



# Narrative Voice: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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**Abstract:** Genette calls the narrator and the narrating stance as the narrative voice. A narrative cannot influence the reader consciously or unconsciously if there is no fascination with story and storytelling. According to Kenon there are three basic aspects of narrative fiction: story, text and narration. The linguist Emile Benveniste finds the difference between the story and the way it is told to draw attention to the presence of narrative voice. Thus, it becomes clear that the act of narrativizing is more important rather than the story. The present chapter tries to explore the narrative voices in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. The important aspect to understand narrative voices in the novel is to understand the selection and typology of the narrator, the role of the narrator, presence of different characters and focalizers. Although the omniscient narration is the most common method of storytelling it is not necessarily the simplest one and many novelists have experimented continually with it, for example, omniscient narration with a shifting point of view. The other is omniscient narration along with first person narration simultaneously and *The Hungry Tide* follows the second pattern of narration. The main narrator is not only one i.e. the omniscient but includes Nirmal as dramatized and first person narrator. Similarly, the other character focalizers Horane, Nilima, Kusum narrate the history of Morichaphi in their own ways. Amitav Ghosh aims to expose colonialism and the policies of Government from a variety of differently located voices and ideological positions represented by Fokir a fisherman, Kanai a businessman and a translator, Piya- an India born American based cetologist, Nilima- a social worker, Horane -a boatman and Nirmal- a Marxist and a social activist. To serve this purpose he devices a very sophisticated narrative technique.

Keywords: Narrative voice, narrator, focalizer, omniscient narration, mimesis diegesis

## Narrative Voice: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

In *The Hungry Tide* Amitav Ghosh has incorporated varied voices not only from diverse backgrounds but also from different generations. Apart from the Omniscient narrator, Nirmal is the first person dramatized narrator in the novel who embodies a lived relationship with the past and carries a range of historical and cultural knowledge. He tells the historical past of Morichjhapi, the refugees, government policies, resettlement camps, confrontation between government forces and the settlers and many more things. Nirmal's narration is very often like the way elder people tell the younger generations- the history of their village and groups. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh has not only revolutionized his perspective of history but his mode of creative discourse about history has moulded a new kind of novel by resorting to the indigenous tradition of oral narrativity. This is Ghosh's way of incorporating the indigenous tradition of storytelling. Here Ghosh has been able to incorporate history well within the narrative structure itself. As character focalizer Nirmal starts his narration with the words "All right, then listen...Now that you've asked you'll have to listen. And pay attention, for all of this is true" (40). As a dramatized narrator he begins his diary abruptly with an address to Kanai: "You, Kanai, were among the last to see Kusum in Lusibari, in

1970” (143). The diary written by Nirmal, is read by Kanai and revealed to readers and we should realize at the same time that this story is part of the account of the suffering of the people of Morichaphi which itself contained in the narrative as the major influence on Nirmal and further on Kanai.

Nirmal both as the character focalizer and the dramatic narrator tells everything as if he had been everywhere as if the rhythms of the historic rise and fall of the people of Morichaphi flowed in his veins. Similarly, the other character focalizers Horane, Nilima, Kusum narrate the history of Morichaphi in their own ways. Amitav Ghosh aims to expose colonialism and the policies of Government from a variety of differently located voices and ideological positions represented by Fokir a fisherman, Kanai a businessman and a translator, Piya- an India born American based cetologist, Nilima- a social worker, Horane -a boatman and Nirmal- a marxist and a social activist. To serve this purpose he devices a very sophisticated narrative technique.

The novel opens with a scenic description by the omnipresent narrator. The characters narrate so many stories and through their numerous and varied point of views, Ghosh throws as much light as possible on the history of Morichaphi and the life of the refugees. The main narrator is not only one i.e. the omnipresent but includes Nirmal as dramatized and first person narrator (as the narrator in *The Shadow Lines*) whose narration is constituted of personal memories, experiences and other character’s recollections written as copious notes to give a detailed account of Morichaphi incident. Much of the part of the novel is the narrative account of Nirmal as a writer and Kanai as a reader of the book explaining the incidents. But both are not in a position to be omniscient observers. As narrative agents, they do not take the reader beyond the superficial aspect of the world of Sunderbans and Morichjhapī. All the central consciousnesses also tell stories from different perspectives. Their views of things and the world are constantly subjected to authorial censure or qualifications.

It is not only through the point of view of the literates like Kanai, Piya, Nirmal and Nilima that the meaning of the loss of freedom and identity has been presented but, the reader is presented with a narrative “history from below” – a view of what this displacement means to ordinary people, both in terms of how they understand and what it implies for not only their future but the coming generation too.

In the chapter ‘Morichjhapī’ Nilima as character focalizer tells Kanai about Morichjhapī, the refugees, government policies, resettlement camps, eviction of settlers and confrontation between government forces and the settlers. While thinking of the past in the novel there is a shift in the narrative situation. In terms of narrative form, Nilima instead now starts thinking and withdraws into her mind to establish a pattern that will explain her particular mode of revolt in larger social and historical terms. “But in time it comes to be learnt that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh. Some had come to India after partition, while others had trickled over later. In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communities and by Hindus of the upper class” (118). Over a period of about a year, there had been a series of confrontations between the settlers and government forces.

It becomes apparent that the novel incorporates a specific collective vision of the people, suffering from common oppression and with a common need for future directions. The recognition of this transcendent ‘we’ leads immediately to the interpretive abstraction that the essence of the book’s meaning is to be found in the collective ethics and experience delineated. Ghosh wants his pen to be the voice of the people and to give voice to the silent and suppressed he incorporates diverse voices. Here, one also observes the narrator’s role as a truth-teller.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the voice ‘we’ is not only used to suggest mere connectivity. It is highly functional. Ghosh’s omniscient narrative voice generally merges with the people and community voice and keeps on impinging on the character’s thoughts and actions. As all the characters of the novel are involved, their views of things are constantly subjected to the omniscient narrative voice or to the communal voice ‘we’ sometimes both the authorial and the communal merge to show a polyphonic view of things.

As a narrative voice, Ghosh incorporates the collective voice ‘we’, but the usage of collective ‘we’ is used in a variety of ways. The pronoun doesn’t always represent the same persons. There are a number of collective ‘we’s’. This further makes the novel fully polyphonic by adding the multiplicity of voices. For example, it means at times the habitants of Lusibari or Morichjhapī. In short, the ‘we-s’ represent the men and women who are in the background but whose presence is not felt constantly. They are the masses of past and present generations, the people of the village, the settlers, the migrants or the displaced refugees.

The protagonists like Kusum, Horane and Fokir are also included in the collective 'we's', but they appear as he, she, his, her, him or they, as in this passage:

It was terrible to see Kusum: her bones protruded from her skin, like the ribs of a drum, and she was too weak to rise from her mat. Fokir, young as he was, appeared to have weathered the siege in better health and it was he who was looking after his mother...Kusum had starved herself in order to feed Fokir. But the truth was not quite so simple. For much of the time, Kusum had kept Fokir indoors, fearing to let him out because of the swarming police.(260-61)

The 'we' voice is also incorporated in the text in chapter 'Crimes'. It opens with first person narrative describing Nirmal's mental agony through the collective voice 'we':

The siege went on for many days and we were powerless to affect the outcome. All we heard were the rumours: that despite, careful rationing, food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tube wells and there was no potable water left. (260)

At the outset of the novel, the omnipresent narrator draws the attention of the reader with abrupt opening: "Kanai spotted her the moment he stepped onto the crowded platform: he was deceived neither by her close-cropped black hair nor by her clothes, . . ." (3). Every fact about the characters and events is given either by the omnipresent narrator or by character focalizers in Ghosh's novels. The novel begins with diegesis mode of narration and later it shifts to mimesis when Kanai and Piya talk to each other. The entire novel is constructed of shifting of both kinds of narration- mimesis and diegesis.

Nirmal's remarks are noteworthy as he philosophically quotes Rilke -a voice in which he finds confirmation of his ideas and thoughts to describe the plight of migrants of Morichjhapi:

Because of what the poet says, Fokir, Because the animals  
"already know by instinct  
we're not comfortably at home,  
in our translated world". (206)

At one moment after the feast of city guests in Morichjhapi, Nirmal has so much in his head and heart and he finds refuge in Rilke's poetry. Here Nirmal finds silence to be more eloquent emerging as a strong voice:

There is so much to say, so much in my head, so much that will remain unsaid:  
oh, those wasted years, that wasted time. I think of Rilke, going for years without writing a word and then producing in a matter of weeks, in a castle besieged by the sea, The Duino Elegies. Even silence is preparation. As the minutes pass, it seems to me that I can see every object in the tide country with a blinding brightness and clarity. ...How better can we praise the world but by doing what the Poet would have us do: by speaking of potters and ropemakers, by telling of  
'some simple thing shaped for generation after generation

until it lives in our hands and in our eyes, and it's ours.'(193)

One of the basic methods to analyse the text narratologically is to understand the distinction between narration and focalization. In *The Hungry Tide*, focalization shifts mainly among Kanai, Piya, Fokir, Moyna Nilima and Nirmal. Nirmal's point of view has been given through his packet which is left for Kanai to read. There are, however, shifts to the occasional external narrator focalizer or even to different other internal characters –focalizer.

As far as the emotive aspect is concerned the difference between external and internal focalization further corresponds to the difference between objective, neutral or uninvolved focalization on one hand and on the other hand subjective, coloured or involved focalization. In *The Hungry Tide*, for example, at the beginning of the novel the passages which tell about mangrove forests are externally focalized:

When the tide creates new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right, they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe . . . there are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos . . . Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (7)

But, the same mangrove jungles in the chapter 'Signs' are internally focalized by Kanai when he is left alone by Fokir in these jungles.

Kanai's head filled suddenly with the vision of the ways in which the tide country dealt out death. The tiger, people said, killed you instantly with a swipe of its forepaw, breaking the joint between your shoulder and neck. You felt no pain when it happened; you were dead already of the shock induced by the tiger's roar. . . . the mangrove branches were pliable and sinuous; they bent without breaking and snapped back like whips. . . . it was as if he had passed into the embrace of hundreds of scaly limbs. . . . (329)

Here the same place mangrove jungle is focalized in an entirely different colour.

In *The Hungry Tide* another aspect of focalization -the ideological aspect is also important to notice. One of these ideologies is related to the duplicity of government policies, national boundaries, preservation of animals at the cost of human beings etc. This certainly allows the reader to see in its hypocrisy. So many questions come to the mind of the reader as to how difficult these norms are to live by and follow. At the same time there is Piya's own ideology as one of the main character focalizers when she shows her resentment on the killing of a tiger and Kanai convinces her:

Kanai spat into the dust. 'Piya, you have to understand – that animal's been preying on this village for years. It's killed two people and any number of cows and goats-'

'This is an animal, Kanai,' Piya said. 'You can't take revenge  
on an animal.' (294)

The reader is also bound to question himself - who is more important under the circumstances presented in the text – the citizens of a country or its national animal – tiger?

In *The Hungry Tide*, the narrator is neither much authoritative nor gives many assertions. He rather tries to be more neutral and objective and maintains significant distance from the characters. Throughout the text, the narrator remains uninvolved. In the novel, the omnipresent narrator is not overt. The function of projecting the political ideologue and narrating history is also attributed to the characters themselves. Piyali Rao and Nirmal's voices are the strongest voices amid the diverse voices – incorporated in the text.

Amitav Ghosh's narrative technique is like that of the European novelists also. Through the consciousness of the characters, he focalizes the text as there are frequent indirect monologues and dialogues in his novels. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh as an omnipresent narrator or implied author, remains invisible and neutral. He is presented in his novel as an omniscient neutral observer. But it doesn't mean that in this novel Ghosh as an author completely effaces himself from his novel. In consonance with his



modernist ideology, Ghosh also maintains authorial reticence, that is, he does not project his ideology and vision directly and explicitly. It is through the voices of the characters he projects his vision. This also he does in a subtle manner. He does not make his characters his mouthpiece. He maintains ironic distance from his characters in *The Hungry Tide* and in the end he holds no vision and leaves the narrative open-ended. There is a preference for the plurality of ideological positions as manifested in the ideas of Fokir and Kanai, Nirmal and Nilima, Kanai and Piya, Moyna and Fokir and many more. Thus, Ghosh imparts polyphony and heteroglossia to his novels. As such, there is no propagandist tone or didactic note for the readers. There are no cliché endings in his novels. Ghosh has based his main narrative in the novels on the orderly progression of events leading towards a suggested goal, but he has also given his narrative form a pattern by presenting certain events from past through memories, stories, memoirs, diary and letter writing.

Throughout, the text Amitav Ghosh leaves his characters to work out their own fate. This is not to suggest that he vanishes from the scene completely. He relies on mimetic techniques for presenting his material. By resorting to showing or scenic presentation in his novels he tries to achieve the imitation of action. In order to achieve the scenic effect in the text he makes use of scenes, dialogues, direct discourse, interior monologue, detailed narration and pattern of images and symbols.

As an omniscient narrator Ghosh intrudes but, his authorial intrusions are totally conscious and he knows where to start and where to stop. He never crosses the limits of aesthetic boundaries. So, in *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh's omniscience, detailed documentary, descriptions and political discourses at the same time never mar the polyphony of the text. Ghosh as a subtler artist controls the narrative movement in such a way as not to disturb the aesthetic poise which is the hallmark of cocktailing the techniques of western narrativity with Indian oral narrativity. He does not merely resort to telling and detailing the realistic details himself only; instead, he resorts to character focalizers, myths, symbols, memory, interior monologues, testimonials, diary writing, intertextuality and other narrative techniques like mimesis and diegesis modes of narration too. As a consummate artist, he attempts to create a more aesthetic fictional world which would carry out his observation of the lives of people and the world around them both in past and present.

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