

The Back Mutation in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide

Fırat YILDIZ*

ABSTRACT

This study aims to focus on the back mutation process of the protagonist, Piya Roy. Piya has migrated to United States with her family during the post colonization process. There are many motives that lie behind the migration to another country. Colonization process also has a role in the practice of migration. As a postcolonial writer Ghosh, represents a story that takes place after the colonization process. As a result of migration the cultural conflicts causes some problems in Piya's approach to her original culture and language. At the beginning of the novel she appears as a young American who is on a work trip. She works as a cetologist in other words she is a researcher of marine animals. She is back to her country of origin, Bengal, to work on a special species of dolphins. In a Bengali setting, excluding her skin color, she appears as a complete American. She does not look Indian. Her foreignness is stamped in her posture, the way she stands, she moves and her appearance seems out of place. She seems lost in the setting until she meets the deuteragonist, Kanai Dutt. As the two characters start a dialogue it becomes clear that Piya is ignorant of her mother tongue. She is given a Bengali name but she does not know the language. She does not show any interest in intimacy to Bengali. It indicates that she has forged some barriers between her identity and the mother tongue. Piya has internalized the concept of being an American citizen. She is reluctant to be identified with any Bengali element. She feels as a foreigner in Bengal and somehow she is contended with this feeling. Piya's adventure in Bengal and her friendship with Fokir causes profound changes in her character. The Piya at the beginning and the Piya at the end of the story are totally different from each other. At first a character that ignores her mother tongue, culture and tradition is on the scene. But by the end of *The Hungry Tide*, Piya appears with a serene soul. She has made peace with her cultural values. She is willing to embrace her mother tongue and culture. This study names Piya's metamorphosis as 'back mutation'. Though there is not any expression of Ghosh which indicates this intention evidently. But the general frame of the story represents the possibility of such a subconscious intention. A person can be assimilated in a new culture. But in respect to the case of Piya, it can be suggested that Ghosh has an inner reaction to the concept of turning back to original values and culture. The peaceful end of the story, Piya's decent state of mind and her determination to start a new life in her culture can support this claim. As her back mutation completes, she embraces her cultural values and as a result Ghosh graces her with a decent place. As a conclusion it can be claimed that one of the most important messages that Ghosh gives in *The Hungry Tide* is conservation of traditional and cultural values.

Keywords: Migration, Culture, Mother tongue, Back mutation.

The type of research: Research

Amitav Ghosh'un The Hungry Tide Çalışmasında Öze Dönüş

ÖZET

Bu çalışma ailesiyle birlikte Amerika'ya göç etmiş Piya Roy karakterinin öze dönüş sürecini ele almaktadır. Bir başka ülkeye göç etmenin arkasında yatan çeşitli nedenler vardır. Sömürgecilik akımı da bu nedenler arasında yer almaktadır. Sömürgecilik sonrası edebi akım yazarlarından biri olan Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* adlı çalışmasında sömürü sonrası süreçteki bir olayı ele alır. Göçmenlik sonrası kültürel çatışma sonucu Piya'nın kendi öz değerlerine ve anadiline yabancılaştığı görülür. Bir sitolog olarak çalışan Piya, özel bir cins olan nehir yunus balıklarını incelemek üzere Bengal Körfezine gelir. Bulduğu ortamda deri rengi dışında, tam bir Amerikalı olarak göze çarpar. Duruşu, hareketi ve giyimiyle Bengal kültürüyle ilgisiz görünmektedir. Kendi kültürüne yabancı olan Piya, anadili olan Bengal dilini de bilmemektedir. Bengal dilini bilmemekle birlikte bu dile ve bu kültürün tüm öğelerine yabancılık hisseder. Bu durumdan rahatsız değildir. Aksine Bengal ile ilgili öğelerle özdeşleşmekten de hoşlanmaz. Bengal'de bir yabancı gibidir ve bu durumdan dolayı mutludur. Piya'nın *The Hungry Tide* boyunca Bengal'de yaşadığı maceralar ve Fokir adlı bir köylü balıkçıyla arkadaşlığı, kendi karakterinde önemli değişikliklerin olmasına neden olur. Romanın başındaki Piya ile romanın sonundaki Piya birbirinden çok farklıdır. Kendi anadilini, kültürünü ve geleneğini yadsıyan bir karakter, kendi öz değerleriyle barışan ve kucaklayan bir karaktere dönüşür. Bu çalışma bu değişimi 'öze dönüş' olarak adlandırır. Amitav Ghosh'un böyle bir amacı ifade eden herhangi açık bir ifadesinin bulunmamasına karşın, romandaki genel çerçeve ve yaklaşım bilinçaltında böyle bir kasıt taşıyor olabileceği izlenimi vermektedir. Bu yaklaşımıyla bir bireyin başka bir kültürde yaşama durumunda kalmasının, kendi kültürüne ve diline yaklaşımında bir engel oluşturmaması gerektiğini savunur. *The Hungry Tide*'ın sonunda Piya'nın ulaştığı dinginlik, yaşamına yeni bir sayfa açma kararlılığı kendisindeki 'öze dönüşün' göstergeleridir. Romanın başında kültürüne yabancılaştığı için bazen zor ve bazen gülünç duruma düşen Piya, romanın sonunda Ghosh tarafından erdemli

* Yrd. Doç. Dr., Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi

bir karaktere büründürülerek ödüllendirilir. Sonuç olarak Ghosh'un verdiği mesaj her durum ve koşulda geleneksel ve kültürel değerlerin korunması gerektiği yönündedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göçmenlik, Kültür, Anadil, Öze dönüş.

Çalışmanın Türü: Araştırma

I- Introduction

The term of 'back mutation' is generally used in positive sciences to refer a reversal process whereby a gene that has undergone mutation returns to its previous state (Ahdictionary, 2011). In this study it will be used as a metaphor to figure out the characteristic mutation of protagonist of *The Hungry Tide*. The character in question, Piyali Roy, has migrated to United States with her family during the post colonization process. There are many motives that lie behind the migration to another country. The colonization process also has an important role in the practice of migration. As a postcolonial writer Ghosh, represents a story that takes place after the colonization process. As a result of migration the cultural conflicts causes some problems in Piya's approach to her original culture and language. Generally the identity confusion that results from the migration is a problem dealt by sociology. This study looks the problem from a more literary point rather than sociological approach. It aims to feature the character change of a person. As Ambethkar claims; "Amitav Ghosh seems, as always, to be more interested in people than in issues" (Ambethkar, 2012; 8). So it can be suggested that the central problem of *The Hungry Tide* is people and humanity. Piya's state of mind and identity confusion is at the center of the novel.

II- Discussion

The protagonist's country of origin is Bengal and her family has migrated to United States when she was one. At the beginning of the novel she appears as a young American who is on a work trip. The name of Piyali is shortened as Piya in the novel and she works as a cetologist in other words she is a researcher of marine animals. She is back to her country of origin to work on a special species of dolphins. In a Bengali setting, excluding her skin color, she appears as a complete American. She does not look Indian, except by descent. Her foreignness is stamped in her posture, the way she stands, she moves and her appearance seems out of place (Ghosh, 2005; 3). She seems lost in the setting until she meets the deuteragonist, Kanai Dutt. As the two characters start a dialogue it becomes clear that Piya is ignorant of her mother tongue. She is given a Bengali name but she does not know the language. A person with Bengali name and ignorant of her mother tongue astonishes Kanai. However; Piya is reluctant to explicate her matter with language to a person who she has just encountered. She does not show any interest in intimacy to Bengali. She seems quite unconcerned about the language. It indicates that she has forged some barriers between her identity and the mother tongue. In forthcoming parts of *The Hungry Tide*, the evidence supporting this claim comes along. Piya has internalized the concept of being an American citizen. She is reluctant to be identified with any Bengali element. She acts quite offended when the fisherman identifies his semblance with her. She feels as a foreigner in Bengal and somehow she is contended with this feeling. In some trips, foreignness has functioned as a means of protection, but in a place where she felt even more a stranger than elsewhere, her appearance had robbed her of that protection (Ghosh, 2005; 34). Because her countenance and skin color look familiar in the current setting. She is well aware of the fact that she has common characteristic with the vicinity that function as a disadvantage from her point of view. When an officer cheats Piya, she doubts whether the man would have adopted the same attitude if she had been European or Japanese.

Piya's state of mind at the first stages is negative about her homeland and her mother tongue. She feels as an American. She feels completely stranger to Bengal and the language. The mere reason for her existence in the area is her survey on the river creatures. She does not intent to make any contribution to the society. As soon as Ghosh gives a clear picture about Piya's inner world, he gives an example from a real westerner. It is a well known fact that the Eastern world has always been a place of attraction for colonialists. The colonial process is structured on the philosophy of exploitation. However the westerner character mentioned in *The Hungry Tide* is far from this philosophy. The person in question is Sir Daniel Hamilton who becomes one of the richest men in India and who does not leave the country after he gets rich. Kanai praises his approach; "Another man might have taken his money and left – or spent it all on

palaces and luxury. But not S'Daniel" (Ghosh, 2005; 50). Hamilton becomes wealthy in India. Normally he is expected to leave because the goal of his existence in India has been derived. However, contrary to expectations he decides to stay. He considers even the mud of Bengal worthier than gold. He struggles hard to constitute a settlement for natives. He gives land for free to natives, he aims to construct equality, and he wishes to provide a settlement for people from all races, classes and religions so they can live together without any conflicts because he is against caste system. He desires to build a country where people would not exploit each other (Ghosh, 2005; 52). The desire to build an equal and prosperous community turns into destitution. However; the realization of the utopist dream is out of question for this study. The crucial point is his intention and approach to do something for India. Ghosh mentions the story of Hamilton as a contradiction. The irony in this case is that Hamilton as a westerner opens his heart to Indians, but Piya takes an aversion to her homeland.

As mentioned before Piya's family migrates to United States when she is a little child. Migration does not function singly as an imposing power in the assimilation of a person. Many immigrants protect their culture, language and identity in a new society. They sustain their own values; moreover sometimes they transfer their culture to the country where they migrate. In this respect an individual either adopts or resists the new culture. In Piya's family, the father adopts the new culture, whereas the mother resists the new culture. There is a serious conflict between parents of Piya. Her father's approach to migration differs radically from her mother's understanding.

He believes that Indians – Bengalis in particular – don't travel well, because their eyes are always turned backwards, towards home. When we moved to America, he decided he wasn't going to make that mistake: he was going to try to fit in. (Ghosh, 2005; 250)

He is determined to adjust to the new society in America. That's why he is motivated to learn the language and culture of the new country. There is no need to look back because it may demotivate and as a result he may lose his courage to fit in the new culture. Her father's approach accelerates Piya's absorption to the new culture. Her father's role is vital in her identity formation. On the other hand her mother's approach is just the opposite. She never fits into the new culture.

She was like an orchid in a way, frail and beautiful and dependent on the love and labour of many, many people. She was the kind of person who should never have strayed too far from home. In Seattle she had no one – no friends, no servants, no job, no life...I guess my mother kind of fell through the cracks. At some point she just gave up. (Ghosh, 2005; 219)

Piya's parents disaccord about the purpose of their existence in America. Unlike her father, her mother has a serious adaptation problem. Furthermore she has no intention to adjust the new culture and community. She yearns for her life in India. She has lost her supporters, friends and the environment. These damaging matters cause a serious problem on her psychological life. She becomes weary of life and she loses her interest even in her family. Sociologically women often take a passive role in migration. They follow the man as a wife, daughter or sister. So Piya's mother's existence in United States is not result of her free will. İrtiş states that when the structures of two societies do not cohere, family becomes the place where the conflicts start (İrtiş, 2008; 249). This conflict becomes a serious problem in Piya's family.

The two characters symbolize two different statuses. The father is integrated to western life. The mother still lives according to requirements of the eastern life. The father is more positive to new life. The mother appears gloomier. The favorable approaches incorporate in father's status and the negative approaches are observed in mother's situation. The differences and the separate approaches to the new society cause unrecoverable problem among them. The parents fight in the mother tongue. The resentments are phrased in the mother tongue. The sounds of that language represent the music of unhappiness (Ghosh, 2005; 94). So Piya identifies the mother tongue with quarrels. She dreams of washing her head of those sounds. In this respect the language becomes an unlikeable object in her conscious. She loses her interest to her mother tongue and eventually it becomes a foreign language for her. The language is not the only reason for her estrangement to her culture. The Indian food and

garments also have some effects on formation of her personality. When a child she finds out that the odor of the Bengali food follows her everywhere like unseen pets. This discovery causes a shock for her.

Her response was to fight back, with a quietly ferocious tenacity, against them and against her mother, shutting them away with closed doors, sealing them into the kitchen. (Ghosh, 2005; 97)

Like the smell of food, the traditional garments also become a source of shame. Sari is a traditional clothing of Indian culture. Her mother's way of clothing has been a cause of embarrassment for her: "It was impossible to bring friends to a home where the mother was dressed in something that looked like an old bed sheet" (Ghosh, 2005; 71-72). As she becomes closer to western culture, she loses her interest in her own culture. After she loses her mother, her most important bond to eastern culture dissipates. She grows up as a westerner; moreover, she feels as a westerner. But it is hard to claim that she orients herself completely to the western society. She is called; "the little East Indian girl" (Ghosh, 2005; 74) by her friends. It can be suggested that she remains in limbo. She is neither a full westerner nor a full easterner. This state of mind plays an important role in selection of her job. Despite the difficulties and extreme conditions of the job, it brings a sense of independence for her. As a requirement of the job she does not have to be grounded at a certain place.

As with many of her peers, she had been drawn to field biology as much for the life it offered as for its intellectual content – because it allowed her to be on her own, to have no fixed address, to be far from the familiar, while still being a part of a loyal but loose-knit community. (Ghosh, 2005; 126)

The job provides a zone of liberty for Piya. It becomes a shelter to drive back the identity struggle. All these circumstances indicate that Piya's identity problem has reached to a peak. As mentioned before, Piya cannot get rid of her eastern side totally, however; she identifies herself as an American. When the two parts are compared she prefers to be westerner because she has negative images of the east.

Piya's preconceived opinions about East do not change until she meets Fokir. It is ironic that a poor, simpleminded and unlettered fisherman like Fokir plays an important role in character mutation of Piya. When Piya sinks in the river, Fokir saves her and this incident causes an uncanny connection between them. Fokir's wide knowledge about the river and his quick wit are the other elements that attract Piya's attention. Fokir is the first person in Bengal who earns Piya's trust and she feels safe in his presence. "What greater happiness could there be than this: to be on water with someone you trusted, at this magical hour, listening to the serene sound of these animals?" (Ghosh, 2005; 158). The person who she trusts is Fokir and it is striking that Piya trusts a fisherman who she cannot even communicate with. It can be suggested that this happens because she needs someone to trust. Being on the water provides independence and the existence of someone trustworthy makes her to feel secure.

As Piya becomes more intimate with Fokir, her approach to her original values begins to change. One of the elements that she ignored is her mother tongue. Despite her mother's efforts she disregarded the Bengali language. "My mother used to say that a day would come when I'd regret not knowing the language. And I guess she was right" (Ghosh, 2005; 249). This is the first explicit spark of the mutation in Piya's access to her culture. It can be suggested that Piya overestimates Fokir. She thinks of him as a mature sage not just a fisherman. This illusion is broken only after Fokir's participation in a group trying to liquidate a tiger that attacks to a village. Piya is a nature lover and according to her philosophy every element of the nature should be conserved. The tiger is also a part of the nature and it should be protected. Fokir's efforts to terminate such a creature cause a disillusion. Ghosh has reflected his environmentalism in Piya. Ghosh, himself, is a defender of environment. He participates in debates about the conservation of Sunderbans. He strongly objects the tourism that will ruin ecological balance in wetlands (Ghosh, 2004). There is a parallelism in environmentalism concept of Ghosh and Piya. But Piya's environmentalism is a little bit exaggerative. She is ready to sacrifice her life to rescue the dolphins (Ghosh, 2005; 302). In this respect Fokir's performance in the raid causes a total disappointment in Piya. Although she tries to stop the crowd killing the tiger, she is pulled up by her crew. As the tiger dies, Piya's

belief in Fokir dies as well. She thinks somehow he would be different but eventually she finds out that she has nothing in common with him.

After tiger's termination Piya's back mutation is halted for some time. During this time she focuses on her survey. This state of mind continues until the cyclone strikes their boat. During the cyclone Fokir saves Piya's life one more time at the risk of his life. He shields his body to protect Piya from a strike. Something very heavy and big, an uprooted stump hits him to death. Fokir sacrifices his life to save her. The death of Fokir effects Piya traumatically. Iris Murdoch suggests that 'death' has an important role in disposal of illusion. The experience of death has a potential to direct a person's energy from himself to others. As a result the person begins to see the reality. She states that death is a great teacher (Murdoch, 2001; 68). Death is defiance to conceit. Fokir's death accelerates the back mutation process in Piya. The guilt and the responsibility cause a psychological pressure on her. Contrary to expectations she decides to stay. This stay is not just for a temporary period. She prepares necessary arrangements to run an office and eventually settle down in Bay of Bengal. In this way she will be able to guard Fokir's family. Piya starts to consider and address the place as her 'home' (Ghosh, 2005; 399). For the first time she embraces a place as her home.

III- Conclusion

The Piya at the beginning and the Piya at the end of the story are totally different from each other. At first a character that ignores her mother tongue, culture and tradition is on the scene. But by the end of the *The Hungry Tide*, Piya appears with a serene soul. She has made peace with her cultural values. She is willing to embrace her mother tongue and culture. This study names Piya's metamorphosis as 'back mutation'. Though there is not any expression of Ghosh which indicates this intention evidently. But the general frame of the story represents the possibility of such a subconscious intention. In the novel Ghosh quotes a line from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*; "Life is lived in transformation," (Ghosh, 2005; 225). A person can be assimilated in a new culture. But in respect to the case of Piya, it can be suggested that Ghosh has an inner reaction to the concept of turning back to original values and culture. The peaceful end of the story, Piya's decent state of mind and her determination to start a new life in her culture can support this claim. Living in another country, in another culture should not be a barrier for a person's access to his own culture. The bond between the original values should not be broken. In *The Hungry Tide*, the back mutation of Piya to her own culture is aggrandized by Ghosh. This indicates that he believes in retrieval of the lost values. His sensitiveness about language should also be brought into forefront. Talib states that; "As a creative writer in an imperial language that is not his mother tongue there is a sense of guilt in the use of English" (Talib, 2012; 142). Ghosh does not feel comfortable to write in a language other than his mother tongue, Bengali. From this respect Piya's ignorance of Bengali, is not agreeable for Ghosh and it causes ludicrous situations sometimes. As Mehta states that; "Piya's simultaneous Indianness and foreignness make it harder for people to assess her" (Mehta, 2010; 56). She looks Indian but she does not know the language. It can be suggested that Ghosh degrades this character on purpose. But by the end of the *The Hungry Tide*, Piya declares her desire to learn her mother tongue. As her back mutation completes, she embraces her cultural values and as a result Ghosh graces her with a decent place. As a conclusion it can be claimed that one of the most important messages that Ghosh gives in *The Hungry Tide* is conservation of traditional and cultural values.

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