

## Understanding the ‘Subject’ and the ‘Other’- *The Hungry Tide*

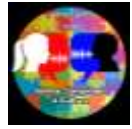
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*The Hungry Tide*, written by Amitava Ghosh (2004) can be seen as a means to re-live the experiences of refugees in Marichjhapi, the northernmost island of West Bengal (Sundarbans), who were killed mercilessly and uprooted by the ruling party of the then Bengal. The author attempts to reach out to the masses of the brutal event that took place at that particular period in Marichjhapi. The incident goes something like this: many refugees, who were originally from Bangladesh from the Dandakaranya region, came to Marichjhapi. They had faith in the Left Front Government, who promised to help out those refugees and this was possible when they would be the party in power. After becoming the ruling party, The Left failed to keep their promise and were forcefully sending those refugees back to that place from where they came. But the refugees by then had already sold all their belongings to make this trip to the island. The period of the 70s was a crucial period when, throughout the country, different protests were going on, including the Naxal movement, which had no reference in this novel.

The story revolves around many characters, Fokir, the boatman, being the protagonist. Another significant character is that of Nirmal, whose gaze is that of the author’s. In the narrative, the onus is upon Normal, a member of nouveau rich society, to reach out to the masses of the twenty-first century the ghastly incident of Marichjhapi through his writing. The character/author feels morally responsible to make elites<sup>1</sup> aware of this particular incidence of injustice, who have an indifferent attitude towards those migrants. Besides

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘subaltern’ was first used by Antonio Gramsci. In the year 1982, a series of Subaltern Studies emerged who were keen to understand the position of the marginalized or the subaltern in the post-colonial and post-imperial society. Both Gramsci and subaltern Studies scholars used the word ‘subaltern’ to reclaim the lost histories of those groups of people who were underprivileged and made an effort to make their voices audible. In this paper, I am going to use the term ‘subaltern’ in a similar sense.



this particular episode, the novel also portrays a tension among the characters.

The paper intends to show this particular novel can be used as one of the exemplars to understand an individual's position as a subaltern<sup>2</sup>, which is in a state of flux. At the same time, it would be interesting to perceive how in a different situation, one's position as an 'elite' becomes a subaltern – the position of the 'Self'<sup>3</sup> and the 'Other'<sup>4</sup> keeps shifting with the flow of the narrative.

Keywords: elite, Marichjhapi, Other, refugee, Self, subaltern.

### **The Story**

The novel revolves around some characters, namely, Nirmal, Nilima, Kanai, Piya, Kusum, Horen, Fokir, and Moina. There are four main female characters in the story. They are Nilima, Kusum, Piya, and Moyna who are quite assertive and independent in their way. Nilima runs a Trust of her own at Lusibari. Piya is a cetologist by profession. Kusum shows extreme courage by traveling all alone to Bihar in search of her mother. Moyna is very articulated and knows very well what she wants to do in her life. She wishes to become a nurse and also dreams to give a good life to her son Tutul. Her husband Fokir is a boatman and Moyna does not want her son to follow the footsteps of his father. So, she is working hard to achieve her goal.

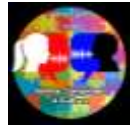
Nilima's husband Nirmal was actively involved in politics during his Calcutta (Kolkata) days. To save his life from the suspected political upheaval in the city, Nilima, decided to take him into Lusibari, a place in Sundarban. There he was

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<sup>2</sup> Elites can be understood as the educated ones who usually enjoys all kinds of benefits of city life.

<sup>3</sup> The 'Self' or the core stands for those who are at the center of power and thus, enjoys an epistemological advantageous position.

<sup>4</sup> The 'Other' or the margin are placed far from the seat of power and are marginalized.

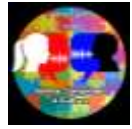


able to fetch a livelihood for himself as a school teacher. Nilima also started doing philanthropic work and this gave birth to Badabon Trust. She was quite happy with the kind of social work she was doing there. Kanai, their nephew, was sent to Lusibari as a punishment where he met Kusum, a local girl and they became friends. Kusum's mother was deceived by a man named Dilip who took her to the city with the assurance of providing her with some job but ultimately she ended up in prostitution. The friendship between Kanai and Kusum ended very abruptly in the story. For many years Kusum disappeared and her sudden appearance in the latter part of the novel on the island of Marichjhapi was an unexpected turn. Nirmal met her and her son Fokir by chance on the island, who had settled down there. But an unfortunate incident took away Kusum's and Nirmal's life and Fakir became an orphan.

As the story proceeds, we came to know about Kanai who was then a successful interpreter based in Delhi and an unmarried man having liaisons with many women. To keep his aunt's wish, he again went to Lusibari to see his uncle's diary kept only for him. On his way, Kanai met Piya who was going to Canning to study the Gangetic dolphins. Kanai invited Piya to Lusibari and in due course, she went to Lusibari in Fokir's boat.

Fokir was portrayed as a very efficient boatman and was well versed in the locations of Dolphins. He was of great help to Piya in locating those dolphins and studying their movements. Fokir showed his hospitality and made Piya comfortable in every possible way. Though Piya had her roots in Bengal, she was based in the United States. As a consequence, she hardly understood Bengali but that did not hinder the communication between her and Fokir.

The diary that Nirmal left for Kanai narrated the gruesome incident of Marichjhapi. It acted as an eye witness to the series of events that took place starting from its origin to annihilation by the ruling party of West Bengal. Kanai came to know from the diary that at the fag end of his uncle's retirement, he came to know about that island of refuges. Nirmal was awestruck with the



island's development and wanted to teach children over there. He started day-dreaming regarding the island's prosperity and his spiritless life suddenly became meaningful. The reason why he got mixed up with Marichjhapi, as Nilima would say, was because '... he couldn't let go of the idea of revolution'<sup>5</sup>. He wanted to teach the children to strive for achieving equality. But his work got interrupted as Marichjhapi was declared as reserved forest and the government was taking every action to evacuate people. Nilima had some reservations regarding her husband's involvement and smelled some kind of danger. She did not want any taint on her image for it took her many years to reach there. But Nirmal was driven by his visions to change and was reliving his moments there. To put it in his words -

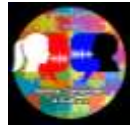
... I was watching the birth of something new, something hitherto unseen. This, I thought, is what Daniel Hamilton must have felt when he stood upon the deck of his launch and watched the mangroves being shorn from the islands. But between what was happening at Marichjhapi and what Hamilton had done there was one vital aspect of difference: this was not one man's vision. This dream had been dreamt by the very people who were trying to make it real<sup>6</sup>.

While visiting the island, he got stuck due to the storm and was forced to take shelter there. It was a sheer coincidence that they met Kusum there. Unfortunately, they did not make their way back.

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<sup>5</sup> Amitava Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2004), p. 282.

<sup>6</sup> Amitava Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2004), p.171.



After getting a glimpse of the story, the next section would endeavor to undergo a deep analysis of the characters involved.

### **The Analysis**

Let us start exploring the male characters.

In the story, both Nirmal and Kanai are the educated, middle-class elites. Horen and Fokir, who are boatmen by profession, belong to the lower rung of society. They were happy by meeting their daily needs where the revolution had no place. They were the residents of Lusibari and hardly had any idea of the world outside their known domain. Despite being marginalized, the situation became such that the elites had to rely upon these minoritized people. Though they did not have the scope to receive a proper education, their knowledge regarding their lived-experiences placed them in a privileged position (sometimes epistemologically<sup>7</sup>). Despite being a pleb and lacks in sophistication, Horen remarked on Nirmal -

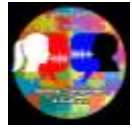
He was a man of many words, your uncle – and *I had very few*. I knew he was wooing her [Kusum] with his stories and tales – I had nothing to give her but my presence, *but in the end it was me she chose*<sup>8</sup> [My Emphasis].

The above quote makes quite apparent the feeling of superiority that Horen was feeling over Nirmal. Horen overshadowed Nirmal's presence, a charming erudite elite failed to lure the belittled Kusum.

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<sup>7</sup> Epistemology is that branch of philosophy that deals with the study of knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> Amitava Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2004), p.36.



Hence, the subaltern not only defied but overturned the position of the ‘Other’ to ‘Self’.

Besides Horen, Fokir also challenged the rational capable intellectual male Kanai. Piya, as we know from the story, hired Fokir’s launch to study Gangetic dolphins. While out on her expedition, she found Fokir of her age. Piya fell from the launch but Fokir was quick enough to jump into the river and saved her life. The unread Fokir made every attempt to make Piya feel comfortable and his effort forced Piya to think that -

It was not just that he had thought to create a space for her; it was as if *he had chosen to include her in some simple, practised family ritual*, found a way to let her know that despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she was a person to him and not, as it were, a representative of a species, a faceless, tongueless foreigner... He had probably never met anyone like her before, any more than she had ever met anyone like him<sup>9</sup> [My emphasis]

*Piya* was an educated woman who enjoyed certain perks in society. She held a powerful position when compared to Fokir. To include Piya within the ‘subaltern space’ and to assure her safety were juxtaposed by Kanai’s opinion on Fokir who believed Fokir as the ‘other’. His thought became perspicuous from the following quote -

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<sup>9</sup> Amitava Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2004), p.71.



Listen, said Kanai, in a flat, harsh voice. You shouldn't deceive yourself, Piya: there wasn't anything in common between you then and there isn't now. Nothing. He's a fisherman and you're a scientist. What you see as fauna he sees as food. He's never sat in a chair, for heaven's sake. Can you imagine what he'd do if he was taken on to a plane? Kanai burst out laughing at the thought of Fokir walking down the aisle of a jet, in his lungi and vest. Piya, there's nothing in common between you at all. You're from different worlds, different planets. If you were about to be struck by a bolt of lightning, he'd have no way of letting you know<sup>10</sup>.

Kanai's remark was distinct enough to reflect the tension between the 'Self' and the 'Other'. The Self, who always relished the authoritative position, showed an apathetic attitude to embrace the 'Other'. But Piya was an exception here. She emphasized that though she and Fokir are from two different worlds, it did not bother her much. But Kanai often went out of his way to embarrass Fokir. He imagined Fokir in a certain situation which goes like this-

... he had a vision of Fokir, travelling to Seattle with Piya. He saw two of them walking into the plane, she in her jeans and he in his lungi and scuffed T-shirt; he saw Fokir squirming in a seat

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<sup>10</sup> Amitava Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2004), p.268.



that was not like any he had ever seen before: he pictured him looking up and down the aisle with his mouth agape. And then he thought of him in some icy Western city, wandering the streets in search of work, lost and unable to ask for directions<sup>11</sup>.

Fokir saw some fresh signs of the tiger's paw near the edge of the river. He asked Kanai to look at those marks. *Kanai* noticed an alteration in Fokir's way of addressing him – from 'apni' (the formal 'you') to 'tui' (the informal 'you'), which was rightly pointed out by these lines – '...as though in stepping on the island, the authority of their positions had been suddenly reversed'<sup>12</sup>.

The wetness of the mud caused *Kanai* to slip. Fokir offered him help but Kanai straightaway rejected it. Fokir's smile pestered Kanai and he told him to leave the place. Without any delay, Fokir complied with his words. The novel poignantly depicts the never-ending rift between the elite and the subaltern.

As the story proceeded, the author described a fierce storm that compelled Piya and Fokir to take refuge on the island. Fokir sat with Piya hugging a tree and -

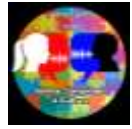
... sitting behind her, Fokir had his fingers knotted around her stomach. His face was resting on the back of her neck and she could feel his stubble on her skin. Soon her lungs adapted to the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>12</sup> Amitava Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2004), p. 235.





rhythm of his diaphragm as it pumped in and out of the declivity of her lower back. Everywhere their bodies met their skin was joined by a thin membrane of sweat<sup>13</sup>.

The way this scene was depicted gave us the impression that in reality, there is no such separation between the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’. Another such instance of dissolving the dichotomy between the two was found in the novel where -

Their bodies were so close, so finely merged that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; *it had fused them together and made them on*<sup>14</sup> [My Emphasis].

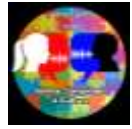
The subaltern pasts were never fully lost because modernity despises its best efforts and is even now entangled with these pasts. In the same way, the lost incident of *Marichjhapi* re-appeared in the present through Nirmal’s diary. The subaltern history and its people continued to co-exist with elites.

The subaltern is not identified with ‘ideal’ subjectivity but defined in terms of a subject with a difference. In the context of men/women,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 390.



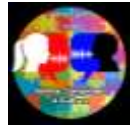
French philosopher Luce Irigaray opines that ‘the question of the other has been poorly formulated in the Western tradition, for the other is always seen as the other of the same, the other of the subject itself, rather than another subject [un autre sujet], irreducible to the masculine subject and sharing equivalent dignity’<sup>15</sup>. She articulates this in the context of a binary of men/women, where women are always defined in terms of men. Like Irigaray, Australian philosopher Val Plumwood<sup>16</sup> says that in two-valued logic, ‘not p’ is explained in terms of ‘p’. Here, ‘p’ is necessarily a male, and ‘not p’ is a female, who is defined in terms of a lack. At this juncture, the quintessential thing would be to come out of the all-powerful one model (male) and to think about the possibility of integrating two models, ‘two which is not a replication of the same, nor one large and the other small, but made up of two which are truly different’<sup>17</sup>. Refusing to be reduced like the ‘One’, but by inventing oneself as an autonomous and different subject is what Irigaray talks about. The subject is not one, nor is it singular, but plural with diverse characteristics. The traditional logic does not think ‘not p’ in terms of ‘q’, an individual with different features. In the same manner, subalterns also lose their identity when they are seen from the perspective of elites. This becomes distinct when the elite’s dominant way of thinking constantly shadowed the presence of a subaltern; Kanai’s perception was biased that denied Fokir his status of a ‘subject’ with a difference. The prevalent system of thought as well as social structures do not recognize the ‘different other’.

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<sup>15</sup> Luce Irigaray, Luce Irigaray, ‘The Question of the Other’ in *Yale French Studies* (87, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Val Plumwood, ‘The Politics of Reason: Towards a Feminist Logic’ in *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, (Vol, 71, No.4, December, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Luce Irigaray, Luce Irigaray, ‘The Question of the Other’ in *Yale French Studies* (87, 1995), p. 11.



Throughout the novel, the author seemed to underline constantly on this issue.

Fokir died in the storm as he was hit hard by an uprooted stump. Before he died, he uttered two names to Piya – Moyna and Tutul. Out of gratitude, Piya took their responsibility. After coming back to Lusibari, she raised money for Tutul and Moyna to buy them a house and took care of his education. Piya's work got recognition and was offered funding from various conservation and environmental groups. She wanted to share this fund with the Badabon Trust and this made Nilima interested. Despite some obstacles, Piya was determined to stay back in Lusibari for her love for dolphins and in memory of Fokir. She accepted Fokir in his way, her perspective did not eclipse his existence. The subaltern Fokir gave meaning to the presence of different characters and in a way remained unforgettable in the novel.