

Redefining ‘Diaspora’: A Postcolonial Reading of *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

*Amitav Ghosh focuses on the modes of conceptualizing nation and nationality in his writings. In his novel *The Hungry Tide* he reveals how ‘nation’ in the Indian context may be interpreted as a collection of linguistic identities or a composite religious and Socio-Political identity. Ghosh emphasizes upon the possibility of creating a ‘deep communication’ in his novel, *The Hungry Tide*. Probably, in the novel’s setting, the mangroves of the Sundarbans, a deep communication is plausible and pragmatic between its inhabitants and nature. National identity, an abstract concept that subsumes the collective expression of a subjective individual sense of belonging to a socio-political unit called the nation state.*

Keywords: Linguistic identity, Socio-political identity, Deep communication, National identity, Multiculturalism, Mangrove forests, The Sundarbans, Tide country

Introduction

India is a land of multiculturalism. It contains variety of people having distinct cultural ethos. People of Indian origin are diversified all over the world. The sense of yearning for the motherland is the most overwhelming sentiment of the Indian diaspora, wherever it exists. The literary talents of the diaspora found expression first in adversity and flourished with the advent of prosperity. The migrant who leaves his homeland runs from pillar to post, crossing the boundaries of time and money to become one with his new surroundings, but longs to return home at appropriate time. The writers of Indian diaspora later began mixing nostalgia with criticism of evils in the Indian society in contrast with their host countries. Some of the prominent Indian Writers in English belong to the diaspora. V.S.Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri and Rohinton Mistry are diaspora writers.

Amitav Ghosh is one among of famous Indian Diasporic writers in English. Some of his famous novels are *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosomes*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *The Flood of Fire*. The last three novels are called *The Ibis Trilogy*. *The Gun Island* is the latest outcome from this dynamic writer.

Review of Literature

Divya Anand in her article titled *Locating the Politics of the Environment and the Exploited in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide*, says that Ghosh focuses on the socio - environmental politics of the environmental conservation, raises voice for the existence of the human and non-human species, and how one-dimensional environmental conservation policies, detrimental to the socially, economically, backward classes like indigenous people, forest dwellers, tribals and nomads.

Dr. Mathew P. Joseph and Riya Susan in their article titled *Bioregionalism and Ecoconsciousness in Amitav Ghosh's novel The Hungry Tide*, observes that how bioregionalism helps in building the ecological consciousness. Ghosh focuses on the Sunderbans as a territory of bioserve and a domain of consciousness. *The Hungry Tide* has a strong appeal for preserving our own bioserves and restoration of watershed.

Results and Discussions

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* was set in the tide country called the Sundarbans. His writings reflect the concern of Anthropologists with the porosity of Cultural boundaries. The novel is told from two different perspectives by the two major characters, a Delhi based businessman Kanai Dutt and an American cetalogist cum research scholar Piyali Roy. Both Kanai and Piya are the representatives of upper middle class Bengali society, with a globalized philosophy in life. Kanai has no hesitation in usurping the seat of a fellow passenger in a local train. He is the archetypal privileged 'babu'. Whereas, Piya is more egalitarian, prefers to eat vitamin bars and oval tin than the unsanctified 'home' food. According to Robert Dixon, "The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures but dwell in travel in cultural spaces that flow across borders – the 'shadow lines' drawn around modern nation status" (Travelling in the West).

The Hungry Tide is set in the Sundarbans where there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. For hundreds of years the people of the Sundarbans delta region encounters the hostile nature of the brackish water and the ferocious man eaters like the tigers and crocodiles. No one is ready to dare to explore the tide country until the American cetalogist Piya Roy braves the haunting nature of the waters of the Sundarbans. Piya hires Fokir, an illiterate fisherman as her guide in exploring the tide country and Kanai takes the Translator position. From this moment the tide begins to turn. Kanai the translator of cultures finds himself stripped down of all his urban pride and defenses while facing a tiger in a swamp. Kanai confeses: "I had always prided myself on the breadth and comprehensiveness of my experience of the world I had loved, I once liked to say in six languages. That seems now like the boast of a time very long past. At Garjontola I learnt how little I know of myself and of the world" (353).

The same people belonging to the same nation, yet the lives of the characters are as diverse as the fauna and flora of the Sundarbans. Ghosh points out that in *The Hungry Tide*, Kanai is someone from modern India. He is wealthy and minting money, yet he cannot forget that there is other India which is represented by Fokir. In the worlds of Kanai and Piya represented in the novel *The Hungry Tide*, they prefer the structure of science or business where they can view everything black and white. By chosing the Sundarbans as the backdrop of this novel, Ghosh allows to create a setting where everyone is on even footing.

Kanai's uncle Nirmal, a poet for himself, constantly invokes Rilke, approaches his post retirement life is poorly spent because he never lived up to his revolutionary ideals. His wife Nilima represents the practical side of their marriage life. Their middle class upbringing and college education brings them no luxury, just the gratitude and respect from the locals in the Sundarbans for the service they have rendered. This is a life which Kanai does not understand. In the Sundarbans, Kanai's wealth, his servants and pride have no values. Always he feels that he is superior to Fokir by all means. But

on the river he needs Fokir's skills for his survival. Piya who is very much attracted to animals she studies, needs Kanai's translation skills and Fokir's local knowledge of river and wildlife for her to do her research.

The fundamental issue to be addressed here is not that of the real nation or national identity, which lies behind the construction of such a model employed in political practice. But that the formation, articulation and propagation of the concepts themselves. Nationalist ideas are formulated in order to gain and retain hegemony. The subversion of established notions of a 'national identity' becomes palpable through the development of the characters. If Kanai seems to represent the commodification of Indian Languages, then Piya seems to represent for their suppression. Raised in Seattle, she remembers her mother tongue Bengali as simple as the language for argument, because of her parents. Both characters, one devoted to penetrating the secrets of nature, the other occupied with exploring deep into the interior of other languages, find themselves adrift on a tide of shifting tongues.

Conclusion

We may observe that in *The Hungry Tide*, there can be no simplistic response to the notion of Indian 'nationality'. National identity itself is an abstract concept that subsumes the collective expression of a subjective individual sense of belonging to a socio-political unit called the nation state. *The Hungry Tide* attempt to recognize decisive elements like common Territory, common origin, common historical experiences, common religion, common language and common customs. However, this novel also caution that these objective elements cannot be completely exposed but can only be understood in terms of interdependence.

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