Journal of Namibian Studies, 33 (2023) : 6567-6574 ISSN: 2197-5523 (online)

The Layers And Dimensions Of Diaspora In Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

Ramanuj Konar

Assistant Professor of English Sarat Centenary College,
Dhaniakhali, Hooghly, WB.

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to interrogate and the depiction of the different layers and dimensions of the diasporic identity by Amitav Ghosh's novel, The Hungry Tide. While doing so, this paper also questions the validity of the straightforward notion of diaspora as being related to the event of migration outside the boundary of one's own home nation.

KEYWORDS Diaspora, Home, Nation, Migration, Local Diaspora

Introduction

'Diaspora' […] has come to mean any sizeable community of a particular nation or region living outside its own country and sharing some common bonds that give them an ethnic identity and consequent bonding. (Emphasis mine, Sharma xi)

The concept of diaspora is generally associated with displacement or dispersals, travels or journeys – usually cross-country. In the next few pages I will focus on Piya, Kanai – two characters in Ghosh's The Hungry Tide – and also on the Morichjhapi people who, after the independence of East Pakistan (Bangladesh now), migrated to the Sundarbans. This will bring out the departures from the traditional notion of diaspora in Ghosh's characters.

Piya, an Indo-American cetologist, comes to the Sundarbans purely on the professional purpose of studying river dolphins. Least of an Indian diasporic identity, she bears not even a single patch of Indian culture on her, except her name. She does not even know Bengali and remembers how her father took utmost pain in building up a non-Indian identity in her: "[…] neither her father nor her mother had ever thought to tell her about any

aspect of her Indian 'heritage' that would have held her interest" (95). In the novel Moyna always refers to her as 'the American'. At the first sight it also occurred to Kanai that "[…] she was not an Indian, except by descent. […] she was a foreigner; it was stamped in her posture" (3). She is completely an outsider to the Sundarbans as she has always been to the other places she travelled. Conforming to the notion of diaspora, she has been literally on a transit since she took up the project on river dolphins. But she contradicts with and departs from the diasporic notion in retaining her monolithic American identity and resisting hyphenated diasporic hybridity.

This resistance can be traced back to her days when she stayed at Kratie in eastern Cambodia. Her relationship there with Rath failed and her analysis of that situation made her withdraw herself from 'encountered communities' (Brah 196):

> You're always going to find yourself in some small town where there's never anyone to talk to but this guy who knows English. And everything you tell him will be all over the town before you've said it. (314)

Her travel is like a carriage of memories of her home back in Seattle. Her memories about the places she has travelled are mostly comprised of her work on dolphins and have the least space for the peoples and societies of those places. When she is with Fokir, and does not have any language to communicate, she rescues herself from loneliness by going back to memories.

At the end of the novel she proposes to stay at the Sundarbans to start a dolphin project and thus gives faint hints of becoming a part of this 'encountered community'. But her concept of 'home' brushes out any possibility of the Sundarbans becoming even her adopted home: "[…] for me, home is where the Orcaella are: so there's no reason why (the Sundarbans) couldn't be it" (400). Here she is not guided by any instinct to (re)connect herself with her lost heritage, but by purely professional purpose. She exemplifies that only cross-country travels added with a diasporic heritage do not always hyphenate one's identity. Hybridity can be accommodated or resisted – and Piya's workaholic nature and monolithic American-ness have always done the latter.

In contrast to Piya's professional zeal, Kanai bears many traits of diasporic identity as Stuart Hall explains the concept:

> […] an endless desire to return to 'lost origins', to be one with the mother, to go back to the beginning. […] [It is] the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery. (120)

Kanai bears these features though his displacement is not a cross-country one. It does not conform to the notion of diaspora in general but I would like to refer to Stuart Hall once more:

> The diaspora experience […] is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (Original emphasis, 120)

In a country like India, which is full of diversities in language, culture, religion and myths, it is not difficult to find 'differences' leading to diasporic identity in people who are dispersed even within this country. Kanai had his early days mainly in Calcutta and also in the Sundarbans. Later he migrated to Delhi to set up his own enterprise. Opposite to Piya's coming to the Sundarbans, which swells in her no feeling of her Indian heritage, Kanai is swayed by memories of home as he reaches the tide country. On this point of emphasising memory and home along with topography, Bill Ashcroft believes, "Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces" (217-8). In the same vein Paul Gilroy opines, "The value of the term 'diaspora' increases as its essential symbolic character is understood" (309). This 'essential symbolic' nature of diaspora is, in my opinion, a displacement into an 'encountered community' carrying along identity and memory of home. For Kanai, it was a migration of purpose when he went to Delhi. But back in the Sundarbans he starts acknowledging his roots as he frequently goes past in his memories. He remembers his deceased uncle Nirmal:

> Kanai smiled to recall his last encounter with Nirmal, which dated back to the late 1970s when Kanai was a college student in Calcutta. […] In the year since he had always imagined that when he

> next ran into Nirmal it would be in a similar fashion […]. But it hadn't happen […]. (17-8)

His memories are comprised of both Calcutta and his short stay in the Sundarbans. In the very second chapter of the novel he narrates to Piya how he was sent to the Sundarbans for the first time as a punishment. As he reads the diary of Nirmal he can relate himself more vividly to the place. A complex narrative strategy, involving Kanai's remembrances, Nirmal's story and Ghosh's own omniscient narration, demands the reader to switch time along with the pace of the novel. A major part of the novel makes the readers hop back into past – through Kanai's memory and Nirmal's diary.

Kanai's adaptation of cosmopolitan culture is stated when he is described as an 'outsider' at Dhakuria railway station:

> Kanai was carrying a wheeled airline bag with a telescopic handle. To the vendors and travelling salesmen […] 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 […] metropolitan affluence. (4-5)

At the same time his association with Bengalee culture is revealed when he translates for Piya the story of Bon Bibi – a local myth which has an epical stature for the inhabitants of the tide country. This translation, though written in prose format, has a clear rhythm of poetry. I quote a few lines here:

> Roused to anger, Bibi spoke to Shah Jongoli, [/] 'It's time to cure this demon of his devilry. [/] Brother, strike him a blow that will fill him with dread'. [/] Picking up his stuff, Shah Jongoli ran ahead. [/] So eager was he to carry out his (sic) command, [/] that he struck the tiger with the flat of his hand. (359-60)

It is not mere command over language, but a result of internalization of the cultural tune that sets poetic ripples on the prose. His trying to maintain this subterranean rhythmic pattern in his prose translation shows that he acknowledges the stature of "the epic of the tide country, as told by Abdur-Rahim: Bon Bibir Karamoti orthat Bon Bibi Johuranama – "The Miracles of Bon Bibi or the Narrative of Her Glory" " (354). The undercurrent of rhyme in this prosaic piece can be paralleled with, or can be seen as a

result of, the undercurrent of his memories of home beneath his apparent 'metropolitan affluence'.

The tension between 'home' and adopted home works in him when he hastily decides to go back to Delhi at the middle of his tour. But very soon, in the last chapter, it is reported that he would come back and 'write the story of Nirmal's notebook – how it came into his hands, what was in it, and how it was lost' (399). What is interesting here is that his aunt Nilima always wanted him to come back and he does so only when he holds himself accountable to his community.

The Morichjhapi incident, which Nirmal's notebook describes, problematizes the issue of migration even further. The whole problem with the settlers of Morichjhapi island began with the political turmoil in this subcontinent which started with the partition of India and continued unto Bangladesh achieving independence. A huge number of people migrated from Bangladesh to India during the period of 1940s to 1970s. Morichjhapi settlers came towards the end of that period. Initially they belonged to the Sundarbans of the Bangladesh part. When they migrated they only wanted to be in the Indian part of the forest. They are an ethnic group with their own belief systems, myths, customs and manners. All of these components of their ethnic identity are based on the ecological aspects of the tide country they belong to. The Government at first tried to settle the refugees in a resettlement camp in Madhya Pradesh. But this severing of the ties from their familiar ecological ambience made the resettlement camp

> […] more like a concentration camp, or a prison. […] The soil was rocky and the environment was nothing like they had ever known. They could not speak the languages of that area and the local people treated them as intruders […]. (118)

So they came back and wanted to settle in their familiar environment in Morichjhapi. The Government tried to evict them – and when could not, organised a massacre there.

Andrew Milner says on the point of black ethnicity that the blacks are "inheritors of a particular tribal history and cultural context" and this is the reason they resist their absorption into a fabricated and dominant national ethnicity (156). An analysis of the myth of Bon Bibi would show its relevance for this ethnic group. The myth goes like:

> Bon Bibi […] decided that one half of the tide country would remain a wilderness; this part of the forest she left to Dokkhin Rai and his demon hordes. The rest she claimed for herself and under her rule this once-forested domain was soon made safe for human settlement. […] the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order. (103)

This passage displays at least three points of resistance against authority. Firstly, the local people create their own concept of 'off-limit' territory and thus nullify the Forest Department's imposition of that rule upon them. The positive aspect of the rule of Bon Bibi is that if a fisherman enters Dokkhin Rai's territory by mistake, (that is 'off-limit' for the authority) Bon Bibi would save him, instead of taking bribes like the forest guards. Secondly, this myth negotiates wilderness and civilization, 'the wild and the sown, […] in careful balance' and creates their own slogan parallel to the governmental hue and cry of forest preservation or reservation. Here, the myth, created by them, becomes a script of responsibility for the inhabitants. Thirdly, the mythification of human settlement in this wilderness tries to de-recognize the colonial history of Sir Daniel Mackinnon Hamilton's initiative in creating human settlement in the islands.

In one of my papers, entitled **Eco-ethnicity in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide: Negotiating Wilderness and Civilisation**[*], I used the term 'eco-ethnicity' to acknowledge the ecological dimension of their ethnicity. In fact Kusum in the novel makes it clear when she remembers her days in the industrial town of Dhanbad:

> […] walking on iron, we longed for the touch of mud; encircled by rails, we dreamed of the Raimangal in flood. We dreamed of storm-tossed islands. […] We thought of high tide […]. (164)

This kind of attachment to the tide country, which is a part of their eco-ethnic identity, excludes them from any 'imagined community' (Anderson) of national culture. They can only

[*]This paper was presented at a National Seminar on "Ecocriticism and Literature", organised by the Department of English, Vinoba Bhave University, Hazaribag, on September 12, 2005.

'imagine' themselves as connected to the other side of the Sundarbans in Bangladesh. They, being in the forest, want to remain secluded as the islands are from the mainland. By creating their own 'imagined eco-ethnic community' they try to avert 'double misrecognition' (Milner) which happens to most immigrant groups.

So, the purpose of their immigration was (re)locating themselves in the same ecological environment as they had prior to immigration. For them the Sundarbans are all the same on both the sides of the border in spite of a political borderline dividing it into two. In the Indian part of the forest they are very much at 'home' – even after cross-border migration – except for the authoritarian guardianship of the Government which destroys this feeling.

The ethnic identity (eco-ethnic to be more precise) of the Morichjhapi people once more unsettles the traditional relationship between diaspora and cross-country migration. It shows that after the partition of a country, which is not rare in today's world, groups migrate mainly with the purpose of (re)locating themselves in an atmosphere which is the nearest to that they belonged to. In this way they try to retain their identity, almost uncontaminated or non-hyphenated.

Works Cited

1. Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities. London: Verso, 1983.
2. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin. eds. The Empire Writes Back. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002.
3. Barker, Chris. Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice. London: Sage Publications, 2000.
4. Ghosh, Amitav. The Hungry Tide. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2004.
5. Gilroy, Paul. 'Cruciality and the Frog's Perspective: An Agenda of Difficulties for the Black Arts Movement in Britain' (1988). Writing Black Britain 1948-1998. Ed. James Procter. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
6. Hall, Stuart. 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'. Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader. Ed. Padmini Mongia. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
7. Milner, Andrew, Jeff Browitt. Contemporary Cultural Theory. 3rd ed. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2003.

8. Sharma, Kavita A, Adesh Paul, Tapas Chakraborty. eds. Theorizing and Critiquing Indian Diaspora. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2004.