

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND A READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S THE HUNGRY TIDE

Ms. Sarika Deshpande

Ph. D Research Scholar

Department of English, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai

Abstract:

*History has been a crucial theme of the Indian English novels since the first quarter of the twentieth century. This theme gained more gravity in the post-colonial Indian English fiction wherein history not only emerges as a contested space but also a major preoccupation of the novel. However, the postcolonial writer depicts history through many discourses and documents. The present paper undertakes an endeavour to explore ways in which history is used in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2008). The paper tries to explore the novel which emerges as a historical novel and identify its characteristics. Further the paper investigates how the novelist uses the historical event refugees' issue in Bangladesh during 1978-1979 as the backdrop of the narrative and aligns it with the novel's characters, plots, setting, form and its themes. An attempt has been made to highlight how history is one of the main focalizers in the novel as it explores the environmental, cultural and political history of the Sundarbans. Lastly, the paper tries to explore the relevance of such a mode of narrating the history in the 21st century.*

Keywords:

history, postcolonialism, narrative, cultural history
Historical Consciousness and A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

The literature of erstwhile colonies engages with the questions of history in its core. Postcolonial fiction engages deeply with the blend of fiction and history to interrogate the given history and to propose alternate histories that would enable the readers to consider the nation or a community in a different perspective. The history conceived in postcolonial historical novels is often that of the minorities, immigrants and the marginalized. Such a construction of history facilitates a serious interpretation of the past and asks a few pertinent questions about what the given history represents and what it excludes. History also often emerges in a postcolonial narrative as an allegory of the present socio-political conditions. In this sense, history provides an oblique context to make commentaries on the present time. The two-fold aspect of present with past provide a structural imperative to major postcolonial novels. Homi. K. Bhabha in his notable

essay "Representation and Postcolonial Text" maintains that historicism and realism are necessary for each other though such a link has been overemphasized in imperialist discourses. He recommends a kind of historical fiction that would question "the representation of history which operates in terms of fixity and closure" and those "perpetual familiar stereotypes". He maintains that an "open and fluid portrayal of history permits fictional accounts to subvert and break up such petrified notions" (Bhabha 96). What Bhabha points out is the possibility of achieving an interpretation of history and allegorical realism with the help of postcolonial historical novel.

In his recent study solely focused on Postcolonial historical novel, Hamish Dalley surveys how genre of historical fiction alters its nature in the hand of Postcolonial novelists. He aptly observes that though in theory, postcolonial subversive stands invite postmodern techniques and notions of deconstructed history, the project of postcolonial historical novel does not entirely reject the concept of plausibility of history:

As is well known, professional history was challenged in the 1970s and '80s by the postmodern or 'linguistic' turn, which drew attention to the tropological structures that shape the representation of the past, and implied – or argued openly in some cases – that historical knowledge was a language-effect rather than description of past reality (Jenkins; LaCapra 'Rethinking Intellectual History'; Levi-Strauss; White Metahistory). While it is certainly a misreading to suggest that the postmodern turn implied that anything goes in history, many historians and readers did worry that the focus on textuality rather than plausibility made it more difficult to challenge false accounts of the past. (Dalley, 2014, p-8)

In this way the rubric of historic realism plays important role in the construction of postcolonial novel. Especially in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, one can find the above imperative in its aesthetic form.

Amitav Ghosh qualifies as a postcolonial historiographic novelist who inserts the histories of minorities and adds interesting historiographic notes in his novels. His novel, *The Hungry Tide* is laced with historical and counter-historical details that deal with postcolonial historical consciousness. It has interwoven in its narrative the history of Sundarbans ecosystem, the history of conservation in India and an account of Morchhapi Massacre of 1979 as the resultant refugee crisis. These historical details are narrated through various point of views and mechanisms, implicating the significance of historiographic questions. The use of the personal journal, memories of the characters and mythological and folkloric accounts where history has been fossilized in oral tradition are some of the mechanisms intertwined with the quest of contemporary characters. Thus, not being explicitly set in historical time, *The Hungry Tide* brings questions regarding history and its representation at the center of the novel. Set in narrow geographical territory of Sundarban, the novel describes events of short time-span from Piya and Kanai's arrival in Sundarban and events in their life occurred in Sundarban till the death of Fokir in a storm and Piya's and others rescue from it. In this short span of time novel includes events revealing various relationships among the characters. The discovered notebook of Nirmal which contains narration of the events also occurred in brief time-frame of massacre in Morchijanpi 30 years ago acts as a shadowing past which places the contemporary characters in continuity of the history of Sundarban. The narrative structure of the novel implies two parallel levels of time – where events closer to narrative time forms one layer of dramatic actions unfolding within limited span of time. The events related to the marine researcher Piya, translator Kania and local resident Fokir comprise one level of plot of the novel while accounts from Nirmal's notebook and Horen's and Kusum's memories and tales narrated by Fokir shape another level of lost history of the 1970s. The novel keeps these two-time frames always in interaction with each other. With this structure contemporary events have been evaluated through the gaze of past and past have been constructed and conceptualized according to the urgencies of the present. Thus, history becomes a focalizing agent in the novel.

The third person narrative and changing focalizations place Kanai and Piya as a twin protagonist in the novel while accounts of the notebook of Nirmal provides a third imperative to the narrative. The novel opens with the accidental contact between two contemporary characters –

Piya and Kanai who are interested in certain aspects of the past. Piya as a biologist is interested in history of marine mammals – Irrawaddy Dolphins and their changing habitats while Kanai is trying to retrieve the childhood memories of Sundarban along with his uncle's notebook which contains crucial accounts from the past. Fokir provides the fourth important point of view in the narrative who inherently possesses traditional wisdom and knowledge about Sundarbans as a unique habitat where mythologies and ecologies interact with each other. The narrative moves in non linear ways back and forth into past and present. The dramatic events occur in the life of these four characters and minor characters which provide a narrative frame in which events from the history has been inserted occasionally. But these historical accounts are not simply revelation of any secrets as in popular narratives but they play a crucial role in the understanding of the totality of Sundarban and impact of nation state on it. The ecological disasters, depletion of the animal habitats and a violent rift created between nature and human are all generated effects of expansion of the capitalist modernity by the West through colonies. His project tries to set a responsibility of these catastrophes of colonial history. In *The Hungry Tide*, through the chronicle account of utopian village Morchijapaji, the novel tries to bring an alternative model of society where answer for these catastrophes can be realized. But following the colonial legacy, the state apparatus in Postcolonial India is always against such a utopian social experiment and set ups. The theme of the novel comprises this utopia and its melancholic end.

The three types of historical consciousness interacting with each other in the structure of *The Hungry Tide* provides a ground for characterization also. The characters like Piya and Kania share contemporary modern world view and their sense of history limits themselves into certain aspect of the past. For instance, Piya is initially only interested in conservation project for endangered Dolphins. Her environmental concerns are not informed by actual socio-political problems which come along with shared habitat among animals and human being. On the contrary, Kanai is affiliated to Sundarbans with his childhood memories and Nirmal's notebook where human endeavour of structuring society has importance. The novel further explicitly leads towards this basic contrast between environmentalist and humanist where one has to choose either human centeredness and modernity or conservation and environmentalism. Both are the prime examples of modern historical

consciousness. Secondly, the historical outlook derived from Nirmal's notebook and his affiliation to revolutionary events in Morchipanji village provide another direction from which understanding of history could be sensed. Here, the experiment of formation of the refugee village based on egalitarian principles which Nirmal finds very close to Marxist imagination of society carries a force of revolutionary historical consciousness where conventional notions of capitalist bureaucratic hierarchical state have been rejected and active intervention of human action to create a just society comes to forefront. This two historical consciousness are somewhat representatives of left and right political views of 20th century. With these two modern perspectives, the novel artistically invents and insert third type of historical consciousness. In modern sense, one could not tag it as a "historical" in its strict sense. The character, Fokir is a representative of such premodern world view where history is preserved in its mythical form. He possesses ample of the traditional knowledge regarding the nature and other phenomena surrounding Sundarbans. He is also a carrier of oral cultural history which metaphorically becomes untranslatable for modern mind. There are certain instances in the narrative where Fokir's authenticity of his knowledge about Sundarbans is not recognized because of his lower status. In one of the dramatic events, the narrator describes Kanai's psyche with a subtle commentary on modern middle class which is nurtured under colonial education:

Suddenly the blood rushed to Kanai's head and obscenities began to pour from his mouth: 'Shala, banchod, shuorer bachcha.' His anger came welling up with an atavistic explosiveness, rising from sources whose very existence he would have denied: the master's suspicion of the menial; the pride of caste; the townsman's mistrust of the rustic; the city's antagonism to the village. He had thought that he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past, but the violence with which they came spewing out of him now suggested that they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve. (Ghosh, 2010, p-326)

All the three understandings about the world and history interact with each other in dramatic pursuit of eventful narration in the novel. As events unfold the ideological conflict between these three forces gets intensified.

As said earlier, identity, environment and colonialism are the three major determining thematic concerns in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. Especially, In *The Hunger Tide*, the blend of postcolonial agenda with an environmental concern is explicitly observed. The search for alternative political model of society which is experimented in Morchipanji village and its brutal massacre in 1978-79 by the state-sponsored forces, signify how colonialism remains a powerful force which restricts all such search for different societal models. As the novel hints environmental and political castrophy, both are the different sides of the same coin of colonialism. The loss of authenticity of traditional cultural knowledge is also symbolized through the character of Fokir and his death at the end of the novel. Thus, historical consciousness and postcolonial agenda shape the thematic premise of the novel.

In classical historical novel, confrontation with given historical consciousness plays a crucial role in the formation of the narrative. Harry Shaw, in his classical study of historical novel, states that historical novel tries to fulfill two types of probability, one is of general knowledge about history or an outer world depicted in historical novel and the other contains other types of probability where logic of novelistic structure plays a central role. The events also must be represented in a way that could be probable in the constructed story world of the novel. This classical probability parameter has been transformed in plausibility parameter in the discussion of Hamish Dalley who emphasizes how postcolonial historical novels questions given history but not the narratability of history. He argues that postcolonial agendas of rejection of given history leads the postcolonial novelist to invent a structure where alternative realistic principles gain more importance. These novelists tend to invent and insert other ways of narrating history through the historical consciousness of marginalized characters and subaltern subjects. And thus, historicity and historical consciousness alter the very structure of genre of historical fiction. One finds such a postcolonial structural alteration in *The Hungry Tide* with the multiple historical outlooks of Piya, Kanai, Nirmal and Fokir blend and clash.

The above discussion about Postcolonial historical novel finds its relevance in the analysis of the novel *The Hungry Tide* as it invites principles of historical novel subtly into its structure. Though the larger part of *The Hungry Tide* is composed of contemporary setting and historical events used as random interventions, the novel uses historical

consciousness as an apparatus on which entire events revolve around. The two parts of *Jowar* and *Bhatta*, the ebb and tide, symbolize cyclical notion of time where past and present intertwine and interact with each other in larger totality of life.

References: -

- Bhabha, Homi K. 1984 "Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism." *The Theory of Reading*. Ed. Frank Gloversmith. Brighton, Harvester Press, Sussex.
- Dalley, Hamish. 2014 *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory and the Representation of Contested Past*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Ghosh, Amitav. 2010 *The Hungry Tide*. Harper Collins, United Kingdom.
- Shaw, Harry. 1983 *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and his Successors*. Cornell University Press, Ithica and London.