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The Hungry Tide: A Discourse of Dispossessions

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Abstract

The Hungry Tide can be read as a textual site that problematizes the issue of dis/possessions. On the one hand it is the nonhumans whose survival is at stake and on the other it is the humans; refugees from Bangladesh who fled to India in the given condition of the political turmoil that led to their displacement from their own nation facing further displacement for the space that they have eventually come to occupy, reminiscent of their homeland, vie for the space that is reserved as a biosphere reserve to protect the mangroves, the wild life in general and the tigers in particular, inhabiting it. The poignant issue in the novel is the problem of space, closely linked to the issue of survival in terms of space and resources for sustenance.

Key Words: displacement, dispossession

Human advancement has not come free of cost; it has brought in its wake alarming results for the flora and fauna of the world for the advancement has been unplanned raiding the natural wealth irrationally. Where on the one hand technology has had its own horror to unleash on the natural world, on the other advancement in the field of medicine has stupendous implications on the carrying capacity of the Earth in the wake of the ever growing world population. It is true that awareness has taken place in this regard but the impact of such a growth has been far reaching; though people have been enabled with technology they have also had to face the brunt of the same. The result has been the same as that of age old politics of exploitation; a class loses, a class wins; a class thrives and the other is dispossessed of everything that it has. Who/ what is to be blamed for such a situation? Where does the onus lie? And what is the remedy of this man-made problem? The Academia has not remained untouched by these concerns.

David Carolyn Merchant observes, "Science can no longer be considered value-free as the logical positivists of the early-twentieth century had insisted, proponents of ecocentric ethics look to ecology for guidelines on how to resolve ethical dilemmas. Maintenance of the balance of nature and retention of the unity, stability, diversity, and harmony of the ecosystem are its overarching goals. Of primary importance is the survival of all living and non-living things as components of healthy ecosystems. All things in the cosmos as well as humans have moral considerability. [sic]" (1992,75)

It has also been pointed out that the prevailing conception of nature is informed by a racial and class bias with no place for "people" who are an integral part of the landscape and the environment. The article revolves around three basic ideas emergent in *The Hungry Tide*: the role of humans in relation to the nonhuman world, the impact that they have on the non human world and

vice versa and the elemental forces of Nature in all its glory as well as fury. The idea underscored is that the role of the two vacillates of entities from that the dispossessed victim to victimizer as both are intertwined in a tightly knit bond, a bond so close that one cannot function without affecting the other. Nature is seen in its both benevolent and destructive aspects, giving as well as destroying. The Hungry Tide, thus can be read as a textual site that problematizes the issue of dis/possessions. On the one hand it is the nonhumans whose survival is at stake and on the other it is the humans; refugees from Bangladesh who fled to India in the given condition of the political turmoil that led to their displacement from their own nation facing further displacement for the space that they have eventually come to occupy, reminiscent of their homeland, vie for the space that is reserved as a biosphere reserve to protect the mangroves, the wild life in general and the tigers in particular, inhabiting it. The poignant issue in the novel is the problem of space, closely linked to the issue of survival in terms of space and resources for sustenance.

When considering *The Hungry Tide* and its often changing waterscapes that Amitav Ghosh etches the hair raising terror-inducing, graphic description of the natural disaster cyclone cannot be appreciated enough, neither can one close one's eyes to the fact that mangroves have a great role to play in maintaining the purity of the environment apart from having the resilience to withstand such storms, providing natural habitat to a variety of species. Ghosh writes of the cyclonic storm and its impact on the vegetation and the protagonists in vivid terms. It is a point in the novel when the scientist Piya is caught up in the lonely island with no one but the fisherman Fokir, but Fokir rises to the occasion and sacrifices his life for her protecting her from the devastating storm that leads to waves three metres high flinging heavy objects like children's playthings :

The minutes crept by and the objects flying through the air grew steadily larger. Where there had been only twigs, leaves and branches, there were now whirling coconut palms and spinning tree trunks. Piya knew that the gale had reached full force when she saw something that looked like a whole island hanging suspended above their heads: it was a large clump of mangroves, held together by the trees' intertwined roots...Piya glimpsed something that looked like a wall, hurtling towards them, from downriver. It was as if a city block had suddenly begun to move: the river was like pavement lying at its feet, while its crest reared high above, dwarfing the tallest trees. It was a tidal wave, sweeping in from the sea; everything in its path disappeared as it came thundering towards them...The weight of the rushing water bent the tree trunk almost double. Encircled in Fokir's arm, Piva felt herself being tipped over and then upended as the branch met the ground. All the while, the water raged around them, circling furiously, pulling at their bodies as if trying to dismember them. The tree strained at its roots and it seemed that at any moment it would be torn from the earth and added to the storm of turbulence following the wave. (382-383)

Background

In South- Asia, particularly, Bangladesh and Indian context Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide proves to the most pertinent text exploring the dual force of nature as the giver and destroyer of life and the relationship between the human and the nonhuman elements, in the background of the Morichjhapi massacre incident of 1978-79, when the newly elected CPI (M) government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island. The locale of the novel is the archipelago of islands in India known as the "Sunderbans"-a conglomeration of islands, also a home of mangrove jungles. Located on a vast delta on the Bay of Bengal the Sunderbans covers an area of 10,000 sq. km. Individuated by tidal waterways, mud flats and small islands the forest functions as a haven for the Royal Bengal Tiger, a variety of birds, spotted deer, crocodiles and snakes. In the year 1997 it became inscribed as UNESCO world heritage site. The novel underscores links between environmentally and socially oppressive systems, becoming not only a site for environmental praxis but also simultaneously providing a comment on the anthropocentric attitude of humans.

It is in Lusibari, one of the many islands in Sunderbans that the principal character's Kanai's uncle and aunt reside; at his aunt's behest Kanai goes there to make sense of his dead uncle's writings that the aunt has discovered while cleaning his study, thus starting the story. The three significant characters of the text are: Piyali Roy an American born in India who is a marine biologist working on the rare species of the endangered dolphin-*oracella brevirostris*, Fokir-an illiterate fisherman who is Piya's boat's pilot, helper and guide in the Sunderbans,; and- Kanai Dutt, a city bred, successful translation business owner.

The Ecological Issue

The Sunderbans serves a crucial function as a protective barrier for the millions of inhabitants in and around Khulna and Mongla districts against the floods resulting from the cyclones. Studies indicate that the shore currents along the Sunderbans vary greatly with the monsoon. During each monsoon almost the whole of the delta is submerged for almost half the year. Cyclonic action is another factor affecting them and impacting any man made development along the shore; the tidal waves covering almost three hundred kilometers, devouring and reshaping both land and lives in its wake, the sediment of the lower delta plain being pushed inland by these two natural factors. Lusibari also suffers from the same predicament being reshaped as river Matla becomes more silted with its water becoming lesser with the years. Ghosh writes:

The bazaars ended in a causeway that led away from the town towards the Matla river. Although the causeway was a long one it fell well short of the river;: on reaching its end Kanai saw what Nilima had meant when she sid the river had changed. He remembered the Matla as a vast waterway, one of the most formidable rivers he had ever seen. But it was low tide now and the and the river in the distance was no wider than a narrow ditch., flowing along the centre of a kilometer wide bed. The freshly laid silt that bordered the water glistened in the sun like dunes of melted chocolate. From time to time, bubbles of air rose from the depths and burst through to the top, leaving rings on the burnished surface. (24)

One of the greatest threats for the people inhabiting the islands comes from the rising sea levels, the reduction in the land area as a result of climate change. The land area of Lusibari also coming under the influence of the tidal waves:

At low tide, when the embankment , or badh, was riding high on the water, Lusibari looked like some gigantic earthen ark, floating serenely above its surroundings. Only at high tide was it evident that the interior of the island lay well below the levels of the water. At such times the unsinkable ship of a few hours before took on the appearance of a flimsy saucer that could tip over any moment and go circling into depths. (37)

According to an ANI report in (London, Thu, 25 Mar 2010 ANI) the latest victim of global warming was a low lying island; known as the New Moore island in India and South Talpatti in Bangladesh. A study conducted by Jadavpur University, Kolkata pointed out that the Sunderbans would lose another 15 percent of its total habitable land, displacing more than 30,000 people by 2020. According

to the local villagers there is a politics of gaining new lands for settlement with the powerful getting a hold on the land and the poor being handled ruthlessly, plagued with poverty and unemployment people try to deforest the existing mangrove vegetation for shrimp farming and agriculture in turn upsetting the delicate ecological balance of the area, modifying the silt roots that can stand firmly in the mud and withstand the devastation brought on by cyclones and tsunamis.

SYMBOLIC

ANTHROPLOGY

The lives of the people of Lusibari can be an example read as of 'symbolic Anthropology' using the nature-culture opposition as an analytical device for the interpretation of myths, rituals, systems and other aspects of social life. They believed, like that of other communities in India which have their own preferred gods/goddesses depending upon the region they belong, 'Bon Bibi' was the goddess of the forest ruling over all the animals of the jungle. A play that was staged on an evening clearly manifests the idea.

The setting of the play was Medina where a man called Ibrahim lived as a Sufi *faqir*, who through the intervention of the archangel Gabriel, became the father of twins: Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli. The twins on coming of age were given the task of making the jungles of 'the country of eighteen tides'/Sunderbans fit for human habitation, which was till then the realm of Dokkhin Rai, a powerful demon king who harbored a particular hatred for mankind coupled with insatiable desires, for the pleasures afforded by human flesh. One day Dokkhin Rai heard strange new voices in the jungle calling out the azan, the Muslim call to prayer. This azan was a warning and indication to him that Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli had come into his realm. Rousing his demon army, the incensed demon set upon the trespassers only to be put to rout in a pitched battle. But Bon Bibi was merciful and decided that one half of the tide country would remain in wilderness; this part of the forest she left to Dokkhin Rai and his demon followers. The rest she claimed for herself, and under her rule the once -forested domain was soon made safe for human settlement. Order came to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance (103). All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order.

Anthropocentrism, Marginalization and Conservation: Reflections on the Dispossessed

The theme of marginalization is common to all the three entities under discussion; the refugees from the camp (the Humans), the Nonhumans) tigers (the and Nature (environment). Both the anthropocentric and anthropomorphic attitudes of the humans are brought to fore as they both revere and exploit Nature. The idea is problematized as all are not in agreement and a conflict is seen as Human vs. Human in relation to Human non-human world. vs. the with the Morichjhapi massacre of 1978-79, when the newly elected CPI (M) government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island.

Also, in 1973, with the help of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), India launched Project Tiger, a program designed to save the tiger habitat. By 1990, 17 tiger reserves had been established. Based on a (United Nations Development Programme) report, The Deccan Herald on 5th March reported that: At least 15 per cent of the Sunderbans will be submerged by 2020 and neglecting the area further can have global implications. The report revealed that 54 of the 102 islands of the Sunderbans as being inhabited with poor infrastructural support and the local people having few alternative livelihood options other than depending on natural resources. Though the Central government had declared the Sunderbans forest as the Sunderban biosphere reserve in 1989 as a part of the Man and Biosphere Programme (MABP), the fragile ecosystem of the delta was under threat due to overreliance of its human inhabitants on the resources at hand.

Unlike many islands of Sunderbans reserved for tiger conservation Morichajapi a tide country island, a few hours from Lusibari by boat, was relatively easily accessible from the mainland. In 1978 it was found that a large number of people suddenly surfaced in Morichajhapi. An island uninhabited till now suddenly had thousands of residents. Ghosh writes, "Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built badhs and put up huts."(118) The refugees were originally from Bangladesh. Some of them had come to India after the Partition while others had migrated over the years. In Bangladesh they had been the poorest of poor oppressed both by Hindus and Muslims. But to Morichjhapi they came escaping from the confined life of the government resettlement camp. They had miscalculated that they would not meet opposition from the state government.

Morichjhapi had been declared a protected forest reserve and thus the authorities came down with an iron fist on the settlers, leading to a series of confrontations between the settlers and the government forces. The incident is considered as one of the darkest episodes of CPI(M) led government of West Bengal. The refugees who were roped in with a lot of promises by the CPI(M) were betrayed after the elections. The settlement established by refugees in the Morichjhapi island of Sunderban were treated ruthlessly by the West Bengal government who deemed it' illegal' brutally evicting them with the help of the police and hired mercenaries who killed, raped and successfully demolished down entire settlements.

(Marichjhanpihttp://t.co/2YwLEoPP) As the battle between the government and the refugees took an ugly turn and the settlers were on the brink of starvation, their plight is highlighted in the novel with Kusum, a refugee settled in Morichjhapi, making a heart rending plea, initiating a poignant debate as against the importance of nonhumans over the humans:

"This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a 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 gnawing 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? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers?....No one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived- by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (The Hungry Tide 261-262)

When Kanai wants to accompany Piya in her expedition his aunt dissuades him; the area is the home of the man eater. When Bengal tiger. he remains unconvinced she cites instances and figures to prove her point. A young girl had become a tiger's prey in Lusibari. The tiger had swum six kilometers and back in search of a prey. According to the aunt's records based on word-ofmouth accounts more than hundred people are killed by tigers in Sunderbans and according to each year her calculation She says," I'm just talking about the Indian part of the Sunderbans. If you include the Bangladesh side, the figure is probably twice that. If you put the figures together, it means that a human being is killed by a tiger every other day in the Sunderbans – at the very least." (The Hungry Tide 240)

In his research paper, 'Local People and the Global Tiger: An Environmental History of the Sundarbans', Ranjan Chakrabarty writes, "By the second half of the nineteenth century it was estimated that tigers killed 1,600 people every year. It was also estimated that on average each tiger killed between 300 and 600 pounds' worth of cattle in a single year. Tigers were hence classified as vermin." But the cetologist, Piya, is not convinced by the argument that the space and freedom of the nonhumans should be sacrificed in favor of the humans.

Defending the right of the animals to dwell in freedom in human funded forest reserves airs her view to Kanai in these following words:

there's big difference between preserving species in captivity and keeping it in its habitat....' (*The Hungry Tide* 301) 'The difference is that it was what was *intended*-not by

William Rueckert's observation is remarkably suitable in this context when citing John Brunner's The Sheep Look Up (1972) when he says that in ecology, "man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing. The ecological nightmare (as one gets it in Brunner's The sheep Look Up) is of a monstrously overpopulated, almost completely polluted, all but totally humanized planet." (The Ecocriticism Reader 113). He further cites Garret Hardin's (1972) population projection that concludes, if we continue our present 2% growth rate indefinitely, then in 615 years there will be standing room only on all the land areas of the world.

Conclusion

The issue of dispossessions and marginalization as problemtaized in *The Hungry Tide* can be addressed through sustained development measures as taken up for the N'hambita Community as in Mozambique's Sofala province where a you or me, but by nature, by the earth, by the planet that keeps us all alive. Just suppose we cross that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves. What'll be left then? Aren't we alone enough in the universe? And do you think it'll stop at that? Once we decide we can kill off other species, it'll be people next-just the kind of people you are thinking of, people who'll be poor and unnoticed.[sic] (*The Hungry Tide* 301)

project has been taken up that successfully addresses the multiple demands of community, biodiversity and the human induced climate change. The N'hambita Community Carbon Project, a 1469-hectare site in a buffer zone of the Gorongoso National Park, aims to restore degraded areas and promote sustainable land use through a number of methods as good forest promoting management, reforestation, nitrogen-fixing trees, and the production of non-timber forest products such as traditional medicine, fruits and fungi. Sedentary agriculture is replacing slash and burn. For these activities around 70 per cent of the N'hambita community has been involved, with each farmer owning 0.7 to 1.8 hectares of land promoting sound governance and community participation in decision-making through representation on the project management team. The problem of funding is taken care of by the sale of carbon credits in the voluntary carbon market. The funds are shared among participating individuals and some are put in a community trust fund for projects such as school construction.

Other benefits include sustainable generation of timber and fuel wood, good watershed conservation management, soil and enhancement of other ecosystem services. Yields of traditional maize and sorghum crops have increased by use of nitrogenfixing food crops such as pigeon pea. The livelihood of the people inhabiting the region is laso diversified as they take recourse in enterprises ranging from beekeeping and micro-irrigation for cultivating vegetables, carpentry and bioenergy production for schools and the community. Training has been extended to farmers who have been for tree planting and protection, micro-enterprise and fire management. Land use rights are

clarified and better defined with regional organizations simultaneously being trained to verify carbon offsets, administer trust funds and provide land management support (www.miombo.org.uk).

I would like to conclude on the note that technological progress and human greed have devastating implications not only on the environment and the nonhuman denizens residing therein but also the humans. A holistic conception of environment and progress based on the lines of sustainable development will lead to formation and preservation of a healthy and long lasting relationship between the human and nonhuman world.

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