

Research Paper

Borders and Boundaries in The Hungry Tide

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Abstract

Borders and boundaries are important ideas belong to postcolonial world and express postcolonial theory. Amitav Ghosh's novels are in accordance with the idea of constant crossing and recrossing or with rejection of borders and boundaries; this paper aims to examine how they are treated in The Hungry Tide. As memory provides the narrative trigger in this novel; Ghosh's mnemonic enterprise as part of his narrative management. As the title suggests; Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide centers on the shadowiness of existing borders.

Keywords

Borders and Boundaries, Partition, nationalism, communalism, cross-border

Borders and boundaries are very significant in day to day life. Amitav Ghosh also knows the importance of borders and boundaries. Almost all the works of Amitav Ghosh reflected the theme of borders and boundaries. The ablest hand of Amitav Ghosh treated the idea of constant crossing, recrossing or with the rejection of borders and boundaries. To show the idea of border crossing, he sometime takes the help of characters, events and sometimes symbols also. The modern idea of borders and boundaries opted by Ghosh, includes two different, but interrelated spheres of meaning. Therefore Ghosh discusses both the political impact and the methodological dimension of borders and boundaries by exposing the systematic correlations. These types of correlations one can easily find in in The Hungry Tide. Borders drawn out of some political interest affects the harmonious environment. This kind of division brings out nothing but wars, massacres, riots and unhappiness among the people.

Ghosh presents the border between languages, religions, social class, races, human beings and nature and between, urban and rural. His fiction The Hungry Tide (2004) by Amitav Ghosh is a multilayered, subtle and complex novel. This one is about a place, a very special that is a part of the coast of India. The extensive archipelago of tiny islands and labyrinthian waterways known as the Sundarbans, stretching from India to Bangladesh. This little known tide country offers no visible borders between the river and the sea, and sometimes not even between land and water. The region is named after the Sundari tree, as the mangrove is locally called. It is an area of islands that appear and disappear, sometimes overnight, sometimes over many years. In this precarious place, people try to eke out an existence, along with man-eating tigers, crocodiles, and the ever-present dense mangroves that appear as soon as the land is undisturbed for a short period of time. By this murky existence Ghosh artistically presents the theme of crossing borders.

In this widely read novel Ghosh has depicted the borders and boundaries between outsider and insider, rich and poor, and powerful and powerless. Along with these borders and boundaries he also deals with the borders and boundaries of language, religion and social class. The notion of border and boundary is somewhere direct on the one hand

and characterized by symbols on the other.

Ghosh shows clear distinction between outsider and insider. This outsider-insider paradigm is based on geographical and cultural attitudes of the characters. Kanai, Piya and Refugees are depicted in this novel as outsiders. Whereas Fokir, Moyna, Nilima, Nirmal, Kusum and Horen as insiders.

Kanai Dutt is a linguist who runs a translation bureau in Delhi. Ghosh placed him as an outsider, "Kanai was the one other 'outsider' on the platform. . ." (4). At the age of forty he comes back to Lucibari to read the journal left by his uncle Nirmal during the last days of his life at Morichjhāpi. Kanai comes back Lucibari to just read that journal. He has nothing to do with the culture and environment of Lucibari so he is regarded as an outsider.

Piyali Roy, the Indian-American cetologist is another outsider. She is studying the rare Irrawaddy dolphin that lives in the waters of the Sunderbans. ". . . she knew no Bengali: ami Bangla janina" (4). She has lost her identity and thinks of herself simply as a scientist and researcher, working without emotion in solitude and physical discomfort, and in regions where she knows neither the customs nor the language. So she is also regarded as an outsider.

The other outsiders were the refugees who crossed over from East Pakistan in the forties and fifties. They were forcibly kept in refugee camp in Central India. In 1978 a group of refugees fled from the camp. And come to the islands of Morichjhāpi in the Sundarbans with the intention of settling there. But they were outsiders so they were evicted by government in May, 1979.

Fokir, Moyna, Kusum, Horen are the characters who are insiders in the Sundarbans. Fokir is Kusum's son. After the death of Kusum in that massacre, he is looked after by her distant relative, Horen. Fokir grows up to be an illiterate fisherman, but he knows and lives the ways of the waters and the wildlife of the Sundarbans. And he always remains an insider. Like Fokir, Moyna is also brought up in that particular land and marries with Fokir. Though Kusum went to Dhanbad in search of her mother and married there, but she returned back after the death of her husband. So she is also called an insider.

Nirmal and Nilima do not belong to that place; they

first came to Lucibari in 1950. Nirmal taught English Literature in Calcutta. Nilima was a student in one of his classes. Though belonging to a high profile society she chose Nirmal as her husband and married him in 1949. Due to some circumstances they come to Lucibari. They decided to spend a couple of years on that island. There Nirmal joined a school, and Nilima founded a union which was later named as Badabon Development Trust. Both Nirmal and Nilima accepted and assimilated the culture and manner of living of that island and turned gradually into insiders.

Bangladeshi refugees, along with Kusum, Fokir, Moyna and Horen are presented in this novel as powerless and Government, Nature, wild animals as powerful. Ghosh has minutely drawn the line between the powerful and powerless as the line reversed in some circumstances. In West Bengal, left Front government was in power, when the refugee settlers were evicted forcibly from the island. They were helpless before the power of government. They have no food to eat, no water to drink. There was no one to help them because, "... anyone suspected of helping them was sure to get into trouble" (122).

The people of the islands are also powerless over the powers of wild animals such as tigers, snakes and crocodiles. The powerless, impoverished and poor people become easy prey for these wild creatures. These powerless people do not have a voice. They can not make themselves heard and understood, and no one pays attention to their plight.

Nature also plays its role as powerful, as the island is under constant threat from cyclones and tides. But if nature is a destroyer it also acts as defence for the survivors. The Mangroves forest "... served as a barrier against nature's fury, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges" (286). If they were not present in the islands, the tide country would have drowned long before. Ghosh is a firm believer of the idea that the borders and boundaries are not real the concept is purely imaginative: "... a place does not merely exist, that is has to be invented in one's imagination. ..." (TSL 21). Ghosh longs for an ideal world. He conveys the dreams of a completely integrated inner and outer world through Tridib who expresses: "... one could never know any thing except through desire, real desire ... a pure painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried on beyond the limits of one's mind to another place and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (TSL 29)

Unlike Fokir, Kusum and Kusum's mother are powerless creatures. The powerful Dilip Choudhary, takes Kusum's mother and sells her somewhere in Calcutta. Kusum is luckily saved by Horen. Moyna also belongs to powerless community though she is very ambitious. There was no school in her village so she walked every day to another village to complete her school education. Her parents marry her off with illiterate Fokir who made his livelihood by catching crabs. But she did not give up her idea of education, and joins the trust and takes training in hygiene, nutrition, first aid and midwifery, and works as full fledged nurse in the hospital and becomes powerful. Through the concept of borders and boundaries Ghosh has raised some grave questions. One of them is the border line that divides the human life and animal life. The Left Front government of West-Bengal forcibly evicted the Bangladeshi settlers from Morichjhāpi. In that brutal eviction hundreds were killed, their homes were burnt; there

was no value of human life. Kusum in *The Hungry Tide* is one of the dispossessed at Morichjhāpi struggling against the government's attempts to remove them from their settlement. Kusum narrates her struggle to Nirmal:

... the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policeman making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. "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.".... Who are these people. I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? (262) What is underscored here is the casual way in which the refugees' lives are dealt with by the government because it links "development" with foreign aid. It is an irony that men were killed by men for saving animals. It was a reality, a tragic occurrence that actually took place in that island, and not merely a fictitious narration of an imaginary event.

The same fact is underscored again when Piya sees a tiger being killed by the villagers for having harmed humans and livestock. Piya is greatly upset by the killing and in a shocking display of insensitivity to human life condemns the killing of the tiger: "Every where in the world dozens of people are killed everyday – on roads, in cars, in traffic. Why is this any worse?" (301). This is what prompts Kanai to give the most telling statement in the whole novel: "... it was people like you... who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, curry favour with their Western patrons. (301)

The suffering of an animal overshadowed Piya's emotions. Although there are more tigers in captivity in America, Piya can still talk "emphatically" about "preserving" species and keeping them in habitat and also about nature "intended". She is of the view that the intention of nature is most important for every being, for it keeps them alive. If this killing goes on continuously no other species will remain. Since it is very hard to cross the imaginary line that separates human life from animal life, there is need for a boundary that demarcates between animal life and the human life.

Reality is very far from utopia, it is what one can feel and experience whereas the imagination can take one to utopia. Ghosh in this novel under scrutiny draws a distinct line between reality and utopia through the characters of Sir Daniel and Nirmal. A Scotsman, Daniel MacKinnon Hamilton, comes to colonial India to seek his fortune. In Calcutta he joins a company. While his sailing in P & O lines he chances upon the islands of the Sundarbans. "When the Scotsman looked upon the crab-covered shores of the tide country, he saw not mud, but something that shone brighter than gold" (49). Without understanding the land and guided by civilizational paradigms, he asks: "why is this valuable soil allowed to lie fallow?" (50). The island was totally unsuitable for human settlement, as it is subject to catastrophic famines, floods and storms. It is inhabited by tigers, crocodiles, snakes and several thousand of the country's destitute. In this land he decided to set up a Marxist utopian human settlement, where all people would be treated as equals. His attempt was to establish a casteless, classless human society and impose his view of man – nature relationship on the Sundarbans. Hamilton's utopian settlement could never really succeed because he had ignored the historical realities of class. In fact Hamilton was merely an English colonizer and he also lacked the required

knowledge of the land and its people. Barry Lopez notes, "The more superficial a society's knowledge of the real dimensions of the land it occupies, the more vulnerable the land is to exploitation, to manipulation for short term gain".

Hamilton's failure, his ignorance of history and nature, is replicated in the case of Nirmal. Nirmal aligns himself with the dispossessed refugees of Morichjhāpi in order to realize his dream of changing the world through revolution. Nirmal fails because like Hamilton, he too functions on ideologies that ignore local history, society and nature. His revolution ignores the larger historical reality of the partition which had produced the refugees at Morichjhāpi. Nirmal also forgets that he is in a land where people exhausted themselves in their struggle to exist. Taking neither historical reality nor natural factors into account and functioning on the dictum "revolution or nothing", Nirmal looks like a misfit. Like Hamilton Nirmal also dreamt of a society where: "...men and women could be farmers in the morning poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening" (53). He believes that all this can be achieved by "revolution". Both the men failed because they ignored the reality regarding historical circumstances of the people and their natural terrain. It is a universal truth that one can not succeed by closing one's eyes to reality, imagination may help but one has to cross the imaginary line that isolates reality and imagination.

The novel under consideration is also a record of the border that is present between ignorance and knowledge. Those who cross the borders of ignorance can achieve knowledge. But this border may be misleading as it is difficult to draw a line between ignorance and knowledge. Sometimes ignorance works as knowledge and knowledge as ignorance. Kanai as a translator-cum-interpreter has the knowledge of six languages. He takes the job of narrating Nirmal's journal in English which is how the Morichjhāpi incident is communicated to the reader. He also takes the responsibility, at a later stage of translating Fokir and other local people to Piya. At one point Piya asks Kanai to explain the content of a traditional song that Fokir is chanting. Kanai replies: "You asked me what Fokir was singing and I said I couldn't translate it: it was too difficult. And this was a history that is not just his own but also of this place, the tide country" (354). Thus despite his sound knowledge, Kanai becomes ignorant. Fokir is an illiterate person; his ignorance shapes his knowledge about nature. He never shows his knowledge. Through him Ghosh articulates the primary subaltern concern of being heard. In an interview with Chitralekha Basu, he comments:

... Fokir is almost completely speechless and that's exactly the issue I wanted to address. These are the circumstances becoming increasingly prevalent around the world. How do people who have very little words communicate with the rest of the world? There is such a gap.

Fokir though usually silent, has a strong communion with nature. Nature is an integrated part of his personality. When asked by Kanai how he "learnt about these things", he replies: "I can not remember a time when I didn't know about this place; back when I was very little long before I had even seen these islands and these rivers, I had heard about Garjontola from my mother" (307). The illiterate Fokir's reply, which speaks of a certain holistic idea about life and the man-nature relationship, is in stark contrast to Piya's fractured and faulty ideas about nature although it is part of her profession. Fokir saves her from drowning, from a crocodile and in the end from a tide. Piya's scientific knowledge proves to be of no use; it is the Fokir's natural

knowledge that saves Piya.

The novel shows that in love like in nature it is the maladjusted who is rejected, the adjusted accepted. Ghosh also beautifully presents the border between the rejected and the accepted. Sir Daniel, Nirmal and Kanai also rejected by nature because they did not understand the laws of nature. Saswat S. Das aptly remarks, "Kanai's fall, in a literal sense, indicates nature's way of rejecting those who rush into its fold without understanding its law, which is one of perpetual change and transformation" (235). Love also follows the same rule. Between Nirmal and Horen Kusum chooses the latter. Again, Piya and Moyna intrinsically know that Fokir's worth is more than Kanai's. Moyna, in spite of her dissatisfaction with Fokir's unworthy ways, recognizes his well-adjusted inner core and chooses to live with him. In this way Moyna crosses the border.

Ghosh in this novel delineates the theme of border crossing not only through his characters but also by through symbols. The most significant and interesting one is the cult of Bon Bibi, which has been handed down through the generations, through the oral tradition of story and song. When Fokir, Tutul along with Piya go to Garjontola, where Piya sees a small shack a "leaf thatched alter or shrine" (152). It reminds her of her mother's puja-table, but the images inside do not resemble any Hindu god. There is an idol of Bon Bibi and Shah Jangoli along with a tiger. Fokir and his son perform a ceremony and offer some leaves and flowers in front of the idols:

... Piya recognized a refrain that sounded like 'Allah'. She had no thought to speculate about Fokir's religion, but it occurred to her now that he might be Muslim. But no sooner had she thought this, than it struck her that a Muslim was hardly likely to pray to an image like this one. What Fokir was performing looked very much like her mother's Hindu pujas – and yet the words seemed to suggest otherwise". (152)

The strange coexistence of the name of Allah with puja-type gestures is a sign of crossing border between both the communities, Hindus and Muslims. Novelist and Critic Khushwant Singh speaks in this respect in his review of this novel: "scheduled caste Hindus subscribing to a faith which is happy blend of Islam and tribal Hinduism".

In this novel Ghosh has also employed the symbol of dolphin to suggest the idea of crossing border. The Gangetic dolphin, *Orcaella brevirostris* attracted Indian – American cetologist Piya, who comes to Sundarbans crossing so many physical boundaries. Saswat S. Das rightly remarks, "Piya chases dolphins, who carry her always across fixed boundaries..." (235). For studying rare dolphin in Sundarbans she also crosses social cultural barriers. Piya's lack of knowledge of her mother tongue, which is also the local language of Sundarbans, and lack of local knowledge makes her engage the services of Fokir for her research. This research also involves Kanai who takes the charge of translating the Fokir and local body to Piya. Through the interaction between Piya, Kanai and Fokir and through their predicaments and their pasts, Ghosh explores the idea of rejection of borders or religion, class, language and gender. In this heart touching novel all the characters reveal the theme of border crossing. Nilima is the only person who manages to conduct life and work successfully throughout the novel. She lives in precarious balance, with the awareness that all her life's work can be claimed by nature in a matter of minutes. She is aware that, "... building something is not the same as dreaming of it: building is

always a matter of well-chosen compromises” (214). She crosses the borders, as she sees the suffering and exploitation of women of that island that appalled her. So she decides to establish a “Mohila Sangothon” – the women's union. By establishing this union she wants to help the poor, needy, downtrodden women of that island. She also crosses the cultured boundary when she comes to know the relationship between Kusum and her husband and treats her husband normally.

Nirmal also crosses the border as he helps the Morichjhāpi settlers by teaching their children. His soft corner for Kusum shows his idea of crossing border of class. Such border is also crossed by Piya when she finds herself falling in love with Fokir. In this regard Christopher Rollason truly remarks, “If Nirmal as a Marxist believed in a rapprochement across class barrier that could bring him and Kusum together on some level, a generation later Piya repeats this pattern with Kusum's son Fokir” (6). She once again crosses the border as she decides to make her home in Lucibari and to help the widowed Moyna and Tutul while she continues her research work. Kanai also crosses border, as he gives up his earlier lifestyle in Delhi to return to his roots in Calcutta, to rediscover his lost love of language, and to Piya. In this context Banibrata Mahanta notes: “It signifies a symbolic relocations of the earlier positions of Kanai and Piya and symbolizes a return to native traditions, away from borrowed constructs of knowledge” (104).

The “hungry tide” as a symbol of natural forces, serves to reject the hegemonic constructs of border present between superior culture and ways of life. The tide serves to put things in perspective. The tide kills the Fokir. It is like a punishment from Nature because Fokir helped a foreign element to enter in that island where one who ventures there with an impure heart will not return alive. The tide which kills Fokir changes Kanai and Piya too. They realize the insignificance of border and boundary present between science and religion. They also realize that science can not stand up before the fury of nature. The tide also exposes the transitory nature of human constructs posited against elemental forces. It also shows the relevance of those things that are relegated as unfit for the demands of the new world order. The tide is thus, an agent of nature, which leaves in its wake the realization for a need for dialogue with the indigenous culture of the world. It is clear from the above discussion that tide (nature) erases the notions of border and boundary and allows everyone to live freely.

The Hungry Tide is an elemental rather than an epic novel. It does not privilege the human position in the world as readers may rightly anticipate, and certainly not the intelligence of one class (the educated) over that of another (represented by the fisherman). Although the story begins with such differences, there is a marvellous symmetry between different perspectives and the borders of class, gender and nation are crossed, with the implicit rejection of borders and boundaries.

In this brilliant piece of work, Ghosh grapples with big questions- the collision between human beings and their habitat, the daily struggle of living and insensitive theories of justice that think nothing of sufferings. Environmental decline in Sundarbans is also a serious question raised by Ghosh. Ghosh himself says:

... one of the things that strikes you so much is the real paucity of bird life. You hardly see any birds at all. ... In years past, when you went to the mudflats, they would be covered with crabs. Now, the crabs have just vanished. Similarly, the Sundarbans was named after a kind of tree called the sundari

tree. These trees have become incredibly rare; you hardly ever see them these days. (Interview with Hasan Ferdous and