

TEXT AND CONTEXT WITH REFERENCE TO AMITAV GHOSH'S THE HUNGRY TIDE**Dr. B. Kathiresan***Associate Professor of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore - 632115*

A text is a galaxy of signifiers and these signifiers extend their meanings far and wide. A text means different things to different theorists. For Barthes, texts are products and not productions and they make up the enormous mass of our literatures. For Feminist Literary Theorists, the text and the reality are realities. The text arises from the reality, and there is no obvious relationship between the reality and the text. For a person who advocates Reader-Response Theory, a text gives sense when a reader reads it, and interacts with the page to produce meaning. A reader is the one who constructs meaning for a piece of writing. If criticism engages in the analysis written, psychoanalytic criticism includes even spoken texts. And text is the manifestation of the original author's subjectivity. Texts are cultural products: a text can present tension, anxieties, mental abilities and psychological disturbances (neurosis), and a text is a psychic structure. Deconstruction, associated with a range of contexts like historical, philosophical, conceptual, and discursive determines the structure of a text that is analyzed. "The text is a structure, an idea, an institution, a philosophy, all contain in themselves that which disturbs and is in excess of the serenity of the full, simple identity as such." (Wolfrey: 119) Deconstruction is not the mere visible structurality of structure. Derrida's object of analysis is upon a single theme, term, word or concept. In the process of analysis "he transforms the structure of the text, concept, institution, and theme - through examining how that single figure operates in the structure as a whole." (Wolfrey: 119) The focus, that text concept or institution, moves the structure but is necessarily logical within the economy of the structure.

The focus of study in Deconstruction is 'language/text'; Derrida's deconstruction deconstructs Saussurean statement. For Saussure, in language there are only differences without fixed terms. Saussurean differences operate at two levels: signifiers (form/expression) as well as signified (concepts). Signifiers are sound images, expressions, audible sounds in speech and visible marks in writing; signified are concepts. Both, signifiers and signified are purely differential. For Derrida, signified exists but should be put to scrutiny. The signified is present in the signifier but is elusive. In the process of understanding the signified we move from one signifier to the other signifier and finally a circularity of signifiers is formed. No fixed meaning can be derived. The meaning is infinite.

"Derrida also points out that in everything (word, text, context) the opposite of it is always already there as a trace" (Krishnaswamy: 33) Language is a state of dissemination and it is the state of perpetually unfulfilled meaning. Derrida's difference expresses not only difference but also the endless deferment (postponement), and the endless deferral. All signifiers are traces of what is absent. Each sign is a trace of the other and no sign is

complete. Thus, there is circularity, plurality, indeterminacy, free play, difference and supplementation. When a sign is a supplement of another sign, a text must also be a supplement of another text. This text can either be a word, sentence or discourse that cannot remain independent of itself without depending on another element.

A text is no longer a finished corpus of writing. One text is a trace of the other called as intertextuality. Simultaneously, if a text is a text of another text then a context is a context of another context. So even contextual meaning is not fixed. A context has no limit and anything can be included into a given context. So a context is flexible and yields to new contexts. A context includes other supplements like emotional, spiritual, mental and imaginative and other inbuilt supplements. Krishnaswamy opines “to deconstruct is to examine minutely in order to dismantle conventional hierarchies in the given system to arrive at an exactly opposite position.” (Krishnaswamy: 33) A deconstructive enterprise involves setting-up binary oppositions-God/man, heaven/earth, etc. He further adds that a text comprises of the effect of “traces and remnants, marked by a ghostly logic of death and survival.” (Krishnaswamy: 64) Reality then is merely a text. A text is not a presence and it remains in crucial ways imperceptible. On the other hand, context can be anything like speech, life, the world, the real, history etc. Meaning is within the context and the context has no saturation. The context gets altered continuously even if in some sense the text remains the same.

Relating Derrida to Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide is meaningful, as the novel is based on the binary forces of man and nature. This text of nature is presented in Sunderbans, which is the milieu of the novel. The land, like the text, defies human understanding. It is ever changing and the “river channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable.” (THT: 7) Just as a text is a train of signifiers the river channels meet often in clusters. The landscape and the forest, like meaning and context, dwindle into a distant rumor, “echoing back from the horizon” (THT: 7)

Just as the text and the context have no borders and meanings overlap, there are no borders in the Sunderbans to divide the “fresh water from the salt, river from sea.” (THT: 7) So do the currents reshape the land and even create a new land eternally. The Bhatir desh or the ebb tide creates the land and the land creates new settlements, new cultures, new myths and new relationships. Like language, the land defies penetration. The terrain is hostile towards humans, just as a man gets entangled in the labyrinth of the language. The people of Sunderbans loose themselves in the embrace of the forest, and they are killed by the animals.

Ghosh has used the milieu as a powerful tool in The Hungry Tide in order to relate dilemma in human communication, which is one of the themes of the text. The novel opens with Piya, an American (though her parents are Indians) cytologist, who studies marine mammals, lands in the Sunderbans with a hope to “wangle” a permit to survey the marine

mammals of the Sunderbans. She is helped by Fokir a rustic boatswain who is familiar with the ways of the Mohanas. Piya encounters Kanai during her onward journey to the Sunderbans. Kanai is a translator and introduces Piya to his aunt Nilima, a social worker. Nilima understands her community than her husband Nirmal, a leftist idealist. The human language is a barrier for communication but they do communicate among themselves and with nature in the novel. Communication as a theme has been dealt from different perspectives- gestures, songs, silence and verbal translations along with the skills of communication - listening, speaking, reading and writing. The issues are dealt from the perspectives of the character who comment on the purpose of language, the barriers to communication, the strategies people use to communicate and the mode of communication. The writer also talks of communication between man and nature at large that is presented in the novel.

Piya communicates with Fokir through gestures for he has made no attempts either to name things or point out objects to Piya, trying to teach her Bengali. Their gestures are like the text incorporated with protests, exclamations, appraisal, and mental process of sorting reasons, signs, mimes, songs and even body language. Piya's parents were Bengalis but they never introduced her to the language. They used it for their quarrels and fights. Language was like a "surgeon's instrument, tools with nothing attached except meanings that could be looked up in a dictionary empty of pain and memory and inwardness." (THT: 94)

Music is another medium of communication. Fokir sings the Bon bibi song but Piya doesn't understand the meaning of the song. Fokir's song means nothing to Piya except to be a river of words but she can understand that there is grief in it as his voice is hoarse and it seems to crack and sob through the notes. It's these non linguistic aspects that unsettles and disturbs Piya. If Piya's relationship with Fokir is based on gestures, Kusum's relationship with Horen is of silent understanding. The relationship between Nirmal and Nilima is the attraction of two opposite characters. Nirmal's poetry and writing vocation is the only magnet that binds both man and wife. They don't use much language to communicate as they are engrossed in their own commitments- Nilima to her trust and Nirmal to his writing, which he never does. The barriers of language are in the inability of one to communicate with another on the one hand and there is man's lack of concentration in understanding communication on the other. Piya and Fokir fail to understand nature because they are involved in their pursuit of the Dolphins. Moyna and Fokir cannot communicate because language and culture are barriers between them.

Moyna's relationship with Fokir, is clouded with, mistrust. She understands that she is incapable of expression and needs a translator (Kanai) to communicate her feelings to Fokir, because "words are just air...when the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the river lies beneath, unseen and unheard. You can't blow on the water's surface from below... only someone who's outside can do that, someone like you."(THT:

258) This reflects on the role of an outsider to prevent the communication between Piya and Fokir. For it is Kanai, who stands between them as a translator decoding the messages of both their minds to one another. "Their words will be in your (Kanai's) hands and you can make them mean what you will" (THT: 257). The irony of the situation is that Kanai, who is a translator, fails to communicate his love for Piya. His hesitation, postponement, and dilemma are because of Piya who has fixed her eyes on the water which reminds Kanai of "a textual scholar poring over a yet undeciphered manuscript: it was as though she were puzzling over a coded text that had been authored by the earth itself. He had almost forgotten what it meant to look at something so ardently- an immaterial thing (crocodile)." (THT: 269) Kanai also has such experience in trying to understand texts but he has been looking for meanings that lay within the "interior of other languages," as he is a translator.

In Kanai's professional life as a translator he has also been an interpreter. During those moments of translation he has the sensation of being transported out of his body, into another. He looks as if language as an instrument has metamorphosed - instead of being a barrier, a curtain that divides a transparent film, a prison that permits Kanai to look through other's eyes to see the world through a mind apart from his own. Kanai sees himself as an outsider with the experiences in the suction mud. Kanai's understanding of Fokir is perfect as he (Kanai) is a representative of the destroyer of Fokir's village, and home. Fokir's anger seems to be a judgment for Kanai.

It is this sense of the outsider that makes Kanai to write his feelings in the form of a letter to Piya. When oral communication has barriers or fails, one adopts to writing especially in the form of letters because letters (personal) are very subjective and they communicate using orthography. Writing itself can be directly and indirectly representing one's emotions. Kanai and Nirmal adopt this. Nirmal writes on the day when the Morichjhapi civil war has begun and leaves it incomplete. Kanai too incapable of expressing orally, attempts to write. He uses indirect mode of letter. He writes a poem that has been sung by Fokir, to explain his love for Piya and to show his understanding of her love for Fokir. Nirmal writes a letter of experience filled with incidents about Morichjhapi, Kusum, the political struggle of the people of Morichjhapi, the storm and his leftist ideals. Kanai writes about the Bon-bibi myth that reiterates love and faith as the pivot of human existence in Sunderbans. But he too fails to make Piya understand.

The next skill the novelist has used is listening. Piya in her Ceteacean pilgrimage listens to the sounds of the dolphins, air, water and finally the storm. Piya reads through Kanai's letter in which he has explained what he could not orally. Piya earlier asks him to translate the song that, Fokir has sung and Kanai replies that "I couldn't translate it .It was too difficult ... for in those words there is a history that is not just his own but also of this (Lusibari) place, the tide country." (THT: 354) The song that Kanai writes is not rendered by him perfectly as it is part of Fokir. He doesn't regret for the flaws in the rendition "For

perhaps they (rendition) will prevent me from fading from sight as a good translator should for once I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible.”(THT: 354) The rendition foregrounds that there is subjectivity even in a song. The song of Bon bibi has been transferred to Fokir through his grand father and mother (Kusum) and in the transference Fokir has internalized and modified the song with his own rhythm.

Like Piya torn between the love of Kanai and Fokir, the readers of the novel are torn between the text and the context. Piya makes Fokir sing her song and Fokir’s language is like the flow of a river that makes sense. “She understood it all. Although the sound of the voice was Fokir’s the meaning was Kanai’s...” (THT: 360) Rilke’s song on love which Kanai sends as a gift is not only of love that dies and fades in a season, but also the text of the human mind. Text, like the memory, “incorporates not only the future but also the past” (THT: 360).

According to Nirmal life is lived in transformations and languages are not stagnant. Language transforms like Nilima’s Bengali that gets adapted to Lusibari’s dialect. But her English, which is unused, remains the same. Nirmal’s language is soaked in the faith of Rilke who says that “life is lived in transformation.”(THT: 282) Nirmal’s historical materialism, which means that everything which exist is interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science and nature. “He (Nirmal) is hunted down by facts in the way a magpie collects shiny things yet when he strung them all together, somehow they did become stories of a kind” (THT: 282-283). This is what the text and the role of writer in a context are. Meaning is derived according to the perspective of the reader, just as for Nirmal “A place is what you make of it.” (THT: 285) Kanai has listened to the stories as imaginary tales but later on introspection discovers it to be true. The river’s communication to Mr. Piddington is failed to be accepted by the British is yet another example. They build a port in Canning, but it is swept by the water in four years.

The failure of verbal communication is expressed in the climax when Fokir is about to give up his struggle with nature. Piya has been unable to do anything for Fokir, other than to hold a bottle of water to his lips. “She remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved, and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words”(THT: 393) in spite of their incompatibility- for Piya’s job depends on satellites and Fokir’s on the bones of fish. But it has proved possible for “Two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously. People who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another’s head was far more than surprising.”(THT: 141) In the last moment Piya promises to Fokir in the silence of her heart. She is unable to do anything for Fokir “she remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved- and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words. (THT: 393) Finally, Piya makes it her goal to keep up Moyna and Tutul transforming Fokir’s

goals into her goals. For Piya “the idea that to see was also to ‘speak’ to others” (THT: 159) of the rustic kind and for Fokir “simply to exist was to communicate.”(THT: 159)

Apart from the language, Nature also is seen as a text which has multiple transformations. The land and water, apart from the Flora and Fauna change. Tigers have their own territories. When it tries to intrude into the territory of humans “it’s because it (the tigers) wants to die” (THT: 295) and If men enter the forests they are killed by tigers. The killings are insignificant and are never reported by the press. The nature, earth and planet are united to form a text defying understanding.

The land that defies meaning in the novel is Garjantola, the land of the Bon-bibi myth. The myth is presented from many perspectives and is related to the storm. It acts as a connective thread of the different incidents in the plot. The novel is structured by the storm. The myth is connected to listening and the storm. Piya and Fokir fail to listen and read the symptoms of the fireflies, the rainbow made by the moon and the calm of Gerafitola, the land of Dokkhin Roy, the demon.

Though the chapters are titled after places and proper nouns they describe events in relation to key words of the title. But the storm which shapes the Sunderbans forms the structure of the novel. The storm appears at many instances in the novel as faced by Horen, Kusum’s father, Nirmal, Piya and Fokir. The theme of love and understanding is consolidated in the storm. It is the storm that leads Horen and Nirmal to Kusum. Piya woos Fokir through his presence and Kanai woos Piya through his language (translations). Kusum is wooed by Horen and Nirmal. Nirmal woos her with his stories and tales while Horen has nothing to give her but his presence, and in the end Kusum chooses Horen. Just as Kusum has chosen Horen, Piya chooses Fokir. After the killing in Morichjhapi Kusum dies and Horen lives with the memory of Kusum and Piya lives with the memory of Fokir.

Memory plays a vital role in the novel. It’s a technique that Ghosh employs to intermingle his complex world of information, faith in the Bon bibi myth, science, poetry, history and psychology. Memory is related to the geography of the tide country for in his notebook Nirmal writes “No one knows better than I how skillful the tide country is in silting over its past” (THT: 69). The memory of Kusum is recorded in the notebook and handed over to Kanai. Memory and the mind are compared to mirror and eyeglass that reflect the interiors that lay deep within human mind. Kanai has been looking into the depths of other languages. His desire is to learn the ways in which other realities are conjugated. As a translator Kanai knows the obstacles and frustration of speaking and using words. Kanai says “speaking was recasting of things.”(THT: 269). Along with memory, dreams, and desire sustain the novel. Memory, dreams and desire are part of the mind. The mind’s cognitive process reflects the personalities, as each concept is different from the other. The land is also a character in the novel which has its own ways and means and it can be understood only by itself. Man is just a target against many malignant forces of nature, and man’s unquenching struggle with language is crucial to understand each other

in order to survive. The text of the novel is vast while its context relates to many themes like love, borders, history, co-existence, freedom, humanism and politics that are eternal themes like the flow of the Ganga. As stated in the text, “Love flows deep in rivers”. (THT: 182)

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