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A Search for Ontological Identity through the Characters of Nirmal and Nilima in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

Nirmal's memoir serve as a perfect fictional device to opportunely delineate a search for metaphysical and ontological identity of a character thrown into the wild rigours of Sundarbans. The political and social beliefs of Nirmal are in stark contrast to the kind of life he has to live in the new place, and his soul is always in a state of restlessness. The world view of Nirmal, with his deep communist sentiments and his yearning for a revolution to affect the lives of people on a grand scale, is frustrated by the sedentary and monotonous lifestyle of the place. The Morichjhāpi incident shows him a path at the twilight of his life to do something which his heart desires, even at the cost of forever bidding goodbye to his wife. On the other end of the spectrum lies his wife Nilima, a deeply pragmatic lady who realises that she has to affect as much change she can within the constraints of her immediate reality. Forced to leave from the life she knew owing to her husband's political compulsions, she tries to create something worthwhile, a trust to help the local deeply poverty-stricken and distressed people. This dialectic of two opposing world views serve as a fecund ground for Ghosh to deal with the question of the metaphysical significance of our lives, of the freedom we crave to realize what we believe in.

Keywords: Nirmal, communist, revolution, Nilima, poverty-stricken, metaphysical.

Ghosh's fiction has attracted a lot of academic and critical attention on account of the width and depth of its thematic structure. Scholarly articles dealing with various strands of his vision as articulated in the various novels abound in the academic space. The same can be said about *The Hungry Tide*. The "geographically narrow" (Auradkar 113) setting of *The Hungry Tide* allows Ghosh to delve deep into the existential aspects of the characters on a purely philosophical plane rather than material considerations or temporal locales. This paper analyses the characters of Nirmal and Nilima in the novel through which Ghosh deals with such ontological questions hitherto unseen in his novels.

Nirmal Bose is an educated, fiery communist, full of idealist notions of revolution. A teacher of English literature, his fiery speeches and his impassioned recitations win him many admirers among his students. Nilima, a student of his with remarkable resourcefulness and determination, and mesmerized like her friends by Nirmal's passionate exhortations in the classroom, manages to strike a conversation with him and gradually they get married. However, Nirmal's frail temperament resulted in an unforeseen hindrance to his political cause, when a simple detention for a day or two by the police over some meek interrogation resulted in him becoming mentally unsettled. The doctors advise a period away from the city,

which Nilima has to accede to. Through her family's connections, Nirmal manages to get a job in Lusibari School, sixty miles from Kolkata.

Ghosh throughout the novel shows the fundamental differences between the two characters. At the very outset, when they reach Gosaba, they are flummoxed to see the level of destitution the locals are forced to live in. Overwhelmed by the situation they saw, Nirmal's first instinct is to pour over the leaflets of Lenin while Nilima starts speaking to the local women on issues that ailed those most. This instinctive difference between the two partners shall define their relationship in the years to come.

Nilima says of Nirmal:

...that as a young man Nirmal was in love with the idea of revolution. Men like that, even when they turn their backs on their party and their comrades, can never let go of the idea: it's the secret god that rules their hearts. It is what makes them come alive; they revel in the danger, the exquisite pain. It is to them what childbirth is to a woman, or war to a mercenary. (Ghosh, 100)

After thirty years of serving as a headmaster of the school, at the eve of his retirement, regret starts to haunt him. He states in his own words: "The true tragedy of a routinely spent life is that its wastefulness does not become apparent till it is too late." (120) He starts to regret all the things he had sacrificed unknowingly- his writing, for which he was known once, his reading, which was his other great love, and the revolutionary ideals that he never lived up to.

In Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, the character of Arjun, comfortably ensconced in the service of the Britishers, undergoes a transformation in his outlook as he starts perceiving the world through the eyes of others like the less privileged Kishan Singh. Nirmal too gradually realizes the alienation he has performed throughout his life. In a scene when Nirmal is taken by Horen to Gorjontola for a religious ceremony, he is surprised to hear the mantra for the local deity- Bon Bibi- being recited in a language that was a mixture of Bangla, Arabic and Persian. The ritual involves a strange mixture of Islamic mantras although in the form of a Hindu Puja. The original book on the deity is also notable, since the pages opened to the right as in Arabic and not to the left as in Bangla. Nirmal realizes the significance of this, a realization strange to him despite his years in the islands, since he consciously kept himself away from any kind of religious events- "...And so it dawned on me: the tide country's faith is something like one of its great mohanas. A meeting of not just many rivers, but a circular roundabout people can use to pass in many directions- from country to country and even between faiths and religions." (247)

Horen's personal interests lead Nirmal to Morichjhāpi for the first time. Although he had heard of the settlers' arrival on the island, and prospective trouble between them and the Forest Department owing to the refugees settling on a reserved land, he had not given them much thought. Upon reaching Morichjhāpi to be protected from a storm and reaching Kusum's hut, he hears her tale. He hears how she alone as a fifteen year old went to Dhanbad in search of her mother, how she found her, how she got married to a man and had a son, and how tragedy struck and she lost both her mother and husband. She wished to come back to her place, but was afraid of the destitution and helplessness she might have to face without

anyone there. Then she recounts the tale of the thousands of people, travelling by the place she stayed, towards her motherland. That was their motherland too! Compelled by partition and subsequent compulsions to stay at a place called Dandakaranya whose rocky and dry features were completely in contrast to the wet and muddy fields they were born into, they wanted to return, and were doing so. Kusum does not wait anymore, and joins them with her son. The poet within Nirmal is stirred, and in his mind he sees-

...them walking, these thousands of people who wanted nothing more than to plunge their hands once again in our soft, yielding tide country mud. I saw them coming, young and old, quick and halt, with their lives bundled on their heads, and knew it was of them the Poet had spoken when he said: Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited ones to whom neither the past nor the future belongs. (137)

For him, Kusum becomes his 'idea of transformation', his 'Muse'. (216)

In the next morning, quite in contrast to what he expected, he sees that the settlers have industriously and diligently built many things within the space of a few weeks- paths have been laid, dams which are the guarantor of life on the island have been built, plots of land have been enclosed with fences, fishing nets have been hung for drying and so much more. Looking at them, Nirmal feels a sense of steady excitement. He feels he was visualizing the birth of something new, something unseen previously. He remembers Sir Hamilton, who he venerates due to his endeavours to create a country out of his own hard earned money without any consideration of profit. Sir Hamilton, in spite of being a foreigner, had bought ten thousand acres of land from the Forest Department in India and had envisioned a country "where no one would exploit anyone and people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences and where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening." (51) He promised free land to all who came, and had just one condition- they should not bring with them all their differences of class, caste, race and religion. He brought on board all the respectable names of his times- Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and all agreed that this could be a model for all of India. He worked dexterously and ingeniously to make it habitable for population, and thousands of lumpen people all across eastern India answered his call. He had the foresight to even building infrastructure for electricity and telephone lines. It was that dream of creating something new that Nirmal realizes actually transpiring in front of him. And for a communist like him, it gives him the greatest joy that this is being dreamt by none other than all the people themselves rather than a single mind, that too by minds without learning and power- "...between what was happening at Morichjhapi and what Daniel Hamilton had done there was one vital aspect of difference: this was not one man's vision. The dream had been dreamt by the very people who were trying to make it real... imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without." (171)

He realizes that the life which he has apparently wasted for the last thirty years could be redeemed after all, by being a part of this transformation. He thinks, "the significance of Morichjhāpi extended far beyond the island itself: Was it possible, even, that in Morichjhāpi had been planted the seeds of what might become if not a Dalit nation, then at least a safe haven, a place of true freedom for the country's most oppressed?" (191)

The feast organised for the writers', intellectuals', journalists' by the residents of Morichjhāpi in order to garner support from the intellectual class to their cause served further to increase Nirmal's questions about his own life. Looking back, he could not help but regret the trajectory his life had taken. He says:

It was as if, on the eve of my retirement, I had been presented with a glimpse of the life I might have led if I had stayed in Kolkata. The guests who had been brought in from the city were exactly the people I would have known: journalists, photographers, well-known authors; there was the novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay and the journalist Jyotirmoy Datta. Some of them I even recognized for I had known them back in the university. One of them — we used to call him Khokon in those days — had once been a friend as well as a comrade. I observed him from a distance, marveling at how well he looked, at the bright effulgence of his face and the raven-black hue of his hair. Would this have been me had I stayed on, living the literary life? I became aware as never before of all my unacknowledged regrets. (158)

Here therefore Nirmal is further investigating his own existence, what has been the real meaning and significance of his life till date. This regret is further exacerbated when Khokon, upon reintroduction, asks him "But what have you been doing all these years? Where have you been?" (159) That such an innocuous question should engender within Nirmal feelings like he was being asked to account for his existence till date is in itself evidence enough of his inner turmoil. He modestly answers that he had been serving as a school teacher, and concedes that he has given up on his writing.

However when a discussion ensues regarding the fate of the refugees and Nirmal glowingly speaks of his ambitions to teach the settlers' children, Khokon remarks that they might not be allowed to stay. When a flummoxed Nirmal asks how would that be possible when thousands of refugees have already come and therefore evicting them would result in bloodshed, Khokon in the most cavalier way possible remarks "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs." (160)

Nirmal sees in his cynical smile the shade of those people who does not believe a word of what they profess, and considers everybody to be as base as them. However, the greatest shock to him is his inability to say exactly what he thought of Khokon to his face. He thinks "I was tempted to tell him what I thought of him, but it struck me with great force that I had no business to be self-righteous about these matters. Nilima — she had achieved a great deal. What had I done? What was the work of my life? I tried to find an answer but none would come to mind." (160) To a mind as idealistic and as revolutionary as Nirmal's, there could not have been a psychological and emotional abyss deeper than this.

The cry of the settlers' in a particular face-off between them and the police further compels Nirmal to question the reality of his existence. As the police open fires in order to stop a group of people from getting food and other provisions into the island to their families through a boat, the people cries "Who are we? We are the dispossessed." Listening to this, Nirmal realises the question is apt for him as well: "Who was I? Where did I belong? In

Calcutta or in the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?" (254) Kusum tells him,

...the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust. 'This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it 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.' Every day, sitting here with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their name? Where do they live, these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? (216)

He realises he is but a worthless headmaster, and cannot do anything material for them.

Nilima, on the other hand, is a highly pragmatic lady. This combined with her resourcefulness and determination, proves to be a very potent force. Ghosh states- "Nilima's settings were utterly unlike Nirmal's. She was from a family well known for its tradition of public service. Her grandfather was one of the founding members of the congress party and her father was an eminent barrister at the Calcutta High Court." (76) Compelled to come far away from her familiar surroundings owing to her husband's political compulsions, she from the very beginning tries to get into the lived life of the women in order to understand their problems and help them. She is astounded to learn that the daily ritual of the women begins by breaking their bangles and removing their vermilion and donning the clothes customary for widows, the moment their husbands depart from their homes in search for honey, or fishing or such activities which would take them in close proximity to the jungle or river. It was because death was a regular occurrence in the country. She realizes that the women needs to be financially independent. While Nirmal dreamily searched for a term to denote the women as a particular group, Nilima had only one consideration- their betterment from their current predicament. She starts inducting young widows to go and buy daily provisions from nearest cities and sell them in Lusibari. The prices charged by local shopkeepers were so exorbitant that despite the conveyance costs the women have substantial profit. This business acumen ultimately leads to the establishment of the Women's Union and then to the Badabon Trust. The Trust would gradually evolve into a model for all the NGO's in India. Nilima doesn't allow her fettered existence to stand in way of what she believes in. Her efforts are with time recognised all over India- she gets a President's medal for her social work.

Nirmal was always extremely dismissive of social service. He didn't believe in anything other than transformation on a grand scale. To him, social service carried the stigma of being forced to acquiesce oneself with the activities of bureaucrats and politicians, and to compromise with one's ideals. And this is what he accuses Nilima of, compromising one's ideals in order to stay on the right side of the government. Nilima refuses to help the settlers' because she knows that the government is against them. She knows that if she helps them, the government would go against her as well, and the Trust she has so painstakingly built would cease to exist. She decides to consider the 'greater good'. The fiery exchange between the couple brings their relationship to its precipice. Nilima angrily accuses Nirmal of living "... in

a dream world — a haze of poetry and fuzzy ideas about revolution. To build something is not the same as dreaming of it. Building is always a matter of well-chosen compromises” (178). It is this realization that differentiates the two. She further states that although Nirmal throughout the years has done nothing but judge her and her endeavours, she has something concrete to show for her efforts. Nirmal had nothing to say. He realizes the sacrifices Nilima had to make for him, and the dedication she has put in the foreign land, and he desists.

Nirmal turns down Nilima's request to help her run the Trust. He realises he won't do anything that someone else might not be able to do. But as for Morichjhāpi, Nirmal states that he has got an inspiration from one of Rilke's poems. Rilke's poetry for him “captures supremely the pathos and cadences of the tide country” (Luo 155). He says “In one verse I had found a message written for my eyes only, filled with hidden meaning. When the time came I would receive a sign and then I would know what I had to do. For the Poet himself had told me: This is the time for what can be said. Here is its country. Speak and testify.” (274-75)

And the time comes, when Nirmal overhears Nilima telling a doctor that something massive is going to happen regarding Morichjhāpi. He immediately leaves and Horen informs him that the island is being surrounded by hardened criminals to do what the government could not do legally- evict the settlers. Thereafter, taking night as their cover, they manage to get into Morichjhāpi. The information comes that there is going to be an attack on the island by these criminals. Although Horen decides to escape with Kusum's son Fokir in order to get the latter to safety, Nirmal decides to stay on. He writes in detail of all the happenings of Morichjhāpi right from its inception to the night of his stay. Before Horen escapes, he gives the writing to him so that he can pass it on to his nephew Kanai. Nirmal writes: “All night long I have been asking myself, what is it I am afraid of? Now, with the rising of the sun, I have understood what it is: I am afraid because I know that after the storm passes, the events that have preceded its coming will be forgotten. No one knows better than I how skillful the tide country is in silting over its past.” (58)

Nirmal recognises his destiny- the destiny that would allow him transcendence. It is worthwhile to bring Levinas into this discussion. In Levinas' philosophical consideration, the binary of the self and the other is redundant, since the self is itself the producer of meaning to the world. Therefore, the other simply becomes a reflection of the consciousness, and hence cannot be known by the same consciousness. For Levinas, the journey of Ulysses who despite his trials and tribulations returns home represents a reality which he calls totality. This reality fails to perceive the 'other'. In contrast, the journey of Abraham, who permanently leaves his home in order to reach the unknown, the Promised Land, which for Levinas represents infinity. The 'other'- beyond one's own consciousness, can only be known by offering one's self to this infinity. Further, communication for Levinas has two dimensions- the Saying and the Said. “Saying states and thematises the Said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbour, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the Said” (*Otherwise Than Being* 46). In the words of Simon Critchley, Saying is “the non-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts philosophy and is the very enactment of the ethical movement from the Same to the Other” (7). Thus, as

Thomas Huttunen states, Said is the surface level where language is used for themes, ideas to be communicated to one another, whereas Saying is prediscursive, the 'ethical dimension' of communication.

Nirmal thus transcends his mundane everyday world and escapes into the infinity of the 'Sunderbans', the infinity which the poet in him has always craved. He accomplishes it through his submission away from the world he knew, and into the unknown, a submission that reaches its crescendo through the experiences Nirmal encounters in the worlds 'other' than his own. Through his writing, he manages to escape the 'Said' of everyday world and enter the realm of the 'Saying', within the very heart of the life, further exemplified when he refuses to leave the island in the wake of the attack. His madness after being found days later can thus be attributed to the failure to return to the world of the 'Said' after an encounter with the infinity.

Nilima says of Nirmal- "For him it had to be all or nothing, and of course that's what he ended up with — nothing." However, Kanai corrects her. He did achieve something- he left his memoir through which the struggles of Kusum and all her fellow settlers, their trials and tribulations, the efforts they had put in order to start a new life, and the cruel steps the government had taken in order to thwart them in their ambition. The entire cadence of the phenomena was recorded by Nirmal- and Kanai promises to bring them to public discourse. Nirmal who for Kanai was a "misplaced, misgendered Scheherazade,...with a flying, fleeting pen" (148) transforms into a voice for the voiceless. Bill Ashcroft argues that the "most compelling achievement of *testimonio* is its representation in history of the unhistoricized, the "voiceless"" (113) and that "a key function of *testimonio* is the strategic attempt to control representation, to interpose a voice that has been silenced, oppressed or misrepresented, a goal which lies at the core of all interpolating strategies" (111).

Auradkar aptly describes Nilima and Nirmal as "She, the pragmatic builder of today; and he, the deceased dreamer of a better future" (123). The President's Medal is the hallmark of Nilima's sincere altruistic endeavours to build a better world for the people around her. She refuses to let the fetters life put on her decide the meaning of her life and navigates through the existential questions to create her own identity. Nirmal attains salvation through the memoir which and achieves an ontological finality which he so earnestly craved.

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