

## In Whose Voice Should a Subaltern Speak? Reading the Problem of Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* addresses multiple socio-political issues: development is one of them. Development is a much-debated concept in the context of the third world. It becomes more crucial when it is posed against the issue of the sustenance of eco-system. *The Hungry Tide* introduces the question of the subalterns' agency into the discursive purview of development already fraught with contradictory nuances. Instead of remaining a mere rhetoric, the question of subaltern agency becomes a central problem which unravels the correlations between the other above-mentioned issues e.g. nature, development, etc. To delineate this complex network, the writings of Hardt and Negri, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Arturo Escobar provide the necessary theoretical scaffolding.

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### Introduction

Divya Anand observes that Amitav Ghosh is the first Indian author to have addressed ecological issues in English fiction with the publication of his fourth novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2004).<sup>1</sup> Here it should be noted that Arundhati Roy does touch upon the emerging trend of destroying natural resources in order to build tourism infrastructure in her *The God of Small Things* (1997), but this issue has not been addressed to the same extent as in *HT*.<sup>2</sup> Shakti Jaisingh reads this novel as a problematization of the existential crisis of the South Asian peasant life at the face of neoliberal aggression. This paper attempts to focus on the aspect of the voice of the subaltern in the politics of development versus the ecological question. The subtle complexity of this politics is gradually unraveled through different stories in the novel. But more importantly, in the course of telling those stories, the problem of agency never goes out of the discursive focus—to be more precise the perspective of the narration is constantly interrogated. The problem surfaces more prominently in the novel in reference to Nirmal's journal. The authority of the writer and the act of writing is also explored, especially in relation to the possibility of ideological influence over an ethnological, oral testimonial.

Further to the complex problems of agency, the very place, the Sundarbans, is presented as a site of contestation. Lisa Fletcher discusses the historicization of the Sundarbans in *HT* as a congruous topic in the discourse of island studies.<sup>3</sup> Annu Jalais shows how the Sundarbans has

<sup>1</sup> Divya Anand, 'Words on Water: Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*,' *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 34.1 (2008) 22.

<sup>2</sup> *The Hungry Tide* is referred to as *HT* several times in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Fletcher, 'Reading the Postcolonial Island in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*,' *Island Studies Journal* 6.1 (2011) 3-16.

undergone several transformations in terms of definition from the colonial period until now.<sup>4</sup> What in the British colonial period was considered to be a mere wasteland producing no revenue has gradually taken on significance as a site chosen by the World Heritage Site Committee in order to preserve the flora and fauna of its eco-system. During the long process of the Sundarbans' graduation as a geographical place to a space of political dispute and ecological concern, the people who have inhabited some of the islands rarely get any political recognition. It is observed that the marginalisation of these people, some of whose ancestors had settled here as early as 1765, and others who came as late as 1970 as a post-Partition effect, has been consistent throughout this centuries-long period. Contrary to other places, the conditions in which these people live have been always poor and underdeveloped.

### **Examining development as a statist propaganda**

The reality of the marginalization of the human population in the Sundarbans is typically evident in Victorian gazetteer-writer W.W. Hunter's reference to these people as inhabitants of the Sundarbans which comes at the end of the long list of different species of plants and animals made by Hunter in 1875.<sup>5</sup> He refers to them as a 'few wandering gangs.' The colonial viewpoint has been carried into the postcolonial period as well. These marginal people are continuously being pushed to the fringes, sometimes in the name of wildlife preservation as it happened at the time of the Morichjhanpi Massacre, or sometimes in the name of development.<sup>6</sup> The definition of development is ambiguous, and the government uses all the available powers of an establishment to act and reap the opportunity of the ambiguity of this very word. In today's context, ecological reservation too has gained multiple layers of meaning and implication. In the recent past it was seen that the government and the local Adivasis had opposing opinions regarding the mining of bauxite at Niyamgiri hills region in Odisha. In this case, despite the Adivasis' protest that mining in this region would destroy the forest, and harm their cultural practices and communal beliefs, the government's claim is that their commitment to development is progressive. Here it is worthwhile to problematize the very concept of development. Development, according to Gustavo Esteda:

always implies a favourable change, a step from the simple to the complex, from the inferior to the superior, from worse to better. [It] indicates that one is doing well because one is advancing in the sense of a necessary, ineluctable, universal law and toward a desirable goal.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Jalais 5.

<sup>6</sup> The Morichjhanpi massacre or incident is known to be a notorious mass killing of low-caste Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan by the Left-led government of West Bengal in May, 1979 at the time of forceful evacuation of the refugees from Morichjhanpi—an island declared as reserve forest in the Sundarbans, but the government never acknowledged any such incident.

<sup>7</sup> Gustavo Esteda, 'Development,' *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 2007) 10.

'In Whose Voice Should a Subaltern Speak? Reading the Problem of Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.' Sukanya Mondal and Rashmi Gaur.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, December 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

The idea of development thus, even today, bears the legacy of the civilizing mission of colonial times. In most cases, it is the lowest rung of society that is the target of the mission of development, yet the benefits of the government policy only trickle down to them. The downward gaze of the development policy-makers entails the possibility of glossing over the essential problems of the marginal. Partha Chatterjee notes that development is regarded ‘as a process affecting the whole of society’ and ‘it was premised upon *one* consciousness and will — that of the whole’<sup>8</sup> (emphasis original). Thus the very idea of development bestows on the state a rational consciousness that it wields on behalf of the entire population. Naturally the multiple differences of needs among the population is not addressed in this process. Arturo Escobar demonstrates this idea of development, which in his book he aptly puts thus:

Development was – and continues to be for the most part – a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach which treated people and culture as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of progress.<sup>9</sup>

In his essay, ‘The Making and Unmaking of Third World through Development,’ Escobar elucidates the argument further. According to him, development has been functioning as a discourse since the advent of the European Enlightenment initiated modernization. This discursive system ‘sets the rules of the game; who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise ...’<sup>10</sup> Thus it can be seen how in the case of Niyamgiri, the state tries to encroach upon the land in the name of ‘development.’ On the other hand, during the Morichjhanpi incident (or prior to that) the government was against any settlement on the island because they were intent on preserving the forest areas and the tigers that inhabit the forest.

Thus, in the age of Capital, the state always shifts between two extreme positions of pro-nature and pro-development, according to the sway of the economic interests. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh not only reveals the deceptive stand of the government, but the progressive façade of the urban Bengali bhadralok section is also exposed. This part of Bengali society that claims to be progressive, educated, and sensitive, actually turns a blind eye to the misery of the marginal people. Besides the ecological issue, Ghosh points to the porous nature of the barriers separating different ideological stands, e.g. humanist/nonhumanist, elite/subaltern, government/non-governmental philanthropy, etc.

### **The subaltern and the ethnographer’s problem of perspective**

The ‘subaltern in the Subaltern Studies,’ Prathama Banerjee argues, is ‘an invented category.’ As no one claims it to be his/her label, it has always been used to label one particular sect of society or the other in the discursive field. Sometimes the term ‘subaltern’ refers to the peasants,

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<sup>8</sup> Partha Chatterjee, ‘Development Planning and the Indian State,’ *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015) 247.

<sup>9</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) 44.

<sup>10</sup> Escobar 87.

‘In Whose Voice Should a Subaltern Speak? Reading the Problem of Agency in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*.’ Sukanya Mondal and Rashmi Gaur.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, December 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

sometimes the refugees, sometimes the women, and sometimes the Dalits.<sup>11</sup> Subaltern studies has been always engaged with the mechanics of power, knowledge, and obviously, language. It is the elites who designate the subalterns as ‘subalterns.’ The ensemble of various characters in *HT* creates a space for interaction between different economic classes as Ghosh draws his characters from different socio-economic and cultural levels of society.

The narration is presented chiefly through the perspectives of Piya and Kanai. What is noteworthy here is that Piya and Kanai are both from the affluent portion of society, though they have vastly different cultural backgrounds. Thus Ghosh shows how the problem of the subaltern is looked at by the elites of the society. Piya or Piyali Roy was born in a Bengali family but has grown up in Seattle. Also, her father does not encourage her to learn Bengali because he thinks that the retaining of a separate linguistic identity is too much cultural baggage for an immigrant, as it hinders his/her assimilation into the mainstream. Thus when she comes to the Sundarbans, she feels herself a stranger among her own people. Her father has the progressive look befitting an ideal immigrant:

He believes that Indians—Bengalis in particular—don’t travel well, because their eyes are always turned backwards, towards home. When we moved to America, he decided he wasn’t going to make that mistake: he was going to try to fit in.<sup>12</sup>

She comes to the Sundarbans to conduct her research on *Orcella* (river-dolphins). An accident on the river brings her to Lusibari after having been invited there by Kanai. Kanai too belongs to the same economical strata as that of Piya. He is a linguist who runs a translation agency in Delhi and makes a lot of money. He has come to Lusibari following an invitation from his aunt Nilima to claim a journal left by his uncle.

At a glance, having the two choices of characters (Piya and Kanai) as the medium between the happenings of the novel and the reader may seem bizarre because the novel is situated in such a place, the Sundarbans, where the local people were not known to be rich, educated, and powerful. As noted, they rarely have a voice for their own issues in governmental discourse. In choosing Piya as a narrator Ghosh allows himself a flexibility to document certain minute details, which he could not otherwise have done. Her American upbringing and ignorance about the local culture, and obviously the language (Bengali) give Piya an almost innocent point of view. Every small thing she views, be it the crab line used by Fokir, or the make-shift arrangement to take a bath in Fokir’s boat, elicits curiosity mixed with some amount of surprise in Piya because of her status as an outsider. She cannot feel curious and express her own thoughts about these things without complicating them. Someone who is indigenous and already has some knowledge about these things can never give an innocent account of things the way Piya does. Piya cannot be said to be a pro-subaltern person, but at places she is seen to feel sympathy for the marginal people in the Sundarbans. Her sympathy might have sprung from her concerns about the river dolphins, the endangered species on which she has been working. Thus

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<sup>11</sup> Prathama Banerjee, ‘The Subaltern: Political Subject or Protagonist of History?:’ *Subaltern Studies in Retrospect and Reminiscence*, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38.1 (2015) 39.

<sup>12</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2004) 250.

‘In Whose Voice Should a Subaltern Speak? Reading the Problem of Agency in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*.’ Sukanya Mondal and Rashmi Gaur.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, December 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

when the subaltern question is raised, sometimes it extends to the non-human species too. While giving an account of the government's initiative to save tigers in the Sundarbans, the novel not only cites the authority's negligence towards the human residents of this place but implicitly raises the question of the lack of any measure to save the Gangetic dolphins.

The other main character, the sole narrator of Nirmal's journal, is Kanai. He is a happy-go-lucky man. He has money and he loves to flirt with 'interesting' women. On his first visit to the Sundarbans, although he is a small school child, he has the audacity of a city-bred boy to undermine the rural way of life. On his second visit when he is a 42-year-old man, he has lost whatever innocence he had as a small boy. He apparently has no sympathy for the people of the Sundarbans. Thus Piya's account is placed as a foil to Kanai's seasoned account of all the incidents in the Sundarbans.

Ironically, it is Kanai for whom Nirmal leaves his journal. The entry is an account of what happens on May 15, 1979, in Morichjhapi. But again Nirmal declares at the very beginning that what he is going to write down would not be his story, but Kusum's. The importance of the voice of the marginalized people lies in the originality of what they say because when they talk (if they *can* talk) about their life and their problems, they speak about what *they* feel. It is always a first-hand experience. Manoranjan Byapari, a noted figure in the Dalit tradition of Bengali literature, writes that it is not the case that nobody has ever articulated the problems of the marginalized, dispossessed people. Rabindranath Tagore, the three famous Bandyopadhyays (Bibhutibhushan, Tarashankar, and Manik), Sunil Gangopadhyay, the group of litterateurs of 'Kallol' and 'Kali-kalam,' also seriously address the issues of the Bengali Dalits but as they are all from the upper-caste society, they themselves never had to go through the plights of the dispossessed. Amitav Ghosh not only addresses the issues of the marginalized people in *The Hungry Tide*, but he elegantly depicts the problem of subaltern speech, especially as it sits within the governmental discourse. None of the subaltern people within the novel are able to document the hardships undergone (hardships that are unthinkable to an urban middle or upper-middleclass citizen) just to earn the daily wage, or the barbaric way in which the state government politically bulldozed the settlers of Morichjanpi island. Therefore, Ghosh has to employ a person from the urban progressive section to tell this history: Nirmal, who sympathizes with the causes of the settlers of Morichjhanpi, and even though he is writing about the dire situation of these people, he nevertheless unequivocally declares at the beginning that the account is in their words. The only thing he is providing is the penmanship: 'All I need say for the time being, is that this is not my story. It concerns, rather, the only friend you made when you were here in Lusibari: Kusum. If not for my sake, then for hers, read on.'<sup>13</sup> A central argument of the subaltern scholars is embedded in this bidding of Nirmal for his nephew to read and understand: whose story is told, by whom, and for whom. When we read the accounts of Morichjhanpi by Nirmal, it is through the eyes and thoughts of Kanai. Nirmal originally writes in Bengali. Kanai's version is in English. The crux of the problem, then, is that there is a huge difference between Nirmal and Kusum, whose story Nirmal claims it to be. Nirmal writes down what he sees on that fateful day, and at times his writing is interrupted by Kusum's direct interjections. There is a danger when one attempts to write down someone else's experience that there will be a chance of

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<sup>13</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 69.

misappropriation. When there is a huge difference in terms of economic, cultural, and social status between the writer and the subject, the risk of misappropriation increases. Nirmal is an educated, urban Bengali, with a strong Marxist ideology. And Kusum is decades younger than him. She has no institutional education as such, and obviously there is the difference of gender. In such cases, the writer who is documenting may not understand the proper implication of the victim's experiences. Also, because of the intervention of the ethnographer, there is a loss of immediacy. There are other ethical and political problems in writing such testimonies. The problems are articulated in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*.<sup>14</sup> David Stoll here argues that the narrator (Rigoberta Menchú) might have made a romanticised speech in order to garner the support of the international media for the Guatemalan guerrilla organization with which she is affiliated, and that Menchú might be seen as a spokesperson for the Latin American Leftist vanguard.<sup>15</sup> John Beverly problematizes Stoll's position in his article 'What Happens when the Subaltern Speaks.' Beverly argues that judging the truthfulness in the speech of the subaltern speaker may not be a very wise idea because there is no universal standard of truth. It may vary according to the culture of the speaker. When the ethnographer is from a completely different background, then determining the importance and truthfulness in a subaltern's speech entails a risk of being unfairly judgmental.<sup>16</sup> Another probable problem is that the writer, using his superior position, may be able to control the flow of speech thereby suppressing certain facts. He may manipulate the story to fit with his own ideology. While reading Nirmal's journal, all these above-mentioned facts should be taken into consideration.

### **The subaltern question as a dilemma in the imagination of Bengali *bhadralok* (the educated gentle class)**

At the time of writing the journal, Nirmal is in a very ecstatic state of mind. Nilima explains this situation quite precisely when Kanai expresses his surprise about Nirmal's involvement with the Morichjhanpi incident. She asserts that Nirmal feels sympathy because of the idea of revolution he had always cherished in his youth:

You have to remember Kanai ... that as a young man Nirmal was in love with the idea of revolution. Men like that even when they turn their backs on their party and their comrades, can never let go of the idea; it's the secret god that rules their heart.<sup>17</sup>

In his political affiliation, Nirmal is a Marxist. But he is moved more by the romanticism in Marxism. The practicality which is needed to make the dream of revolution come true is not present in him. Losing importance among his comrades in Calcutta, he finds the Sundarbans, or

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<sup>14</sup> Vijay Mishra discusses the role of testimonial history and literature in his essay 'Plantation Diaspora Testimonies and the Enigma of Black Waters,' *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 17.4 (2014) 548-567.

<sup>15</sup> Arturo Arias, 'After the Rigoberta Menchú Controversy: Lessons Learned About the Nature of Subalternity and the Specifics of the Indigenous Subject,' *Modern Language Notes* 117.2 (2002) 481-505.

<sup>16</sup> John Beverly, 'What Happens When a Subaltern Speaks: Rigoberta Menchú, Multiculturalism, and the Presumption of Equal Worth,' *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* ed. Arturo Arias (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2001) 231.

<sup>17</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 119.

'In Whose Voice Should a Subaltern Speak? Reading the Problem of Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.' Sukanya Mondal and Rashmi Gaur.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, December 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

to be more precise, the Badabon, an ideal place. This place, according to Nirmal's account, is a place where equality has been practiced from the first day of human habitation. When Sir Daniel Hamilton first established a new settlement in the Mangrove forest in the Sundarbans, he invited people to come and settle there, but the invitation was not unconditional:

Everyone who was willing to work was welcome, S'Daniel said, but on one condition. They could not bring all their petty little divisions and differences. Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together.<sup>18</sup>

Egalitarianism is a very fine idea to believe in, but when a group of people who have different cultural backgrounds are compelled to treat each expression of culture on equal terms, it may not be ethically laudatory. It is true that when two communities with different cultures live in close physical proximity for a long time, they begin exchanging their cultural traits. But this is a natural process. And the relation between them may not always be very peaceful too. In this context, Charles Taylor's famous article 'The Politics of Recognition' can be noted. According to Taylor, recognition of one's difference, especially by the other, might be a precondition of identity. In that way the mainstream people can recognize the culture of the minority, or subaltern, or aboriginal, and this could facilitate the flourishing of the culture in question. Taylor also emphasizes the 'rolling back' of colonial rule in order to give the Third World a chance to be themselves. Here the inevitable question crops up as to whether it is possible to unlearn the gestures or habits learnt in the colonial age, or to efface colonial history from public memory. In fact, Charles Taylor's 'presumption of equal worth' has been countered by Homi Bhabha because, as Bhabha alleges, 'it focuses exclusively on the recognition of the excluded.'<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the recognition of the other is not always achieved, but through the process of recognition of the other the self also comes to the fore of the discursive ambit.

The case of the settlers of Morichjhanpi becomes conspicuous at this theoretical juncture because they are living a life of exclusion at the time of Nirmal writing the journal. The government never acknowledges the legitimacy of their settlement. Nirmal's place in the tension between the government and the settlers is a bit ambiguous. He believes in neat political compartmentalization of everything. And his iconoclastic bent is so strong that he looks down upon Nilima's government-aided co-operative, the 'Badabon Trust.' He proclaims himself to be against the government who, at this point, is synonymous for him with the capitalist bourgeoisie. But to where does *he* belong? He is not a subaltern either. Indeed, he has severed his ties with the urban Marxists of Calcutta, and in that way, he is politically marginalized, but that cannot be compared with the state of the hundred thousands of refugees settled in Morichjhanpi. Nirmal is, after all, in spite of his refusal, a representative of the Bengali bhadraloks. On the contrary, the refugees from East Pakistan who have been sent to the Dandakaranya camp by the government and some of who later come to the Sundarbans to settle are the chhotoloks. This dichotomy in Bengali society is very important. The bhadraloks are generally the upper class and upper caste

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<sup>18</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 51.

<sup>19</sup> Discussed in Beverly 227.

Bengalis, and they are educated too. The chhotoloks are ‘nimnobogiyo, nimnoborniyo’ (as Byapari describes them)—lower class and lower caste people. Nirmal, definitely a bhadralok, goes to Morichjhapi, in order to experience the zeal of a revolution, and for his love for Kusum. It is a love about which Nirmal has a feeling of illegitimacy that he can never articulate.

Apparently, Nirmal claims to have a great concern for the well-being of the poor marginalized people of this place, but besides teaching small children and exerting an effort to instill the germ of revolution and equality in others through conversation, he is never seen to have done anything as such to ameliorate the condition of the poor in the entire novel until he writes the saga of the settlers of Morichjhanpi. On the other hand, Nilima dedicates her life to the poor. It is Nirmal who christens Nilima’s public welfare trust ‘Badabon Trust,’ but he actually frowns upon any such endeavour that has the slightest association with the government. In fact, initially, he haphazardly takes up the job of teaching in Gosaba, the area before the forests of the Sundarbans begin, in the settlement founded by the capitalist Sir Daniel Hamilton. The thing which deserves reconsideration in this context is the difference between the first inhabitants who had come to the virgin jungle at the time of Sir Daniel and the people who lived there when Nirmal and Nilima arrived. The former were subjects in colonial India, and the latter are citizens. In the latter phase, governmental discourse is more widespread though it is not always readily visible.

This novel also problematizes the case of widening government space in today’s world. It showcases an example of what Hardt and Negri call ‘Hybrid constitution,’ i.e. the transformation and mixture of different governmental forces.<sup>20</sup> Nilima’s Badabon Trust that works for the welfare of the villagers of the Sundarbans is such an organization. In fact, Nirmal looks down upon Nilima’s endeavour, for having taken funds from the government. Here, the ‘Badabon Trust’ is a completely private organization, but its aim is to improve the health facilities of the locality and to empower women economically. Thus it does precisely what a government of a nation-state is supposed to do. Here, by funding the NGO and recognising Nilima’s effort (through conferring a President’s award on her) the state actually channels capital through a method that appears politically benign. Like the NGOs, Hardt and Negri problematise another site of postmodern society: the media. This is a site of expression of civil society as well as a medium to reach civil society.<sup>21</sup> At times, it works as the public conscience too. Ghosh shows how the media could be the desired site for the subaltern also.

It is true that Amitav Ghosh does not employ a subaltern narrator to tell the stories; rather he cannot, as the political reality does not allow him to do that. Gayathri Prabhu shows that by employing several micro-narratives Ghosh demonstrates how there cannot be a universal simplified voice of the subalterns.<sup>22</sup> Ghosh also shows that it is not always the philanthropic whim of the mainstream which leads one to document the subaltern’s history for them, but sometimes it is the subaltern who consciously wishes for their plight to be recorded. When Nirmal has a tour of the island Morichjhanpi, he congratulates his guide saying that they have

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000) 317.

<sup>21</sup> Hardt and Negri 311.

<sup>22</sup> Gayathri Prabhu, ‘Retelling Nature: Realism and the Postcolonial Environmental Imaginary in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,’ *Transnational Literature* 7.2 (2015) 2.

luck on their side. The guide apparently believes more in the practical facts of the present than the futuristic assurance of luck. Their conversation is evident of how self-conscious a subaltern can be at the time of his exposure to an urban educated person, here a bhadralok:

At the end of the brief tour, I clasped my guide's hand: 'Destiny is on your side, comrade.'

He smiled and said, 'But still, we cannot succeed without help.'

It was clear at once that he was thinking of all the ways in which I might be of use to him. This impressed me. It was a good sign, I thought, that he was applying his mind in this practical way.

'I want to be of help,' I said. 'Tell me what I can do.'

'That depends,' he said. 'What's most important to us at this time is to mobilize public opinion, to bring pressure on the government, to get them to leave us alone. They're putting it out that we're destroying this place; they want people to think we're gangsters who've occupied this place by force. We need to let people know what we're doing and why we're here. We've to tell the world about all we've done and all we've achieved. Can you help us with this? Do you have contacts with the press in Kolkata?'<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, at the time of an emergency, a subaltern feels that it is necessary to let the world know what s/he has been going through and to gain moral support from others. The unnamed settler of Morichjhanpi here wants to reach the media. The situation is quite analogous to that of Rigoberta Menchú's testimonial. At this point, the subaltern wants to make a speech in front of the mainstream media, and s/he would obviously say what would ameliorate their situation. For the media or the ethnographer, it is difficult to judge the veracity of the things the subaltern speaker makes.

In the next part of the conversation, when the guide gets a negative answer from Nirmal, he asks, 'Then do you know anyone with power? Policeman? Forest Rangers? Politicians?'<sup>24</sup> Another negative answer makes him lose interest in Nirmal. Thus it is understood, though it cannot be generalized, that a subaltern knows the importance of power in special cases. And when he is in a pressing situation he may want to access that power. Before the dubious government-conducted operation of Morichjhanpi and after it, a great number of articles were published in Bengali (Ross Mullick's is the only one in English). These articles are written by people from various walks of life—poet, journalist, novelist, politician, IAS officer, IPS officer, and even the then chief minister of West Bengal Jyoti Basu. Interestingly, though all these articles deal with the condition of the people in Morichjhapi and the righteousness of government to conduct a forceful evacuation of the island, they vary greatly in terms of the details. Sunil Gangopadhyay, one of the most noteworthy and popular authors in post-independence West Bengal urges the government to be sympathetic towards the settlers. He does mention the restrictions with which the government has to function and acknowledges the difficulty on the part of the government to peacefully tackle this situation, but in the end he

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<sup>23</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 172.

<sup>24</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 172.

'In Whose Voice Should a Subaltern Speak? Reading the Problem of Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.' Sukanya Mondal and Rashmi Gaur.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, December 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

wants the government to be more humanitarian. Ashok Mitra, the noted Marxist economist who was the Finance Minister of West Bengal at that time, and Amiya Kumar Samanta (Superintendent of Police) also write articles on the same issue but they never admit that any kind of atrocity has ever been exercised against the settlers. The journalists and free-lance social workers also write articles whose sympathy is for the cause of the settlers but the details vary. In fact, within the novel itself the question of agency is broached. Nirmal, in spite of being from the strata of bhadralok, is not sure about the reception of his journal. Thus when he writes, ‘You will have greater claim to world’s ear than I have,’ he admits that everyone, even if s/he is from the elite or middleclass part of the society might not have the authority to speak. By keeping faith in Kanai’s ability to publicize the refugees’ tragic fate in Morichjhanpi, Nirmal ascertains the necessity of the dissemination of the subaltern’s fate and history to the rest of the world. Priya Kumar argues that by portraying the deaths of both Fokir and Kusum, Ghosh forecloses any possibility of subaltern agency, but it may be counter-argued that Ghosh in this novel, tries to situate the subaltern in a position which does not let them have any agency or speak for themselves and it is the elite society which mechanizes such a situation. Even Nirmal’s journal does not have the agency of Kanai’s proposed book.

As the perspectives of the afore-mentioned real-life writers vary, in the novel too, the characters have different points of view. Piya’s perspective is completely different from those of Nirmal and Kanai. She is more scrutinizing in her visual observation and about the tones in which words are uttered because she cannot understand the language. After all, the tones are quite similar across the languages. It is not always the words through which feelings are expressed or messages are conveyed, but sometimes silence becomes more meaningful than the words. Ghosh shows through Piya’s experience how, at times, silence becomes an armour to deflect the indifferent superciliousness of the elites. In her first visit to Fokir’s and Moyna’s residence, Piya asks Kanai if he can make Fokir take part in the conversation as he is very much reticent and it is Fokir to whom Piya is very grateful. Kanai tries to initiate a conversation by telling him that he knew Fokir’s mother. But the way he starts his speech, ‘Ha re Fokir; do you know me? I’m Mashima’s nephew,’ does not work. Here, the very word with which he begins his speech ‘ha re’ is indicative of the speaker’s low esteem for the person he is speaking to. ‘Ha re’ is a very common word used in domestic conversations in Bengali, but it is rude to address someone who is almost a stranger. In this case, Fokir, instead of continuing the conversation, goes further inside his shell. Here Ghosh also shows that language cannot be a barrier to understanding a person’s situation. Piya is also from the elite part of society, and in addition to that she does not understand Bengali, yet she can clearly perceive what has been exchanged between Kanai and Fokir:

She hadn’t understood what had passed between the two men, but there was no mistaking the condescension in Kanai’s voice as he was speaking to Fokir; it was the kind of tone in which someone might address a dimwitted waiter, at once jocular and hectoring. It didn’t surprise her that Fokir had responded with what was clearly his instinctive mode of defence: silence.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 210.

In fact, Nirmal, who is so enthusiastic about the matters of the so-called downtrodden and marginalized people, does not actually ever try to look at their lives from their perspective. At times, his elitist way of dismissing the subaltern culture is revealed. When Kanai first comes to know about the deity Bon Bibi from Kusum, he asks Nirmal about it. Nirmal's response is dismissive: 'Nirmal waved him airily away. "It's just a tale they tell around here. Don't bother yourself with it. It's just false consciousness; that's all it is."' <sup>26</sup> Nirmal is, therefore, one of those methodical Marxists, despised by Antonio Gramsci, who theorize every aspect of the Proletariat culture. Here lies the problem in an elite representing the subaltern. Pablo Mukherjee in his essay on *The Hungry Tide* points to the same problem: the myths that the marginal people believe in are apparently ludicrously meaningless to the urban people. In this case, the Bon Bibi myth is about a deity who is believed to be the presiding goddess of the jungle by the local fisher-folk and others who have to frequent the jungle for their livelihood. The interesting fact about this deity is that her origin is, as the local people of the Sundarbans believe, Arabia. She along with her brother, Shah Jongoli travelled to the Gangetic delta of Bengal. It was deep forest at that time and Dokkhin Rai, the god of the tigers, had his reign over this place. Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai had a fight. Dokkhin Rai lost, but Bon Bibi was so generous that she let Dokkhin Rai have his rule over a part of the delta. According to the treaty it was decided that in Bon Bibi's territory, people would have their habitation and in Dokkhin Rai's part, tigers would have theirs. <sup>27</sup> Precisely, this is a story of man's fight with nature to claim more space. Like many other mythological stories, it also claims a space in the public imagination and memory. What might be of interest to an urban person without any knowledge about this place and the local culture is the communal syncretism in their beliefs, which are almost non-existent in the urban space.

The syncretism in religious practices in this Mangrove area bears a discreet signature of subaltern ideology. Piya hears Fokir uttering 'Allah' several times at the shrine of Bon Bibi. Though she does not understand any other word in the prayer, she perceives the mode of the prayer to be a Hindu one. Fokir's religious affiliation is Hindu by birth, but like many other of the fisher-folk community in the Sundarbans, he believes in the greatness of Bon Bibi. And Bon Bibi is not a goddess to be found in the Brahminic Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses. Here this trend exhibits exactly what Gramsci describes regarding the subaltern's customization of the religion of the elite. According to Gramsci, religion for the subalterns does not always work as a false consciousness, but it contributes to their method of rationalizing things in everyday life. <sup>28</sup>

### **The subaltern and the ecological issue**

The subaltern people, whether they are the poor fisher-folk of the Sundarbans or the tribal people resisting the 'development projects' of the government in many places of India, do not think about the sustenance of the ecosystem in the way the people from 'civil' society think. There is an inherent syncretism in their lifestyle both in regards to religious matters as well as ecology.

<sup>26</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 101.

<sup>27</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 39.

<sup>28</sup> David Arnold, 'Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India,' *Mapping the Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi (New York: Verso, 2000) 32.

'In Whose Voice Should a Subaltern Speak? Reading the Problem of Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.' Sukanya Mondal and Rashmi Gaur.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, December 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

The Bon Bibi shrine, which Fokir returns to again and again is first shown to him by his mother Kusum. He goes there to pay homage to the deity but at the same time the school of *sush*, the *Orcella* which frequent this area, somehow seem to be the messengers of the deity to Fokir. The kind of religion Fokir and the other people of his community in the Sundarbans practise is in stark contrast with the Brahminical version of Hinduism. Praying to Bon Bibi is one such example through which the religious autonomy is evident among the subalterns in the Sundarbans. For example, Ranajit Guha mentions the ceremonies held to invoke rain at the time of drought and of organizing puja to ward off the evil during an epidemic, as subaltern practices which they developed on their own and had not taken on cue from the elites.<sup>29</sup>

The incident of Morichjhanpi is a focal point around which the novel develops. The refugee settlers are evacuated by the Police Force in 1979 in order to protect the mangrove and the wildlife. It is a historical irony that when *The Hungry Tide* was published, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the West Bengal government led by the Left (the same political coalition who were in the ruling government in 1978) and the Sahara India Parivar – a private corporate agency. Sahara India declared an intention to build a five-star tourism infrastructure in the Sundarbans.<sup>30</sup>

Ghosh shows the different modes in the relation between the elite and the subaltern, especially when they are in conversation. In his first address to Fokir, Kanai uses ‘tui,’ which in Bengali, is indicative of disrespect. Fokir always sticks to ‘apni,’ indicative of respect, until they reach Garjontola. There Fokir starts addressing Kanai as ‘tui.’<sup>31</sup> The elite/subaltern divide or the hierarchy of power where the elite is considered to be the superior seems relative at this point. Kanai, in spite of his knowledge of six languages, is powerless in the jungle, whereas unlettered Fokir knows the tricks to survive the jungle’s adverse conditions. Apparently in the everyday public domain, Kanai would be considered to have *power* in comparison with Fokir because the former has knowledge, which he derives from his institutional education. Fokir, although he does not have any academic experience, gains knowledge from his life on the river. The latter’s knowledge may be termed as a form of ‘subjugated knowledge’ (according to Michel Foucault). His knowledge does not receive recognition in the dominant discourse of knowledge, yet he knows the ecosystem of the Sundarbans apparently better than the urban-educated set.

Coming back to the Morichjhanpi issue, all the hubbub and government/settlers tension arises because of the ecological issue. The government emphasizes that the jungle is to be preserved at any cost. The novel’s stance seems to be slightly oblique regarding this matter and the humanitarian cause that has been prioritized. Gareth Griffiths accuses the novel of over-prioritizing human causes, but this novel actually cites an example when nature is destroyed not because of human greed but because of lack of empathy in human beings. The settlers who encroach in Morichjhanpi, a government territory, without permission, do so because they have no other way to survive. The atmosphere in Dandakaranya is so hostile that they come to the Sundarbans, a place where they can feel at home. If both the central and state governments had been proactive in solving the issue of the Hindu Bengali refugees from East Pakistan, the

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<sup>29</sup> Arnold 41.

<sup>30</sup> Anand 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 325.

problem would not have resulted. The governments, instead, are known to have reacted ruthlessly. Kanai points out the exact reason of this trend of some people's prioritizing animals over human beings:

'...it was people like you,' said Kanai, 'who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me –Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons. It's not hard to ignore the people who're dying – after all they are the poorest of the poor.'<sup>32</sup>

This is identified as the common practice with elite society in India. They ignore the problems of the subalterns. In his article 'Some Important Words about Morichjhanpi,' Sunil Gangopadhyay almost echoes Kanai's concern about the man versus ecology tension. Gangopadhyay wants the government not to take any coercive step against the refugees in the name of preserving forest. He writes:

...let the effort to subdue the refugees by the police force be stopped for some time. In the meantime, if a few tigers die, then let them die, if some trees are felled for wood in the jungle, then let them be felled. But let the people survive.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh presents how the voice of the subaltern, when it exists at all, is caught in the whirlwind of state, civil society, and neoliberal capital ideologies at present. It may be quite worthwhile to mention here how Hardt and Negri show in their seminal work *Empire*, that in the modern empire, there is no Rome, ie there is no centre that controls everything, but that in today's world the controlling force is all pervasive. It is not only the government that decides how things should work. The non-governmental agencies and the corporate sectors with their gigantic purchasing ability can influence many parts of society. At present, the state is not able to control everything centrally, but the flow of capital is to be found everywhere, thereby having a powerful influence. For example, Nilima's co-operative which works for the betterment of the poor people of the Sundarbans is aided by both governmental and non-governmental agencies, and Piya's research on Gangetic dolphins is funded by an international agency. Hardt and Negri discuss how the NGOs and such organisations work from below while the government works from above. They also assert that 'many NGOs serve to further the neoliberal project of global capital.'<sup>34</sup> In almost the same vein, in his most recent book, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh discusses how the equilibrium of the environment has been consecutively pushed to the threshold of collapse – first by colonialism and then by the all-encompassing influence of capital. Ghosh demonstrates how the establishment of the port of Canning in the Sundarbans in 1864 was profusely cautioned against by Henry Piddington, a ship

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<sup>32</sup> Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 301.

<sup>33</sup> Sunil Gangopadhyay, 'Morichjhapi Somporke Joruri Katha,' *Morichjhapi: Chhinno Desh, Chhinno Itihas* ed. Madhumay Pal (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2009) 67; translated by Mondal.

<sup>34</sup> Hardt and Negri 313.

inspector by profession and a meteorologist by passion, in 1853, but the colonial administration with their usual arrogant decision-making tendencies did not pay heed to that. The consequence was as miserable as it had been warned.<sup>35</sup> The ruin of Port Canning is still there to mock colonial myopic arrogance. In the current situation too, Ghosh observes that there are several coastal cities in the world which run the risk of fatal inundation, but because of the strong real-estate lobby everywhere, any information about the possible meteorological disaster is prevented from circulation.<sup>36</sup> It can be noted here that Piddington was indeed equipped with the pen and was English by birth, but still his plea addressed to the then governor-general was not paid heed to. At that time the colonial state was the supreme power.

Thus the complex network through which power works rarely allows the voice of dissent to be heard, when the voice emanates from the less powerful section of the society, even when there is no racial or linguistic barrier as such. Although a specific language as a medium of expression is problematized in this novel, and the linguistic differences between the elite and the subaltern are also showcased, at the same time, it is also pointed out that language cannot be a barrier between two persons with different linguistic abilities. This is evident in the relation between Piya and Fokir. In the novel, Nirmal writes for the refugees, and in reality, an eminent person like Sunil Gangopadhyay writes in support of them. But still their cause is not taken care of. Thus the novel raises the issue of the subaltern's own voice, and questions whether it should have been a subaltern armed with a pen, as then s/he could have put his/her cause more persuasively. Dipesh Chakrabarty comments that Derrida once said that voice was 'no guarantor of presence.'<sup>37</sup> In this novel, the very question of the voice the subaltern speaks in remains open-ended.

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<sup>35</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016) 76-8.

<sup>36</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 64.

<sup>37</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Subaltern Studies in Retrospect and Reminiscence,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38.1 (2015) 16.

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