

A Study of Island Culture in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Culinary has become a part of research in various literature as it reveals the culture of the people represented in the works. Culinary is an art as well as science. It not only deals with the food habits of the people, but also represents the culture of a specific region. The representation of culinary is observed in the works of Indian Diaspora such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*, Jumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh, all of these Indian Diaspora writers refer to food, which becomes a metaphor for the location, people, etc., in their works. Thus Culinary literature has gained significant place in literature. The present study is an attempt to foreground Island culture through their food as represented in the *Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Culinary, Island people, Island Landscape.

Introduction:

Culture is as old as man himself. When humans began to communicate, they started to disseminate their interests which was followed by the people of the place and thus came to be a culture. Amitav Ghosh, the Padmashri Awardee (2007) and Gyanpit Award winner of 2018 has written novels and essays that abound with references to food and culture of people. The novel abounds with Ghosh's references of the Islands' life, landscape, economy and so on. It is in the characterisation of the Islanders that Amitav stands at his forte. The paper aims at foregrounding the Island life, which includes their customs, culinary and economy, as well as the landscape as portrayed by the writer and its significance in the present scenario.

Literature Survey:

Ghosh has been widely appreciated by the critics for his lucid language, style and portrayal of real life-like characters. The pioneer praises the novelist as "...a writer who looks, listens and tells the story...There are chances you may catapult into the tidal landscape of Sunderbans." Business standard appreciates this as "trip of a life time." The Sunderbans, islands divided between India and Bangladesh that stretch into the Bay of Bengal, provide the setting for the novel. Discussing on his motivation to write the novel, Ghosh suggests that dominant visual practices contribute to a lack of knowledge about the Sunderbans, and he positions his novel as a response to these practices. Some of the critics find the novel as an amalgam of various themes where in they observe: "The *Hungry Tide* by Ghosh is a unique combination of anthropology, migration, travel, environmentalism, ethnography, photography and landscape; wrapped under the cloak of fiction" (Qtd in Thodum, 75). Another researcher states:

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra

discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity. Ghosh sets his novel in the Sundarbans, the tide country where the contours of land constantly change with the ebb and flow of water . (23)

In yet another article Fletcher states that, “The Hungry Tide, like much of Ghosh’s work, explores the significance of place (in multiple senses) to the formation and expression of personal and social identities in India and the Indian diaspora” (5). Thus in all the above, Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is discussed from the point of Diaspora, nature from an eco-critical perspective and culture as a whole but not focused on the Island culture in particular. Thus, this research highlights the Island Culture of the Tide country including the geographical significance and food culture.

Summary of the Novel:

The novel is divided into two parts, with part one titled “The Ebb: Bhata” and the second part is titled “The Flood: Jowar”. In the opening of the novel, the writer introduces the central characters Piyali Ray, an American Indian, whose roots lie in India and Kanai Dutt, a well-bred Bengali in his middle age, a translator by profession living in New Delhi. The protagonist Piyali is a marine biologist who had come to Bengal to study the Cetacean particularly the Irrawaddy Dolphins and the Gangetic dolphins in the Tidal country.

When she was on her way to Canning, she met Kanai Dutt and the story moves on. The initial hurdles Piya faces at Canning as an outsider with another challenge of the coast guard who wants mint more money from her. She somehow was able to escape from the guard and accidentally falls into the waters. There, Fokir, a young boats man, a native Islander comes to her rescue. He not only rescues her, but was also resourceful by providing her with the vital information for surveying the river dolphins. They both share a few common interest and Piya was drawn towards Fokir due to his cordial nature. His son Tutul also likes Piya. It is evident when the child tries to help her overcome the chill by hugging her.

Though Piya does not know a bit of Bengali, she manages to communicate with them through gestures. Moreover, her job needs very less communication. When she tracks the dolphins, an unexpected storm brews up taking away the life of Fokir. But she was saved and with the help of her GPS instrument, she could recover the data and gets an assignment on mapping the river dolphins. There is also a myth around the islanders that anyone without a pure heart if venture into the sunderbans would never return. Both Piyali Roy and Kanai Dutt are outsiders in the tide country, who disturb its balance.

Island Culinary:

Like many other novels of Ghosh, here too one can find references to food, such as in the first chapter titled “The Tide Country” there are references to the tea vendors and Kanai Dutt “... resolved to buy him a cup of tea” (6) proves that the people are fond of drinking tea. Even the protagonist Piya buys tea from the vendor which again drives home the point that tea is a part of our culture. The food habits of the islanders is well explained in “Crabs”, which contrasts the food habit of Piya, who thrives by the protein bars, ovaltine and bottled water with that of the Islander and his son Tutul, who eat freshly cooked rice with crab cooked in spices. The writer elaborates on the brief arrangements made by Fokir to cook a meal of rice and fresh crabs seasoned with spices

thus: “...red, yellow, bronze...the spitting oil with pinches of turmeric and chilli, coriander and cumin” (96) all of which makes Piya nostalgic of her mother’s kitchen.

The above lines prove that the people in the tide country share a similar culture with the Bengalis and Bangla people. Again in another chapter, there is a reference to food, “the meal was simple: plain rice, musuri’r dal, a quick cooked chorchori of potatoes, fish bones and a kind of green leaf he could not identify. Finally, there was a watery jholofa of a tiny but toothsome fish called murola” (143). The above lines demonstrate that the food of the islanders are both simple and elaborate. Rice is a staple diet with fish. There is a certain difference in their cooking, where the native Kanai was unable to tell about the green leaves. Other than that it resembled a traditional Bengali meal. Like the rest of India, these people are fond of drinking tea, which finds many references in the beginning of the chapter, as well as when the story progresses and also at the end, where the novelist gives a vivid description of Nilima preparing tea, wherein she remarks: “...home is wherever I can brew a pot of good tea” (400). Even the hospital has small tea shops which again proves that tea is the staple drink and common among the islanders as much as it is in India.

Island Landscape:

The novel centers around the “island archipelago, in the Ganges delta”. In the first part titled “The Ebb: Bhata”, there is a reference to the geographical location of the island. Ghosh gives a pictorial description of the Island thus:

...interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands. But that is what it is: an archipelago, stretching for almost three hundred kilometers...The islands are the trailing threads of India’s fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the ācholthat follows her, half-wetted by the sea. (6). The novel is “the largely forgotten history of the forced evacuation of refugees from the island of Morichjhāpi in 1979. The liminal space of the Sundarbans, the “tide country”, is an extraordinary setting for a literary exploration of the relationship between postcolonial island geographies and identities.”(academia.edu)

Ghosh’s depiction of the Sundarbans addresses the issues and challenges faced by the people of the tide country and it could be considered as “...the heart of the critical meta-discourse of island studies.” (“academia.edu”)

Though these islands are small by area, what is astonishing is the fact that these islands’ boundaries are highly inconsistent. The Island had its colonial past which is reflected in the names of the islands such as Canning-after Lord Canning, the British Vice Roy of Bengal, and “The island’s main village-also known as Lusibari” (37), besides which there are towns with names such as Jamespur, Andrewpur, etc., all of which are named after the Whiteman Sir Daniel Hamilton and his relatives.

Lives in the Island:

Lives of the islanders were never easy as they were often caught by the gaurds who wrongly accuse them of poaching. It is on one such incident that Piya meets Fokir. Though he was cautious not to fish on an off-limits area, these coast guards often misuse their power to mint money from the innocent islanders. The above mentioned incident is an instance for this. In the island, mangroves begin to gestate overnight. This the writer refers to as a universe with diverse life forms. The mangroves are different in

their topography with a thick canopy of leaves and muddy waters is a microcosm in itself. Piya was awestruck by the symbiotic relation of dolphins with the fisherman in Mekhong. The writer questions: "Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals?"(169). Thus, the tide country and the mangroves were interrelated and one depended on the other.

History of the Island:

When explaining the inhabitation of the tide country, he talks about the past when S'Daniels, a Scottish man who settled in India wondered at why the islands were not inhabited again. To this, the writer explains, "... the speciality of the mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize land, they erase time. Every generation creates its population of ghosts." (50). (284) one of these many islands, Lusibari is conch shaped and has housed many inhabitants. "The Glory of Bon Bibi" is a myth that circulates in the island. The islanders have a strong belief in the legend, where Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jangoli will protect the innocents from being killed by the Big Cats, which they consider a form of the demon Dhokin Roy. Through Kanai, Piya comes to know about Fokir's view of the dolphins, as he adds: "As for the big shush, the dolphins who live in these waters,...were Bon Bibi's messengers" (307), this is another myth of the islanders.

Island People:

The first reference to an islander is found in the chapter "The Fall", wherein there is a description of a local fisherman thus: "...it seemed to her that he had the grizzled look of an experienced hand: "around his thin mouth was a dusting white that suggested stubble or a beard. There was some kind of turban wrapped around his head but his body was bare except for a single twist of cloth, wound between his legs and around his waist" (42). The above description gives the readers a clear picture of the islander and his profession. The fisherman on spotting the boat looks alarmed and when her launch neared the boat she realised that both the fisherman and the child with him are terrified. Later, Piya understands that the guard wanted to mint money from the innocent fisherman by blaming him to be a poacher.

Priya thinks that the islanders are living in perfect harmony with their surroundings. It rather comes to her as a shock that even Fokir wants to kill the Tiger which has entered the island. In the chapter titled "Interrogations", Kanai tries to make sense by adding: But what did you expect, Piya? Kanai Said. Did you think that he is some kind of grass-roots ecologist? He's not. He's a fisherman-he kills animals for a living" (297). Piya tells Kanai the difference between preserving a species to letting it live in its habitat. She is bent upon preserving the rare species Irrawaddy Dolphins even if it means to give up her life. In yet another chapter, "Blown Ashore" the writer through Kusum's past demonstrates how tough life is for the islanders once they are out of their place. "Walking on the iron we longed for the touch of mud; encircled by rails, we dreamed of the Raimangal in flood"(164). Further, when she comes across a group of people, whom she finds later to belong to the tide country, and hope blossoms in her as they too "hankered for the tide country"(165).

It is quite surprising that the islanders were not divided by caste or creed. Everyone were treated as equal but on one condition, that is, their willingness to work. The aim of the white man was not money but to construct a new society which could serve as a model for India. But unfortunately, the dream of the White man was unfulfilled. Nirmal,

Kanai's uncle was hopeful and responded to Kanai's mockery thus: " '...it was that the tide country wasn't ready yet. Some day who knows? It may yet come to be.' " (53). Nilima Aka Mashima and Nirmal lived in one of these islands named Lusibari. The earliest settlers were in 1920s. then there were successive settlers in 1947 and 1971. many were recent settlers, who were on the projects for wildlife conservation. Everything came as a surprise to Kanai, who has visited the island after a long time. Lusibari has a supply of electricity for a few hours from evening till nine pm.

All these are show the improved lifestyle of the islanders. Also, there is a cycle van which serves as a carrier of load as well as passengers. Another astonishing fact about the islanders is that they are not greedy. When Piya offered money to Fokir, he initially refused to take it, but on the insistence of Piya, as she tucks the money in his arm where he has tied a cylindrical medallion, he accepts just one note as a compensation for his money taken away by the guard and returns the rest. There are many instances that prove the islanders to be simple folks. Kanai's face to face meeting with Kusum is one such instance.

Conclusion:

Thus the novel keeps the readers informed about the culture of the Island people, their struggles for survival which is dual, where on one hand they fight with the rough sea and with the intruders on the other. These people of the tide country are simple, without innate crookedness, a quality found in their city bred counterparts. Fokir is a best instance for the island people. They are simple folks without greed and lead their lives with contentment sailing over the tides. They are the kind of people who are honest, sincere and hard workers.

Scope for further research:

The present study pertains to the landscape and culture of Island People in the novel. Besides this, one could also study the novel from an anthropological point of view or as a culinary literature.

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