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The Sunderban Landscape as Representative of the Subaltern Status

Under the pressure of globalization, post-colonial nations attempt rapid modernization, leading to the displacement and dissolution of many of its citizens (Nayar). Addressing this after effect in India, and Bangladesh, Amitav Ghosh’s *Hungry Tide* narrows in on the Sunderbans, a place occupied by the refugees of these post-colonial states. “The rivers’ channels are spread across the land like a fine mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable” (Ghosh 6). Ghosh describes a unique landscape that is beautiful and dangerous, alive but deadly, an unknowable place of incomparable climate and inhabitants. The human inhabitants of this delta too live a life with unique conditions. How this landscape affects the lives of the inhabitants is misunderstood by the cosmopolitan and reader representatives played by the two protagonists, Kanai and Piya, as well as the representations of government within the novel (Tomsky 53). This threatening, unknowable landscape of the Sunderbans represents the misunderstood post-colonial situation of the subaltern.

Kanai the main male protagonist of *The Hungry Tide* goes to the Sunderbans only upon request of his aunt Nilima who seeks to pass on a notebook left behind by her husband Nirmal. Nirmal and Nilima are not originally inhabitants of the area but cosmopolitan political refugees from the nearby Calcutta. Ghosh describes their arrival: “They had not expected a utopia, but neither had they expected such destitution. Faced with this situation they saw what it really meant to ask a question such as ‘what is to be done’”(Ghosh 67). Upon seeing the living conditions of the inhabitants of the Sunderbans, Nirmal seeks answers in the same theories that led him to political radicalism in his cosmopolitan birthplace and finds no answers. The subaltern is unknowable for the newly introduced man. “Nilima, ever practical, began to talk to the women who gathered at the wells and ponds (Ghosh 67).” While his wife finds smaller more practical means to adjust the situation in their new home of Lusibari, Nirmal’s vast knowledge of political idealism fails almost entirely. This is Ghosh’s first clear indication that even the educated neighbors of this subaltern area do not fully understand the problems of the post-colonial setting and fail in finding solutions to a lifestyle they would see as unfit.

It is not until many years later; upon retiring as the headmaster of the Lusibari School that Nirmal finds some hope for his idealism to have some fulfillment. Dramatizing historical events, Ghosh involves his characters in the Morichjhapi Incident in which 30,000 refugees inhabited the island of Morichjhapi only to be forced out, or possibly killed by government forces under the claim of environmental protection, namely that of the local tigers (Nayer). A doctor who only sees the refugees as a nuisance represents an obviously misguided interpretation by outsiders of the refugee movement, a misunderstanding that allows for the mistreatment of the subaltern. But the novel notes another misinterpretation. Upon entering involvement with Marichjhapi Nirmal makes the mistake that the Morichjhapi settlement is a sign of idealistic hope rather then a base of survival for a displaced people. In this context Nirmal’s experience and education are decidedly useless in assisting the settlement. His idealistic ideas only lead to the frustrations that finally cause him to write in the notebook he will leave for Kanai.

This idea of misinterpreted hope is a thread within *The Hungry Tide.* The settlers, attempting to gain public favor, invite a cadre of Calcutta intellectuals to their island for a feast. The event is effective in winning favor but the guests make the same misinterpretation of subaltern survival as idealistic hope, “It was universally agreed that the significance of Morichjhapi extended far beyond the island itself (Ghosh 159).” The guests misunderstand or underestimate the completely anti-idealistic environment of the Sunderbans. They see a representation of political idealism when they are actually looking at the survival of a populace disillusioned by a post-colonial status, a populace whose only option is to live on the unforgiving lands of the Sunderbans.

The idealism and survival contrast is best represented early in the novel. “‘One of the many ways,’ said Nirmal, ‘in which the tide country resembles a desert is that it can trick the eye with mirages’”(Ghosh 42). This introduction leads to the story of Sir Daniel Hamilton, the before successful British colonizer who first establishes the estate on Lusibari that Nirmal and Nilima later move to. The story goes that Hamilton saw in the Sunderbans soil that would be worth more than gold. He invites thousands of refugees with new land to work dreaming as an end result of a classless, utopian society. The result is soil found to produce poor harvest, and a people forced to hunt and gather for the sake of survival, only to too often fall prey to the dangers of the mangrove jungle. This British idealist saw opportunity for the forsaken people of the area as well as himself. When in actuality the best result found in the Sunderbans for the people that moved there is only their inconsistent survival. Following a thread of misunderstanding the powerful difficulties of the Sunderbans, Hamilton led himself to his own failure.

Before he sets off for the journey with Piya to research the river dolphins, Kanai is warned by his Aunt of the danger of the Bengal tiger. The amount of tiger killings surprises him as it would any outsider. The fact that Kanai has difficulty understanding the tiger as a part of life represents a grand misinterpretation of the local condition. Finally the idea that a tiger could kill Kanai himself seems un-reasonable in his twenty first century mind\*\*, but in this he again underestimates the world he is now in. This thread finalizes itself when he is stranded on an island, and according to his own senses, encounters a tiger and finds himself hopeless. This personality-changing event leads to a more fully realized respect from Kanai toward the Sunderbans, as well as the people living there; with all his superiority, the conditions of survival in the Sunderbans are too much for him. It is this new realization perhaps that inspires Kanai at the end of the novel to work with his uncle’s Notebook, to explore the question of the Subaltern status of the Sunderban inhabitants.

The danger of the Sunderbans is not only treacherous to those who misunderstand it. Fokir runs parallel to the “noble savage” stereotype within the novel. He has excelled in his subaltern status, and from early childhood impresses those around him with his knowledge of both the landscape and its spirit. “His mother turned to me and I saw she was choking with pride: ‘See, Saar the river is in his veins.’”(Ghosh 205) This surprise is followed by Fokir’s memorized knowledge of Bon Bibi, the sort of patron God of the Sunderbans. The boy seems to list off his knowledge of the legend as fact and creed rather than the result of mixed cultures and the mystery of the Sunderbans, which is how Nirmal sees it. This full incorporation of his subaltern condition as source of expertise leads Fokir to be crucial to Piya’s studies; his intimate knowledge of the area assists her in her cosmopolitan concerns as he shows her the location of the river dolphins. Twice, his knowledge even saves her life.

At the end of the story, Piya and Fokir find themselves stuck in a storm. Following Fokir’s lead they climb a tree and tie themselves to it. When the second wave of the cyclone passes, a tree trunk hits Fokir from behind killing him. “Was this why he had been looking for a branch on another tree? Had he known right from the start his own body would have to become her shield when the eye had passed?” (Ghosh 321) Fokir’s intimate knowledge of the area does not save him, but it is implicit that he is aware of his impending death. After all of his resistance toward the more educated life his wife had planned, it is the lifestyle he loved and preferred that killed him.

In one story of Fokir’s local devotion there is a demon that once ruled the Sunderbans. It is told that by making a deal with the demon, who takes the shape of a tiger, a trader is supplied with a fortune of wax in exchange for one of his crewmen. In the story, Bon Bibi comes to the aid of this crewman and chastises the demon. It is even in the eyes of those forced to live in the post-colonial state that there is hope for bounty as long as one deals appropriately with the wild lands, and that there is a protector for those left behind by the opportunists. The novel’s actual events run paradoxically to this story. The opportunists are left with nothing to take back and those left behind are not under the protection of anything. The Sunderbans represent the subaltern state, in that colonizers seeing idealistic hope in the fortune of new lands are left with little, and those whose lives the colonizers are willing to exchange for fortune are victims of the new conditions set.

Ironically it seems, Fokir’s first appearance in the novel is involved with the local forest reserve, who fine him in the name of protecting the environment he loves. The novel makes an effort to establish the government as the main destructive factor towards the environment, even going as far as to note a fisherman’s ability to fish alongside dolphins in perfect symbiosis, and later showing the death of a young river dolphin by a speeding government motorboat (Ghosh 285). This points to a failure of the authorities to understand the subaltern, and making the problem worse by feeling the need to patrol them.

The only section in which the local inhabitants harm their environment in an emotionally challenging way, is when a tiger is captured within a village, and the village people use the opportunity to kill it since it has harassed the village and killed two of its inhabitants. The scene is gruesome and disorients Piya intellectually, as she is stopped by her companions from doing anything about it. Yet, even here Ghosh lays out some justification for this instance of environmental cruelty. The villagers are merely acting on survival, and the concerns of a cosmopolitan environmentalist would be at best misunderstood. It is only in the context of what their situation truly is that we can see why the subaltern can stand on the opposite side of environmental movements that protect the very dangers they live with. The obviously wrongful event of a tiger essentially tortured to death runs into ambiguity when faced with the justification of the killing. It is here that Ghosh points again to the outsiders’ misunderstanding of the Sunderban lifestyle and the subaltern state. One cannot simply claim environmental protection is a wrong or right. The question becomes more difficult when faced with direct reality.

When faced with Piya’s response toward the tiger incident, Fokir has a seemingly simple solution, “He says, ‘when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die’”(Ghosh 244). There is separation between Piya and Fokir. Piya has an urgent need to do something to protect the tiger and Fokir harbors a belief that the tiger itself is only being killed on its own choice. Fokir’s relationship with nature is one that sees nature as the true master. While outsiders feel the need to protect the Sunderbans, it seems that a great deal of its inhabitants feel the environment needs no such help. In fact, they believe human society has very little chance against the encroaching nature. “Now ask yourself: how long can this frail fence last against these monstrous appetites – the crabs and the tides, the winds and the storms? And if it falls, who shall we turn to then, comrade?” (Ghosh\*\*) Nature to the inhabitants is always a powerful force in the world. It is in this context that survival is the only hope. It is an outsider’s misunderstanding of this natural power, similar to the misunderstanding of Hamilton, which leads to a time parallel at the climax of the story.

Searching for a new port in India, the town of Canning was built. The British were moving forward with the project without paying heed to the warnings of a man certain of the powerful element of nature that will destroy it. “There would come a day when a great mass of salt water would rise up in the midst of a cyclone and drown the whole settlement; on this he would stake his reputation…” (Ghosh 236) The town is as predicted, destroyed by a storm in the area. This concept of a great destructive force is played again with the storm at the end of the story, an event sown to run parallel to a similar storm some thirty years before. These storms are shown as metaphorically unpredictable and all powerful, a force that will destroy anything that has been established in the Sunderbans. Even someone as adapt as Fokir is killed by such an event. This is representative of the subaltern state, in which the tides of ever changing policy and condition finalize a displaced peoples’ inability to find steady footing upon which to elevate themselves from the subaltern state.

Amitav Ghosh’s *Hungry Tide* is a book about the subaltern condition in the Sunderbans. A novel of clashing ideals, classes, and realities, it is an appropriately ambiguous and complex story of post-colonial issues. The story’s setting runs parallel to the nature of itself. It is a land both beautiful and dangerous, a massive, unknowable, and unforgiving land. The affect it has on its inhabitants, its dangers, and its unyielding and ever changing realities are all together misunderstood by the characters as well as those involved with its real life past. In this way, the land itself represents the post-colonial subaltern state as a misunderstood condition where survival is not guaranteed and hope is hard to find.

Work Cited

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