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**UNDERSTANDING THE DISASTER UNCONSCIOUS:
THE MARICHJHAPI MASSACRE DEPICTING PRECARIOUS LIVES AND
VULNERABLE ECOLOGIES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE***

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Abstract: The paper situates the massacre of Dalit refugees of Marichjhapi Island (1978-79) in West Bengal, India through a multidisciplinary reading of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) along with local history, vernacular literature, reports and experiential narratives. The refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh who settled on the island of Marichjhapi at Sundarbans (currently one of the most ecologically endangered places on Earth) were forcefully evicted by the government citing ecological issues. Utilizing a framework that incorporates both ecocriticism and postcolonial theory, this paper reads the vulnerable humans and non-humans, especially the island's unique ecosystem and fauna as victims of anthropocentrism and biopolitics, propelled by ecological and political factors acting together. Taking up from Ghosh's own interventions on ecological thought and the Sundarbans, the paper further delves into the concept of "the disaster unconscious" in postcolonial literature as suggested by Pallavi Rastogi

through a close reading of *The Hungry Tide*. It describes the co-constitution of precarious lives (both human and non-human) and fragile environments during disaster as what Blanchot would call “outside of temporality” marking the ‘necroeconomy’ of the nation-state, as conceptualized by Achille Mbembe.

Keywords: Disaster unconscious, Sundarbans, Biopolitics, Amitav Ghosh, Anthropocentrism, Refugees, Necroeconomy.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2016), originally published in 2004, can be cited as a postcolonial Indian novel in English that has been a pioneer in foregrounding the ecological question at the heart of the postcolonial subaltern identity formation in the subcontinent. The representation of the massacre of the Dalit refugees at the Marichjhapi Island (referred to as Morichjhapi in the novel) of the Sundarbans has been employed to connect the temporalities of the creation of human settlement in the ecologically vulnerable island by the colonisers, the refugee occupation in Marichjhapi and their eventual eviction and the incessant storms increasing in number under climate change. The novel moves between the Marichjhapi event as recorded in the diary of Nirmal which happened more than two decades before the time frame of the novel and the real-time of the novel when it is read by Nirmal’s nephew Kanai. The search for a particular species of dolphin by Indian-origin American cetologist Piya in the waters of Sundarban is also set in real-time. The narrative engages with both ecological and political discoveries. Both the survival strategy of the Irrawaddy dolphins in the distinctive ecosystem of the Sundarbans and the gory reality of the incident of Marichjhapi are unveiled. The resilience of political refugees to settle on the island against the will of the government was violently suppressed in Marichjhapi and the evocation of this moment anatomizes the parallel between anthropogenic violence on the environment, the humans and the non-humans. It is a fiction about disasters of various sorts – which are ecological as well as political and this paper will attempt to focus on their representation, causes, consequences and their relationship with temporality.

The cataclysmic event of Partition was produced out of the consequence of late British imperialist policy, where the colonizers shipped back to Britain leaving behind a state of disaster - the newborn state in trauma of suddenly created barbed wires of separation and influx of refugees. This exodus has been happening since the

Partition of 1947 at regular intervals through the porous anthropogenic border but especially saw a spike during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. While the upper-caste *bhadralok's* traumatic abandonment of their place and nostalgia of a lost homeland after resettlement in West Bengal have dominated the discourse of Partition, little is spoken about the *nimnorno* (lower caste) refugees who were doubly marginalised and treated as disposables by the government of a free nation-state. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, Caste groups are populations hierarchically separated in terms of access to social, cultural and economic capital who could not mix or inter-marry. Ambedkar described caste as an “enclosed class” (19) who have been segregated based on the religious order of purity and pollution, characteristic of Brahminical Hinduism. The Dalits were the worst victims of this order who were prohibited from being touched and considered outcastes - the most polluted ones. In Bengal under the colonial government caste hierarchies were perpetuated and because of their privileged access to education, the upper caste people could take advantage of the English education and became collaborators of the British rulers. In postcolonial West Bengal, the upper castes continued to dominate education and politics. Dwaipayan Sen in his research on Caste in West Bengal exposes the fallacy of liberalism and Marxism in the state dominated mainly by upper caste bourgeoisie who focused on class difference and obfuscated the category of caste (D. Sen 269-272). Asrukumar Sikdar, a veteran critic of Bengali literature who worked on the literature of Partition talked about the broken Bengal and *boba Bangla Sahitya* (dumb Bengali literature) in his essay “Bhanga Desh, Bhanga Manush, Boba Bangla Sahitya” (Broken Land, Broken Men, Dumb Bengali Literature). He underscores the silence on the trauma of displacement. The sugar-coating of apparently comforting stories of communal harmony and victorious resettlement of the upper caste in the new land along with nostalgia for an idyllic past does little to break the silence (Sikdar 9-88). The lower caste and labouring class refugees dependent on agriculture and fisheries for livelihood, whom Prafulla Chakrabarti called “marginal men” in his book *The Marginal Men* (1999) on the other hand were scattered in camps like Coopers Camp and Mana Camp across India where their spatial identity was temporary and in transit, and eventually from the camps they were forced to move to the arid and inhospitable regions of Dandakaranya or Andaman. The living conditions there were as despicable as the Concentration Camps under the Nazi regime and thus could be perceived as

potentially “death worlds” (Mbembe 92). Yet the situation was precarious in a different way than the Concentration camps that Agamben would refer to in his works to denote how thanatopolitics is orchestrated against the myth of life-affirming nation-state (Agamben 122). In the case of the Dalit refugee base that migrated in the aftermath of Partition ironically citizenship was conferred even though without alternative resources for livelihood and resettlement – a condition which makes them what Udit Sen calls “citizen refugees” – a term of paradoxical nature. She mentions that “India’s Citizenship Bill formally acknowledged the contradictory category of the citizen-refugee” (U. Sen 8).

The Entangled Ecological and Political Precarity and the Context of the Sundarbans

The conflict and struggle that refugees had to encounter were not simply that between the humans (riots or hostility of the host society). Because of the denial of governmental recognition, assistance and proper rehabilitation, the conflict was also between vulnerable humans and nature or other non-human life forms. While Lawrence Buell claims “a mature environmental aesthetics” (Buell 22) that would “take into account the interpenetration of metropolis and outback, of anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns” (23), inscribing the critique of the centrality of “nature” and “ecology” in the context of postcolonial governmentality may open up a different dimension. The focus of eco-criticism on nature and nature-writing in a postcolonial context can be overridden by a certain precarious ontology where the concern for anthropogenic violence on nature, non-human animals and humans are entangled. The Cartesian separation of the consciousness from the world around and the various environmental and as well as anthropogenic processes could not be maintained in such reading and the humans and non-humans are both placed as objects posited in what Graham Harman calls a “flat ontology” (54).

The Sundarban region is a place that defamiliarizes the Western conception of pristine nature. The islands of the Sundarbans with their topographical complexity, mutability and diversity are a place fraught with natural disasters. The geographical location of the Sundarbans replete with mangroves with their dense foliage and gnarled branches is such that it shields Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal and the residing place of the upper castes and the privileged, from natural disasters. Ghosh rightly says that “there is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in” (Ghosh, *The*

Hungry Tide 7) and the imagination of nature as a space of solace and comfort and eternal hospitality is not sustainable in the vulnerable ecology of the Sundarbans. The marginalized people live in the Sundarbans and they constantly battle the tides, cyclones, swampy marshland, tigers, crocodiles and snakes to exist in an unknowable natural surrounding “which possess the power to annihilate men with their «serene scorn»” (59). The innate precarity of such a region subverts the notion of the environment being “rendered precarious due to human intervention in the Anthropocene” (Nayar 7). Amitav Ghosh’s deployment of the Anthropocene and the literary imagination in *The Great Derangement* (2016) focuses on the impact of climate change in the Anthropocene and natural disasters propelled by the same, an issue that has been unrepresented in realist novels. Disaster ecology is outside our imagination of temporality and Ghosh shows how the surfacing of disaster appears improbable in the construction of everydayness in realist novels (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 20-32). The present reading of Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* however delves into literature’s ability to bring together multiple scales of geological and realist time and break the categorical separation of anthropogenic and ecological factors in producing precarity. John Parham in his “Introduction” to *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene* suggested that “what is actually changing the Earth is not humans but, rather, «large-scale» assemblages. Composed of «horizontal patterns of relation among ontologically different entities» (which exist in «discontinuous scale domains»), assemblages conglomerate human, nonhuman and technological agency” (6). *The Hungry Tide* shows not only the transformation of the earth through “large scale” assemblages or “hyperobjects” (5) but also how the human and non-human life suffer from vulnerabilities created out of such assemblages. The scales of geological history and world history centred on humans, which Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021) refers to in his work can be thus brought together in a critical dialogue, thereby “reconnecting human life with exponentially vaster scales: deep history, the planet Earth, the distant future” (Parham 10).

In *Gun Island*, a more recent sequel to *The Hungry Tide* written after fifteen years of the latter Ghosh has spoken about the climate refugees of the Sundarbans, inhabitants who take great risks and endure pain to escape the harsh life of the Sundarbans. Mostly the displaced and the homeless belonging to the lowest strata of society take refuge in such a precarious region as did the Dalit refugees on the island of Marichjhapi and then they are exposed to further ecological vulnerability and

homelessness. However, the portrayal of the anthropocentric notion of non-humans as “usable” and otherwise “expendable” abounds in *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and this notion also extends to the marginalized Dalit refugees who combat all the challenges thrown at them by nature and try to make peace with the inhospitable environment paying respect to its unpredictability and unknowability. Such inhabitants possessing indigeneity are seen as undifferentiated from nature, as analogous to the non-humans by the sovereign state assuming them to be uncivilized and unutilized and subjecting them to exploitation. These humans are deemed as non-humans and thus “natural” life. Rendering them precarious by humans having political and social empowerment adds to the theory of Ecoprecarity as espoused by P.K. Nayar who says that “intertwined set of discourses of fragility, vulnerability, power relations across species and imminent extinction is what I term «ecoprecarity»” (Nayar 6). Humans not only render other species precarious but biopower blurs the boundary of speciesism while at the same time foregrounding it.

The novel draws upon two sets of characters. On one hand, we have Kanai, Piya and Nilima who in various ways act as sympathetic upper-caste privileged people having access to Western education and global systems of knowledge. They have the right to observe, study and bring affirmative changes to the lives of the “others.” Their role is akin to benevolent colonizers having the white man’s burden. They are agents of globalized governmentality. The other could be the vulnerable humans – the inhabitants of Sundarbans who depend on the river and the jungle for their livelihood or the non-human other – the tigers or dolphins. As Nilima in the novel has spent her life building up her NGO Badaban Trust with the positive intentions of doing something for the people of Sundarbans, Piya is crazed by the idea of gaining knowledge regarding the habits and habitats of the endangered Dolphins she was looking for. On the other side, there are characters like Fokir – the fisherman protagonist of the novel, his mother Kusum, his wife Moyna or Horen – the boatman. These characters are precarious selves and are “death-bound subjects,” a term borrowed from Abdul A. JanMohamed in the context of the Afro-American slave narratives who explains the “death-bound-subject,” as “the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death” (JanMohamed 2). In the context of the ecoprecarity of Dalit lives the naturalization of Dalit bodies living close to nature without adequate protection of the biopolitical apparatus exposes them to death by natural processes of disease or ecological

catastrophe. Being expendable subjects of the nation-state they are also subjected to frequent anthropogenic violence without governmental protection or care. The death-bound subjects of the Sundarbans dwell in its unanticipatable landscape and riverscape and have identities unfixed to the global biopolitical paradigm, being haunted by death and loss. Nirmal Bose, Kanai's uncle and Nilima's husband becomes a liminal character who stands between these two sets when he gives away his secured post-retirement life and starts empathizing with Marichjhapi settlers whom the then government of West Bengal was determined to evict. The biopolitical apparatus of the nation-state considers these marginal people, close to nature, equally discarded when they are no longer usable despite using their labour as well as voting rights in electoral democracy (and thus conferring citizenship without proper security of life, habitat and livelihood making them citizen refugees).

Dalit identity has historically been pushed beyond the horizons of mainstream space and belonging and has been thought of as natural labouring bodies that are put to human use and expendability. Despite not focusing on the caste identity of the subaltern characters in the novel particularly, Ghosh pitches them as unthinkable for the privileged English-educated people like Kanai or Piya, who speak through silence as we see in Fokir who could communicate with Piya even without knowing English, the only language she knows and speaks. It also shows how these expendable death-bound subjects are subjected to the tripartite violence of caste, refugeehood and ecological precarity which the Dalit migrants suffer both due to lack of government acknowledgement and subsequent persecution and the unforgiving natural surroundings of the Sundarbans against which no governmental care has been provided.

The earliest violence of man reducing nature into use and expendability is seen in Lord Canning's occupation of a part of Sundarbans to make Port Canning ignoring the warnings of unstable climatic conditions. Interestingly, Port Canning was washed away by a storm and here the anthropocentric hubris comes to terms with reality and is rendered precarious. Sovereignty's precarity is depicted by Ghosh through this incident and is a reminder that humans considering themselves powerful and estranged from nature subjugating the same with a notion of fully understanding it through calculative reasoning are nothing but mere participants of the earth and are incapable of decoding nature's inscrutability. Similar violence on lower caste refugees is meted out who were intended to be used to develop the arid

areas of Dandakaranya (Dasgupta 53; Gupta 20) and were considered expendable when they settled in Marichjhapi on their own. The Marichjhapi Massacre, the result of the government's capitalist objective of profit maximization through international conservationist agencies funding The Tiger Reservation Project depicted in *The Hungry Tide* (2004) testify the same. On one hand, the Dalit migrants and the non-human entities are subjected to similar violence of biopolitical management and on the other hand the vulnerable ecology of the Sundarbans is pitted against vulnerable humans of Marichjhapi with the manufactured sense of threat of destruction of Sundarbans by human interference of the refugees.

Pallavi Rastogi's study *Postcolonial Disasters: Narrating Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century* (2020) develops an overarching idea of disaster which is not limited only to "natural" disasters. She insightfully points towards the essential links between "imperial history, ecological vulnerability and cultural production in postcolonial societies" (Bhattacharya 3). While defining her theory of the "Disaster Unconscious", she states that "fiction about disaster, no matter how temporally distant from the calamitous events it registers, is underpinned by what I call a Disaster Unconscious" (Rastogi 5). The refugee crisis since partition, the state-sponsored violence to forcefully evict and even kill the migrant refugees of Marichjhapi citing ecological conservation can be analysed through the method of the Disaster Unconscious showing the links between natural and political disaster and thus enhancing the scope of the theory. Maurice Blanchot considers disaster as "that which is most separate" (Blanchot) and therefore it is the imminence that makes disaster outside of temporality. It is like tragic anagnorisis or recognition which was never a part of the perceived temporality as Matthew Gumpert thinks – "Catastrophe, which appeared to arrive in accidental fashion, from without, was now understood to be merely the visible wake of an invisible sequence of events" (Gumpert xxxvi). However, disaster in the context of the ideology of postcolonial governmentality and uneven development of globalization becomes a part of the everyday of the subaltern subjects. The spatial and temporal separation of disaster is not sustainable in vulnerable ecologies and politics preconceived upon the ideas of the bodies that matter and those that do not. A situation of human-animal encounter in the novel when a tiger was torched to death by the villagers on an island of the Sundarbans shocked the liberal sensibilities of Piya having concern for Tiger conservation. Kanai comments how the number of people killed by the tiger

“anywhere else on earth...would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 300). In the Sundarbans, islands and micro-ecosystems disappear with the ebb and flow of the tide especially during disasters. They seem phantom-like as if outside of temporality. The displaced humans surviving there similarly live an existence which is “outside of life and death,” (Arendt 444) always dwelling on the imminence of disaster and thus as “living dead” (Mbembe 92). Their everyday is constituted by disaster as much as they are outside the everyday – the temporality of biopower that rules by affirming life to the citizen subjects. The question of temporality is important in Disaster Unconscious as it determines the intensity of relationships between “Story” (the literary representation of disaster) and “Event” or the actual disaster. Rastogi conjures a framework to represent the unrepresentable. The novel *The Hungry Tide* too dwells broadly on whether disaster which is the “most separate” (Blanchot) and outside of temporality can be represented in a literary text. The fact that critical dissection and dissemination of knowledge regarding the Marichjhapi Massacre of 1979 has started relatively recently can also be seen as a form of slow violence taking a cue from Rob Nixon’s book *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). However, such “slow violence” should not be perceived as that of man over nature which is made invisible, as discussed by Nixon in the context of the Anthropocene, but also the violence of humans on other humans who are perceived to be expendable in the onslaught of the ideology of development and remains unremarked. The state-orchestrated disaster is a form of “subjugating life to the power of death (necropolitics)” (Mbembe 92) as we observe in Marichjhapi. The Marichjhapi Massacre is “an unprecedented form of governmentality that consists in *managing the multitudes*” (86). Mbembe refers to the oppressive power of sovereignty which selects the dispensable humans and eliminates them to maintain the control of governance. In the context of *The Hungry Tide*, the state's necropower kills not only what it considers being expendable humans, but also the non-humans. As Annu Jalais states the floating dead bodies of the massacred refugees are eaten by the Bengal Tigers turning them into prolific man-eaters. Tushar Bhattacharjee also shows in his documentary “Marichjhapi: Tortured Humanity,” how the dead bodies of the refugees were fed to the tigers who are supposedly conserved (Bhattacharjee 8:00-8:10). Tiger attacks on humans and the islanders’ retaliation have increased since the massacre resulting in a disruption of the participative dwelling of the

indigenous community with the non-humans. The episode of killing of an entrapped tiger in *The Hungry Tide* points to the fact. The greed for international funding under the guise of Tiger Conservation Project, while in reality, endangering their existence, is an offshoot of the all-encompassing environmental crisis during the Anthropocene, the ideology of anthropocentrism and perceived necessity to preserve the bodies that matter to the nation-state, as hinted by Ghosh in the novel. The humanist ideology of understanding and shaping the rest of the world to an economy of use produces imaginary ecologies and ideologies of preservation.

The Refugee Influx and Marichjhapi Massacre, Disaster Unconscious and *The Hungry Tide*

The Marichjhapi event here must be read against the historical background of the aftermath of Partition. During the first couple of years (1947-49) after independence, the upper-class gentry and *bhadraloks* mainly migrated to West Bengal and they integrated themselves there by virtue of having jobs and connections without needing much assistance from the government. In the beginning of 1950, when serious riots started in the districts of Khulna, Rajshahi and Barishal of East Pakistan, a heavy exodus of refugees happened. These refugees were mainly from lower caste Namashudras and Poudra Kshatriyas, who were largely agriculturalists needing resettlement, not having secure education or white-collar jobs. The West Bengal government was unable to tackle such a heavy influx. By 1954 the government of West Bengal decided that the “refugee problem” needed the intervention of the Central Government and thus the Dandakaranya rehabilitation plan was conceived in early 1956 to resettle the East Pakistani refugees (Sengupta 104). However, historians like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay have noted that the Dalits faced centuries of discrimination (Bandyopadhyay 51). While the unauthorized colonies consisting of upper castes saw smooth legalization, the lower caste refugees were always kept on the margins and Kolkata was attempted to be sanitized of Dalit refugees. In esteemed dailies like *The Statesman* and *Amrit Bazaar Patrika*, it was reported that the inhospitable jungles of Dandakarnya and the arid lands of Koraput and Malkangiri were uninhabitable. Instead, the waste and waterlogged lands available in West Bengal would provide better rehabilitation. “In 1978, 10,000 families deserted the place [Dandaranya]” (J. Sen) and this was a place “culturally, physically and emotionally removed from the migrants’ known world” (Jalais 1757-62). However,

the Dalit refugees who were dispersed in various camps outside of West Bengal led lives as “virtual «prisoners of war» and «serfs» under military office” (Mallick 106). To voice their grievances the Dalit refugees formed an organization named Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti (UUS) and in 1975 “the organization decided to launch a national movement for resettlement in the Sundarbans area of West Bengal” (106). Meanwhile, the Left Front had been continuously antagonizing the Congress Party's attempt to evict the lower caste refugees from West Bengal and promised them settlement in one of the islands of the Sundarbans if they came to power. When a delegation of the refugees went to visit Jyoti Basu after the Left Front was elected to power in 1977, he agreed to let the refugees resettle at Marichjhapi if they wanted to (J. Sen) and “Having sold their belongings to pay for the trip, 15,000 refugee families left Dandakaranya only to discover that Left Front policy had changed now that the coalition was in power, and many refugees were arrested and returned to the resettlement camps” (Mallick 107). The refugees did not want any aid from the government but only wanted to stay as citizens of India. Jhuma Sen writes “It was on 18 April 1978 that more than 10,000 refugees crossed Kumirmari and reached Marichjhapi” (J. Sen). Based on their own effort, they built schools, and a fishing industry and it was as if a democratic society sprang up from the mud of the island: “Marichjhapi could have been an ideal model to be emulated for refugee rehabilitation and resettlement” (J. Sen). In *The Hungry Tide*, we see Nirmal writing in his diary how he was amazed and energized by this effort – “I was watching the birth of something new, something hitherto unseen” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 171). This he could connect with the left idealism for the subaltern struggle for a better world in his early youth which gave a better purpose for him to live – “I, an ageing, bookish schoolmaster, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined not by those in power, but by those without!” (171). The idealism of Nirmal in the novel has been shown to be propelled by a left political idealism to which he attached himself in his early youth. However, the irony of history is such that the government run by a Communist Party would not tolerate such self-sufficient endeavours by the Dalit refugees and made baseless charges against them such as they were running a parallel government, smuggling illegal weapons and immigrants and since Marichjhapi was a part of the Sundarban Reserve Forest such human habitation was destroying the ecosystem of the space. Ross Mallick reports that on 26th January 1979, the Republic Day of India, the West Bengal government started an economic

blockade of the refugees with thirty police launches and they were deprived of food and water. Their huts were razed, fisheries and tubewells destroyed and the community was tear gassed (108). Debjani Sengupta depicts a grim picture of state atrocity over the refugees stating that “those who tried to cross the river in makeshift boats were shot at” and “several hundreds of men, women and children...died either through starvation or were shot at and their bodies thrown into the Raimangal river” (Sengupta 2018). *The Hungry Tide*, instead of commenting on such violence, directly surfaces Nirmal’s voice through Kanai’s reading of his diary and enumerates the crisis of representing the event that contradicted the left political ideology of the regime under which the massacre happened. The Marichjhapi event emerges in terms of its unrepresentability in historical and political discourse.

In her book, Pallavi Rastogi theorizes the refugee crisis as “CODA” (Rastogi 197) or an occurrence where all the disasters discussed in her book (Oceanic, Economic, Medical and Geopolitical) have been yoked together. We shall see how this concept can be engaged in the context of the Marichjhapi incident, especially with reference to *The Hungry Tide* and how the “event” of the Dalit refugee influx leading up to the Marichjhapi massacre helps in structuring the “story” in *The Hungry Tide* or how the narrative builds around the political disaster of Marichjhapi brought in by the state. Given the temporal distance of the massacre from the composition of the novel as well as the ongoing refugee crisis, it will be interesting to show how the crisis seeps into other parts of the novel not directly related to the Marichjhapi incident and thus influencing the craft of the narrative while also serving its direct expositional agenda of unveiling the disasters of the Marichjhapi massacre. Rastogi discusses how “the oceanic disaster emerges not only as an ecological calamity but also as an affective, or ontological, state. Some minds permanently inhabit a state of disaster; some people will always live in a state of disaster” (50). Nilima tells Kanai in *The Hungry Tide*, “In 1978 a great number of people suddenly appeared on Morichjhāpi. In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 118). Later we see in the novel how these downtrodden Dalit refugees would be mercilessly killed and Marichjhapi became what Deep Halder in the introduction to his collection of oral history of the event calls “neverland” (Halder 2). The expositional agenda of such a heinous and sudden occurrence is served by Ghosh by taking recourse to diary writing within his novel. The novel through Nirmal’s diary

performs an unconcealment of the truth of structural violence of the postcolonial biopolitics which transforms the refugee bodies into expendable. A parallel unravelling of the truth about Sundarban's ecology – the dolphins, tigers or the destructive instability caused by storms happens to Piya and Kanai in the present. Nirmal's account of the Marichjhapi incident was penned in his notebook and intended by him to be read by Kanai, during the happening of the disaster or within a day or two of it and thus having no temporal distance from the event. Starting to write, Nirmal states "I am reminded of the moments before the coming of a cyclone," (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 68) thus reinforcing the suddenness of the event and linking the natural disaster with the political disaster of the Marichjhapi massacre. The Oceanic Disaster, according to Rastogi is an "explosion" or a "violent, sudden onset disaster" (Rastogi 42). This sort of disaster includes storms, tsunamis etc. The metaphor of "water" according to Rastogi "is a source of life as well as death" (199) which can be used to depict this disaster in a literary form. The belonging of the caste subaltern subject dwells in the precarious border of existence – grounded in water rather than in the stability of land as both their ecological and political experience happens in the form of an abandoned subject excluded from the sense of human security and essence of future. The political event of the Marichjhapi massacre is deeply connected to a certain kind of conceptualization of nature and its conservation by postcolonial governmentality which thinks in absolute terms of human/non-human difference set in by an anthropocentric approach to nature. Similarly, the natural catastrophic events in Sundarbans in the form of the storms and their after-effects also precipitate through forms of human settlement, geopolitical planning of the space and the understanding of lives that matter or the qualified life to be protected according to the biopolitics of the postcolonial nation-state. The apparently invisible connections between several kinds of disaster acting together with ecological and political factors acting in a co-constitutive ensemble get revealed in the semiotic vulnerability of a literary text where meaning is never calculatively categorized but is described in terms of actual human experience.

Economic disaster is also an inextricable part of the tide country which is deeply entangled with spatiality and consequently the experience of precarious ecologies where the subaltern subjects are forced to dwell. We see such disaster culminate during the Marichjhapi Massacre where economically and spatially destitute Dalit refugees were subjected to economic blockade for a forced eviction

despite their successful effort in settling down in the tide country, after being adapted to live with perpetual economic and ecological disaster, informing and propelling each other. Ghosh says:

The destitution of the tide country was such as to remind them of the terrible famine that had devastated Bengal in 1942 — except that in Lusibari hunger and catastrophe were a way of life. They learned that after decades of settlement, the land had still not been wholly leached of its salt. The soil bore poor crops and could not be farmed all year round. Most families subsisted on a single daily meal. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 79)

They often died by drowning or were killed by tigers, crocodiles or snakes when hunger compelled them to go hunting and fishing or collecting meagre amounts of honey, firewood, wax etc. The situation worsened during the Marichjhapi incident when the Dalit refugees were like “the ghosts, covered in dust” (164) heading towards Marichjhapi. When the government decided to evict them and imposed an economic blockade, “despite careful rationing, food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass” (260). Death and disease are constant companions of the refugees as medical disaster coexists with them especially in the face of massacre as we see in *The Hungry Tide*. The refugees “had been forcibly prevented from bringing rice or water to Morichjhāpi” (252) and “the police had destroyed the tube wells and there was no potable water left; the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out” (252). Kusum saved the crabs for little Fokir to eat “while she had subsisted on a kind of wild green known as jadu-palong” (261). This had caused her “severe dysentery. That, on top of the lack of proper nutrition, had been terribly debilitating” (261). Many “medicalized rhetoric” (Rastogi 123) abound in *The Hungry Tide*, especially in the mention of the hospital built by Nilima and its interior details given by Moyna who wants to become a nurse. Sadly though, this medical facility could be of no use to the refugees of Marichjhapi. When Kusum asked Nilima for help, she could not dare to go against the government in fear of being doomed of her benevolent enterprise for interfering. Nilima represents here the domain of humans as “homos” (2) who can rationally understand the world and transform it and therefore she abandons the other humans as “anthropos” (2) or as a species who act as “embedded on the Earth” (Parham 10). The ecological and medical abandonment of the poor lower caste islanders as we see in the novel

however point towards a failure of the homos to bring justice as the question of power and self-interest binds them to their situation thereby returning to the question of embeddedness. Nilima's philanthropy remains blind to the naturalized lives of the islanders as much as the policies of the nation-state which uses the rationale of ecological protection to abandon and evict the vulnerable people in Marichjhapi.

Rastogi uses the metaphor of "simmer" while speaking about the *longue durée* of geopolitical disaster which incorporates "myriad factors such as war, ethnic conflict, religious tension, and border issues" (Bhattacharya 5). The Event of refugee influx after Partition, the history of their rehabilitation and suffering and their journey from Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi come in Ghosh as an ensemble of political, economic and ecological factors. These factors co-constitute disasters, whether in the form of state-orchestrated violence in Marichjhapi or environmental catastrophes like the frequent and sudden storms caused and accelerated by climate change under the Anthropocene. Describing the settlers of Marichjhapi Nilima says to Kanai in the novel - "But in time it came to be learned that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh...In Bangladesh, they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes. Most of them were Dalits" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 118). She adds:

But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhapi; it was from a government resettlement camp in central India. In the years after Partition, the authorities had removed the refugees to a place called Dandakaranya, deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of kilometres from Bengal. (118)

Therefore, the event of Marichjhapi cannot be understood by either of the economic, political, geographical, caste or ecological factors but in terms of their interconnectivity. The genealogy of the event could be traced from their migration from East Pakistan or Bangladesh (after its creation out of Pakistan as a separate nation in 1971), miserable conditions of living in the temporary structures of refugee camps, their forced migration from these camps to the barren land of Dandakaranya and eventually their abandonment of Dandakaranya and attempt to resettle in

Marichjhapi. This journey is traced thoroughly in the earliest novel in Bengali that extensively refers to the incident of Marichjhapi titled *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi (From Dandak to Marichjhapi)* by Saktipada Rajguru published in 1986 and the name of the novel suggests that journey. *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi* (1986/2008) shows how the project of Dandakaranya exposed the Dalit refugees to absolute ecological precarity fighting with malevolent nature and wild animals. In Marichjhapi too they had to fight with nature in order to survive and *The Hungry Tide* shows how the government's condemnation that the refugees have encroached on a protected forest reserve is a sham. Nirmal says, "Marichjhapi, wasn't really a forest, even before the settlers came. Parts of it were already being used by the government for plantations and so on" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 213-214) when Nilima asks him "What will become of the forest, the environment?" (213). This is a question of an upper caste Hindu absorbing the ideology of colonial governmentality of managing the nature and the humans and "preserving" the pristine nature and the non-humans at the cost of "disposable" humans. The privileged environmentalism of Nilima fetishizes nature as an object of consumption and protection which assumes anthropocentric autonomy of the modern subject to orchestrate justice for the environment or the non-human entities. We see this in other parts of the novel including Piya's bewilderment during the tiger-killing episode by the villagers. The government uses this ideology to generate funds and profit from the West as Kanai says to Piya, "Because it was people like you," said Kanai, "who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons" (301). Cary Wolfe observed referring to Etienne Balibar that "«every theoretical racism draws upon anthropological universals,» underneath which we find «the persistent presence of the same 'question': that of the difference between humanity and animality» that is at work in «the systematic 'bestialization' of individuals and racialized human groups»" (xx). To supplement him it can be also argued that the question of human/animal difference can be inverted with the invocation of a certain version of environmental justice or animal rights where humanization of the non-human as the subject of rights and justice precludes a simultaneous bestialization of the vulnerable humans. Instead of understanding them through a flat ontology of

shared vulnerability of ecological and political precarity, they are understood as exclusive taxonomic categories.

Anthropocene, Necropolitics, Marichjhapi Massacre and *The Hungry Tide*

The term “Anthropocene” indicates a new geological era in which human agency has become a significant geophysical force at par with natural forces, modifying the world’s ecosystems with greater rapidity than witnessed in any earlier period of human history. Ghosh who dealt with this concept in his later works especially in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) extensively, perhaps had it in his mind while writing *The Hungry Tide* as we see indirect inkling to Anthropocene. Brandon Jones in his article argues this. Nirmal, in the novel, “describes how it used to be the case that signs of death and decay for the humans and nonhumans of the Sundarbans emerged slowly and were few and far between” (Jones 645). However, as Nirmal aged, he saw the signs increasingly - “The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take to submerge the tide country? Not much — a minuscule change in the level of the sea would be enough” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 215). What is important to note here is the fact that these events might have exacerbated during the Anthropocene but cannot be entirely the doings of humans or in other words anthropocentric, especially in an unknowable and mutable ecology like the Sundarbans. Undoubtedly the anthropocentric damages done to the environment abound in the novel but *The Hungry Tide* also provides enough evidence to refrain from formulating a reductive view of the environment based on anthropocentric determinism. Precarious ecologies run parallel and supplementary to anthropogenic activities on man and nature. As Nirmal contemplates the prospect of the submergence of the archipelago by a little rise in the sea level he esteems - “that this might not be such a terrible outcome. These islands had seen so much suffering, so much hardship and poverty, so many catastrophes, so many failed dreams, that perhaps humankind would not be ill-served by their loss” (216). Here he is speaking about both natural and man-made catastrophes and his reference to death and failed dreams also points towards the Marichjhapi Massacre among other sufferings. The mark of separation between the natural and anthropogenic or between the ecological and the political dissolves where malevolent nature as well as

humanly built political systems, which nonetheless affect each other, can create disasters as states of exception, an idea floated and grounded by Giorgio Agamben in his book *The State of Exception* (2005). Such a state of exception often produces further vulnerabilities for precarious lives in the archipelago. It links catastrophes brought about by anthropocentric greed to the concept of biopolitics which deals with the power of sovereignty to dictate who should live and who should die and consequently the “contemporary forms of subjugating life to the power of death (necropolitics)” (Mbembe 92). In the understanding of the Western political philosophers like Agamben or Mbembe the production of killable lives under the sovereign are assumed to be natural and unqualified. The production of “nature” as an entity outside the human and the fear of the “state of nature” as unregulated and undersigned by man cause the conceptualization of the sovereign state that will give protection from this state of nature. Consecutively the “bare life” or “unqualified life” is the other of this protective state which is revealed when the state suspends its laws to protect itself. Agamben comments that “the state of exception constitutes rather...an emptiness of law, and the idea of an originary indistinction and fullness of power must be considered a legal mythologeme analogous to the idea of a state of nature” (Agamben 6). The natural and the political are tied in this ensemble and the running parallel of Piya’s exploration in the Sundarban – its vulnerable ecology, its deprecating animal lives and precarious humans with the account of Marichjhapi massacre of Dalit refugees testifies that. Ironically the postcolonial government acts as the pre-independent imperialist conqueror and in its eyes, “savage life is just another form of animal life” (Arendt 192). Anthropocentrism subscribes to the view of man being solely of value, practises exploitation of nature for human use and considers those humans who think themselves to be a part of nature, as savages. Similarly, the government, in *The Hungry Tide* treat the Dalit refugees close to nature as “phantoms, unreal, and ghostlike” (Mbembe 78) and lacking “a specifically human character, a specifically human reality.” (78) So, when the government massacred them, “they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder” (Arendt 192). Such treatment is a denial of their existence and thus the refugees stay outside of temporality or life and death.

Hailed as a “green postcolonial novel” (Hoydis 295), *The Hungry Tide* shows how the massacre of Marichjhapi citing Project Tiger and thus pitting the environment and the Dalit refugees who are ecological citizens, against each other, is

an exercise of “ecological sovereignty” (Smith 193-218). This was done not out of love of the non-humans but to attract foreign investment. Ross Mallick notes that “schoolchildren in Britain, Belgium, Holland, and Germany were raising money for Project Tiger” (Mallick 116). The destructive politics behind environmental conservation is voiced by Ghosh in the novel through the character of Kusum who says: “The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements... «This island is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world»” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 261). Marichjhapi thus becomes an “enclaved economy” because of “the controlled inflow and fixing of money movements around zones” (Mbembe 86). Such enclaves become “privileged spaces of war and death” (Mbembe 86). Kusum says in the novel, “Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 261-262). The government ensured that the refugees “experience a permanent condition of «being in pain»” (Mbembe 91). In a state of helplessness, hunger and thirst Kusum listens to “the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 261). Such abominations by the government, disrupted the “idyllic relationship” (Jalais 1758) which the inhabitants of the Sundarbans and the tigers hitherto enjoyed. Jalais notes that the “sudden development of their man-eating trait was believed to have been caused by two factors. One was the defiling of the Sundarbans forest due to government violence, the second was because of the stress which had been put thereafter on the superiority of tigers in relation to the inhabitants of the Sundarbans” (1758). In *The Hungry Tide*, when Kanai asked Horen what happened on the fateful day of the massacre, he answered that “the assault began the next day” and after all imaginable ravages of the settlers by the government hired rogues, “a group of women were taken away by force, Kusum among them. People say they were used and then thrown into the rivers, so they would be washed away by the tides. Dozens of settlers were killed that day. The sea claimed them all” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 278-279). This perhaps answers how man-eating became a part of the tigers’ nature after the Marichjhapi massacre as it was “the corpses of killed refugees that had floated through the forest that had given them the taste” (Jalais 1761) of human flesh more than ever before. The Dalit memoir of Manoranjan Byapari confirms the same when he says – “It was

heard that people were shot and carried in a steamer and then some of their bodies were dumped in the deep sea, while others were thrown in the forest to satiate the tigers.” (Byapari 271) We witness how this conflict between humans and tigers enraged villagers in *The Hungry Tide*. When the villagers “had been presented with an opportunity unlikely ever to be repeated,” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 292) they killed a tiger trapped in the livestock pen of the village.

Conclusion

While the geographical and political ecologies accelerate the vulnerabilities of the humans and non-humans living in the Sundarbans, *The Hungry Tide* in its act of storytelling and narrative strategies does not stop at bringing the political and ecological factors in an ensemble. This operates upon two areas that distinguish the novel as an aesthetic commentary on the vulnerable ecologies of Sundarbans. Firstly, the act of storytelling employs the strategy of what Heidegger would call unconcealment where the narrative reveals the concealed truth of ecological and political co-production of bare lives in the postcolony alongside maintaining respect for the unknowable. It unravels the truth but also accepts its concealment when the “unexperienced and unthought, underlies our familiar and therefore outworn essence of truth” (Heidegger 177). This unconcealment is unlike the anthropocentric ways of segregating humans from nature and the non-human entities of nature, where it becomes fully possible for the political apparatus and human language to understand the world around them objectively. It breaks the continuous temporality of modernity and its gaze. On the other hand the novel posits silence as a form of resistance against the biopolitics of globalization and the nation-state. The silent nature of the archipelago along with relatively silent subjects like Fokir, Horen, Kusum or Moyna living with its vulnerable ecological and political landscape (rather than just living in it) becomes suggestive of what Antje Ellermann would call “the reverse state of exception” (Ellermann 1). Here the migrants and stateless people speak through silence and upturn the gaze of the governmentality. The Marichjhapi settlements happened beyond the intention and support of the government where the citizen refugees thrown outside the protection of the state become the bare lives who “have nothing left to lose and can act unconstrained by the fear of the consequences of resistance” (23). However unlike the European context, Ellermann unfolds where migrants resist by refusing to reveal their identities to stop the state

from deporting them, the lives of people like Fokir living in the disaster-ridden everyday of the vulnerable ecologies of the Sundarbans resist by their fearless attitude to death. They become death-bound subjects who fail the biopolitical sovereignty, perpetually moving on a boat under the open sky, depending on the forest for sustenance. In the novel when Fokir dies while protecting Piya from the storm with his body, the skins separating them touch closely signifying the dissolving border of life and death – “Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 389). It seems that in the moment of the storm, the bodies of Piya and Fokir, like the bodies that matter to the sovereign power and those that do not, touch each other dissolving the biopolitical determination of identities. It is also like the dissolution of the difference between spatial security of land and unsure waters in the face of the storm which is a general feature of the tide country. The novel shows how the “necropower” of sovereignty fails in the face of impending death and shared vulnerability in the precarious storm-ridden ecology of the Sundarbans, as much as the “biopower” which separates bodies and identities with the promise to protect and govern.

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