

Unstable Homelands And Marginal Lives In Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) locates the crisis of displacement within the tidal wilderness regions of the Sundarbans, a landscape known for the perpetual ecological instability. This article examines how Ghosh configures the idea of homeland as an unstable thing, always contested, and politically vulnerable for the marginal communities who deliberately inhabit this particular region. It inevitably has drawn towards postcolonial timelines, subaltern studies, and ecological frames; the article traces how the novel's central characters, Fokir, Piya, Nirmal, and Kusum, struggle for survival and save their belongings. It shows the erasure happens within a space where the state simultaneously exploits and abandons the people. The Morichjhāpi massacre is also a central terrible event that is read as the novel's core trauma where the state's conservation agenda becomes the major instrument of violence against its most naive citizens. The article further explores how Ghosh uses the terms "memory," "narrative fragmentation," and "ecological imagery" to expose the external forces that affect marginal lives and make them disposable. Ultimately, *The Hungry Tide* is not merely an ecological novel but interiorly a sustained critique on power and forced displacement.

Keywords: displacement, postcolonial ecology, subaltern studies, marginal lives, unstable homelands.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh has a distinctive place in contemporary Indian English fiction, which is not only for the range and ambition he has secured in the fictional world but also for the ethical seriousness with which he approaches the domains of displacement, history, and environment. In many of his major novels, Ghosh persistently imports the evocative themes such as homelessness, the dispossessions in life, and the forgotten identities due to continual movements. The people's lives have been collapsed by the forces like colonialism, nationalism, and ecological crisis. The novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) has represented his most sustained ideas about displacement and ceaselessly searching for something uncaught by readers in the mentioned themes. Ghosh painlessly discusses the crisis of homelessness within the mystic landscape of the wet Sundarbans, where the mangrove delta stretches its border between India and Bangladesh; the regions become the main landscapes for the novel.

The wetland Sundarbans has not been merely a setting in this novel; it justly holds a life in the novel. In another sense, it possesses the value of a protagonist in a particular way. A landscape that is formed by the constant interaction of river and sea and collision of tide and storm. The Sundarbans landscape is not often friendly towards the human desire to live permanently over its surface. Sometimes the islands appear and dissolve due to the calamities, and especially rivers shift their courses of run because of climate change in the region. The region is completely threatened by vanishing due to the water. The portrayal of communities that have made their lives in this tide region are actually trying to establish a stable homeland and a secure enduring place for ordinary living. The narration explains that it is not simply achievable and structurally impossible because of the region's environment. The instability is certainly ecological at its root, and to intensify the pain, the political dejections haunt the people; to extend the pain, the colonial dispossession by the state plays a major role. This article argues that in *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh defines displacement not as a singular historical event but as a continuous project designed by the power systems in the society and a compounding condition produced by the convergence of ecological precarity, subaltern silencing, and mainly institutional violence.

The structural framework of this article especially draws on three intersecting thoughts: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorization of the subaltern, David Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession, and Rob Nixon's framework of slow violence. Together, these frameworks highlight how *The Hungry Tide* maps the multiple layers in marginalizing the people that define the unstable life in the Sundarbans and explain Ghosh's narrative strategies like fragmented temporality of deserted people, multivocal narration, and ecological awareness.

The imagination of geographical space in *The Hungry Tide* is inseparable from the theme of political argument and involvement of imperialism. The Sundarbans, as Ghosh renders it, is a space that could confound the

ordinary people with many unexpected events, which are categorized through unstableness in the lives of the people slackening from property, territory, sovereignty, and settlement. In a region like Sundarbans, where the boundary between land and water is perpetually renegotiated and changed by tidal forces, the legal and political settings that govern ownership of the region and lives become not merely inadequate but actively violent and infecting. The state's abrupt claim over the territory where the deprived people have settled and enforced their evacuation through forest laws, conservation regulations, and the administrative apparatus in the name of the Tiger Reserve. The state imposes a fixed and static cartography line upon a landscape where the human and other habitats share the region, by natural dynamic or provisional setup.

David Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession really offers a useful configuration for moving this paper in the intended direction. Harvey argues that capitalism continuously grows like a monster by enclosing and grasping the wealth of the commons; the activities like privatizing shared resources and displacing vulnerable communities in the name of development or conservation are underhand processes of capitalism. In the Sundarbans, this process takes a specifically dangerous form, even if it is conducted by the state power. The forest has not been completely inhabited by people or creatures, but the state forces' administration designated a protected reserve primarily for the extraction of timber and the management of wildlife, as what the forces call "continues under imperial governance." The communities who have lived alongside the forest for generations are expelled and relocated; in the eyes of the state, they are encroachers and threats to nature. The state considers their presence illegitimate, and their removal is justified in the name of ecological protection.

Ghosh makes this dynamic explicit in his portrayal of the landscape's daily activity. The individual from fishing communities like Fokir's expects survival within a space governed by rigorous regulations they had no hand in creating; they can only follow the set of rules and cannot afford to enjoy. In the story, the honey collectors and forest-dwellers enter into the protected areas at the high risk of imprisonment or even death, driven not by defiance but by necessity. The novel's ecological concentration has tended to its detailed rendering of tides, dolphins, tigers, and mangroves, and they are not merely in an aesthetic sense alone but analytical. Ghosh's argument is that human life in the Sundarbans is embedded deeply within the natural world, which it possesses, that official policy of the state treats as separate and opposed to human habitation. The homeland these communities inhabit is not actually stable because the political and ecological systems that govern them refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of their presence in the regions where the sources are accumulated.

At the heart of *The Hungry Tide*, Fokir has stood as one of Ghosh's most quiet devastating characters throughout the novel. He is an illiterate, economically precarious, and linguistically far away from the novel's other protagonists, Piya, Fokir embodies the condition of the subaltern, which could reflect Spivak's ideology in the fullest sense. He truly possesses an intimate and acclaimed knowledge of the Sundarbans region, especially of its tides, its creatures, and also the dangers. He really had no formal scientific education and no connection to modern education. But his knowledge is precisely embodied from oral transactions and is non-institutional, which doesn't carry authority within the systems of power that govern the blended region. His rural knowledge cannot be published, cited, or administered. Fokir's knowledge exists in practice, and it cannot speak within the terms of modern epistemology and science.

Spivak's foundational work "Can the subaltern speak?" crucially resonates with Fokir's arc of experience in the novel. Ghosh poses the question of whether Fokir has any voice in a literal sense, which means does he really have any rights in the structures of knowledge, governance, and living platforms? He is not embedded or allowed to produce or voice anything to be heard, understood, and acted on in the way he likes. The answer for the posing questions *The Hungry Tide* gives is unambiguous and deeply sorrowful. To note, Fokir's understanding of the river really exceeds Piya's scientific instruments, yet within the institutional framework of conservation science, his knowledge firmly registers all over the novel, and it greatly helps Piya. Thus, he can guide Piya to examine the dolphins, though he had no formal education; he cannot excel Piya, but without his rural knowledge, her institutional education is helpless. Because his community survives long by this rural and practical education.

This epistemic marginality is deliberately exposed by Ghosh in the novel by compounded linguistic exclusion. Naturally, Fokir speaks only Bengali; Piya speaks only English. The novel makes this contradiction a chance to communicate indirectly within them; this is the unique structural feature of their relationship, not merely viewed as the personal inconvenience. Here the language barrier is not incidental but carefully constructed; it figures the broader possibility of translation between the world of the subaltern and the world of the institutionally empowered systems. Anyone can understand what actually passes between Fokir and Piya, the wordless understanding that develops through a kind of spirituality and observation. Ghosh moves the story by this silence and real moving; it is

not at all fragile and not insufficient. The relationship can survive the storm, and it can alter any conditions that made Fokir's life so precarious.

Unexpectedly, Fokir's death in the novel is the most pathetic and most emotive event. He saves Piya's life by shielding her body with his own body during the cyclone; it is a final act of generosity and more than that, where the novel refuses to sentimentalize. His death is not heroic sacrifice in any redemptive sense, but it is his response to a kind of love and also the outcome of a lifetime of exposure to ecological danger, economic vulnerability, and institutional invisibility. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence completely illuminates the outcome or the sacrifice. Fokir does not die from a single dramatic act of oppression or duty but from the accumulated weight of a life lived without protection, without recognition, and without recourse; he only cares less about his own life. His death comes under the concept of slow violence but is terribly visible to kind hearts.

The Morichjhāpi massacre is the terrible incident that is recounted through Nirmal's journal and Kusum's testimony, which constitutes the moral and political center of *The Hungry Tide*. In 1979, thousands of marginalized refugees were violently displaced by the Partition of Bengal and subsequently resettled in the Dandakaranya forest region of central India, which is termed as the place for refugees. They attempted to return to the land they considered their ancestral homeland but failed. So, they occupied Morichjhāpi, an island in the Sundarbans, and began to build their community, and they constructed homes, and cultivated the land for a sustainable livelihood. The West Bengal state government was controlled at the time by the Left Front; according to the narration of Ghosh, it ordered the violent eviction on the grounds that the island lay within the protected forest reserve and that their presence had been termed a threat to the ecological safety and integrity of the Sundarbans.

Ghosh's narration of this episode is one of the most politically charged passages in his fiction. Through Kusum's voice, the novel exposes the testimony where the dreadful official history has been largely suppressed, especially the blockade of food and medicine, the violent killings of innocent people, the burning of huts, and these mass deaths from starvation and disease. Kusum's angry reflections and questions, like why the animals of the forest seem worth more than the innocent people who have nowhere else to go other than the forest region. Truly her engagement is not rhetorical. Kusum's expression is the precise indictment towards the conservation model that deserts the people of nothing and they possess nothing; they have been under the exclusions of the state powers.

The origins of state power are not an incidental model to Ghosh's argument in the novel. Factually, British imperial forest policy in India, codified as the Indian Forest Act of 1878, strictly does not allow the systematically criminalized entrance into the forest and also does not allow the indigenous and rural communities. This simultaneous restriction by the state powers becomes dangerous to the rural communities, but the real control is based in order to assert state control over timber and wildlife resources. The postcolonial state largely inherited and perpetuated this framework, though the European centers leave, the state power holds the elements, and it views forest-dwelling communities as obstacles to conservation rather than as its primary parts. The Morichjhāpi eviction is, in this context, a direct continuation of colonial dispossession and state power under the broad name of ecological protection. Here they just change the language that is from imperial extraction to socialist conservation, but the logic of exclusion remains structurally identical and the same; the lives of the marginal are sacrificed for the benefit of unknowns.

Homi Bhabha's concept of the colonial stereotype is immensely transposed into the imperial context, and Ghosh has made the traces in the novel. He has in some way changed the moisture of the text by fixing the colonized subject in a reductive manner, like dehumanizing the images, and state imperial conservation discourse fabricates the forest-dwelling poor people into the images of the ecological threat, as the poacher and main destroyer of habitat. The stereotype thinking makes a political function hard, and this political condition builds the unjustifiable displacement as a moral defense and even necessary. Ghosh firmly refuses this stereotype throughout the novel, insisting that it is only a political stunt, fully against humanity and ecological knowledge of the Sundarbans' rural communities; he exposes undesirable political interests that the language of conservation so effectively conceals in the name of projects.

Other than the subaltern figures in the novel, Fokir and Kusum, Ghosh carefully drafts two characters who arrive in the Sundarbans from outside of the region: Piya Roy, an American-born cetologist of Bengali descent, and Nirmal, a retired schoolteacher and former Marxist idealist who is discussed through his journal. Both characters act differently in many ways, though they are figures of high education; they are the privileged outsiders who happen to confront the limits of their own institutional education. They are haunted by the reality of marginal life. Through

the characters, Ghosh stages a sustained meditation on the ethics and politics of witnessing and shows how horrible it is just being a witness alone.

Piya arrives in the Sundarbans with the high aspiration for the professional scientific research on the Irrawaddy dolphin. Her main goal is to collect data on the population and movement patterns of the Irrawaddy dolphin, and her initial relationship to the human world of the Sundarbans is largely notable. To execute the research, she needs a boat and a guide, Fokir, who turns out to be the provider of both facilities. But the novel gradually shows Piya's earlier detachments draw her into an ethical relationship with the human realities; she had the bond with Fokir. She grows her understanding on Fokir's knowledge, and the horror at the conditions of his community endures, and then realizing the problem, she eventually committed to funding a conservation project that centers local livelihoods and promises to develop the poor conditions, where Piya transformed from a detached observer to an engaged witness for a change. Ghosh is careful and does not try to romanticize this transformation. Piya's decision to fund a dolphin sanctuary is generous and well-intentioned, but it is also a decision made from a position of institutional and economic power. Ghosh's portrayal of the position of Piya to donate is both celebratory and a quiet critique of the limits of liberal environmentalism in the regions.

Nirmal's arc of characterization offers a different and darker version of the outsider's encounter, witnessing and mourning the marginal sufferings. His journal seriously records his witness to the Morichjhāpi massacre and his own failure to act and exposes his immovable condition. His journal shows that he is inspired by Rilke's poetry and animated by a Marxist utopianism; the reality of the Left Front's governance has discredited his belief system. Ghosh proposes that Nirmal arrives at Morichjhāpi in a state of ideological crisis. He was dejected to find the community has been dispossessed of buildings, resourcefulness, and dignity. In the homeland, every political authority has denied them; nothing can restore his faith in society. He is unable to prevent their destruction, and his journal becomes a record to mention the gap between intellectual witnessing in silence and terrible political action. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laube's theorization of testimony is found a place in this moment. The testimony is never simply the transmission of fact but always an act of interpretation to propagate that was shaped by trauma due to the reception of the terrible events. Nirmal's journal is testimony in precisely this sense, addressed to Kanai, a future reader who must decide what to do with what it reveals, and also it is the implication to the general readers.

One of the most significant formal features to be noted in *The Hungry Tide* is its treatment of time. The novel does not move linearly; that is how Ghosh engineers a novel. It oscillates between present action and recovered memory, that is, between Kanai's contemporary journey to the Sundarbans and the historical testimonies he reads, which were preserved in Nirmal's journal. The non-linear study is not merely aesthetic to mourn, but it is an argument about the relationship between past and present, between the traumatic histories of dispossession and the ongoing conditions of marginal life, where people should take action in their real lives.

Cathy Caruth's influential theorization of trauma argues that the terrible traumatic events always resist the full assimilation into consciousness, and in narrative style itself, trauma works as intrusive fragments that disrupt the forward movement of time. *The Hungry Tide* embodies this understanding formally and shows the past does not stay past; it can reach the present. Morichjhāpi surfaces through Nirmal's journal not settled as history, and it reaches the present and is an unresolved wound that demands acknowledgement and response from those who encounter it. Ghosh expresses through the narration Kanai's initial reluctance to fully engage with what the journal reveals, but his tendency is revealed upon reading the terrible history. The history mirrors the broader cultural suppression of the massacre and the state power's erasure from the official memory using its Left Front's governance.

Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory is also equally relevant to the novel's temporal politics. Halbwachs firmly argues that memory is never purely individual instinct but mostly framed by society and shaped by the communities and institutions that determine what is remembered for long and what is forgotten shortly. The Morichjhāpi refugees exist at the margins of collective memory and are shaped by social realities; their suffering is preserved in personal testimony of Nirmal and local oral tradition but is carefully absent from official archives, political histories, and national commemorations. Ghosh's novel intervenes and unearths the issues to the world; the eroded memory is back to life through Kusum's voice, which is the status of historical testimony, insisting that her account carries an authority to the deprived people and no one can move unaddressed by her voice.

The novel's title itself carries an implied meaning. The hungry tide is not merely a meteorological implication but a figure that shows the underlying meaning. The processes of erasure are noted by Ghosh, and he professes that the tide that takes lives and covers settlements, which really means the critical environment, the tide that can return, bringing with it the residue of what has been submerged, now he gives alternative meaning to tides, that is,

psychological. Memory is also a tide in *The Hungry Tide*, the tide that refuses to recede. The tide has been interpreted as a force that carries the lost histories of marginal lives back into view, as a rising one, demanding general unity for the poor people.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh offers a rigorous argument and deeply felt critique of the state forces that make homelands unstable and marginal lives disposable, like the waste that is washed by tides upon the shore. Ghosh is situating displacement within the convergence of ecological domains; that is how the environment plays a major role in displacement and colonial inheritance, where the imperial state violence refuses the consolations of easy political affiliation. As Ghosh's narration shows, the Left Front government's ordering the Morichjhāpi eviction is not simply a corrupt or authoritarian regime but a brutal action, and that is precisely Ghosh's point on the issue. The displacement of the poor in the name of conservation or development is indirectly condemned by the author by provoking the readers' senses and emotions; it is a structurality of modern governance criticized in the text.

The novel's ethical vision is not essentially nihilistic; however, through the transformation of Piya, the testimony of Kusum, and the preserved memory of Nirmal's journal, *The Hungry Tide* insists on the voices that come from the common people and the necessity of a different kind of relationship over namesake. The relationship would be grounded not in abstraction or metaphorical assumptions but upon immeasurable love towards humanity, maybe towards rights of wildlife, imperatives of conservation, and solidarity in class politics. Ghosh's portrayal of Sundarbans remains, at the novel's close, as volatile and uncertain an image as it was at its opening, but it is no longer merely a landscape but a speaking image, and then it remains as a testimony of brutality.

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