



Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide: Intoning Silence

KEYWORDS

Intoning silence, subalterns, Postcolonial literary scenario, unhistorical figures etc

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ABSTRACT *Amitav Ghosh is an iconic figure in English literature whose vision and treatment of history is quite different as he does not focus upon kings and queens to interpret history. Instead of it he focuses upon the history of ordinary unhistorical figures of the past in his novels. This research paper is an attempt to present the framework of Ghosh's style of voicing the unvoiced, the silence of the Others or Subaltern. Ghosh's style of giving voice to the silence or intoning silence is going to be taken into account here. The aim of this paper is to analyse the narrative strategies employed by the author to integrate the fictional and historical characters and to recreate the history of nations by filling up the gaps and absence. This paper is an attempt to illustrate the position of Amitav Ghosh in the postcolonial literary scenario and his role in reconstructing the lost culture heritage and myths of the communities he came into contact.*

Introduction: The novels and writing by Ghosh have been granted several major awards and have been nominated or short-listed for even more. He is regarded as one of the most important of the Indian writers in English of the post-Rushdie generations, and in the Bengali tradition within this larger category. His reputation is mainly due to the ambivalent nature of his fiction as both intellectually important and topical, whilst remaining immensely readable for the wider public. This combination of academic viability and popular accessibility is rare and a very important one.

Intoning Silence: Ghosh in his famous novel *The Hungry Tide* sketches the life of dalit refugees from Bangladesh who are ejected from the cast in Sundarban forest, a region of difficult archipelagos full up with hunger and calamity. The novel *The Hungry Tide* is set in the sundarban region of rural Bengal which registers a response to the social and political concern of the marginal sections of the Indian society. It dramatically performs the impact of religious intolerance and environmental conservation projects upon the communities of subaltern humans.

To make the above given aspects more clear a brief characterization of his few famous characters from *The Hungry Tide* is going to be taken into account in this study. The *Hungry Tide's* four major women characters can be widely categorised based on their cultural positioning as rural and urban women. Nilima and Piya, who are the urban women and unfamiliar to the Sunderban topography. Infact they were not born into these adverse surroundings and had not been culturally adapted into its rules of survival. Culturally removed by their superior learning and upbringing both these women are at pains to familiarize themselves with the harsh realities of the rural life. Removed from their confined urban lives Nilima and Piya develop their own networks - each exclusive in their application to create a deal with their confrontational surroundings. The novel truly chronicled the enthusiasm and strength of mind of these women which can be seen at appearance of terrible personal predicament. Through these characters Ghosh attempts to recover or highlight the experiences of those who are up till now absent from history, is of course not new.

Married to Nirmal, the staunch Marxist, Nilima had long lost her husband to his revolutionary zeal and poetic outlook. Nilima was born with the silver spoon in her mouth but after the marginalization from the comforts of her well off middle class upbringing she seeks to construct some permanence within the unsettling change she suddenly encounters. Out of the

ashes of her lost faith in her husband's impractical Marxism she creates her phoenix-the island's Mohila Songothon – the Women Union – and ultimately the Badabon Trust. Years of hard work and dedication turns it into a muse of hope amidst the general gloom of the water ravaged countryside.

Nirmal and Nilima were going to the different direction and not made for each other. Nirmal mellows in his poetry and idealism but Nilima's strenuous efforts turn out well, and Lusibari hospital becomes a model medical facility to the deltaic population. Nirmal's hunger for a revolutionary moment in his life drives him to Morichjhâpi but Nilima is worldly wise and knows that their efforts can only end in self obliteration. Although sympathetic to the plight of the Morichjhâpi refugees her colorless nature appeared as the greater good. She stubbornly isolates herself and her organization from the revolutionary zeal that had gripped the islanders even at the cost of losing her husband to her rival and his muse, Kusum. To Nilima "the challenge of making a few little things better in one small place is enough" while for Nirmal "it had to be all or nothing". (Ghosh, 2004, 387)

She is derided by her husband when she declines to help the refugees of Morichjhappi on his persuasion. She justifies her decision by arguing that she doesn't want to do anything violent and destructive.

"She would have liked to help but it was impossible. The government had made it known that they would stop at nothing to evict the settlers. Anyone suspected of helping them was sure to get into trouble. Nilima had the hospital and the union to think of: she could afford to alienate the government. She has to consider the greater good" (HT 122).....

In these circumstances Nilima's voice is barely audible under the mad loudening of Nirmal's poetic hallucinations. The agency of language remains loyal to the patriarchy so that Nirmal's 'notebook' – a metaphoric male discourse gains in supremacy under its new patriarchal benefactor, Kanai. But the 'subaltern' Nilima's injured plead can be heard at the end of the novel in the words of Ghosh.

In *The hungry tide* the characters of Kanai and Fokir represent two different kinds of world. Kanai is someone from modern India. His world is moving so quickly. He is rich and making money. Yet, Kanai can't forget that there is this other India, represented by Fokir. It is always at the back of his mind. I think that is true of most Indians; even the Indians who drive fast cars and go to night clubs remember and know that there

is this other world out there. In this novel Fokir never forgets that Kanai is a representative of the world that destroyed his world. This theme runs continuously throughout the novel.

Piya is the another example of silent character of history in *The Hungry tide*. Piya is the migrant cetologist who soon turns to be the object of Kanai male 'gaze'. Although she has a superior learning and global upbringing she is helpless and become a prey to corrupt and vulgar forest officials. Stripped of the luxury of the vernacular, Piya is truly a 'subaltern' until Fokir rows her to the safe haven of the dolphin's pool. It is among these river dolphins that Piya regains her natural strength and confidence. A troubled childhood and a nasty affair have permanently silenced her so that she prefers the awe-inspiring presence of nature to human conglomerations. Her passionate involvement with the Irrawady Dolphin is equivalent to Nilima's obsession with the Trust hospital. Piya's mobility and rootlessness creates a false sense of empowerment which runs her into the perils of negotiating multiple spaces for herself. Piya is left helpless to the ploys of patriarchy bereft of any emotional or social stilts against the harsh realities of a migrant life. Fokir breaks through her shell so that she is able to communicate with him. But Nature intervenes and Fokir dies trying to save her. Fokir's death dooms Piya to a life of perpetual guilt. Piya, a widow is condemned to a life of silence, unable to overcome the death of the man who had changed her life. But the grim realities of Sunderban and the resultant change fortify Piya beyond any simplistic binaries so that she can exploit her mobility to build public opinion over the sensitive ecology of this Gangetic delta.

However a similar upbringing cannot gloss over the generational gap in the multiple aspirations of these women. Positioned in an altogether different societal infrastructure than Piya and Nilima these native women of deltaic Bengal, Moyna and Kusum have sharpened their own tools of survival. The rural women of this swampy habitat have developed their own set of survival tactics unique and different from privileged order of urban women in that they draw sustenance from primitive belief structures and social norms.

It is a determination to survive that makes Moyna the most haunting character in the novel. Oppressed and deprived under the patriarchal control Moyna braves all odds to educate

herself and mount in life. But no sooner had she taken flight than she is continuously shackled by the chains of patriarchy in an unequal marriage to the illiterate Fokir. Never abandoning her dreams to qualify as a nurse Moyna coaxes her husband to move to Lusibari and give proper education to her son. Her marital tussle with her unpragmatic husband echoes similar battles between Nilima and Nirmal.

And the string that binds all these 'widowed' women together, the hospital or rather the Badabon Trust, has turned into a source of substance and weapon to fight the claws of widowhood in the 'tide country'. Nilima's Mohila Songothon becomes a source of female bonding that helps these women both urban and rural to find a reason however small to live. To Nilima it becomes an indirect escape from the frustrating emptiness of marriage, to Kusum a shelter though temporary from the cruelties of an orphan life, to Moyna her only chance to get on in life and finally to Piya a sponsorship and hence a reason to stay connected with Fokir's tide country. The female networks that these women develop help empower them and many such subaltern women of the region. The heroics of these unknown women of Sunderbans had long eluded the realms of history. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* chronicles the daily negotiations and bargains of these subaltern women with the adverse condition of their lives and thus rescues them from being obliterated to anonymity by the 'flood of history'

Conclusion: In conclusion we may observe that *The hungry Tide* is a cultural construct, not a fixed objective reality and a changeable process depends on social relations and different identities. It is an attempt to recognize decisive elements like common territory, common origin, common historical experience, common language, common morals and common customs which remained unrevealed and unvoiced in the historical perspective. Amitav ghosh's works interweave history and fiction in a manner that is inseparable and at the same time not compromising either of the two. By assigning the centrality to the marginalized characters, Ghosh also answers the dilemma of the postcolonial intelligentsia regarding the ability of the subaltern to speak. By doing so he also gives voice to those who are unvoiced in the historical perspective.

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