

## Narrative as History in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

SAPNA KUMARI

**Abstract.** Amitav Ghosh is a postmodern Indo-Anglian novelist whose novels pivot round multi culture, multi ethnic issues as the wondering cosmopolitan roves round and weaves them with his deft, narrative styl. This article focuses how Amitav Ghosh uses history against fiction and how he represents reality against fiction. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, literature and history were considered branches of the same tree of learning, a tree which sought to interpret experience for the purpose of guiding and elevating man. Then came the separation that resulted in the distinct disciplines of literature and historical studies today despite the fact that the realist novel shared many similar beliefs about the possibility of writing factually about observable reality. This article explains how Ghosh captures and tries to capture and represent historical events of a flood and resettlement of the people in the Sundarbans delta, a remote unnoticed place in his novel *The Hungry Tide*.

**Keywords :** Nuance; cetologist; carnage; confrontation; resettlement.

History is a story of people of particular time in past. The authenticity of these documentations is always under sceptical criticism. We know what happened during an event but know it partially as it tends to be generalised and bring in the major threads of the fabric. Even generalised statements about such events are overlooked and the victims are the people who suffer because of such events. They get quantified and get reduced to number. By creating narratives of such individual lives here it is an endeavour by Ghosh to imagine and create those situations from history and see what happens to an individual life. When he/she is past of historical events, they explore this dynamic of theories and literature. The focus is shifted to what history does not say. This gap of what is not being said becomes the foreground for practical imagination for Amitav Ghosh who endeavours to establish a link between the past and the present through stories. His canvas is filled with an amazing merger of reality and fiction from history and present. He engages the readers with the issues and debates on History/Historicism and Historiography as well as India's tradition of narrative. Historical events are always the background against which all individuals' lives revolve in all novels.

In almost all the major novels of Amitav Ghosh, there is the brilliant narrative pattern to send blood through their thick veins with blobs of 'Magic realism' strewn here and there. His novels brim with interesting themes set against fascinating historical backdrops. These two quotes are a good place to begin our description of Amitav Ghosh, however, because they place a salutary emphasis on the third of the equation that might otherwise be short and changed the stories.

*The Hungry Tide* tells the story of Indo-American cetologist Piya Roy, who comes to the tide country of the Sundarbans in Bengal to study river dolphins. She is drawn into a curious love triangle involving the local fisherman Fokir who helps her to locate dolphins in remote Garjonlota pool; and Kenai Dutt a Delhi dilettante, who is visiting his aunt, Nilima years earlier. Nilima's husband, the Marxist teacher Nirmal had become involved in aiding and assisting a displaced refugee population who had settled on the Sundarbans island of Morichjhapi. Among those refugees was Kusum, mother of a then infant Fokir. In another love - triangle of sorts Nirmal had been motivated to help the refugees out of love for Kusum, who was also being assisted by Horen. In the present Kenai has returned to the tide country from Delhi to read a lost Journal written by his now dead uncle, Nirmal. This recounts the final hours before Morichjhapi Island was forcibly cleared of refugees by police and military troops following a protracted siege. Kusum was killed in the resulting massacre. At the conclusion of the novel, Fokir also is killed in cyclone, while guiding Piya decides to continue her aquatic research in the Tide country and ask Nilima to help her set up a research trust as a memorial of Fokir. She also asked Kenai to be her partner in this venture. Sagarika Ghosh writes of this novel that the setting evokes a series of paradoxes in the interaction of these characters:

Piya learns to love Fokir without language. Kenai the translator of cultures finds himself stripped down of all urban defenses facing a tiger in a swamp. Fokir the unlettered fisherman falls in love with a woman who is an embodiment of science [Piya]. A massive storm brings death and terminates a potentially rich love. Nirmal falls in love with Kusum and finally breaks with his armchair past. Ghosh's musings on language on translatability, on the forgotten massacre of Morichjhapi, in which dominant cultures forcibly wipe out movements from below, are deftly woven into the interaction between the characters... (Ghosh 41)

The last point is certainly true; the cyclone is powerfully described and reminds readers very forcefully of humility that is demanded in the face of nature and our place in it. Much of Ghosh's writing career has demonstrated a fascination with the passage of history and its continuities over time. This novel seems more to underscore the fragility of our brief time on earth.

*The Hungry Tide* seems almost intimate, nonetheless, it shares Ghosh's concern for the individual against a broader historical or even in this case geographical backdrop. The book is divided into two sections – The Ebb and The Flood – and is set in the Sundarbans. Measuring over ten thousand square kilometers,

this delta is the world's largest mangrove system. The name means "Beautiful forest" and is located in the Northern part of the Bay of Bengal. It stretches across India and Bangladesh from the Hoogly River in the west Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. It is the home of the Bengal Tiger, which has killed tens of thousand people. Because the tiger is a danger species, the government has taken stakes to preserve its natural environment. This however, has resulted in confrontations with the local populaces and that conflict is part of the history behind this novel. The Tide comes in twice daily resulting in a constant reshaping of the land and in uprooting of anything permanent. Such a setting makes an apt symbol for the ebb and flow of history and an uprooting of population, both of which have come to be seen as "Ghosh-Ian" themes. Furthermore, just as the natural tides of the area tend to obliterate the sense of permanent division – land and sea. Ghosh's characters gradually learn to recognise transient nature of the divisions between individuals, of whatever social class.

Ghosh chooses to set *The Hungry Tide* in the Sundarbans for several reasons. The Tide country is not simply a remote and hostile environment where nature can be studied in the raw. It is also a substantial human environment, where natural phenomena is developed through interaction with mankind. It is in fact a zone of several different kinds of interaction, a zone of contact between different cultural, national ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. It is in short, a border zone. Kenai explains this to Piya in the following ways:

This is after all, no remote and lonely frontier- this is India's doormat, the threshold of a teaming subcontinent. Everyone who has ever taken the eastern route into the Gangetic heart land has had to pass through it- The Arakanese, The Khmer, the Javanese, The Dutch, The Malays, The Chinese, The Portuguese, and The English. It is common knowledge that almost every island in the Tide country has been inhabited at some time or other. But to look at them you would never know the specialty of Mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize the land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghost (HT. 50)

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh challenges established norms of understanding reality. On one level he shows what mainstream post colonialism ignores that of the less celebrated migration that takes place on the fuzzy borders of India and Bangladesh, between two minor cultures. This is to recall one critic who points out that to borderline figures/refugees the concept of nation is an anathema. "Desh" may mean not India or Bangladesh but either West Bengal or East Bengal.

With more particular demand they can be more localized Calcutta or Dhaka. Even the concept of 'Jati' or Community based on religious or cultural identity preceded the thought of nation. Thus for refugees settled from the other side of India Sundarbans are their immediate home. History is a means of salving or identity formation. But Amitav Ghosh shows that past remains inaccessible once one is displaced from it and it is necessarily perspectival mediated. It is only from a subjective viewpoint that the past is approached and therefore the multiple contesting variants of the same past is given either from Nilima or Nirmal or from Horen or Kusum's stand points.

*The Hungry Tide* is a book about reading a book. Nirmala's secret journal is discovered and read by Kenai as part of a larger sequence of events during his relationship with Piya and Fokir :

All I need say for the time being." Is that this is not my story. It concerns rather, the only friend you make when you are here in Lusibari; Kusum if not for my sake than for hers read on. (69)

In this novel Ghosh employs many of the narrative techniques of the earlier novel such as the 'double-helix' pattern of alternate narrative strands, the use of flashback and memory and the insertion of textual fragments that offer alternative avenues into a forgotten history.

*The Hungry Tide* is an exclusive mixture of anthropology, migration, travel, fat, fiction, environmentalism, ethnography, photography and landscape covered under the cloak of fiction. This interrelationship between the world of human nature and animal and the dilemma of preserving one at the risk of destroying another is brought up by Ghosh in this novel. Ghosh also restructures history through different methods of narration, such as truth exposed through a diary as employed in *The Hungry Tide*. This is a historical or unhistorical narrative. The narrative explains historical truths that have been preferred to be suppressed and forgotten what Nirmal records in his diary is the struggle of refugees not only as an observer but also an energetic participant in the fight against the government. Nirmal transmits the painful struggle of these poor people who have fallen victim to the unfulfilled promises of the government. Ghosh does not want such historical events which display the carnages of the government towards its subjects, to be simply wiped out of the memories of people. Always speaking for the voiceless through his novel Ghosh uses Nirmal as his mouthpiece in the hope of bring what is left unscarred as well as voicing a glimmer of hope for change. Nirmal's diary ends :

I will hand it to Horen in the hope it finds its way to you... you will have a greater claim to the worlds

earthen I ever had ... Your generation will. I know, be  
richer in ideals, less cynical, less selfish than mine. (278)

Ghosh's use of diary helps to toss light on the history of partition as well as the history of migration. The elements of this essay exchange the questions of how the difficulty of such a rich historical situation can only be captured by a complex mixture of realism, narrative, historical fiction, myth, intertextuality and linguistic texture. The novel succeeds within the manner of stressed social or realism both diversity and hierarchy. Situation in the whirl of nature, history and imagination are the characters of *The Hungry Tide*. Characters from different worlds descended to each other; an American scientist, an Urban Indian translator and entrepreneur and a local fisherman, each having to struggle with problems of identity and the forces of nature within the limitations of the place. Piya, an American Cetologist of Indian origin, has newly arrived at the Sundarbans to conduct research on a rare type of river Dolphin, the Irrawaddy Dolphins, and sets off on her journey into mass accompanied by a protector from the forest department who turns out to be heartless, deceitful and a scarcely in direct sexual threat. The entire dramatic action of the novel is content within the natural region of the Sundarbans.

The storm sequence in *The Hungry Tide* is remarkable, not just for the storytelling and the detailed account of what happens in the eye of the storm, but for projecting the power of nature over even the multiplicity of human narratives. The only available means to access, retell and decolonize nature is consequently through the fertile mutuality of historical narrative and environment imaginaries. Ghosh has identified that his central interest is in "people" and their everyday life which slips through the fingers of an academic, historian or social anthropologist. As an anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer and teacher, Ghosh rejects the lines between fiction and non-fiction and transfers a third space in his writing. His fiction deals with deterritorialization and reterritorialization that transfers between two lands divided by time and space, history and geography. This makes his writing redefine the present through nuanced understanding of the past. Ghosh's revising of history uses frequent disciplines of knowledge and brings out the omissions and silences of dominant historiography. His writings display a balance between the real and imaginary in a unique manner.

**Sapna Kumari**  
Research Scholar, Dept. of English  
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

### **Work Cited**

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