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Politics of Subjugation and (Re) locating Marginality: Reflection on Social Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* tells the story of the margins. Its background itself lies on the margin of West Bengal and it depicts the almost unheard story of the refugees coming in the 1970's. These refugees are powerless group without financial, commercial and political power. Still they have become victims of politics. The story of their lives has not found space in Bengali elite society and its voice has remained muted. Ghosh brings out the almost untold story in fictional garb. It recounts the final hours of turbulence in Morichjhapi island¹ which was forcibly cleared of refugees by police and military troops following a protracted siege. Peter Leonard defines marginality as, "...being outside the mainstream of productive activity and/ or social reproductive activity". There has been scarcity of fiction dealing with the turbulent lives of the Sundarban as there was political suppression. Ghosh takes interest in depiction of subjugation of the refugee people who took shelters in that area. They were excluded from the power and position found at the centre. In Sundarban natural phenomenon has always co-existed in conflicting situation with the mankind.² This novel is a narrative of dispossession and it challenges colonial history on the Indian subcontinent. Ghosh focuses on the tragedy of the personal lives against a massive historical sweep of Morichjhapi massacre. Ghosh has taken proper care to depict the milieu, customs, tradition and human beings' effort to carve out a new civilisation on the almost deserted land. The people are on the margins as government with its panoptical gaze has tried to silence them with its vicious political persecution. Ghosh calls into question the official narrative of political control. It is marginal people's narrative, thematically registering different histories of dispossession and migration and further setting forth the cultural significance of a smaller island. This island has remained as other world to most of urban citizens but it, in Ghosh's vision, proves to be an ideal world giving shelter to all the people irrespective of caste, class, religion, race,



ethnicity. Ghosh tries to point out marginal situation in a post-independence world from multiple points of view.

Keywords: Subaltern, margin, history, refugee, partition etc.

Partition of India has always been regarded as the most pertinent event in modern India. It was consummated in 1947. But its after-effects have structured the social life and nature of South Asia in a new way. It reduced both the citizens and refugees to stateless objects as they were evicted from their motherland and they had to embrace the unfamiliar soil as their abodes. In Indian continent it could be compared to the Holocaust of German. Ayesha Jalal calls this partition as-“A defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of Postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future” (4). Therefore, it was a dark period in Indian history as it led to the formation of a new nation-a nation which, metaphorically speaking, rose out of the ashes of burnt down country. Ultimately, India became able to shake off the chain of bondage from British rule but partition claimed many lives. The colonial force left India but it marked new scars. Therefore, many of the Indians think that the real freedom is yet to be achieved. Nehru thinks that, India had fulfilled a “tryst with destiny”³ with its attainment of Independence. But in the later years people have watched sites of pain. As a result, lakhs of people could not help bearing the brunt of partition. People of West Punjab and East Punjab left their homelands in thousands and they underwent excruciating torture in the hands of the orthodox Muslim who belonged to the major community in the then period. The partition of the country brought many hazards at the outset. Politicians of both sides could conjecture that it would somehow affect the countrymen. But they could not imagine how it would bring disastrous result upon the social life, values and passions of Bengalese. People could have the glimpse of several waves of exodus which took place after the Independence. But the exodus from East Bengal could not get public limelight as prominently as it found in the western front. The condition of the dalits became far more wretched and piteous. “Partition,” as Annu Jalais thinks, “however, meant that Dalits lost their bargaining power when they were divided along religious lines of Hindus and



Muslims and became politically marginalised minorities in both countries.” Ghosh has taken the real history from 1970’s decade and has enlivened it with his power of imagination.

Refugee problem is not any new issue. This problem has been going on for hundreds of years. But this problem has reached to the extreme in modern period. There is distinctive historical background associated with each refugee problem and refugee movement. We call him refugee when he is uprooted from his country home forcefully. In her book *The Greater Common Good* Arundhati Roy has dealt with the history of crores of natives⁴ who have been displaced from their own homes when the government planned to set up projects and urbanization. Both the migrant and refugees shared the spirit of bonhomie and solidarity and their almost equal experience of marginalisation brought them together over a common cause. Once the borders were established, about 14.5 million people crossed the borders to the relatively safety areas of religious majority. According to the census of 1951, 7.226 million Muslims went to Pakistan from India and 3.5 million Hindus moved from East Bengal to India. Though they could be said the citizens of newly independent India, the question of a threat to national security easily came to one’s mind. According to some estimates, more than 10 million Bangladeshi refugees escaped in 1971 and took shelter in India.

Ghosh has written this novel about the poorer Bengalees from East Bengal who came to West Bengal after 1971. Those people were sent to various inhospitable areas outside West Bengal and were assured that they would be relocated in West Bengal in gradual course of time. Since then they were considered to be the second ‘class citizens’ of the state-The government, she said, saw these people as squatters and land-grabbers; there was going to be trouble; they would not be allowed to remain” (*The Hungry Tide*, 190). Under the aegis of Dandakaranya Project⁵, the refugees were sent to the semi-arid and rocky places and thus, they were removed both culturally and physically from their familiar world. The communist party burst in protest against this evil treatment on the refugees and promised that they would provide suitable rehabilitation when they would come to power. They could not acclimatise themselves with the unhygienic weather and



rocky soil and therefore, they were expecting rehabilitation in the uninhabited islands of the Sundarban. Actually, Sundarban has long been treated as immense archipelago situated between the vast Indian ocean to the south and the fertile plains of Bengal to the north. The early inhabitants left the place due to the severe depredations of pirates. Ghosh has given most recent account of East Bengali Hindu refugees who were seeking shelter on the island of Morichjhapi in the late 1970s. The Sundarban has always exerted fascination over the Bengalese psyche. W.W. Hunter devotes an entire book to the Sundarbans where he makes a passing reference only to the people as “few wandering gangs”. Hunter’s tradition continues even to this day. One can only find the segregated history of the inhabitants. There is a pervasive silence on the social and human facets of the region.

Political history changed a few years later and left front came in power. But they brushed aside the problems of refugees. In this situation thousands of refugees returned to West Bengal as they yearned to set up there by eking out hard work. At first they seemed to be free from the relative oppression and exploitation that they had undergone in the hands of Muslim communalists and upper class Hindus. Gradually, this situation came to an end but they found themselves pitted against the government. Indeed, “the government had made it known that they would stop at nothing to evict the settlers: anyone suspected of helping them was sure to get into trouble” (*Hungry Tide* 122). Thousands of families took shelter on Morichjhapi. It was an island situated beyond Kumirbari and the refugees demanded nothing but legal citizenship. Surprisingly, they were marked as devastators and government accused them of undeservedly plotting against the state. They were treated as betrayers and therefore, forced to decamp from the place. The government blocked the Morichjhapi Island on 24th January of 1979 and later this island was completely isolated from the mainland. As a result, the refugees could not get minimum elements of sustenance for living on this island. So, many of them fell victim to death due to lack of medicine and food. Still in a short passage of time, they turned it into habitable place, and made it a perfect replica of a civilization. They set up school, bread factory and raised the river bank. It was regrettable that no newspaper⁶ except ‘Kalantar’, ‘Janani’, and ‘Jugantar’ came afore to publish the news which was related to Morichjhapi. Bengal intellectuals like Sunil Gangyopadhyay, Niranjana Halder, journalist



Jyotirmoy Sengupta, Sukhranjan Sengupta dwelt heavily upon the ill-treatment on the inhabitants of Morichjhapi. Actually the then chief minister declared Act 144 on Morichjhapi for the journalists lest the press should support the public sentiment and the efforts of the refugees and their militancy and self-importance.

Indeed, the inhabitants of this island were not thought to be human-beings and social beings. So, they were thought as miscreants, anti-socialists and outsiders making congregation in an island. People were not allowed to enter Morichjhapi without special permission and those persons who were attempting to enter were imprisoned for a few days. Refugees living there were considered “forbidden people inhabiting a forbidden land”. Police imposed economic blockade on the inhabitants of the island. The refugees were the wretched of Bengal of that particular period. Government also played hide-and-seek with them and they were kept in rigid subjugation. So, when the refugees attempted to occupy one of the uninhabited island and turned it into habitable and developed one, the government came down upon them with all the mighty force. Thus, there was “a confrontation with the authorities that resulted in a lot of violence” (26). The government attacked them with the pretext of preserving eco-system. Actually the government tried to show off its power and drove the people to the periphery zone of almost non-existence. The refugee people set up the settlement camps in economically marginalised land within Sundarban areas. Still it boosted grievance from the part of the authority.

Ghosh presents this history through reflective memory and subjective voice, through a part of ‘family history’ of Kusum and oral telling of painful experiences by Nirmal. Kusum was a native woman of the tide country and she was fated to undergo excruciating pain. She became widow at her early age and therefore, she had to seek new home. At this time she got mingled with some ill-fated persons who are described as “ghosts, covered in dust”. The life-story of these ill-fated persons would gradually take the shape of a history of Morichjhapi. So, they were on the way to build new home. The refugees’ struggle for a niche in Sundarban can be identified as the metaphoric reclamation of voice in New Left Front West Bengal.



Amitav Ghosh has tried to recover history. This history of Morichjhapi contains several events, persons, their ideas that got suppressed at some period of Indian history. But writer has tried to reconstruct the past and its hidden remnants. He tries to fill up the gaps with remarkable understanding correcting the errors. In his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in 1997 Camus writes, “The Writer’s function is not without its arduous duties. By definition, he cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it” (quoted in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*). History as Gandhiji thought may be collected record of conquests but literature changes its focus and emphasizes upon the lived realities. But it is a truthful matter that the stories of the subaltern have been silenced both at the level of the state and at the level of the history writing. Resultantly, many facets of histories have emerged instead of one facet in the course of history writing. However, one can recover the “voice” throughout different modes. Some may be contemporary, having the immediacy and reflecting the concerns of the here and now. But others may be reflective because they can come after a gap of many years. The history of this reflective voice is important and written by others. People try to define their own identities but there are conflicts about the manner how these identities get represented. A voice reads into and interprets other voices. The former voice tries to recollect and reconstructs events from that voice. This voice helps in recording the memories of the real people. Thus, one can gaze at history and other associated things throughout the memory.

Their remembering voice pertinently reveals that they are the victims of partition. They are the neglected subjects of history. Still, they can build a community, the same nation in unison because “we shared the same tongue, we were joined in our bones; the dreams they had dreamt were no different from my own” (165). Ghosh here unequivocally suggests that nations and communities are not imagined by the elite class alone. Powerless, dispossessed, poor people also have something to contribute to the construction of nation. Ghosh has given details about the civilisation that was developing due to the hardship of the new comers in course of time:



They had set up their own government and taken a census-there was 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)

This is the starting point of a new history which would come in conflict with the mainstream history of government. This written down history is enriched by the direct experience of Kusum who fell victim to the whimsicality of history. She narrates her own history and Nirmal records that story in his journal. This story became inseparable part of history and forms the backdrop of this.

Those people become marginalised. Marginality is the condition of being subordinate by others. 'Marginal' refers to the individuals who exist in the society but cannot properly mediate themselves to its norms. The upper class tried to marginalise the lower class in every possible way. Marginality is a bad experience and it forbids the individual to obtain the resources of society. An individual is obstructed from participating even in local life. Peter Leonard defines "marginality" thus: "...being outside the mainstream of productive activity and/or social reproductive". The Encyclopaedia of Public Health defines marginalised groups as, "To be marginalised is to be placed in the margins, and thus excluded from the privilege and power found at the center". Latin thinks that, "Marginal groups can always be identified by members of dominant society, and will face irrevocable discrimination" (qtd in Saksena Devesh). Marginality exists in a society which severely experiences the transformation and turmoil. This text looks forward to analysing the participation of the marginalised groups in local area with different degree of decentralisation. Those groups fight against the oppressive situation, corruption and injustice and ultimately reveal the misdeeds of the authorities. Here, the refugee people are marginalised. They have been considered as fringe claimants to the status of the citizenship. These homeless people come to background of history and emerge as the new subalterns. They suffer from deprivation and are distanced from power. So, their subject position is plural and this position problematizes their subalternity. They have been pushed to the margins. In this novel individual is placed in crisis point and they are pitted against the state apparatus. It unambiguously describes the relationship between the state and the citizen. State is important part of governance in India. The governance includes the government, political parties



and several other interest groups. It also includes the administrative section and the bureaucracy. Bureaucracy occupies a central part in implementing policy. It is the source of power of the state where the state constructs its hegemony with the dominant classes. The government served as the oppressive power. This novel documents peoples who are victimised by the postcolonial nation-state. So, those victimised people burst in protest against the government's oppression and seek help of media:

We need to let people know what we're doing and why we're here. We have to tell the world about all we've done and all've achieved. Can you help us with this? Do you have contacts with the press in Kolkata? (172).

Govt plays the role of the elite section and so tried to suppress the dissent voice of the refugee people so that those poorer people who are only seeking lands to inhabit may be wiped out in a massacre by the state. In this respect one can recollect the unequivocal comment of Neil Bissoondath in *A Casual Brutality*:

As they (the colonizers) exploited us, so we (the post colonials) exploited each other ...We had absorbed the attitudes of the colonizer, and we mimicked the worst in him. We learnt none of his virtues. (200-201, Bissoondath, Neil)

We know that the native was once subaltern during colonial rule as the English people treated them in inhuman way. The country has achieved freedom but this idea of the subaltern still perpetrates in the post colonial period through different entities. It is an enchanting book of Ghosh, which captures the rudimentary but neglected piece of history. This history is set in apparently exotic place but Ghosh has been careful enough to depict the milieu, customs, tradition and human beings' effort to carve out a new civilisation on the almost deserted land. The people are groping to find the center but they fail to find the hope and only stand on the the margins as government with its panoptical gaze has tried to silence them with its vicious political persecutioun. Ghosh calls into question the traditional official narrative of political control. This narrative exclusively forms part of the marginal people and it thematises different histories of dispossession and migration and



points out the value and cultural significance of a smaller island. This island may appear as another world to most of the urban citizens. But it is a visionary world-an ideal space-which gives shelter to all the people irrespective of caste, religion, race, ethnicity etc. Ghosh has been successful to point out marginal situation in post-independence world from multiple points of view.

Notes

1. Morichjhapi was uninhabited island set in a mangrove forest and the massacre committed there was known as Morichjhapi massacre in which several hundred people died but the actual number is still in mystery.
2. Sundarban was once believed to be the habitable place for pirates, *tantric* etc. We get a reference in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Kapalkundala*. People always tried to avoid this place because of rough weather.
3. 'Tryst with Destiny' was a famous speech delivered by Nehru on the eve of India's Independence, towards midnight on 15 August 1947.
4. Adivasi people became specially affected due to the projects though Indian constitution gives special status to them. Roy became concerned at the construction of Sardar Sarovar reservoir.
5. Dandakaranya Project run by Dandakaranya Development Authority and headed by Saibal Kumar Gupta was formed to resettle the Bengali refugees in Orissa and Chattishgarh.
6. News could not be leaked because everyone was debarred from entering into this area and there was no social media or social site at that time to spread news.

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