

Cross – Cultural Crisis in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

The intersection of cultures with global trends is evident everywhere. When one or more cultures are encountered into one environment, it causes disruption to the contemporary traditions. Owing to displacement and dislocation, one finds the characters getting on to suffer. They are subjugated and marginalized by a colonial hegemony that establishes itself as a super structure. Piya, the protagonist, enacts continuum of life by immediately moving on to watch, or rather do her research on the dolphins. Piya comes as a successful individual who has engaged this momentum of life as she begins to see the human in the dolphin.

The clash of cultures with global trends is evident everywhere. When one or more cultures are integrated into one environment, it causes disruption and challenge to the contemporary traditions. Ethnic nations, fragmented faiths, transnational business and professional groups find both their inward loyalties and their international contacts which leads them to question the political structures by which the world is still organised.

Owing to displacement and dislocation, one finds the characters getting on to suffer. They are subjugated and marginalized by a colonial hegemony that establishes itself as a super structure. As against the backdrop, Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* could be read and scrutinized. The characters face the problem of finding a space which is ready to accommodate them. The discovery of displacement frees them to live in the world as it is on its terms. Yumma Siddique comments:

To be a postcolonial subject is to be an unbidden guest at the table of modernity. Its fruits are spread delectably before one, economic development, political freedom, yet as one reader for these, one feels a hint of queasiness, for they evoke the postcolonial double bind. (14)

Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* encapsulates the crucial yet phenomenal evolution of modern life. He pins down his strong beliefs that cross - cultural experience is inevitable since the modern man has turned out to be socially mobile in the globalised post - structural infrastructure. Movement is a term which has been fixed in every individual and so immigrant experience constitutes the modern living.

The novel opens with Kanai who is watching Piya in the South Kolkata commuter station on the way to their common destination, the Sundarban islands. He sees Piya as “She was not Indian except by descent” (*The Hungry Tide* 3) [Hereafter referred to as HT]. With these few words, Ghosh establishes that American – raised Piya is out of place and she speaks her difference despite herself to Kanai. She is not a foreigner to India. By Kanai’s initial reading, Piya seems to be the classically confused woman who cannot speak her mother tongue and stands out like a sore thumb in the motley multitudes of India. But Piya is not simply a stranger to the Sundarbans as she finds there is much in and around Lusibari to speak to her of home.

Walking down the memory lance, Kanai remembers his days as a college student, when he is a pet to his uncle Nirmal and aunt Nilima. Kanai comes to the Sundarbans from Delhi to read a journal written and willed to him by his late uncle Nirmal, a romantic - intellect idealist in the tradition of the 1970 Bengal. With Nirmal in the forefront, Ghosh puts before the reader the problem of the migrants and the Morichjhapi incident. Ghosh avers: In the years after partition the authorities had removed the refugees to a place called Dandakaranya, deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of kilometers from Bengal . . . They called it “resettlement” but people say it was more like a concentration camp or a prison. They were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get down were hunted down. (118)

Piya has travelled to India to study the Gangetic dolphins in the rivers of the tide country. Her journey is neither strictly a home coming nor a venture into entirely unknown territory. She has been engaged in the research in the Sundarbans. She is only left to be alone. The forest area is new to her and this 'alien' feeling brings her the feeling of an 'outsider'. After being taken for a ride by a forest department guard and Mej-da, Piya observes that she "had no more idea of what her own place in the great scheme of things than she did of theirs - and it was exactly this, she knew that had occasioned their behaviour" (31).

Piya does not know her mother tongue which is incidentally the local language of the Sundarbans. She is really startled in the boat when she finds out that her guide cannot speak English. Ghosh beautifully records the language barrier thus: "Then pointing to the illustration of the Gangetic dolphin he asked if it were a kind. She understood him because he used the English word, 'Bird? Bird?'" (32-33). Piya's lack of local knowledge makes her to engage the services of Fokir, a local fisherman, for her research. Through the interaction between Piya, Kanai and Fokir and through their predicaments and their pasts, Ghosh explores the manifold cultural barriers of religion, class, language and gender that have been created in the course of the onward march of civilization.

Ghosh speaks against the narrowness of the human heart. The world is a 'salad bowl' on account of the simultaneous presence of numberless communities and groups, belonging to different religions, castes and nationalities. G. Rai has elaborated this concept thus: A number of different cultural groups are present in one place with little communication between them taking place. Each is confined to its own cell. Britans do not spend long enough in the West Indian cells nor do they invite West Indians to their cells either. (16)

Ghosh portrays the characters Kanai and his aunt Nilima to deal with the theme of alienation and the widow Nilima's existence gets on to signify the encased experience of loneliness and this desperate sense of isolation and alienation is saturated with the conflicting civilization as represented by Kanai and Piya. Ghosh never fails to present the desperation of the human condition and that is why Nilima comes as a helpless and lonely reflexive insider.

Ghosh unfolds the story of Nirmal, who hails from Dhaka. He reaches Calcutta as a student and after completing his studies he becomes a teacher and Nilima is his student. They fall in love with each other and they get married. Nilima's situations were utterly different from Nirmal's. She was from a family well known for its tradition of public service. In 1950 they first came to Lusibari in the Sundarbans in search of a safe asylum. But fortune was impossible and invisible in Sundarbans. It took some days for them to make their minds up. Ghosh writes:

Nothing was familiar; everything was new. What little they knew of rural life was derived from the villages of the plains: the realities of the tide country were of a strangeness beyond reckoning Many died of drowning, and many more were picked off by crocodiles and estuarine shark No day seemed to pass without news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile. The soil bore poor crops and could not be farmed all year around. Most families subsisted on a single daily meal. (79)

Nirmal and Nilima are shocked when their confrontation with a subaltern alternity makes clear the insularity of their affluent, scholarly lives. Horrified to learn of the high levels of poverty, corruption and deaths in the Sundarbans, they subject their beliefs to scrutiny: "How was it possible that these islands were a mere ninety - seven kilometers from home and yet so little was known about them?" (66).

Kanai blames Piya for the interest shown by her in protecting the wild life without any regard for the human cost and for being complicit with the western patrons. Piya asks Kanai: "Do you see anything easy about what I do? Look at me: I have no home, no money and no prospect. My friends are thousands of kilometers away" (302). The haunting sense of futility makes her more depressed but still she continues her research work.

Fokir's lack of language is to be seen along with Kanai's felicity in a number of languages and the narrator's observation is that "Speech was only a bag of trick that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being" (HT 159). Kanai is a translator who has the knowledge of six languages and runs a translation agency in Delhi. Though Kanai speaks six languages, he cannot achieve anything in alien culture

and place. When Piya asks Kanai to translate Fokir's song, he cannot translate it and he says: "You asked me what Fokir was singing and I said I could n't translate it: It was too difficult. And this was a history that is not just his, own but also of this Place, the tide country" (354).

Piya encounters not a broad - minded community but a spiritually deep rooted religion with its legendary cultural rites set in western society. Piya has lost her identity as Indian and thinks of herself simply as a scientist and researcher and works without emotion in solitude. She knows neither the customs nor the language and she cannot fully involve in all the matters in her mother country, India. She thinks herself as an outsider and alien. The fear of classism and castism strikes her frequently. Piya's dilemma is another immigrant experience which show cases her as a cross - cultural victim. Ghosh's idea of cross - culture is conceived and executed in the great humanist tradition.

The Sundarbans is not Nirmal's native place but he clings to it as a refugee. Both he and his wife Nilima establish a trust hospital in the Sundarbans. They first saw the Sundarbans as life killing place but soon they adopt themselves to the new environment. Nirmal is an embodiment of the romantic - idealist in whom the poet and revolutionary socialist Marxism attract him equally. He believes that utopia can be achieved by the revolution. Ghosh beautifully records Nirmal's dream as:

What he wanted was to build a new society, a new kind of country, it would be a country run by co-operatives He wanted to build a place where no one would exploit anyone and people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences. He dreamed of a place where men and women could be farmers in the mornings, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening. (53)

Nirmal's dream turns into vain because he is new to the Sundarbans and he could not predict and change the situation of the place. He dies as unsuccessful lover of the idea of revolution. After the death of Nirmal, Nilima takes charge of all the duties and responsibilities which is

left by Nirmal. She adapts to the new environment and she is ready to accept the Sundarbans as her native place. After a long time, Kanai visits the Sundarbans. He defies the utopian idea of Nirmal and he calls the Sundarbans as "these rat - eaten islands" (53).

One finds along with the immigrant experience a number of strands in the novel. It rests on one simple principle continuum of life. Ghosh intensifies the continuum with rivers and voyages and the continual play of the dolphins. In the novel, for example, after the death of two innocent villagers by the tiger, Piya enacts this continuum of life by immediately moving on to watch, or rather do her research on the dolphins. Piya comes as a successful individual who has engaged this momentum of life as she begins to see the human in the dolphin.

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