



Spatial Literary Theory in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

The notion of being a social animal makes it difficult for humans to exclude space, a quintessential factor of life itself. It serves and chisels humanity throughout. The movement and actions of individuals actuate the space because only when people and artifacts inhabit a space, it turns into a place. This space, be it social or cultural, moulds a person into a mature self and it reflects the ideology, power and politics of the institution existing within it. Every literary work testifies to a space, even though it may be virtual or fictive space. *The Hungry Tide* is a prophetic novel by Amitav Ghosh about insight, beauty and humanity. It explores the precarious life of some 'desperate' souls sustaining in the region of Sundarbans. The central plot is that Piya, an American cetologist who comes to India and gets the aid of Kanai, a translator and Fokir, a local fisherman, in her adventure in waters. The unlikely trio travel to find the rare Irrawaddy Dolphin and face several unexpected turns. Survival is an everyday battle for the settlers of the Sundarbans who have learned to strike a balance with nature. The space of sea has enormous influence in the destiny of fishermen like 'Fokir'. The novel unravels the ongoing tension between humanity and the space of Sundarbans with its vast salty tracts of mangrove forest. The routine as well as the beliefs of the inhabitants were tamed according to the conditions of that marshy land; for instance, the perpetual threat of tigers. The paper attempts to bring forth the relevance and recognition of the role of space in this novel.

Keywords: Space, Social, Cultural, People, Artifacts, Cetologist, Sundarbans, Humanity.

Space is an inexcusable element that makes up life as well as literature. It serves mankind from birth, till death. It chisels him or her with its several tools like society and culture. Also, it witnesses the complex human tales of Pros and Cons. Even though it may be the most distinguishing factor in every life along with the aspect of time, it has not earned the acknowledgement that the latter received, till recent years. The idea of time and space conglomerate in Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935) where he announces,

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: It's presence in time and space, it's unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subjected throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various

changes in its owner's help (Benjamin, 220).

Each individual has his or her life and there is a rare chance of this being duplicated like a Xerox in another's life because the space that surrounds a person moulds him or her differently from others. For the sake of argument one can say that the space around an educated, well-settled young lad from an elite, business family will be quite different from that of an Illiterate son of a fishmonger. Society's responses to both won't be similar, as status is deemed to be a deciding factor in it. Culture maybe a common factor to both these men, but their way of following it cannot be judged as same. Similarly, space provided for every individual may be different. These wide –ranging faces of space can be conceived with the aid of works like Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1964), Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1974), Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974), Edward Said's *Literature and Society* (1978), Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975) and Homi k Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). This is the case that is depicted in literature as well because it is the representation of life itself. Spatial Literary Theory is a turn towards the world itself, towards an understanding of our lives as situated in a mobile array of social and spatial relations that need to be mapped. Applying it in the work *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh opens a new perception of the novel. The three places depicted in it; Lusibari, Morichjhapi and Garjontola imprint varied emotions on the islanders and possibly on the readers as well.

Lusibari is a portrayal of the raw tidal life which paces hard to attain development. It is one of the busiest villages of the island. It had a rhythm of development. Nilima's trust-related works for the upliftment of the island women is an element of great significance in this respect. Daniel Hamilton, the modifier of the forest into today's island did not want any divisions and differences like Brahmins or Untouchables and Bengalis or Oriyas – a system still followed in this island village. The hospital was another structure of relevance. The village also nourished certain make-beliefs which were adorned by its inlanders like – they believed that a married tide-country woman is sure to be widowed in her twenties and the enactment of Bon Bibi as the savior of the land – a belief deeply embraced by everyone there, like Kusum, Fokir and Horren.

The island's main village — also known as Lusibari — was situated close to the base of the mudspit, in the lee of the embankment. A newcomer, looking down at Lusibari from the crest of the bādh, would see a village that seemed at first glance no different from thousands of others in Bengal: a tightly packed settlement of palm-thatched huts and bamboo-walled stalls and shacks. But a closer examination would reveal a different and far from commonplace design. At the center of the village was a maidan, an open space not quite geometrical enough to be termed a square. At one end of this ragged-edged maidan was a marketplace, a jumble of stalls that lay unused through most of the week, coming alive only on Saturday, which was the market day. At the other end of the maidan, dominating the village, stood a school. This was the building that was chiefly responsible for endowing the village with an element of visual surprise. Although not large, it loomed like a cathedral over the shacks, huts and shanties that surrounded it. Outlined in brick over the keystone of the main entrance were the school's name and the date of its completion: SIR DANIEL HAMILTON HIGH SCHOOL 1938. (Ghosh, 40)

Morichjhapi shows the refugee crisis as well as the social integrity among those masses. The city dwellers long for the raw tidal life which could aid them with a let out from the mechanical city life. This tide country island is a solace for the refugees from Bangladesh. Morichjhapi also witnesses the pestilent interference of the government and media between

the islanders and their land, which disturbs the entire harmony.

Morichjhāpi, said Nilima, was a tide country island a couple of hours from Lusibari by boat. It fell within a part of the Sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation, but unlike many such islands it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland. In 1978 a great number of people suddenly appeared on Morichjhāpi. In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight. Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built bādhs and put up huts. It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to be learned that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh. Some had come to India after Partition, while others had trickled over later. In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes. (109)

Thus, the space of Morichjhapi turned a relaxation for one of the most unfortunate sections of the Globe, the refugees. Even though the island was embraced and well-maintained by the new comers by setting up several buildings and shops and developing new job opportunities, their enthusiasm for rejuvenation was put-out by the government through its anti-refugee approach. Later police patrolling was initiated by the latter and the people were surrounded by armed men everywhere. Thus, the land they thought as a boon turned a doom for them. This act of the authorities also shackled the natural sync of man and nature that was followed there.

Then comes the island of Garjontola which is a cord that ties the islanders with the myths and beliefs of the land. It is a land that was the Centre of the Bon Bibi concept, with the presence of a shrine built by Kusum's father. He built it because he thought it was Bon Bibi who guided him when he got stranded on the land after going astray in the sea. This shrine was approached by many for worship. This same island purified Kanai of his superiority, by using the figure of Tiger. When he returned from the island he was well aware about how helpless and inferior man is when compared to nature. The forest in Garjontola is a double-faced entity – an all giver to its dependents as well as needy ones and amazing aspect for the outsiders. Like a tortoise, it never exposes completely to anyone. At times it veils the islanders, but also Shelters the beast that waits anxiously for the unfortunates.

This was the closest she had been to the forest, and she felt as though she were facing it for the first time: before, it had been either half submerged or a distant silhouette, looking down on the water from the heights of the shore. Staring at it now, she was struck by the way the greenery worked to confound the eye. It was not just that it was a barrier, like a screen or a wall: it seemed to trick the human gaze in the manner of a cleverly drawn optical illusion. There was such a profusion of shapes, forms, hues and textures that even things that were in plain view seemed to disappear, vanishing into the tangle of lines like the hidden objects in children's puzzles. (136;137)

The role of sea as a spatial aspect is a versatile one. It is this element that gives life to the novel. It acts as the ground source for the meeting and acquaintanceship of Fokir and Piya . The sea also shelters the Irrawaddy Dolphins which are Piya's attention-seekers. The Irrawaddy dolphins can also be taken as the totemic concept of space here. They are representations of the endangered species of the Earth. They prompt people like Piya to take actions for conservation. They are the best friends of Fokir who knew every nuance of the sea. For the dolphins, the space of sea and beings who care, make them live unaware of the

selfish world. For people like Fokir and Horren, the sea acts as their livelihood as well as a veil of protection. Fokir could feel a sense of relaxation when he is alone in the sea with his boat – a kind of experience he couldn't grab from the land. In the shore, he has to abide by the laws and customs prevailing, but in the sea there is nothing to stop him and he could remain as he is. This merging with nature has made possible for Fokir a perfect understanding of the rhythms and moves of the dolphins, which is exactly what Piya wishes to attain. Yet there is also a devastating side to it which is evident in the storm that can inturn be sighted as a purgation process of the mother Earth. The inlanders can't think of a survival without the sea – the space that the sea has in their lives is irreplaceable.

While Kusum and her husband Rajen were in the city, they deeply longed for a return to their homeland and in place of the iron rails they needed a touch of the tidal mud which deeply penetrated into their veins a sense of belonging. But Kanai, on the other hand embraced his city life and had cast away a contempt for the island life. But he later realized that this sense is due to his inability to accept the latter as it is.

But he was not working now, and yet it was exactly this feeling that came upon him as he looked at Fokir: it was as though his own vision were being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes and he were seeing not himself, Kanai Dutt, but a great host of people — a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men who had destroyed Fokir's village, burnt his home and killed his mother; he had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose value was less than that of an animal. In seeing himself in this way, it seemed perfectly comprehensible to Kanai why Fokir should want him to be dead — but he also understood that this was not how it would be. Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged. (287)

A must mention figure of the novel is Bon Bibi, the deity of the land. People consider this mother image as their saviour in times of distress –an allegedly reliable shoulder to lean on. The islanders believe that it is she who guides them whenever the future fidgets them in its tricky hands. The very description for this is the alleged interference of Bon Bibi when Kusum's father went astray in the vast sea. He believes that it was she who saved his life and guided him out of danger. Several myths revolve around this figure, which are passed on from one generation to another, mostly through the stage performance of *The glory of Bon Bibi*.

The stage for *The Glory of Bon Bibi* was erected on the open expanse of Lusibari's maidan, between the compound of Hamilton House and the school. Its design was so simple that it took less than a day to set up. The floor, a few planks of wood, was laid on a trestle and enclosed within an open scaffolding of bamboo poles. During performances, sheets of painted cloth were suspended from the poles at the rear. These served as backdrops for the audience and as screens for the actors, so they could eat, smoke and change costume out of public view. Several large, hissing gas lamps illuminated the spectacle, and music was provided by a battery-operated cassette recorder and loudspeakers. (95;96)

The open space taken to enact the play signifies the equivocal appeal it has on every soul of the land. The open expanse let for it at the centre of Lusibari also denotes that it enters directly into their hearts.

The hospital in Lusibari is yet another aspect which stands as a symbol of the

islanders' longing for development.

Such was the hospital's reputation, Moyna said, that people now came there from great distances. Many who could have traveled more conveniently to Canning or Kolkata chose to come to Lusibari instead: the hospital was known to provide, at a nominal fee, a standard of care that could not be had elsewhere even at exorbitant rates. This traffic, in turn, had led to the growth of a small service industry around the hospital's perimeter. Over the years, a number of teashops, guest houses and stands for cycle-vans had taken root and flourished. Directly or indirectly the hospital now provided employment for the majority of Lusibari's inhabitants. (122)

Even though there is an operation theatre and well-trained nurses like Moyna, it is deprived of proper facilities to proceed. This pricks her heart as she is devoid of a ground to exhibit her passion. This case portrays a bitter reality of rural life in present scenarios – even though many talents sprout from the rural side, they are not well nourished by the authorities, which eventually lead to stunted passions.

Fokir's boat is another concept of space. It is just broad enough in the middle to allow two people to squat side by side. But it made his world and allowed him to be himself and merge with the rhythms of the sea and the tide country. It navigated him to Garjontola where he feels his mother's soul. Within the boat he has created a mini house, with all the immediate essentials needed for a small family to survive. For him his boat was like his mother Kusum, always caressing and pacifying him. As a whole, Fokir's boat let him be one with nature and opened a means to know it to its depth.

Garjontola, together with the image of tiger invoked a recurring sense of terror in the islanders. The life of the people there was always dimmed by this fearsome situation that the tiger has created.

So great was its confidence that in the last stretch it actually broke cover and went racing along the shore, in full view of the far shore; intent on its prey, it no longer cared about concealment. This was in itself an astonishing sight, almost without precedent, for the great cats of the tide country were like ghosts, never revealing their presence except through marks, sounds and smells. They were so rarely seen that to behold one, it was said, was to be as good as dead — and indeed the sight caused several of the women on the embankment to lose consciousness. (101)

This is a most significant example of the helplessness of man in front of the vast nature. The hazards caused by the beast to the islanders is a remembrance of the extent to which the nature would turn sinful if we tried to disturb its equilibrium. This experience had a great effect in Kanai and his contempt towards the tide country when he was left alone in Garjontola.

Mr Sloan - a dolphin that Piya sighted during her internship about Marine Mammals in South China sea, in a village near Phnom Penh - is a perfect example of how a being is dependent on the space around him or her. It had swum to the reservoir there during the flood, but could not swim back with the pod. Thus, it faced a massive transition from the liberal space of the sea to the constricted face of the reservoir, which was quite hard to digest. This can be conceived as a nutshell depiction of the influence space has in our lives. Our characters and actions are wholly dependent on what we experience from around. In a way, Mr Sloan can be seen as a substitute of both Fokir and Kanai. If Fokir is uprooted from the island he doesn't know how to survive because he is that much adhered to the ways of that

land. If he is taken to the city life of Kolkata, his condition will be the same as Sloan, not able to cope with the currents of the city life. But Kanai, on the other hand is well used to his city routines and embraces it and is prejudiced against the island life as being monotonous.

The whole concept of tide country was a new window for the revolutionary within Nirmal. The myths of the land revolving around the figure of Bon Bibi did not let him a chance to do anything against it. He had to abide by the laws of the land because these beliefs were the driving force for the people of the island. When he entered the land of Garjontola he thought, “ had never felt so much an outsider” (219). His final endeavor to preserve Morichjhapi was the note book that he addressed to Kanai, but when that got lost in the waters it became clear that nothing can withstand the flow of nature. The destructive power of it which is portrayed towards the end of the novel illustrates the ultimate control it holds in the ways of the world. The island was a great realization for Kanai. The harmony of the islanders with the nature; the conditions and limitations of the land – all these let him understand the influence that space had in the life of those people.

The conditions of the tide country are perceived differently by different people. On the one hand, there is Moyna and Nilima who wanted to let the island attain development and rise from its present status of utter rural life. They desired to have a metropolitan overlook of the land and the guidance and assistance of the authorities. But on the other hand, there is a group of men like Fokir, Horren and to some extent Nirmal who wanted to enjoy the land as it is. They embrace the land for its beauty and try to dig deep into its inner folds. For them the present tide country appears the most ideal one as in it they could let their souls free, devoid of city life and tension.

By applying Spatial Literary Theory, the influence of space in the nuance development and actions of the characters can be traced. Like the way the tide country and its conditions moulded Fokir right from his childhood to what he is, how Kanai had gone through a purgation and the way Piya tried to immerse in the nature and dedicate herself for the cause of the sea. Nirmal’s slow transformation in approach to and perception of the island is also significant. It also explores how several structures like Fokir’s boat and the hospital play relevant roles in the novel through their influence on people.

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