History and/or a Sense of Place:  
Reading Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*  

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Like all serious academics, let me begin in a theoretical way. In his seminal essay entitled “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics,” Mikhail Bakhtin analyzes the nature of the artistic chronotope thus:

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope (1981:84).

As in most of his earlier novels, in *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Amitav Ghosh exemplifies the Bakhtinian model of interweaving time, plot and history in a deft manner. He interweaves his narrative by bringing in the history of Nilima and Nirmal’s arrival at Lucibari, which, historically speaking, was part of the estate of Sir Daniel Hamilton. But more significantly, through Nirmal’s diary (who himself died in the brutal assault), Ghosh describes in graphic details Nirmal’s subsequent involvement in the activities of Morichjhapi. Roughly translated as the “pepper island,” this refers to a particular island in the Sunderbans where long ago (1979 to be exact) some homeless people died of hunger and bullet wounds while resisting the policies of the then West Bengal Government. Many people of Bengal still recollect the actual facts and the political machinations when a group of East Bengal refugees left Dandakaranya and tried to settle in Morichjhapi but were once again forced to abandon that island. Discussing the relevance of presenting historical facts in a work of fiction, this paper will highlight how Ghosh embeds the real history of the Sunderbans with the make-believe world of his novel so skillfully that one cannot ultimately identify how much of it is fact and how much fiction.

Before delving into the manner in which Ghosh has used history in this novel, it would be useful to reiterate the definition of the historical novel. Speaking about Mahasweta Devi’s historical discourse, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak defines ‘historical
fiction’ as history imagined into fiction. The division between fact (historical event) and fiction (literary event) she states, is operative in all Mahasweta’s moves:

Indeed, her repeated claim to legitimacy is that she researches thoroughly everything she represents in fiction. Fiction of this sort relies for its effect on its ‘effect of the real.’ The plausibility of [her characters] is that they could have existed as subalterns in a specific historical moment imagined and tested by orthodox assumptions… Those who read or write literature can claim as little of subaltern status as those who read or write history. The difference is that the subaltern as object is supposed to be imagined in one case and real in another. I am suggesting that it is a bit of both in both cases. The writer acknowledges this by claiming to do research (my fiction is also historical). The historian might acknowledge this by looking at the mechanics of representation (my history is also fictive) (1997: 77-78).

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh, like Mahasweta Devi, blurs the boundary between both these categories. He frees himself from the obligation to create the ostensible mood of objectivity sought by most factual reporting. Take the case of Sir Daniel Hamilton. A Scotsman by birth, this high level British official served in Bengal for a long time and somehow fell in love with the region. He could feel the tragedy in the lives of the people that arose primarily due to poverty. So after his retirement, instead of going back to Scotland with all his savings, he took lease of three islands in the Sunderbans from the then government. These islands of Gosaba, Satjelia and Rangabelia then gradually came to be known as ‘Hamilton’s laat.’ [Hamilton’s Estate]. Hamilton decided that he would turn this snake, tiger and crocodile infested region into a land where civilized people could reside, a land where all people would be treated as equals. It would be a place devoid of hunger, illiteracy, and unemployment. With all his life savings he built up a free school, charitable hospital, cooperative bank, rice mill etc. The aims and achievements of his rural development project was later recorded in his book, *New India and How to Get There*. It was of course unfortunate that his utopian settlement could never really succeed because he had ignored the historical realities of class and his knowledge of the land and its people was insufficient. In the novel, Ghosh incorporates this information thus: “When the Scotsman looked upon the crab-covered shores of the tide country, he saw not mud, but something that shone brighter than gold” (49). While showing the young Kanai around the house at Lusibari, Nirmal tells him the history of “Hamilton House” built by Lucy’s uncle Sir Daniel MacKinnon Hamilton.
“And who was he?”
“You really want to know?”
“Yes.”
“All right, then. Listen… Now that you have asked you’ll have to listen. And pay attention, for all of this is true” (40). [emphasis mine].

The first question that comes to our mind is do we really need historical truth in a work of fiction? In other words, is veracity a prerequisite for fiction? In the “Author’s Note” at the end of the novel, Ghosh states:

The characters of this novel are fictitious as are its two principal settings, Lucibari and Garjontola. However, the secondary locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhapi and Emilybari do indeed exist and were indeed founded or settled in the manner alluded to here (401).

Ghosh also bases the character of Nirmal partly on his own uncle who was headmaster of Rural Reconstruction Institute, the high school founded by Sir Daniel Hamilton in Gosaba and for some years before his untimely death, in 1967, he was also the Manager of the Hamilton Estate. In an interview given to Ramya Ramamurthy, Ghosh narrates how the novel originated in his mind. Among the “two factors that triggered the novel” the first one was that “an uncle of mine went to live in the Sunderbans in 1948 and he inspired me to start thinking about the place” (2004). In a chapter narrating how Nirmal and Nilima arrived in the Sunderbans in 1950, fearing persecution by the police in Calcutta, Ghosh reminds his readers that “in the tide country, where life was lived on the margins of greater events, it was useful also to be reminded that no place was so remote as to escape the flood of history” (77). The Hamilton estate that Nirmal and Nilima came to had fallen into decrepitude and was crippled by lawsuits. As a schoolmaster, Nirmal’s sympathies had always remained with the leftists and the diary that he had left behind also elucidates his socialist beliefs.

As Banibrata Mahanta rightly points out, at a complex level, Kanai serves as a conduit to the history of the Sunderbans as the reader and interpreter of Nirmal’s diary, which calls for a reassessment of history. Hamilton’s failure, his ignorance of history and nature is replicated in the case of Nirmal. Nirmal aligns himself with the dispossessed refugees of Morichjhapi in order to realize his dream of changing the world through revolution. He fails because like Hamilton, he too functions on ideologies that ignore
local history, society and nature. His revolution ignores the larger historical reality of the Partition which has produced the refugees at Morichjhapi. Nirmal also forgets that he is in a land where people exhaust themselves in their struggle to exist. Taking neither historical reality nor natural factors into account and functioning on the dictum “revolution or nothing,” Nirmal looks like a misfit. Like Hamilton, Nirmal too dreamt of a society where “men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening” (53). He attempted to achieve all this through a ‘revolution.” Both men ignored the historical circumstances of the people and natural terrain thus ending in failure. (Mahanta 100-01).

Through Nirmal’s diary again, Ghosh subtly narrates historical facts through his account of Henry Piddington, Lord Canning and the port town on the Matla River. Kanai narrates this to Piya with a focus on the shortsighted idea of development carried on by governments, scientists and surveyors with scant attention to the natural demands of the terrain. The failure of Port Canning in 1867 as predicted by Henry Piddington proves that man’s idea of development when divorced from an understanding of nature paves the way for destruction of human life and poverty.

Apart from this factual documentation, Ghosh significantly blends fact with fiction through the narration of the Morichjhapi incident. Part One of the novel has a chapter entitled “Morichjhapi” (116-127) and it is a name not many are familiar with. As a part of the post-Partition refugee influx, many poor and homeless people had been hounded out from a similar terrain in Bangladesh and repatriated to the parched lands of Dandakaranya in central India. These people decided to travel all the way to the forested marshlands of the Gangetic delta, especially to this particular island called Morichjhapi, in search of land and livelihood, but were evicted all over again in spite of the fact that the then Left Front Government of West Bengal had given them assurances that they would be given land and shelter in the Sunderbans. In The Hungry Tide Amitav Ghosh interweaves his narrative by involving Nirmal in the activities of Morichjhapi, the form of whose diary encompasses the objectivity of journalism and the intimacy of a memoir.
When Kanai starts reading Nirmal’s diary, he sees that there was a date in the top left-hand corner, written in English: May 15, 1979, 5.30 a.m. The first few lines read thus:

I am writing these words in a place that you will probably never have heard of: an island on the southern edge of the tide country, a place called Morichjhapi…

(67)

As Nilima explains to Kanai:

Morichjhapi…was a tide-country island…In 1978, it happened that a great number of people suddenly appeared in Morichjhapi…Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built bundhs 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 learnt that they were refugees 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 both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes (118).

However since the government was strongly opposed to any settlement at Morichjhapi, Nilima clarified that “the government [was] going to take measures. Very strong measures” (252). In the ‘Author’s Note’ section at the end of the novel, Ghosh refers to an article by Ross Mallick as the only published historical treatment available in English on the Morichjhapi incident. Highlighting the conflict between environment preservation and development, Mallick states that the investigation into the massacre of the refugees “led in a political direction” and “raised questions of secular institutional failures and how Untouchables and other marginalized peoples were being presented in Indian studies by those claiming to represent them” (1999:104).

Probing a little deeper into the historical context of this event, we are made aware that the events leading up to the massacre actually revealed a trail of communal and class conflict that had its roots many centuries earlier. After the Partition, the Untouchables became politically marginalized minorities in both countries. The failure of the Congress government to grant them squatters’ ownership and its attempts at eviction provided the Communist opposition with a ready following among the refugees, who gradually came to be organized by Communist front organizations. Since these refugees came from lower classes, they lacked the means to survive on their own and became dependent on government relief. They had to accept the government policy of dispersing them to other
states on the claim that there was insufficient vacant land available in West Bengal. In this period the left-dominated opposition took up the case of the refugees and demanded the government settle them within their native Bengal rather than scatter them across India on the lands of other peoples. The Communist Party leader, Jyoti Basu, in prophetic words stated that it would not be “an easy administrative affair to get rid of the refugees from their colonies” in West Bengal, and a “united movement would make it impossible for the government to carry out the bill’s [eviction] provisions.” In 1977 when the Dandakaranya refugees decided to come and settle in the Sunderbans, the Left Front government was already in power and they reversed the erstwhile declared policies. Many of the refugees were arrested and returned to the resettlement camps. The remaining refugees managed to slip through the police cordons, reaching their objective of Morichjhapi island where settlement began. By their own efforts they established a viable fishing industry, salt pans, a health center, and schools over the following year. Though they did not ask for any money from the government, the state government was not disposed to tolerate such settlement, stating that the refugees were “in unauthorized occupation of Morichjhapi which is a part of the Sunderbans Government Reserve Forest violating thereby the Forest Acts”(Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department 1979).

The rest of the history as described by Ross Mallick and other historians is rather pathetic. With no national party to take up their cause, the Untouchable Namashudras were indeed without powerful allies. On January 27, 1979, the government prohibited all movement into and out of Morichjhapi under the Forest Preservation Act and also promulgated Section 144 of the Criminal Penal Code, making it illegal for five or more persons to come together at any given time. When police actions failed to persuade the refugees to leave, the State Government ordered the forcible evacuation of the refugees, which took place from May 14 to May 16, 1979. Muslim gangs were hired to assist the police as it was thought Muslims would be less sympathetic to refugees from Muslim-ruled Bangladesh. At least several hundred men, women, and children were said to have been killed in the operation and their bodies dumped in the river. The CPM congratulated its participant members on their successful operation at Morichjhapi and made their refugee policy reversal explicit stating that “there was no possibility of giving shelter to
these large number of refugees under any circumstance in the State” (CPM West Bengal State Committee, 1982). In a final twist to the episode, the CPM settled its own supporters in Morichjhapi, occupying and utilizing the facilities left by the evicted refugees. Prafulla K. Chakrabarti in his seminal book *The Marginal Men* gives us further details and socio-political repercussions:

Even if it is admitted that the refugees should not have left Dandakaranya in so sudden a manner after selling out everything they had, the Left Front Government should have shown some more consideration for those whose total participation in the Left’s struggle against the Establishment and whose kith and kin in West Bengal voting correctly for the Left Front enabled it to hit the Writers’ Building [take state power]…the Marxist Government had no compunction in driving out precisely those refugees who, according to their own statistical evaluation of the amount of surplus lad available in West Bengal, could have been absorbed in West Bengal. (434)

In *The Hungry Tide*, Nilima makes us aware, as Ross Mallick did, that these people were more unfortunate as they belonged to the Scheduled Castes – they were Dalits or what was earlier known as the Harijans. These “Untouchables refugees were very different from the upper-caste, middle-class urban refugees of the immediate post-independence period, who were educated, well-connected, and politically influential” (Mallick 108). Ghosh gives us a graphic description of the resistance that the refugees tried to put up. Many were killed trying to resist the police forces, and the women raped. After the gunshot was fired into the air, Nirmal like many others felt that the settlers would turn their backs:

> In our heart of hearts we prayed they would. But what happened instead was something unforeseen: the people in the boat joined together their voices and began to shout, in unison, ‘Amra kara? Bastuhara. Who are we? We are the dispossessed.’....Then we heard the settlers shouting a refrain, answering the questions they had themselves posed: ‘Morichjhapi chharona. We’ll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may’ (254).’

With his own strong socialist leanings, Nirmal feels that his home is among the refugees and that it is impossible to abandon them. With Rilke’s verse showing him the way, he internalizes the struggle of the refugees whose exodus never stops in history:

> Standing on the deck of the bhotbhoti, I was struck by the beauty of this. Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave. I joined my feeble voice to theirs: ‘Morichjhapi chharona!’ (254).
One of the steps that the Left Front Government of West Bengal adopted during the Morichjhapi operation was to hush up the whole thing as much as possible. Thus nothing concrete was ever known about the brutal assault on the settlers. Morichjhapi was declared out of bounds for everyone including the journalists and reporters. In the novel, while reading Nirmal’s diary, Kanai asks Horen, the local boatman about the incidents in Morichjhapi. Initially Horen in an indifferent way replies, “I know no more than anyone else knows. It was all just rumour”(278). A little later, Horen recalls, “…they burnt the settlers’ huts, they sank their boats, they laid waste to their fields. Women were used and then thrown into the rivers, so that they would be washed away by the tides”(279). Eventually, a whole bustling settlement was razed to the ground within a few weeks. Thus we find that apart from depicting the remarkable acts of courage and resistance by people who were poor, helpless, deprived and dispossessed, Ghosh has managed to retrieve a forgotten chapter of partition history. Like historians of subaltern studies, he has shown openness, factual authenticity and compassion that instigate us to look into certain facets of post-partition politics. As in his earlier novels, displacement becomes a leitmotif in The Hungry Tide also. When an interviewer Amulya Gopalakrishnan asked Ghosh about the Morichjhapi story and whether it can change minds more effectively than flag-waving activism can, he replied:

Oh, I’m very aware of the limits of being a writer. But your critique of the world is reflected in everything you do. For me, Morichjhapi was inescapable. I’m concerned with the dilemma of how to balance human needs with nature. In India, the state seems to be so rigid, throwing people out, working under the assumption that they are wicked people with some perverse criminal instinct. But they are so terribly poor, braving the forest for nothing more than some honey. These are some of the poorest people in the world (2004: 75).

Thus it becomes clear that the form of The Hungry Tide is both journalistic and novelistic. At the same time, though the novel is history, the facts are not always recounted in simple chronological order and Ghosh presents each incident at the point of the narrative where it is most relevant and dramatically effective.

Before concluding, I want to digress a little on the significance of the Morichjhapi incident via-a-vis Indian political history. It is true that as an anthropologist Ghosh found special interest and retrieved this long-forgotten or rather lesser-known history of
subaltern resistance and embedded its facts in his fiction. Though there isn’t much research material available on this subject in English [apart from the in-depth study by Ross Mallick and an unpublished 1992 dissertation by Nilanjana Chatterjee, both acknowledged as sources at the end of the novel], Morichjhapi has been referred to off and on in several Bengali publications, and in often different contexts. For example, in a forty-page pamphlet called Roktakto Morichjhapi: Udbastu Gonohotyar Abhishapta Kahini [“Bloody Morichjhapi: A Haunted Story of Refugee Genocide”] published on 6th September 1996 to celebrate the “19th Morichjhapi Day” by the North-24 Paraganas District unit of West Bengal Bahujan Samaj Party, Morichjhapi becomes an iconic example of Indian caste politics. Apart from painstakingly recording several journalistic and historical documents related to the incident, the author, who calls himself Bhimraj [Journalist], primarily blames the upper-class political leaders for the tragedy. According to him Morichjhapi “is still filled with the bloodshed and sighs of the Shudras” (5; translation mine). Requesting the future generation not to forget the atrocities inflicted upon the Untouchables, the writer also eulogizes the sacrifices made by the undaunted leaders of the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee. Interestingly, he then turns the whole issue into present day political activism, asking all downtrodden and untouchable men and women to rise up on the occasion:

That good time has arrived for all the Shudras, Dalits and members of the Bahujan Samaj in India to rise up and create an intense public opinion against these Stalinists who killed innocent Shudra refugees at random, threw innocent children into the river and raped young mothers and sisters. Today we have a king, a leader and a political party. Can’t the Bahujan Samaj all unite now, shout the “Jai Bheem” slogan, clutch the blue flag in our hands and call in unison, “Come let us visit Morichjhapi?” (6; translation mine).

Coming to even more contemporary times, Morichjhapi has once again been retrieved from the long-forgotten pages of history vis-a-vis the governmental policies in West Bengal related to the forcible acquisition of land from farmers and selling it to multinationals and industrialists to set up factories. Since February 2007 the Left Front Government’s actions in Singur and Nandigram under the leadership of the present Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya has led to a deluge of protests by people from all walks of life. Local newspapers are flooded with comments, criticism, opinions for, as well as against, such moves. What is interesting is the fact that in a large number of these
articles and reports, there are comparative analyses of the present event with that of Morichjhapi. One example will elucidate the matter further. In a front-page column entitled “Erporh?” [“What Next?”] published on 10th February 2007 in the Bengali newspaper Dainik Statesman, Mahasweta Devi, in her unstinted criticism of governmental action states:

What I am writing now is exactly how I have understood the situation. Along with Singur, the task of uprooting man from the soil is going on everywhere. A tree uprooted from its roots dies, so does the farmer…Buddha is a liar. Today there was a journalist from Maharashtra. He has read the statements of Buddha in English where I have been accused of agitating against industrialization. On hearing this, I told him that in this state lies were being cultivated in the name of industry…He asked me whether Jyoti Basu was different from this man.

How do I make people understand? So I had to narrate the incidents of Morichjhapi. I do not know whether this generation has heard the name of Morichjhapi. If I analyze the source of this name, this is how it stands.

In order to support her point of view, Mahasweta then quotes from a book called Morichjhapir Kanna [The Tears of Morichjhapi] by Shibnath Chowdhuri that lucidly explains the entire history of that subaltern resistance.

“After the Partition, the uprooted refugees were sent outside Bengal to Dandyakaranya. During that time many eminent people including members of the undivided Communist Party and other leftist parties had opposed the move. After the partition fifty lakh refugees came to West Bengal. Out of that forty-seven lakh people arranged for rehabilitation on their own. About three lakh refugees needed to be resettled.”

But three lakh refugees remained in Dandyakaranya. I have further read in this book that in 1975. Jyoti Basu had gone to address a meeting at Bhilai…On 17.12.1977 Jyoti Basu stated: “If the refugees want to live without any help from the government, they can do so.” He also informed that if they came to West Bengal, the police would not act in the manner that they did during the Congress regime. The refugees from Dandyakaranya started coming to West Bengal from March 1978 onwards. They advanced up to Hasnabad when the state police and party cadres started inflicting unspeakable torture upon them. It was then that with the help of a particular reckless minister these people landed at Morichjhapi in the Sunderbans. They built a eight-to-ten feet high and thirty-mile long embankment. They built houses, primary and secondary schools, markets, hospitals and roads. They sank tubewells, developed bidi factories and bakeries, and even wood and handloom industries. If Morichjhapi remained as it was then, it would be a worth visiting place.

After this, Jyoti Basu’s police force tortured these people, killed them, sank their launches and forced them to return to Dandyakaranya. Narrating that story will leave this article incomplete. I am writing all these things today because if Jyoti
Basu did it very crudely, Buddha is doing the same thing now in a more cunning way. So Buddha is behaving in such an uncivilized manner today and the word ‘man/human being’ has no value for him. (2007: 1 & 5. translation mine).

The purpose of including such a long extract from Mahasweta Devi’s article here (which is reiterated in many such indictments by Sunanda Sanyal and other intellectuals) is to come back once again to Amitav Ghosh and his treatment of subaltern history in *The Hungry Tide*. When the novel was published in 2005, the Morichjhapi incident seemed to most readers a unique piece of a micro-event in Bengal’s long political history. But somehow, by blending fact and fiction in his own signature fashion, the author has unknowingly stoked the embers of post-partition politics in the subcontinent. Morichjhapi is raising new issues, thoughts and ideas for us today.

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