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Life in Sundarbans: Spatial Dimensions of Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island

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ABSTRACT

Space and Time were always treated as a fascinating matter for the aspiring research fraternity of English literature. It is of contemporary relevance and practicality to discuss the topic in detail. Many theorists like Henry Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Yi Fu Tuan were leading the discussions based on Space through their seminal literary works. Here intention of this paper is to analyse the novel Gun Island in the light of space theory and study how spatial dimension were employed by Amitav Ghosh in his narrative. Sundarbans, the tide country is the focus of the narrative though which he talks about the major themes like marginalisation, trauma of the destitute, man vs. nature conflict and so on. The inclusive view of Sundarbans especially Lusibari is narrated here pinpointing the issues of refugees, ordeal of Dalits, Natural calamities etc. Lusibari, its people their beliefs, jobs, social conditions, educational background, economic aspects, and so on were talked about. The uneducated people who were strong believers and how intimately they keep and pass on their tradition beliefs, legends etc were shown in the novel. This paper will add knowledge regarding the space Lusibari and its culture to the reading public.

Keywords: Space, Narrative, Historical Fiction, Migration

1. INTRODUCTION

It's been really difficult to extract an individual from his own familiar place where he belongs but nowadays it's common in society that people are shifting their locations just for economic prosperity and social progress. If it is a kind of voluntarily done activity then it is easy to accommodate with the new environment. But if it is otherwise the condition is quite different. Such individuals would be practically unacceptable in the newly reached society as well as the earlier society where they can't definitely go back.

Space is an interesting topic of discussion in the present scenario. It has a contribution of many theorists like Edward Soja, Yi Fu Tuan and so on. In fact Space is explained as unspecific, absolute and infinite entity. It does not associate with physical setting but it talks more about the cultural, social, linguistic, racial, political and religious facets of the space referred. Living space is the backbone of each author with which he is so familiar and may reflects in his fiction also.

It is indeed notable that many Indian authors talk about India in total through their narratives. For example writers like Raja Rao, R K Narayan, Salman Rushdie and so on took the materials out of their own spatial experience. This will certainly generate materials for their writing as in like themes, characters, plots and events for his literary productions; Amitav Ghosh too is abundantly depending on his life experiences and the living space to supplement his narrative space.

Here my attempt is to analyse the novel *the Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh through the perspective of the displaced individuals and how truthfully the fiction discusses the issues faced by the dislocated people in a society. Amitav Ghosh is a well known writer in historical fiction whose exuberance in it made his fiction memorable monuments to reader community. Amitav Ghosh, being an Indian by birth knows Indian culture, rituals religious beliefs and so on in a much unconscious way which obviously reflected in his narratives as well. While he was a traveller in his time he also knows what life was going on in other countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, London and so on.

Indeed Ghosh was the most excellent person to talk about rootlessness, expatriation, identity crisis, home sickness, alienation, isolation etc as because he was a person who lived in Newyork and married a foreigner. So far he travelled a lot around the world and his investments are his indisputable life experiences and in-depth historical awareness. Indianness in his fiction is an inevitable feature which is come together with a comprehensive perspective. It's a journey through spaces- western as well as eastern landscape is the focal point of his narration. His journeys are triggering his characters as well. Obviously his narration is a mixing of what all things happened in and around the world. It's not talking merely what happens within India but it talks much more than that.

Generally his historical fiction deals with the themes like displacement, dislocation, colonial segregation, nationalism, homesickness, globalisation, post colonialism etc .To engage in his narration means the readers are literally made familiar with a physical space and how he was taken to the world created by the writer. His fiction talks in detail about the life of ordinary men and women like Horen Naskar and Moyna in *The Hungry tide* kings and queen as in the characters of Queen Supayalat and king Thibaw as in *The Glass Palace* , westerner like Antar in *Calcutta Chromosome*, natives like Alu in *The circle of reason* and so on . so it is not giving a single perspective but instead it provide a wide range of characters ranging from common man to even people who are having utmost power in the power structure of the society. His fiction provides glimpses from the lives of slum dwellers, black slaves, proud Indians, sex workers; refugees etc. such marginalised and repressed section of society is represented very poignantly by him in his fiction. His perspectives regarding homeless refugees and their existence are visible in his novels like *The Hungry Tide* , *Ibis Trilogy* and *Gun Island*. Here through this paper the focus is on the spatial dimensions of the *Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* which was really a blending of legends and the beliefs of the people. Sundarban islands which was obviously a promised land for the depressed and marginalised section of the society. Indeed Sundarbans is a mangrove area in the delta formed by the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers in the Bay of Bengal. It spans the area from the Hooghly River in India's state of West Bengal to the Baleswar River in Bangladesh's division of Khulna. It comprises closed and open mangrove forests, land used for agricultural purpose, mudflats and barren land, and is intersected by multiple tidal streams and channels. Obviously nobody will be there with their desire. Almost all the people who lives there were once wretched homeless refugees who were haunted in their native mainland and as a final resort they escape themselves to this tide country Sundarbans which is having violent climatic conditions. There are many odds and oppositions to face in the country whether it may be natural hazards or from animals.

His novels provide plenty of information regarding the poor people of Sundarbans and how they lead a miserable and were a victim for the perennial torment from the nature of the tide country. It is not as easy to lead a life in the tide country as it was frequently attacked both by awkward climatic conditions and from the cruel attacks of violent animals as well. So Life becomes really precious for them as they have to face all this issues on a daily basis. Poverty due to terrible weather and dreadful cultivation and poorer harvest made their life so miserable.

And subsequently they were forced to either leave the place or they can have to get meagre salaried jobs within the island itself. Child labour is too common among islanders as they are really lacking educational facilities in the locality. Women were accepting sexual work in various other places just to nurture the remaining members in their families. The reason is that they cannot find any other jobs for the uneducated and marginalised women of the island. Ghosh through his novels like *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* portray the life and struggle of such people who lives their life in the islands of Sundarbans.

Gun Island talks mainly about global migration crisis and the effects of climate change through the focus of Bengali Folklore. Both the above said issues are predominantly visible in the contemporary society. Hence his novel reflects life and society around him truthfully with an amalgamation of elements of imagination as well. Space represented by him in the novel reflects the accurate depiction of events that took part in the narrated space. The novel begins with a chapter called *Calcutta* the space with which he is too familiar. Its culture, social and ideological framework economic and political milieu and so on are so familiar for him to portray . The writer proudly took advantage in mirroring the nook and corner of his life giving space in his narration and the variety of characters and incidents born out of such space gives a candid scope for the ingenuous portrayal. The novel beyond doubt highlights the importance of tradition, legends, and beliefs and so on of one place and how it makes a deeper mark on the psyche of people. How far they have gone it will be in their unconscious mind without losing its lustre.

This novel is a search behind the legend of Manasa Devi which is triggered from a simple word 'bundook' which takes the reader from Cairo to Calcutta. Ghosh as a proud Bangali displays how his land is full of myths, legends and having a rich tradition to keep through generation. In fact the protagonist of the novel is a small replica of Ghosh himself as if both of them show some similarities in their life and attitude towards life. His character Deen is in fact like him is an academician who travels from place to place but is a strong Indian who have indianness even in his soul. Usually Deen mocks at his own space Sundarban and always argues this will not be a safe space for living but in his mind he unknowingly admires his native space- its climate, flora and fauna, culture, beliefs, myths and legends associated with the space where he had close bonding.

Bangla literature just like Bangla myths and legends influenced his life and thoughts .This is embedded in his consciousness that reflected in his narration as well. The novel revolves around a space which is known as Lusibari a small town on the edge of the Sundarbans where the protagonist accidentally visited and the further developments of the plot is just a continuation of such a casual visit. His visit became instrumental in triggering his innate feelings and beliefs related with his ancestral relations which have triggered legend sand myths in his mind.

Lusibari a beautiful space was provided by Amitav Ghosh through his narration brings forth life of the poor destitute and how they were expecting impending danger as a day today affair. It is very difficult even to imagine a life there for the protagonist but he happened to be a part and parcel of those people whose legend regarding gun merchant became crucial in his life journey. Deen Elias Dinanath is an emblematic representation of current modern Indian who was highly educated and had a scientific

perspective in everything and a reservoir of wide experiences. He had a peripheral distaste for what is native of the place and instead he goes after all kinds of western outlooks and even his desires are framed accordingly. He never wanted to visit Lusibari or any part of Sundarbans but his only aim is to visit foreign lands as Los Angeles and Vienna which will open up new vistas for his career development. His words reveals his character as shown in the text as ,

‘Not if it goes against reason,’ I said, ‘I pride myself on being a rational, secular, scientifically minded person. I am sorry if this does not conform to stereotypes of Indians - but I am not religious and don't believe in the supernatural. I will not, on any account, go along with a whole lot of superstitious mumbo-jumbo’.

(p 34)

Sundarbans as represented in his novels is a place where the human beings have a vulnerable life as it is continuously under the jaw of natural hazards. This is a tide country located in Bay of Bengal where the destitute rehabilitated due to many impoverished circumstances. The helpless communities of tide country were not considering facts and science and instead they were more worried of the tradition, myth, legends, and so on which they blindly follow in their life time. These aspects are spreading from one generation to next through oral stories.

Here in the novel many became homeless destitute only because of a terrible cyclone which sweeps away life and existence of many people in society. The remaining members of the family have to suffer a lot due to poverty and are forced either to leave their places or to continue in the swampy areas of Sundarbans where the nature is the strongest enemy for them.

In terms of casualties the Bhola cyclone was the greatest natural disaster of the twentieth century; its toll is conservatively estimated at three hundred thousand lives lost but the actual number may have been as high as half a million. Most of those casualties were in East Pakistan where political tensions had long been simmering. West Pakistan's laggardly response to the disaster played a critical part in triggering the war of independence that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. In West Bengal it was the Sundarbans that absorbed the impact of the cyclone. Lusibari, the island where Nilima and her husband lived, suffered a great deal of damage: a large chunk of the island was ripped away by the storm surge, houses and all.

(P 13)

How Bhola cyclone affected the life of islanders is displayed very vividly with the life sketch of Horen Naskar a poor fish folk. The natural disaster have immeasurable effects on Lusibari, the island.

On each outing they saw horrific sights: hamlets obliterated by the storm surge; islands where every tree had been stripped of its leaves; corpses floating in the water, half eaten by animals; villages that had lost most of their inhabitants. The situation was aggravated by a steady flow of refugees from East Pakistan. For several months people had been coming across the border, into India, in order to escape the political turmoil on the other side; now the flow turned into a flood, bringing many more hungry mouths into a region that was already desperately short of food.

(P 13)

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Terrible weather conditions in Lusibari drives people into new realms to fetch a good living. Many characters shifted their traditional jobs as fishermen and they move to different jobs available in society according to the new situation. for example character named Horen changed his profession from fishing to tourism only because of bad cyclones in Lusibari. The novel vividly portrays the cyclone Aila which hit the Sundarbans in 2009 which create large scale destruction to the land in total.

Yet Aila's long-term consequences were even more devastating than those of earlier cyclones. Hundreds of miles of embankment had been swept away and the sea had invaded places where it had never entered before; vast tracts of once fertile land had been swamped by salt water, rendering them uncultivable for a generation, if not forever. The evacuations too had produced effects that no one could have foretold. Having once been uprooted from their villages many evacuees had decided not to return, knowing that their lives, always hard, would be even more precarious now. Communities had been destroyed and families dispersed; the young had drifted to cities, swelling already-swollen slums; among the elderly many had given up trying to eke out a living and had taken to begging on the streets. The Sundarbans had always attracted traffickers, because of its poverty, but never in such numbers as after Aila; they had descended in swarms, spiriting women off to distant brothels and transporting able-bodied men to work sites in faraway cities or even abroad. Many of those who left were never heard from again.

(P 48)

Plight of women in Sundarbans before and after the tragic cyclones is noteworthy to mention. Women from tide country suffered a lot due to the backlash of intermittent cyclone in their country which created dangerous stimulations to their life pattern. Many of them are forced to sex work as it is otherwise helpless to acquire money for their upbringing. The novel shows this aspect when Moyna discuss about Lusibari to Deen as in

As the quarrel raged on Moyna began to whisper into my ear, explaining that the women at the back were 'sex workers' (she used the English phrase) and had been rounded up by the police from various red-light districts in Kolkata and elsewhere. They were all originally from the Sundarbans, she said, so the police had called on the trust to help rehabilitate them, through its workshops and employment generation schemes. But the trust could not offer much by way of money and this was what the dispute was about. The women at the back were protesting that they would not be able to support themselves on the wages they had been promised; the trust's staffers were angrily refuting this claim. Unfortunately, Moyna told me, this was a losing battle. The trust's experience showed that many, if not most, of the rescued women would soon go back to the lives they had been living before. 'How can you be so sure?' I asked. Moyna gave a weary sigh. We've been dealing with these problems for many years,'she said. 'Ever since Aila.

(P 47)

Moyna , the mouthpiece of Amitav Ghosh talks about the life of the young generation of island and how they were forced to flee from the land just to escape the cruelties of Nature.

Sometimes, said Moyna, it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans. When people tried to dig wells, an arsenic-laced brew gushed out of the soil; when they tried to shore up embankments the tides rose higher and pulled them down again. Even fishermen could barely get by; where once their boats would come back loaded with catch, now they counted themselves lucky if they netted a handful of fry. What were young people to do? Making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere. Some were slipping over the border into Bangladesh, to join labour gangs headed for the Gulf. And if that failed they would pay traffickers to smuggle them to Malaysia or Indonesia, on boats. The only way to avoid this fate was for the young to get an education. But how could boys and girls who had been brought up in mangrove country, studying by candlelight and sharing old textbooks, compete with city folk with their tuition centres and easy access to the Internet? (P 49)

Tipu, son of Moyna had a different perspective regarding everything in Sundarbans. He happened to be separated from all other children of the tide country only because he was given whatever he wants by an educated American woman named Piya. In fact Piya had contributed for the upbringing of Tutul whose father had been killed while working for Piya. This prick of conscience made Piya to do a lot of charity activities within Lusibari in association with Nilima Bose and her Borbadon trust. Tipu happened to be a well educated youngman who even visited United States once for his education with the help of Piya. But due to circumstances he could not continue his education and returns to Lusibari which culminated in a kind of identity crisis for him. Tutul or Tipu as he calls himself can't belong neither to America nor to Lusibari. He had to face caste discrimination when he was admitted for higher education in a well known boarding school of Kolkatta.

For Tipu to go to school in Lusibari was clearly impossible so Piya had admitted him into an expensive boarding school in Kolkatta. But that too had turned out badly. The attitude that Tipu had brought back from America had not sit well with his fellow students and teachers. Things had become worse still when his schoolmates discovered that he was a Dalit, from the Sundarbans. One day a classmate had said to him that only servants and whores came from the Sundarbans. Tipu had lost his temper and given the fellow the beating he deserved. But the other boy was from an influential family and they had ensured that Tipu was expelled. (P 51)

Tutul, a native of the island talks about the plight of the people in Sundarbans which was basically decided by the place itself. In fact the land decides the fate of the people. He knows the prose and cones of whatever is happening in the tide country. And as an educated person he had his own perspectives regarding everything. The frustrated youth of the island is symbolically represented here through his character. He simply says about the life in Sundarabans as

He laughed again. 'Whoa there, Pops - you sure like those big words! What I'm doing is I'm offering an essential service. In these parts, there's a whole bunch of dirt-poor, illiterate people scratching out a living by fishing or farming or going into the jungle to collect bamboo and honey. Or at least that's what they used to do. But now the fish catch is down, the land's turning salty, and you can't go into the jungle without bribing the forest guards. On top of that every other year you get hit by a storm that blows everything to pieces. So what are people supposed to do? What would anyone do? If you're young you can't just sit on your butt till you starve to death. Even the animals are moving - just ask Piya. If you've got any sense you'll move and to do that you need someone who can help you find a way out.

(P 60.)

Apart from the depiction of poor rustics of Tide country Amitav Ghosh finds interest in portraying well educated and scientific Indian characters and some very interesting foreigners too in his narration. This will add a juxtaposition of east and west in all his novels. And no doubt the gun island also have such portrayal of rich affluent enlightened Indian characters; like Piya , Kanai Dutt, Dina Nath, Tipu , Nilima Bose and so on. These characters prove how efficient Indians were during that time even in such an underdeveloped island like Sundarbans. These characters reached the island not out of their bad life conditions but with a vivid intention in their mind .For Nilima Bose, her entry into the tide country and her subsequent growth as the most influential persona of the island is noteworthy to mention. She, Kanai's aunt moved to Lusibari after marrying an impoverished school teacher. Later she had founded a women's group that had since grown into the the Badabon trust, one of India's most reputed charitable organisation. Now runs an extended network of free hospitals, schools, clinics and workshops. She proved to be instrumental in guiding the natives of Lusibari to enlightenment from darkness through establishing proper educational facilities and health facilities within their reach.

Piya like any other well educated Indian researcher reaches Lusibari to study about a rare variety of Gangetic dolphin but soon she turns to be a part of Lusibari from which she can't go away forever. She is a supporting pillar for the people in total and special attention is given to Tutul and his family. Later she was instrumental in opening the wide knowledge of the world to him. It was Piya who found out reasons behind the climate change that is happening in and around Lusibari. She learns about the life and death of dolphins in the country and as a result she identified the role of chemical fertilizers came out from the refinery nearby. It poisons the Sundarbans, its climate, its flora and fauna, animals, water body and so on. In total this was a cruelty done by man to nature. Polluting water resource is the reason behind all such critical situations. This later created a kind of friction between Piya and Bodabon Trust on one side and the powerful rich factory owners on the other side.

So as a conclusion it must be noted that the space represented here in the novel is vividly portrayed by the writer. Ghosh proves his talent in creating a space before the readers with its multi dimensions – social, ecologic, political, and economical aspects. The life in Sundarbans comprehensively presented to us through characters like Piya, Kanai Dutt, Dean, Moyna and Nilima Bose. The fiction is going through the life of Sundarabans and how they were fighting between oddities in society as well as in Nature. Sundarbans

the tide country is deciding the fate of the people who lives there. It was the place that makes the people orphan, poor and physically handicapped through its vicious natural calamities. Continuous floods and cyclones affected badly to the people. Here is describing a group of people who are tortured and ill treated within the boundaries of Sundarbans and are incessantly fighting with nature. Man versus Nature is an imperative theme discussed in the novel which discusses about long term consequences of natural calamities. Sea had invaded places and fertile land become swampy by salt water. All this create mass evacuations and people were uprooted from their villages. Begging and poverty was the available opportunities for the remaining majority. And there are a few groups who are traffickers – taking women to distant brothels. Many became refugees in other places as they left their homeland Sundarbans and obviously they lead a marginalised life in Bangladesh, Gulf, Malaysia and Indonesia.

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