



SHADOWING NATIONAL HISTORY BEHIND INDIVIDUAL DOCUMENTARY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh, a humanist projects the postcolonial turmoil in his novels. For this, he uses history as one of the tools to highlight pangs, suffering, traumas and troubles of the colonized. Fusing of historical events does not mean that the works are mere chronicles of history but history remains in backdrop of his novels. The present paper aims to bring forth how the fictional characters and events in *The Hungry Tide* retrieve the national historical issues that are wiped out of public memory. Using some fictional as well as real places of Sunderbans for the setting of the novel, Ghosh depicts the plight of refugees, their struggle for re-settlement and their eviction. From the places they want to relocate and the ruthless attitude of the government towards them. The characters of the novel- Piyali Roy, Kanai Dutt, Nirmal, Nilima, Kusum move to the locals of Sunderbans for different motives and get involved with newly habituated people there and closely view their sufferings. The stories of these characters and their experiences take the readers into past to acquaint them with the pages of history.

KEYWORDS: refugees, re-settlement, eviction, historical events, plight.

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Amitav Ghosh, essentially a writer of postcolonial consciousness, is very selective in dealing with themes in his narratives. Underlying of history beneath the surface story has been one of the striking features of his novels. He writes about gone days still does not lose his claim as modern writer. He often retrieves the events of the past that have been deliberately slipped behind the pages of history out of human knowledge and vision. In fact it is his passion to highlight such events that have been neglected. He finds these events of great value and tries to re-evaluate them in his novels. "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." (Paranjape 235-245) In most of his works, Ghosh, probes into past and brings out the unknown visage to forth. In *In an Antique Land* he explores the history of Egypt. In *Shadow Lines*, he takes historical events and communal riots in India as backdrop of his novel. His epic saga *The Glass Palace* deals with the colonial history of Burma, Malaya and India. Ghosh has deep sense and understanding towards history that is revealed in his own words in an interview:

I find completely absorbing and fascinating. I am always interested to discover aspects of history; it adds a kind of richness to one's experience of place. Speaking about history, one of the very important things in a text is that it becomes a place where those cultural interactions are performed in most difficult possible ways. (Hasan para 2)

The Hungry Tide (2005) reveals the pangs of the displaced. It deals with people who are "out of place" and seeking a "home." Exploring history and myth of the tide country Ghosh narrates the life and struggle of refugees in their marginal status. He offers himself as a humanist critique of dispossession in the postcolonial world. He outlines the history of the Sunderbans as a history of failed colonization by humans.

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh weaves two narratives: One records Piya's expedition in Sunderbans revealing the situation and traumas of people living there while, another, through the writings of Nirmal unfolds the recounting of Morichjhapi, its formation and other details. Ghosh selects two prime locales for the course of actions in Sunderbans: Lusibary and Garontola; both places are the outcomes of Ghosh's imagination while the other secondary locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Satjehia, Morichjhapi and Emilyberi existed in real and are inhabited by refugees from East Bengal and other places of society. "Sunderbans" means "beautiful forest," and is located in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal. It stretches across coastal India and Bangladesh, from the Hoogly in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. It is the habitat of the Bengal tigers, and since the tiger is an endangered species, Government of India takes steps to protect it by preserving its natural environments. This, however, results in confrontations with the local masses, and that conflict remains part of the history behind this novel.

The story of the novel begins with an encounter of Piya (Piyali Roy) with Kanai Dutt on the railway platform in Kolkata. Piya, a cytologist from Seattle has come Sunderbans for her research on marine-mammals, dolphins, the rarest orcaella. She is of Indian origin but doesn't know Hindi or Bangla. For

this she justifies: "I grew up in Seattle. I was so little when I left India that I never had a chance to learn"(THT: P.12) In her studies, she takes help of Fokir who is illiterate but well versed with the situations of Sunderbans. Kanai has come to Lusibari on the call of his aunt, Nilima to collect a document which is left for him by his uncle, Nirmal who arrived at Lusibari in 1950 and worked as socialist, later, Nilima founded the Badabon Trust. Nilima runs the school that her husband Nirmal had run until his death. The place Lusibary was named after the name of Lucy, wife of a utopian visionary, Sir Daniel Hamilton who had bought ten thousand acres of Sunderbans and invited impoverished people to come and populate the place it was free to them on one condition- there should be no caste system and no tribal nationalism. Many arrived although it was dangerous to live there and made that jungle populate. They left their traditional profession of farming and became fishermen. This migration to this hostile zone occurred in three waves in 1920s, in 1971 after Bangladesh war. This zone, although called Sunderbans but ironically it was no beautiful place to live anyway. No one could foretell what would happen the next day.

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to reemerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily – some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before.(THT: P.7)

Telling about such places to Kanai, Nirmal says, "It's only in films, you know, that jungles are empty of people. Here there are places that are as crowded as any Kolkata bazaars"(THT: P.17)

Fokir remains of great value for Piya in her studies. He is the son of Kusum whose story forms the subtext of the novel. She became friend of Kanai when he was living with his uncle and aunt on expelling from the school. Later he came to know that she had been abandoned by her mother and

raised by women's organization. She had eventually married Rajen, a poor man who became handicapped by a bus in Calcutta. She gave birth to a son and named him Fokir.

Nirmal's account of formation of Morichjhapi retrieves one of the darkest historical events that lies at the center of the novel. The refugees came to India in the wake of violence unleashed at the time of the Bangladesh war. Within a short span of time they cleared the mangroves built *bandhs* and for shelter put up their huts. Nilima tells Kanai about them, "It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to be learnt that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh.....In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of upper caste." (THT: P.118)

Earlier the refugees thought they would not have to face any opposition from the state government but there had been a lot of clash between both. The settlers were not against the government or rebels or revolutionaries. But "they just wanted a little land to settle on." (THT: P.119)

The government acted against them and told them to return and denied food and water for them. The government supported its view by saying that refugee settlement in Morichjhapi was a violation of the forest act, it was not official and it would harm the ecological balance in the area. The eviction of refugees from there as accounted in Nirmal's journal is a recapitulation of details mentioned in Annu Jalais' article. Ghosh's sense of history is revealed with this description. Annu Jalais, in his document, writes:

Thirsty police launches circled the island thereby depriving the settlers of food and water; they were also tear-gassed, their huts razed, their boats sunk, their fish and tube wells destroyed, those who tried to cross the river were shot at... Several hundred men and women and children were believed to have died during that time and their bodies thrown into the river." (Jalais para 17)

Thus, the events in the novel that account the plight of the refugees and irrational ways of authorities remind of some national historical issues which

Ghosh is preoccupied. As the characters from various provinces flow to the Island of Lusibari, each having different motives but when they come across local inhabitants, it realizes that forces of history have great impact even in the remotest of regions and people living there. The novel tells the personal histories of its characters- Nilima, Nirmal, Fokir, Piya, Kanai, Moyna, and Kusum and simultaneously explores their acts in the backdrop of National history of the refugee camps in India.

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