

“This is My Gift to You”: Aesthetic Value and the Search for Utopia in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh’s 2004 book *The Hungry Tide*, set in the Sundarban islands, explores the intersections of environment and humankind, man and woman, Indian and American, subaltern and cosmopolitan. In my article, I argue that the novel also demonstrates the search for utopia as a fruitful endeavor. Characters in the novel seek utopia through interaction with the dispossessed (utopia-as-person), attempts to create a utopian society (utopia-as-place), and subaltern death (utopia-as-sacrifice). Utopia-as-person is articulated mostly through Kinai’s interactions with the displaced Piya. Attempts at achieving utopia-as-place fall short because of a harsh environmental and political climate, but these projects are not perceived as failures. Rather, the striving for a utopian ideal place is worthy for the aesthetic and cultural discourse it creates. Finally, utopian sacrifice and death allow the subaltern to achieve voice. Ghosh calls for a world in which this discourse is translated into material existence and there is a more socially conscionable way of life in which cultural heterogeneity is uncompromised.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Utopia, Subaltern, Sacrifice, Indian, Aesthetic

Introduction

The search for utopia has generally been implemented in an imperialist way that globalizes, homogenizes, and eradicates difference without allowing consideration for subaltern perceptions of a different utopian ideal. Amitav Ghosh’s portrayal of the search for utopia in his 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* subverts this implementation by using aesthetic value as a means of allowing the subaltern to become engaged in dialogic discourse. In the novel, characters seek utopia through the lens of aesthetics. Utopia is sought through interaction with the dispossessed (utopia-as-person), attempts to create a utopian society (utopia-as-place), and subaltern death (utopia-as-sacrifice). Utopia-as-person is articulated mostly through Kinai’s interactions with the displaced Piya. Attempts at achieving utopia-as-place fall short because of a harsh environmental and political climate, but these projects are not perceived as failures. Rather, the striving for a utopian ideal is worthy for the aesthetic and cultural discourse it creates. Finally, utopian sacrifice and death allow the subaltern to achieve voice. Ghosh calls for a world in which this discourse is translated into material existence and there is a more socially conscionable way of life in which cultural heterogeneity is uncompromised. In this way of life, people would be open to expanding their horizons, reexamining prejudices, and recognizing their own place in the world and in relation to postcolonialism, globalization, and the subaltern.

While aesthetic theory has been most often applied to postmodern literature, it also provides a useful approach to the postcolonial novel. The postcolonial novel looks at identity and

interactions in development of a postcolonial society to formulate a theory of identity politics. Different literary genres have different degrees of distantation for the reader, but the novel and in particular the postcolonial novel allows for internally persuasive dialogue and therefore altered value systems. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of aesthetic emphasizing indicates that in novelistic writing, the writer witnesses the interrelationship of the observer and the observed and the moment in which that relationship occurs (78). The writer steps outside of the relationship to write about it, creating a necessary subjectivity. The immense diversity of subjectivities in the postcolonial novel means it has great ability to move audiences because audiences themselves are diverse. Bakhtinian dialogics focus on literature as part of a conversation rather than as an authoritative dictate. The novelization of genres is a movement toward more dialogical texts; persuasiveness comes from many voices or from a single questioning voice, presenting facts and experiences. Readers can aesthetically empathize through the novel by vicariously experiencing other perspectives. Further, postcolonial literature is "inherently translated," because it "has always needed to compare and translate among regions, languages, and literatures" (Walkowitz 169). This inherent translation means that the postcolonial novel provides multiple venues for questions of aesthetics.

Postcolonial novel writers like Ghosh became popular following widespread decolonization and the rise of postcolonial thought. Ghosh's textual corpus, including nine novels, deals with issues of postcolonialism, identity, nationality, ecology, India, and utopianism. *The Hungry Tide* is his sixth novel. Since its 2004 publication and Hutch Crossword Book Award for Fiction selection the same year, the novel has been approached by literary scholars through the lenses of postcolonial, diaspora, Indian English, and island/ecoconsciousness studies. Saswat Das explores Ghosh's metaphorical exploration of home and homelessness that encompasses the lived diasporic experience. Pramod Nayar argues that the specter of postcolonial dispossession haunts the novel, resulting in a politically foregrounded uncanny. Nandini Bhattacharya argues for a comparative politics reading of *The Hungry Tide*, since its exploration of dualism written in English by an Indian author represents the tradition of "contemporary Indian English writing (embodying its every singularity)" (59). While Ralph Pordzik, Jessica Namakkal, and others explore the trend of utopian literatures as they intersect with postcolonialism to argue for cross-cultural comparisons between these texts, nobody has yet explored the different types of utopian ideals as they take place in the novel. Reading aesthetic value and utopian processes into the text is especially useful today since our planet is more interconnected and cosmopolitan than ever. By returning our attentions to a fictionalized version of the problematic relations in the area, both personal and environmental, we can work towards awareness and growth.

Ghosh's novels portray the inherent connection between utopias in postcolonial literature and aestheticism. As John Su argues in "Amitav Ghosh and the Aesthetic Turn in Postcolonial Studies," the recent turn towards the aesthetic reverses the anti-colonial contention that aesthetic value is inherently Western, based on Enlightenment values (65). However, utopianism in postcolonial literature ensures these values are "reclaimed and redeployed within postcolonial contexts" (66). Su explores these reclamations and redeployments by examining beauty and its functions in these texts, since its recurring appearance in Adorno, Marcuse, and

Kant "suggests its enduring capacity to motivate anti-imperialist sentiment" (66). Aesthetic value is intrinsic to utopianism, a prevalent theme in postcolonial literature. Utopias and aesthetic function are closely related in Ghosh's works, and he has "consistently portrayed in positive terms his notion of a more egalitarian society" (67). The search for a perfect place in Ghosh's novels is often ravaged by environmental disaster or political mishaps; however, characters (and we as the reader) still experience the aesthetic value of beauty during this search. Su analyzes the relationship between aesthetics and utopianism in Ghosh's 2001 *The Glass Palace* to argue that the novel clashes with Adorno's correlation of positive utopian thinking with dangerous aestheticism (68). Instead, beauty in the novel creates a space wherein characters may appreciate aesthetic value while still retaining anti-imperial and postcolonial utopian thinking.

Similarly, in *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh depicts a beautiful topography marred only by the insidious dangers--human-killing tigers, inter-class tensions, and devastating cyclones. Despite these terrors, however, the beauty of the area is aesthetically enhanced by the characters' search for utopias. Through the depiction of this search, the novel "seeks a postcolonial ethics and aesthetics that transcends the ideologies of the past, even as it cautiously evaluates the extent to which such a utopian ideal is possible" (Giles 2). Ghosh seems to argue through his novel that the search for utopia has aesthetic value in itself; even if utopia itself is impossible to reach, the desire for a beautiful world is not. This desire defies imperialist oppression while producing a rhetoric of the postcolonial sublime, the desire for interconnectivity and understanding between man and nature (1). The postcolonial novel encourages a new approach that combines aesthetic theory with anti-imperialist ethics.

Utopia-as-Person

One means by which characters in *The Hungry Tide* seek utopia and aesthetic function is by finding utopia in other people. The novel opens with a hunt: Kinai spots Piya "the moment he stepped onto the crowded platform" (Ghosh 3), and characterizes her based on her performative identity. Piya's outward appearance is articulated in terms of subversion. She is dressed in androgynous clothing, similar to "those of a teenage boy," has a severely short haircut, stands "like a flyweight boxer" and is free of any culturally-dictated feminine adornment (3). Kinai is attracted to Piya's obvious displacement, and finds the "neatly composed androgyny of her appearance" to be "almost exotic" (3). Piya thus becomes a source of utopia for Kinai, as she belongs no-where and to no-place and so becomes the place where anything and all can occur.

Kinai finds beauty and utopia in Piya's diasporic body, the "ideological and symbolic battleground in which foreign-local distinction is played out" (Goh 342). Piya has a history of not belonging. Her home life was hostile and full of neglect, and Piya was regularly used as an intermediary between her first-generation Indian parents who had never fully assimilated into American society. When she was at school, she was also viewed as an anomaly, as her outward appearance and physical form were different from those of her peers. She must travel constantly for her work and even her attempts at love have rendered her outcast. Kinai realizes his love for Piya when she asserts that she has decided to "get used to the idea of being on [her] own" (Ghosh 259). To Kinai, her "true extraordinariness" lies in her displacement (259); he is

attracted to this island of a woman who needs no one and nothing and so to him embodies everything. Piya's displacement makes her a utopia for Kinai, whose move from superficial utopian attraction moves to a deeper longing for the dispossessed as he interacts with and is changed by the people and environment of the Sundarbans, and in particular by Fokir. Kinai faces his worst fear when he is alone with Fokir, that of a return to his ethnic roots. He learned multiple languages in an attempt to become the Western watching object instead of the subaltern subject, and the ethnic and racial slurs he yells at Fokir demonstrate instead how very interpellated in the "fraught trajectory of coercive mimeticism" he has become (Chow 124). Kinai overcomes this by continuing his aesthetic search for utopia in Piya and transcribing Nirmal's diary in an attempt to open up subaltern discourse.

Utopia-as-Place

While seeking utopia in another person is one means by which individuals respond to aesthetic representations and desire perfection; utopian ideology is also represented in the search for a perfect chronotope. In *The Hungry Tide*, a representative of the European West, Sir Daniel Hamilton, attempts to create a utopian settlement in West Bengal that would eliminate racial, ethnic, religious and class boundaries. This would be a place separate from societal dictates, where preconceptions of status and caste would be replaced by an egalitarian utopia. There would be no "petty little divisions and differences" and "everyone would have to live and work together" (Ghosh 44). Hamilton buys ten thousand acres of land despite warnings about the Sundarbans being home to a terrifying climate, dangerous animals, and political strife. There is "no prettiness" in the treacherous location, and yet it is known as "the beautiful forest" (8). Hamilton hopes to "build a new society, a new kind of country... run by cooperatives" that could be "a model for all of India" where people could live together without hegemonically-imposed social caste distinctions (45). Hamilton's dream of utopia is untranslatable in the harsh Sundarban environment, and after his death everything reverts once again to imposed regimes, marked social difference, poverty and subalternity. These political and biological realities dictate the means by which characters in *The Hungry Tide* interact and are involved with one another. Fokir protects Piya from animal attack and is ultimately killed in a giant storm; Kusum's father is killed by a tiger, altering the course of her existence; Kinai's experience with the land changes his very being and allows him to fall in love; and Nirmal becomes involved in refugee politics, which are then altered by the dire landscape. Indeed, the "landscape of the Sunderbans becomes a problematic warfield between forces of nature and that of the human world" (Rath 18, 19). Hamilton's conception of a utopian world is essentially lost in translation, as his imperialist discourse and Western implementations surrender to the biological dangers and political strife of a subaltern environment.

Like Hamilton, Nirmal also dreams of a utopian land, but as a man "possessed more by words than by politics" he is unable to reconstruct his words and desires as something tangible (Ghosh 282). His interest in Morichjhapi is provoked through his desire for Kusum. When Nirmal initially hears of the "tens of thousands of settlers" traveling to the island belonging to the Forest Department, he responds with apathy, as it is "no business" of his (132). His discussion with Kusum alters this attitude. In transcribing the story of how she came to Morichjhapi, he fancies her the representative of these dispossessed people and himself their historian. Nirmal

emplots the tale of Morichjhapi and its refugees as that of a doomed romance and insinuates himself inside its history, though in actuality he has very little to do with the politics and cultural happenings of the land. By using Kusum as a prism through which to view Morichjhapi, he places her inside a utopian ideal which may never be achieved but through death. The Morichjhapi refugees themselves exist in a state of no-place or non-place, though their living places are oftentimes not ideal. The utopia for these refugees is instead something purely in the emotive terrain; it becomes something they strive for but may never achieve. Non-places are represented through refugees and their "memories, recollections, blurring of lines between narrative time and real historical time, and the idea of 'places' as a desire and a process for gratification of that desire, are the aspects of these 'non-places'" (Rath 30). The utopian ideal is omnipresent in the mind of the migrant refugee and exists as a point temporally distant from their spatial reality, ensuring it is a time-space construct that may never be attained. The place they reside may also be classified as a non-place, for it is a place of struggle, possible displacement, and apprehension of government and of mobility.

Nirmal becomes obsessed with the idea of Morichjhapi, which he views as an "egalitarian world disentangled from capitalist exploitation" (Su 39). In this intentional community of no-place, he finds "an astonishing spectacle--as though an entire civilization had sprouted suddenly in the mud" (Ghosh 159). This land would be a crowning achievement of diasporic humanity, a land whose significance would "extend far beyond the island itself" as "a safe haven, a place of true freedom for the country's most oppressed" (159). However, Nirmal's hope proves to be dangerously idealistic. The gap between discourse and material realities lead to a dangerous conclusion wherein the most hopeful, poetic ideas could not provide food and goods, and establishing a representative discourse could not alter the economic establishment of an oppressed minority. Discourse does not exist in a separate realm, as Said may gesture toward, but instead is engaged in constant conversation with material existence. This is why Nirmal's diary is especially problematic. It is written at a place spatially and temporally distant from the present, and he writes it as an outsider. Nirmal is an intellectual, a theorizer, and a poet, who attempts to transcribe the political happenings of a group of refugees of which he is not a part. He is dead at the time the diary is read, and so his words gain a profound importance of time and space separation and voice through death. The incorporation of the Bon Bibi legend, which is itself a sort of religious utopia, also grants the diary power through mysticism and mythology.

Nirmal's wife Nilima understands the limits of utopian idealism. Rather than yearning for revolution or searching fruitlessly for a utopian world that may never be translatable except through death like her husband Nirmal, Nilima shows that adapting outside technology and information may help subalterns. Globalization generally conveys Western, hegemonic ideologies that may translate as encoded imperialism. However, these ideologies can be appropriated by those impacted in order to benefit the community. Nilima founds and runs the Badabon trust, which utilizes equipment and technology from both local and foreign sources in order to provide aid and services to locals. Similarly, Moyna seeks out education and trains to be a nurse in order to provide assistance to subalterns. However, her understanding of Western ideology causes her to look down on her husband and people like him, who try to

remain unaffected by globalization efforts. Both Nilima and Moyna deny utopian idealism, but do integrate globalized cultural values, ideology and technology in order to better the place and time they exist in and still retain hope for a brighter, if not perfect, future.

Utopia-as-Sacrifice

Alternatively, Fokir tries to resist modernization and globalization and represents the impossibility of a subaltern voice except through the utopian state of silence and death. His physical appearance is described in terms of alteration and a potent relationship to the earth. He has "the grizzled look of an experienced hand," his clothes are sparse and have a utilitarian purpose, and his body shows his time spent "slowly yielding his flesh to the wind and the sun" (Ghosh 36). When Piya first sees Fokir from afar, she thinks he is an old man, which demonstrates his connection to an ancient earth and way of life; however, upon closer review she is startled by the aesthetic value of his youth and attractiveness. Fokir is "not wasted but very lean" with limbs "almost fleshless in their muscularity" (40), and his stance invokes both destitution and defiance (41). Fokir lives "in an organic fusion with the ecosystem of Sunderbans" (Rath 24). Fokir is also an aesthetic figure because he believes "people must safeguard spheres of existence outside of politics" (Su 70). Whatever other people do, Fokir "does just the opposite" (Ghosh 129); he has no interest in the world outside of his personal relationship with the land and water, which is "enough for" him (263). As an aesthetic figure, Fokir demonstrates a natural beauty untouched by modernity or capitalist appropriation, and thus "provides the basis for an allegory of the limits of bourgeois society's capacity to extinguish alternatives to itself" (Su 70). Fokir represents a utopian ideal because he shows that there remains part of existence untouched by the imposing of pseudo-universals.

Fokir's existence as separate from homogenic structure and discourse necessitates his death. He becomes Piya's organic connection to the Sunderbans after he sacrifices his life for her; it is through him that she establishes an ecological existence in the harsh terrain. "The subaltern who wholly resists incorporation by dominant state forms is 'an ideal figure,' a utopian concept designating the limits of hegemonic thought" (Li 1). Through death, the subaltern achieves voice as a demonstration of alterity. It is only after Fokir's death that the other characters are brought to action. His death "provides the occasion for a meditation on subalternity as a critical alternative to dominant regimes of power" (1), which grants the ability to view the world in another, utopian way. Fokir must die in order to "serve as an irreducible idea" (1). Since any true utopia may only be achieved in another realm, in another place, death provides the means to access this alternative existence.

The subaltern voice must be translated through Western academic discourse in order to be heard. It is paradoxically this very translation that creates a misrepresentation of the subaltern, as "language necessarily involves an act of violence whereby the object of representation is defined exclusively in terms of the subject's categories of understanding" (Su 39). There may be no accurate representation of the subaltern, as it becomes lost in translation. However, through silence and through death, the subaltern achieves voice that needs no translation, thus answering Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The subaltern may provide perspective through dialogic discussion and heteroglossic voice as represented through

literature and conceptions of utopia. The impossibility of subaltern voice "results in the paradoxical condition in which utopia and death are linked, in which the subaltern's death or disappearance enables the subaltern to fulfill the ideal role of the resistant and inappropriable other" (Li 2). The subaltern voice is loudest in its silence, when it is "the unemphatic agent of withholding in the text" (Spivak 190). It is this power in withholding that creates the subaltern utopia, a no-place that is untouched by colonial discourse and power regimes. It is only through Fokir's death that "makes possible subaltern inaccessibility, unfigurability, and singularity" while also creating a "utopian alternative to the postcolonial present" (3). Through death, Fokir defies the attempts of others to translate and modernize the simplistic fisherman. It is defiance through death, agency through silence, and subversion of imposed ideology through sacrifice. Kusum's death foreshadows that of her son, and his death is a return to his mother and her silent subalternity. Both subalterns die so that their death and silence may create a more utopian world.

Conclusion

Ghosh implies that no matter the format or the result of the search for utopia, value is founded in the aesthetic function of the search itself. This aesthetic search for utopia is prevalent throughout the course of *The Hungry Tide*. Characters in the novel are constantly seeking a utopian ideal as a means of escape from the present or in hope for a better future. These utopias exist largely within the "terrains of the mind" and may be translated through material existence (Rath 14), found in representations of others, or exist as idealistic endeavors toward a better world. The interrelatedness of temporal and spatial realities deconstructs and subverts the material and cultural binary, and through aesthetic portrayals of man, nature and death, utopia is sought for and sometimes achieved (15). In *The Hungry Tide*, utopia is found in outside perception of the dispossessed, in the various ways individuals have attempted to construct it as a tangible place, and through subaltern sacrifice. These utopias are translated through hope, idealism, and the search for improvement. By applying these vectors to other forms of communication, we can encourage subaltern voice and an ecoconscious ideal. While *The Hungry Tide* was published nearly fifteen years ago, its exploration of postcolonial ethics and aesthetics is even more significant today. Recent ethnographic studies show that the Sundarbans are suffering from climate change, which would be worsened by a proposed coal-burning Rampal Power Station. Advancements in technology have increased the disparity between subaltern citizens and the local elite. It is vital that we turn the lens to focus on postcolonial literature and its aesthetic representations in order to strive for a more egalitarian approach to these crises.

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