

## THE HUNGRY TIDE AND THE DISCOURSE OF DISPLACEMENT, SURVIVAL AND REVOLUTION<sup>1</sup>

Md.Monirul Islam

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Asannagar Madan Mohan Tarkalankar College

Nadia, West Bengal.

[mi.moni23@gmail.com](mailto:mi.moni23@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Amitav Ghosh in an interview said that The Hungry Tide is at bottom a story about “a relationship between a girl and two men”. But with this story is interwoven the history of a people living in the Sundarbans, struggling for survival, fighting against the fulsome package of whimsicality and destructiveness of the forces of nature. These people are marginalized by nature, and they live on the margins in economic and social terms. The issue of marginalization gets further complicated as the political marginal gets incorporated within the breadth of the novel. Nirmal, the political marginal is forced to leave Calcutta in fear of the state machinery and retreats with his wife to the Sundarbans. This displacement subdued much of revolutionary zeal but an encounter with a group of displaced people (‘refugi’) at Morichjhāpi ignites his radical dreams. The article aims to discuss the complex issue of displacement, survival, and revolution which involves the problematic nature of postcolonial nation state as well as the agonizing history of partition.*

**Keywords:** Partition; Refugee; Displacement; Identity; Revolution.

### Introduction

Amitav Ghosh in his writings is continuously preoccupied with the colonial and postcolonial experience. He is particularly interested in exploring the agonizing process of evolving of a nation that reveal the harsh realities of the political, socio-cultural, economic and ethno-regional problems. His focus turns both to the formation of the idea of nationhood during the period of colonization and the disillusionment of the people with the idea of nation after the formal decolonization and independence. Ghosh depicts the colonial experience as generator of an acute sense of inferiority and rootlessness engendered by the intellectual slavery under the conditions of political and economic domination. More importantly, he constantly hints

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that national descriptions are redundant as cultural rooting is impermanent and characterized by a continuous flux. Consequently, the trauma of an uprooted protagonist or a group of people comes to be chronicled in his novels. In his fictions as well as in his non-fictions people living on the margins are portrayed struggling for survival, in its various manifestations. In *At Large in Burma* Ghosh explores the problem of the ethnic minority being marginalized during the Burmese Civil War through the Indian migrant Mohinder Singh. In *The Glass Palace* it is the subaltern agency and its presence or absence that becomes the central focus. In *The Hungry Tide* his focus is once again on the issue of rootlessness through displacement and the struggle for survival by the displaced people. It can also be defined as a novel about the struggle of each person to find their place in the world. Thus, to Nirmal the cry of the settlers in the face of police atrocity, “‘Amra kara? Bastu Hara’, does not seem to be a shout in defiance, “but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves, but on behalf of bewildered humankind. Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong?”(254) However, in the novel Ghosh adds a new dimension by interconnecting the struggle for existence to the discourse of revolution.

### **The Postcolonial Nation-State and its Problematic Nature**

The issue of displacement in the novel is linked to the problematic nature of postcolonial nation state. The problematic nature of the postcolonial nations is the central preoccupation not only in the writings of Ghosh but in most of the postcolonial fictions. Chinua Achebe in his novel *Anthills of Savannah*, examines the fortunes of West African nations like Nigeria since the formal independence was achieved. It basically depicts the colonial tendency in the post independence rulers namely, the western educated social elites. Simultaneously, it shows the futility of the nationalist ideology with Chris’ death. Chris, a nationalist in his way to Bassa meets a group of drunken revellers who are celebrating the news of His Excellency’s downfall. During this revelry one police officer tries to drag a girl away with sinister intentions. When Chris confronts the policeman he is shot dead. Ironically, a nationalist dies in a nationalist celebration. Chris’s nationalist status in the novel is also questioned through the character of Beatrice. Achebe draws our attention to the chauvinism of powerful male characters and points out that their fortunes do not constitute the adequate representation of the nation’s history through her. In other words, the issue of ‘elite historiography’ and how it silences the ‘subaltern’ voices is raised by Achebe. The ‘elite historiography’ in Amitav Ghosh’s novels is not only questioned but he continuously attempts to recover the buried narratives of the subaltern people. In *The Hungry Tide* the recovery of the packet of papers where Nirmal records the events at Morichjhāpi thus becomes a metaphor for what Ghosh tries to do in his novels.

In postcolonial criticism the concept of nation and nationalism remains the most complicated and most problematic issue and the problem of nationality and national identity

in the case of the Indian subcontinent is more so. Homi Bhabha in his famous essay “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nations” points to the fact that nationalistic representations are highly fragile and unstable constructions which can never produce the unity they promise. The apparent homogeneity of a nation is fraught with heterogeneous identities. In one of his major articles “The Mask of Nationalism” (1993) Ghosh questions the concept of the homogeneous identity as he points out the difference between the colonial concepts of nationhood with the post-independence concept of it. In the colonial days the united identity of nationalism derived its meaning from the conflict between colony and colonizer and in this phase it is a vision of political community founded on the notion of a ‘pure’ homogenous body of people, undivided by divergent interests, and united by common traditions that becomes the driving force. Once the independence is achieved, the illusion of this notion of homogeneity becomes evident. The division of the country on religious line and the sudden creation of the ‘shadow lines’ led its people into a paradox –the home became their enemy. In *The Shadow Lines* (1988) Ghosh deals with this futility of post independent sub-continental politics which intends to erase the human lives by inventing ‘shadow lines’ of divisions. In other words, the problems arising out of the partition form the core of the novel. *The Hungry Tide* (2004), unlike *The Shadow Lines*, is not directly involved with the issue of partition but once again the problem of displacement in the aftermath of partition and the related issue of survival of the displaced people are incorporated within the frame work of the novel.

### **Tales of Displacement**

The novel is set in the Sundarbans, which is an archipelago of thousands of islands, many of them sandbanks, dominated by mangroves. The area forms a part of West Bengal as well as of Bangladesh. In this ‘tide country’ is told the story of an Indian-American cetologist Piya Roy and her relationship with Kanai, the well-educated business man, and Fakir, an unlettered fisherman whose lifeblood runs through the treacherous waters of the Sundarbans. Ghosh in an interview said that “*The Hungry Tide* is at bottom a story about a relationship between a girl and two men”. However, there is another story embedded in the fabric of the novel: the story of Kusum, Horen, and Nirmal. The theme of displacement and survival runs through both of the stories and in them are interwoven the history of a people living on the margins of the society and struggling for survival, fighting against the fulsome package of whimsicality and destructiveness of the forces of nature. Their lives are continuously shaped and reshaped by the natural forces as the tide shapes and reshapes the islands. The effort of these people to establish a root on the islands is always threatened.

In the novel displacement occurs at several levels. The central figures in the novel are all displaced people: Nirmal, a leftist radical forced to recede to the Sundarbans as his very life was in danger in his home city, Calcutta. Nirmal’s wife, Nilima is forced to accompany her

husband to the wild for emotional reasons. Piya comes to research on the Dolphins from far away America. Kanai, a Delhi based businessman very unwillingly comes here for the notes left behind for him by Nirmal and in his notes Nirmal has left the history of another group of rootless people. My discussion primarily has in focus this story/history left behind by Nirmal in which he is actively involved.

### **The Refugees**

The embedded story with Nirmal as its protagonist incorporates the history of a group of ‘refugi’, who settled at Morichjhāpi. Ghosh chronicles the saga of these people by means of the firsthand account of Nirmal. The use of the diary method (not written on daily basis but in one night) to describe the events at Morichjhāpi enables him to make the account of the event realistic. As in case of many of his novels in these parts of the novel the thin boundary between fact and fiction is blurred as he chronicles a historical event in the fictional frame work.

The problem of ‘refugi’ in the Indian subcontinent was the direct result of the partition. The ideal of unified national identity was deliberately broken by the vilest form of communal politics producing a fractured nation with fractured national identity. Suddenly, large scale of people became homeless in their own home. The communal violence that preceded and followed the partition led to one of the worst form of migration in world history. The people of the subcontinent could never erase the scar left by this event and consequently, partition has remained the most influential element in modern Indian fiction. Unlike most of the partition fictions, however, the novels of Ghosh focus on the Bengal front than on the Punjab border.

The inflow of the people into West Bengal from the East Bengal took place in several phases. In the first phase before and after the partition the landed gentry, the upper caste Hindus came to India and got themselves well positioned in West Bengal with their socio-political influence. Then in the second phase the socially marginalized lower caste Hindus who formed a part of the East Bengal Namsudra Movement began to flow in and it is these people who became the cause of concern for the Indian Government. Ross Mallick in his article, “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Morichjhāpi Massacre”, traces the problem of the people of Morichjhāpi long back in the history of the class and caste struggle in Bengal, in reference to the East Bengal Namsudra Movement in the colonial period . In this movement the Muslims and the Untouchables were political allies in their opposition to the Hindu-landlord dominated Bengal Congress Party. As a result of the political mobilization of the Untouchables in alliance with Muslims, the Bengal Congress was kept out of power from the 1920s. This exclusion of the high caste Hindus from power eventually led Hindu landlords and ultimately the Congress party to press for partition of Bengal at independence, so that they could control at least the western part of

the undivided Bengal. After the partition the Untouchables lost their bargaining power as a result of the swing in the vote bank between the high caste Hindus and Muslims and consequently they became marginalized on both sides of the border. The displaced people of Morichjhāpi, thus, have long history of marginalization.

These lower caste refugees who thronged the suburbs of Calcutta in the aftermath of the partition were seen by the government as a disarranged mass, a burden upon the state of West Bengal and on India. To relieve the burden upon the government of West Bengal the Government of India in the Rehabilitation Ministers' Conference of 1956 decided that government relief would be given only to those 'Bangladeshi' refugees who agreed to resettle outside West Bengal. Subsequently, the Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) was established in 1958. DDA was responsible for developing an area of 78,000 square miles, known as Dandakaranya, in the Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Orissa, and the Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh. Thousands of refugees were sent by the West Bengal Government to Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh in 1961, but many of them found the place uninhabitable and left the place to return to West Bengal in 1978. Nearly thirty thousand of these people settled at Marichjhapi.

A number of factors have been identified by the historians as the possible reasons of the East Bengal refugees coming back to Bengal from Dandakaranya -- the cultural, the climatic, the linguistic differences; the maltreatment of the government officials; the discriminatory attitude of the local people etc. The people of Bengal habituated to the plain and the water found themselves in the rocks and hills. They did not know how to make a living in this alien environment. The physical features of the area, together with the cultural and linguistic differences, left the refugees psychologically broken and they sneaked into the Sundarbans to breathe in some fresh oxygen into their hearts.

### **Marginality, Survival and the Discourse of Revolution**

This supposedly chaotic mass of people tries to build a community of their own at Morichjhāpi. Nirmal on his first visit to the settlements is amazed at the acumen of these people in creating an order in the small island: "They had set up their own government and taken a census—there were some thirty thousand people on the island already and there was space for many more. The island had been divided into five zones and each family of settlers had been given five acres of land" (172).

To Nirmal the island presents a spectacle of fulfilment of his revolutionary ideal of equality. His imagination is fired at the prospect of fulfilment of his dream and he feels a new kind of sensation: "I felt something changing within me: how astonishing it was that I, an ageing, bookish school master, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power but by those without!" (171).

We are reminded of Sir Daniel Hamilton who in the pre-independence days had a utopian desire to establish a society based on co-operative system. Amitabh Ghosh writes in his blog May 7, 2011 how Tagore was influenced by Hamilton's ideas. In a 1930 letter to Sir Daniel, Tagore wrote:

‘I have not much faith in politicians when the problem is vast needing a complete vision of the future of a country like India entangled in difficulties that are enormous. These specialists have the habit of isolating politics from the large context of national life and the psychology of the people and of the period. They put all their emphasis upon law and order, something which is external and superficial and ignore the vital needs of the spirit of the nation... (Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore, ed. Krishna Dutta & Andrew Robinson, 382)

Tagore's statement made on pre-independence Indian politics becomes significant in the analysis of the post- independence politics and the problem of Morichjhāpi . It was the lack of understanding of the psychology of the people and their needs that led to the problems like that of Morichjhāpi because it was the result of the ‘isolating of politics’ from the people, Tagore speaks of. The ‘isolation’ results in the marginalization of the people and finally leads them to the path of rebellion. Ghosh seems to suggest that it is the state and its ideological apparatus that lead people not only to displacement and dispossession but also to the path of violence. The state itself prepares the ground where a political marginal like Nirmal can work.

Nirmal's ideological battle of survival seems real to him when he meets these people of Marichjhapi. He had been fighting with his inner emptiness, the disillusionment with his dream. He feels: “I had cast away the emptiness I held so long” (p.171). The refugees on the other hand, are deprived of the basic needs and are struggling to have them. The difference between Nirmal and the refugees is clear from the conversation between him and the ward leader. When Nirmal proposes to the ward leader that he will teach the children of the ward, the leader's sharp reply is: “Our children have no time to waste” (173). Of course, the ward leader fails to understand the intended meaning of his ‘teaching’, which Nirmal makes clear to Kusum: ‘I will teach them to dream’ (173). Nirmal wants to fulfill his re-enkindled revolutionary dream in this island. The orderly life at the island perhaps brings the image of the Marxian concept of ideal society to his mind and here the issue of displacement and survival merges with the discourse of revolution.

The government would not tolerate the illegal settlement of migrants who have violated Forest Law by settling at Morichjhāpi, which was a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest. Consequently, they must be evicted and sent back to Dandakaranya. Persuasion fails to make the refugees abandon their settlement and they try to build a resistance against the state. In reply to their resistance the state machinery unleashes inhuman



atrocities to control them. The Left Front West Bengal government started, on January 26, 1979, an economic blockade of the settlement with thirty police launches and from May 14 to 16 the Government ordered forcible evacuation of the refugees. The community was tear-gassed, huts were razed, and fisheries and tube wells were destroyed, in an attempt to deprive refugees of food and water. 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 refugees established their own form of governance based on the principle of equal human rights and the state deprives the human rights to them in the name of animal rights.

The government attitude to the refugees becomes clear in the novel from Nilima's perspective. She thinks that what they (the settlers) have done is unlawful. Nirmal, on the other hand, holds anti-establishment view and truly supports the cause of the settlers. However, there is a basic difference between Nirmal and the settlers, as already pointed out: for Nirmal fighting against the exploitative state machinery is a matter of ideology – a choice not forced upon him; he had the freedom of choice. The settlers, on the other hand, choose the path of rebellion only when their very survival is in danger -- when they have no other choice. For the people of the island going against the government is not a matter of ideology but of basic human instinct-- the desire to live. Their point of view is well expressed by Kusum in the novel: “and our fault, our crime, was that we are just human beings , trying to live as human beings always have , from the water and the soil. No human being could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing by clearing land by planting the soil” (262). The issue of revolution and survival in the novel, thus, become inseparable.

### **Conclusion: The ‘Bhadrasamaj, the Failed Revolutionary and the Social Worker**

The islanders try to garner support of the ‘bhadrasamaj’ by inviting the city intellectuals into the island. These representatives of the ‘bhadrasamaj’ make hollow speeches in praise of the settlers but in their own cynical mind they know that the refugees will be evicted. The effort of the settlers to make their voice heard is doomed to fail, as the city intellectuals are part of the establishment .This is made evident from the conversation between Nirmal and his old mate Khokan. Khokan knows that the government is going to use force to evict these people, and when Nirmal fears that there may be bloodshed he reminds Nirmal, “You can’t make an omlette without breaking eggs”. Khokan an erstwhile revolutionary has turned to a cynic: “He laughed in the cynical way of those who, having never believed in the ideals they once professed, imagined that no one else had done so either”( 192).

He has fulfilled his personal dream by joining the establishment leaving behind the revolutionary ideal. Nirmal could not metamorphose himself and he remains a revolutionary still. No doubt Ghosh directs his criticism against Khokan but, I think, it is done not because of the loss of his revolutionary ideal in him but because of his hypocrisy. Simultaneously, we

should also note that Nirmal is also subjected the critical eye which is evident from the fact that he repeatedly referred to as a 'dreamer' and an impractical man ( Nilima on one point asks Nirmal, " Niramal you have no idea of what it takes to do anything practical" (214) ). This repeated reference to him as a 'dreamer' takes away much of the weight of his character and forces the readers to recall certain ironical figures like Don Quixote, thereby problematizing the discourse of revolution in the novel. Whereas the narrative of the rebellion of the settlers against the government for the cause of their own survival is straight forward, the narrative of the two revolutionaries is fraught with irony.

The irony becomes more evident when we contrast the narrative of Nirmal and Khokan with that of Nilima. Nilima is neither a dreamer nor a self-seeker. She is a practical woman who uses the state machinery for the benefit of the people of Lusibari. By establishing the Badabon Trust she is able to establish herself, find a root for herself. She is the only character in the novel who somewhat seems to conquer her displacement.

Is Nilima then, the answer to the question of displacement, survival and revolution in the novel? The question remains.

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