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Cross-Cultural Barriers in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's novels are rich explorations of cross-cultural encounters, often set against historical backdrops that highlight the complexities of colonialism, migration, and identity. His works, including *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies*, and *The Hungry Tide*, address the profound social, linguistic, and ideological barriers that arise in multicultural settings. Through intricately developed characters and intersecting narratives, Ghosh examines how colonial and postcolonial experiences shape individuals and communities, forging connections across boundaries but also underscoring divides. Themes of displacement, cultural hybridity, and the search for belonging are recurrent, with Ghosh capturing the tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as the enduring impacts of imperial histories on personal and cultural identities. This study analyzes Ghosh's narrative techniques and thematic concerns, emphasizing how he confronts and critiques the limitations imposed by cultural differences while also celebrating the resilience of human connections across these divides. Ultimately, Ghosh's novels underscore the need for empathy and understanding in an interconnected but often fragmented world.

Key words: migration, empathy and understanding, identity, migration, colonialism, tradition and modernity etc.

The Hungry Tide contains some autobiographical elements. Ghosh mentions the name of his uncle Shri Satish Chandra Ghosh who had been a headmaster of a school, founded by Sir Daniel Hamilton in Gosaba. He had been the Manager of the Hamilton Estate for some years. Ghosh's boyhood visit to the tide country is reflected through the fictional character Kanai. The novel starts with the travels of the two principal characters who are on the way to the Sundarbans. The narrative begins with Kanai Dutt standing on a crowded platform of a south Kolkata railway station named Dhakuria and watching Piyali Roy standing on the same platform and awaiting a local train in the same direction to Canning. Kanai goes to Lusibari to meet his aunt Nilima. Nilima runs a charitable trust named as „Badabon Trust' in Lusibari. Kanai has been invited by his aunt to receive a recently discovered diary left to him by his deceased uncle Nirmal. Nirmal was a headmaster in the local school and a Marxist ideologue. Piyali Roy's journey to the tide country is the part of her research and fieldwork on river dolphins. She is a cetologist.

The multiple places Kolkata, Delhi and Seattle intersect spatially for the sake of the plot. The storyline mainly rests in present time but traverses through memory and Nirmal's diary entries in two different time periods in the post-Partition India – the 1950s and the 1970s. *The Hungry Tide* begins with a man and a woman on a train. Kanai Dutt, a translator who runs a successful corporate interpretation service in New Delhi, notices Piyali Roy, a young American scientist of Indian Parentage who has come to the Sundarbans to study the rare Asian river dolphin. Both Kanai and Piya negotiate with the socio-cultural space in the Sundarbans. Both of them are 'outsiders'. Ghosh points out the appearance of Kanai as:

Kanai was carrying a wheeled airline bag with a telescoping handle. To the vendors and travelling salesmen who plied their wares on the Canning line, this piece of luggage was just one of the many details of Kanai's appearance – along with his sunglasses, corduroy trousers and suede shoes – that suggested middle-aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence. (*THT* 4-5)

Piya's inability to converse in either Bengali or Hindi is emphasizing her diasporic identity. Piya's negotiation with her American identity becomes more clearly visible when she calls the tea-seller for a cup of tea. Kanai was reading a Bengali newspaper. He turned the page when she tries to maneuver the cup

through the window of the train; a small trickle splashes over the papers. Piya quickly apologizes to Kanai. This incident sets them in conversation. After Knowing about Piya's research on the cetacean population in the rivers of the Sundarbans, Kanai invites her to visit Lusibari. Kanai also tells her about the purpose of his own journey to Lusibari and in this connection also tells her about his first visit to the tide country in his childhood in 1970.

As the train reaches Canning, before they depart, Kanai warns Piya about the hostility of the ecological space of the tide country. He asks her to be careful with the man-eaters. This warning obliquely alerts the reader about the unfamiliar socio- cultural and ecological space of the place. After reaching Lusibari, Kanai had spent a few days with Nirmal and he is affected by a temporal awareness and a consciousness of spatial dislocation. Memory is a repository of historical events and also contains cartographic realities or maps. Kanai recollects how Nirmal told him the history behind the naming of the place during his first visit.

From the launch, Piya catches the sight of Fokir and his son Tutul on a small fishing boat. She asks the forest guard and Mej-da to take the launch near the boat. She approaches Fokir with the display card on which there were pictures of both the Gangetic dolphin and the Irrawaddy dolphin. At the moment Fokir assures her of the presence of the Irrawaddy dolphin or *Orcaella brevirostris* in the upriver. The forest guard threatens Fokir's son and snatches away the money from the boy. Feeling compassionate, Piya attempts to offer some money to Fokir. As the launch starts moving, Piya loses her balance and falls into the river. Fokir dives into the water and saves her. When Piya gets back to her senses, she asks Fokir about Lusibari and „Mashima'. The sudden feeling of vulnerability gradually disappears as she decides to negotiate with the present situation on Fokir's boat.

Cultural space is related to the geographical boundary and territory. Fokir's boat appears to be a microcosmic presentation of the socio-cultural space of these impoverished subaltern fishermen community of the Sundarbans. Piya realizes that she has somehow becomes part of that space with her specific gender identity and personality. Her successful negotiation with this reality makes her feel easy. Fokir starts the boat in search of a safety place for the impending night. Piya engages herself with her binoculars and other research equipment in scanning the watery surface of the river to find out the trace of the dolphin's movement. While looking through the binoculars on the boat, Piya recollects her past. She remembers the

first day of her University life at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California. Those were the days of her first negotiation with the cultural space of scientific knowledge of Oceanography and her initial attempt to earn the identity of a researcher in Cetology.

Nirmal is a Marxist and he always believed in his dreams and idealistic visions. His dreams of socialist revolution get merged with that of Sir Daniel Hamilton. Before coming to Lusibari from Calcutta, Nirmal's initial dilemma of being associated with an enterprise founded by a leading capitalist was washed away. Nirmal goes in search of a job. He is appointed as a headmaster in a school. The school is run by Sir Daniel Hamilton. Nirmal decides to settle in Lusibari along with Nilima. The conventional conflict between the visionary capitalist and the socialist dreamer gets dissolved within the identity of Daniel Hamilton.

However, after reaching Lusibari, Kanai and Nilima move to the compound of the Badabon Trust. On the way, Kanai comes to know from Nilima about Moyna and also about Fokir. Moyna is a trainee nurse in the hospital of the Trust in Lusibari. Kusum was the playmate of Kanai during his first visit to Lusibari in 1970 when she was just a girl of fifteen or sixteen years. She became one of the casualties of the Morichjhapi massacre in 1979 when Fokir was a boy of five years. After that Fokir was brought up by one of their distant relatives named Horen Naskor. Kanai is allotted one of the four guest rooms upstairs for his stay and as he unlocks the tin- roofed room on the roof of this building. He finds himself in Nirmal's study and he also finds the notebook inside a sealed packet on the table in this room. Nirmal has left the notebook only for him.

Kanai opens the packet and finds that the basic content of the notebook is prefaced with a kind of extended letter addressed to him without any customary salutations and dated May 15, 1979. The letter and also the notebook are written in the Bengali language. From this letter, Kanai comes to know that Nirmal wrote this diary at a place called Morichjhapi. Kanai as a skilled translator immediately translates Morichjhapi into English as „Pepper-island’. This diary could be seen as Nirmal's attempt to negotiate with his own identity as a writer just before a politico- historical turmoil in the tide country. Kanai reads the following words from the diary:

*There is nothing I can do to stop what lies ahead. But I was once a writer;
perhaps I can make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace,*

some hold upon the memory of the world. The thought of this, along with the fear that preceded it, has made it possible for me to do what I have not been able to for the last thirty years – to put my pen to paper again. (THT 69)

Nirmal's diary focuses on the historical event of the forced eviction of the refugee settlers from an island named Morichjhapi by the newly elected Left Front government of West Bengal. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh blends the political event of Morichjhapi eviction with the environmental issue of wildlife conservation in the Sundarbans. Religious syncretism is one of the aspects of cross-culturalism. It becomes obvious when the immigrants worship the forest-goddess Bon Bibi. The cult of Bon Bibi which is peculiar to the community is a re-presentation of a certain strand of Hindu and Muslim syncretism. Fokir and his son Tutul pray at a shrine using a word that sound like „Allah'. The way he prays Allah resembles Hindu Pooja which reflects a transcultural fusion of elements of both Hinduism and Islam. Similarly, this fusion of two religions Hindu and Muslim confuses Piya as she watches Fokir and Tutul performing „a little ceremony' at the shrine of Bon Bibi in an island named Garjontola. A similar event is described in Nirmal's notebook, where Nirmal recollects his visit to the same shrine with Horen, Kusum and her son Fokir. The cultural space of the tide country accommodates diverse religions, linguistic currents, and literary traditions and ultimately transforms them into a newer and wider reality.

However, Kanai learns from Kusum about the tragic death of her father who was killed by a tiger. She also tells him how at that time all her prayers to Bon Bibi to protect her father did not yield any result. Actually, Bon Bibi is omnipresent to the people of the tide country. Kusum meets her mother at Dhanbad in Bihar, and Rajen gives the proposal to marry Kusum. She leaves Lusibari before Kanai's return to Calcutta after his first visit, and during his second visit at present, she is already dead. But she stays alive in the memory of other characters like Kanai, Horen, Nilima and Fokir and also in Nirmal's notebook. After reading Nirmal's notebook, Kanai realizes why Kusum was so significant personality to Nirmal. In that sense, Kusum becomes the spirit of the tide country. Nirmal's notebook and Piya's research, the past and the present, folk belief of the Sundarbans and field survey of cetology cross each other's borders.

Globalization is one of the aspects of cross-culturalism. The cosmopolitan characters like Piya, Kanai and Nirmal know their limitations. Each of these three characters reshapes their perceptions and attitudes more or less after the influence of a residential character: Piya by Fokir, Nirmal by Kusum and Kanai

partially by Moyna. The fictional lives of Kusum, Horen and Moyna are not different enough from Fokir in regard to their residential or local nature. The tide country is not Fokir's place of birth, but certainly, this is the place of his belonging and his home. After the death of Fokir in the storm, Piya departs from Lusibari and goes to Kolkata. Nilima and the people in the village think that Piya will not come back to Lusibari. But she comes back after a fortnight and tells Nilima that she has raised a handsome amount of money for Moyna and Tutul and also has decided to stay in Lusibari to continue her research.

Kanai finds himself privileged not only for being a representative of the educated people but also for being the link between Piya and Fokir in terms of language. Kanai's role as the mediator between two different linguistic and cultural spaces becomes obvious. Though Piya is well conscious of Kanai's feelings for her, she senses a fascination for Fokir inside herself. She finds a glimpse of the life of the tide country when she works with Fokir. In the novel *The Hungry Tide*, the fictional narrative of Amitav Ghosh breaks down the barriers of language and geographical borders. The novel promotes the possibility of the reconciliation between the personal relationships and the local and global concerns.

The select novels of Amitav Ghosh assess the movement of characters across borders and cultures. He explores the cultural barriers of religion, class, language and gender that have been created in the course of progress of civilization. The characters of Ghosh break away from the ties and take up new identities and new familial relations to live a new life with energy and enthusiasm.

Amitav Ghosh's novels offer a profound commentary on the impact of cross-cultural barriers, highlighting both the struggles and possibilities inherent in diverse cultural exchanges. His exploration of themes such as colonialism, migration, and identity reveals how historical and social forces shape personal lives and relationships across different societies. Ghosh portrays cross-cultural encounters as complex and often fraught with misunderstandings, yet he also emphasizes the potential for resilience, empathy, and connection. By bridging fragmented histories and disparate communities through his narrative style, Ghosh advocates for a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity. His works ultimately serve as a call to move beyond the limitations of national and cultural boundaries, inviting readers to recognize shared human experiences and the transformative power of empathy in a globally interconnected world.

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