



AN EXPLORATION OF ELITE AND SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S 'THE HUNGRY TIDE'

Dr Upendra Kumar Dwivedi, Sr. Assistant Professor, Department of English, D.A.V. College, Kanpur

Abstract

In the postcolonial world, the issues of communication and equality between the once-colonial people of the West and the previously colonized peoples of the Eastern and Third World are ever-present. Without effective communication and mutual respect existing between the two parties, discrimination, and exploitation finds an opportunity to manifest. It is therefore essential to form connections and relationships across the division of the rich and the poor. This research paper delves into the complicated depiction of elite and subaltern perspectives in Amitav Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide', a singular set in the ecologically and culturally precise Sundarbans area of India. How Ghosh addresses socio-financial disparity, environmental conservation, and cultural war can be explored through an investigation into the contrasting experiences and viewpoints of the novel's characters. It follows Piyali Roy, an Indian-American marine biologist, and Kanai Dutt, a rich businessman from Delhi, as representatives of elite elegance. Their interactions with the Sundarbans' surroundings and its nearby inhabitants display their privileged positions and regularly detached engagement with the area's complexities. In juxtaposition, the subaltern perspective is embodied with the aid of Fokir, a neighbourhood fisherman whose lifestyle and understanding are deeply intertwined with the natural rhythms and dangers of the Sundarbans. Fokir's experiential wisdom and precarious life spotlight the cruel realities confronted through the indigenous community, underscoring problems of marginalization and survival.

This paper also analyses how Ghosh's narrative method correctly bridges these disparate worlds, providing a nuanced portrayal of the strength dynamics and interdependencies between the elite and subaltern characters. The novel's engagement with environmental concerns is huge because it follows out the lines of tension between medical conservation efforts helmed by outsiders and lived experiences of the nearby populace. By opening up space for both views, Ghosh makes his case for a holistic and sensitive approach to the environment and social



problems, paying heed to the need to embed indigenous understanding in tackling socio-monetary inequalities. Through an essential examination of person improvement, thematic factors, and narrative shape, this paper also pursues to explain how 'The Hungry Tide' no longer reflects the complexities of the Sundarbans however also serves as a broader observation on global issues of environmental justice and socio-monetary disparity. The findings underscore the need for inclusivity and mutual admiration in dealing with conservation and human development challenges that are intertwined.

Keywords: *Elite, Subaltern, Postcolonialism, Social hierarchy, Power dynamics, Environmentalism, Cultural identity, Marginalization, Indigenous communities, Colonialism, Ecocriticism, & Socioeconomic disparity*

Amitav Ghosh is the most renowned of the Indian writers of troubled narratives that intertwine history, lifestyle, and politics, reflecting the problematic postcolonial identification. His literary importance lies in his capacity to traverse distinctive time durations and geographies, by growing a wealthy tapestry that challenges readers to rethink historical and current issues. Bengali refugees displaced during the partition of Bengal in 1947 and Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971 eventually settled in the Sundarbans and faced challenges associated with these events. In the 1940s and 1950s, some slept in inhospitable surroundings while others sought refuge in the Calcutta countryside. Many fled the harsh conditions in the Dandakaranya jungle camp. In 1978, a group established a self-sufficient community on the island of Morichzhabi, with towns, schools, markets, etc. that show flexibility and adaptability.

'The Hungry Tide' is a compelling novel that intricately weaves collectively non-public and political narratives set in the Sundarbans, a far away and treacherous region of India. Sundarbans is a remote archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, which serves as a unique backdrop for exploring small, beautiful figures. It is the story of Piya Roy, an American marine biologist of Indian origin, who reaches Sundarbans to conduct research on the rare Irrawaddy dolphins. Her travel coincides with that of Kanai Dutt, who travels across the land to decipher a mysterious notebook left behind by his deceased uncle, Nirmal. The narrative additionally and prominently proves Fokir, an illiterate but knowledgeable fisherman, whose profound connection to the Sundarbans becomes central to the unfolding drama. Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans is not only a setting but also a symbolic embroidery of natural beauty and



danger. Through characters such as Pia Roy, an American-Indian pediatrician, and Kanai Dutt, a Delhi translator of note, Ghosh explores divergent worldviews, creates aversion to struggle, while underlining variety for the residents. As Kanai comments:

It struck him that for all its squalor and poverty, this village had the same form of completeness and autonomy that he had discovered in the Sundarbans (P. 102).

The novel also highlights the voices of subaltern characters, such as Fokir, an illiterate but intelligent fisherman with a deep connection to land and water. Fokir betrays a deep knowledge and has a great respect for Nature, which Ghosh examines deeply in the novel. The novel also explores issues of marginalization and socio-economic inequality by providing contrasting views. It shows how elites and immigrants coexist in the same physical space but experience radically different realities. This sheds light on broader social, political, and environmental issues.

By framing the story of a historical expedition or placing historiography next to the story, the issue of representation is at stake, operating and speaking from certain subjective positions, leaving almost no scope for stitching big narratives together. 'The Hungry Tide' is a postmodern novel, that balances all its storylines, and the multifaceted rendition of the history of the Morichjhapi Revolution has been under severe criticism in the past and has raised controversy regarding subaltern studies.

The term "Subaltern" refers to an oppressed class in the historical framework of hegemonic power while the terms "subalterns" refer to an oppressed class that is no longer connected to industrial labour. The term "subaltern" was borrowed from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, in 1971, where the term "Subalterno" is used as a euphemism for the proletariat, as stated in the Encyclopaedia of Postcolonial Studies. Thus, subaltern history is 'history from the below,' offering a voice to people whose histories have been omitted. When subaltern research first emerged in India, it was to contest the then-existing historiography of Indian nationalism, which gave no place to official and elitist versions of the movement struggles of the poor and the outcast.

First to be considered will be the writings of Edward Said, Fanon, and Spivak concerning colonial dominance of colonized peoples, subaltern voices, and postcolonial theory. As Said



says: “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self “(Said 3). The dominance that the West assumes over the East is in turn reflected by the superiority that the cosmopolitan assumes over the countryman, as this statement reflects. It is this kind of relationship that is represented by Ghosh between his characters Kanai and Fokir; it is the strict Indian caste system that divides them. Kanai belongs to a higher caste than Fokir, and this distinction mimics colonial power over colonized subjects. The Hungry Tide in its entirety constantly comes back to this subaltern relationality; the educated, westernized reader responds to both the Western and Eastern elite characters and the impoverished Eastern Indian characters within the novel, and the elite Western and Eastern characters respond to the impoverished Indian characters and in turn the reader and the characters respond to the animals in the novel - namely the tigers - and adding one more thread to this relational web, both the rural poor and the tigers all have to potential to turn against their elite oppressors. All these inter-relationships and relations are multi-layer and are always in changing combinations of power and understanding.

Where the subaltern is facing the cosmopolitan and is at the mercy of the metropolitan power, the poor of India, as described in the novel, come face to the authority values and language of the elite.

Thus, it references colonial dominance over colonized peoples, but it also serves as an exemplar of how the country views the city: inferior, uneducated, and, ultimately, inconsequential. It is the will of the cosmopolitan world that the country is forced to yield to, and the city that imposes its rule over the rural confronting it with its metropolitan language and lifestyle, primarily in the relationship between Kanai and Fokir that this hierarchy gets displayed in The Hungry Tide. The city dwellers view the country dwellers with suspicion and have the notion that they cannot make enough informed choices concerning their lives and therefore require persuasion and regulation. In apartheid, the same value held of the East: under colonial rule, it was assumed that the East embodied a lack of reason and was therefore in need of the supply of reason that the West held. This dominance is portrayed in The Hungry Tide through the treatment applied by the authorities on the people of the Tide country; according to them, these people are: ‘too poor to matter’. They are therefore disregarded in favour of the



desires of the West and the conservation of the tide country is carried out with no regard to the wellbeing of the people that live there.

In the following lines, from Fanon's work, Spivak discusses how to allow subaltern voices to become a material force in resistance to the strength of colonial and elite powers. In building from Fanon, the subaltern must confront 'the language of the civilizing nation' 14 whilst constructing ways in which to speak back. As will be explained: 'the term 'subaltern' is applied to signify the many different peoples who did not constitute the colonial elite. These could be "the small rural gentry, poor landlords, wealthy peasants, and upper-middle-class peasants" (Barry 109). In the case of 'The Hungry Tide', the subalterns are the rural poor of West Bengal. When such poor Eastern people inhabit a world that is dominated by the West, the question needs to be addressed regarding how these voiceless people can have their voices heard and their opinions counted for anything of importance, as Spivak observes:

But we are now, I hope, at the following question: On the other side of the international division of labour from socialized capital, in and beyond the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak? (Spivak 283)

For Spivak, the concern is that the subaltern is being politically and socially silenced, an injustice that must be resolved. She suggests some resolve exists in the narrative that elite Indians can provide on behalf of the subaltern Indians, but this is still not sufficient:

Certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other. But one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous (Spivak 284).

Subaltern studies, particularly the paintings of Spivak, emphasize the difficulty of representing subaltern voices inside dominant frameworks. In her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak argues that subalterns are frequently spoken for by way of others, rather than being allowed to articulate their very own reports. Ghosh's narrative strategy aligns with this critique by providing a platform for Fokir's voice, albeit filtered via the perspectives of Piya and Kanai. This narrative choice highlights the inherent demanding situations in bridging the gap between elite and subaltern reports.



Furthermore, the ancient context of the Morichjhãpi incident inside the novel serves as a vital backdrop for expertise in the systemic marginalization of subaltern organizations. Ghosh uses the individual of Nirmal, whose notebook recounts the tragic events, to foreground the political and social injustices faced by the refugees. This ancient layering enriches the novel's exploration of subaltern narratives, supplying a stark reminder of the results of elite indifference and country violence.

One of the imperative themes in 'The Hungry Tide' is the conflict between modernity and subculture. Piya and Kanai represent the elite, urban, and knowledgeable segments of society, bringing with them scientific understanding and metropolitan sensibilities. In evaluation, Fokir and the nearby population embody traditional wisdom and an intrinsic bond with Nature. This dichotomy is obvious when Kanai displays his surroundings.

The elite narratives are embodied via characters like Piya Roy and Kanai Dutt. Piya represents the voice of clinical authority and modernity. Her perspective is usual via her education and upbringing within the United States, which makes her distance herself from the neighbourhood realities of the Sundarbans and Kanai, in addition to embodying the city. His initial notion of the Sundarbans is tinged with a sense of superiority and detachment. This is obvious whilst he muses:

It struck him that for all its squalor and poverty, this village had the identical kind of completeness and autonomy that he had located in the Sundarbans (P. 102).

This quote highlights the contrasting perceptions of the same environment by way of those from special social strata.

Contrasting these elite views are the subaltern voices, the most considerably represented by Fokir, an illiterate fisherman, whose deep expertise of the Sundarbans is rooted in lived revel in instead of formal training. Fokir's connection to his environment is intuitive and holistic, a stark contrast to Piya's clinical detachment. This is poignantly captured within the passage wherein Ghosh writes:

Fokir did not go searching. His eyes were fixed on the water as though he had been studying an eBook. His attention become so complete that it seemed not possible to assume he may be conscious of anything else. (P. 172).



Fokir's attitude is emblematic of the subaltern narrative, which frequently remains underrepresented in mainstream discourse. Thus, 'The Hungry Tide' engages deeply with the subject matters of elite and subaltern narratives, reflecting broader scholarly discussions in postcolonial and subaltern studies.

There is a great role of Gramsci's concept of sovereignty in Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide' that can be used to understand the complex interactions between elites and minorities, as well as their worldviews. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony refers to the dominant group's cultural, ideological, and moral leadership over subordinate groups.

The characters of Piya Roy and Kanai Dutt portray protagonists who focus on education, science, and urban curiosities. Piya, a marine biologist who wants to study Irrawaddy dolphins, takes a scientific mind to the people of Sundarban. Her approach reflects a hegemonic discourse of scientific rationality and conservation, which often ignores or undermines the traditional environmental knowledge of local communities. This dynamic is evident when Piya and Fokir's interactions reveal an initial inability to fully appreciate her understanding of the environment. Ghosh writes, "Piya found herself looking at the water through Fokir's eyes; The sight was so different from what he knew that he couldn't help but wonder" (P. 172). Piya's shock here suggests a momentary breakdown of her authoritarian worldview as she begins to realize the validity of Fokir's knowledge. Kanai's behavior further illustrates the influence of the authoritarianism of urban educational elites. His initial disdain for the local village community reflects his internalization of strong cultural values that prioritized intellectual and financial capital over indigenous knowledge.

This village, for all its pollution and poverty, has the same fullness and freedom that he found in the beautiful forest, speaks Kanai. (P. 102)

This observation underscores his detached, almost pro-colonial view of the way hegemonic ideologies establish social and economic regimes. Thus, Gramsci's concept of sovereignty also helps to contextualize the historical context of the Morichjhapi case, where refugees were forcibly removed from the Sundarbans Narrated by Nirmal's notebook.

In 'The Hungry Tide', Ghosh illustrates the perspective of protagonists through characters like Nilima Bose, whose role and actions shape narrative and power structures more in the



novel. Founded by, Nirmal's wife, Nilima Bose, the Badabon Trust embodies an elite mentality of progress and change. Her efforts to bring development and healthcare to the impoverished areas of the Sundarbans underscore her commitment to social justice. But her methods and framework often reflect the limitations and biases of a high worldview. Nilima's approach to development and support is centred around modern and rational principles, emphasizing structured interventions rather than traditional skills and practices. This is evident in the clinics and schools as she established the institutions. They are symbolic structures of the elites' reliance on knowledge and structured, standardized care. Her interaction with the community is characterized by a mixture of empathy and authority. She does so by conflating a paternalistic disturbance of her own place in the elite with a strong sense of authority. This is especially evident in her treatment of Kanai, who invites him to the Sundarban, reflecting her belief in the power of educated individuals to bring about change. As she tells Kanai, "I need someone like you, to be able to read and write and understand the outside world" (P. 59). This line highlights her reliance on the skills and opinions of elites to effect change, reinforcing the idea that progress is driven by those with education and resources.

This analysis highlights the importance of including postcolonial perspectives in order to fully appreciate the nexus of elite and colonial perspectives in shaping narratives and power structures within the novel, suggesting that they can subaltern voices could be marginalized.

In 'The Hungry Tide', Ghosh also intricately weaves a look at elites and colonists, highlighting their interactions, conflicts, and occasional cooperation. Characters like Piya Roy and Kanai Dutt especially represent the main character's point of view in the novel. Educated in the United States, Piya was a marine biologist from India, with a global scientific and global outlook. Her early approach to forest beauty is based on her knowledge and Western education, with an emphasis on first-hand observation and rational analysis. This idea emerges when she reflects on her scientific mission: "Piya had come to study baboons; He was there to gather information, not to investigate human suffering" (P. 129). This throws light on her professional detachment, and the limitations imposed by mainstream scientific discourse on full engagement with humans and complex environments the emphasis. Kanai Dutt represents a new dimension of elite perspective. Well-Educated and well-versed, he initially looks at the Sundarbans through the coloured glasses by the cause of his urban upbringing and psychology. Often, what he



ordered, reflects a degree of deviation from his culture, as shown by his attitude toward the village:

This village, with all its dirt and poverty afterwards, it had the same completeness and freedom that he had seen in the beautiful forest. (P. 102).

Interactions between major and minor characters often create conflict and tension in the story. The novel illustrates how the hegemony of elite discourses can marginalize and ignore the subtle realities of life. This is exemplified in Nilima Bose's deliberate but sometimes paternalistic efforts to bring development to the lush forest, which can inadvertently reinforce existing structures of power in postcolonial thinking so, how conceptions of domination, ideology, structures and limit subaltern agency and representation. Thus, the novel offers a compelling portrait of elite-colonial interactions, highlighting the intersections of power, knowledge, and identity in a post-colonial context through its characters.

Language also plays an important role in the presentation of dominant sub-ideas in the novel. Prominent figures like Piya Roy and Kanai Dutt often speak in the language of their urban education. Ghosh uses various narrative techniques to portray the minor characters, using language, images, and symbols to represent their point of view in the novel. These techniques are not alike. It, not only enriches the story, but also adds power, dynamics, and cultural identity. The representation of small, and dominant ideas further enhances the imagery and symbolism in the novel.

Epilogising Elite and subaltern perspective, Ghosh deftly explores the interactions between elites and minorities, crafting a comprehensive narrative that reveals broader social structures and power dynamics in the novel. Through characters like Fokir, who has a deep connection with the people of Sundarban based on personal experiences and spiritual beliefs, Ghosh challenges the marginalization of immigrants and highlights their resilience. The novel's analysis of elite and colonial ideologies resonates with postcolonial theory, providing insights into how ideologies support social structures. Ghose's narrative strategies, including language, imagery, and symbolism, argue that the discourses of elite's shape knowledge and constrain new ideas.

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