

## Myth, Politics and Ethnography in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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**ABSTRACT:** Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a representation of a post modern text as it interpellates within itself a significant number of creative and critical oeuvre that was traditionally thought as binaries. In Ghosh's text, history and myth flows into each other's domain, thereby constructing a fluid wall in the construction of canonical genres since what is myth and what is history depends on the subjective position of the interpreter in terms of the relation he shares related to time and space with the narrative in question. The paper proposes to look into the various aspects of myth creation in terms of historical narratives, as also ethnographic ones so that a time inflected narrative is the outcome where the 'story' is both within time and outside it. The paper focuses on the cultural politics that comes with identity creation and the subsequent pitfalls that are the obvious outcome of such an exercise. The emphasis is on the construction of history as a part of one's own lived experiences that gives history a kind of subjective perspectivalisation as also a narrativisation that is dependent on the way the narrator wants to envision it. Finally the paper also proposes to look into the ethnic local beliefs in the myth and how the insider/outsider dialectic is constructed as a result of such a diachronic system where myths are more appropriated by the locals as they form a part of the local cultural system than the outsiders, who take time to understand the given coordinates of the function called culture.

**Keywords/ Phrases:** *Bon Bibi*, epistemology, ethno-history, historicity, meta-textuality, settler community, syncretism.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* as a text is a significant literary piece in the contemporary era, simply because as a text, it reflects upon the spatio-ethical context of the Sundarbans, where there is a merging of the physics with the metaphysics. Sundarbans, as a setting itself is significant enough because, as the text says, it is a land that lies between the sea and the land- a concurring literary and philosophical motif to barge on the human mind's quest for the unknown. Ghosh brings in a large number of issues in the text- ranging from the Morichjhapi massacre, the cult of the tiger, the diaspora, as also the local realities. The text then almost gains a mythical momentum in the sense that everything merges and flows into a fluid system where nothing seems to be the way it actually is. Pia's visit to the Sundarbans for her Ph.D. marks the entry point to the story, and the entire narrative focuses on the way she comes to know of the local cultural psyche, and there are counter narratives too, especially that of the diary of Kanai's uncle that relates us to the Morichjhapi massacre. Parallely, the *Bon Bibir Johuranama* forms a narrative in the text that constructs the mythico-ethical space that is almost related to human consciousness from the immemorial time. *Bon Bibi*'s myth is a part of the *bot-tola* literature that came out of the ancient locations of souther part of Kolkata, especially in the Kalighat region, often known in the local lingo as *potua para*, or a locality where artists carved out figurines from mud. Here, some pamphlets were published in late nineteenth or early twentieth century regarding the folklores and local tales from different parts of Bengal, and Bon Bibi and Dakhin Ray made their appearances in these local pamphlets as local supra-human beings in South 24 Parganas, especially in the delta region of Sundarbans. In Ghosh's text, the diary of Nirmal, Kanai's uncle and the myth narrative of *Bon Bibir Johuranama* meet at a common coordinate- the space where myth becomes the ruling principle of people's existence. Fakir's piety to the goddess Bon Bibi and Nirmal's disgust at the Morichjhapi massacre, conducted by the ruling political elite reflect a space where everyone seems to be perpetually on the brink of extinction- politically, historically as also mythically. There is no one to rescue Nirmal's family and the scores of others who were surrounded by the police before the mass murder, but in the pages of the myth, Bon Bibi do come to rescue Dukhe, the small boy from Dakhin Ray, the tiger, but even then the tiger prowls around as an unmentionable atavism that is best revered fearfully than challenging. In the tide country, one's identity is pushed to its limits, thereby it often so happens that identity gets more defined by one's point of view of the local space and the historicized narrative that defines the culture of that space, rather than preconceived notions or prejudices of the self.

*The Hungry Tide* depicts the reality of such a cultural system where recorded history, unrecorded human tales, myth and politics- all coalesce to form a narrative where the setting is an immense group of archipelagoes called the Sundarbans, which seems to have a trans historical presence because as Kanai would have it, it seems to have remained the same across many generations. The layers of mud seem to replicate the multi checkered history that Sundarbans have experienced from the dawn of human existence. The history of Morichjhapi is rewritten for fictional purposes by Ghosh, which relives the moment of massacre in Bengal under the stewardship of both the central and the state governments. Family is reborn in the moment of tragedy and human bond is made to struggle in the time of extreme social pressure, as the refugees from Bangladesh come and form a settler community in Morichjhapi to survive after the formation of Bangladesh, after being forcefully evicted from Dandakaranya. Ghosh writes in the novel:

“In 1978 it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi... But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhapi; it was from a government resettlement camp in central India... ‘They called it resettlement’, said Nilima, ‘but people it was more like a concentration camp, or a prison. They were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave’”. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 118)

The issue of resettlement becomes an important issue here since a settler colony, as it were, has its own cultural and ideological forces, the theoretical background to which can be later harped back upon. But the larger issue is who the settlers are and where is the colony at all? Is West Bengal a lesser ‘Bangla’ desh or is it so that the dominant ideology is trying to colonise the cultural capital of the settler communities who seem to have been caught in a hopeless battle of existence with the power centre? If the evicted was to be butchered in the planned manner, then what happens to larger question of identity formation through language? The settlers speak Bengali too, as in the manner of the natives, but what Ghosh points out through his rewritten history is that the evicted were politically stamped as somewhat anti-social and a threat to the stability of the nation, but in reality was a damning political statement of a State that has gone to war and has won. That is why a man like Nirmal, who is so enthusiastic about a proletariat revolution in Bengal cannot match his ideology with the ruthless state power which tries to subordinate the have-nots through the state machinery- very surprisingly so since the Left Front government was sworn to power in Bengal in 1977 and Morichjhapi happened in 1978.

*The Hungry Tide* as a novel is a historicized account of what happened in those ill-fated days, when a mass massacre was conducted in Marichjhapi, and Kanai becomes the secondary observant in those incidents through the personal diary records of Nirmal. The political siege of the Marichjhapi settler colony created a sociological disaster, as Nirmal notes in his diary:

“The siege went on for many days...food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tubewells...the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out.” (Ghosh, *THT*, 260)

The history of Bengal was at the cross-roads once again, and the dominant politics had yet again created a crisis on human rights. Ross Mallick, in his essay “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre” notes:

“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 central government's Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission, which was aware of the massacre, said in its annual report that there were no atrocities against Untouchables in West Bengal, even though their Marichjhapi file contained newspaper clippings, petitions, and a list with the names and ages of 236 men, women, and children killed by police at Marichjhapi *prior* to the massacre, including some who drowned when their boats were sunk by police.”<sup>1</sup> (Mallick, 111)

It is therefore quite interesting to figure out what Ghosh is trying to do in his novel. Is he merely rewriting history or is he trying to construct an artifact from the historicized versions of various narrative accounts? The answer perhaps is not unproblematic, Ricoeur noting in “Narrative Time” that “historicality” is something that has a multi-dimensional construct after taking into its fold the narratives of memory, past and space, and finally “deep temporality” which “elicits a configuration from a succession”(Ricoeur 166, 167, 174). So instead of a chronological construct of history, there is a movement towards a personalized text of myth formation through historical accounts that has more of a quality of a story than a claim for authenticity in facts. Nirmal’s diary is therefore not a history per se, it is a personal record of what Nirmal had been through in Marichjhapi. The space of the novel is reoriented in order to incorporate the individual experiences of Nirmal, Horen and Kusum- all tied together in a moment of history that is so fraught by coercive politics, leading to the ultimate tragedy. Kusum is the symbol of fortitude in the tide country, where the physical and metaphysical forces meet to wreak havoc on the human civilization but even she breaks down at a point when she starts to believe that she will not survive to protect her son Fokir. The identity politics reaches a crescendo of irony when the government issues the notice that the settler’s occupancy is against the Forest Acts, but the economically

downtrodden is not given any space to settle after their eviction from their native land. "It is debatable whether the CPM placed primacy on ecology or merely feared this might be a precedent for an unmanageable refugee influx with consequent loss of political support" (Ross Mallick, 107). Nirmal in his diary captures this mood of helplessness on the part of the refugees who are dislocated from their socio-cultural space, and worst of all they become migrants, being forcefully made rootless and they suffer the consequence of not belonging to any locale- hungry and helpless, the settlers are left to the mass killing only to get wiped out from the map of inherited values and memories.

The reality of migration not only changes the social structure of the locales from and to which it happens, the psychic effect can at times be devastating. Epistemologically, the cartographic mapping of spaces is done more by perceptions than any concrete values, because the latter does not even exist. It is really then a matter of filling up the vacuum with constructed versions of reality:

"That is the trouble with an infinitely reproducible space; since it does not refer to actual places it cannot be left behind... Eventually the place and the realities that accompany it vanish from the memory and... the place, India, becomes in fact an empty space, mapped purely by words." (Ghosh, *Imam* 248-9)

The island of Marichjhapi becomes the site for an extended family that has a common case of tragedy, trying to fill up the spaces by mapping out their charter of rights that seems to be perfectly immobilized. Kanai's intellectual urge to write a social history in line with the *das* capital is received rather naively by Fokir, who has a better understanding of the rules prevalent in the island. In fact, the myth of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai that catches the imagination of Pia later on are not simply rustic myths that are nice bedtime stories for children. Myths reflect the cultural ethos of the space called the Sundarbans that is wrought with the history of the Marichjhapi massacres. If Kanai's connect with the past is his uncle's diary, Pia's search for her 'self' in her native land takes place through the myth narratives that she hears from Kanai and understands through the mystic actions of Fokir. *Bon bibir Johuranama* was produced in the *bot-tola* press in Bengal, in and around the alleys of north Calcutta and it reflects the mythical past of the southern part of Bengal that has a rich cultural heritage of folk literature. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh does not use the myth simply to make a Diasporic character to find her roots in the folk culture; rather the myths help Pia to come to terms with the metaphysical reality of the Sundarbans. Pia shows an acute awareness about the bodily presence of Fokir, to whom she has an undefined attachment, as mysterious as the impenetrable mangroves, showing an acute sub-conscious awareness of his physicality. Pia suffered a near fall in the mud, and then the novelist writes:

"Suddenly she was tipping over... But at just the right moment, Fokir appeared directly in front of her, with his body positioned to block her fall. She landed heavily on his shoulder and once again she found herself soaking in the salty smell of his skin" (Ghosh, *THT*, 151)

The cult of the tiger within the deep nook and corner of the forests maps out the cultural psyche of Fokir. Fokir seems to be the man who has internalized the cult of the tide country in the best possible ways. Every morning, Fokir lip-sorts certain prayers that Piya cannot understand linguistically, but she does note that it is meant for some reverential forces in order to receive protection from the tigers. Across spaces, Piya can gauge Fokir more than people who have seen him as a boy, and a part of the reason is that Piya is so respectful to the ethnographic reality of the tide country. She lets herself get appropriated within the psycho-ethnic space of the forests through Fokir, even though she fails to distinctly understand the rites that Fokir is performing. Fokir seems to be a product of religious syncretism as he prays both to Bon Bibi as also to the Muslim *Pir*. Sundarbans happen to be a unique space in the southern tip of West Bengal, where the Hindus and the Muslims merge their cultural rites, not only because of the fact that the struggling terrains force them to do so, but also because of a historical tradition, where both the communities have existed and flowed into each other's spaces for centuries. Even the text of *Bon Bibir Johuranama* incorporates such a syncretic model, acting as a protective goddess for both the communities. The field anthropologist Annu Jalais notes that in the realm of the forest, Bon Bibi is construed as a maternal super power, who is above the considerations that whether she is a Muslim or a Hindu- she is revered by all as the protector against Dokkhin Rai. The story goes that Dokkhin Rai did not like the intrusion of people in his territory and invoked Allah to drive them away. Later Bon Bibi came in the form of a savior (like the ultimate symbol of Shakti cult in Hinduism, which is more often than not perceived as feminine, like goddess Durga) and she was called into friendship by Dokkhin Rai's mother by invoking *Narayani*, the divine consort of the Hindu Godhead, *Narayan*. Jalais hence notes that such a syncretic model was reached because the *Johuranama* was written around 1800 by a Muslim, maybe Abdur Rahim or Mohammed Khater (Jalais, 71) in an Arabic form but in the Bengali language. Yet, the form of poetry is based on the ancient *Vaishnav Padabali*, poems based on the Vaishnavite cult of devotion and the cultural syncretism, already present in Bengal, gave rise to such a narrative. Fokir is a product of this ethno-religious syncretism, as she watches Fokir in Garjontola:

"Piya stood by and watched as Fokir and Tutul performed a little ceremony. First they fetched some leaves and flowers... then standing before the shrine Fokir began to recite some kind of chant... Piya recognized a refrain that occurred over and over again... 'Allah'" (*THT*, 152)

Piya is indeed confused that a Muslim man like Fokir, chanting out the name of Allah, should perform something like a Hindu 'puja', and that is where it becomes clear that in the tide country what matters is survival, and the Godhead who can provide with that is Bon Bibi.

As far as the thematic concern for the construction of family is concerned, Pia's undefined relationship with Fokir calls for a different construction of familial bond. It is indeed very symbolic that Pia cannot understand the local language of Bengali and her interactions with Fokir takes place purely at the plane of silence. Silence not only defines Pia's quest to understand Fokir, but it also reflects her urge to find the real meaning of 'home'. Home is not simply where the cultural roots lie; home requires a special psychological identification with the spatial quality of the place. Pia's hunt for the gangetic dolphins for her U.S based research takes her to the Sundarbans, but what she ultimately finds is far more than the Orcaellas. Fokir is the living embodiment of what happened in Marichjhapi so many years ago, and for him home has an added significance of the struggle for survival. Fokir takes his boat everyday to the shrine of Bon bibi to pray- a gesture that is almost impossible for Pia to understand but to Fokir it is a necessary act of devotion to survive in a land infested with tigers and crocodiles. Ghosh experiments with the narrative form of the novel by writing about the myth of Bon Bibi in a poetic form which can be scanned with ease. So the passages of *Bon Bibir Johuranama* are metered, which accounts for the fact that the world of the myth is a product of meta-textuality that pervades through texts and cultural impositions. He can easily utter the Holy word Allah and perform pujas which are more Hindu dominated cultural rites, but he has no dogma in a space where Allah and Bon bibi co-exist to protect the mortals from the attack of Dokkhin Rai. Religion is not an act of superstition, it is a signifying cult to outline the struggle that comes with surviving in a land that spares none- it did not spare the settlers from Dandakaranya. While talking about the politics of language, Deleuze and Guattari notes:

"Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has nothing to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come." (Deleuze and Guattari, 1603)

In a way, Pia also tries to write the spatial history of the tide country, using the translation capabilities of Kanai. Yet it is purely an act of psychological translation: trans-creating the time-space continuum of the Sundarbans into language that Pia knows. Surveying and mapping is done by Pia to find out the gangetic dolphins, but it is Fokir who constructs the real Sundarbans for her, with all its wild beauty, the local mythical realities and evading from the dangers of tigers and crocodiles that has no definite guidance in tourist booklets. The tide country is indeed a blank epistemological space that is given a form and language by Fokir and the trans-national flow of culture is achieved through the psychological mapping of the tide country in Pia, who returns to live permanently there. Fokir's death in the arms of Pia in a stormy night on a lonely island has an apocalyptic vision of a lost world that almost exists in the space of the bon bibi myths, away from the faculties of technological reality of Pia and Kanai's world, and creates a new family- the family of troubled minds that finds it hard to accept certain epistemes of reality, certain narratives of tragedy that forces them to reorient their versions of history with which they were in a comfort zone. In a world post the storm, Pia could suddenly spot a tiger- Dokkhin Rai, who ruled the cultural psyche of the tide country, and the storm gave her something else, "...it had fused them together and made them one"(Ghosh, *THT*, 390). This is the reality of the tide country; Pia's language merges with Fokir's silence in a distant space where myths are more potent realities than the 'rational' mind would like to believe.

What is quite striking in Ghosh is the fact that in his fiction, myth and history often coagulate into a complex narrative, losing their traditional binary response. The Marichjhapi massacre is a part of 'lived history' (a concept that Ghosh explicates further in *The Imam and the Indian*) for Nirmal, but for somebody like Kanai, it becomes a part of a distant memory, or perhaps a mythical construct, that is found in the personal diary of his uncle. Kanai is separated from Nirmal both in time and space; he only comes back to the tide country because his aunt wanted to hand him over the diary. Ethnography, politics and lived experiences therefore flow and interpellate into each other in Ghosh, perhaps thereby making him a writer of post modern fiction. Bon bibi's myth is ethnologically internalized by Fokir, who prays to her in order to appease the spirit of the forest, because he knows that in the tide country, a greater force rules the spirit that lies beyond the control of the human beings. Pia is almost frozen to despair when she finally sees the tiger- the whole scene thereby symbolizing an apocalyptic vision of cosmic collapse. Fokir breathes his last in Pia's arms and it seems that he has breathed his spirit onto Pia, who returns to Sundarban to permanently settle over there. If identity creation is itself a fluid experience, then it has to be acquiesced that identity becomes a negotiable entity in this novel. Both Pia and Kanai had presupposed notion of the tide country when they had first met in the Lakhikantapur local, and both of them emerge at the end as having a different notion of their own selves as also about the essential culture of Sundarban. Politics, history, myth and human bonds carve out their niche within a larger web of a metaphysical spirit that seems lurking deep within the human consciousness. In that space it is not human speech that matters, what matters is the awareness of local traditions, beliefs and politics that ensures a place in the topography.

## II. NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Letter from All India Scheduled Castes/Tribes and Backward Classes Employees Coordination Council to Bhola Paswan Shastri M.P., Chairman of the Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Subject: "Genocide Committed on the Scheduled Caste Refugees of Marichjhapi Island."

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