

The Horrors of Colonialism: A Special Reference to Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide



Dr. Ritu Sharma

Dyal Singh College, Karnal

Indian abroad are not just people abroad. They are bundles of attitudes, convictions, anxieties, shared notions, fears and anticipations, all of which are Indians in their very texture. The links of Indian with India when in abroad is many times stronger than that of many other nationalities in similar situations. "Members of the family" for the Indians abroad includes different kinds of relatives with considerable and pronounced detachment in attitude and affection generally maintains a strong sense of belonging to India.

Two aspects about Indian Diaspora need to be emphasized: first, though abroad, Indian Diaspora is the product of Indian socio-political-cultural complex; second, it is not insulated against what goes on taking place in the mother country. Indian Diaspora continued and still goes on unabated, including skilled workers, businessmen, professionals, scientists and men and women of different cultures. The first generation of Diaspora has made their mark in many fields of activities in so many countries of the world.

"The story of Indian diaspora is one of the sweat and toil often washed with tears, of achievements despite impediments, of educational advancements and economic progress, of political success at times crushed by cruel coups. The descendants of this diaspora have also inevitably produced work of literature illustrative of their history and heritage, of their own awareness of their society and its problems, its achievements, its limitations and frustrations. Some of them have turned their attention to India to assess and understand the nature of their relationship with the land of their ancestors. They have explored their own Indianness in its uniqueness, its new geo-political and social context; its separation from the forces and factors that changed the face of India in the years following the emigration of their ancestors. The search for this identity goes on and finds their expression in their writings. The delineation of this identity constituent element in their character and collective psyche is not easily susceptible to succinct expression, but the attempt is as fascinating as it is untiring."¹

Many Indians overseas have revisited and researched the history and culture of their ancient land and produced works of great historical as well as literary merit that help us understand India with its baffling contradictions; its discords and divisions; its tolerance of religious diversity side by side with the painful apparition of bigotry and intolerance even evinced in barbarous violence; its message of one reality and no other, as well as its distinctions of caste and class despite their categorical repudiation in the scriptures and by the saints and sages of so many reform movements.

"When the people of a country living under an autocratic or oppressive rule want to throw off that rule and establish a new political set up of their own choice, the people of that country are said to have been imbued with the spirit of nationalism"²

In their zeal to show that they are by no means inferior to their rulers, they make a search for their own identity and try to affirm it. It is thus that the people of a country are roused by nationalism; make their efforts to distinguish their manners and customs, religious and social institutions and culture and civilization. Identity remains one of the most urgent as well as the hotly disputed topics in literary and cultural studies.

Amitav Ghosh, a world renowned novelist, was born in Kolkata (then Calcutta) in 1956. His father was an army officer that is why he got many chances to visit a number of countries including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Iran, Egypt and the United States. As an Indian and anthropologist Ghosh has been immensely influenced by the political and social milieu of the country. As an active anthropologist he never gives rest to his mind and thought. His long and deep contemplation about India, its people and its culture is widely reflected in his works.

Amitav Ghosh's famous novel *The Hungry Tide* was published in 2004 and was awarded one of the Best Works in English Fiction in Hutch Cross Book Award. **The Hungry Tide** has been divided into two parts: Part I - *The Ebba: Bhata*, Part II: *The Flood: Jowar*. **The Hungry Tide** is about migration, cultural dispersion and assimilation, globalisation and its circuits of movement and exchange. It transports the reader into a place and time about which people know very little.

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The Hungry Tide tells a very contemporary story of adventure, love, identity and history; set in one of the most fascinating regions on the earth. Off the easternmost coast of India, in the Bay of Bengal lies the immense labyrinth of tiny islands known as the Sundarbans. For settlers, life is extremely precarious. Without warning, tidal floods rise and surge over the land, leaving devastation in their wake. In this place, the lives of three people from different worlds collide.

Piyali Roy is a young marine biologist of Indian descent but stubbornly American. Her Journey begins with a disaster when she is thrown from a boat into crocodile - infested waters. Rescue comes in the form of a young fisherman Fokir. Piyali engages Fokir to help with her research and finds a translator in Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi whose idealistic aunt and uncle are long time settlers in the Sundarbans; Kanai comes to visit his widowed aunt and to review some writings left behind by his uncle. Both Piyali and Kanai disturb the delicate balance of settlement life and set in motion a fateful cataclysm. From this moment, the tide begins to turn. **The Hungry Tide** is a prophetic novel of remarkable insight, beauty and humanity. Marshal Zeringue explores that **The Hungry Tide** is a story about the 1979 massacre of refugees by government forces who had settled the village of Morichjhapi. Through Nirmal's journal, Amitav Ghosh tells us about this historical event as well as the search of identity of the refugee settlers from the island of Morichjhapi in the Sundarbans and the massacre done by left front government of West Bengal in 1979. The story of Morichjhapi occupies a central place in **The Hungry Tide** by which Amitabh Ghosh wants to explore human struggle, conflict and desire to re-settlement. To each, the Sundarbans represents something different but for all they become, "a proliferation of small worlds.....a meeting not just of many rivers, but a roundabout people can use to pass in many from country to country and even between faiths."³

The Hungry Tide reveals the characters' quest to know the history about Lusibari, Hamilton House and Sir Daniel Hamilton using story telling method and flashback techniques. **The Hungry Tide** elaborates the conditions of resettlement which is harsh and alien. In 1978, a group of refugees fled from the Drandakarnya camp in Madhya Pradesh and came to the island of Morichjhapi in the Sundarbans with the intention of settling here. They cleared the land for agriculture and began to fish and farm. But their presence there alarmed the left front ministry and settlers were evicted in a brutal display of state power in May 1979. Many, like the girl Kusum, were killed in this massacre. Nirmal's idealist hopes had been killed and he himself is shattered by the events and never recovers. After Morichjhapi massacre, the victory of Bengali refugees, when Nirmal, Horen and Rajon went to the house to see Kusum. They wanted to know about Kusum and her struggle. When the question is asked about her conditions, she again asked question and made everyone to think about this massacre:

"It was terrible to see Kusum; her bones protruded from her skin, like the ribs of drum and she was too weak to rise from her mat. Fokir, young as he was, appeared to have weathered the siege in better health and it was he who was looking after his mother."⁴

Nirmal and Neelima came to Sundarbans after their marriage when Nirmal's revolutionary ideas became too dangerous in Calcutta. In starting, their settlement in Lusibari was very difficult. Working as headmaster when he approaches near retirement, he feels that his wife was poorly spent because he never lived up to his revolutionary ideas. He secretly envies his wife for achieving what she did and he is overwhelmed with a sense of uselessness for having achieved practically nothing for all his bluster about revolution. The conflict of Nirmal Bose has been given as "Life as he approaches retirement the true tragedy of a routinely spent life is that its wastefulness doesn't become apparent till it's too late." The feeling of alienation was in the behaviour of Nirmal felt by Nilima, his wife. He became changed after his visit to Morichjhapi.

After 30 years of the death of Nirmal Bose, when Piyali and Kanai reached Lusibari, Neelima got herself involved in Piyali. While discussing with Piyali, Neelima feels alienation of her own life. **The Hungry Tide** explores the quest of Nilima Bose after marriage. In Lusibari, Nilima made a women union and everyone calls her Mashima. At the age of seventy, she called up Kanai to show the packet left by her husband for him. She was closely linked with Kusum as well as Kanai. She achieved success and respect in Lusibari but always felt uneasiness in her husband's presence.

The Hungry Tide also touches upon the quest of Kusum who had to depend on women union after her father's death. But her aspirations make her strong. She wants to be educated herself and to be a nurse for Lusibari's hospital.

At the age of forty, when Kanai returned to Lusibari, to meet Nilima, he was surprised to see Moyna, Kusum's daughter-in-law's quest to win life. Even Kanai feels concerned about the struggle, Moyna has undergone in her life:

"Just think of life she's led, said Kanai. She's struggled to educate herself against heavy odds. Now she is well on her way to become a nurse. She knows what she wants - for herself and her family - nothing is going to keep her from pursuing it. She is ambitious, she's tough and she's going to go a long way."⁽¹⁴⁶⁾

The Hungry Tide also expresses Piyali's alienation in India during her visit. She is a cytologist who is of Indian parents but remains stubbornly American in orientation and temperament. She is the daughter of Bangla parents who had immigrated to Seattle. She is a woman used to solitude and rigors of the life of a scientist working in a field. She decides to work in an area where she knows neither of customs nor the language. She can survive for some days on just energy bars and ovation. Her life quest is to create a body of knowledge on the river dolphin which is on the verge of extinction. She perceives herself to have been overlooked by life and loneliness is slowly closeting her gradually. She creates an aura of self - sufficiency around her to keep away from unwanted

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intrusion in her life. **The Hungry Tide** reveals Piyali's search for marine life. She is not able to understand language of that region but she decides to come here with some cards. With her cards, she starts her search. Ghosh touches upon the quest of Piyali:

"When communication was possible, she would show them to fishermen and boatmen and ask questions about sightings, abundance, behaviour, seasonal distribution and so on. When there was no one to translate she would hold up the cards and wait for a response. This often worked; they would recognise the animal and point her to places where they were commonly seen" (32)

The Hungry Tide explores Piyali's quest to know about her identity. In her life with her parents, she hadn't listen a single word about Indian Heritage. Her quest for love brings her to Fokir when she feels jealous of his wife. She feels herself alienated but for safety, Fokir sacrificed his life.

Ghosh adds that according to Piyali, her life had been complicated. She explained her life to Nilima which underlines her feeling of alienation and rootlessness in her life: "You see, my father's parents were Bengalis who'd settled in Burma- they came to India as Refugees, during the Second World War. Having moved around a lot, my father has all these theories about immigrants and refugees. He believes that Indian- Bengalis in particular don't travel well, because their eyes are always turned backwards, towards home. When we move to America, he decided he was not going to make that mistake, he was going to try to fit in it." (249)

The Hungry Tide explores the character of Kanai Dutt, an interpreter, who runs a successful translation business in Delhi. In his childhood, he had been in Lusibari as a teenager. After rustication from school for his pride and arrogance, he had been sent by his parents. He is now been summoned by Nilima because of a packet left for Kanai by her late husband, Nirmal which has just been found some twenty years after his death. The packet now left for Kanai contains important information. As Kanai read the pages, its narrative of past events at the end of Nirmal's life revolves around Kusum, her son Fokir and the catastrophic struggle of the dispossessed to form a new society on the island of Morichjhapi. This is a life which Kanai fails to understand. His wealth, servants and pride have no values here, while he himself feels superior to Fokir. He tries to seduce Piyali but begins to realise something extraordinary about that diasporic Indian Marine Biologist.

Fokir's eye always shows his quest for life for, his livelihood, for his parents. He has not seen ever his mother. While his journey to Nirmal, Nirmal acquainted his quest and explained it.

Fokir's quest can be felt in his conversation, his notes, his music and his lifestyle. Piya feels herself secure with Fokir. She imagines about Fokir's life. But she feels sympathy for Fokir when she comes to know about his life. Both had similar childhood. Both had grown up without mother even Fokir's conditions were much poor. She doesn't understand his language, but feels grief and isolation in his music.

At the end of the novel, both Kanai and Piyali return to Lusibari to live with Kanai's aunt Nilima. They both returned due to their personal and professional quest. Kanai wants to rewrite from memory, his uncle's journal which was lost during a storm and which contains records of local culture and Morichjhapi Massacre; Piyali wants to continue her research on dolphins by partnering with Nilima's NGO so that international organisations can contribute funds to help them both.

The Hungry Tide, thus, relates local, national and global levels of consciousness with each other. Piyali's research is situated between the local and the global, while Kanai's re-writing mediates between the local and the nation. **The Hungry Tide** emphasizes the positive contributions of professional dedication in contrast to Nirmal's revolutionary romanticism and his alienation felt in the tide country.

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The Hungry Tide transports the reader to a remote time and place and gives people information and feeling about something they knew very little about. One remark holds views about it as an "armchair safari" in the Sundarbans, the tidal country between India and Bangladesh. These terms "tourism" and "safari" suggest an anachronism and irreducible difference in which the people and the places are depicted. There is some sort of pre-modern wilderness and they appear to be remote and cut off from "our" modernity "over here". The issues of social class barriers appear in **The Hungry Tide** twice over across two generations - in the refugees' revolt of which Kusum is a part and in the friendship that develops across the cross lines between Fokir, her illiterate son and the cosmopolitan outsider Piya.

The Hungry Tide is the work produced by Amitav Ghosh at the peak of his power. It is geographically quite narrow. It is limited to the Sundarban islands in the Bay of Bengal and perhaps by extension Bengal. It is conceptually limited - basically to conceptual plots. First it explores the plight of displaced people especially group of refugees from Bangladesh who found themselves in a confrontation with the Indian state in 1979. The other conceptual question is how humans share a complex and dangerous system with animals. Amitav Ghosh has discovered yet another new territory, summoning a singular place from its history, language and myth and bringing it to life. Yet the achievement of **The Hungry Tide** is in its acceleration of a particle and more unknowable Jungle the human heart. Amitav Ghosh presents a ruthless appraisal of the horrors of colonialism.

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