



Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: A Document on Border Politics at Uncanny Spaces Unearths Dehumanization of Refugees

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Abstract:

*History is vocal and sometimes repeats itself brutally. History is also deserted, silenced, unrecorded, buried and it gasps heavily to re/discover its voices for rights in the form of agitations, movements and blood-shed stirs. Colonialism under its hegemony and splendor has buried few histories which gave a picture of its viciousness, barbarism and savagery. History is a genealogy for any community's survival. Fourth world is a history of peripheral community in the capitalist society. Twenty first century has produced a new flavour of fourth world community in this global arena: environmental refugees. Neocolonialism is a shadow of colonialism and native sovereign 'governmentality' of brutality has produced plethora of refugees who were narrowed to xenophobia in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and were termed as Fourth World environmental refugees of Sundarbans. Amitav Ghosh digs out the Morichjhapi massacre of 1978, which was deep buried under the debris of neocolonial state of hegemony. From this vantage point, this paper endeavours to explore how uncanny spaces of unknown world where Fourth World Bangladeshi refugees, in the fiction of *The Hungry Tide*, were oscillating from pillar to post for their survival, rights and basic amenities, succumbed to neocolonial powers. This study explores the 'unspeakable' and 'unspoken' fraternity of refugees who are unrecorded metaphors of uncanny way of the modern world histories.*

Keywords: Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Environmental Refugees, Capitalism, Globalisation

They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the smallholding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power which subordinates society to itself.

-Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war. Why? Because we're told that it's being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good.

- Arundhati Roy, *The Greater Common Good*

'Fourth World,' principally embraces sections that are politically, socially, educationally and economically underprivileged and not having a strong presence in the global setting. The idea of the 'Fourth World' as enunciated by M P Parameswaran, a leading thinker from Kerala, is a new concept of a post-capitalist society. It can form the basis for Marxists, Gandhians, environmentalists, feminists, socialists, Dalits and peace activists to work together. It offers a theoretical space for all these movements.

The twentieth century, owing to World War I and II, Partition, globalization, borders porosity and natural calamities, has been called the ‘century of the refugee’. This is reflected in the increasing salience of research on those forcibly uprooted. The post-colonial study of refugees and forced migration have surfaced as a major thirst area within anthropology, which has been earlier limited to sociological studies of immigrants and anthropological studies of labour migration and settlement in urban areas. Displacement is a growing concern in globalized world; it is said that for any development project the cost has to necessarily be borne by the displaced and affected population. Anthropologists have played a crucial role in addressing the consequences of growing development projects and their impact on environment and human ecology.

“Amara kara? Who are we? We are dispossessed. Where did I belong? In Kolkata or in the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?” (The Hungry Tide)

When these distressed shrieks of refugees in unison piercing through the untidy waters of border politics in the midst of uncanny spaces documented in *The Hungry Tide* (hereafter HT), one more chapter of dehumanization in the history of the fourth world community is attached for our perusal.

The South Asia and Middle East map has undergone a remarkable change since the rise of geopolitical borders in the early twentieth century. These borders constructed by colonial powers and maintained by postcolonial ones have not only divided the region into nation-states but have also entailed boundaries between people on the basis of national, cultural, linguistic and religious differences. In the light of Edward Said’s recurrent reference to the intertwine between narrative accounts and geopolitics, Amitav Ghosh observes ‘how histories in his works challenge spatial and temporal configurations interlocked with these boundaries—histories that are left out of mainstream narratives.’ Fiction and nonfiction of Ghosh contest geopolitical maps enforced by power structures by foregrounding what Joel Migdal calls—“people’s mental maps”.

Refugee movements, across the globe, are generally the result of conflict but can also be a cause of conflict. Much of the existing environmental security literature examines the causal linkages between environmental paucity and violent conflict. Globalization is apparent and so the displacement which has turned out to be an endemic phenomenon that affected those uprooted, the native communities take on them as their counterparts and governments take them as ‘permanent liabilities’. Process of assimilation with the new communities starts with a note of friction and ends with negotiations, adjustments, compromises, humiliations and they live their ‘lives in a series of punctuations, each chapter’ of their lives ‘joined with an ellipses’ (Ya, Renee: *A Punctuation Life*) of memories of their past. In India, especially, uprooting and forced migration also lost trust over the governments and the subterfuge political leaders. Words like ‘torture camp’, ‘gang rape’, ‘modern slavery’, and ‘human cargo’ evoke a shared discourse among journalists, social workers, and activists in refugees.

HT attests to this, with the novel intertwining accounts of the Morichjhapi Massacre of 1979 in the Sunderbans and the history of riverine dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*) which are an integral part of the island’s history and ecology. The discussion in this paper will be confined to the massacre in the Sunderbans. William Faulkner famously said that the past is not over; in fact the past is not even the past (if it is over). For anthropologist Ghosh, one of the paradoxes of history is that it is impossible to draw a graph of the past without imagining a map of the present and future. He explains the difference between the sorrow of grieving for the traumatic loss of life in World War II and the violence that occurred to the migrants of the Partition of 1947 and 1975, and Sikh community in 1984. He explains that when we grieve for the loss of life in World War II, it does not involve the thought that the war changed nothing that we know that the world changed in very significant ways and created a new era (Ghosh 317). However, the violence of Partition and 1984 did not see such changes—the suffering had not altered the trajectory of history of politics of the region and the displaced in any significant way (317). The main objective of Amitav Ghosh in HT is to show, rigorously and through his anthropologic

eyes, with reference to a particular case of Partition and Morichjhāpi massacre of climate refugees, that past is essential to the understanding of the present, because the past lives in the present. It is not easy to demonstrate the past, because contemporary forces actively hide the continuing life of the past in the present. Violence is a double-edged sword and it is used in the neocolonial regime for the politically motivated purpose. In rewriting the anthropological historicity of the refugees of fourth world, defined by M P Parameswaran, history becomes a discourse for Ghosh in HT that is open to interpretation as any other narrative discourse. "History is not the past; it is a consciousness of the past used for present purposes" (Denning, 1993:170).

Amitav Ghosh's' approach, of viewing Fourth World history of Bengal partition refugees in HT, derived from 19th century imperialism, as a human construct written from the point of view of those who wield power provoked the contemporary postcolonial writers to frame an alternate historiography, 'as a necessary first step towards envisaging a liberated future' (Darby, 1998:218). A neocolonial text HT attempts to tell the story of the other side of globalization and environmentalism to accommodate not only the key events experienced by a displaced and refugees' community but also the cultural context through which these events are interpreted and recorded. Ghosh sketches the history of the Sunderbans as a humane history of failed colonization by Europeans. Cecil Rhodes, a British colonial official, businessman and effective founder of the state of Rhodesia (named after him), articulated the motives and goals of European colonialism in the 19th century:

"We must find new lands from which we can easily obtain raw materials and at the same time exploit the cheap slave labour that is available from the natives of the colonies. The colonies would also provide a dumping ground for the surplus goods produced in our factories." (R. Dumont)

Due to its hegemony history and culture, European colonialism is characterized by genocidal practices, including wars of extermination, massacres of non-combatants, biological warfare, and scorched earth policies (land capturing and destroying food & shelter). Other atrocities include the torture of prisoners, rape, and enslavement of indigenous populations. These acts are fueled by racist and patriarchal ideology (i.e., Christianity and white supremacy), greed, and a psychopathic desire to kill and inflict violence and suffering on others.

HT introduces two extreme paradoxes of the fourth world realities of impossible assimilation between: 1) the geographical reality of barren Sundarbans and, 2) the most deprived, booked under hyphenated identity and 'nationality at odds' refugees from the 'other' country who were thrown to the various inhospitable region of a semi-arid rocky place of Dandakaranya- outside West Bengal with the assurance that they would eventually be relocated in West Bengal. Dandakaranya was not a utopian sight for the refugees. It turned out to be 'a land of banishment rather than haven of hope it had been made out to be by rehabilitation administrators.' As Ghosh has expressed his vision of terror on this rehabilitation Bengal Partition refugees in one interview in the Frontline magazine:

"For me, Morichjhapi was inescapable. I'm concerned with the dilemma of how to balance human needs with nature. In India, the state seems to be so rigid, throwing people out, working under the assumption that they are wicked people with some perverse criminal instinct. But they are so terribly poor, braving the forest for nothing more than some honey. These are some of the poorest people in the world."

-Amulya Gopalakrishnan interviewed Ghosh for the Frontline magazine

The West Bengal Bhadrak Hindu community (elite class) unanimously developed apprehensions that the refugees 'were a severe economic liability and that their rehabilitation would make enormous demands upon the meagre economic resources of the province' (Kudaisya and Yong). Dandakaranya dense forest was progressively explored by refugees as a 'land of exile' rather than the haven of hope promised by rehabilitation administrators. Refugees were, as if, transnational exiled to an unexplored

planet. Right from its implementation, the rehabilitation drive was a resettlement 'in the narrow economic sense' for Dandakaranya refugees:

Most of the plots did not produce enough food to keep the families who farmed them alive. In this bleak and barren terrain, there was no other work by which the refugees could earn a few rupees. Such industries as the authority tried to run, in a hopelessly amateur fashion, were disorganized, unprofitable, mismanaged and usually closed down soon after they were set up. For the brief periods that they were open, they paid their workers scandalously low wages. (Joya Chatterji: *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*: 138)

Cravings for sustainable lives from the myopic political consciousness have made 'refugees to be the pawns in a political game' (Shaktipada Rajguru, *Dandak Theke Morichjhāpi*, (Trans: From Dandakaranya to Morichjhāpi Calcutta, 1996) of fake or false nationalism. The dichotomy between the advocacies of equality and fraternity preached in the Indian Constitution and that of dehumanized section of the society for centuries has raised brows against the legitimacy of our highly esteemed Indian Constitution which seems dwarf and indifferent to these societal anarchies. The issue raised in HT is that the neocolonial eco-socio-political nerves of the nation have put its best foot forward to reformulate the idea of nation and nationalism envisaged by Brahmanism and capitalists and have disregarded and annihilated the largest mass of subaltern and indigenous peoples who themselves have all the possible potential to come out with a new unbiased nation without atrocities.

Ghosh has made a scathing attack in his fictions of HT and *The Shadow Lines* on the logics of post-colonial nation building especially on the border's issues of our country where the indigenous subaltern and refugees are geo-politically mapped as diagonal ghettos- mapless and unmapped chords of subalternity- living on the fringes of posthumous colonialism and born out of sovereigns of neocolonialism. The issue raised in HT is that the neocolonial Governmentality has put its best foot forward to reformulate the idea of nation and nationalism envisaged by Brahmanism and capitalists and have disregarded and annihilated the largest mass of subaltern and indigenous peoples who themselves have all the possible potential to come out with a new unbiased nation without all sorts of atrocities. With a utopian vision and to liberate himself from the frustration over the Indian societal pyramid, the first Scottish colonial settler S'Daniel Hamilton, for instance, had sought to domesticate the land of Sundarbans by institutionalizing an egalitarian society and a classless harmony: 'Here there would be no Brahmins or untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together' (HT: 51). With no tribal nationalism and caste fundamentalism, thousands of humiliated subalterns arrived at Sundarbans by jeopardizing their life encounters with crocodiles, tigers, snakes and etc. and they collectively exercised to accomplish Hamilton's vision of communist province where the tamed 'fourth world' peoples emerged as a sovereignty of pride, respect and benevolence. One of the noteworthy accomplishments of Hamilton's dream is the fact that the religious affiliations of beliefs and assimilations seem to be a porous palimpsest between Hinduism and Islam, where the religious rites of worship, veneration and endurance seem to be a confluence between these two 'oil and water' religions. The script of the hymn is immersed with Arabic names and references and yet, the chanting itself is reminiscent of a Hindu Ritual. As Nirmal notes in his diary:

I was amazed. I'd thought I was going to a Hindu Puja: imagine my astonishment on hearing these Arabic invocations! Yet the rhythm of the recitation was undoubtedly that of a Puja; how often, as a child, had I heard those endless chants, rolling on and on, in temples as well as in our home? (HT: 246) The migration to their subaltern commune voluntarily took place into three stages: in 1920s, in 1947 after the Partition of India, and in 1971 after the Bangladesh Liberation war. Ghosh writes in the novel:

"In 1978 it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi... But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhapi; it was from a government resettlement camp in central India... "They called it resettlement", said Nilima, "but people

it was more like a concentration camp, or a prison. They were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave”’. (HT: 118).

In Bangladesh these migrants had been living in penury and forced to live a rustic life. They were exploited, oppressed and tormented both by ‘Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes. These migrants were. the victims of the primitive and barbaric fourth world Govern/mentality. The political siege of the Morichjhāpi settler colony created a sociological disaster, as Nirmal notes in his diary:

The siege went on for many days...food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tube wells...the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out. (HT: 260)

The geo-political historicity of the fourth world community of refugee lies at the centre of the fiction of HT which delineates the ‘identity’ is a tension between ‘essential anxiety’ and ‘ontological security’ for caste and religion based migratory birds. Both sides of the porous borders are people living hand to mouth. The nationalists labelled them, therefore, a ‘permanent liability’ and deployed muscle power to silence them.

The socio-political history of Bengal was at its worst once again, and the dominance of neocolonial politics powers violated human rights. Ross Mallick, in his essay “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Morichjhāpi Massacre” notes:

“At least several hundred men, women, and children were said to have been killed in the operation and their bodies dumped in the river...The central government's Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission, which was aware of the massacre, said in its annual report that there were no atrocities against Untouchables in West Bengal, even though their Morichjhāpi file contained newspaper clippings, petitions, and a list with the names and ages of 236 men, women, and children killed by police at Morichjhāpi prior to the massacre, including some who drowned when their boats were sunk by police.” The geo-political historicity of the fourth world community of refugee lies at the centre of the fiction of HT which delineates the ‘identity’ is a tension between ‘essential anxiety’ and ‘ontological security’ for caste and religion based migratory birds. Both sides of the porous borders are people living hand to mouth. The nationalists labelled them, therefore, a ‘permanent liability’ and deployed muscle power to silence them. The choric voice of subaltern at the borders was toiled to a vegetation state from where the returning the voice fabrics was another utopian dream which the neocolonial powers would never look for. Nirmal first responds by recognizing the universal yells and yearnings of the wretched of the earth, the millions without a home:

How strange it was to hear this plaintive cry wafting across the water. It seemed at that moment, not to be a shout of defiance, but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves, but on behalf of a bewildered humankind. Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong? (HT: 254)

The settlers of Morichjhapi were displaced but insubordinate till their last breath. Armless fourth world humans gave fight to the government for the injustice. In the last breaths of their struggle, when they were being forcibly evicted by a 1500- strong police force (who were specifically deployed for the purpose), their battle-cry became:

‘Amra kara? Bastuhara. Morichjhapi chharbona’ we’ll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may. (HT: 254)

Anecdote:

We notice that in most of the post-colonial countries the “vestiges” of colonialism survive and persist. Why the post-colonial world continues to cherish ‘the colonial ‘traces? Why the subaltern countries to suffer the pangs of deprivation and exploitation? Why the societies of ‘colonial free’ Afro-Asian countries still conduct themselves in a colonial mode? Perhaps the answers to these anxieties lie in the long histories of enslavement of these countries, the people of which have an ingrained mentality of “to rule or to be ruled over”. This mindset embraces most of the Afro-Asian countries and some parts of Europe. We have to attribute a comprehensive meaning to shadow/colonialism. It is beyond geo-political implications. It denotes a particularly inherent mentality of the people who are colonial because they are humans. It is a great irony that human civilization progressed and reached where it is today because of the ‘colonial element’ in the humans. Human history is red with bloodshed in every corner of the world. With Renaissance in Europe spurred the colonial instincts and they were equipped with the advantages of Industrial Revolution which enabled them to explore the world and spread their wings. The colonial instincts were now in full play and France, Portugal and England ruled the people who were already being ruled by others. The long history of being ruled over the enslaved countries had suppressed their ‘colonial instincts’ which sprang to their peak soon after they threw off the yoke of the foreign rule. May be a time will witness the ‘fourth world’ societies throw away the shadow colonial instincts and rule the country in an egalitarian way!

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