

FOURTH WORLD IN AMITAV GHOSH'S

THE HUNGRY TIDE

DR. SOMALI GUPTA

PROFESSOR AND HEAD,

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH,

CLC GOVT. ARTS & COMMERCE COLLEGE,

DHAMDHA, (CHHATTISGARH) INDIA.

Abstract

Victims of exclusive borders and the resultant xenophobia, the political refugees of Bangladesh War (1971) find a prominent and sympathetic representation in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide (2004). Set in the symbolic borderless areas of the seas, the Sundarbans provide the ideal setting for the intermingling of the refugee and indigenous fourth world inhabitants depicting the ebb and flow of human emotions and conditions. Bereft of a homeland and hence an identity, the endeavors of the refugees at establishing both in the adopted land is a threat to the idea of homogeneity central to a sovereign state. In the ensuing centralizing process, violence is a potent tool in silencing and annihilating the voices that rise for freedom and liberation. Ghosh revisits the Morichjhapi incident of 1978 that was lost in the annals of recorded history, to reveal the complicity of the state in the massacre.

Key words: *Refugees, Homogeneity, Indigenous inhabitants, Xenophobia*

FOURTH WORLD IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

- DR. SOMALI GUPTA

When 'Amra Kara? Bastuhara. Who are we? We are the dispossessed.' (254) reverberates through the pages of *The Hungry Tide* (2004), we feel the term fourth world as appropriate for the situation of the people caught in the *Morichjhapi* massacre. The term originated with a remark by Mbuto Milando, first secretary of the Tanzanian High Commission, in conversation with George Manuel, Chief of the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada. Milando stated that 'When Native peoples come into their own, on the basis of their own cultures and traditions that will be the Fourth World.' The *Morichjhapi* massacre in which hundreds got killed with the complicity of the incumbent state was the result of one such uprising involving the refugees from Bangladesh and the labourers from this side of the border.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is set in the Sundarbans which is an apt setting for the depiction of fourth world. Like the fourth world, this area too is not spatially bound. The ebb and flow of tide ensures that the contour of the place is indefinable by a map. The setting of the novel is thus a place which is by this very characteristic secluded and beyond the parameters of a mapped world. All that happens in this area is thus symbolically cut off or not recorded. The land reflects the neglect that the population face from the outer world, the state in this context. Ghosh writes: At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.' (8) The hostility of the terrain is what Ghosh writes explicitly about and which as readers we are presumed to have foreknowledge about. All this is part of recorded history. What the novel sets out to do is to bring to our notice what recorded history has overlooked and thus silenced. The implicit hostility that history had meted out to the people of the Sundarbans

is brought to the fore. In not recording the *Morichjhapi* massacre, the state machinery clearly obliterates the plight of people who are not part of their fabric. The massacred are the refugees who had come seeking a homeland in a land which is closest in resemblance to the one they were forced to leave. Refugees, across the globe, are typically fourth world.

The hostility of the state is far greater than the one that Nature ravages on the population. The setting in its hostile form is thus symbolic of the neglect and hostility of the state machinery towards the people who inhabit these places. The novel brings to light the *Morichjhapi* massacre in which hundreds lost their lives, yet, which like the land lost by the tide in the Sundarbans area, is lost from the annals of history. The tide, we are told, 'creates new land' and here 'the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable.' (7) The setting is very symbolic of the fates of the people who inhabit it. The area is peopled mostly by refugees, the unwanted of the world. The

The setting is far from the visitations of civilization and the tell tale marks that it entails. Kanai notices that nothing much has changed in the last 30 years since he visited it. The place still reeks of negligence, though it has its share of a large chunk of population who do '*daily passenger*'.

The novel opens at a south Kolkata station through which runs a train to Canning. In the platform we are introduced to two characters who will lead the story forward. Ghosh points out that 'this line was the only rail connection to the Sundarbans.' (4) The action opens with the advent of a 'foreigner' determined to make her way through the milling crowd that populates this part of the world that is usually not a part of the travelling foreigner's itinerary. (3) Ghosh introduces her to us through another "outsider" who is also alien to the surroundings. (4) The area of action is therefore defined for us. It is set in a world which is not only geographically alienated, but alienated by the advancing society too. But it is not isolated at all, as Kanai finds to his surprise. On his first arrival as a ten year old he had remarked to his uncle and aunt, "But there are so many people here!" (17) Nirmal, his uncle, had been amused and asked him if he expected a jungle. When Kanai relies in the affirmative, Nirmal tells him that it is only in films 'that jungles are empty of people.' (17) This attitude is again symbolic of the general ignorance towards the place. He

notices that nothing has changed since the last time he visited here. A stark statement to make considering its proximity to Kolkata. Though Kanai knows six languages, and the meaning of cetologist. Yet he knows not that the Sundarbans had marine mammals, and to study which Piyali had come visiting. Like him, we too are caught unawares because as Kanai says, "All we ever hear about is the tigers and the crocodiles." (11) The river dolphins that Piyali wants to study here are symbolic of the people that Kanai is eventually going to learn about from his uncle's diary entries. Like the dolphins these people too have 'disappeared from view'. (11) The dolphins Piyali feels are either gone or have never been studied. As with them so with the people of the *Morichjhapi* massacre - 'there hasn't ever been a proper survey' (11). The tigers and crocodiles are equivalents of the first world here, the one that draws attention of the authorities and the environmentalists. The dolphins represent the fourth world. The antipathy towards them is similar to the one that is reserved for the unwanted of the islands. Hence, the abject poverty of the area. When Nilima mentions *Morichjhapi*, Kanai is perplexed and asks, "What was that? I don't recall it exactly." (26) Ghosh here brings to light the absence in memory of that incident even in such a person as Kanai who 'prided himself on his memory.' (17) The fault lies not in him but in the reporting of the incident that quickly put it under wraps. It is Nilima who gives us the first account of the incident, "Some refugees had occupied one of the islands in the forest," she tells Kanai. (26) She adds, "There was a confrontation with the authorities that resulted in a lot of violence. The government wanted to force the refugees to return to their resettlement camp in central India." (26) This is our first introduction to the unrecorded incident that will unfold before us, albeit through the eyes of Nirmal, and told through his diary recordings some 25 years after the happenings. The refugees are 'such a nuisance.' (275) The government cannot allow them to occupy the land earmarked for tigers. The refugees from Bangladesh had migrated from their camps in Dandakaranya, a place in modern-day Chhattisgarh. They would simply not leave, and to evict them the state government took 'strong action'. (275) Such action is warranted because a homogeneous society is a primary requirement for establishing a nation distinct from the other outside the borders, and well marked within a defined border. The refugees refute the homogenisation process that nations pursue to enable better governance. They therefore

are to be controlled. And when the government fails to send them back to central India where they are kept in seclusion, it resorts to use of might in their eviction. Yet, as the novel shows, a heterogeneous intermingling is at the heart of the population that survives the massacre and now populates the Sunderbans area. This is most obvious in the folklores and the belief in the legends of Bon Bibi, the goddess of the forest.

The dormant Nirmal finds a cause in their fight. Someone who had been looking for some action all his life, and following Marxist principles, is left disillusioned after he witnesses the massacre firsthand. His ideals and what he sees being meted out to the people do not match.

Fokir is typically a fourth world character, yet through him Ghosh challenges the myths that surround his world. Unlettered he is, but he is not ignorant. He follows Nature and knows more about the area than anybody else. He has the river in his heart. It is with his help that Piya can navigate the waters and reach the dolphins. It is also through him that Piya revisits her childhood memories and eventually learns to appreciate the feelings and gestures of her parents who left India when she was a baby never to return again. Fokir facilitates a homecoming for Piya.

Piya is a foreigner not only to the land and its language, she is also a foreigner to the norms and practices of the land. Hence, her introduction could be read as a first world character's entry to the world inhabited by the fourth world. Her reactions to the characters she meets and to the situations that arise can be read as the reactions of a first world visitor who is initially interested in only the data that the study underway can provide. Ghosh points a shift in this attitude as Piya gets to understand their world better.

Kanai is the third world character who visits the islands rather reluctantly. With his 'middle-aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence' he too is a foreigner in that milieu. (5) The reluctance could be read as indicative of the negligence that the islands and its people face from the society and state. What is remarkable here is that though the islands have a large population and is just a very short distance from Kolkata, a metropolitan city, it is still the same as Kanai saw it the first time 30 years ago. The smugness of Kanai is symbolic. As Piya observes, it is shared by some of her relatives in Kolkata who seem to 'share the

assumption that they had been granted some kind of entitlement (was it because of their class or their education?) that allowed them to expect that life's little obstacles and annoyances would always be swept away to suit their convenience.' (10) This is typically the attitude that is exposed and challenged in the novel. And it is through Kanai that the incidences of the massacre come to light. Somebody who is alienated is drawn into the sufferings of the people he has no attachment with. The translator of languages is introduced to the language of forceful silence. What ensues is a change in perception and a gradual appreciation replaces the condescension that was evident in his first interactions with the locals.

Kanai, is introduced as someone who knows a lot, even more than his teachers. He should therefore have known about the massacre. Yet, like the world outside, he too has no inkling of the happenings at *Morichjahapi* that killed how many nobody knows anything about. The novel swiftly moves through time and space with the parallel tales of Piya, Kanai, Fokir Nilima and Nirmal. The lives of these characters finally converge to meet in the fourth world of the Sunderbans where the terrain changes with every tide, forming new geographical boundaries.

The novel typically deals with the fourth world issues of centralization and decentralization. Homogeneity and heterogeneity, Xenophobia, Refugee Management, State Vs People. In a space where religion is intermingled. (the prayer of Bon Bibi sung like Azaan invoking Allah and prayed to an idol) the only thing that the homeless people search for is a space they can belong to. They are often forgotten, their voices are never heard, except when they raise it to protest. That too is brutally suppressed. In the ever changing terrain of the Sunderbans, Amitabh Ghosh has very aptly chosen a locale to talk about the dispossessed. Symbolically even the dolphins represent the fourth world because Sunderbans is known for the Tigers and Crocodiles; dolphins are not recognized in spite of being an extinct and rare species.

Works Cited:

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. London: HarperCollins, 2004. Print.