



The Politics of Subalternity: A Postcolonial Analysis of the Subalternised Other through Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Disha Dahiya

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Guru Kashi University, Punjab, India

Received: 22 Oct 2023; Received in revised form: 30 Nov 2023; Accepted: 07 Dec 2023; Available online: 15 Dec 2023
©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This research paper delves into the post-colonial narrative presented in Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide*, published in 2004. Through a post-colonial lens, the paper examines how Ghosh's narration captures the intricate interplay between identity, representation, and power dynamics in the Sundarbans region shared by India and Bangladesh. The novel portrays the 'Subalternised Other', individuals and communities which are marginalised and silenced by dominant forces; it sheds light on their struggles for agency, voice, and recognition. Drawing upon the works of M.H. Abrams, Antonio Gramsci, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper explores the significance of the terms "Subaltern" and "Other" in the context of postcolonial studies through this text. It analyses how Ghosh's characters, including Piya, Kanai, Nirmal, Fokir, Kusum, Moyna, and the Morichjhapi refugees, represent the diverse manifestations of subordination based on class, caste, age, gender, and ethnicity. Overall, this article is a vivid academic demonstration of how *The Hungry Tide* offers a compelling exploration of the 'Subalternised Other', inviting readers to critically reflect on representation, identity, and the urgency of embracing diversity and harmonious coexistence within societies in a post-colonial context.



Keywords— Subalternised Other, Subaltern, Other, Postcoloniality, Morichjhapi Refugees.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse around the post-coloniality of a text is not new; when it comes to writers like Amitav Ghosh, their narratives bind the nation as a whole and present a fictionalised historiography of the relation between hegemonic groups. Literary texts such as *The Hungry Tide* might not have been written to situate the subaltern in a post-colonial context, but it serves the purpose efficiently. Published in 2004, *The Hungry Tide* is a compelling literary work transcending conventional storytelling to delve into the realm of socio-political themes. This novel captures the interplay between identity, representation, and power dynamics, set against the backdrop of the delicate ecosystem of the water and land of the Sundarbans region, shared by India and Bangladesh. Ghosh skillfully employs his narrative prowess to navigate the complex terrain of post-colonial human experiences where tangible and

abstract socio-geographical borders emerge, merge and blur.

Establishing a post-colonial narrative enables literature to delve deeper into the study of the subaltern — it plays a significant role in post-colonial studies. It stems from the basicities of Marxism and moves through post-structuralism and then de-construction to establish a relationship between society's historical, social and cultural aspects. Subaltern literature, a facet of postcolonialism, explores themes of oppression, marginalisation, and discrimination against lower classes, women, and marginalised groups. The term 'Subaltern' according to M.H. Abrams, is a combination of the Latin meanings for "under" (sub) and "other" (alter), used to refer to someone of an inferior rank (Abrams 237). Then, Antonio Gramsci, in his 'Notes on Italian History' (Hoare and Smith 265), described the 'Subaltern' as someone who

belongs to the oppressed class of society. His interest in the study of the subalterns led him towards developing a methodology for the subaltern historiography, a history of the subalterns and a political policy of transformation to trace the evolution and existence of the history of subalterns. Antonio Gramsci also introduced the term "hegemony" to signify one group's cultural or intellectual dominance over others. He linked hegemony to socially coercive power representations, emphasising its connection with social compulsion expressions. Gramsci identified two aspects in examining the state: political society and civil society (Hoare and Smith 145). According to him, the dominant social group maintains hegemony through governmental institutions, education, and religious establishments, exerting force while employing violent expressions of cultural values.

The 'Subalternised Other' and the Postcolonial Aesthetic

In her article, Nandana Dutta draws upon the "development of a postcolonial aesthetic" (Dutta 35) of the colonial experience in India and neighbouring countries that involved significant changes in geographical and administrative structures. She talks about how the borders were redrawn and territories were divided into smaller units. The impact of these processes can still be observed in the postcolonial world, where colonial boundaries persist, or new ones are created for improved governance. These transformations have influenced literary themes in various ways. While the terms 'Subaltern' and *Other* have been used interchangeably at times, they indeed operate in differing social-cultural, political and historical scenarios. However, in literary theory, the "subaltern" refers to marginalised and oppressed groups within a society. At the same time, the *Other* represents characters or groups portrayed as different or alien from the dominant cultural norms in a literary work.

According to Olson, how we negotiate our balance with the *Other* "is a weighted responsibility". It is so because all human interactions entail various encounters with an *Other*, and it is so that we often bring our own agendas, mainly our desires, wishes, needs and motivations, which leads to various conflicts in our interactions with the *Other*. Therefore, we constantly tussle to negotiate and renegotiate our interactions (Olson 46).

During the late 1970s, a group of English and Indian historians delved into subaltern themes and discussions, culminating in the publication of a series of essays titled *Subaltern Studies: Writing on South Asian History and Society*. Ranajit Guha initially edited the first four volumes, followed by collaborative efforts involving

scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said. Drawing inspiration from Gramsci's theories, Ranajit Guha presented a novel interpretation of subordination, encompassing its diverse manifestations based on class, caste, age, gender, and office. In the Indian context, Guha contends that power dynamics are best understood as the elite subordinating the subaltern, with these terms serving merely as euphemisms. Employing a distinct dichotomy between "domination" and "subordination," Guha postulates that the latter is a nuanced interplay of "resistance" and "collaboration," while the former involves a harmonisation of "coercion" and "persuasion" (Guha vii).

Conceptualising the 'Subalternised Other' through *The Hungry Tide*

"The problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of "othering." In a world beset by seemingly intractable and overwhelming challenges, virtually every global, national, and regional conflict is wrapped within or organised around one or more dimensions of group-based difference." (Powell and Menendian)

In postcolonial and cultural studies, the concept of "othering" refers to the process of defining someone or a group as different or outside the perceived norm of a given society. The "Other" is often constructed as an outsider, different in terms of culture, race, ethnicity, religion, or any other characteristic that marks them as distinct from the dominant or mainstream group. When the 'Other' is subjected to various forms of subordination, marginalisation, and oppression by the dominant group or society, they can be described as the 'Subalternised Other'. In this context, 'subalternised' signifies the process of relegating the 'other' to a subordinate and marginalised position, often denying them agency, representation, and equal rights within the social order.

The term 'Subalternised Other' highlights the intersectionality of power dynamics and how social, political, and cultural forces can marginalise and exclude certain groups or individuals from positions of influence and authority. It emphasises the experiences of voiceless and invisible voices within the dominant discourse, shedding light on the complexities of identity, representation, and societal power.

In Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*, the concept of Subalternised Other' is vividly depicted through characters, including Fokir, Kusum, Moyna, and the rest of the Morichjhapi refugees. The term 'Subalternised Other' refers to individuals or groups who are marginalised, oppressed, and excluded from positions of power and authority within society. For instance, Fokir, a local fisherman from the Sundarbans, embodies the

marginalised and subalternised identity. He belongs to a lower socio-economic class and is considered an outsider by privileged characters like Piyali Roy and Kanai Dutt. Fokir's knowledge of the islands and the tide is invaluable. However, his insights are often dismissed or ignored, highlighting the unequal power dynamics between the *Other* and the dominant group, thereby pushing them towards the margins as the Subalternised Other. This exclusion reflects the dynamics of subalternity in postcolonial societies, where socioeconomic disparities often determine the positioning of the 'Subalternised Other'. Furthermore, Fokir's representation raises questions about cultural representations and stereotyping. The novel challenges how local cultures and traditions are perceived by outsiders, who often view them through orientalist lenses, reinforcing the marginalisation of the 'Subalternised Other'.

In another account, Kanai abuses Fokir, calling him "Shala, banchod, shuorer bachcha" (Ghosh 286). Ghosh portrays this swelling up of anger in Kanai when Fokir laughs at him after his feet get trapped in the swampy mud of the forest as follows:

"His anger came welling up with an atavistic explosiveness, rising from sources whose very existence he would have denied: the master's suspicion of the menial; the pride of caste; the townsman's mistrust of the rustic; the city's antagonism toward the village. He had thought he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past, but the violence with which they spewed out of him now suggested that they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve." (Ghosh 286)

Another character, Kusum, an educated and strong-willed widow, represents the 'Subalternised Other' in the context of gender. As a woman in a patriarchal society, she faces multiple challenges and restrictions. She faced unfathomable suffering at the hands of the government when she was stranded on the Morichjhapi island, and hunger or thirst was not the worst part of it, according to her. Instead, "it was to sit there, helpless, and listen to the Police making announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence was worthless than the dirt or dust." (Ghosh 233) Her desires and aspirations are often overshadowed or suppressed by societal norms, reflecting the subjugation of women in the region. Ghosh's portrayal of Kusum echoes Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism" (MAMBROL), which entails mobilising essentialist identities to challenge oppressive structures.

On similar grounds, Moyna, Fokir's wife, embodies the plight of indigenous communities in the

Sundarbans. People like her are often dispossessed of their ancestral lands and resources, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and marginalisation by the dominant society. Moyna's struggle for recognition and rights epitomises the struggles indigenous populations face globally. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" comes into play here, as Moyna's character signifies the blending of her indigenous identity with the influence of the external colonial world (Bhabha 5). Through Moyna, Ghosh challenges the binary distinction between coloniser and colonised, highlighting the complexities of identity formation in the postcolonial context.

Piya and Kanai, as outsiders in the Sunderbans, further illuminate the politics of subalternity in the novel. Despite their privileged backgrounds and educational qualifications, they encounter their own forms of subordination and vulnerability when confronted with the realities of the region. The dependence of Piya and Kanai on local guides and interpreters exemplifies how outsiders may occupy the position of the 'Subalternised Other', challenging their assumptions and preconceived notions. This aspect resonates with Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" (Spivak 75), where knowledge is often controlled by the dominant group, marginalising the voices and experiences of the 'Subalternised Other'.

Apart from providing an eco-critical perspective towards the Sunderbans region, this novel also paints a picture of the Morichjhapi refugees who had been displaced and marginalised due to political and economic decisions. These refugees clearly represent the 'Subalternised Other' on a larger scale; they are victims of government policies that prioritise the interests of the dominant groups, leaving them voiceless and powerless in their own land. The refugees' struggle for agency in the face of governmental oppression echoes the writings of Antonio Gramsci, who introduced the concept of hegemony and the domination of one social group over another through cultural and intellectual means (Hoare and Smith 123). The refugees were helpless, the government silenced their history, but their cries of dispossession were heard across the waters: "Amra Kara, Bastuhara. Who are we? We are the dispossessed." (Ghosh 226) Amitav Ghosh tactfully utilises the pain of these refugees to make Nirmal, a school teacher, question his place in society as he writes in his diary:

"How strange it was to hear this plaintive cry wafting across the water. It seemed at that moment not to be a shout of defiance but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves but on behalf of a bewildered humankind. Who, indeed, are we? Where do we

belong? And as I listened to the sound of those syllables, it was as if I were hearing the deepest uncertainties of my heart being spoken to the rivers and the tides. 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? (Ghosh 227)"

Through these characters and their experiences, Ghosh portrays the "Subalternised Other" as individuals and communities who are relegated to the fringes of society, often silenced and overlooked by those in power.

The 'Subalternised Other' as an Outsider

As a Western-educated scientist, Piya Roy grapples with her positionality as an outsider trying to unravel the mysteries of the Sundarbans. Her evolving relationship with the region's inhabitants exemplifies the transformative power of empathy, leading her to reassess her preconceived notions and transcend the confines of scientific objectivity. The character of Piya Roy exemplifies the complexities of alterity within the novel. Her presence in the Sundarbans, a region shared between India and Bangladesh, becomes a manifestation of Bhabha's concept of the "third space". Bhabha theorises that this third space is a site of cultural negotiation where identities merge, and new narratives emerge, challenging established norms and binary categorisations (Chen).

Piya Roy serves as a critical vehicle through which Ghosh explores the intricacies of representing the *Other* as an outsider. Her hybrid identity allows her to navigate the Sundarbans with a unique perspective, transcending the limitations of traditional outsider-insider dichotomies. Her encounters with the indigenous inhabitants of the Sundarbans prompt her to confront her assumptions and preconceived notions about the *Other*. Through her interactions with characters like Fokir, a local fisherman, Piya begins to bridge the gap between herself and the *Other*, embracing alterity as a means of mutual understanding and coexistence. Through Fokir, Piya begins to recognise the limitations of her own perspective and the complexities of understanding the realities of those living in the margins. Ghosh's portrayal of this evolving connection emphasises the agency of the observer in acknowledging the need for a more inclusive and empathetic approach to representation. As an American marine biologist with Indian heritage, Piya embodies a unique perspective that straddles her insider and outsider identities. However, as Piya immerses herself in the region and engages with its inhabitants, her journey unfolds as she transcends her observer's gaze and begins to empathise with the local communities. Through Piya's self-awareness and willingness to learn from the *Other*, Ghosh encourages

readers to critically examine how representation can perpetuate power imbalances and stereotypes.

Fluidity and Complexity of the "Subalternised Other"

Kanai Dutt represents the urban intellectual whose perspective is shaped by metropolitan sensibilities and colonial legacies. As he confronts the realities of the Sundarbans through his encounters with Fokir, a local fisherman, Kanai undergoes a process of self-discovery, shedding the armour of urbanity to engage with the intimate knowledge possessed by the region's indigenous communities. He undergoes a profound transformation as he confronts the Sundarbans' and inhabitants' complexities. Initially burdened with his own cultural baggage and Western-centric worldview, Kanai grapples with the challenge of engaging with alterity in a manner that transcends mere observation.

Ghosh's portrayal of Kanai's journey reflects Bhabha's notion of mimicry, wherein the *Other* appropriates and adapts the dominant culture, leading to a renegotiation of identity. Kanai's transformation is emblematic of the fluidity and complexity of human subjectivity as he moves away from rigid binary notions of self and *Other*. His evolving relationship with the characters in the Sundarbans, particularly Fokir and Moyna, illuminates the potential for mutual recognition and the dissolution of cultural boundaries.

Through Piya's evolving relationship with Fokir, a local fisherman, Ghosh underscores the transformative power of crossing boundaries and unmasking the politics of representation. Fokir becomes the embodiment of the *Other*, whose voice has been historically silenced by dominant narratives. Ghosh's narrative in *The Hungry Tide* invites readers to grapple with the ethical implications of representation, mainly when depicting marginalised communities. By presenting the Sundarbans' indigenous inhabitants through multiple perspectives, Ghosh challenges the notion of a single, fixed truth about the 'Subalternised Other'. Instead, he offers a nuanced portrayal that acknowledges the diversity of voices and experiences within the marginalised communities. This approach is aligned with Spivak's concerns about the danger of essentialising the *Other's* identity and the imperative of avoiding homogenising portrayals (Spivak 88).

The 'Subalternised Other's' Quest for Agency and Voice

Drawing upon insights from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Ghosh critically engages with the power dynamics that govern the act of representation, questioning whether the voice of the 'Subalternised Other' can be authentically conveyed

through dominant narratives or not. *The Hungry Tide* also reflects upon the power dynamics inherent in representation, where dominant narratives often subsume the voices of the 'Subalternised Other'. Ghosh's exploration of the politics of representation aligns with Spivak's call to interrogate the authority and authenticity of those who speak on behalf of the subaltern. The quest for agency and voice amidst power differentials lies at the heart of Amitav Ghosh's portrayal of the *Other* in *The Hungry Tide*. Drawing inspiration from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism" (MAMBROL), Ghosh examines how the character of Nirmal, Kanai's late uncle and a fervent revolutionary, embodies the subaltern's strategic adoption of essentialist identities as a means of resisting oppressive structures. Nirmal's idealism and dedication to his cause exemplify the complexities of the subaltern's pursuit of agency within a power-laden context.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Nirmal's character serves as a canvas upon which Ghosh paints a profound exploration of the 'Subalternised Other's' struggles for recognition and empowerment. As a revolutionary fighting for justice and equality, Nirmal strategically adopts an essentialist identity in line with the marginalised communities of the Sundarbans. This strategic essentialism, as proposed by Spivak, entails temporarily embracing essentialist identities to mobilise and resist dominant forces. Through Nirmal, Ghosh challenges essentialist readings that may render the subaltern as passive victims or fixed entities. Instead, Nirmal's convictions illustrate the subaltern's agency in navigating power differentials, even within a context where oppressive structures seem insurmountable. Ghosh carefully navigates the fine line between essentialism as a tool for empowerment and its potential pitfalls, encouraging a nuanced understanding of the complex negotiations of power within the Other.

The *Other's* quest for voice transcends linguistic boundaries, advocating for validating diverse narratives in a globalised world. Ghosh's portrayal of the subaltern's linguistic agency demonstrates how language becomes an instrument through which the Other can assert its identity and reclaim its voice. As characters like Piya Roy and Kanai Dutt navigate the Sundarbans' linguistic landscapes, they witness the intricate interplay between languages and cultures, challenging the notion of a fixed, monolithic Other. Therefore, language becomes a conduit through which the barriers between self and the Other are blurred, fostering mutual recognition and empathy.

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* delves into a unique narrative beyond traditional storytelling, exploring

the intricate post-colonial human experiences. It paints a vivid picture of the Sundarbans region's delicate ecosystem while shedding light on the struggles faced by marginalised individuals and communities, who are often silenced and overlooked. The characters, like Fokir, Kusum, Moyna, Nirmal, Piya, Kanai, and the Morichjhapi refugees, embody the quest for agency and recognition, challenging conventional power dynamics. In today's global challenges, *The Hungry Tide* resonates profoundly, urging us to reevaluate our interactions with marginalised communities and the natural world, fostering a more empathetic and sustainable approach. A compelling narrative like *The Hungry Tide* demonstrates the lasting significance of post-colonial literature, using fiction to illuminate the complexities of human existence and inspire positive changes in the world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abrams, Meyer Howard. *A glossary of literary terms*. Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999.
- [2] Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- [3] Chen, Linhuei. "The Third Space — linhueichenstudio." *Linhuei Chen*, <https://linhueichen.eu/The-Third-Space>. Accessed 30 July 2023.
- [4] Dutta, Nandana. "Subaltern Geoaesthetics in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2016, pp. 35-45. *Open Edition Journals*, <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/4738>. Accessed 1 August 2023.
- [5] Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. Penguin Classics, 2004.
- [6] Guha, Ranajit. *Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. vol. 1, Oxford UP, 1982.
- [7] Hoare, Quentin, and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, editors. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. London, The Electric Book Company Ltd, 1999.
- [8] MAMBROL, NASRULLAH. "Strategic Essentialism – Literary Theory and Criticism." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 9 April 2016, <https://literariness.org/2016/04/09/strategic-essentialism/>. Accessed 1 August 2023.
- [9] Olson, Gary A. "Encountering the Other: Postcolonial Theory and Composition Scholarship." *JAC*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1998, pp. 45-55. *Jstor*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/d4507d75-616b-3def-b060-58851ab14556?read-now=1&seq=2>. Accessed 29 July 2023.
- [10] Powell, John A., and Stephen Menendian. "The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging - Othering and Belonging." *Othering & Belonging*, <https://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/>. Accessed 2 August 2023.
- [11] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can The Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 66-111.