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Sundarbans: A Historical Study of Amitav Ghosh□s Select Novel

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh describes the history and geography of a place mould lives and shape identities and destinies. He also explores how people of different nationalities and different social and cultural identities have struggled against political and ideological positions that have pertinently confined them to the fringes of human society. He is predominantly a writer with a postcolonial consciousness in his novels. In An Antique Land explores the history of Egypt and The Shadow Lines deals with the colonial impact on the cultural, social and political lives of people in India, Pakistan, Egypt, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. The Glass Palace is a vast, expansive canvas of epic dimensions also traces the years of colonial presence in Burma, Malay, and India. This research paper is highlighting the plight of the subalterns of Sundarbans in West Bengal, where socio-political turmoil extracts as heavy a toll as the ravaging tides. Ghosh is immersed in the Indian-Bengali ethos. He also examines the influence of past on present and reveals the predicament of individuals who are subjected to ,the events of history, individuals who do not appear in the spectrum of history but the ones whose life underwent a complete transformation because of the larger political, social and national upheavals.

Keywords: History, Geography, Sundarbans, Environment, Social, Political.

Introduction

The Novel The Hungry Tide is divided into two parts: " The Ebb: Bhata" and " The Flood: Jowar" and is set in the Sundarbans. Measuring over ten thousand square kilometers, this delta is the world's largest mangrove ecosystem. The name "Sundarbans' 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 home of the Bengal tiger, and since the tiger is an endangered species, Government of India has taken steps to protect it by preserving its natural environments. This, however, has resulted in confrontations with the local populace, and that conflict is part of the history behind this novel.

The Hungry Tide is geographically narrow. It is set in the Sundarbans, a labyrinth of rivers and islands, often subjected to catastrophic floods and storms and famine. The Sundarbans is infested with snakes and crocodiles and, as mentioned earlier, is the home for the Royal Bengal tiger and the endangered Gangetic dolphins known as Orcaella. The waves here are treacherous. The tides reach several miles inland and everyday thousands of mangroves disappear to re-emerge hours later. And no one dares to make home there but the truly dispossessed and displaced who are unwanted and who have nowhere else to go. Yet, they have settled there to eke out a living from the barren, unyielding salty tracts of land. The people are mostly fishermen who are the entire river and the sand for fish and crabs for sustenance. Each day of their life is unpredictable, and survival is precarious on those islands, also referred to as the "tide country."

The Hungry Tide Ghosh illustrates how the history and geography of a place mould lives and shape identities and destinies. He explores how people of different nationalities and different social and cultural identities have struggled against political and ideological positions that have pertinently confined them to the fringes of human society. He is predominantly a writer with a postcolonial consciousness. This consciousness makes him time and again to retrieve the events of the past that have been deliberately tucked behind the pages of history, out of

human knowledge and vision. Unearthing stories and events that have deliberately been effaced from official government records is a passion for Ghosh. In An Antique Land he explores the history of Egypt and in The Shadow Lines; he deals with the colonial impact on the cultural, social and political lives of people in India, Pakistan, Egypt, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. The Glass Palace that is painted on a vast, expansive canvas of epic dimensions also traces the years of colonial presence in Burma, Malay, and India. Ghosh's deeply sense of history has revealed in his interview with Hasan Ferdous: "I find history 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 the most difficult possible ways" (152).

Sundarbans - A Historical Perspective

The Hungry Tide succeeds in highlighting the plight of the subaltern people of Sundarbans in West Bengal, where socio-political turmoil extracts as heavy a toll as the ravaging tides. Ghosh is immersed in the Bengali ethos in the novel. So, now and again, as the ebb and flow of tides, he returns, one novel after another, to document stories of how large sections of Indian society have been trampled down and defeated by the storms and tides of history. His books challenge the centers of power and prestige, and crusade for the impoverished and displaced and create space for their plight to be heard.

Ghosh weaves together two temporal narratives: one unfolding through Nirmals journal recounting the Morichjhapi episode that happened twenty eight years ago, and the second through Piya' s expedition, revealing the on temporary situation of the people and the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans. The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights the chief conflict in this novel, the problems and issues of wilderness conservation and its related social costs in areas populated by socially and economically unprivileged both in the past and in the present. The sub- narratives for grounded in the character of Fokir represents the third voice of this ecological drama.

As we really probe into the novel, we are moved by the plight and suffering of the refugees from East Bengal who fled their place of birth after partition and also during the 1971 crackdown by West Pakistan. The great divide of 1947 wreaked havoc with the Hindus and Sikhs of West Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan etc., and also with Hindus of East Bengal. It was, however, the crackdown in 1971 on the people of East Bengal by the Punjabi dominated, Urdu speaking Muslims of West Pakistan that sounded a death knell for Hindus of East Bengal. They were the special targets of the army and thousands of them were literally butchered in cold blood. Many of them fled to neighbouring India, and were treated as refugees. Even after the formation of Bangladesh, many were reluctant to go back and wanted to live in India. These people made the Sundarbans their home and settled there. Life for these settlers is an incessant battle for survival against the unpredictable storms and tides, both natural and manmade. Despite its threatening environment charged with fears of the all devouring tides and man eating tigers and crocodiles, it is the deep sense of human bonding among the islanders which transcends differences of class, caste, creed, and nationality that helps the inhabitants defeat the forces bent on annihilating them. The two prime locales of the actions in the Sundarbans, Lusibari and Garjontola are fictitious places. However, Ghosh remarks that the secondary locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhapi, and Emilybari are real places inhabited by refugees from East Bengal and other dispossessed factions of society. Ghosh travelled to this area along with Annu Jalais, an authority on its history and culture. In fact, Ghosh acknowledges his deep sense of gratitude for the willingness with which she shared her knowledge of the islands with him. Besides, he had linkages with the tide country, for, as a young boy, he had stayed there with his uncle, Sri Chandra Ghosh, who had been for more than a decade the headmaster of the Rural Construction Institute, a school set up by Sir Daniel Hamilton, an Englishman who dreamed of making it a land without the barriers of caste, class, race, and religion that divide and segregate human beings.

The tide in this area comes twice in a day and constantly reshapes the land and uproot anything permanent. Such a setting makes an apt symbol for the ebb and flow of history and the uprooting of populations, both of which have come to be seen as "Ghoshian" themes. Furthermore, just as the natural tides of the area tend to obliterate the sense of permanent division between land and sea. Ghosh' s characters gradually learn to recognize the transient nature of the divisions between individuals of whatever social class they might belong to. Ghosh is respected across the globe as the strongest critic of the exclusionist nationalist discourse which often ends up repressing the moorings of its own people. His works defy generic categories, his discipline disciplinary categories, his career professional categories, and his identity national categories. Not surprisingly therefore, the primary engagement of all his novels opines Gabriel " to disturb the stable boundaries and epistemological conception of culture as fixed and homogeneous systems" (40). Throughout his fictional journey Ghosh carries a sustained attack against the borders that divide nations, human beings, cultures, and disciplines.

The novel begins with the meeting of the two most significant characters Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy on the railway platform in Kolkata waiting for a train to Canning, for their onward journey to the Sundarbans. As the story unfolds, it is clearly seen that Kanai and Piyali Roy are involved in their respective quests. Piyali Roy, a cetologist from Seattle in New York, is there for research on dolphins, the rare Orcaella. Kanai Dutt, who is bound for Lusibari in the Sundarbans, is there on his aunt's request to claim a document bequeathed to him by her husband, Nirmal, at the time of his death twenty years ago. Both are not really sociable and are well guarded by their self-centered, overbearing attitude, quite becoming of people belonging to the educated, elite sections of society. However, the novel is structured on their individual quests Piyalis quest for information about dolphins and Kanai's quest for the circumstances leading to his uncle's mysterious death in 1979. Piya (Piyali Roy) had been born in Kolkata, but had moved to the United States when she was just one year old. She does not know Bengali, but she recalls that this is the language in which her parents argue. A graduate student in cytology from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California, she is interested in observing the marine mammals that she thinks are unique to the Sundarbans. Her destination is the town of Canning, the train stop for that region. Kanai's real destination, on the other hand, is Lusibari, the farthest of the inhabited islands, where his seventy six year old aunt runs a charitable organization called Badabon Trust.

After they soon arrive in Canning, Piya hires a dubious guide and an even more dubious guard imposed upon her by the government functionaries. The two men become quite threatening to Piya. After she hires the service of a poor fisherman by name Fokir to direct her to the dolphins she wishes to study. In the memory process she falls into the river and Fokir saves her from drowning in the salty, vegetation-filled water. She pays her "helpers" to leave her with Fakir, who promises to take her to the dolphin region. Fokir does not know English, but they manage to do the best with what they can to communicate.

As the tale progresses, it becomes clear that Fokir is the son of Kusum, a childhood friend of Kanai Dutt. Kusum's story, which forms the subtext of the novel and which is recounted in Nirmal's journal, is instrumental in retrieving the history of Morichjhapi, which stands till today as one of the darkest spots in the history of mankind. The events of 1979, "widely discussed in the Calcutta press, English as well as Bengali" (402) were deliberately erased from the public memory, and also from history. The Badabon Trust that Nilima Bose runs and the high school that her husband Nirmal had run until his death are built over the site of a commune established by a British idealist named Sir Daniel Hamilton. This is called "Lusibari" a pidgin version of "Lucy's House," and was so named for Hamilton's wife, who had sadly died on her way from England to join him. Hamilton was a utopian visionary, and he had bought ten thousand acres of the Sundarbans and invited impoverished people to come and populate the place, free' to them on one condition there should be no caste system, and no tribal nationalism. Many arrived brushing aside all dangers from crocodiles, tigers, snakes, etc. They were also ready to convert to fishermen from farmers, which had been their profession so far. This migration to the commune occurred in three waves in 1920s, in 1947 after partition of India, and in 1971 after

the Bangladesh war and they helped Hamilton establish a semi communist region where the inhabitants shared possessions.

In the year 1950, eleven years after Hamilton's death, Nirmal and Nilima Bose arrived at Lusibari. They had been married for less than a year, and the reasons for their decision to move to this remote and tenuous locale were complicated. The year before, Nirmal had attended the conference of the Socialist International in Calcutta; he had been teaching at Ashutosh College at that time. Nilima was one of his students, her grandfather was a founder of the Congress party and her father was a reputed barrister at the Calcutta High Court. Although her family did not approve of their marriage, they nonetheless helped arrange the move so that the two could take the management of Hamilton's estate. When the couple arrived, though, they saw utter destitution; much had fallen into decrepitude in the past eleven years. The Hamilton Estate was also crippled by law suits. Not an individual to accept defeat easily. Nilima established the Women's Union and sought support from outside. By the 1980's this had developed into the Badabon Trust. It had become, in short, her life' s work though, not perhaps, her husband' s.

The level of geographical terrain of the Sundarbans that serves as the chronoscope of the novel is itself a metaphorical representation of nature's rigid resistance to be put into fixed categories and strict compartmentalization. Awanish Rai, in his review of the novel, says, " in speaking about the tide country, Ghosh seems to have found the perfect landscape, one that says' almost everything that he has been writing about for so long and with such eloquence" . In this tide country boundaries collapse, diffuse, and become inconsequential. Ghosh writes:

"They number in the thousands, these islands; some are immense and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago. These islands are the river's restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift. The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. Some of these channels are mighty waterways, so wide across that one shore is invisible from the other; others are no more than two or three kilometers long and only a few hundred meters across" (162)

Thus, the land bears a name, which is equally deceptive. Even though the place is called the Sundarbans, we are told that, "at no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them." (8). It is in this hostile terrain that all action of the novel takes place, for, as Ghosh says, " yet in the' tide country, where life was lived on the margins of greater events, it was useful to be reminded that no place was so remote as to escape the flood of history" (77). As the characters from diverse realms of time and space drift to the island of Lucibari, each for a different reason, and as their lives cross paths with the local inhabitants, it can be realized that forces of history have great impact even in the remotest of regions and in the lives of the poorest of the poor.

The tale of Kanai learns from his visit that his friend Kusum had been abandoned by her mother when she (Kusum) was a child. Kusum' s mother had been tricked into working at a brothel and had finally been literally worked to death there. In her mother' s absence, and to save her from a similar fate, a women's organization had raised Kusum. She had eventually married Rajen, a poor man who had been made lame by a bus in Calcutta. Rajen had taken Kusum to see her mother in the brothel, and her mother died three months after the two had married in her presence. The couple had son and they named him Fakir, but just four years after the child's birth, Rajen fell in front of a train and died.

The aim of Kanai is a successful business man and owns a translation firm in New Delhi. As mentioned earlier,

Kanai, a nephew of Nirmal' s, comes at his aunt's request to take the dairy which his uncle had willed him before his death, and thinks of his stay on the island as "exile" and Piya comes to study the Genetic dolphins. The novel is structured around the personal histories of its characters Nilima, Nirmal, Kanai, Piya, Kusum, Moyna, and Horen- played in the backdrop of the national history of the refugee camps in India as an aftermath of Bangladesh partition and the Left Front Government in West Bengal and its decision to carry out strong action against the refugees. Ghosh uses the local folk tale of Bon Bibi as a digressional strategy as opined by Meenakshi Mukhrjee: "There seems to be two distinct ways in which myths have been used in Indo-Anglican novel: as part of a digressional technique and as structural parallels, where a mythical situation underlines the whole or part of the novel." (136)

The novel opens with the description of the history of the geographical region and the legend of the Puranic tradition of Shiva taming the ferocious Ganga. Lore! Shiva holds the waters of Ganga in his braids, lest Ganga drowned the entire universe. This region, however, is associated not with the popular part of the legend but with its lesser known later part where "there is a point at which the braid comes undone: where lord Shiva' s mattered hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds may thousands, of tangled strands." (6) This part of the legend, tells the narrator, " is never told and thus never imagined." (6) Thus legends also go through a process of transition, travelling through the course of history as a result of various socio-political dynamics. It is to this legend that the Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands, owes its existence and to believe this one has to see it: " Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe." (6) Thus history is a mere continuum of myth distinguished from it only by the act of "witnessing."

Kusum tells to Fokir the tale of Bon Bibi, a good spirit who fights with the evil spirit Dokkhin Rai for control of the forests and waterways. In this story, there is a man named Dhona who is seduced by the evil spirit into offering a young lad named Dukhey as food to Dokkhin Rai, who sometimes takes the form of a tiger. But Bon Bibi saves Dukhey at the last minute. Kusum passes this legend from her childhood memories. Her father had built a little temple in Bon Bibis honour on the island of Garjontola, and her son Fokir and later, he and his son Tutul often visit there'. The story has a strong and lasting effect, therefore, on her, on her child Fokir, and on her grandson Tutul, but Kusum sadly admits that Bon Bibi had not helped her years before (When Kusum had called out to her to save her own father, from whom she had learned the legend) from a tiger. In fact, soon after passing along the story to Fokir, Kusum herself abandons him. This is because she has been told by her friend Horen that Dilip, the man who had forced her mother into a life of prostitution, is hunting or her hoping to force Kusum to lake her mother's place.

Amitav Ghosh reveals how the Government of West Bengal and that took a Marxist one had betrayed the refugees from East Bengal by not only refusing to rehabilitate them in West Bengal as promised in their election manifesto but also how they were brutally evicted on charges of violating the Forest Act, when they returned to settle on the land promised to them. The uprising and its ruthless quelling, in a bid to preserve the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans that were allegedly being destroyed by the refugee settlers, sparked off a number of debates and the controversies continues till this day as to whether it is human enough to preserve forests and wild animals at the expense of the tribal' s and the dispossessed who have nowhere else to go and who, while living on the edge, struggle to eke out a meager living from the protected forest reserves. And. as vested forces are always in the fray, an amicable settlement for the issue will be hard to come by and debates on it will continue "to be extremely acrimonious and heated" as noted by Sekhsaria. In this connection, Shampa Chaterjee remarks, "Ghosh's book is all about the dichotomy - wild life versus human suffering or destruction of the ecosystem versus human survival" (190). In her article "Dwelling on Morichjhapi" Annu jalais remarks that the reasons leading to the massacre had their roots in the "intricacies of caste, class and communal differences." When India was partitioned in 1947 on communal lines, there was a migration in huge numbers of East Bengali

Hindus to West Bengal in India. The first wave of migration consisted of higher-class Hindus who were persecuted by their low class Muslim tenants. They fled and found a haven in the homes of their affluent friends and relatives in Calcutta. But the low-caste Hindus found nowhere to go and they "squatted" on public and private land.

The historical event that lies at the core of the novel and guides its pivotal action at Morichjhapi is the event of Bangladesh independence in 1971, which had led to a huge influx of refugees into India. While the event is neither a contemporary reality nor did it occur in the recent past, its aftermath constitutes the lived reality of the people. The inhabitants of the Sundarbans on both sides of the border are the poorest of the poor. It is therefore that the elitist nationalist forces on both sides of the border attempt to silence them. The refugees who came to India in the wake of violence unleashed at the time of Bangladesh war of independence are presented in the novel in choric voices: "When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash, we crossed the border because we ha d nowhere else to go." (115) Nilima tells Kanai about them: " In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of upper castes." (l18) Within a few months of their arrival at the Sundarbans, the refugee settlers worked in perfect fraternity with the islanders. They built huts, cultivated the land and some earned their livelihood by fishing. They dug tube wells and established fishing industry, saltpans, dispensaries, schools, and so on. Similar experiences of neglect and marginalization brought the islanders and refugees into a strong tie of solidarity. They bounded together for "a common cause, which was to fight for a niche for themselves" (216), which would become a " metaphor" for the reclamation of voice in West Bengal.

Conclusion

The historical novelist is none but a historian but history imposes limitations on him. He is not free to distort history. He has to adhere to factual accuracy. The novelist is obliged to be careful in research into the period he has chosen for presentation and every detail of that period has to be accurate. The historical novelist not only has to detail the layout of a geographical region but also about the people living in that region, their mode of speech, their dress, their habits, their peculiar traits and countless other characteristics of that particular community. He should guard against anachronism. The historical novelist should not infiltrate too much history into the plot of the novel. He also examines the influence of past on present and reveals the predicament of individuals who are subjected to ,the events of history, individuals who do not appear in the spectrum of history but the ones whose life underwent a complete transformation because of the larger political, social and national upheavals. Amitav Ghosh weaves together two temporal narratives. The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights the chief conflict in this novel, the problems and issues of wilderness conservation and its related social costs in areas populated by socially and economically unprivileged both in the past and in the present.

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