



Representing social justice in contemporary Indian literature: A comparative study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tides*

Tanaya Mandal

Department of English, Netaji Subhas Open University, West Bengal, India

Abstract

This article intends to show the issue of social justice as presented in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tides* (2004) whereby, the novels are analysed using an ecocritical approach in order to reveal how literature portrays several environmental problems emerging from the influence of colonialism, displacement, class-caste conflict, and migration along with identity crisis. The novels set in postcolonial India, critique the sociocultural and economic structures that perpetuate inequality and marginalisation. These novels also carefully represent how people and nature can be helpful to each other and in some ways dependent on each other for their own needs. There is no doubt that people take advantage of natural resources for their own benefits quite often. Through a comparative analysis, this article highlights the authors' exploration of caste, class, and environmentalism, demonstrating their commitment to social justice.

Keywords: Social Justice, Ecocriticism, Postcolonial India, Caste and Class Conflict, Environmentalism

Introduction

The God of Small Things and *The Hungry Tides* are two significant works of Indian English Literature that explore the complexities of social justice. Arundhati Roy's novel is a powerful critique of the caste system, and class hierarchy in Kerala, while Amitav Ghosh's work explores the intersection of environmentalism, migration, and identity in the Sundarbans. Present article plans to comparatively analyse the concerning issues of social justice as represented in the above mentioned novels. The texts lack literary similarities but the theme revolves around the class-caste conflict causing the suffering of the marginal people as well as the influence of human beings in the disruption of the ecological balance.

Roy's novel opens with the return of two of its main characters, dizygotic twins who twenty-three years earlier were embroiled in the traumatic events surrounding two deaths in 1969 involving a Syrian Christian family who live in Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala. The family was the descendant of the eminent Father E. John Ipe who was blessed by the patriarch of Antioch. The family prospered during colonial rule, as landowners and government bureaucrats. The family comes to a crisis when in 1969 during the Christmas holidays, it is learned that Ammu, the divorced daughter of the family is engaged in a sexual liaison with a worker in the family's pickle factory, an untouchable paravan named Velutha. Events spiral out of control, and the crisis eventually leads to his murder by the police and the drowning death of Sophie Mol, a visiting cousin of the twins. Members of the family especially, the twins Estha and Rahel were affected by the deaths.

Ghosh's novel starts with Piyali Roy, a young Indian American cetologist who has come to the Sundarbans in search of an endangered river dolphin, which is very rare. On her way she falls off a boat into crocodile infested river and later is saved by Fokir, a local fisherman, Piya and Fokir did not understand each other's language yet they were attracted towards each other. Piya seeks Fokir's help in order to complete her research. Another character Kanai, a Delhi based businessman and translator who also has come

to the Sundarbans to claim the letter left for him by his uncle Nirmal who was killed in the massacre happened in the island of Morichjhapi. It is through the letter that Kanai discovers the socio-political mysteries of the island. Kanai gets to know that his uncle who was a communist in his youth, tried to fight to protect the refugees who hid in the island to protect themselves from the government. Piya, Fokir, and Kanai set off on their journey along with Horen, Nirmal and Nilima's friend who has a large boat. Suddenly the boat's engine died and had no other option but to take shelter in a village. That night the locals of that village captured a tiger, Piya tried to protect the tiger but Kanai stopped her by making her stand in front of the question, if the locals living here are less to her than the tiger. Later on Fokir and Piya went deep into the river trailing behind the dolphin. While on the boat Kanai and Horen learned that a major cyclone was approaching so they decided to leave and return later but they could not find Piya and Fokir and could not wait there all night as they wanted to save themselves. As the cyclone approached Piya and Fokir tied themselves with a tree where a flying object hit Fokir and somehow Piya navigated back to Lusibari, where she stayed for a few more weeks and decided to name the project after Fokir's name.

One of the striking similarities of these novels is that in both novels the narrative shifts from past to present, exploring different objectives of the respective novelists. In Roy's novel the past time is placed against the present in order to inquire the past happenings from a mature point of view and to show how past events shaped the present. Whereas, in Ghosh's novel the juxtaposition of past and present narrative highlights the chief conflict in the novels, the problems and issues of wilderness conservation and its related social costs in areas populated by socially and economically underprivileged both in the past and in present. Roy's novel is frequently praised for its sensitivity to social injustice. *The God of Small Things* is no exception. In the context of India, casteism is one such practice where injustice is done to an individual only because he/she belongs to a certain caste which is considered to be lower by the dominant group

of society. The practice of casteism is so much embedded in Indian culture that it transcends the religious boundary. In the novels the caste based oppression is not performed by any Hindu Brahmin or any other upper-class Hindu but by a Syrian Christian family. In this novel we see Velutha, a paravan, an untouchable with excellent physic and exceptional craftsmanship is denied all the opportunities to become an architect or civil engineer, only because of his lower class identity. His skills in carpentry were exploited by the Ayemenem household. He used to make and repair furniture for the house as well as the pickle factory without getting paid. He was not allowed to touch anything in the house. He was served food on a separate utensil. After Independence untouchability was prohibited by Article 17 of Indian Constitution but, in small regional areas it was still practiced rampantly because strong imperative actions on part of the government officials was still lacking. Therefore, when the secret relationship of upper-class Ammu, with an untouchable Velutha was exposed, Velutha was beaten to death by the police. Velutha's murder in police custody was well planned and well executed. Family members of Ayemenem house, police officers, even the communist party leader, comrade Pillai joined hands to structure a lie to justify Velutha's murder.

This novel also poses a subtle criticism of the communist party and its flagbearer. The Communist Party that preaches equality on the basis of merit, that denounces all kinds of classist casteist division, not only fails to achieve its goals but also becomes instrumental in continuing the prevailing injustice when it comes down to regional level implementation in the hands of leaders like comrade Pillai who outwardly preaches what his political ideology asks him to preach for satisfying his own interest, his own upliftment in the political ladder. But when it actually comes to his faith and belief, he speaks just like any other upper-class, upper-caste Hindu who denounces that an untouchable like Velutha cannot have any right.

This very concern is echoed in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tides*. The novel highlights how environmental and social justice are intertwined, particularly in postcolonial context. The novel gained critical attention of the literary critics primarily because of its presentation of world's largest ecosystem which is threatened by rapid globalization, and for his concern for the poor, hapless people who are to quote Antonio Gramsci, 'the subaltern' living in those areas, struggling strenuously against the oddities of their surroundings to earn their livelihoods. The portrayal of Morichjhapi massacre in the novels questions the class based discriminatory treatment of refugees on part of the state government. Multiple waves of refugees influx from erstwhile East Pakistan and Bangladesh have been seen since 1947 after the partition of India. The upper caste Hindu landed elite were the best equipped to relocate to India. The early refugees including urban middle class, rural middle class, agriculturist, and artisans with their economic prosperity and social networks were easily able to integrate with mainstream Calcutta society. They enjoyed a superior social status all over Bengal. Even the squatter colonies established by them were eventually legalized by the government. The experiences of the lower class and lower caste refugees belonging to the occupational castes categorised as leather workers, boatmen, fishermen, and social on, who were classified as untouchable in British Bengal, who came from 1950 onwards was drastically

different from that of their upper class, upper caste counterparts. These Dalit refugees faced unemployment, denial of their refugee status; They were forcibly rehabilitated to places away from Bengal, in Bettiah in Bihar, in Andaman and Nicobar islands, in Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh, where the surroundings were completely different from their native places. Accustomed to paddy cultivation in Bengal, the majority of the refugees found it increasingly difficult to cultivate the sparse and infertile soil. The Dalit refugees remained in their dispossessed condition, with negligible opportunity for integration and inadequate relief and infrastructure. With increasing discontent over their dismal conditions, the refugees began to consider leaving the settlement. The Communist Party of India opposed the state government's plans for solving the refugee problem and recommended refugee resettlement within Bengal mainly in the Sundarbans. Encouraged by the communist rhetoric many refugees began to move to the Sundarbans on their own. After 1977, the Left gaining power led to an increase in the refugee influx into the Sundarbans. Contrary to its policy statement till then, the government demanded that refugees must return to their camps. The decision was based on the dictum that the "refugees were in unauthorised occupation of Marichjhapi, which is a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest, violating thereby the Forest Acts" (Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department qtd. in Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement" 107). Refugees who had already reached the island experienced brutal police atrocities. Huts were torched, police launches patrolled the island, preventing the refugees from obtaining supplies, including food, water, and medicine. People were starved to death. Hungry and helpless, those who ventured out had to brave the police bullets. Groups were tear-gassed, boats were sunk and several people were arrested. This historical event is fictionally recounted through Nirmal's letter in the novel. The government's apathy and disregard to support this vulnerable community was due to the fact that they were illiterate, unconscious to claim their rights and too poor to matter.

The theme of both the texts are somehow relatable as both have eco-criticism in them along with socio-political scenarios. Ghosh shows the wrath of nature when something is done against it, whereas Roy puts more attention on the injustice against nature and its elements. It is highlighted in the novel through the contrasting past and present depiction of river Minachal that flows near the Ayemenem house. The river in which once in the flow of water currents Sophie Mol was drowned now with the junk and rubbish that have been dumped in it becomes a thin line of water. Ghosh's novel is also filled with plenty of rich narrative where social actions towards nature can be seen particularly in relation with colonialism and displacement. Increasingly common postcolonial conditions including homogeneous conservation policies and increasing commodification of the natural world which lead to the loss of territory for indigenous people and loss of biodiversity are highlighted in the novel. According to Ghosh, here, human activities may disrupt the delicate balance that nature has which can have further disastrous consequences for both environment and humanity.

The Hungry Tides is set in the Sundarbans, the residents constantly face hazards caused by natural disasters, which are natural responses but Ghosh has portrayed them as

nature's way of paying back. Impoverished residents constantly struggle with living expenses and settle in uncomfortable locations within the Sundarbans. The salty water expansion destroys soil, worsening malnourishment. Desperate for food, residents turn to fish farming to survive. However, this caused another crisis. The Sundarbans' temperature worsened because fishermen exploited the sea. They harvested excessive prawns and fresh water, triggering severe environmental damage. This disrupts fish life cycles, damaging the ecosystem further. Postcolonialism plays an important role in the novel, connecting with eco-criticism. Colonialism triggers environmental challenges. The novel shows animals' entitlement to protection is often prioritized by the Western character over human lives. The Cosmopolitan Piya in the novel opposes the killing of wild animals, advocating for non-human lives. Western characters ignore the natives' welfare, treating them with disregard. The Government plans wild animal conservation at the expense of the poor, displaced, local people who feel identityless because they are denied their basic human rights in their own country. Fokir who loses his life in the process of steering the outsider safely through the forest, represents the hapless, illiterate native, exposed to the man eating tigers, crocodile and snakes inhabiting the tide country and also vulnerable to the bribe taking official of the state. These marginalized people face dangers from wild animals, natural disasters, and government eviction efforts aimed at environmental protection.

Conclusion

The suffering of the subaltern is present in both the texts. In *The Hungry Tides* the title is justified through death, through unjust, as the hunger of the river is finally satisfied through Fokir's sacrifice. Thus ensuring the establishment of balance in the eco community of river and people. The river goes back to being the benevolent mother only after claiming the mayhem. Fokir's death becomes the synecdoche in the bigger scheme of things, where suffering becomes the purgation in interest of the country. Similarly in *The God of Small Things* the upheaval caused by the romantic relationship between Ammu and Velutha was calmed by the brutal murder of Velutha. The police system in the form of Inspector Mathew, the communist party leadership in the form of comrade Pillai, and the upper class society of Ayemenem in the form of Ammu's family members specifically Baby Cochamma irrespective of their religion, their distinct ideological beliefs came together in order to consolidate the division between the dominant and marginal. Together they manoeuvre, judiciously structured lies to take up the place of truth to keep the untouchable in their place so that they never expect any radical transformation, never ask for justice, opportunity, and never aspire for their betterment. Society is guided by the voice of the massive, powerful who have all the powers and means to suppress all those who are small, weak, negligible and peripheral. But interestingly these peripherals continue to fight back. Marginals' fight against the dominant may often turn out to be ineffectual. But they never take their defeat for granted. They mark their disapproval of this overpowering strong control that the powerful exerts on them.

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