

Deconstruction of Eurocentric Historiography in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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ABSTRACT

The Hungry Tide, the fourth novel of Amitav Ghosh, mainly chronicles the daily struggles of the marginalized people living in the islands of Sundarbans. Along with their struggle, Ghosh records their customs, culture, religion, language, dreams, legends and myths in the novel. Ghosh's incorporation of such elements of the tidal country has two prominent implications. Firstly, it allows him to deconstruct the Eurocentric historiography of India that resulted from its colonial past. Secondly, he writes an alternative history from the perspective of the subaltern where the people of marginalized group gain their voice, agency and position that are absent in the official and recorded history. Although he writes the novel using English language, he artistically subverts the language of the colonizers to dig up an authentic history by employing his own style of historiography that reconnects us with both our past and forgotten history. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to show how Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *The Hungry Tide*, endeavours to create an alternate historiography of the tidal country that transcends the stereotypical Eurocentric narrativity and presents a scrap of history that is omitted from the officially recorded history.

Index Terms: Amitav Ghosh, Eurocentrism, Historiography, *The Hungry Tide*

INTRODUCTION

Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* deals with the events of two different timelines. In one timeline it presents Piyali Roy's attempt to track down Oracella dolphins in the narrow rivers of Sundarban and Kanai Dutta's journey to Lusibari to retrieve the notebook of his uncle Nirmal that is written almost twenty years ago and is willed to him by his uncle. It is on that notebook the second timeline of the novel is found where Nirmal's experiences and interactions with the settlers of Morichjhapi Island for a number of days before a violent massacre takes place are found.

In both timelines, Ghosh critically addresses the religious and cultural beliefs, and practices of the inhabitants of the islands of Sundarbans and the historical account of a political incident that happened in 1979 in the Morichjhapi island. Albeit, his fictional account of all the events intersects with the actual history in a manner that has interventionist possibilities in the traditional discursive practices of historiography.

While giving an account of the spatial and temporal changes that take place for over 30 years in the tidal country, Ghosh aptly creates an alternate history defying the Eurocentric view that always "lead to a complete ignorance of the multiplicity and the cross cultural dynamics present amongst diverse societies as is found in the sub-continent" (Khan, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, he creates "a cultural system where recorded history, unrecorded human tales, myth and politics- all coalesce to form a narrative" (Chakraborty, 2013, p. 25).

DECONSTRUCTION OF EUROCENTRIC HISTORIGRAPHY

Amitav Ghosh fulfils his role as novelist whose perception of historiography transcends the conventional ways of looking at it. Ghosh achieves a unique position as a writer and fulfils his roles as a novelist who

blends history with his own philosophy and vision instead of assessing the events in a traditional way (Dhawan, 1999, p. 14). This becomes evident in his novel *The Hungry Tides* where he aptly disrupts the Eurocentric historiography of the Indian sub-continent by eliminating all the binaries, creating a unique symbiosis of cultural and religious practices, and showing some of the characters' deviation from their preconceived notions of the tidal country.

The novel, like other writings of Ghosh, deals with history, myth, memory, struggle, violence, love and philosophy "interwoven in such an intricate way that it is difficult to maintain a boundary line between one idea and another" (Singh, 2018, p. 52). Thus he places his writing, by combining such elements, outside Eurocentric tradition of history and literature. In this process, Ghosh further creates a unique literary form that is as Hawley (2003) says, "A political protest concerned with questions of indigenous socio-economic, cultural, and racial marginalization" (p. 235).

In the novel, Ghosh characterization inadvertently subverts the Eurocentric account of indigenous language, culture and epistemology. In the novel, one of the characters, Piyali Roy, an American marine biologist of Bengali-Indian decent and a second generation diaspora, goes through a transformative journey due to her interactions with the people and environment of the tidal country. Her journey from Canning to Lusibari changes her Eurocentric vision of the culture, language and knowledge of the indigenous people as she gathers first hand experiences during the time spent there. Her transformation is reflected in her fascination with the legends of Bon Bibi and Dakkhin Roy, her admiration for a crab fisherman named Fokir and her decision to come back to stay permanently at Lusibari at the end of the novel.

Although Piya is a young scientist of western origin who subscribes to the western system of knowledge and historicity as she was born, raised and educated in America, her interactions with the tidal country compel her to decipher the homogeneity that is created by, as Abrams (1999) puts it regarding the discourse of colonialism, "A discourse which, although, it may seem to present, or reflect and external reality, in fact consists of what are called representations" (p. 183). For example, before her interaction with Fokir, the "Bengali language was an angry flood trying to break down her door" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 84). Although the reason for that is not the influence of western hegemony, her sentiments towards the language bears resemblance of such influence. That is why "for her its sound had come to represent the music of unhappiness" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 84).

However, her perception of the language changes as soon as Fokir starts singing a song in that very language. Piya immediately feels a complex spectrum of emotions without understanding a single word. She admits to herself "that a river of words would not be able to tell her exactly what made the song sound as it did right then, in that place" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 88). Thus Piya's perception of the language of the marginalized group in the tidal country goes through a massive transformation that potentially allows Ghosh to reiterate the originality and diversity of 'the Other' that ultimately unsettles Eurocentric account of stereotypical homogeneity of indigenous language and culture.

Furthermore, Piya gradually humanizes Fokir after listening to the song, observing him closely and identifies him as an individual with a different views on life as she spends more time with him. She ponders "whether it was she who was naïve" to consider Fokir "a likable kind of naïveté" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 88). Piya's understanding of Fokir as an individual is further complicated when Piya witnesses him completing a ritual in Garjontola. Piya fails to categorize Fokir's religious belief as the narrator suggests:

...it occurred to her now that he might be Muslim. But no sooner had she thought this than it struck her that a Muslim was hardly likely to pray to an image like this one. What Fokir was performing looked very much like her mother's Hindu pujas — and yet the words seemed to suggest otherwise (Ghosh, 2004, p. 137)

Here, Fokir, of course, represents the people of the marginalized groups and the Indian people in general about whom the Eurocentric narratives bear prejudices. This also indicates that the narrative of the simplicity of Indian life, the barbaric ways of living and homogeneity found in colonial discourses are far from being the truth. Far from the city centres and metropolis of Indian, even the illiterate people of tidal country have their own culture that is an amalgamation of various rich and diverse cultures coming from

different parts of the world although the Eurocentric historiography denies such richness of culture especially of the marginal groups.

Throughout the novel, Piya, despite her socio-cultural differences and language barriers, establishes a bond with Fokir that is difficult to categorize but certainly goes beyond the Eurocentric notion of 'the Self' and 'the Other'. In many circumstances, we see romantic tension between the two characters where it is Piya who is more interested in the other and speculates about what Fokir thinks of her. Her interest is so intense at times that she feels jealous of Moyna, the wife of Fokir. Her jealousy is evident in the following lines:

She felt a twinge of envy at the thought of her going back to Fokir and Tutul while she returned to the absence upstairs. This embarrassed her and to cover up she smiled at Kanai... (Ghosh, 2004, p.176)

Although Piya is an American, she feels safe and comfortable while working with Fokir although the western hegemonic account of the locals states otherwise.. Among many instances found in the novel, the incident of riverbed mapping can be given as an example. While mapping the riverbed, she inadvertently helps Fokir to catch a plenty of crabs (Ghosh, 2004, p. 126). Their harmonious co-existent and reciprocity are analogous to the symbiosis of the dolphins and the fishermen as found in another section of the novel. As Piya wonders, "the stops required for the laying of the line seemed to be ideally timed for the taking of soundings" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 153), the readers are compelled to see how the demarcation lines between 'us' vs. 'them' drawn by eurocentrism vanish. Thus, Ghosh successfully omits the Eurocentric binary of 'the Self' and 'the Other'.

In this way, Piya gradually deviates from her Eurocentric perception that the religious, culture and social life of the colonized group are inferior. In another instance, her interest in understanding the local culture and language is further intensified when she requests Kanai to translate Fokir's song (Ghosh, 2004, p. 283). Here, Ghosh, through her character, subverts the colonial discourse that, "produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhaba, 1994, p. 76). Piya also comes to discover the fact that Fokir's practical knowledge of the dolphins are way advanced than her textual knowledge of the dolphins as he showcases a peculiar understanding of the habits of the dolphins that is unknown to Piya, despite being a cetologist, and cannot be found in the textbooks. It is seen that what Fokir learned from his experience as a fisherman and from the stories told by his mother is far more accurate than what Piya learned in her systematic pursuit of the subject. This implies that the western epistemology may sometimes prove to be flawed and is in no way superior to the knowledge shared by the marginal group let alone other systems of knowledge.

Moreover, Ghosh, while portraying Nirmal's character, does a wonderful job in countering the Eurocentric notion of history and revolution. Nirmal, a person who carries Marxism in his heart, fails to understand the diversity and ingenuity of the ways of life of the tidal country instead he subscribes to the theoretical implication of Marxist notion of history and revolution. The problem of Nirmal's perception is that he subscribes to a Eurocentric view that renders his thoughts and actions ineffective in the world where he lives in due to its diversity and uniqueness. His problem can be clarified by the statement of Young as he states, to clarify the problems of a Marxist, that "the Marxist written history of the world is by no means the true history since it is a dominantly Eurocentric view (qtd. In Khan, 2015, p. 3). In contrast to Nirmal, her wife Nilima becomes more successful in her endeavour to establish *Bababon*, a Trust for the women, due to her practical understanding of the originality and diversity of the situations. A sharp contrast between the two characters are made in the following lines:

Nirmal, overwhelmed, read and reread Lenin's pamphlet without being able to find any definite answers. Nilima, ever practical, began to talk to the women who gathered at the wells and the ponds. (Ghosh, 2004, p. 71)

Therefore, it can be said that Ghosh, as Abdullah (2020) argues, "Disrupts the hegemony of the West and deals with the cult of silence and secrecy through the use of the supernatural, myth and mysticism" (p. 9). The same strategy can be found as he contrasts Nirmal's Eurocentric understanding of the world with Kusum's account of the legends of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli. While listening to Kusum's fantastical story of Bon Bibi, he tries to find inconsistency in the story and further becomes shocked when both Kusum and

Horen make ritualistic gestures while crossing the imaginary line that is drawn, according to their belief, by Bon Bibi to keep the inhabitants of the islands safe. Nirmal's response to all these is as follows:

"What's happening?" I asked in surprise. "What do you see? There's no temple nearby. This is just open water." (Ghosh, 2004, p. 211)

Nirmal's rigid inclination to Marxism, his European ideals and perception of revolution and education totally shatter when he first encounters the settlers of Morichjhapī. He thought that the settlers would live in a much unorganized way and he would see "a mere jumble perhaps, untidy heaps of people piled high upon each other" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 153). However, his understanding significantly changes as he notices that the people are very organized in terms of their living arrangements, strategies to deal with potential threats and understanding of revolution. This is evident in his confession as he says, "What I saw was quite different from the picture in my mind's eye" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 153). This significantly alters the mind-set of Nirmal and ultimately allows Ghosh to successfully deconstruct Eurocentric narrativity. Later, Nirmal becomes desperate to help the people of the island. Although he is unable to help the settlers in a significant way, he decides to record what happens on that island so that the history of the settlers and voices of the silenced and marginalized group survive through his writing as an alternate history.

Furthermore, through Nirmal's fascination with Rainer Maria Rilke, an Austrian poet, Ghosh omits the binaries of the discourse of 'the Orient' and 'the Occident' by employing intertextuality as Nirmal throughout the contextualizes the implications of the poems that are written by an European poet to describe the environment of the tidal country as well as his experiences of living there. In one instance where he is amazed to look at the vast strangeness of *othemohona*, an intersection of two rivers, and torn between his love for his wife and his affection for Kusum, he says, "I felt myself torn between my wife and the woman who had become the muse I'd never had; between the quiet persistence of everyday change and the heady excitement of revolution" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 196). The he quotes:

Maybe what's left
for us is some tree on a hillside we can look at
day after day...
and the perverse affection of a habit
that liked us so much it never let go (Ghosh, 2004, p. 196).

Thus, Ghosh achieves his success in omitting the discrepancies found in the Eurocentric historiography of the sub-continent and allows the global reader to perceive the history of the land from a new, if not unique, perspective of looking at the history of language, culture and way of life of the land.

PORTYAL OF THE SUBALTERN HISTORY OF MORICHJHAPI MASSACRE

Apart from his successful endeavours to deconstruct the Eurocentric notion of historiography, Amitav Ghosh not only shows passion but also a sincere dedication "in his portrayal of the individual as a victim of history in his novels" (Dkhar, 2012, p. 43). Dkhar (2012) further argues that Ghosh refuses to view history as "a conventional documentation of the past" (p. 44). Ghosh's novels make sure, in the words of Young (2009) on his accounts of history, "...that you are looking at the world not from the centre but from the margin's forgotten edge" (p. 16).

In portraying the history of the subaltern, Ghosh masterfully uses the character of Nirmal. Although Nirmal can be criticized for his rigid inclination to Marxist ideology and western ideals, his contribution in recording the lives of the inhabitants of Morichjhapī island is indeed praiseworthy. After going through a phase of despair and regret, he decides to write all his experiences related to Kusum and the incidents that occur in Morichjhapī island in a diary. Ghosh, through the notebook of Nirmal, gives a new dimension to the incident that is torn from the books of history in a way that people fail to notice that it has ever happened. However, Ghosh's portrayal of the incidents compels the readers to rethink the implications of what actually happened by giving voices to the voiceless.

Historically,, the incident of Morichjhapi is an event where the government of West Bengal forcefully evicted hundreds of Bengali Hindu Dalit refugees who illegally occupied the reserve forest land on Morichjhapi, one of the 100 islands of Sundarbans. These people started to enter India from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as refugees after the Partition of 1947. Although the upper and middle classes were able to settle in different regions of West Bengal, the lower class due to their economic crisis couldn't resettle themselves. The influx of refugees peaked in the 1970s as the political condition in the East Pakistan saw unrest. Although these people were relocated in different places but these places were not suitable for living. They were forced to live in camps that resembled concentration camps and the camps were heavily guarded and surrounded by barbed wire (Mallick, 1999).

Then the refugees started moving to towards West Bengal and gradually settled on the Morichjhapi island. Although they received continuous threats from the government, they continued to live there until government started taking steps to evict them from the conservation land of the forest that is reserved for tigers. There were police blockades to sabotage the supply of fresh water and food that ultimately forced the inhabitants of the island to drink contaminated water and to starve. Malnutrition, diseases and death subsequently followed. Later on, the government made arrangements to crack down on the inhabitants.

Nirmal's record of the same incident in his notebook gives us some new perspectives on the incident. Instead of considering it as a mere political incident of the past, the readers are compelled to remember it as something lively and worth serious attention due to Nirmal's attempt to give voices to the people who actually lived and were killed in the massacre. It is Nirmal's writing that challenges the political and traditional historicization of the incident where the faceless mob who were killed become individual characters with their own dreams, aspirations, desires and rights to live. Nirmal's purpose of writing his experience with the incidents of Morichjhapi arises out his urge to preserve the actual history of the refugees as he says:

I am writing these words in a place that you will probably never have heard of: an island on the southern edge of the tide country, a place called Morichjhāpi. (p. 60)

Through Nirmal's notebook, Ghosh gives Kusum, a member of the marginalized group and a victim of the Morichjhapi massacre, a unique character, a voice and an agency to tell her stories. Kusum's agency in narrating her own story, her struggle and dreams can be traced throughout Nirmal's entry on the notebook. The notebook further captures Kusum's life, his struggle to find her mother, her marriage with Rajen and subsequent death of her husband, her involvement in the revolution, and her beliefs in the myths and legends of the tidal country.

Nirmal further writes about the struggles of the islander's strategies to survive, their struggles due to the blockades and the brutality of the government in raping women, killing hundreds of people and dumping the death bodies in the river. Although the incident survives just as a mere historical incident in the official history, Ghosh, through Nirmal's writing, gives it a more detailed, lively, vivid and thought provoking dimension. He writes history from a perspective what is popularly known as "frog's eye point of view". He, thus, digs up the history to reevaluate the importance of marginalized groups in the context of the history of a land. This account of history not only gives voices to the voiceless people but also provokes us to think critically about the way history is written. Thus, Ghosh, using his unique style of blending the fact and fiction, empowers the subaltern whose voices remain unheard in the study of history in traditional discursive practices.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *The Hungry Tide*, has not only successfully deconstructed the longstanding metanarratives of Eurocentric historiography but also initiated an authentic counter narrative that represents the history of the language, culture, religion, myths and legends of the sub-continent. In the process of doing so, he has also given voice to the silenced and marginalized groups. Although some people might argue about his authenticity in representing the subaltern as he is from a privileged class, a close reading of his fictional works and critical evaluation of his characterization reveal

the objective nature of his portrayal. He, thus, successfully demystifies the self-proclaimed tradition and myth of linguistic, cultural and religious superiority of the colonizers that has dominated the history of the sub-continent for a very long time.

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