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‘The Other’ – The Sunderbans: A Land of Dangers

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Abstract

The sense of ‘otherness’ in any cultural space is never created in a vacuum. It is often produced by a long history of structural oppression that gets initiated by many reasons like colonization, natural geographical obstacles, economic positioning etc. This paper works on the premises that though the Sunder bans had been declared as a world heritage and subjected to numerous historical, ecological understandings yet the sense of ‘otherness’ is in as much as part of its geographical positioning as it is often associated even with its cultural space. The first part of the paper will look into the history of settlement. The second part will concentrate on the story of this land largely feared or non-negotiable will be looked at through the novels of Amitav Ghosh’s *Hungry Tide*, Shibshankar Mitra’s *Sunderbanyer Arjan Sardar*, Manik Bandyopaya’s *Padma Nadir Majhi*.

Key Words- *Otherness, Vacuum, Ecological, Sunderbans.*

The sense of ‘otherness’ in any cultural species never created in a vacuum. It is often produced by a long history of structural oppression that gets initiated by many reasons like colonization, natural geographical obstacles, economic positioning etc. Groups that have been isolated by natural borders – like the Klingit (Eskimo), native Caribbean tribes, and Australian aborigines have found themselves labelled as less civilized or even less cultured. Being the ‘other’ often is attached with some recognizable elements: a) that one group is superior to the other b) the superior group which in possession of power acts against the

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inferior group discriminately and without redress and the actions involved is often harmful. c) hatred amongst groups give rise to arbitrary actions that complicates and disrupts human relations d) the sense of 'otherness' builds stereotypes, initiates beliefs in separate, recognizable features and needless to say that all these get reflected in our literatures, films etc.

Historically and naturally, almost every group of human beings who managed to cultivate a cultural identity did so partly by defining themselves as better than any other group. This paper works on the premises that though the Sunderbans had been declared as a world heritage and subjected to numerous historical, ecological understandings yet the sense of 'otherness' is in as much as part of its geographical positioning as it is often associated even with its cultural space. The scholarship on the history of the Sunderbans and its bio-diversity has focused to reveal the history of the entire locality but the result has not been always absolute. Thus, there remains many debatable and unexplored things about the region – all these because of lack of availability of written documents on it till in the colonial times. Indeed before the colonial settlement or even during the medieval times or earlier in ancient times, we do not find detailed information of the formation of mangrove forest, human settlement, migration etc. in the region. It is only during the late 1980s that the cosmopolitan naturalists and the so called civilized world were beginning to talk about Sunderbans. The above mentioned facts stand supported by two incidents – i) in the year 1983, the World Wild Life Fund declared the Sunderbans as one of the greatest wild places of the world, and the other incident is of the year 1990 when the West Bengal Government Forest Department started promoting the Sunderbans as an eco-tourist spot. In fact, these initiatives are no different in ethos from the colonial policies that had been formerly initiated about Sunderbans. Academic activities and media coverage had further contributed to the various policy adaptations with respect to the Sunderbans. Interestingly, colonial land proclamation in the Sunderbans begun with holding the hands of Mr. Tillman Henckell, the judge and magistrate of Jessore who submitted certain proposals to Warren Hastings, the governor

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general on 20th December, 1783 and pressed to grant leases of the forest land in the Sunderbans to people. The process begun with entire Jessore, Backergunj, Khulna and 24 Paraganas Sunderbans and thus the vast wild and uncultivated land was divided into several 'lots' that was reclaimed and used for human settlement. The process of reclamations of the 'uncultivated' land was begun in the adjoining areas of Sunderbans under the East India Company by the British collector general Mr. Claude Russell who granted leases to individuals during 1770-1773. Mr. Henckell's plan was also to lease plots of land to 'raiya'ts' who would clear his 'own plot of land' by employing wood cutters and migrated labourers. The government drew an estimate of 6 lakhs bighas of land that would be under cover of cultivation and would help derive revenue in tune of 7.5 lakhs in seven years. Colonial literature does mention that the human activity in the Sunderban region was scarce. It is true that as far as the study of the history of this locality is concerned, we remain grossly and largely dependent on the English. The history of Sunderbans is not very clearly available prior to the arrival of the Englishmen. Needless to say that it was the development of capitalistic economy that initiated the exploitation of the Sunderbans. The European settlement in the Sunderbans was practically a capitalistic settlement. Before the establishment of the Imperial Forest Department in India in 1864, the Sunderban forest elimination was a reality that was unscientific and showed lack of common sense of the newly settled white race. They failed to understand the natural law of the land. The ruling elites were solely, it is to be understood, motivated by imperial designs. As it is rightly mentioned in the government documents of the time, the Sunderbans was said to be a wasteland and its survey and demarcation was begun for the purpose of revenue generation. In the year, 1828, Mr. W. Dampier and Lt. A. Hodges were appointed as the Sunderbans' Commissioner Surveyor respectively to demarcate this land and in the year 1875 Mr. Alison prepared a map of the Sunderbans. The British for the first time experienced a different type of land in the subcontinent - the nature of the land was typical due to its densely forested waste land character. The forest land of the Sunderbans was in no way similar to the English

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forest. Dacoity or piracy, lawlessness, dangerous wild beasts and other hazards made Sunderbans a tricky pitch. And if and when permanent settlement was initiated in the area, it was with the motive to generate revenue.

I would like to argue that from the beginning of the colonial rule in India, the second human settlement in the Sunderbans actually begun. Now the question arises when did then the first human settlement take place? But unfortunately, there is hardly any recorded history for our benefit. Interestingly, Kautilya's Ardhya Shastra mentions 'angerio bon' which is indeed the Sunderbans. In the Puranas, there is the mention of Banga, Bogodh, Patal, Roshatal, Poundra, Angabhumi, Bhatir Desh, Nadi K-harirDesh, Bono Bhumi, Polimatir Desh etc. These are all references for Sunderbans in the ancient times. But there has been an absence of 'deep history' as far as the area is concerned. The Sunderbans experienced natural calamities and devastations and due to natural disasters and human interventions many times over that resulted in depopulation and abandonment in the area. In the year, 1771, Mr. Rennell's map mentioned that the whole area of the Sunderbans was 'depopulated by the Moghs'. And the same map showed a number of forts marked in Backergunj area of the Sunderbans. The Moghs carried out predatory expeditions in Bengal imprisoning and forcibly taking away men, women and children and selling them as slaves. Dianga, 20 miles south of Chittagong, was used as a port for slave trade by the Portuguese. After the Spanish and the Portuguese success in the geographical discoveries and naval trade, the Portuguese turned themselves into pirates because the Bay of Bengal trade route was lucrative in then contemporary times. We know that mostly spice trade was carried out with South-East Asian Nations, so centuries of depredations by the Portuguese and the Moghs' collaborative raids hampered the social and economic life of the whole of Bengal, the Sunderbans in particular. The area concerned that is the Sunderbans was called by Mughal emperors 'the paradise of the kingdom'- and soon became forested after aggression of different nature that played havoc on its topography. And this beautiful forest tract finally fell to the colonial settlers. Now it is easily possible to understand the history of the human settlement of the region.

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Once it was anciently populated and it went up so till to the 15th century. Though, it is correct to note that the interruption began at and with the time of Mughal emperors. Kasim Khan, the viceroy of Shah Jahan, took steps to drive out the Portuguese and Mogh pirates from the Hooghly River. This process was continued for some coming centuries.

The colonial settlement is, in fact, the second settlement of the Sunderbans. When we study the migration in the area, we see a variety or many types of settlements namely 'casual, temporary, periodic, semi-permanent and permanent'. The floating population that came from the North settled here due to economic pressures. It is true that the British administration saved the Sunderbans from absolute lawlessness. But this had a dangerous impact on the forest on the other hand. Frederick Eden Pargitar in the report on the Sunderbans mentioned that the dacoits infested the Sunderbans rigorously, and the government brought the Sunderban waste into cultivation, immigrant people were generally brought into the Sunderban for the purpose of clearing jungle and there after many of them settled down permanently as cultivators. This happens to be the complete picture of the place.

The exclusion of the Sunderbans because of its geography that gave it a typical character meant that for a long time that there was not much of the inside story from the land. Yet the land had generated awe and interest and spurred the pens of writers.

One such early example happens to be *The Mystery of the Black Jungle*, an exotic adventure novel written by the Italian author Emilio Salgari, published in 1895. It features two of his most famous characters, the hunter Tremal-Naik and his loyal servant Kammamuri. The adventure continues in *The Pirates of Malaysia*. The setting is the Black Jungle where few can live, a desolate place, teeming with wild dangerous beasts. Yet it is among its dark forests and bamboo groves here that the renowned hunter Tremal-Naik makes his home. For years he has lived there in peace, quietly going about his trade until, one night, a strange apparition appears before him - a beautiful young woman that vanishes in an instant. Within days, strange music is heard in the jungle then one of his men is found dead without a mark upon his body. Determined to find some answers, the hunter sets off with his

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faithful servant Kammamuri, but as they head deeper into the jungles of the Sunderbans, they soon find their own lives at risk; a deadly new foe has been watching their every move, a foe that threatens all of British India. The attitude of the book remains as one that looks at the Sunderbans as dangerous and untamed in character. The hunter, an outsider is still the only possibility of having access to this world. The people of the land still figure in haziness pushed at the periphery of the frame. The figure of the ghost is also incidentally part of Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide* (2004). Piya's fears the smell of animals that are like ghosts to her. For the dwellers of the place, the animals are manifest as smells which render them ghostly. Even the song Fokir sings is full of sighs, grief and unsettlement. If soft speech as David Punter suggest is a sign of phantom, then Fokir's songs add to the specters of the postcolonial uncanny (Punter 2000, 76). People are alienated from each other and 'the site' of life is also ghostly. When Nirmal begins to get interested in Morichjhapi and its problems, Nilima tries to "warm him off. Years later she describes the situation thus: "we are two ghosts living in the same house." (Ghosh, 2004, 120). This image of the ghosts inhabiting houses or rather the inhabitants reduced to ghosts living in their home, will repeat itself in the case of Fokir. Like Nilima and Nirmal, to also Fokir the entire tide country is peopled by ghosts. *Hungry Tide* one would argue is a ghost story: about ghosts who seek a home or a place to haunt and about people who remain ghostly and invisible to structures of seeing. At the heart of the novel, is of course the crisis of Morichjhapi. Describing the long march of the refugees who end up in Morichjhapi, Kusum reports her encounter with the refugees: "They passed us the next day- like ghosts, covered in dust, strung out in a line, shuffling beside the rail tracks." (164). The refugees are ghostly, unreal people. Further Nilima describes the refugees in the novel as 'squatter' (213), and the one who lacks all rights. What is important is that the people have been made appear ghostly are Dalits. Their presence points to a particular history in the subcontinent. Avery Gordon in the reading of the spectral, ghosts represents the haunting reminders of modernity's violence – in this case a postcolonial condition of exclusion and exploitation.

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Ghosh has an anthropologist's fascination for local mythologies that subvert the official religious and national versions of history. He is oft found investigating the 'local reality', and with it, critiquing the official version of history. Here in the novel of our discussion, the local reality is that of the Sunderbans, a densely populated archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, which straddles West Bengal and Bangladesh. The tide country people have an epic narrative of origins that they have passed on orally from one generation to another. They also have a kind of local religion in the fact that they worship a Goddess called Bon Bibi; (interestingly the epic of Bon Bibi is strongly inflected with Islamic influences) thus Bon Bibi is addressed by the residents of the area when in danger and to help them to tide through the dangers that the land poses.

The tide country is relatively in the remote corner of Bengal. But it is also possible to see it as a separate region. The protagonist Kanai, a professional translator, is entrusted the notebooks of his deceased uncle, and comes across the following explicative passage:

There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as the Sunderban, which means, 'the beautiful forest.' There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove—the sundari tree, *Heriteria minor*. But the word's origin is no easier to account for than is its presence prevalence, for in the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide — bhati. And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as bhatirdesh — the tide country — except that bhati is not just the "tide" but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, mid-waved by the moon, is to know why the name "tide country" is not just right but necessary.

Shibshankar Mitra's *Sunderbanyer Arjan Sardar* deals with life of a hunter Arjan Sardar who at point takes up a gun to kill animals of the forest, foremostly the tiger. But the

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land comes with its ironic twist. It is land where you are alone, then the tiger will attack you and when men are more and the tiger alone, the latter would be killed.

In Manik Bandhyopaya's very famous *Padma Nadir Majhi*, Moynadeep (a part of Sunderbans) is as much a utopia as it is a challenging land. At one point, Rasu and Ammiuddin in the novel report that the land of Moynadeep is infested with tigers, insects and other animals and later Amminuddin refuses to go back to the forest. Thus the land of Sunderbans is oft non-negotiable. Once again we find a hazy picture of the Sunderbans in Rusdie's *Midnight's Children* and the land expectedly is assumed to be dangerous.

Clearly then, writers have agreed that the landscape of the Sunderbans is between land and water. The form of land, its topography is never stable. It largely is not mappable land. The situation of intellectual uncertainty / hesitation about the land stand reinforced through images and metaphors like 'rumours', 'exotic', 'many layers of beguilement' – all collaborating to create the illusion and secrecy. Nirmal in *Hungry Tide* uses the element of concealment and secrecy when he says: 'how skillful the tide country is in silting over its past' (229). When the land goes under the high tide, it has not only vanished temporarily but full of zoological threats with crocodiles, tigers, leopards, snakes etc. Death is often lurking around the corner of a land which works on the strange phenomenon aptly captured in the words of Kubir of *Padma Nadir Majhi*: " padaamagojotodaay, totoloye (Whatever Padma, the river gives, it takes way more.)' Space, geography and topography place it at the center of the uncanny. The 'bon bibi legend' rightly Ghosh says gives the land its history, philosophy and character. (2004, 354). The legend demonstrates supernatural intervention in human affairs, the triumph of the innocence and the power of the country gods. The 'social order' of the land is based on the strengths of the myth themselves.

There is larger alienation in a land that is infested with refugees from Bangladesh who had to suffer severe misfortune, degraded existence – they are caught between the state of home and homelessness. Earlier in the paper it had been stated how settlement came about in the Sunderbans. Ghosh in *Hungry Tide* critiques the formula of colonial settlement by the

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Matla River at Canning. The dilemma of the land is – it is a home and yet not a home, no one in want of security wants to make the land its home for long. Thus often the people of the land do not become the protector of the land/ forest. When the forest is articulated by man, it re-colonizes itself, refusing to be streamlined. Like the land itself, which cannot be mapped or perceived clearly because it is constantly changing shape, the dispossessed cannot be mapped because they have no locus or locale: the tide country is home and not-home. The guests who come either as colonizers or tourists find the land uncanny. These foreigners who come to discover the country's history often unconsciously shape the future. This transformation which hinges upon the discovery of the personal, topographical and historical ghosts is achieved through the knowledge that these 'ghosts'/people possess about this tide country. When the storm rises in this land, it can be devastating. Hossain Miya of *Padma Nadir Majhi* when the storm does wreak havoc on the land lends a helping hand to the people of the village but in return takes their thumb impression so he can exploit them latter. In *Hungry Tide*, the natural catastrophe is known to be routine killer and becomes an engaging metaphor of trouble of the self, politics and more. With cosmopolitanism thrust on it in the recent time, the land is threatened on a different level. With world bodies now in a hurry to collect data of the place, the irony is well sketched when Nilima (*Hungry Tide*) responds: "It would be good to have a memorial for Fokir, on earth as well as in heavens". Fokir thus continues to exist in form of data. In fact Piya uses the word 'his data' much to the surprise of Nilima. (398). Thus when Piya memorializes Fokir, it is with a specific pedagogic project in mind. Piya is the inheritor of the data that has been associated with the land of Sunderbans. Conservation policies pitted against the need sometimes eliminate the tiger or animal and these are intertwined and non- separable. It is a difficult world to understand. And more than often the policy of seeing the Sunderbans as a place full of unknown/known terror, its unmappable texture, the emphasis on the uncanny, persistent idea of national and ethnic used to state the land- all add and problematizes our understanding of the land and adds to its texture of the alienation. Today, Sunderbans is slowly moving away from the shadow of being

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just a data. There are writers trying to write history and literature from within and that is slowly gaining place in the canon. Even then no one still denies that the Sunderbans is a land that still remains dangerous. News of tigers entering human habitat in recent times are not unheard of and there remains a common tendency of wanting to move away from the land and those who stay back is out of necessity or the inability to find a route of moving out.

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