



# Politics and Borders: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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## Abstract

The books of Amitav Ghosh are exemplary of postcolonial ideas, which in their purest form denounce borders and limits while celebrating the inevitability of some forms of border crossing. The themes of boundary crossing and the murkiness of existing borders are central to Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Members of the novel's cast of characters are those who, in the 1940s and 1950s, were forced to flee from East Pakistan to India. The tale depicts the hopeless battle of islanders in the Bay of Bengal to survive extreme hardship. In terms of geography, the novel's setting is a terrifyingly open wasteland. To keep up with the ever-changing patterns of nature, the land's land and water's water limits are always shifting. (p. 7). Under these conditions, the refugees have no choice but to take direct action against the Indian government for its inability to protect them. Those from Bangladesh who fled to Morichjhapi have been labelled as unlawful squatters. While justifying their actions by citing the necessity to protect forests and wildlife preserves, the government harassed, threatened, and even murdered these evacuees. As a result of persecution, many people moved often, preferring to settle in low-lying locations where they were less likely to attract unwelcome attention. In 1979, hundreds of refugees were slaughtered as the government attempted to remove them from the island. Ghosh depicts a nonaligned space of cosmopolitan arguments and their accompanying difficulties being handled without any prejudices owing to the acceptance of global culture, even in such a worst-case scenario. The colonists make do with what they have, despite the area's drawbacks. Ghosh's idea of human value as universal

is on display in his work *The Hungry Tide*, which tells the tales of a group of people who are mostly unknown outside of India.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Borders, Refugees, Migration

## Introduction

Postcolonial literature places a strong emphasis on the ideas of limits and borders. Despite the wide range of topics covered in his books, Ghosh has evolved a style that, although always fresh and engaging, keeps coming back to the same topics that have been identified as crucial to the modern world experience. That boundary between fact and fiction is drawn in this literary style, which is a reflection of the period. Ghosh's creation of this style is a product of its time. During the post-colonial age, when borders and frontiers are constantly shifting as a result of many conflicts and acts of violence, the only way for humanity to strike a chord of survival is via the invocation of globality and infinite locations over the world. In many respects, Ghosh is a postmodern writer; his success is in his ability to immerse his readers in the process of historical construction, uncover the lost inside, and expose the emotions hidden by the facts. Amitav Ghosh's writings represent the pinnacle of postcolonial ideas, with their proclamation of the inevitability of transcending borders and their simultaneous rejection. Some of the themes that Ghosh frequently delves into include the fluidity of boundaries and the interconnectedness of people, as well as the role that individuals and groups play in the larger scheme of political events. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh criticises both leaders and ordinary citizens.

In Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the ambiguity of established borders is front and centre. The novel's location, in terms of its geographic scope, is shrunken down to a terrifying unbounded void with no bounds. Southern Bengal is the setting, namely the Sunderbans, which lie in the deltas of the rivers Ganga and Brahmaputra and are also known as the "tide country" of Southern Bengal. People living there are called "tide people," and their existence is governed by the tides and the creatures that prey on them. Refugees from East Pakistan were the only individuals who were able to cross the border into this volatile area in the 1940s and 1950s. The story illustrates the futile struggle of those who live on the desolate, dangerous islands in the Bay of Bengal. Features of the terrain include the tidewater, a mangrove forest, tigers, crocodiles, and dolphins; this begs the nebulous issue of how humans can coexist with such terrifying, devious, and bewildering creatures. There are a lot of crocodiles and dolphins here. All of this put them at odds with the Indian government, which had not protected their rights.

Ghosh's lyrical description of the tidal land is impressive. The stories are set against the backdrop of the Sundarbans, whose name means the lovely forest. This type of mangrove takes its name from the Sundari tree, a typical species of mangrove. From the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the beaches of the Meghana River in Bangladesh, the borders of this tidal nation are steadily increasing. Home is what the people call "Bhatirdesh," which translates to "the tidal country". The Sundarbans are a group of islands in the Ganges Delta that are frequently flooded due to their low population density and remote location. The description produced by Ghosh makes the constant flooding sound almost fantastical in its description, it is possible to observe the tides from as far as 30 kilometres inland, and every day hundreds of acres of woodland are flooded, only to emerge a few hours later. The islands are almost completely reshaped every day due to the power of the currents. The ocean may be extremely dynamic, erasing huge promontories and peninsulas one day and forming brand-new shelves and sandbanks the next. (THT, p. 7) The ever-changing environmental boundaries and the precarious nature of island life contribute to a pervasive sense of unease and unpredictability on the island.

Because of its unique geology and climate, the island is extremely uninhabitable. In this region, rivers and the ocean meet without being divided by land limits. Furthermore, some islands are in the far eastern part of India, and between the ocean and the Bengal plains, lies a massive archipelago of islands. Not all of them are the same size; some are a little bigger than sandbars, while others are considerably bigger; some have been there since the beginning of time, while others were formed only a year or two ago due to floods. Due to the ever-changing nature of natural phenomena, the land and sea borders are in a perpetual state of change. (THT p. 7). Some river systems are quite broad and lengthy, making it tough to pinpoint their respective beaches. These clusters of rivers create enormous quantities of water power that sculpt the local environment. In the unknown tide country, the river and the sea are not delineated, and the line between land and water is also often difficult to discern. Nobody should be surprised by the public outcry over the steady disappearance of thousands of acres of land. Despite the existence of man-eating tigers, crocodiles, and thick, deadly mangroves, people can make it through life in such a terrible environment, much like a magic performance where the trickster reappears after a set length of time, but in a slightly different shape. Ghosh's use of this foreboding setting, with its alternating sea and land borders, is a magnificent depiction of the problem of the fuzziness of existing borders and limits. Despite its name, there is danger even at the island's physical edge.

The people who make their homes on this island are highly attuned to the dangers inherent in their environment. The first settlers arrive, and they quickly learn the lay of the country and its boundaries. Women in the tidal country were taught that being married meant becoming a widow in one's twenties or thirties at the earliest, as stated in *The Hungry Tide*. Assumptions were once held that this was the case. This assumption was as pervasive in their culture as a skein of black wool; when the men folk went fishing, it was the norm for their ladies to change into the clothes of widowhood (THT p. 80). Sundarbans residents are in danger not just from the water that surrounds and penetrates the land, but also from the animals that call the Sundarbans home. Since Bengali tigers are a part of their environment, they lead a life that can be defined as precarious at best. About the human toll, Nilima says, I believe that over a hundred people are murdered by tigers here each year. Remember that I'm just bringing up the Indian side of the Sundarbans in this context. Including Bangladesh would make the sum at least double what it is now. If you tally up all the deaths caused by tigers in the Sundarbans, you get one human killed every two days (THT, p.199). Knowing how many people have been murdered by tigers in the Sundarbans, the possibility of spotting Fokir among the first rows of the throng, helping a person sharpen a bamboo pole" should not be shocking (THT p. 243). As a result of the unstable conditions on the land, the locals have begun to feel emotionally distant from one another.

Not only does Ghosh describe the Sundarbans as a collection of barren, isolated islands and surrounding natural space saturated with the repulsive forces of tiger attacks and floods, but he also emphasises the place where the people are denied their rights to occupy the land. It is implied that individuals in the Sundarbans are not allowed to legally settle there. Refugees from Bangladesh will be expelled since they are not legally allowed to live there. People feel threatened by the politicians who rule the nation in the name of the government. It's not shocking that politicians and social service workers don't understand the problems people are facing. On the other hand, problems are multiplying in all directions. People's beliefs look naive when seen in the light of the country's basic infrastructure and politics of the nation. Refugees will not find safety or happiness in the land that has been declared off-limits to them. The government, however, has no intention of leaving them alone to pursue their interests. They are being chased mercilessly till they can no longer find any place of refuge. Tigers no longer have the legal right to reside on the island due to concerns for their well-being. This risk is comparable to the peril posed by assaults launched from anywhere at any time. The plight of the refugees

is heart-breaking in its poignancy. A person's freedom and privacy are greatly compromised in Sundarbans areas.

These migrations occurred in three different historical times. People started moving to the island starting in the 1920s, and then again in 1947 and 1971 after Bangladesh and Pakistan gained their independence. Lusibari is the most southern and first populated island in the Sundarbans. When Daniel Hamilton made the island of Lusibari livable in the 1920s, he did it in honour of his wife, Lucy. The island has never been populated before then because of its overgrown jungle. Lucy is a British woman's name, and "bari" means "home" in her native Bangla language. Cultural exchange is brought home vividly on this island. Consequently, "house of Lucy" translates as "Lusibari." Nirmal and Nilima, Kanai's uncle and aunt, relocated to Lusibari in 1950 anticipating major social shifts on the island. Nilima started the firm to better the lives of people in Lushibari. Badabon Trust was established by her. As refugees on Morichjhapi Island, Nirmal and Nilima believed they could make a difference for those who had come to the island seeking sanctuary. First settlers tended to be upper-class people with money and connections.

A huge number of Hindu East Bengalis escaped persecution by moving to India after the partition of India in 1971. As a result of the partition of Bangladesh, many East Pakistanis were forced to flee to the Sundarbans near Morichhapi. They had to live as refugees in Dandakaranya, in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, before they were finally able to make it to Morichjhapi. They are members of the Dalit caste and tend to dwell in rural areas; in the past, they have been considered the lowest of the low. They belonged to the lowest caste in Indian society, the Sudras, and were extremely impoverished. Those who were seen to be a financial drain were forced to live in hastily established rehabilitation zones, such as the ones in Dandakaranya (also known as their "dumping site"). Despite the migrants' paddy farming, fishing, and woodworking expertise, they were unable to thrive in the arid, barren soil of central India and were forced to leave. The poor Hindus who fled the Muslim homeland faced persecution from both Muslims and higher-caste Hindus in their new home. The resettlement camp was seen as a jail by the refugees, who were also alienated from the locals since they could not speak their language. They were forced to spend years in a refugee camp in the middle of India. They believed they were imprisoned since the police never permitted them to exit the camp. Having organised themselves, the exiles rose in rebellion against the government in 1978. Later, they set off for

Morichjhapi with the idea of making it their permanent home. Refugees from the Khulna region of East Bengal set out for Morichjhapi, an uninhabited island in the Sundarbans, in the hopes that the newly constituted Communist government would fulfil its promise to them. Refugees were exhorted to seek shelter within Bengal. In a startling U-turn, however, the Jyoti Basu administration has opted to flat-out refuse their demands. For the sake of maintaining forest reserves and wildlife areas, the government pursued these exiles, put them in perilous positions, and even killed some of them. Many people from East Bengal ended themselves in the Sundarbans of India because they had nowhere else to go. Caste, race, and socioeconomic status are all taken into account throughout the public policymaking process. The resulting judgments often put environmental concerns ahead of human ones. To give an example, Ghosh writes, was it conceivable that here Morichjhapi had been sowed the seeds of what may become, if not a Dalit nation, then at least a haven, a sanctuary of real freedom for the country's most oppressed? (p.159). Because they felt undesired everywhere else, repressed people tended to migrate from one low-lying area to another and stick to living there. After reading Nirmal's journal, Kanai reveals to the reader what happened at Morichjhapi. Kanai's reading of the diary brings the readers to the incident. In 1979, a civil war broke out between island residents and government officials as a result of the authorities' efforts to evacuate the island's population. Tens of thousands of refugees were killed by the government during this battle. Shortly after this atrocity occurred, Nirmal passed away.

Despite the dangers, the people of Morichjhapi felt compelled to fight for recognition of their culture and the right to settle in the new region. It's a lot worse scenario in the new land than what they were used to. There was always some new death toll to add to the tally, whether at the hands of the government or the paws of a tiger, snake, or crocodile. The migrants worked very hard to make the area more habitable and aesthetically pleasing. They performed an excellent job of providing essential services that allowed them to form groups, institutions, and even their government, this was an encouraging development. They divided up the island into several zones and even took a headcount of the refugees. According to Nirmal; he remained captivated, he felt something was shifting within him, how remarkable it was that he, an ageing bookish schoolmaster, should survive to see this, an experiment, devised not by people with scholarship and authority, but by those without. What Nirmal meant to imply was that the idea for the experiment originated with individuals who lacked both knowledge and authority. It demonstrates how they were uprooted from their country and transplanted, demonstrating how they overcame obstacles, improved upon the worst possible circumstances, and resurrected



their lost culture in their new place. Despite the difficulties they've faced, the people have created a rich oral culture that includes many songs, stories, and tales. They have created a rich oral tradition that is replete with stories, songs, and rituals. Their determination to survive has pushed them to overcome these arbitrary obstacles and fight to the death against the omnipresent threats they confront. Even in the direst of circumstances, Ghosh presents a nonaligned zone of cosmopolitan debates and their concomitant issues being addressed without any prejudices. Civilizational and religious boundaries are vaguely defined throughout the novel. Cultural differences like religion, caste, and faith do not appear to bother the island's residents. These limits are encapsulated within the pre-existing cultural norms of the island.

Caution can help reduce the fear that comes from living in a world where danger is constantly looming due to the forces of nature. More revolting than any of these, however, is the savagery perpetrated by humans in the name of their governments. Refugees being denied permission to remain in a dangerous area was a running gag. Subalterns, as seen by the rapid changes in the settled country, are intelligent and resourceful people who, if given a sufficient number of viable alternatives, may prove their resilience. The government fails to recognise the value of the settlers' skills and abilities. To boost the refugees' prospects of obtaining financial aid from other nations and allegedly to conserve the wild animals, the corrupt bureaucrats and dunderheaded elected officials ordered them to leave the region. Major implications resulted from the increasingly violent conflicts between government authorities and the settlers as they attempted to expel the refugees from the neighbourhood. To get the refugees off the island, the government that was ostensibly aiding them tried several devious methods. One example is how the police destroyed the last remaining supplies of potable water for the settlers by damaging their tube wells, even though the region was surrounded by a great deal of water pressure. After apprehending them, the settlers were made to drink poisoned water. The need to provide food and water to Morichjhapi caused a delay in their progress.

Because the islands were so unsuitable for farming, the degraded population was banned from bringing any supplies with them. That left them with only wild grass for sustenance. Complaints from the downtrodden are rejected, and the government's actions are shown to be just. A panopticon-like structure was formed on the island of Morichjhapi due to the state's enforcement of an economic embargo and the sinking of the boats belonging to the island's people. Cholera spread because settlers had little choice but to drink from stagnant bodies of water like puddles and ponds. While the bulk of casualties was the result of preventable causes like

hunger and disease, police shootings and arson also played a role in the deaths of some people. Moreover, Muslim thugs from Bangladesh were sent in to help in the massacres (110). Refugees begged them to let the public know what they were up to, but they ignored their plight. The impoverished were content to stay in the region and suffer the rulers' persecution rather than risk losing what little they had. They declare, "No matter what you do, we are not going to leave Morichjhapi" (p. 254). Because of this, the oppressed people's fears were amplified, and diasporic awareness was sparked, both of which threatened their capacity to live in peace.

Through his research of the political and social factors that contribute to mass migration, Ghosh not only provides insight into the effects that migration has on individuals but also on society as a whole. When arguing that the experience of being uprooted has wreaked havoc on the lives of all migrants, Ghosh persuasively depicts the emotional mayhem that migrants experience daily. Kusum's remarks, which convey the agony and despair of the migrants, run as follows: the hunger and thirst weren't even the worst of it. Our lives, our whole existence, were seen to be of no more value than dirt or dust as we sat helplessly here and listened to the policeman make their pronouncements. It's important to preserve the forest because of the wildlife that lives there, and because it's part of a reserve forest and a programme to protect tigers that's funded by donors from across the world. Who are these animal rights activists, I pondered, that they would knowingly risk their lives to take ours away? Could it be that the things that are being done in their name pass their notice? From what I can tell, it's our fault, it's our crime because we were simply human beings trying to live as human beings, and now the whole planet is full of animals. No sane person would consider this criminal. To this day, people still rely on fishing, clearing land, and farming to make a living (p. 162). Awkwardly, the refugees inquired, "Indeed, who are we to be? What is our place here?" (p. 259). They felt a terrible weight of uncertainty about the issue of who they were.

Each character's plight exemplifies the universal anguish of a man torn between two cultures. When people were made to feel unwanted and unimportant, it caused serious psychological damage. The government maintains that the settlers have no rights over the physical borders, notwithstanding the residents' best efforts at assimilation and adaptation. The shocking reality was that hundreds of refugees were brutally murdered by the authorities. The authorities expelled the settlers in May of 1979 because they were considered foreigners. It took a long time for the emotional scars left by migration to heal, and they were profound. The novels centre on the protagonist's quest for self-discovery and family origins within the chaotic past. When Ghosh writes,



the frontiers of nation, place, and time collapse in his mind, it means that he has come to the painful realisation that unscrupulous political forces continue to smother human ambitions around the globe.

The Western world's ideas are pushed on the natives without regard for their demands for existence, which results in the degrading of the local population. It's heartbreaking that the administration casually killed migrants in pursuit of a foreign concept of progress. The comments of Kanai make this very clear "You're the type of person who would fight to keep this area's wildlife intact regardless of the human cost. People of my social class in India, including myself, curry favour with our Western clientele, and in this, I am culpable" (p. 301). She didn't know what was going on in the Sundarbans, so Piya poked this. Piya posed a similar question: "If dozens of people die every day on roads, in automobiles, and traffic throughout the world, why is this any worse here?" (p. 301). Nirmal and Nilima were two of the many good-hearted persons in Lusibari who committed their lives to improve the lives of their neighbours. No one, however, except a small few, spoke up for the refugees' rights.

Ghosh has struggled in *The Hungry Tide* to demarcate between the privileged and the disadvantaged. The masses are being violently ruled over. Refugee settlers in West Bengal were forcibly removed from the island when the Left Front administration was in office. The government might render them helpless. They were dehydrated and hungry. As the saying goes, anyone suspected of supporting them was likely to get into trouble, therefore nobody came to their aid (THT p. 122). There is no one to speak up for the helpless. Wildlife like tigers, snakes, and crocodiles often prey on the helpless, the poor, and the weak since they are so simple to kill. They are at a loss as to how to make their plight known and understood, and no one seems to care. Storms and high tides are a constant danger to the island; thus, nature also plays a significant role. Nature may be destructive, yet it can also protect the living, and acted as a barrier against nature's wrath, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves, and tidal surges (286). The islands' tide nation would have submerged long ago if they hadn't been there. This paper shows the government, nature, and wild creatures as big and powerful, whereas Kusum, Fokir, Moyna, and Horen, the residents and the refugees are helpless victims.

## CONCLUSION

*The Hungry Tide* serves as Ghosh's political messenger. The discrimination against Muslims fleeing East Bengal, who are considered "transnational migrants," has made Ghosh bitter. Both India and Bangladesh turned

them down because they were seen as financial burdens (Ramachandran 14). Despite Ghosh's depiction of the perpetual hardships endured by the people of Morichjhapi, the novel concludes on a hopeful note. This is why it's important to have a tale that isn't focused on humans. According to Ghosh, the one place where tigers have held their own is in the Sundarbans, and despite an inordinate number of animal-related fatalities, people still display a general willingness to coexist with the species. In my opinion, Ghosh's work *The Hungry Tide*, tells the experiences of one of the world's least recognised societies and demonstrates his all-encompassing view of humanity.

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