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HUMAN ASPIRATIONS AGAINST *THE HUNGRY TIDE*: A STUDY

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh, in The Hungry Tide brings up the past and simultaneously the colonial history of India. After colonial suppression, people need a place of their own. In this novel, it reappears in various forms. It appears in the utopian community founded in Sundarbans at the beginning of the twentieth century by the visionary Scot Sir Daniel. The Islands were peopled by a cross section of the society that was underprivileged, poor and landless. The tide country thus became home to people from different parts of Orissa, East Bengal, Santhal Parganas etc. people who were socially marginalized or segregated.

Keywords: *Human Aspirations, Segregation, Marginalization, Hunger, Desperation Agonies, etc.*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) sets in the remote Sundarbans Islands. Thick mangroves, the man eating tigers, snakes, sharks, crocodiles and huge tidal waves, rising in the ebb and flow of water, rocking the Islands, make the setting of the novel enigmatic and foreboding death. The novelist brings up the past and simultaneously the colonial history of India. The Sundarbans Islands were peopled by a cross section of the society that was underprivileged, poor and landless. The tide country thus became the habitat to people from different parts of Orissa, East Bengal, Santhal Parganas etc. those people were socially marginalized or segregated.

The *Hungry Tide* deals with suffering of the Sundarbans refugees who come back to their home, local people like illiterate Fokir and Horen, educated Nirmal and Nilima with their post nationalist "dreams, to control the disaster going in the lives of local people in 'Lusibari Island'. Translator Kanai from Delhi, who is going to visit her aunt Nilima Bose, and a cytologist Piyali Roy daughter of Bengali immigrants, come with an ambition to study marine mammals of the Sunderland. The island of Lusibari had first been populated as a result of a philanthropic colonialist, the Scot Sir Daniel Hamilton, the Englishman who bought a vast area of ten thousand acres in the Sundarbans from the British Government in 1903 and distributed it free to all the Indians who were willing to settle there. Thus a new country, the-Bhatir desh or The Tide Country was brought into being. The Islands were called 'Shobnomoskar,' 'Rajat Jubilee' and others were given English names like Jamespur, Annpur, Emilybari, Lusibari, Canning, etc. after the names of the relatives of Hamilton. Hamilton wanted to give an impoverished rural population a chance to settle in the new land and begin new agricultural projects. Hamilton wanted to have an egalitarian society that would be free from all kinds of differences based on caste, creed, religion, ethnicity, etc. The narrator states:

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. It would be a country run by co-operatives. Here people wouldn't exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land (Ghosh, *HT*, 51-52).



The people of island had to face the hunger and catastrophe because of the salty water of river. The salty water caused the land to be infertile. The circumstances drove them into the fish culture and haunting, to overcome the disaster thrust on them. It extremely affected the climate of Sundarbans. The fisherman used the net for fishing and take out everything they want, from the water. And then they would take out the lucrative prawn for that they get a fair amount. They started taking out the fresh water of spawn, which brought the complete ecological disaster. This would disturb the entire fish life of the Sundarbans. Ghosh emphasizes on the lives of the common people and how to save the life of human being and the animal world of Sundarbans.

The novelist focuses on the Sundarbans Island, and the life threatening atmosphere of the Island. This novel is the story of the settlement of human being in forested land. Sundarbans is found to be a place where beauty is harsh and vengeful. It makes human existence an intense task and full of struggle. Sundarbans is a tide country where water comes to island every day and disappear later, leaving behind crocodiles, snakes and man eating tigers.

Amitav Ghosh has written this novel with a peculiar intention: in fact he wanted to make the readers familiar with the world of the people of Sundarbans; to observe their suppressed feelings; to witness their tortured innocence and humiliated lives. Thus the narrative has magically interwoven new worlds into a single whole.

The Hungry Tide celebrates the syncretism that marks the life and culture in Sundarbans, an immense archipelago of islands between the sea and the plains of Bengal. Ghosh has landscaped the tide country having no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. Mitu C. Banerjee, reveals what Ghosh tries to seek in this fictional land and it is “the essence of a non confrontational, cooperative relationship between humanity and nature” (Banerjee, Mitu. 2004).

But, in the Sundarban world, as the narrator states:

It is common knowledge that almost every island in the tide country has been inhabited at some time or another. But to look at them you would never know: the speciality of mangroves is that they do not merely recognise land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts (Ghosh, *HT*, 50).

In this novel, Ghosh has portrayed nature as hostile, violent, unfriendly and vengeful on the human being and the human society. This can be understood from the notebooks/journals that Nirmal Bose, the former headmaster, has left behind for his nephew, Kanai. Kanai reads from one of the notebooks:

A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself.... Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. 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 (Ghosh, *HT*, 7-8).

Therefore, in the Sundarbans, everything is uncertain and unsure. Everyone is seen struggling for survival in the hostile environment. The tide changes the environment daily breaking the essence of every person down to its core and obliterating all social distinctions.

Ghosh is perhaps giving a piece of advice to transform the Indian nation in such a mould as envisaged by his fictional European character. A critic words:



The Hungry Tide highlights not only place but, crucially, dynamically evolving human relationships in a context that includes cross-cultural barriers and communication, and the relationship between past and present” (Ibid., 18).

However, the settlers of Sundarbans see it as separate and distinct nation with “...arrangements for electricity... telephone lines...Central Bank of Gosaba...a Gosaba currency” (Ghosh, *HT*, 52-53).

This is illustrated in the notebooks of the uncle of Kanai in the following words:

There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as the Sundarban, which means, ‘the beautiful forest.’ There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove - the sundari tree, *Heriteria minor*. But the word's origin is no easier to account for than is its presence prevalence, for in the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide - bhati. And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as bhatir desh - the tide country - except that bhati is not just the “tide” but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwived by the moon, is to know why the name “tide country” is not just right but necessary (Ghosh, *HT*, 8).

Ghosh is a post-colonial writer. He wanted to describe the cultures of the land which had so far been relegated to the periphery. He has claimed that his “mind has always been drawn to the marginal, the remote and the rural” (UN Chronicle). The Sundarbans had been an area of darkness and his avowed objective. It was very strange for Ghosh that “people don't think of it, they don't write about it, they don't look at it” (Ghosh, 3). For Ghosh the Sundarbans was "a place of incredible beauty and presence" which “reveals itself very slowly” (Ghosh 3). He himself went there, get involved with the villagers. It equipped Ghosh to familiarize us with the culture and history of the people of tide country.

Interestingly, it is Amitav Ghosh's first novel located and situated in Bengal. For him “it was also very exciting to explore the deep layering of Bengal” (Ghosh, 3). He expressed “what is interesting to me is that Bengal is such a land of rivers” (Ghosh, 3). His fascination for the rivers of Bengal also, to a certain extent provoked him to write this narrative with the islands where river Ganges and Brahmaputra merges with the Bay of Bengal. He has Not only presented the Bengali life but Bengali words have also found intrusion in the text such as “gamchha, lungis, chhata, dhuti-punjabi, jhort mohona, chhele-chhokra, bagh, jhi, khata, jhol and chorchori” and even utterances “ami Bangla jani na” (Ghosh, *HT*, 4).

Ghosh has vividly depicted the impact of the tide:

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as 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 (Ghosh, *HT*, 7).

Nature is seen controlling the entire fate of the people:

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 (Ghosh, *HT*, 8).



On one hand, there is awesome fear of the devastating effect of the hungry tide, on the other hand, human lives are no more even safer on land:

Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles”. The tigers created such great terror among the people that they never uttered its name, for them “to say it was to call it” (Ghosh, *HT*. 108).

The men who left homes for the purpose of fishing hardly returned. “The hazards of life in the tide country were so great” (Ghosh, 81) that the girls grew up assuming that they would be widowed in their early twenties. “When the men folk went fishing it was the custom for their wives to change into the garments of widowhood” (Ghosh, 80). “So many perished in their youth, men especially that without exception the fate the girls had prepared themselves for did indeed befall them” (Ghosh, 81). The devastating impact of the great storm of 1970 is underscored throughout in the novel:

The wafers rose so high that they killed thousands of animals and carried them up river and inland. The corpses of tigers and rhinoceroses were found kilometers from the river, in rice-fields and in village ponds. There were fields covered with the feathers birds (Ghosh, *HT*, 204).

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