



**The Storm of History: Memory, Witnessing and Archiving Betrayal in Amitav  
Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun***

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**Abstract**

The partition of India has produced an entire genre of literature and a surrounding academic discourse. However, there is a general paucity in the literary discourse about the Bengal experience of the partition and its concomitant “refugee problem”. This paper will engage in Walter Benjamin’s conception of historical materialism, memory studies and testimony to investigate the function of literature in archiving the testimonies of the subaltern refugee characters: their dislocation, relocation and the ultimate betrayal . I will critically analyse the role

of literature and the ethics surrounding these fictive testimonies in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* (1971) to delineate the waves of refugee exodus and argue that these novels offer us a subaltern narrative to unearth the suppressed reality of the refugee existence, the state apathy and the Morichjhanpi massacre.

**Key words:** Witnessing, Memory, Testimony, Historical Materialism, Bengal Partition, Morichjhanpi Massacre.

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In this paper I will dabble with Walter Benjamin's concept of historical materialism explicated in his essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" as an important point of access to investigate the interactions between memory and history archived in literature. I will critically analyse the role of literature and the testimonies of the fictive characters and the ethics of reading such testimony in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* (1971)--to which I will refer while contextualising the refugee exodus teleologically--to gauge the common function of memory and witnessing in the numerous betrayals faced by the refugees from East Pakistan to West Bengal. These two text separated by more than three decades are engaged in representing/revisiting the aftermath of the partition and the concurrent self rehabilitation that invariably posits the refugees at a tussle with the government. These two texts showcases the linkages between history and individual memory where characters like Arjun, Nirmal, Kanai and Fokir "bear witness" to the betrayal and the atrocities by the government and the nation at large. Through their singular experience and individual memory, the readers are offered a subaltern text to re-construct the popular collective memory and foreground the validity

of witnessing<sup>1</sup> to commemorate and unearth atrocities. The role of Arjun and Nirmal as the “native informant” is important to contextualize the dislocation, relocation and the Morichjhanpi massacre--both Gangopadhyay and Ghosh’s fiction are based on archival search and field work, this in order to recover a slice of history and publish it to the world. Hence, the author is a producer who recognizes the extent to which the literary is no longer the representation of an external political position; rather the literary is political<sup>2</sup>.

Benjamin in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” asks for a constant re-investigation and re-reading of the past through what he calls the “backward gaze” and questions the notion of historical progress. Benjamin critiques the traditional historian’s narrative for it puts forth history as a singular text and forgets that it is actually a succession of victories by the powerful against the subordinate classes and ignores the importance of co-texts that should merge in the making of history since there is no singular history. Historicism’s empathy is with the dominant or the victor “And all the rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. (Benjamin 256) Benjamin therefore sets a path for what he calls historical materialism which is not to make the future, but to save the past

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<sup>1</sup> The actual witnesses’ claims were not taken seriously when they escaped from the island and reached Kolkata to testify against the atrocities committed in Morichjhanpi. They were invariably put in prison. See Mallick and Jalais.

<sup>2</sup> I am drawing from Benjamin’s essay *The Author as Producer*. However both Gangopadhyay’s dedication “For the freedom fighters of Bangladesh” and Ghosh’s numerous interviews and end note form what Gerard Genette terms “paratexts”: those materials that lies on the threshold of the narrative. This includes chapter-headings, pictures, promotional material, interviews given by the author, dust jackets, preface, foreword and even other novels written by the author, which can influence our understanding of the narrative and hence, become part of the narrative.

“To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was,””(Benjamin 264). This puzzling statement, that history need not be written “the way it really was,” underscores Benjamin’s departure from the prevailing conception of historiography at the time, which he refers to as “historicism” in contrast to his own “historical materialism”. To Benjamin “Historicism gives the ‘eternal image’ of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past” (Benjamin 271) Historical materialism is a way of inserting oneself, not toward the totality of the historical process, but toward certain instances in the historical past: to disrupt the supaltern narrative and make the fragments whole again. Literature becomes an important co-text in this disruption, a witness to the crisis and the politics of history writing. A tool for unearthing hidden repressed incidents and through these fictional characters alternate histories can be invoked to implicate the readers in this ethical venture of re-writing the wrongs. The memory of both Kanai and Arjun hence becomes an important tool to give a faithful account of the subaltern history that has been denied by historicism. It cannot be formulated on its own terms and needs to be situated in the present context and the present silence/absence in popular history implicates the failure of historicism and is intrinsic to give full meaning to these texts.

As the Ghosh’s novel opens Sunderbans is the chronotope where history and myth merges Nirmal’s account of the legend is translated from Bengali “*there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where lord Shiva’s matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe thousands, of tangled strands*” (AG<sup>3</sup> 6). This part of the legend explains the narrator, “*is never told and thus never imagined*” (AG 6). It is to this legend that the Sunderbans owes its existence

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<sup>3</sup> Citation Amitav Ghosh and referred so hereafter.

and to believe it one has to see it: “*Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe*” (AG 6). Therefore, history and myth can be distinguished only by the act of “witnessing.” As Benjamin posits not man or men but the entire struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge (Benjamin 269). Their witnessing and gaps in the popular history is where one should look for the repressed incidents. Drawing from Marx Benjamin posits the appearance of a revolution, that notably the enslaved class completes liberating in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This however is a point of departure from the texts as both *The Hungry Tide* and *Arjun* espouses help from the ‘oppressor’ class in the form of Abanish in *Arjun* or Nirmal and Kanai in *The Hungry Tide*.

In *Arjun* the protagonist is constantly reaffirming his memory from stating his name, age, educational and family history “I remember everything” (Sunil Gangopadhyay <sup>4</sup> 14,15, 179); his backward gaze is symbolic because in both instances he cannot actually remember the attacker or the events of the final fight, instead the memory serves the purpose of aligning his experiences of growing up in East Pakistan, the event and aftermath of partition and the concurrent efforts at self rehabilitation. So, this nagging concern for his memory is to bear witness to the event of partition, violence and betrayal in the land of arrival. Scholars of memory studies are troubled by this inherently backward gaze and the idea therefore that it is stuck in the past and perhaps hinders a move forward. This archiving of memories by textualising it has to be seen righting/writing the gross inaccuracies of the past. As it directly effects the present and future. Jonathan Boutler in *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel* draws from Derrida’s understanding of the Archive and posits the idea of a constant threat looming over the archives and states :

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<sup>4</sup> Will be cited as SG hereafter.

“The archive, as traditionally conceived, is a location of knowledge, a place where history itself is housed, where the past is accommodated. The archive is intimately conjoined with cultural memory, with its preservation, perhaps even with its supplementation. Thus, the archive.... is oriented to, just as it is defined by, a peculiar structure of temporality. We perhaps conceive of the archive as a response, material or affective, to the past, as working toward a preservation of what has been, but Derrida wishes to emphasize the degree to which the archive works authoritatively to mark out the space of beginnings and futurity.... The archive, for Derrida, marks a space of anxiety, precisely, an anxiety about the possibility of loss: the archive exists only as an anticipation (and we note the futurity of this concept) of the loss of history; as such, it works proleptically to preserve what will inevitably be lost. The temporal valence of the archive thus is precisely futural: “the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory”” (Boutler 3-4)

Challenging the supposition that memory and archiving are backward looking and an end in itself because the backward gaze is about and for the present and future, thus archiving valuable memory of fear and loss haunting the lives of the East Pakistani refugees which needs to be told and remembered. Despite escaping the large scale massacre Arjun and his family have to negotiate loss and dislocation. The popular rhetoric of homecoming (Van Schendel) is undercut by the apathy of the state and dismal condition in the Sealdah station--where women were exploited, child labour ensued and hunger was a constant factor in their daily lives. The betrayal in the land of arrival as Arjun explicates “You cannot compare their lot with ours. They have acquired rights. It is hard enough to forget the sorrow of forcible eviction and not being

able to return. Over and above, there is another sorrow, that of having been treated like beggars and destitutes here. No one showed us any kinship any closeness.” (SG 89-90)

Similarly in *The Hungry Tide* Kanai the translator prides himself on his sharp memory “Of all his faculties, Kanai most prided himself on his memory. When people praised him for his linguistic abilities, his response was usually to say that a good ear and a good memory were all it took to learn a language, and he was fortunate to possess both. It gave him a pleasurable feeling of satisfaction now to think that he could still recall the precise tone and timbre of Nirmal’s voice despite the decades that had passed since he had last heard it. ”(AG 17) This is important as Nirmal bequeaths the diary to Kanai to bring to light the incidents of Morichjhanpi to the world; the subsequent loss of the diary renders Kanai and his memory as the only tool to recover and publish/present it to the public at large. Nirmal is often placed under some kind of threat even as he is witnessing, textualising and archiving the incidents to preserve a subaltern history, a consciousness. Nirmal’s motivation in writing his journal is clear: “*No one knows better than I how skilful the tide country is in silting over its past... perhaps I can make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world*” (AG 69) Kanai has to now unearth the silted history that is perhaps revised or repressed. This witnessing as Nirmal posits is to look into the past in order to shape the present and future, to circumvent the politics of amnesia, to archive and store individual and collective memory in order to democratize the politics behind the writing of history. If not justice a chance to commemorate the event and let the survivors mourn because the dead bodies of the Morichjhanpi incident were dumped in the river and the number of deaths never enumerated for which acts as a hindrance for imagining the massacre in collective memory. As Mallick and Jalais reiterates the actual number isn’t relevant

but to the collective memory of survivors of the incident it forms a pricking point that they are irrelevant.

Nirmal's citation of Rilke "*This is the time for what can be said. Here is its country. Speak and testify...*" (AG 275) is crucial because witnessing has the important function of testifying. James Hatley on his reading of Primo Levi's work calls in *Suffering Witness-The Quandary of Responsibility After the Irreparable* that the ethical relationship is a priori and not just a "epistemological determination" but a response to the other--an ethical involvement--hence to testify and testify to something irreparable. To testify in order to reveal the plight of the subalterns of Sunderbans in West Bengal, where socio-political turmoil of the Nimnobarlo have been trampled and defeated by the storm of history. The metaphor of the storm is crucial where many scholars have seen it as a leveler of social hegemony and a natural phenomenon. It is the storm that kills Fokir the lone survivor of the Morichjhanpi incident. Fokir's sacrifice for the American Indian Piya is to be seen in a political light where the Nimnobarner has to sacrifice himself for the Bhadromahila from the "tiger food" to "guide" to a "human shield" the status of the island dwellers is always contextualized in accordance to the need and usefulness of the upper class. To the state engineered storm of violence created in the name of saving environment, to the actual storm that kills Fokir, the nature of the storm seem familiar to Benjamin's conception of history and the angel of history:

"A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon



wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet...a storm is blowing from Paradise.....This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”(Benjamin 266)

Such progress has to be critically revalued, especially when the progress is predicated on the silencing and genocide of the subaltern. Fokir’s silence becomes representative of the silence of the subaltern.

Nirmal’s journal recounting the Morichjhanpi episode is now being translated by Kanai for us--the readers--through many filters and subjectivities as we probe into the novel. We are delving into the suffering and resistance of the refugees from East Bengal who fled East Pakistan/Bangladesh and then forcibly resettled into various far flung places, mainly Dandakaranya which is referred in *The Hungry Tide*. The rise of the Left in West Bengal can be inadvertently linked to the considerable vote banks of the refugees and their initial championing of their rights and rehabilitation. The novel however reveals how the Left Government had betrayed the refugees from East Bengal by not only refusing to rehabilitate them in West Bengal as promised in their election manifesto but also how they were brutally evicted on charges of violating the Forest Act, when they returned to settle on the land promised to them.

Many remarks by scholars like Annu Jalais, Ross Mallick and Joya Chatterji explains that the reasons for apathy and violence had the roots in the intrinsic dichotomy between the upper caste Bhadrak and the lower caste Nimnobar. When India was partitioned in 1947 the migration had particular patterns and phases: the first wave of migration consisted of higher-class and middle class Hindus who had ample connection and means in West Bengal to assimilate into the society. Whereas in the later phase the low-caste Hindus were helpless and

had squatted in private and government land leading to enormous squatter settlements which fictional Deshpran colony is emblematic of in *Arjun*. The novel deals with the hardship and process of settling in of the refugees in the makeshift ghettos constantly threatened by the police, the landowners the Duttas/capitalist Kewal Singh. The rehabilitation of the East Bengal refugees is the crux of the problem in both the texts where the lackadaisical approach left many in a prolonged limbo. Discussing the rehabilitation of Bengali refugees, Joya Chatterji in her book *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India 1947-67* brings out how a specific pattern had emerged in refugee rehabilitation, which was that they were primarily self rehabilitation and “Refugees did best in places where they had settled of their own accord; they did best of all in precisely those tracts from which the government wanted to eject them, whether by force or by blandishment” (Chatterji 158) land that either belonged to the elite class that the state didn’t want to antagonize or government itself. The prison camp like situation and outlandish rehabilitation schemes like the Dandakaranya project which was a capitalist experiment to enmesh what the government saw as available labour force in clearing and making viable an inhospitable tribal terrain than a feasible rehabilitation scheme. The failure of the project and other such schemes led to the formation/emergence of stereotypes about the so called parochial and lazy nature of the East Bengali refugee pitting them against positive stereotypes of the hardworking assimilated Punjabi refugees. This seems to posit Punjabi refugees as a model of success and to wash hands by the central government in their responsibility, implying that the East Bengali refugee’s predicament as one of their own doing. This gross de-contextualization of the different partition experience and the different rehabilitation schemes reflects the bias based also on the proximity to the capital evidenced by the lethargic reaction in the policy making and implementing. This is pivotal to the numerous betrayals and the concomitant violence at Morichjhanpi. As Chatterji has

pointed out the Bhadrakok's dream in partitioning Bengal was to have a Hindu majority ruled West Bengal and also to form a power block against the growing Namasudra movement and the Muslim coalition. There seems to be a systemic pushing of this people after the partition to the periphery and finally a systemic attack that annihilates their political aspirations.

Whether the past is assumed to be constantly reconstructed by the very act of reading the diary by Kanai and whether memory is thought to be employed to fix past events in a single, powerful narrative that Nirmal attempts. Ghosh doesn't provide us with Horen and Fokir's testimony the subaltern are seen as too busy with surviving that their memories aren't of equal import. Kusum's voice is used by Ghosh to vocalize the solidarity of the lower caste islanders and provides Nirmal with the "muse"--a personal attachment--in textualising the embargo and the massacre of the islanders. Under tense conditions Nirmal writes his testimony "*The truth was that my reason for staying was very simple...I will hand it to Horen in the hope it finds its way to you, Kanai. I feel certain you will have a greater claim to the world's ear than I ever had. Maybe you will know what to do with it. I have always trusted the young. Your generation will, I know, be richer in ideals, less cynical, less selfish than mine.*"(AG 278) The focus here is therefore on the future which is essential for the following generation. Kanai however loses the diary in the river which can be symbolically interpreted, as Boutler explicates that the anxiety of the archive is loss and that is exactly why it escapes tangible reality and latches only onto subjects--Kanai in this instance. Where subjects like Kanai, Arjun, Fokir and Nirmal are archives and as history flits by the subject cannot carry the past memory to the present unchanged, as the present is constantly impinging and recreating the past memories. Though Kusum and Nirmal lose their lives in the fight this revelation of the incident pushes an ethical impetus to the readers.

Nirmal's utopian vision of seeing in Morichjhanpi the possibility of a "Dalit nation" is however too idealistic and his witnessing must be looked critically. Nirmal seem to have an urge to make right the wasted years of his life. The witnessing is at the right time for the vindication of his wasted years. Begging the question whether it is important to interrogate the intention behind the witnesses' testimony? The question "Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong?" (AG 254) results in an existential universalizing which trivializes the refugee predicament, thereby their experience of trauma: which is hegemonic and manmade rather than a cerebral existential angst that Nirmal projects. Finally the question we must consider is how to read these fictions and how do we read such testimony. As it is essentially also historical fiction (*The Hungry Tide* and *Arjun*) works that act in self-conscious, mediated ways to produce the affect of truth telling when it is "imagined and representations". I contend that the mediation of the text is a key factor in determining what we as readers can reasonably expect from such "truth telling" narrative and it puts us reader on a critical gaze of reading such supposed ethical representations. Whatever the ethics behind such testimony and the politics behind it be *Arjun* and *The Hungry Tide* does gives us what Benjamin call "disruption" in historicism and engages us to capture a flitting reality--a lost memory-- that has be archived in literature.

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