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Transplanted souls: an Introspection into the Agonies of the Displaced in  
Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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ABSTRACT

In an earth where the problems and sufferings of the refugees are becoming an ordinary event, often we need the emotional photographs and news reports on Alan Kurdis to remind the truth that such people were also born into this world. Even though the photograph of Kurdi was described as absolutely shocking and caused a dramatic upturn in international concern over the refugee crisis, one cannot deny the fact that this 'innocent face of death' is the harrowing human cost of the refugee crisis all over the world. Being the illegitimate offspring of the bloody imperialism, refugee crisis has become the theme of many post colonial texts. Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2005) is somewhat different from all these kind of narrations since it experiments the crisis in a different perspective. The novel is a realistic portrayal of the double displacement experienced by the victims of India-Pak partition.

**KEY WORDS:** Displacement, refugees, resettlement, struggles, survival etc.

Resettlement of the refugees continues to be a burning issue in the post colonial world. Basically refugees are people who live in exile; those people who have to flee from their homeland due to the constant wars, internal conflicts and other forms of violence. It can be either a voluntary exile or a forcible one. Anyway all refugees share the same pangs- the pangs of separation from their homeland, the nostalgia and desire for the homeland and the building up of the new dreams in a Newfoundland. But the very same resettlement changes the life of the people. What awaits them there is a new culture, a new society and a new language that are completely different and new to them

In the novel *The Hungry Tide* Amitav Ghosh draws the picture of the victims of partition who were displaced from their homeland. The life of the Bengali Hindus was not a different one. They were considered as a burden by the West Bengal government and they developed a final solution to the problems of rehabilitation of the Bengali refugees; the Dandakaranya Project. Subsequently the government established an authority, the Dandakaranya Development Authority, in 1958. The mission instilled upon this authority was to develop an area of 78000 square miles known as Dandakaranya in the Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Orissa and the Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh.

The novel tells in detail the story of a group of refugees who were forcefully sent by the West Bengal government to Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh and the troubles they have to face once they reached in such an alien forest area. There, they have to fight with everything only to survive their dreams of a better livelihood. The novel has got one of the beautiful landscapes, the Sundarbans, as its background. On the

surface level the novel is about the life of Kanai Dutt, a middle aged linguist who runs a translation bureau in Delhi, and his acquaintance with a young cetologist from U S, Piyali Roy. But on the deeper level, the novel is a history; the history of the place and the history of the Displaced.

The novel is about the existential anguish of the displaced refugees and their struggle to survive. The people were always conscious of the killer waves that can at any moment inundate the whole region.

The settlers were mainly of farming folk who had been drawn to Lusibari by the promise of free farm land. Hunger drove them to hunting and fishing and the result were often disastrous. Many died of drowning and many more were picked off by crocodiles and estuarine sharks... No day seemed to pass without news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile. (79)

In all their hardships they accepted this land of troubles as a challenge and the sheer survival instincts in them had driven them to make it a healthy and habitable one. Even though they were the living martyrs of a harsh colonial drama the land promised them a lot in spite of all its hostilities. They worked hard in order to achieve their dreams. The deep rooted notion of Indian nation has already become a myth for them yet they were unable to sever the emotional tie with their motherland. Thus in a nutshell it can be seen that the novel is a riding into the patterns of survival of the refugees in the Sunderbans. Among the marshy terrains of Sunderbans they were trying their best to overlive and to carve a space for themselves.

The history of the tide country and the displaced anguish of its inhabitants are getting a new language through the diary entries of Nirmal. The Morichjhapi massacre is traced through Nirmal's diary. The settlers from East Pakistan and West Bengal settled at Morichjhapi and they attempted to rebuild their life there.

Salt pans had been created, tube wells had been planted, water had been dammed for the rearing of fish, a bakery had started up, boatbuilders had set up workshops; a pottery had been founded as well as an iron smith's shop; there were people making boats while others were fashioning nets and crab lines...All this in the space of a few months! It was an astonishing spectacle as though an entire civilization had sprouted suddenly in the mud. (192)

But the dreams of Morichjhapi settlers soon shattered since the government planned to evict them forcibly in 1979. It was a gross betrayal from the part of the left government but the Morichjhapi settlers were not ready to give up "Amra kara? Bastuhara. Morichjhapi chharbona, who are we? We are the dispossessed. We will not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may" (254). Hearing the pleas of the refugees, Nirmal writes in his diary, "Standing on the deck of the bhotbhoti, I was struck by the beauty of this. Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave?" (254), this in turn reminded him of his own roots, where does he belong? In Kolkota or in the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry? And he was sure that the police men could not interpret the cries of these people, the lament of those ill fated people.

The Morichjhapi settler and victim, Kusum, articulates the pathetic condition of the refugees to Nirmal during the final phase of the clash between them and the police force sent by the government to evict them: "The worst part was ... to sit here, helpless, with hunger gnawing at our bellies and listen to the policemen say...This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals...it is a part of a reserve forest. It belongs to a project to save tigers" (263). Kusum, at the same time, scorns and wonders at the government and the authorities who love animals so much that they are willing to kill the refugees for the sake of animals.

War and peace and again war have become the fashion of the modern world. And it leads to the birth of new refugees in different parts of the world. Life becomes more and more uncomfortable for many while a few are celebrating it on the cost of others. Thus, what Nirmal writes at one occasion in his diary, citing the problems of the Morichjhapi refugees, gets a universal appeal,

We are not comfortably at home In our translated world. (206)

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