged who are unable to communicate their history in the language of the privileged. His knowledge is embodied, visceral, and transmitted through instinct, music, and stillness. He has a visceral rather than an intellectual bond with the country and its past. He and other characters, such as his mother Moyna, are the event's living memory, with the trauma it caused permanently altering their lives. Through folk songs, Bon Bibi stories, and a profound, survivalist understanding of the tides, they convey their profound but nonverbal point of view.

This framework of multiple perspectives is essential. It proves that one perspective is insufficient to comprehend the "plight" of the refugee. It necessitates the observation of the scientist, the analysis of the intellectual, and the lived experience of the survivor. The spaces between these viewpoints are where Marichjhapi's complete truth can be found.

#### THE SITUATION SHOWN: A COMPLEX TRAUMA

Ghosh paints a whole picture of the refugees' predicament through these interwoven tales, one that goes well beyond the actual act of physical assault. The idea of *desh*—a homeland that is more than just territory—is the main motivator for the refugees. It is a location of social, cultural, and linguistic

belonging. They were displaced from both their Bengali identity and East Bengal as a result of their exile in Dandakaranya. The deep emotional impact of their return trip to Bengal is captured by Ghosh in Nirmal's journal: *They had come home*. Their colonization of Marichjhapi is presented as a valiant act of reclamation, a forging of destiny by sheer willpower, rather than an illegal intrusion. Their situation is similar to that of stateless people who are fighting the arbitrary borders of the contemporary nation-state to claim their fundamental right to a presence in the world.

The violence committed by the very state that was supposed to protect them is the most severe aspect of their situation. Ghosh describes the state's strategies in great detail, ranging from overt aggression to bureaucratic resistance. As a tool of gradual, excruciating aggression, the blockade is described as follows: *The administration... had determined to starve them out*. The police invasion that follows is recounted in graphic detail, including the sound of gunfire, the burning of huts, and the bodies in the water. The state is shown as a faceless, unyielding apparatus, using its ideology—whether communist or environmentalist—as a cover to impose total control and crush opposition. The ultimate helplessness of the citizen before the sovereign state is the suffering of the refugees.

Ghosh introduces a real ecological dilemma, which beautifully complicates the story. The endangered Royal Bengal tiger and other species can be found in the delicate habitat of the Sundarbans. The state defends its activities with the rhetoric of conservation. Piya represents this worry, and the book does not downplay it. But it reveals this position's hypocrisy. The enforced conservation approach is aggressive, exclusive, and top-down; it puts the survival of species against the lives of the impoverished. Thus, the refugees' predicament is also ecological in nature, as they must choose between protecting their environment and ensuring their survival.

According to Ghosh, rather than displacing human populations in the name of preservation, a truly equitable ecosystem must figure out how to accommodate them, particularly those that have a close, symbiotic relationship with the land.

#### NELSA AND KUSUM: THE FEMALE SIDE OF ADVERSITY AND OPPOSITION

The novel's depiction of the refugee experience is highly gendered. The ladies take the brunt of the abuse and end up representing both extreme vulnerability and tenacity.

Nelsa: A refugee mother whose infant is slain by a tiger, Nelsa is a little but powerful character. The government official uses this incident to support the claim that settlers are not welcome in the hazardous tide country. Her personal loss is used as a political justification for her eviction, illustrating how women's traumas and bodies are used as battlefields for ideological conflicts.

Kusum: She is at the centre of the novel's Marichjhapi narrative. She witnesses death and suffering throughout the slaughter as a little child, experiencing its horror. Her life turns into an example of perseverance and subdued dignity. She carries the memory of the incident inside of her, telling her son Fokir about it through the folk song of Bon Bibi, the legendary forest guardian, rather than through written records. The fact that Kusum was ultimately murdered by a tiger while defending her kid has deep symbolic significance. She survives governmental aggression just to be killed by the exact wilderness the state pledged to preserve, which is a final terrible irony that symbolizes the ever-present danger of life in the waves. Her persona perfectly captures the refugees' dual threat—the state and the natural environment—as well as the tremendous bravery needed to deal with both.

#### THE CHARACTER AND METAPHOR OF THE SUNDARBANS

The Sundarbans serve as an active, agential force in the book rather than a passive backdrop, reflecting and enhancing the refugees' predicament.

The tides' continual ebb and flow symbolizes how unstable life is. Here, land comes and goes, and life is a temporary state. The situation of the refugees is reflected in this: their country is temporary, their claims are flimsy, and they could be swept away at any time by the shifting political tides. Like the boundary between danger and safety, the boundary between land and water is constantly changing.

The Royal Bengal tiger is a powerful representation of both untamed horror and exquisite beauty. It stands for the unruly, non-human world that does not care about human politics or pain. The tiger poses a genuine threat to the settlers on a daily basis. It serves as a symbol for the authorities to use as a weapon for eviction. The tiger's existence

establishes the conditions for survival even though it is beyond the moral framework of the human conflict.

Those who have mastered the ability to *read* the language of the winds, the tides, and the animal calls—like Fokir—are the ones who prosper. The refugees were striving to learn this language and become part of the local culture by settling there. The state claimed that only its own bureaucratic language—of laws, reserves, and permits—had the authority to inscribe the land, so by eliminating them, it was essentially erasing their writing.

#### CONCLUSION: LITERATURE AGAINST ERASURE: THE UNQUIET TIDE

*The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh is a significant piece of historical consciousness. The work accomplishes a vital act of healing by including the Marichjhapi massacre into its plot. From the depths of official amnesia, it brings a suppressed history to the surface and demands witnesses.

Ghosh's portrayal of the refugees' predicament is a multifaceted and timeless sorrow. It is the misery of being uprooted and the longing for one's native location. It is the misery of dealing with the harsh apparatus of the state, which acts with forceful exclusion while claiming to speak the language of conservation and the law. It is the ecological predicament of being torn between the necessity of preservation and the demand for resources.

Ghosh makes the case that comprehending such a past necessitates a synthesis of historical, mytho-poetic, and scientific knowledge systems via the travels of Piya, Kanai, and Fokir. In the end, the book implies that the real *hungry tide* is not only the Sundarbans' natural occurrence but also the unrelenting flow of politics, history, and power that eats away at the lives of the weak and marginalized. Ultimately, *The Hungry Tide* is a frightening meditation on current global challenges, including the refugee crisis, state sovereignty, environmental justice, and the never-ending human desire for belonging, rather than merely being a tale about a historical occurrence. Ghosh makes sure that the water cannot simply wash away the memory of people who strolled in Marichjhapi, even though it may remove footprints from the mud, by giving literary form to the murmurs of the place. The book serves as an enduring, potent testament to their predicament and a challenge to any narrative that aims to forget, simplify, or rationalize.

Through Ghosh's fiction, the tale of Marichjhapi transcends from a forgotten statistic to a universal fable. The question it poses to the reader is: Who is entitled to belong? Who is in charge of defining a homeland? And when does the state's need to safeguard its environment and territory become an excuse for using violence against its most defenceless citizens? *The Hungry Tide* asks that these issues be raised and that the memory of those who suffered be preserved in the collective consciousness, even though it does not provide simple answers. By doing this, literature fills in the gaps left by history and makes sure that the suffering of the Marichjhapi exiles endures throughout the silent, changing tides of time.

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