

Water Image and Environmental Imagination

-- An Econarratological Reading of *The Hungry Tide*

Jing Wang^{1, a}

¹Wuhan Guanggu Vocational College, Wuhan, Hubei, China

^aw15927833146@163.com

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is an excellent modern Indian novelist in English writing. His novel *The Hungry Tide*, published in 2004, is an excellent novel that has won many honors for Ghosh. This thesis aims to take an econarratological reading of *The Hungry Tide* by analyzing how image catalyze the immersion of readers in the site-specific environmental imaginations, thus helping readers understand the natural and socio-historical environment in the Sundarbans better.

Keywords

Amitav Ghosh; *The Hungry Tide*; Econarratology; Storyworld; Environmental imagination.

1. Introduction

"The stories we tell each other about the environment and our environmental experiences differ across communities and cultures" (James, 2015, p. 204). But people from around the world always tend to assume that "their particular environmental imagination is universal" (James, 2015, p. 87). For example, some western conservation programs are implemented without taking into account the specific context of the region. Most of them are guided by neo-colonialist objectives of co-opting land and resources for vested interests, the detrimental consequences are always borne by local marginalized people. An econarratological reading of Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* can powerfully illustrate the ways in which narratives help overcome these obstacles. *The Hungry Tide* presents environmental imaginations that run counter to the mainstream and western discourse.

This thesis mainly focuses on how the water image transport readers to the site-specific environment of the Sundarbans, which is different from readers' preconceived assumptions.

2. Historical Context: The Partition and Morichjhapi Massacre

Before exploring the Ghosh's Narrative, a close introduction of the real historical background that Ghosh refers to is required.

The story of *The Hungry Tide* which sets in the Sundarbans is intrinsically linked to the history of the Partition and the events followed in its aftermath. In 1947, India was separated into India and Pakistan based on religious branches under the the Mountbatten Plan formed by Clement Attlee. Pakistan was geographically bifurcated into Eastern and Western Pakistan with India in between. Many Hindus had to flock from East Pakistan into West Bengal region of India because the East Pakistan was created for the Muslim majority. Therefore many Hindus became the homeless refugees who suffered from the discrimination from both the Indian government and upper-caste Hindu landed elite, the bhadralok, a term used to refer to the "westernized caste elite" (Broomfield, 1968, p. 5). While "the bhadralok enjoyed a superior social status all over

Bengal, with their economic prosperity and social networks they were easily able to integrate with mainstream Calcutta society" (Anand, 2008, p. 30), these Dalit refugees still faced unemployment, denial of their refugee status, and forcible relocation.

In the 1960s, the state government implemented a new resettlement scheme. Forcibly relocated to the "detention camp in Dandakaranya: a wild, inhospitable, snake-infested reserve forest in central India" (Majumdar, 2018, p. 194), the refugees led a miserable life and remained in the dispossessed position. Biswas writes that "very few among the intelligentsia are aware that out of 42,000 families who had been dragged and deported there, already nearly 27,030 families have perished; and only now 15,000 families somehow linger on the below sub-human level" (1982, p. 19). The government's refugee plans were consistently opposed by the Communist Party of India. The refugees planned to migrate to the Sundarbans by themselves and they chose the uninhabited island of Morichjhapi. However, after the Communist Party of India came into power, contrary to its early political statement, the government forced refugees to return to their early camps because they argued that the refugees occupied Morichjhapi which was a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest without permission, thus violating the Forest Acts. In fact, this island was not the core part of the "tiger reserve zone" (Jalais, 2005, p. 1760). In order to evict the refugees, the Left government launched an economic blockade on the island, preventing the refugees from obtaining supplies. With tacit governmental approval, the police besieged Morichjhapi and secretly killed refugees. To date, the number of deaths during the eviction remains inconclusive.

The Morichjhapi tragedy as a whole has been marginalized in Indian history. Chaudhuri (2004) commends that the historicity of *The Hungry Tide* as the incidents contrived within the novel are verifiable by the lived experiences of the people who are still living and working in the Sundarbans. This marginalized history is skillfully presented by Ghosh in the text through the image of water. In the novel, water symbolizes the carrier of the historical trauma suffered by people.

3. Water--Symbol of the Hungry World

Surrounded by the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, India is abundant in water resources and most people support their lives by aquaculture. Sundarbans is an archipelago in which water is influential in many aspects is located in the Lower Gangetic Plains. In addition to its important role in people's daily lives, water has always been an image that many scholars pay attention to. Anand states that "as a natural symbol, water is chiefly associated with fertility, immortality, place, creation, and the feminine" (2008, p. 27). Water as an image is of special significance in Hindu mythology. The holy Ganges is viewed as the purifier of all sins, and a bath in the river could wash away all kinds of impurities. Water also narrates another myth that appears in *The Hungry Tide*. It is said that the descent of the goddess of Ganges from heaven will drown the earth with mighty currents. Lord Shiva braids the water of the Ganges into his hair in order to save the earth. It is only when the river approaches the sea that it untangles into a thousand strands, forming the vast archipelago of the Sundarbans. The myth not only presents the geographical characteristics in the tide country but also reveals the strong power of water in destruction.

Usually, people only focus on the positive role of water, especially outsiders with presuppositions, but the image of water serves as a different textual clue in *The Hungry Tide*. Water in the novel exists in different forms including "tide", "storm" and is tightly connected with the events and the fate of people in various ways, revealing the uniqueness and harshness of the local living environment. "Tide", as a form of water, appears in the title as an image with the word "hungry" used as the modifier. This setting places the water image in a special position, highlighting its importance as a symbol of the hungry world.

First, hungry water implies the tremendous power of water in the Sundarbans. The tides can become a hungry beast to swallow and destroy everything, which can be best exemplified by several storms recorded by Nirmal. According to his records, 1737 witnessed the worst storm of all. A large number of residents and animals were drowned to death. After the storm, lands and rivers were scattered with lots of corpses. In tide country, such “hunger” of water can also be exemplified by the floods in the 1970s which caused 300,000 deaths. It happened when Horen and his partners were fishing. After the floodwater subsided, “there were corpses everywhere, and the land was carpeted with dead fish and livestock” (Ghosh, 2004, p. 350). This storm incurred more than 300,000 deaths as if it were the aftermath of a battlefield massacre. Furthermore, as far as the connection between hungry tide and hungry tiger is concerned, the tiger can be considered to be hungry. In another word, the man-eating habit of the Sundarbans tigers can also be attributed to the particular properties of water in tide country. Sy Montgomery refers to the German biologist Hubert Hendrichs’s unfinished study of tigers in the Bangladeshi part of the Sundarbans in 1971. The study correlates the sites with the most frequent attacks with areas having the saltiest water. He suggests that “drinking salty water may cause liver and kidney damage, making the tigers irritable” (Montgomery, 1995, p. 13). The incessant tides and frequent floods are also linked to the continuing depletion of food resources and loss of habitat, which are also cited as reasons for the tiger’s man-eating habit. In a region where water has such a significant role to play, the use of water as an analytical category throws light on the conflicts narrated in the novel, thus providing a set of cues for readers to inhabit the local environment where hungry water makes the tiger hungry.

Furthermore, for local residents, the hungry tides make them live in hunger. Due to periodic floods and storms, the hungry water may drown everything. The longtime submersion in salty water makes the land very unsuitable for crops, so much so that the locals do not have enough food. The deliberate emphasis on the unproductivity of the Sundarbans functions as a reminder of the hardship faced by the inhabitants as they try to survive in a hostile environment, providing readers a set of clues to model the precariousness of their existence. With no other choice, the ingenious hungry people have to seek food in the forest and the sea with disastrous results. Many villagers “died of drowning, and many more were picked off by crocodiles and estuarine sharks” (Ghosh, 2004, p. 79). What’s more, many women become hungry widows because of their husbands’ death.

In conclusion, the hungry tide, together with tigers and humans, constitutes a hungry world where both animals and ingenious villagers struggle to survive in the plight of Sundarbans. Ghosh’s use of water image in *The Hungry Tide’s* storyworld involves a powerful defamiliarization that asks the readers to inhabit a world that runs contrary to our predetermined vision. As a matter of fact, before reading this novel, many readers do not know much about the Sundarbans. Our knowledge about the place basically revolves around mangrove forests, abundant water resources and biodiversity. Just as its name “the Sundarbans” ostensibly means “beautiful forest”, this place is often referred to as a beautiful natural park, as is in the following description: “because it is bordered by the Bay of Bengal, the precipitation here is abundant. The extensive forests and rich water resources provide a suitable ecological environment for a wide variety of flora and fauna” (Wan Xiang, 2003, p.17). However, water in the Sundarbans doesn’t merely play the positive role listed above but symbolizes a hungry and harsh world, which allows Ghosh to demand that readers should reconsider the preconceived understandings of this space. And this process necessarily involves comparison, in which readers juxtapose the text’s representation of the Sundarbans where the ingenious people suffer a lot from the harsh environment of such a hungry world, with other possible representations, such as the biodiversity that comes from abundant water resources and beautiful natural scenery. “This process of engagement and comparison, in turn, can catalyze a companion process of reassessment” (James, 2015, p. 119). Then readers will reconsider the

role that water plays in this place and have a better understanding of the environment in the Sundarbans.

4. Water -- Carrier of Historical Trauma

The image of water has been analyzed as a symbol of the hungry world in section 2. In this part, the thesis will elaborate on the image of water as a reminder of the past trauma recorded in Nirmal's notebook.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the Morichjhapi incident is mainly told through Nirmal's diary. As the story unfolds, the water can be viewed as a secret carrier of historical trauma. After his retirement from the school, Nirmal receives many invitations to visit schools on other islands, one of which is to Kumirmari. It is on his journey to that place that Nirmal heard for the first time of the Morichjhapi incident. However, when he first hears about these things, Nirmal is indifferent. As he records in the diary, "I thought no more of it; it was no business of mine" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 160). But everything seems to be destined, and the water is just like a carrier of history, pushing Nirmal to Morichjhapi. On their way home by boat, a storm suddenly struck with a strange deliberate malice, making it appear that these storms were not entirely natural but have been deliberately arranged by water. It is the water that arranges Nirmal to witness this history. In order to escape the storm, Horen takes Nirmal ashore to Morichjhapi where Nirmal meets Kusum again.

After Kusum recounts her experiences and shows Nirmal around the Morichjhapi, Nirmal sees the real island and is shocked at the industry and diligence of it. For Nirmal, who has strong compassion for revolution and believes in the true ideals of communism, the sight of a revolutionary Morichjhapi is a source of a great excitement. His act of "seeing Morichjhapi" actually refers to "the reconstruction of his knowledge about these refugees as revolutionary creators" (Pilia, 2020, p. 121) rather than illegal encroachers who are burdens to the state. Nirmal's revolutionary zeal is rekindled. He believes that the villagers without knowledge and power can imagine and carry out their experiments, he, a learned scholar, can also start anew. He "felt something changing within me" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 171) and wants to help those refugees. To some extent it's the water that prompts him to transform his ideas. After all, it is the water that makes Nirmal meet Kusum again and thereby changes his mind to pay attention to the refugees, and thus witnesses the whole tragedy. Together with Nirmal, the water witnesses the whole incident.

As time goes by, when Nirmal hears the rumors that Morichjhapi is encircled by police and the food supplies are forbidden, he goes to the island and witnesses a scene of police brutality against some settlers on water. Some settlers plead with the police to allow them to enter the island with some provisions by boat but are refused. As they continue their attempt to reach the island, the police attack them on the river and many people fall in the river.

Apparently, the whole incident happens on the river and refugees fall into the water. Water witnesses the violence of the police and the tragedy suffered by refugees. The government besieges the island and secretly kills refugees. The details of slaughter are not recorded in the diary, but according to Horen's memory, "no one knows for sure... Dozens of settlers were killed that day. The sea claimed them all. (Ghosh, 2004, p. 279)

Superficially, water seems to have become a tool to cover up historical crimes by washing away the dead bodies of refugees. The water here is so powerful that it can drown everything and change the topography in hours. Of course, it can bury all sins and wash away all marks. But in reality, the water can be viewed as "a concrete carrier" (Wardi, 2011, p. 19) of the Morichjhapi tragedy.

Near the end of the novel, as Kanai wades across the river in a storm, he accidentally drops Nirmal's notebook in the current, which swallows the only evidence of the historical tragedy.

But Kanai decides to rewrite what has been recorded in the notebook after the storm. This dramatic ending seems to prove that although the water takes away the last evidence of the massacre, the history of Morichjhapi massacre will never be covered up and it will sooner or later be recorded and remembered in people's hearts. The water becomes a secret bearer of the historical trauma, because when one sees the tide, one is reminded of this history.

In the Sundarbans, water is so tightly connected to people's lives that "the river is in their veins" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 245). Therefore, Ghosh's choice of water to carry the historical trauma does make sense. In addition, if history is a long river, there is no doubt that water is the carrier and witness of historical events. But this witness is silent and secret, it prompts Nirmal to learn about the refugees and accompanies him to witness this historical tragedy. From the beginning to the end, water does not really speak or give any comments, so it gives readers full space to imagine this historical event. After all, if readers want to understand the history, they must immerse themselves in the storyworld the text presents. In the process of reading, readers seem to see the history through the eyes of water and become witnesses to see how the upper-class treat the refugees in a nonhuman way.

Water, as a carrier and witness of history, has an effect of defamiliarization. This defamiliarization of the water image presents history in a more vivid way and asks readers to inhabit a world within which the common people are still living in the aftermath of the partition. In the history of India, the country gained its independence in 1947, which ended 190 years of British colonial rule in India. So it is hard for readers to imagine that people in this place are still living in the shadow of the western countries after almost 30 years. But water image acts as important textual cues that help readers to inhabit the environment where people have to face hardship with no fault of their own for such a long time. This inhabitation necessarily involves a companion process of comparison, in which readers juxtapose the text's representation of the historical trauma that people suffer from, with other possible representations of India as an independent country and the Sundarbans as beautiful natural park. Then readers will change their ideas and realize the fact that though free from colonial rule, the Sundarbans is still under the invisible control of the West.

5. Conclusion

In the context of today's increasing attention to the environment, the complex conflicts between humans and the nonhuman world attract many scholars' attention. Addressing these environmental problems requires the combined efforts of people around the world. But as James mentions in her book *The Storyworld Accord* (2015), "people around the world imagine, inhabit, and experience their environments differently" (James, 2015, p. 208), and they always "tend to assume that their particular environmental imagination is universal" (James, 2015, p. 87). Therefore, people are always prone to misunderstandings and gaps when they talk about the environment. This thesis, by providing an econarratological reading of *The Hungry Tide*, proves that "narratives can and should play a role in the bridging of imaginative gaps" (James, 2015, p. 208) by facilitating readers to live in the locally informed environmental experience.

Anand argues that "as a natural symbol, water is chiefly associated with fertility, immortality, place, creation, and the feminine" (2008, p. 27). But in *The Hungry Tide*, the image of water has different symbolic connotations. First, water symbolizes the hungry world where the hungry human, tiger and hungry water are closely interconnected. The unique features of Sundarbans provide yet a set of cues that prompt readers to model the specific environment and environmental experiences in the Sundarbans instead of a predetermined one. Then water can also be viewed as a carrier of historical trauma and transports readers to a storyworld where marginalized people have to bear the harsh consequences with no fault on their own. Therefore,

Ghosh's use of water image exposes readers to the site-specific socio-historical environment in the Sundarbans and diversifies the way people think about and live in the environment.

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