

Re-mapping the Sense of Place with Jungle for Identity: A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

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Abstract

Man cannot live in vacuum; he must attach himself to a sense of place for his identity as his identity depends on the intrinsic relationship with his surroundings. Naturally, he is indulged into a great identity crisis if he is uprooted from his place as is faced by the characters in bhatir desh in Ghosh's The Shadow Lines and in the Forest of Arden in Shakespeare's As You Like It. Present paper dwells upon how the visible imprint of human activity in their place of living reflects their values, norms and the aesthetics of their culture and how they are indulged into a crisis in an adverse situation.

Key Words: intrinsic relationship, space, diaspora, community identity, janjlee, Partition

Man has a natural and reciprocal relationship with the place he belongs to. Both the place and the people belonging to that place owe their identity to each other. In fact, one's identity depends on the intrinsic relationship with the surroundings. But sometimes they are indulged into some crisis due to some natural disaster, calamity, political or social turmoil with their place of identity that creates, in a broader level, much more crisis in individual, community, social, religious or national identity. It is also noteworthy that in such a crisis people in the periphery, especially woman in general with all other marginalized people become subjected to be much more victimized than the central or main-stream people. Amitav Ghosh's novels are obsessed with this particular phenomenon- conflict in one's identity-formation, in which nature (geography), fate (history) and human endeavour criss-cross in the life of various characters having a background in the form of the sense of place. The local cultural landscape or the visible imprint of human activity in their place of living reflects their values, norms and the aesthetics of their culture. This also includes how they have shaped the environment to serve their own purposes, and how they themselves become a part of the total environment by developing a 'sense of place' of their own.

If in *The Hungry Tide* the people of the tide country identify their 'space' in this world in relation to a unique place, the Sunderbans and in *The Shadow Lines* it is Bengal undivided, in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, it is the Forest of Arden. In these play and fictions by two different artists from the two ends of the world the similarity lies in the uniqueness of the place that has become a part of who the inhabitants are. In other words, they have developed a 'sense of place', the place that is related to particular articulation of the social, historical and geographical relations. Part of these relations of a place is the outcome of the embedded assumptions about their peripheral identity grown out of a sense of displacement, diaspora and a dream of a new society. The only difference is that Ghosh's people are forced to shift from their accustomed place of living to somewhere uncomfortable whereas Shakespeare's characters are banished from the court to enter into an unknown forest where they found themselves more comfortable.

The English Forest of Arden must have carried for Shakespeare a double appeal--- first because Mary Arden was the name of his mother and also the name of the forest country around his Stratford. While discussing the atmosphere in *As You Like It* Prof. Dowden said that Shakespeare, when he had written this idyllic play, was himself in the Forest of Arden. Naturally, its presence is pervasive in the play. Ghosh, on the other hand, devotes a whole chapter entitled 'The Tide Country' in order to set the entire fiction on the background of such an archipelago that bears a mythical attachment to the Ganges and to create a 'sense of place' mixed up with fact and fiction.

The Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* is breathtakingly beautiful and titivated with great oak trees, running brooks, green pastures, banks of willows, flowers, birds, sheep and deer. In the Robin Hood tradition it forms an alternative court in the greenwood as well as stipulates festivity and joyousness in life investing the flora and fauna with some symbolic significance (olive for peace, lioness for royal beauty, or gilded snake for sin and redeeming). Charles, the wrestler says, 'They say he is already in the Forest of Arden and a many merry men with him, and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England. Once in the Forest, all the court characters find their 'selves'. Orlando and Rosalind are both put out of their precepts by passion, as are poor lovesick Silvius and deluded Phebe. Touchstone, who dislikes it for it is 'private' without any audience to hear his jest, finds happily at last that it is full of lively people enjoying him. But it casts also a working atmosphere with shepherds, a goat-girl called Audrey, foresters and locals. Within that environment Shakespeare has sketches the social tensions of his own time. Here the exiled courtiers are liberated not only from all negativity like envy, suspicion, treachery, but also from hierarchy. The 'co-mates' or 'companions of Duke Senior become 'attendants' to Duke Frederick. The social subversion of hierarchy has been used by Shakespeare as an assault on so-called civil norms. William Hazlitt described the forest as an 'ideal' realm, a description both true and misleading. The ideal is blended with the real and the real with the ideal. Just as Rosalind represents the

binaries of heterosexual and the homosexual, masculine and feminine that have been manifested in the figure of Rosalind, the Forest of Arden represents the polarity of the real and the ideal. On the other hand, Ghosh's Sunderban Jangal itself and its associated myths, customs and rituals have a formative influence, in the formation of a distinct community identity for the tide countrymen. The uniqueness of this jangal has been picturesquely explored by the deft hand of Amitav Ghosh. It is a mangrove forest and is 'a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles' (Ghosh: 2006: 7). The topographical name, 'Sunderban' may have been derived from the name of a common species of mangrove – the Sundari tree, *Heritiera minor*. This dense forest is a safe shelter for tigers, snakes and crocodiles. It is often impenetrable because of its tough and leathery mangrove leaves and gnarled branches. '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 and expel them' (Ghosh : 2006 : 8). It is the eternal denial of human interference by Nature in its activity. Nature's playful happiness is evident in this immense archipelago of islands in the region of the *mohona* in the Sunderbans, where five or six rivers interflux and 'the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumour of land, echoing back from the horizon ... The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later.' (Ghosh: 2006:7). It is Nature's own right to shape or reshape, break or build the islands and the peninsulas at its own will. Human endeavour to deforest or install *badh* for their own habitation is of Nature's aversion and it often causes Nature's fury against human beings. Man's formation of their society, social communities, community folkways, myths and legends depend much on such eternal conflict.

Just like Shakespeare's Forest of Arden, in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, jungle is the basic correlator. The settlers in the Sunderbans made their own place of living by hacking at the forests with their *daas* (Ghosh:2006: 52), the place which would be called '*jangala*' in the earlier sense. This '*Jangala*' suggests a balance between society and nature encompassing the intrinsic value of the 'total environment'. The people living in '*jangal*' and treated as '*janglees*' believe in distinct values, develop a distinct paradigm almost opposite to that of the so-called civilized people who with their colonial hangover are made to believe on the derogatory meaning of 'jungle' extinguishing the ancient meaning of the term in accordance with the cultural tradition of India. The people of the tide country have been facing a cultural displacement along with their diasporic experience. The characters like Piyali, Kanai, Nirmal, Nilima, Fokir, Kusum, Horen and others have gone through such kind of identity crisis because of displacement and diasporas along with 'cultural appropriation' based on other values. Since the coming of the first settlers in the 1920s, the natives have been facing the cultural appropriation either by the western people like Piya or by the so-called 'enlightened'

Indians like Nirmal and Nilima. But they never detach them from their own beliefs, myths, and rituals and customs through which they sustain their local ethnic culture that incorporates a homogeneous population irrespective of their religious boundaries and become cohesive in cultural traits. Rather it is unique in case of the Sunderbans that the tide people have been able to assimilate the foreign cultures and a counter-cultural appropriation takes place in which nobody is left unaffected. It is in the colonial conspiracy that they attempted to tag the encountering culture as rudely 'savage' or humbly 'mystic' considering their own culture as paradigmatic or 'authentic'. But Ghosh's novel emerged as a protest suggesting that a folk culture need not be either savage or mystical in order to create an 'authentic' identity for them. It is itself 'authentic' and its own cultural identity survives in confrontation with the colonial cultural appropriations. The so-called 'enlightened' cultural people like Nirmal with a dream of a Utopian society in the western parameter or Piya with the eye of a cetologist-researcher turn out to be affected by a counter-cultural appropriation and both of them end up as gropers in the archipelago of mystic hearts of the tide people. Another important character, Kusum, revolves like a whirlwind in search for her identity with a place. She may have done it unknowingly because of her lack of opportunity or ability for self-assessment in her continuous struggle to survive meaningfully in this world. When she was a little child of six or eight years, she lost her father in a sudden attack by a ghostly tiger. That tragic incident has been very delicately described first by Kusum herself, the only witness, to Kanai (Ghosh: 2006 : 107-8), and then by Horen to Kanai during his second visit to the tide country (Ghosh : 2006 : 362). The author here is very successful not only in evoking sympathy for Kusum who bears the tasting impression of her father's death, but also to reinforce the cruelty of Nature and her creation, the 'ghostly' tiger or *bagh*, the word the people even dare pronounce as they believe that 'to say it is to call it' (Ghosh : 2006 : 108). Kanai's sympathy for Kusum may have turned to childhood infatuation at times, but the author's directedness re-tracked the readers on her struggle for an identity with a place. Informations have been given about the misfortune of Kusum's mother, who, in order to fetch a livelihood after her husband's death had been fallen in the hands of people involved in women-trafficking like Dilip who had sold her to other *danobs*. But attention has never been diverted from Kusum's life long struggle – her escaping from Dilip's hand with the help of Horen, rejection of Horen's marriage proposal, searching for her mother at Dhanbad, her marriage to a lame *ghugniwala*, Rajen, finding out her mother, her mother's death, her giving birth to a son, Fokirchand and finally the unfortunate death of Rajen in a an accident at the Dhanbad railway platform. From the atmosphere of the iron-stuffed Dhanbad, her loneliness has now been turned into her longing for mud, water and the *bhatir desh*. At this moment she is happened to meet some unfortunate refugees heading towards that *bhatir desh* from Dandakaranya, joins them with her son and reaches Morichjhapi. Perseverance joins hand in hand with powerful dream; she sacrifices

her life in the Morichjhapi massacre for the sake of the people of the *bhatir desh* and their future generation in order to possess an identity with place.

The sense of place for identity gets another dimension when with the Forest of Arden Shakespeare delicately puts the 'hunt' motif in the traditions of aristocratic sport against a larger ecological background related to men and beasts. The term 'forester' meant, during the Renaissance, equally the huntsmen who as exiled lords hunt for sustenance or the genuine aristocratic hunter and also their forest-keeper who protect the environment for the beasts. But Shakespeare's felicitous use of this term in *As You Like It* suggests the opposite meaning of what it has been originally meant for during the Renaissance, and asserts emphatically that the term is antipathetic to the working and hunting environment of forest. The hunt in forest is juxtaposed with that in the court ---Oliver's hounding of Orlando, Duke Frederick's hounding of Oliver and banishment of Rosalind, usurpation of his own brother's dukedom. This realm of envy, whispering, eavesdropping, spreading rumours, wrestling-contest as amusement for the idle court which is part of court culture has been transmuted in the Forest of Arden into the hunting of deer. However, from another perspective, the Forest of Arden offers a setting for the joyousness of 'holiday humour', of carnival and feasting. Fools, shepherds and nobility, disempowered patriarchs and crossed-dressed youths indulge into merry-making as well as into moral re-creation. Arden becomes a place of purgation and recreation, if not recreation. The magic that Rosalind has undergone with in this Forest eventually overpowers the court people---Duke, the Usurper is converted to the religious life paving the way to Duke Senior regaining his dukedom and allowing justice to be restored. The Forest of Arden has become a myth like Hamlet, Falstaff or Othello. Rooted in Elizabethan culture---books, topology, economics, social customs---the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* has grown, 'like the biblical mustard-seed, into a vast tree which casts shadows over other cultures and other times' (Juliet Dusinberre Ed., 50). Being the background of a play, the Forest transcends the theatre and manifests the stature of myth. The Forest of Arden not only provides us with an alternative court in the forest in the Robin Hood tradition but also provides the same festivity and enjoyment. This comparison is unequivocally made by Charles, the wrestler:

They say he is already in the Forest of Arden and a many merry men with hi,
and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England (Act 1, Sc.1)

It also symbolizes the freedom from hierarchy as the courtiers here have been liberated from being subordinates and became 'co-mates' as the Duke greets them in his opening line, Duke Senior's lords became 'companions' whereas the unchanged Duke Frederick's lords remained 'Attendants'. This social subversion of hierarchy or gender subversion of Rosalind in the mythical Forest of Arden is a violent blow to the civil and ecclesiastical authority.

Whatever be the place whether it is the Forest of Arden or the Sundarbans, characters get sustenance from and to the place of their living. Place itself becomes an unseen character

often pervading the entire world of the creation. Man cannot live in vacuum; he must attach himself to a sense of place for his identity. The Forest of Arden or the tide country or the 'Bhatir Desh' is both the magic circle of the natural environment and the canvas on which the two magician artists, Shakespeare and Amitav Ghosh conjure their creatures as well as their readers or audience.

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