

Existential Approach: A Kaleidoscopic view with reference to *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

Existentialism is a movement in philosophy and literature that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is a movement of 20th century literature that focuses on the individual and his or her relationship with the universe of God. It basically says how humans define their own meaning of life. It tries to make rational decisions in spite of existence in irrational universe. Existentialism focuses on the view of human existence to prove that there is no purpose at the core of existence. It defines that the individuals are free and have their own responsibility of their emphasized action, thought and will. The present study aims to show how the characters in the novels are independent in their thought, action and will.

Key Words: individual, culture, identity, values , exploitation, struggle

Existentialism is an important element in postcolonial writings. It is a philosophical expression that originates from the Europeans historically and culturally. However, the dominating philosophy of the west recognized in the mid twentieth century has left its “impact on literature [which] has both been substantial and significant” (Chatterji 10). Existentialism deals with the situation of the existence of an individual, their feelings, actions and thoughts. Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Jaspers and Martin Heidegger were the noble writers and philosophers who we associated with the term existentialism in the nineteenth century. The Indian English Novelists explore existentialism successfully. They have attempted to explore the individual’s identity through existentialism. An Individual’s identity is discussed in large terms to illustrate his or her place in the society that includes race, class, gender etc.

The sense of longing for ones identity in the form of a quest becomes more apparent in the postcolonial society to show the relationship of conflict between the inner self and the materialistic society, their struggle, cultural values, and the problems faced by an individual through the exploitation of the colonizers, the western culture as adopted by them and the situation of the migrant. Homi Bhabha coined the word ‘mimetic’ to represent the Indians in the modern subject and bounded them to be in a sad figure of lack and failure. Thus, the Indian history remains in the hands of the socialist or nationalist as mimicry. The construction of the mythical kingdoms and mythical past/future find a place in the Indian history as a mere procedure; as a rule or evidence for the narratives. Such an anti-historical and anti-modern subject cannot prove itself as a theory from the document or from the procedure of the university that exists. It is quoted from the knowledge of anthropologists alone. As Spivak rightly pointed out, “a subaltern term can only have quoted existence in a larger statement that belongs to the anthropologist alone, this subject can only be spoken for and spoken of by the transition narrative that will always ultimately privilege the modern (i.e. Europe)” (384).

As an anthropologist and Cosmopolitan writer, Ghosh travels all over the world to change and face challenges by drawing connections across the boundaries of the nation state. He collects a sense of detailed historical facts and chronology by knowing the cause and effects in creating the art of narrative skill and imagination in his entire collection of novels. Harris believes, “a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the art of imagination” (*A Post-Colonial Reader* 357). Thus, the author weaves a pluralistic and self-reflexive view of the world that challenges the orthodoxy of the accepted narratives and certainties of the postcolonial borders. Amitav Ghosh is very much involved in a quest for ‘narrative significance’ to find a place for himself and other human beings in the universe to re-order it. This quest is expressed more in social and political terms in his novels. He

pursues quest as a problematic issue and places an individual in the narrative mode. His characters in the novels come out with storytelling abilities to present the reality to the readers. The stories of all his novels have been taken from his real life experience. They are the stories that deal with the stuff of humanity. Ghosh opines that, "human yearning, emotions, all spiritual yearnings that create humanity as we know it" (Prasad 57). His narrative significance is shown in both the novels: *The Hungry Tide*.

Ghosh adopts the remote Sunderbans Islands as a setting of the novel in *The Hungry Tide*. The Island in the novel is depicted as, "with its thick mangroves, the man eating tigers, snakes, sharks, ebb and flow of water, rocking the islands" (105). The setting of the novel is unfathomable which indicates death. Ghosh gives the details of the past in connection with Daniel Hamilton, the Englishman who acquired ten thousand acres in the Sunderbans from the British Government in 1903. He allocated it to all those Indians as a compliment for the people who are willing to settle there. Thus, the new Tide Country or Bhatirdesh comes into existence. The Bhatirdesh Islands were renamed with English names as "Jamespur, Annpur, Emilybari, Lusibari, Canning etc. after the names of the relatives of Hamilton" (*Revisiting History in the Hungry Tide* 106). People from different countries occupied the islands. Some were poor and under privileged. Thus, the islands became a home to the people from different parts of Orissa, East Bengal, and Santhal Paryanas. These people lived on the margins of civil society and they represented the marginalized. Hamilton's dream was to create history by establishing an egalitarian society: "here there would be no Brahmins or untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together" (*Hungry* 51). The refugees also settle down in the tide country in order to escape from the political oppression. Some of them moved in 1947 and some in 1971. Thus, *The Hungry Tide* picturizes the unforgettable years of human history to represent the cruel assassination of human beings. As John C. Hawley opines: "such a setting makes an apt symbol for the ebb and flow of history and the uprooting of populations, both of which have to come to be seen as "Ghosh-ian themes" (106).

The meeting between Kanai Dutt, a forty two year old businessman, from Delhi and Piyali Roy, a Catalogist, from America provides necessary connections with the events of the past to determine the future. E.H.Carr states that, "history acquires meaning and objectivity only when it establishes a coherent relation between the past and the future" (68). Nirmal and Nilima, Kanai's uncle and aunt are from Calcutta and have settled down in Lusibari Island in the Sunderbans in 1950. As an agitator, Nirmal had a problem with his political involvement and therefore he left the job of a college lecturer in Calcutta and joined as a teacher in Lusibari School. Nilima established the foundation, the Badabon Trust, a women's union that flourished into a big organization by her utmost efforts. Nilima ordered Kanai to visit the Island in order to resume Nirmal's journal that he had left for Kanai, before his death. Piya visits the Island to explore her research about the Dolphins. She also appoints a local angler Fokir from an Island for her further study.

Nirmal's journal influences Kanai to understand the vision of the past. When he reads the journal, it takes him through the journey of 1970's. A period that had witnessed a serious of political crisis-The Partition of Bengal. During the crisis, many people had left Bengal due to the communal riots. The refugees from Bangladesh had also escaped from the political persecution, because of the outrageous behavior executed by the government in the resettlement camp. Thus, the refugees spread around Morichjapi, an island reserved for tiger conservation by the government in the Sunderbans. These settlers had been banished from Bangladesh due to powerful historical forces. These refugees were under privileged and had many atrocities inflicted upon them by the government. Nirmal felt happy about his idealistic dreams when the settlers oppose the harshness of the government. Being a leftist, Nirmal's ideology made him to cherish the idea of revolution. The settlers' opposition and his vision were materializing in front of his eyes: "I felt something changing with me: how astonishing it was that I, an ageing, bookish school master, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without" (171).

Fokir's mother, Kusum, worked for the Badabon Trust at first and had joined as an informer to the band of settlers later. Nirmal resolved to support them, because they supported Nirmal in all aspects to fulfill his desire. However, the refugees' courage and opposition were not different from their everyday struggle. Their struggle had become a part of everyday's life. Their discomfort, suffering and injustice had become a part of history. The spirit of flexibility, in fact, received from the ancestors was to face any hardship in their life. These refugees lived their life believing in religious myths and ideas of good and evil that led them to live with exceptional strength to face their miseries and difficulties.

Kanai incorporates the typical urban, Indian male with simplicity, innocence and the freshness of life that is exemplified by the life of Fokir and Moyna, his wife. Kanai admires Moyna because he could see the reflection of his own desire through her. Moyna compromises on life for her son Tutul and her husband Fokir. She stimulates a fascination in Kanai: "it was as if her very existence were a validation of the choices he made in his own life, it was important for him to believe that his values were at bottom, egalitarian, liberal and meritocratic" (219).

Through Kanai, it is clear that Nirmal had lived a meaningless life by creating a distinction between the ideas and values to acknowledge, a kind of life that, could be lived only in Lusibari. He identifies himself by delving into the philosophy of the indomitable spirit of the settlers. He had seen the difficulties reflected in the cry of the settlers when they shouted: “we are the dispossessed... 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 Kolkata or the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in Poetry?” (254).

Kanai, Nirmal and Piya discover the roots of uncertainties and insecurities, which unfold in front of their eyes. Their defensible desire makes them to obtain an awareness of the cruelty of the city dweller. As a successful interpreter and translator, Kanai discovers the enigmatic mystery of life as well as the mystery of the islands against the cruelty of power. The difficulty faced by the islanders for their survival, their obstacle makes Kanai to be aware of the outrageous behavior of the civilized people on the poor settlers of Lusibari. The life of the poor becomes worthless like the animals for the imperialists. Piya reacts to the killing of tigers by the villagers. Kanai quickly responds: “I mean, aren't we a part of the horror as well? You and me, and people like us? ... It happens every week that people are killed by tigers... and yet here it goes almost unmarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers” (300).

An uneducated fisherman, Fokir, represents the motif of the past. As compared to Moyna, he seems to be unimportant for them because of his education. However, his character becomes significant in the novel indicating the history of the heritage of the Sunderbans: “Piya understood too that this was a looking-glass in which a man like Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was Lusibari” (220). Ghosh enumerates a new dimension in the lives of Nirmal, Kanai and Piya. They contribute their life towards a purpose. For instance, the death of Fokir is to save Piya from a cyclone. The visit of Kanai and Piya to the Sunderbans changes them, in constituting a better future. Kanai decides to return to Lusibari with a plan of writing his uncle's notebook. The life of Kusum and Fokir correspond with the idea of truth and beauty. This is the message conveyed by Ghosh through the words of Rilke, the poet, whose poetry is introduced to show the importance of Nirmal's philosophy, “life is lived in transformation” (282). Thus, the author highlights the interrelation of the personal and universal thoughts through ordinary people like Kusum, Fokir and Moyna. He portrays the real life history of an ordinary individual and their frequent struggle for their identity.

Thus, Amitav Ghosh produces a chronology of varied thought process to substantiate his existential philosophy. The term “existence emphasizes on the existence of every individual character as free and responsible agents determining their own development through acts of the will”. The characters have their own uncertain will without knowing whether it is good or bad; right or wrong but the characters have distinct line of thinking in their actions.

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