

**Subjugated Refugees and Silenced Subalterns: A Study on Acute Conflicts in Amitav
Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide***

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is an illustrious writer in the contemporary literary canon. His writing not only reflects a profound understanding of ecological dynamics but also highlights the cultural and historical scopes of environmental issues. The novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), centres around ecological anthropology. The plot is set against the backdrop of the Sundarbans and it sheds light on the politics behind the enforcement of the conservation of the Sundarbans. It purports to evaluate the entanglements of humans and nature. The novel recounts the true incident that prevailed on Marichjhapi Island in 1979. This novel traces the plight of the refugees, the refugee settlers' fight against eviction and their endured hardships. This research article also espouses the themes of power and oppression. It focuses on the subaltern voices through the characters of Kusum, Nirmal, and Nilima. Piya and Kanai are those who fight for the impoverished refugees and their efforts for the conservation of nature. Fakir sacrifices his life to save the farmer. The research reflects on the novel's role in representing voices to the forgotten histories of the subaltern. It discusses how these marginalised characters faced the upheavals. The hegemonic power made marginalised people socially, politically, and historically voiceless. The world overlooks the struggles of marginalised people and leaves them vulnerable to ongoing oppression and exclusion.

Keywords: Ecology, Exclusion, Subaltern, Subjugation, Marichjhapi.

Introduction

The cursory glance at the 19th century Bengal history was a discursive space for colonisation and collision. During the 19th century, India was based on natural resources. That prompted the writers to delve into the nation's history. As an anthropologist and a historian, Amitav Ghosh wrote novels about the nation. Amitav Ghosh's ecological novel *The Hungry Tide* addressed the issues of the devastation of nature, refugees' oppression and the tragic history of Marichjhapi Island. This novel won the Hutch Crossword Book Award for fiction in the year 2004. The author has always been concerned about nature. Ghosh's novel advocates alarms like ecological justice, climate change, cultural preservation and human migration. This concern was evident in his novels. Through his writings, Ghosh connected people, land, culture, history and environment.

Robert Cribb states the issue of 'acute conflict' between conservation and human rights. Particularly focusing on the tension when the preservation of natural habitats leads to the displacement of marginalized human inhabitants. This idea is relevant in postcolonial and environmental studies. As it highlights the ethical dilemma, it was protected by nature that often resulted in the suppression or displacement of vulnerable communities, whose livelihoods depended on the land.

The novel *The Hungry Tide* sheds light on the refugees who settled on Marichjhapi Island. The horrific historical incident 'Marichjhapi massacre', which erupted in the Sundarbans in 1979. The novel presents a nuanced portrayal of the silencing of the subaltern, focusing on themes of supremacy, subjugation, and resistance. By exploring the novel *The Hungry Tide*, the novelist probes power relations, oppression of marginalized communities, political and ecological entanglements surrounding the Sundarbans. It becomes a powerful observation of the subaltern's struggle. The novel revolves around the story of the life of Nilima, Kanai, Piyali, Fokir, Henry Piddington, Sir Daniel Hamilton and others. And it also talks about the myth of Bon Bibi; the rituals and customs of the local people in the Sundarbans.

Objectives

This paper highlights the following objectives:

- To comprehend the interconnection between humans and nature.
- To address the social injustice faced by subalterns in Marichjhapi Island.
- To explore the narratives of subalterns.
- To exterminate ignorance and empower the subaltern.

The major theoreticians in the postcolonial contemporary study, Edward Said, Ranjit Guha, and Spivak focus on colonised individuals whose social and political identity resembles that of the European Subaltern. The dark chapter of the narrative remains forgotten. Through the novel Ghosh brings attention to the forgotten truth. He knit the stories together as history, connected stories into events, and exemplified to connection between humans and nature. Many historians and critics give importance to the concept of 'history'. The English historian E. P. Thompson points out the notion of 'history from the below.' Their focus is mainly on the ordinary people, not towards the elite ones. Similarly, Amitav Ghosh's novels revolve around ordinary people like poor and overlooked histories illustrating the struggles of those referred to as the margins of society.

This paper pursues to examine the subjugations and sufferings of Ghosh's characters. Reading the novel *The Hungry Tide* through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and E.P. Thompson's theoretical lens highlights the subjugation of subalterns. The concepts of Gayatri Spivak's 'subalternity' and 'sanctioned ignorance' from the essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and E.P. Thompson's concept of 'history from below' in the work *The Making of the English Working Class* pertinently applied to this research. Spivak's essay discourses the problem of 'subaltern'. The oppressed and silenced individuals are powerless and cannot demand their rights in the hierarchy. Likewise, Thompson's 'history from below' approach highlights the histories of common people. It repeatedly left out grand historical narratives and asserts that combine with the importance of investigation of their lived experiences. It also explores the characters, especially marginalized inhabitants of the Sundarbans, symbolizing the condition of subalternity. The subjugated characters like Moyana, Kusum, Fokir and refugees of Sundarbans whose struggles reveal the multidimensional layers of oppression from colonial, environmental, and socio-political points.

In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak claims that the subalterns within society cannot express their voices. They are systematically ostracised from the structures of power and representation. Spivak's views on the subaltern defined by class, caste, gender, or colonial stand, dwell in a position as marginal. They were muted by the dominant group. The subaltern's experience remains silent and unheard.

Upon scrutiny, Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* exhibits an unconventional way of plot construction and skilful characterisation. His penned craftsmanship creates an aesthetic view of readers. His thematic aspects explicit past events and contemporary subject matter. As a part

of the nation, writer Amitav Ghosh is concerned over his nation. So, his writings resound the concern over the refugees and poor people, the preservation of ancient history, the conservation of forests and precarity over nature.

Unheard Voices: Erasure of Marichjhapi Island

The end of the colonial rule in the Indian nation marked the birth of two nations India and Pakistan. The triumph of the long-awaited political division of power was accompanied by the tragedy of partition. The partition of the country led to unprecedented mass migration and barbaric violence has brought a terrible chapter in history. The history of the violent separation has endured rivalry, riots and bloodshed. The people fled from West and East Pakistan and shared their borders with Panjab and Bengal. After the partition, people fled from East Pakistan in 1947. The partition of India separated many people through their forced evictions and migration as well as communal upheavals. During the communal riots, ordinary people migrated and their homes were destroyed because of political disputes. The West Bengal government did not control the migration. The people started their refuge themselves in many areas of Bengal. People from East Pakistan have immigrated to two groups of communities- the higher community called as “bhadrolok” and the lower community called as “chhotolok”. The higher community entered into the main city with the influence of education and white-collar jobs. They secured their life with high paying jobs. But the lower-class citizens don’t have the right to enter into the main areas. They are forced to settle down on borders as refugees. For the refugees the government announced rehabilitation and resettlement for their basic survival. So, the government officially announced the “Dhandakaranya Project” for the welfare of the refugees. The government started its plan and submitted the plan for rehabilitation for refugees to the National Development Council in 1957. They started to execute the plan but many researchers checked the soil and the living factors. And the result was a failure, the factors of the soil and places were not apt for agriculture. The Government considered their concerns for the refugees. They previously suffered during the partition and also, they suffered much after the settlement in the rehabilitation place “Dhandakaranya”. That’s the reason the government stopped and withdrew its rehabilitation and settlement project. The Dhandakaranya project was failed by the officials and it created worse living conditions for the refugees. The eviction of people from the Sundarbans where refugees built their homes. That place is the largest ecosystem, deltaic land and home to diverse animals. Because of the unique ecosystem, the government makes many efforts to the conservation of Sundarbans. This led to resentment between officials and the local community. Marichjhapi

Island is located in the Sundarbans, West Bengal. The major tragic incident lightly evident in *the Hungry Tide* is the Marichjhapi incident or the Marichjhapi massacre.

The Marichjhapi massacre, one of the key historical events recounted in the novel, reveals the violent consequences of this conflict. Thousands of Bengali refugees were displaced by the government in the name of conservation, resulting in violent evictions, destruction of their settlements, and a death toll that remains a scar in the region's history. Ghosh uses this historical tragedy as a focal point to explore how the state uses control over marginalized communities, enforcing policies that often prioritize ecological preservation at the cost of human lives.

In the Marichjhapi Island, where Bengali Hindu Dalit refugees had settled on Marichjhapi Island. The history of the refugees was forcibly removed by the government. Since the island was part of a protected forest area, the authorities wanted them out. During the eviction, many refugees died due to police gunfire, lack of food and supplies because of blockades, starvation, and illness. In the book *Blood Island: An Oral History of Marichjhapi Massacre*, the author states that the struggles of refugees in Marichjhapi Island:

We were treated as criminals for wanting to live. The bullets didn't care whether we were men, women, or children. We weren't allowed to be human, and our hunger wasn't allowed to matter. (Halder 12)

Refugees who had already been displaced by Partition were further relocated when they tried to build lives on Marichjhapi. The government, summoning laws related to forest conservation, forcibly evicted them, in the name of maintaining the ecological balance of the Sundarbans. This remained a political move to gain international recognition and funding for tiger conservation rather than a genuine concern for the environment.

The novel explores the struggles of poorer people, including refugees from Bangladesh. The government declares Marichjhapi Island a tiger preserve. The government categorized settlers as 'squatters.' This island is part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid by people from all around the world" (Ghosh, 261) Particularly the character Nirmal grapples with the harsh realities of the struggle against the forces of nature and the state. Nirmal's reflection on the massacre: "I am reminded of the moments before the coming of a cyclone." (Ghosh 137) This metaphor not only alludes to the physical storms that ravage the Sundarbans but also symbolizes the impending violence that the refugees are about to face. It captures the sense of foreboding and the inevitability of disaster that permeates the lives of the

marginalized. The Marichjhapi refugees were silenced by the government. Their plight which resonates with the horrific destruction of refugees in India's history. Brutal violence and expurgation of refugees' identity reflect disempowerment and lack of representation.

The voice of Kusum represents the subaltern struggles. Kusum states that "the worst part is not the hunger and the thirst. It makes us powerless, forced to listen to police announcements that devalue our lives and existence, treating them as even less significant than dust or dirt." (Ghosh 261) The above lines give attention to the tragic incident of the Marichjhapi massacre. In the 1970s Bengali refugees fled because of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 and settled in the Sundarbans. The Indian government forcibly evicted these refugees in 1979 for environmental concerns. Bengal is one of the habitats for the Bengal Tigers. So, the government ardently protected the tigers. The international environmental groups applied economic pressure on the government. The government's suppression resulted in violence and loss of life. This tragic incident is an example of sanctioned subjugation. Human lives are threatened by the government and the tigers. Ghosh argues that human lives are valued lower than the lives of tigers. The history of the subaltern recounted by Ghosh:

Despite all the labour that had been invested in the embankments, there were still periodic breaches because of floods and storms: each such inundation rendered the land infertile for several years at a time. The settler's main job was farming land. Their agriculture stock who had been drawn to Lusibari by the promise of free farmland. Their hunger pushed them to hunting and fishing and their results were disastrous. (Ghosh 79)

Through the above lines, Ghosh explores the insolvency of Marichjhapi Island as an appalling example of the famine that confounded Bengal. The novel *The Hungry Tide* conveys ecological, cultural, and historical themes and it explores the intricate dynamic forces between human communities and the natural world. The Sundarbans is situated in the western part of Bangladesh. It is a biodiversity hotspot but also a disputed political and social space. The government's efforts to protect the environment through conservation. However, the government failed to protect the local people, particularly marginalized groups such as the refugees from Bangladesh who fled to the Sundarbans in search of safety and livelihood.

In the Marichjhapi massacre, refugees are silenced both historically and vocally. Their plight echoes the displacement and marginalization of refugees in history. It is a stark example of how the subalterns are underprivileged based on voice. The state's expurgation of their

identity from official records and the brutal violence they face, reflects their disempowerment and lack of representation. The stories of those who died in the conflict are silenced and it was never told to anyone. Amitav Ghosh aims to present an alternative vivid picture of subjugation and silence alongside it helps to revise the history. The violent gory of the attack of officials on the refugees in the Sundarbans expressed the anguishes of refugees. As a historian Ghosh tantalizes to view the history. The novel entails the sufferings of Subalterns during the political upheavals.

Discussion

The Hungry Tide contains two plots. First, the plight of the refugees in the Sundarbans and second, humans shared a complex and dangerous ecosystem with tigers and other animals. The novel links different concepts such as environmental challenges, human endurance, colonial legacies, and socio-political subjugations. Analysing the marginalisation and overlooked histories illustrates the struggles of those referred to as the margins of society.

Kanai Dutt read the notebook of his uncle Nirmal, to know the sufferings of subalterns. The notebook is a major metaphor. It gives a detailed note on the tragic history faced by the subalterns. Nirmal and his wife Nilima settled on the Island 'Lusibari' (imaginary place). Nirmal's character is voiced for the voiceless subalterns. Nirmal's consciousness of this future calamity, voices the broader themes of ecological and political violence in the novel. The author drew a connection between natural disasters and human actions. Ghosh critiques anthropocentrism and the exploitation of people and nature.

Nirmal's narrative also serves as a reminder of the importance of memory in the context of postcolonial literature. His diary becomes a vessel for preserving the voices of those who are often silenced. Nayar notes that through Nirmal's recollections, Ghosh emphasizes the need to acknowledge and document histories that are frequently marginalized or forgotten. The act of writing, for Nirmal, is both an act of remembrance and a form of resistance to erasure. It connects to the broader postcolonial discourse of recovering lost narratives and highlighting the struggles of the oppressed. Nirmal encapsulates the themes of resilience, violence, and the intertwining of human lives with the environment. Nirmal's reflections serve as touching cues of the enduring impact of history on individual lives.

The young refugee Kusum represents resilience and determination. She flees from home in order to search for safety. She was forced to leave her ancestral land during the partition. She and her family faced many struggles in Moricjhapi. Her family members' sudden

demise forced her to become vulnerable to domestic exploitation. The social worker Nilima exemplifies the power of empathy. Nirmal and Nilma's efforts to save the community from oppression. Pramod K. Nayar states that "Dissent is suppressed as elite groups take charge and become more oppressive than the colonial master." (Nayar 106) Ghosh's viewpoint on nation and communities is not necessarily 'imagined' by elites alone: powerless, uneducated and poor people also dream of them. The character Nirmal raises the question against the elite and voices for the powerless subalterns. Nayar says that,

Belonging and non-belonging, powerful and powerless, subaltern and elite: the equations of colonialism continue to hold relevance in contemporary, postcolonial India as subalterns harassed rendered powerless, and even killed in the name of the nation. (Nayar 107)

The erasure of refugees confirmed that the Sundarbans could be preserved as a "pristine" natural habitats for tigers, as well as a symbol of the government's environmental commitment to the global community.

Findings

Nirmal's viewpoint is that the subaltern must know their rights. Kanai's narrative history here, Piyali and Kanai Dutt fight for the conservation of dolphins and forests; Nirmal and Nilima fight for the subalterns. The findings of the research are that every individual needs to be aware of their rights. Nirmal voices his voice for the voiceless. Every subaltern exterminates ignorance and they need to empower themselves for the upliftment of their own life. Piya's research on dolphins discloses that the well-being of the human population and wildlife must be balanced and cannot be treated separately. So, the lives of human beings and the ecosystem of nature are intertwined.

Conclusion

The writer Amitav Ghosh skilfully writes the nested stories of the characters. In *The Hungry Tide*, the title itself denotes the hunger of humans and nature. It estimates how Ghosh astonishingly knits the novel. The word 'subaltern' highlights the supremacy of government officials and how social, political, and cultural forces can marginalise and exclude certain groups or individuals from positions of influence and authority. It emphasises the experiences of voiceless and invisible voices within the dominant discourse. And it sheds light on the subaltern's sufferings and power dynamic. In the essay of Gayatri Spivak *Can the Subaltern*

Speak? Spivak conveys the message that all individuals must raise concerns for their own. But the subalterns cannot speak for themselves because they are silenced by hegemony and hierarchy.

Indeed, in the materialistic world, people's relentless pursuit of wealth has led to distressing consequences for the world. "Cutting off the branch you were sitting on", this idiom expresses the harmful act of human mentality. In the phrase, the branch represents the people (refugees) who live in the Sundarbans region. The government is sitting on the same branch to protect the people. But the government cut off its branch to harm its people in the name of conservation of the forest. Humans destroy nature for the sake of their own essential life for survival. They destroy nature for money.

Amitav Ghosh conveys the suffering of the refugees in the Sundarbans and their eviction in the name of saving tigers; eventually it symbolizes the broader conflict between marginalized human communities and the priorities of state-driven environmental conservation. Nirmal echoes the past policies of Sir Daniel Hamilton, who once provided land to the poor in the Sundarbans to build a cooperative society. The government, influenced by global pressures, treated the penurious refugees as nonessential, prioritizing ecological goals over human lives. The government's conservation policies compensate with alternative livelihood schemes. For the sake of preserving the record, they started their schemes but they didn't implement them. So, the government needs to allocate higher officials and refugee representatives (from the refugee group) to check the implementations. A close reading of the text reveals that Ghosh tries to trace the entire history of the Sundarbans. The historical approach of Ghosh's novels explores the stories of subalterns who were suppressed by colonial and postcolonial power. Through this, Ghosh critiques the anthropocentric view of nature that often pits vulnerable human populations against environmental policies, raising questions about the ethics of conservation and the value of human life in postcolonial contexts.

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