

Life and Struggles of Subaltern in Ghosh's Novel *The Hungry Tide*

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Introduction

Subaltern denotes someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. The term subaltern derived its origin from Marxism, describes a person who is of lower rank in military or class or caste. They do not have political or economic power, and they live under dictatorship. The term subaltern in literature is related with the terms like masses, Dalit, deprived, oppressed, marginalized and neglected sections of society. It concerns about sociological, political, historical aspects of society.

This paper focuses on the life subaltern people through the novel *The Hungry Tide*, written by Amitav Ghosh which portrays the life of subaltern in between the sea and the plains of Bengal, tide and tigers. The term subaltern is derived from the Latin word *Subalternus*, ‘sub’ means next below and ‘alternus’ means every other. It has a remarkable development in Indian history during the partition of the country. Many have lost their homes and has become neglected sections of society. The meaning of the word subaltern has some changes, the adjective form denotes the oppressed people and noun form denotes a military rank next to captain. It is used to describe the peasants of the Indian freedom struggle and later it is included in theory of colonization. This novel shows the life of the suppressed people.

The Hungry Tide is a novel written by Amitav Ghosh an Indian author. His important works are *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*. He has won several awards like Sahitya Akademi Award, Ananda pushcar, and government has given him the civilian award Padma Shri. He has expressed his concern for the downtrodden people of Indian society in many of his novels. He has shown the problems of subaltern people like alienation, migration, and several other external crisis. In this novel he has portrayed the difficult situation of subaltern people. He has used the real incidents of life as theme in many of his novels. In *The Hungry Tide* he shows the effect of the partition of the country. An important critic of subaltern theory is Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak argues that subaltern people do not have voice, but Ghosh argues that the subaltern people will have voice if they have opportunity. In this novel life of subaltern is shown through characters like Fokir, Kusum. They are the dalit refugees of

Bangladesh who settled in Sundarbans, Westbengal. It portrays the event in Morichjhapi in 1979. The refugees from Bangladesh has been considered as offenders and government has ordered their execution. Morichjhapi incident, a brutal violence against subaltern is displayed in this novel.

When the novel begins we find the meeting of Kanai-Dutt a translator and Piyali Raj a cetologist from USA. Kanai is going to meet his aunt Nilima who is running Badabon trust for the downtrodden people in one of the islands of Sundarbans. Piyali is going there for her study of dolphins. Kanai is going to get a journal, written by his uncle Nirmal Bose for him. He has been to canning when he was young, now he is going back there again after several years. Piya is a Indian by birth but she has settled in USA she doesn't know Bengali. After reaching canning Piya hires a guide and guard, she hopes that they could direct her to the dolphins. In her attempt she falls in the river and Fokir a fisherman rescues her. He directs her to the place where dolphins are found. Fokir doesn't know English but they manage to do the best they can to communicate.

The place Lusibari where Badabon trust is located is a pidgin version of Lucy's House, a British officer has named it so in memory of his wife. He has welcomed the impoverished people to come and populate the place, and he has tried to form a society free from caste system and tribal nationalism. The poor people has heeded his call. Nirmal and Nilima arrive in Lusibari after their marriage and they organize a school for unprivileged of Lusibari. Kanai comes to know about his childhood friend Kusum, she has been abandoned by her mother, who is one of the subaltern in that island. She has been married to Ragen but he died in a train accident and Fokir is their son. Kanai gets the journal written by his uncle from his aunt, he goes through the note.

Ghosh often use some form of note or letter to narrate the past events, here he uses the letter written by Nirmal to narrate the history of downtrodden people. This note narrates the Morichjhapi incident. Kusum a helpless woman is one of the affected ones in that incident. Kanai knows her as a teenage girl. By reading Nirmal's notebook Kanai comes to know that Kusum is dead in that incident. Morichjhapi incident refers to historical event that happened in West Bengal where the Bangladeshi refugees are forcibly evicted from the island. After the partition in 1947 Bangladeshi Hindu people settled in Sundarbans.

The left parties who are the opposite party request the government to accept the and to provide them shelter. During this time forty thousand refugees settled in Morichjhapi ,Sundarbans a part of the protected island under Reserve Forest Act. So government asked the refugees to leave the island. But they refused, so West Bengal government imposed economic blockade on them. They stopped the supply of food and water to them. Settlers attacked the police camp and police fired on them. One of the settlers crossed the river and informed the press about the economic blockade becomes a big issue and Calcutta High Court has ordered the government to withdraw the economic blockade. Then government started the forcible eviction and many people died in the incident, they prevented the press from entering in to the island.

Ghosh tries to portray this incident in this novel through the character of Kusum, she is depicted as a woman died in that incident. Kusum is a girl from Sateleja her father has been killed by the tiger and her mother abandoned her. Because her mother doesn't get any help from the government and she has to earn money by some means. A land owner has sold her to a brothel house in the name of a job. He tries the same with Kusum at that time Horen saves her and takes her to the women's trust of Nilima. Then Kusum marries Ragen, they have a son named Fokir. They find Kusum's mother in a pathetic situation in the brothel house, they rescues her from there. But she dies within three months.

Rajen dies in a train accident leaving Kusum and Fokir alone. Then she comes to know that a group of people are moving towards the east along the Railway track, she joins them and settles in Morichjhapi. When government tries to evict them she actively participates in the movement.

During the economic blockade she suffers a lot, the worst thing is hunger and thirst. At the end of the struggle she sends Fokir with Horen, at the last day many including women are raped and killed and has been thrown in to the water. Kusum is one among them. Ghosh narrates all this events in the form a note written by Nirmal. When he comes to know about the refugees he feels pity on them and often visits the island. He tries to help them, he stayed with them. After that tragedy he wants to reveal it to the world, so he writes the incidents in his notebook and gives it to Horen and asks him to give that to Kanai and no one else. Because of the effect of the incident he dies.

As the media and press are banned from the island, the incident is not known to the world. The number of deaths according to official record is two but the news presented by the newspapers at that time says that it is up to one thousand.

The migrants of Morichjhapi island are outside the hegemony that is without any political leadership. They are helpless and voiceless and they fall under subaltern category. Fokir is one of the subaltern who helps the visitors. He accompanies Piya in her search for dolphins. They are stranded in a storm, there Fokir loses his life in his attempt to save Piya. Kanai and Piya decides to settle in the island and to help the downtrodden people of Lusibari. Morichjhapi incident is a public history, to present that Ghosh has used the private history of Kusum, through this he tries to reveal that incident to the world. Here Ghosh has used Nirmal's notebook as a device to narrate the private history of Kusum.

Ghosh tries to bring out the silenced voice of the migrants of Morichjhapi, and he gives voice to the subaltern people like Kusum. Through this novel *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh shows social, political, economic and cultural issues of subaltern people. Tiger killing Kusum's father, Fokir's vulnerability towards state officials depicts the subaltern and marginalized people that is neglected people of Sundarbans. This novel shows the Ghosh's concern for the downtrodden people, his subaltern consciousness is compared to the subaltern consciousness of Nirmal.

Kanai at beginning of the novel stands outside detaching himself from the story but later he enters the scenario after reading his uncle's notebook. Nirmal represents a poet who have interest in subaltern people, Fokir represents their faith in a supportive force beyond a destructive force. Ghosh is more focused on the personal lives of people than on the massive historical sweep that serves as the backdrop. As he argues, he tries to bring out the voice of subaltern to the ears of public, through the characters like Kusum and Fokir.

Kusum struggles through out her life, her father, mother abandons her she lives in a trust but without peace, she fights for her rights and dies without gaining anything. Even Fokir doesn't get that rights and dies in an attempt to save Piya, this shows the kindness of subaltern people. Even though they suffer they try to help others.

The voice of subaltern is hided from the public ears by some authorities in Morichjhapi, Ghosh tries to bring that voice out to the ears of public. Subaltern can given voice through such contribution. In this novel *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh tries to portray the life and struggles of subaltern people of Morichjhapi village who has come from Bangladesh after the partition. These refugees are affected by the caste system and political dominance.

Abolition of caste system and preventing such political dominance can give relief to subaltern. The government which is a dominant power should try to use it's power in a constructive manner. Thus Ghosh depicts the life and struggles of subaltern in his novel *The Hungry Tide*.

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