

A study of 'Time', 'Space' and 'transculturation' in Amitav Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide'

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Abstract

The Time and Space play a vital part in the structure of 'novel' form. The narration of any novel moves forward and backward within the limits of 'time' and 'space' given by the novelist. The cultures also evolve within these two dimensions. This paper attempts to study Amitav Ghosh's selected novels in the purview of time, space and culture. Amitav Ghosh, one of the master Indian novelists, treats both time and space in a very dynamic way. The time keeps on moving as the tide of the sea in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. Similarly, Ghosh's narratives keep on changing the shores. 'The Hungry Tide' juxtaposes both these dimensions in a thrilling manner.

KEYWORDS : Time-Space-Culture- transculturation- transcultural representations- civilization- myths and legends.

Time and Space of the novel '*The Hungry Tide*' from Transcultural purview:-

As far as the structure of the novel is concerned the novel is divided into two parts; part one – '*The Ebb*':*Bhata* and part two '*The Flood*': *Jowar*. This division of the novel brings forth the ultimate character of the novel i.e. the tide, the water and the life in and around it. Conventionally, Time, Space and setting serves the purpose to bring forth life of individuals but here, the novelist does the other way round and makes alive the life of tide country through the lives of individuals. The two part division of the novel goes well along with the central action that individuals coming close to the core of Sundarban wild life while it is the Ebb and in the second part it is the hungry tide which chases these individuals and changes the normal course of their lives.

The Time in the novel covers almost a century. The novel begins sometimes around the closing years of 20th century. The novel begins in post globalization India, when people like Kanai knowing many languages are getting ample opportunities since New Delhi has become one of the world's leading conference cities and media centers. Kanai Dutt runs a company which provides language professional like translators and interpreters for all kinds of organizations. Piyali Roy uses Global Positioning System (GPS), the advanced technology of today's time to track the routes of Gangetic dolphins. The Time in the novel does not remain stuck at one point of time but keeps rotating back and forth in the past and the present. The diary of Nirmal is an important link which connects past with the present. The last date mentioned in the diary is May 15, 1979 a.m. when Nirmal was part of Morichjhpai agitation. Kanai reads the diary completely which enables him to visualize the events happening in Morichjhpai and Lusibari through Nirmal's viewpoint. In fact, through Nirmal's diary, Amitav Ghosh recreates Morichjhpai and real incident occurred in 1979 when thousands of Dalit refugees from Bangladesh and the Northern India were killed mercilessly. The Time in the novel encompasses almost a span of hundred years. The omniscient narrator describes the Daniel Hamilton's dream project in pre-

independent India to create a nation on the principle of ‘cooperative credit’ irrespective of caste, region and religion. Nirmal and Nilima came to Lusibari in 1950s, when it was still less inhabited. But, gradually Lusibari and many such islands, previously part of Hamilton Estate, were densely populated by the poor settlers from various parts of the country. Therefore, the Time in this novel encompasses very important events and the historical processes of deculturation and acculturation.

The space in the novel connects remote parts of the world. The central space in the novel is the forests, islands and the rivers of the Sundarban in the West Bengal. The central character of the novel Piyali Roy is a cetologist i.e. a field biologist. Her occupation makes her roam around the world. Piyali’s family had settled down in Seattle, U.S.A. but she keeps on moving from Seattle to Kratie, Cambodia, to Sundarban in India and many other parts of the world. The space covered in the novel creates transcultural links among people of different cultural localities. The people and their life in Sundarbanas have been rediscovered by the novelist. Sundarban otherwise occupies only peripheral space in geo – political discourse of the country. The novelist selects some facts from the history and brings forth the issues such as cultural encounters, processes of deculturation and acculturation. The historical events such as Daniel Hamilton’s efforts to create new civilization in the islands of Sundarban and the Morichjhpai massacre of Dalit refugees create substantial ground for transcultural scrutiny of civilization in sundarban.

As the Time in this novel is unstable so is the space; the space keeps moving from land to water. The narrator describes this phenomenon in these words;

“There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far three hundred kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily - some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none borders.”(Page no. 07, *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh)

The ‘Space’ in ‘*The Hungry Tide*’ is partly fictitious and partly real. The two principal settings Lusibari and Garjontola are fictitious but locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Morichjhpai and Satjelia do exist. Ghosh acknowledges this:

“The characters of this novel are fictitious as are its two principal settings, Lusibari and Garjontola. However, the secondary locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhpai and Emilybari do indeed exist and were indeed founded or settled in the manner alluded to here.” (Page no. 401, *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh)

The transcultural scrutiny of the novel ‘*The Hungry Tide*’ is necessary since the novelist has selected some facts from the history of pre and post independent India. Sir Daniel Hamilton’s initiative to create a new civilization on the islands of Hamilton estate is one such fact of pre-independent India. This initiative by Hamilton made long – lasting impact on life and culture of the people involved in the project. This project of Sir Hamilton in fact initiated the processes of deculturation, cultural

conflicts and finally achieving transcultural society. Another such historical fact selected by the novelist is Morichjhpaimassacre in 1979 which washed away the possibility of a new civilization, a truly transcultural civilization.

Transcultural representations in ‘*The Hungry Tide*’:

Sir Daniel Hamilton’s dream to build a new society: An effort to create ‘Transcultural’ Society –

Sir Daniel Hamilton, a visionary Scottish capitalist, dreamed to recreate life and society on the islands of the tide country. Sir Daniel Hamilton right from his childhood believed in typically European moral that the “labor conquers everything”. As a young man, Sir Hamilton left his country to seek his fortune. He came to Calcutta, India as his fellow countrymen used to do in those days. He worked very hard as a ticket agent for Mackinnon and Mckenzie Company. Soon, he became the Head of the Company and raised his status as one of the richest businessmen. When he saw the islands of Sundarban, he regretted that nobody inhabit this ‘doormat of India, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent’. He bought ten thousand acres of the tide country from the British government in 1903. The Hamilton estate included islands such as Gosaba, Rangabelia. Satjelia etc. The two principal settings of the novel Lusibari and Garjontola are fictitious, though. Initially, people were reluctant to reside over these islands on account of constant life-threat from predators such as snakes, crocodiles, sharks, leopards and the tigers. But soon out of desperation to hold a piece of land, thousands of poor migrants came to the islands of the tide country. The narrator describes this in following words.

“Everyone who was willing to work was welcome, S’Daniel said, but on one condition. They could not bring all their petty little divisions and differences. Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together.” (Page no.05, ‘*The Hungry Tide*’, Amitav Ghosh)

It means that they had to disconnect themselves from their previous religious, regional, social and cultural identities. What Sir Daniel Hamilton intended was a deliberate effort to deculture these people in wash away the divisive practices so as to try and create a new society. The process of deculturation is the prerequisite for any kind of cultural evolving. Sir Daniel Hamilton wanted to build a new society based on the principles of co-operation and equality.

“What he wanted was to build a new society, a new kind of country. It would be a country run by co-operatives, he said. Here people wouldn’t exploit each other and every one would have a share in the land.” (Page no. 52, ‘*The Hungry Tide*’, Amitav Ghosh)

The new culture in the tide country, initially, was simply to live together and to work together. The thousands of people from northern Orissa, eastern Bengal from the santhalparganas came here to seek their fortune. The people had to find their own ways to survive among the snakes, crocodiles and the man-eater tigers. Sir Hamilton runs this enterprise not for money but to build a new society. He spoke to the nationalists like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Thakur and many others about this

initiative. Everybody agreed with Sir Daniel that this place could become a model for India. Sir Daniel provided the settlers with electricity, telephone connectivity even a currency and a central bank at Gasaba Sir Daniel dreamed of a place:

“Where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening.” (Page no. 53, *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh)

Sir Daniel died in 1939 and Hamilton Estate soon became bankrupt. His dream could not be realized literally but there is always a hope that this land would cultivate a unique culture of its own that would accommodate everyone. The subtle processes of acculturation can be traced through life and culture of the people. These processes of acculturation can be observed through new ways invented by the people so as to adapt with circumstances and surrounding. While people confront with adverse conditions to protect their existence they evolve new ways and strategies fitting to their life in the tide country. The settlers in the tide country did the same thing. A large proportion of island's women dressed as widows. These women wore borderless saris and used to be without any adornment, without bangles, without vermilion, the symbols of their husband's life. It was a custom evolved by these people that when their menfolk went out for fishing, the wives would – wear the garments of widowhood. It was as if they were trying to hold misfortune aside by living it over again and again. It might also be their effort to prepare themselves to face their destiny which they are so certain to occur some day or the other. This is completely a new custom evolved to deal with their fatal lives. The 'Bodabon Trust' led by Nilima works to provide Health facilities to these people. The Trust builds an advanced hospital and a guest house especially for women. The Trust also trains the local women in nursing and runs many other activities to generate employment.

Morichjhapi Massacre : Passing away of unborn civilization:

The novelist has chosen a real event from post-independence Indian history that is Morichjhapi massacre. Morichjhapi was also a tide country island but it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland. In 1978, Bangladeshi refugees living in government resettlement camps in Madhya Pradesh came to Morichjhapi. Most of them were Dalits. The then Left Front Ministry declared Morichjhapi as a protected forest reserve and they had proved to be unbending in their determination to evict the settlers. The settlers kept confronting with government forces for one year. Meanwhile the settlers had divided the land in wards and elected their ward leaders. There were already thirty – five thousand people on the island and each family was given a five acres land. The settlers had taken a great care to establish organization and institution necessary for any well – run society.

Morichjhapi as described by Nirmal would have certainly flourished as a new culture and a new society irrespective of caste, religion and region making progress by following the principles of co-operation, equality and unity. Morichjhapi is probably realization of Sir Daniel Hamilton's dream of establishing a well-run society in Lusibari. The vital difference between Sir Hamilton's dream and what was happening in Morichjhapi was that Morichjhapi settlement was the dream of all settlers whereas the dream of Sir Daniel Hamilton was not shared that intensely by the settlers of Hamilton estate. It was the dream of a visionary but only of an individual.

Unfortunately, Morichjhapi was evicted brutally by the police in 1979 killing thousands of settlers. This incident helps us understand the issue of environment protection verses welfare of the masses which is reflected in to Kusum's cry which seems to be relevant till today. She argues why the priority has been given to animals and not to poor and helpless human beings who do not have any country to own:

“This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world. Every day, sitting here, with hunger growing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them.” (Page no. 262, *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh)

Both these instances, Sir Daniel's dream of new society and Morichjhapi massacre raise issues regarding civilization and human culture. This also affirms that migration due to any reason is the chief principle of human evolution. Cultural evolution is an ongoing process typical to human species.

Myths and Legends invented in the process of transculturation in '*The Hungry Tide*':

Myths, rituals and legends give any society its cultural identity. These myths and rituals keep society unified. But, it is interesting to understand the way these myths are created in comparatively new societies. Many such instances are available in '*The Hungry Tide*'. The best of it is the '*The Myth of Bon Bibi*'. The stage performance of '*The Glory of Bon Bibi*' by the local artists is one of the common practices of the tide country. It is indeed surprising that the story of the tiger-goddess did not begin in expected Hindu way but in the backdrop of mosques and minarets:

“The setting was Medina, one of the holiest places in Islam; here lived a man called Ibrahim, a childless but pious Muslim who led the austere life of a sufi fakir. Through the intervention of the archangel Gabriel, Ibrahim became the father of blessed twins, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli. When the twins came of an age, the archangel brought them word that they had been chosen for a divine mission: they were to travel from Arabia to the country of eighteen tides. (Page no. 103, *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh)

The Myth further tells the 'tide country' was then the realm of Dokkhin Rai, a powerful demon king. Dokkhin Rai attacked Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli, but was defeated by the twins. Bon Bibi was merciful in victory and she decided that on half of the tide country would remain wilderness, one part she left for Dokkhin Rai, the rest she claimed for herself and under her rule this once-forested domain was soon made safe for human settlement. Thus order was brought to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown. It was carefully balanced until human greed intruded to disturb this order. People of the tide country since then believe that whosoever crosses the boundary marked by Bon Bibi for human beings

would die since the person would enter in the Kingdom of Dokkhin Rai. This myth indeed helps to keep the balance between the Mankind and the Nature.

The glory of Bon Bibi prevailed over the tide country, the legend of Dukhey, a sorrowful boy substantiates the glory of Bon Bibi. Dukhey was the member of Dhona's crew who has advanced to jungle to make his fortune in trade. Dukhey's mother advised him to call on Bon Bibi who she tells is the savior of the weak and mother of mercy to the poor. The sailors unknowingly, took the ships on the island which was Dokkhin Rai's territory. Dokkhin Rai revealed himself to Dhona in a dream and proposed a pact according to which Dhona would keep Dukhey for Dokkhin Rai and in return he will give Dhona immense wealth. Dhona kept the pact and left Dukhey alone on the island. Dokkhin came in the form of tiger to eat Dukhey's flesh. Dukhey called the mercy of Bon Bibi. Bon Bibi came to the rescue the boy and her brother Shah Jongoli dealt with the demon. Bon Bibi sent Dukhey back to his mother with a great treasure trove of honey and wax. Thus did Bon Bibi show the world the law of the forest which was that the rich and the greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous was rewarded.

These myths have so much become the part of local people's lives that they pray Bon Bibi whenever they sense trouble. Fokir's grandfather i.e. Kusum's father had built a temple of Bon Bibi on Garjontola island. Fokir twice in the course of the novel visits Garjontola and offers his prayers to Bon Bibi. Interestingly the Gangetic dolphins as recognized by Piyali Roy are the messengers of Bon Bibi for Fokir. Piya could not recognize Fokir's prayer to Bon Bibi as Hindu or Muslim. This in fact is 'transcultural phenomena', where we find synthesis of different religious practices.

The myth of Bon Bibi has its origin to Arabia hence it also suggests that some sort of cultural and linguistic exchange might have taken place between the tide country and the Arabia. While naming Nilima's Trust as 'Bodabon Trust' Nirmal explains this linguistic blending of Sanskrit with Arabic. The word bodabon has been derived from the Arabic 'badiya' which means desert while the Bengali word joins Arabic to Sanskrit – 'bad' to 'bon' which means forest. These myths and culture of tide country connects two great rivers of language – Arabic and Sanskrit and also the lives and cultures of people to create transcultural world.

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