

## Remapping the 'Bhatir Desh': Reflections on Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

Asis De

**Abstract:** The efflorescence of Anglophone narratives by the novelists of previously colonized countries of Asia and Africa in the last three decades addressing the issues of culture, language, citizenship, gender and most importantly identity, with regard to the impact of globalization and cosmopolitanism has garnered serious academic attention. In those narratives, the politico-physical, socio-cultural and mental boundaries are being repeatedly challenged and often successfully dismantled. In their novels, the fixed linearity of European frontiers is disrupted and cartography of cultural space becomes the basic for the artistic expression of the 'newer' identity.

This paper, using Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) as a case study argues that stable concepts of home and belonging, for several reasons, has become something unusual in this globalized world. Along with the phenomenal changes like international migration, multi-linguality and pervasive networking of digital media, societies are fast changing. Routes rather than roots are gaining primacy in the cultural imaginary: a 'remapping' is so relevant. This paper's contribution to scholarship lies in pointing out Ghosh's unique depiction of a multicultural space, which accommodates people of different world views in a place hitherto unattended by all sorts of critical, eco-critical, national and international consciousness. My endeavour also attempts to establish the view that within the discourses of history, culture and language, identity is not something essentialist, but 'a matter of becoming as well as being' (Hall: 1990).

In Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, language also takes a crucial role in questioning the hegemonic solidarity of 'Englishness'. Numerous Bengali words in English script float on the tide of the basic narrative in English, and the experience is unique to the English enabled educated readership. After the tide (also *The Hungry Tide*) is over, a remote region at the far end of Ganges Delta becomes visible - from every corner of the globe.

**Keywords:** *Identity, Cultural Space, Boundary, Globalization, Displacement, Diaspora and Translocation, Bangla Language and Words.*

### **Visiting the 'Bhatir Desh':**

#### **Reflections on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide***

*"...a questioning of the colonial past is intractably tied to the crisis of securing identity in an age of collapsing boundaries"*

-- Simon Gikandi<sup>1</sup>.

The efflorescence of Anglophone narratives by the novelists of previously colonized countries of Asia and Africa addressing the issues of culture, language, citizenship, gender and most importantly identity, with regard to the impact of globalization and cosmopolitanism has garnered serious academic attention in the last three decades. In those fictional narratives the politico-physical, socio-cultural and mental boundaries are being repeatedly challenged and often successfully dismantled. After the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, a new way of seeing at literary productions came out. As the subtitle says, the book reflects on the 'Western conceptions of the Orient'. Later this way of seeing at literature gets a solid foundation as thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire or Léopold Senghor and theorists like Gayatri C. Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Benedict Anderson formed a new school of thought as Postcolonial literary theory. Theorists like Bill Ashcroft see the term 'postcolonial' not as an exclusive one, rather as an attitude to see at literary productions as a discourse of power. The terms like 'Eurocentricism' or 'Eurocentric' have become less significant as the economic centre has been changed and countries like China, Japan or India in Asia are fast developing. In this situation, when the old world orders do not validate more, the English literary canon requires a re-organization.

To enter into the basic theoretical discussion, is to underline the first word of the

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conference theme: Remapping- a cartographic activity in repetition. A map is not only an objective technical representation of topographical or territorial realities of the world. Neither is it a mere scientific charting of the borders and boundaries of political realities of nation-states. A map is also "a cultural text: not one code but a collection of codes" (Harley, 1992: 238), an indispensable 'ideological' tool in the study of Human Geography, where different cultural and social values and beliefs are embedded. The 'ideology' of the map is not just in its image, but in its mode of production: the activity of mapping clearly deals with a language of power. For example, a nineteenth century 'political' map of the world shows a different power-discourse than a present one. In time of mapping, quite naturally, one should peep into Human Geography's history as a discipline. 'Remapping' is relevant when the old model of power-discourse is no more sufficient and valid, when a change is required in the 'traditional' mode of representation.

In the twentieth century, if the two World Wars stand as icon representations of the discourse of power, simultaneously the historical process of decolonization - the withdrawal of colonial power from different parts of Asia and Africa could be seen as another dimension of power-discourse. In just fifty years (from the 1940s to 1990s approximately) the political map of the world changed faster than any such period in human history. Again, after 1990s, the phenomenon named Globalization introduced an extraordinary transformation by initializing a potential increase in the transnationalization of economic and cultural life. So, the World Wars in the first half, the withdrawal of colonial powers from Asia and Africa in the second half, and the process of globalization (which some critics like to identify as neo-colonial activities of Capitalism) from the fag end of twentieth century till now have substantially reshaped not only the social, cultural and political constituencies, but also reminded the contemporary academy to make necessary changes in the cartographic presentation of knowledge: here, in the present case, the English literary canon.

English literary studies as a discipline is becoming increasingly globalized: its contemporary production and consumption no longer take place within discrete national boundaries of English speaking countries in Europe and America only, but unfold in a complex system of transnational exchanges (mainly economic and socio-cultural) characterized by the global flow of cultural products and commodities. Along with the phenomenal changes like international migration, multilinguality and pervasive networking of digital media, societies are fast changing. At this point of time, Doreen Massey

argues that one of the key political tasks before us is to forge a 'global sense of place', a map of meaning that adopts interconnectedness rather than separatism, routes rather than roots, as its foundation (Massey:1994).

For Stuart Hall, as for Massey, it means that we need to understand the way that 'culture' entails a politics of emplacement and displacement. To Hall, culture, identity and maps of meaning must always be understood in relation to geography:

*"...it has many different ways of 'being at home' - since it conceives of individuals as capable of drawing on different maps of meaning and locating them in different geographies at one and the same time-but it is not tied to one, particular place"* (Hall, 1995:207).

From this perspective, place does not simply presuppose a materiality of landscape but an understanding of the spatiality of politics emanating out of a complex interaction of history, socio-cultural environment and language. The idea of place as socio-cultural construct, in a way or other, provokes the political question of difference by constantly giving a reminder of the separation and also the hybrid interrelationship between the colonizer and the colonized in countries having a colonial history.

The consciousness of being in a country with the history of colonial past, writing from such a country, or even writing in the language of the colonizers - all contribute to stimulate the writers and artists to examine the present globalized world in terms of displacement and 'new' placement. Culturally speaking, globalization therefore offers a context to deal with the proliferation of the texts of English literature written in diasporic conditions, literatures that would otherwise be assimilated to a rather narrow, nationalist paradigm ('Afro-Asian', 'Afro-American' or 'Asian-American'). Simon Gikandi's argument seems to be quite illuminating:

*"While diverse writers on globalization and postcolonialism might have differing interpretations of the exact meaning of these categories ...they have at least two important points in common: they are concerned with explaining forms of social and cultural organization whose ambition is to transcend the boundaries of the nation-state, and they seek to provide new vistas for understanding cultural flows that can no longer be explained by a homogenous Eurocentric narrative of development and social change"* (Gikandi, 2011: 109).

The canons to which the fiction of the postcolonial world belongs, namely 'New

Literatures in English', therefore, negates the fixed linearity of European frontiers and a rather 'new' cartography of cultural space becomes the basic for the artistic expression of the 'newer' identity. The voice that its authors project seems to be a challenge to 'tradition' requiring a revolutionary critical vocabulary simply in order to be described (Fraser, 2000: 2).

This paper, using Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) as a case study argues that stable concepts of home and belonging, for several reasons, has become something unusual in this globalized world. Basically it is a two-part narrative (Part One-The Ebb: Bhatia and Part Two-The Flood: Jowar): though the first part is subdivided into 30 and the second part in 37 chapters without any numerical ordering. Each chapter has a title of its own: it is done probably to avoid the linearity of narration. The novel is set in the 'tide country', in the watery labyrinth of islets in the Ganges delta called the Sundarbans that lie on the easternmost coast of India. Ghosh's choice of the location is significant as "it is a region whose fishing folk easily traverse the imaginary boundaries of the modern nation-state"<sup>2</sup>. In this intermittently half-submerged archipelago, no border could divide "fresh water from salt, river from sea" (HT, 7), where lands rise only during 'bhati' (ebb-tide) thus naming the terrain 'Bhatir Desh'. From the historic period of the Mughal Empire in India this piece of land is known in this name but later changed its identity as the Sundarbans ('the beautiful forest') in the map of physical geography. The 'being' of the place remains the same, only it becomes identified in a different way: the focus shifts from the tide to the forest (a very common species of mangrove-the Sundari tree).

The novel begins with Kanai Dutt standing on a crowded south Kolkata railway platform named Dhakuria and watching Piyali Roy, 'a foreigner' standing on the same platform awaiting a local train in the same direction to Canning. Kanai, "a translator... and an interpreter as well, by profession" (HT, 10) in his own words, is heading for Lusibari to meet his aunt Nilima, who runs a charity trust (Badabon Trust) there. He is invited by his aunt to receive a diary left to him by his late uncle Nirmal, who was a headmaster in the local school and a Marxist intellectual. Piya's (Piyali Roy) journey to the tide country is part of her research and fieldwork on river dolphins: she is a cetologist. Kanai lives in Delhi and Piya has come from Seattle in the US. Two distant metropolises get linked with this peripheral rural location of 'Bhatir Desh'.

As multiple places-Kolkata, Delhi and Seattle intersect spatially for the sake of the

plot, so quite interestingly, the novel moves on three temporal strands: 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 map of the tide country starts changing after the Partition of 1947 and the birth of modern India: the first flush of refugees from East Pakistan at that time made the islands of tide country more populated; after the birth of modern Bangladesh in 1971, another flush made the situation quite different. The refugees were forcibly sent to the Dandakaranya camp in Madhya Pradesh (presently Chhattisgarh) which was basically a barren rocky region. As a group of refugees took a collective decision to return to West Bengal and the Sundarbans, political tension mounted high igniting possibilities of events like Morichjhapi massacre. So, the socio-cultural space of the Sundarbans changed according to the movement of history and political realities. The Charity Trusts, in the novel the Badabon Trust run by Nilima also acted considerably in changing the identity of the Sundarbans. From the 'Bhatir Desh', a land of mangroves and swamps, tigers, snakes and crocodiles to a rather utopian space of new civilization as found in Nirmal's diary: "*...there had been many additions, many improvements. Saltpans had been created, tubewells had been planted, water had been dammed for the rearing of fish... It was an astonishing spectacle-as though an entire civilization had sprouted suddenly in the mud.*"(190-191).

As the identity of the land was gradually changing, so were the people. Nirmal, as introduced by the narrator, a Marxist ideologue and a teacher of English at Ashutosh College in Calcutta comes to Lusibari with his wife Nilima, under serious threat of police action and takes the job of a school teacher. Being a believer in the theory of socialism he gets frustrated during the politico-historical event of the eviction of refugees from Morichjhapi in 1979, nearly after twenty years of his arrival. What pains him more, that at the time of this eviction massacre there was Left Front in the state power. Also Nilima, the rather practical lady who believes in community development remains unable to favour the refugees in crisis just to avoid any harassment by the government. The place and its history teach Nilima and she receives the lesson. What is really interesting that the event of Morichjhapi, as it was the most turbulent event at the end of the 1970s remains no more relevant in public memory after twenty years (as we see, Horen Naskar the only eyewitness living at present time narrative, shows no interest in the history of Morichjhapi eviction now and it seems that he wants to forget it). History lives in Nirmal's diary only. Ghosh's credit lies in the fact that he has

enlivened the 'fabula'(the raw event/s of history according to the Russian Formalists) of Morichjhapi eviction into a beautiful 'sjuzet'(the aesthetic discourse based on 'fabula').

However, after reaching Canning, in the present time narrative, the ways of Kanai and Piya part temporarily: Kanai heads towards Lusibari to meet Nilima and Piya goes to arrange a launch of the Forest Department for her field survey. Unfortunately, in the very first trip Piya realizes that the government functionaries accompanying her are not reliable enough and at this point of the narrative, she meets Fakir, a poor fisherman and his son Tutul on a small fishing boat quite incidentally. She pays off the government functionaries and stays in the boat of Fakir. At this point, the issue of language becomes a crucial one as Piya does not know Bengali or Fakir English. Still, they try to communicate with each other and Piya becomes able to make Fakir get the point that she wants to meet 'Mashima' at Lusibari. Fakir, being an inhabitant of Lusibari himself, takes Piya to the place of 'Mashima'. We see that this 'Mashima' is none but Nilima and like the rivers of the Sundarbans the ways of Piya and Kanai meet again.

Kanai starts accompanying Piya in her field survey and tries to learn about the Sundarbans from close. He also helps Piya by taking the role of "an interpreter". It seems, in the wave of Globalization, an interpreter and a cetologist work together to uphold some spatial aspects of the Sundarbans life: Piya with the river dolphin *Orcaella brevirostris* and Kanai, himself being a man of languages with the legend of the Bon Bibi. I find only a little difference between their directions only: Kanai comes here to enliven the histories of the land, whereas Piya comes to search for the possibilities of better life in the field of scientific research; Kanai moves to the Past, Piya aims to the Future. Sitting in the present, we enjoy the tale. Piya's journey at times reminds us of Melville's *Moby Dick* as Kanai also notes: "I thought you were going to lead me to my *Moby Dick*" (304). The boundaries of scientific research and literature dissolve into each other. It is worth noting that Piya herself comes from America, Melville's country. She uses global positioning system and binoculars to track the dolphins, takes chocolates and Ovaltin as food: though a bit incongruous, the American way of leading life, continues even in the Sundarbans. Actually, it is Ghosh's purpose to underline the ineffectiveness and porosity of the boundaries of different cultural spaces. When Piya speaks of her experience of the days in Phnom Penh in Cambodia, her 'routes' get focussed, not her 'root'. She seems to be a citizen of this green planet, not of any specific country or nation.



The cultural space embedded in the socio-economic life of the Sundarbans is an interesting area to explore: as Kanai translates the legend of the Bon Bibi (originally written in Bengali as 'Bonbibi Jahuranama' by Abdur Rahim and referred in detail in Nirmal's diary) for Piya in the novel, we realize that Ghosh himself is quite eager to introduce this ethnic cultural element to an Anglophone global readership. A strategic reversal is Ghosh's use of Rilke's poetry: the poems often become emblematic of the Sundarbans realities seen through the eyes of a leftist visionary like Nirmal. The employment of all these elements is characteristic of Ghosh's "narrative fusion of cultural and storytelling traditions which undermine categorization of what can be considered (or translated) as history" (Hoydis, 2011: 305). The history of Port Canning and the cyclones in the region, the biotope related information of the Royal Bengal Tiger-all contribute to the globalizing trend of paying attention to the 'environmental' categories along with 'political-cultural' categories (Mukherjee: 2006).

In *The Hungry Tide*, like his other novels, Ghosh enlivens history in a new time frame, with 'newer' significance and identity. Memory plays a vital role in picking up a past which is not quite dead. Memories are not mere depositories of fact; these constitute an active process by which meaning is created. Nirmal's notebook and partially the memories of his first visit in 1970, help Kanai to find the meaning of his stay at Lusibari. The rather caustic memories of her parents' conjugal life in her childhood abroad make Piya reactive and less tolerant to Bangla language as this is the 'language of quarrel' to her. Now for the sake of her research she needs to negotiate. It is again interesting to note that she does not translate the language herself. It is Kanai who translates the language for her and she only translates the cultural space when Kanai is not accompanying them and by doing this successfully communicates with the realities around.

Due to India's cultural diversity and multilinguality, translation becomes important in communication. Ghosh, probably with an intention to insist on the porousness of linguistic boundaries, uses too many Indian/Bangla words in English script in the narrative. Beginning with 'bindi', and 'ami Bangla janina' he inserts a flood of Bangla words in the narrative: 'Are moshai', 'Mashima', 'cha'ala', 'achol', 'mohona', 'maidan', 'Mej-da' 'badh', 'bagh' 'puja' 'shush' 'biri' 'bauleys' 'babu' 'gaamcha' 'bhata', 'bhatirdesh'. Expressions like 'Kanai -re' or 'Jongolkortegeslam' touch on the intimate depiction of the local cultural space. Ghosh also uses some Bangla slangs used irrespective of class identity: during the Kanai's sudden collision with Nirmal at College Street, and



the event of Fakir's leaving Kanai in a deserted island these usages could be found. This place, with its own history and politics, own language and culture, its own human and non-human cohabitants stays in its own way. Ghosh only translates the realities of the 'Bhatir Desh' in an aesthetic discourse.

In the title of this paper, I've used the term 'Bhatir Desh' with a clear intention to underline the necessity of putting this novel in a map that includes literatures on Indian realities. For the Bangla speakers, 'Bhatir Desh' is a more intimate term than 'Tide Country'. In this context, it should be noted that in 2009, the Kolkata-based renowned publishing house 'Ananda Publishers' has published a Bangla translation of *The Hungry Tide* under the title *Bhatir Desh*. The translator Mr. Achintyarup Roy, a journalist by profession, takes "a somewhat more impressionistic approach" which was appreciated by Ghosh himself<sup>3</sup>. The sell record of the Bangla Translation in West Bengal and Bangladesh is as high as the English original. There is no reason to think that the buyers of the Bangla translation are not linguistically and culturally competent with the English original, or not well conversant in English. Actually, this novel is too close to the heart of the Bengali readers. In a letter to the translator, Ghosh makes a significant comment: "When I was writing this book I often felt that I had translated these words from Bangla into English"<sup>4</sup>.

In connection with Ghosh's comment, I'd like to refer to one incident: in the Book Launch Program of *The Hungry Tide* in Kolkata in 2004, the eminent poet, novelist and literary personality Sunil Gangopadhyay made a significant comment about the novel: "Are eta to Bangla boi. Ingrejitelekha!" ("Look! This is a Bengali novel, written in English only!":my translation)<sup>5</sup>. To me, Ghosh's novel, in a way, comes close to the modern Bengali novel rather than a modern English one. To quote Prof. Supriya Chaudhury in this context: "...while international modernism appears to be inextricably linked to the city, the modern Bengali novel is certainly not exclusively urban or metropolitan" (Chaudhury, 2012: 120). *The Hungry Tide* uses as its settings, not Kolkata, nor Delhi or Seattle, but the Indian part of the Sundarbans-the peripheral land of islets covered by mangrove forests and swamps, co-inhabited by rural islanders, tigers and other animals of land and water. In every respect, this tide country or 'Bhatir Desh'-a universe in itself epitomizes subalternity, a politically rich motif in present day Indian Anglophone literature.

Ghosh entitles the last chapter as 'Home: An Epilogue', where he broods on the concept of 'Home' quite seriously. I'd like to cite the concluding conversation between Nilima and Piya to make my point clear:

*'Did I hear you right?' she said, directing a startled glance at Piya. 'Did you say "home"?''*

... ..

*'You know, Nilima,' she said at last, 'for me, home is where the Orcaella are: so there's no reason why this couldn't be it.'*

*Nilima's eyes opened wide and she burst into laughter. 'See, Piya,' she said. 'That's the difference between us. For me home is wherever I can brew a pot of good tea.'*

At this utopic end, as Nilima brews a pot of 'Darjeeling tea' (HT.399), we find Ghosh to put a seal of Indianness above everything: the Himalayan region of Darjeeling gets connected at once with a remote region at the far end of Ganges Delta. It seems to be quite interesting that the novel ends with the word 'tea': as the flavour of the globally famous Darjeeling tea permeates everywhere and ignites a desire even in the reader's mind to get a cup of it, s/he remembers that the origin of this drink is, after all, Asian.

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#### **Notes and References:**

1. Gikandi's idea of national boundary is non-essentialist. These words are quoted from his epoch making book *Maps of Englishness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p.229).
2. Quoted from the Review of *The Hungry Tide* by Prof. Supriya Choudhury: available on the 'Reviews'-page of Amitav Ghosh's website ([www.amitavghosh.com](http://www.amitavghosh.com)). In this review, Supriya Choudhury appreciates Ghosh's sense of place in the very first sentence: "Amitav Ghosh's greatest gift as a writer may well be his sense of place".
3. At the end of the Bangla translation, the translator Achintyarup Roy quotes an excerpt from a letter from the author. In that excerpt, it is clear that Ghosh certifies in favour of the translation. Reference: Bhatir Desh, Trans. Achintyarup Roy, Kolkata: Ananda, 2009, p.376. Print.

4. Ghosh makes this comment in a letter to the translator Achintyarup Roy, and that excerpt is printed at the end of the Bangla Translation of *The Hungry Tide*. Reference: Bhatir Desh, Trans. Achintyarup Roy, Kolkata: Ananda, 2009, p.376. Print.
5. In a recent Literary Meet organized by The Publishers and Book Sellers' Guild in Kolkata International Book Fair in 2013 (scheduled on 2nd February at 6:30 p.m.) Ghosh himself referred to this incident after looking at a painting of Sunil Gangopadhyay, who passed away just a couple of months ago.

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