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Shame and the Failure of Recognition in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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What I shrink from, I believe, is the shame of dying as stupid and befuddled as I am.

J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians.*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty sees shame as a dialectic between the self and the other, as that of the master and slave. In so far as one has a body, Merleau-Ponty argues, s/he may be reduced to the status of an object beneath the gaze of another person. To regain the status as a subject, one has to seek recognition within the dialectic (Merleau-Ponty 193). This paper follows Merleau-Ponty's insight into the reduction of the self to an object in the gaze of the other and draws upon this insight to read interruptions to the colonial epistemological projects that attempt to construct the other as an object of knowledge. Neocolonialism's implication in a regime that repeatedly constitutes its other within its own terms of legibility stresses its similarities to its predecessor and a continuation of its practices of epistemological violence on its other.[1] The success of decolonisation has been hampered by an uninterrupted production of marginalisation of the other within postcolonial democracies with a mere shifting of sites of domination.

This paper intends to argue for a place that shame may occupy in disrupting the neocolonial project today. Nirmal's diary from Amitav's Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is an instructive text to study the invocations of neocolonial shame. Timothy Bewes has argued for the ontological inseparability of shame from the forms it occurs in, which is suggestive of how we may approach Nirmal's decision to write the diary as precisely such an instance of writing steeped in the experience of shame (Bewes 39). The possibility of a recovery from this ontological inseparability in shame within the framework of the Hegeli-

[1]This paper's critique of neocolonial shame draws on Gayatri Spivak's formulation of 'neocolonialism' as the transition from old territorial imperialism to the rise of monopoly industrial capitalism. See *Neocolonialism*, edited Robert Young, *Oxford Literary Review* 13 (1991).

an dialectic that Merleau-Ponty envisions by the recovery of subjectivity though is not as straightforward as he may imagine. A closer look at the universalising tendency at the heart of Hegel's framework faces additional barriers to recognition and elides the very possibility of the recognition of difference and the viability of the subject as imagined by Hegel and Merleau-Ponty in the neo-colonial setting. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's reworking of desire in Hegel and Foucault's reworking of the dialectic as a model for historical change, this paper attempts to dwell on the failure of shame as a model for change at the inter-subjective level and looks to explore where instead we may locate the potential for corrective actions in shame.

Before proceeding on to the appearance of shame, it is necessary to account for what inhibits its appearance in the first place. Hannah Arendt argues that the imperial project in Africa was a precursor, and later formed a constitutive element, of totalitarian regimes in Europe (Arendt 207). Arendt isolates the instrument of bureaucracy in the colonies of India and Egypt, and the role it played in engendering a sense of "aloofness" in the administrator. This attitude is characterised by her as a belief in the superiority of European existence on a higher plane of civilisation. Relying on accounts of Cecil Rhodes and Lord Cromer, Arendt brings out how the administrator remained insulated from responsibility to recognise the suffering of those he governed. A shared space (on which Hegel premises his dialectic) between the administrator and the subjects is denied, with the Empire serving as the mediating link, thwarting recognition. Due to such an attitude of aloofness, the representation of the other remained compromised within the ideology and interests of the Empire.

In Ghosh's text, Nirmal is introduced as a Marxist who quits life in Calcutta due to his involvement in politics and health concerns. Nirmal and his wife Nilima move to Lusibari in the Sunderbans, founded by an Englishman as a utopian project free from considerations of caste and religion. Nirmal's and Nilima's first reaction on their arrival at the settlement is one of shock. Nothing appears familiar to them:

> How was it possible that these islands were a mere sixty miles from home and yet so little was known about them? How was it possible that people spoke so much about the immemorial traditions of village India and yet no one knew about this other world, where it was impossible to tell who was who, and what the inhabitants' castes and religions and beliefs were? (79)

They are confronted here with an incommensurability in the understanding of the world they inhabit. The markers of civilisation, the comfort of familiar signs of currency and banks do not greet them. What greets them instead is a feeling of strangeness. Nirmal returns to Lenin's pamphlet, reading it over and over again to deal with the tide of unfamiliarity. It is a retreat to the familiar, a commitment to the sufficiency of the self, to overcome his crisis.

As Hegel journeys from self-certainty to the subject in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he shows the subject's inability to satisfactorily comprehend an object 'immediately' in a practical relation. This practical attempt takes the shape of desire, where:

> Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is for it the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a true certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself in an objective manner. (Hegel 109)

The aloof subject similarly would willingly assert its own individuality and negate the world around it, and in the process only finds himself further absorbed in the enterprise. An endless chain of objects is negated; as a consequence, the object and desire need to be produced again. Nirmal, early in the narrative, stands apart from Nilima in his perception of the alterity in Lusibari. While Nilima views the population of widowed women on the island as a collective whose problems could be solved by a collective action as a 'class,' he believes otherwise. "Workers were a class, he said, but to speak of workers' widows as a class was to introduce a false and unsustainable division" (80).

In the course of writing the diary, Nirmal enacts dogmatic refusals and continually misrepresents the settlements. In reading Nirmal's diary, Gayatri Spivak's suggestion of the figure of the "native informant" is instructive in reading a denial of agency and voice to the other by the self-absorbed colonist. She borrows the term 'foreclosure' from Laplanche and Pontalis, and their tracing of the development of the term from Freud to Lacan: "[t]he sense brought to the fore by Lacan,…[is to be found] for instance, in [what] Freud writes…[about] "a much more energetic and successful kind of defence. Here, the ego rejects [*verwilfi*] the incompatible idea *together with the affect* and behaves as if the idea has never occurred to the ego at all"" (Spivak 4). Where Spivak argues that the rejection of an affect can lead us from psychoanalytic speculation as a practical science towards ethical responsibility, this paper follows her by reading the ap-

pearance of shame as precisely such an affect that raises the possibility of a disruption. Spivak echoes Freud here who writes in *The Un-Ease of Civilisation* that this rejection of affect served and serves as the energetic and successful defence of the civilising mission. Shame's disruptive potential in the postcolonial setting is brought out with its interruption of the civilising mission and an interrupted interpellation of the colonial subject.

How then is the appearance of shame to be understood on the site of the encounter between the self and the other? Shame often appears on the scene even before we are aware of the 'norm' within a particular social value system. It emerges as an experience prior to one's learning of social standards but remains open to being moulded by social influences exerted upon it.[2] Discussions of shame in Derrida[3] and Merleau-Ponty fixate on the image of the naked body, underlying which is an experience of being uncovered and exposed. For Levinas too, this idea of unwelcome exposure remains central:

> Shame arises each time we are unable to make others forget our basic nudity. It is related to everything we would like to hide and that we cannot bury or cover up… What appears in shame is…precisely the fact of being riveted to oneself, the radically impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself, the unalterably binding presence of the I to itself. (Levinas 64)

For Bewes, shame is an experience of incommensurability between the "I" as experienced by the self and the self as it appears reflected in the eyes of the other (Bewes 24). Drawing on Sartre, Bewes views it as a paradoxical structure which, despite its intense focus on the self, is always experienced before the "Other." For Sartre, it is through the other as subject that my being gets its "object-state":

> I am conscious of myself as escaping myself not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other.
> Shame is a unitary apprehension with three dimensions: '*I* am ashamed of *myself* before the *Other.'* If any one of these di-

[2]Martha Nussbam has argued that shame appears on the scene even before we are aware of the norm within a particular social value system. Shame for her is fundamentally a concern between the tension between our aspirations and ideals, against our awareness of the helplessness of the other. See Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*. Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. 173–216.

[3]See Jacques Derrida "The Animal That Therefore I Am" trans. David Wills in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 2.

> mensions disappears, the shame disappears as well. (Sartre 290)

What is intended to be drawn out from these analyses is a sense of *exposure* in front of the other, the feeling of being *fixed* by the gaze of the other and shame as an affect that is predominantly centred on the body.[4] For the self to accord importance to the gaze of the other and to overcome the ego's denial of affect, discourse on the cultivation of self-consciousness is necessary to the appearance of shame.

Tracing the appearance of self-consciousness in Hegel, Alexandre Kojève introduces desire's engendering of an awareness of the "I" in his lectures as:

> Indeed when man experiences a desire, when he is hungry, for example, and wants to eat, and when he becomes aware of it, he necessarily becomes aware of himself. Desire is always revealed as my desire and to reveal desire, one must use the word "I". Man is *absorbed* by his contemplation of the thing in vain; as soon as desire for that thing is born, he will immediately be "brought back to *himself*." (Kojève 37, emphasis in original)

With this in mind, let us draw the emergence of a similar desire in Nirmal which cultivates self-consciousness. At a dinner organised by the people of Morichjhapi to garner public support, Nirmal is presented a glimpse of the life he would have led had he stayed in Calcutta. Observing them, he becomes aware of his unacknowledged regrets. But on interacting with the people he knew from the city, he turns increasingly critical of them. Speaking of a friend, Nirmal writes:

> He laughed in the cynical way of those who, having never believed in the ideals they once professed, imagine that no one else had done so either… but it struck me with great force that I had no business to be self-righteous about these matters. Nilima — she had achieved a great deal. What had I done? What was the work of my life? I tried to find an answer but none would come to mind. (192)

As he begins to reflexively look upon his self, Nirmal is soon presented with a desire that leads him the opposite way. Electing to sit with

[4]Additionally, Dan Zahavi has highlighted the impact the status and authority of the observer makes in the experience of shame in the individual. See Dan Zahavi, *Self & Other*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

the people of Morichjahpi instead, he yearns for an identification with them. Nirmal berates his former comrades for their hypocrisy, acknowledges his own lack of worth in the rumblings of his shame, and harbours a desire for the other. The desire to move away from an identification with the city, towards its other in the tide country, leads him to the consciousness of "I" who struggles and desires.

The first instance of a sought identification follows soon after on his visit to Gorjontola with Horen, Kusum, and her son, Fokir. Nirmal observes the little boy leap over the side of the boat as they approach land and push the boat to the shore. This display of adeptness does not surprise anyone but Nirmal. Kusum's utterance of pride at the sight as she proudly declares, "the river is in his veins" is received by Nirmal as the negation of his claim as a member of the tide country. As per Sartre's conception, it is through the other—the true inhabitants of the tide country—that Nirmal's being gets its "object-state" and his gaze reversed on himself. Nirmal writes, "What would I not have given to be able to say that this was true also of myself that the river flowed in my veins too, laden with all its guilty burdens? But I had never felt so much an outsider as I did at that moment" (245). A parallel is witnessed here with Levinas' description of the urge to flee oneself. Levinas views pleasure as a concentration in the instant, and the movement of pleasure as a loosening of malaise and a departure from Being (Levinas 62). Pleasure is characterised as an affectivity in his writings because it does not take on the forms of being, but rather attempts to break them up. But pleasure remains a deceptive escape. It is an escape that is bound to fail. Nirmal's involvement with the refugees can only loosen his malaise, not resolve it. The moment of Nirmal's escape in the form of his failed identification with the other is always followed by a presence of his self, where the feelings of exhilaration caused by his involvement evaporate and he is left with the nakedness of his being. All attempts at an escape lead to a heightening of self-consciousness and shame.

By Nirmal's own admission, it is only years after his arrival in the tide country that he wakes from his stupor on accidentally finding himself at Morichjhapi with Horen. Ghosh here reconstructs the Marichjhapi incident (referred as Morichjhapi in the text), which was the scene of violent state action in 1979, leading to the death of several hundreds of refugees including children. Most of the refugees belonged to the Namasudra caste and had settled at Morichjhapi, having migrated to India after the violence of the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. After the creation of Bangladesh, they had been initially relocated to refugee camps in the Dandakarnaya region of Jharkhand. Hailing from

the tide country, the refugees never got used to the forests of Dandakaranya and yearned to move back to their home. They were wooed by the State government as a potential electoral base with promises of resettlement to the tide country in Bengal, but the move never materialised. Many of the refugees attempted to move to the Sunderbans, but most were detained, and only a few reached Marichjhapi. In the face of the coercive state action to evict the refugees, Nirmal finds he can no longer accept the image of himself as a city man without finding himself complicit in the actions of the government. As Nirmal seeks to regain his status as a subject by gaining recognition from the other, the tide country continues to see him as an alien. Neither does he understand Kusum's and Horen's feelings for each other or their choices for survival. His constant formulation of literal movement, the migration as a rebellious "movement" of the people is steeped in a formulation alien to their experience of it.

As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the appearance of shame enacts a dialectic between the self and the other, as that of the master and slave. What it also entails in this reading of neocolonial shame is the reversal of the master-slave dialectic. While Nirmal occupied the privileged position of a city man moving to the Sunderbans and occupying the centre of its social structures earlier, he now seeks identification with and recognition from the other. The reversal of the dialectic is experienced most starkly between Nirmal and Kusum. Nirmal may have harboured the desire to write for a long time, but it is his meeting with Kusum at Morichjhapi that nudges him to write. Kusum becomes the occasion that enables his writing. His thoughts, actions, his very purpose of writing is to speak of Kusum's struggles. "I felt myself torn between my wife and the woman who had become the muse I'd never had," he writes (Ghosh 216). To achieve her wish of settlement at Morichjhapi becomes his labour.

In a departure from Hegel, for Lacan desire emerges as the constant process of questioning what the Other has or desires to have (Seminar XI, 235). For him, desire is the desire of the (M)other. Unlike Hegel's dialectic where both master and slave are initially on an equal footing, for Lacan there is no such equivalence. Desire in the dialectic splits into two aspects—the desire that is projected on to the other and the recognition of the desire of the other. Kusum functions as the (M)other to the extent of introducing Nirmal to alterity in the tide country and being the occasion of his awakening. The absence of the Sundarbans in his perception, its vagaries, the strangely secular rituals at Gorjontola would emerge as the unconscious of the land thus far repressed. Nirmal attributes his waking from the stupor entirely to Kusum—"My pen will have to race to keep up: she is the muse and I

am just a scribe" (162). And yet, Nirmal must always rely on Horen to discover Kusum, to understand her, and to experience the Sundarbans through her. It is really Horen who breaks Nirmal into the Symbolic—as the father, "the human being who stands for the law and order that the mother plants in the life of the child...widens the child's view of the world" (Winnicott 115). The most urgent task for Nirmal in the development of his desire, therefore, as Lacan suggests, is to answer the question—*what does the other want?* Finding a posture for himself with regard to this unfathomable 'x' eludes him. Nirmal is consigned to the situation where there will always be a difference, a gap, between what is desired and what he actually wants. As Lacan articulates it, "[Desire] …is produced in the margin which exists between the demand for the satisfaction of need and the demand for love" (Lacan Seminar V). To gain meaning from the (M)other eludes Nirmal, being forced to rely on scraps and nods from Horen as an interlocutor.

"To speak of the origin of Self-Consciousness is necessarily to speak of a fight to death for recognition" (Kojève 7). In his decision to stay with Kusum on the night preceding the attack on Marichjhapi is his attempt to stake his life, to force a recognition he craves from the M(other). Kusum is thrust into the role of the muse without her knowledge of it, and the possibility of an attraction from Nirmal towards her is repeatedly hinted at in the text. What had thus far been rejected by the ego and its affect denied, re-emerges with a renewed potency for Nirmal as shame after his failure and his survival through the massacre.

Lacan also finds fault with the lack of attention Hegel pays to the unconscious, finding the unconscious to be the force that prompts action. The unconscious is conceived as the existence of the negative—of gaps that impress upon the speech of the "I." It manifests itself in speech "…at that point, where, between and that which it affects, there is something always wrong" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 22). The unconscious functions as a series of metonymic significations. Unlike Hegel's realisable experience of self-consciousness as mediated reflexivity, Lacan envisions the unconscious as a chain of signifiers constantly interfering with the coherent self-presentation of the conscious subject (Butler 189). The conscious subject is unable to account for this gap with a simple recourse to itself. It is repeatedly confronted with this gap and the discontinuity signified by the unconscious as the absent signifier. Further, the presence of a frustrated desire as a gap wrecks discontinuities in the subject.

Foucault's reformulation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic does away with its dialectical framework while retaining its relation of inversion. Eschewing an attribution of change to a single instance, Foucault, unlike Hegel, argues for a heteronomous order against an orderly development. For Foucault, the heteronomous character of historical change cannot be tamed within a dialectical framework. Instead of looking for a synthesis, Foucault sets out to show how the two terms of the dialectic can morph into a multiplicity of possibilities. Using Nietzsche's analysis of the master-slave dialectic in *The Genealogy of Morals*, Foucault intends to show how 'forces' do not always result in an ultimate conciliation. For Foucault, the master and slave do not share a common ground and cannot be said to inhabit a system of shared norms. The gap that exists and persists is the generative moment of history itself. It is the scene of conflict on which power is produced and deployed, and values emerge:

> Emergence designates a place of confrontation, but not as a closed field offering the spectacle of a struggle among equals…it is a 'non-place,' a pure distance, which indicates that the adversaries do not belong to a common space. Consequently, no one is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it always occurs in the interstice. (*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* 150)

In Hegel, the master and slave share a common space which serves as the basis of their interaction and historical change. While Lacan points us towards an always unequal configuration of power between the two, Foucault also reverses Hegel's assumption of a shared space. Foucault instead asserts that historical experience would emerge at the point where a common ground can no longer be ascertained—Lacan's unbridgeable gap becomes the generative moment of history. Domination becomes the scene where history engenders itself at the moment when values are created and new configurations of force emerge.

The experience of shame and the self's inability to find recognition from the other brings forth Lacan's unbridgeable gap. The possibility of historical change at the inter-subjective level within the dialectic does not seem likely in the absence of a shared space. Nirmal cannot gain the recognition he craves, nor does he have the agency to achieve a potential synthesis of his crisis in the face of a gap, the discontinuity of shame. At this juncture, it is imperative to train a closer eye to substantiate the operation of power and the subjects it constitutes in the text. In Foucault, strategies for law's self-implementation become a moment for a new historical configuration of force. To that

extent, in works like *The History of Sexuality*, juridical laws are shown to be generative: they produce the subject and the phenomena they mean to control. Both Nirmal and Ghosh are surprisingly silent on the larger history of the Namasudras in Bengal. While the basis of this omission could be traced to what Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Chaudhury attribute to Dalit peasants acquiring the identification of being 'refugees' in post-partition Bengal, This omission can be seen as the very basis of misrecognition. The subject of the 'refugee' gains political legibility at the cost of obscuring Namasudra identity and their larger history of oppression.

Partha Chatterjee has formulated the existence of a "political society" in postcolonial democracies which bare marked differences from the civil society and its functions. Drawing on Kalyan Sanyal's observation that primitive accumulation of capital is accompanied by a parallel process of the reversal of its effects, Chatterjee defines the "political society" in terms of constant political negotiations with the State. The political society is not regarded by the State as a part of the more formally constituted civil society. Rather, these groups are seen as people with statistically described characteristics, and organised as targets for specific governmental policies. Since dealing with this group involves a "tacit acknowledgement of various illegal practices," they are often treated as exceptions.

The Namasudras in Bengal were wooed as a potential vote bank, constituted as refugees, and their existence in post-independence Bengal can be seen as such a "political society." As electoral considerations changed, the migrants were labelled illegal, their political negotiating capacity denied, and the tacit acknowledgement of their claim to the Sunderbans withdrawn. They instead began to be seen through the lens of civil society rationale, as subjects of law and violators by 'occupation' of Morichjhapi. Environment conservation laws were cited and public opinion generated with the refugees accused of being the most direct threat to wildlife and wildlands. An incident later in the book featuring Piya who is confronted with the spectacle of a trapped tiger being killed by people in a village enacts a confrontation between the increasingly ill-informed policies framed for environment conservation, confining conservation activities only to particular regions without regard for the survival needs of those who inhabit these spaces. The figure of the essentialized natural man living in conjunction with nature circumscribes and produces the subjects that the State aims to govern in these spaces. Piya and Nirmal are both guilty of subscribing to this essentialism in the text.

To then trace the possibility of historical change between the self and its other, the interstice between the two terms of the dialectic deserves greater attention alongside the terms themselves. Butler argues for an understanding of this interstice, this "non-place" of emergence as a "non-dialectical version of difference":

> It appears safe to conclude that for...Foucault, [Hegel's] *Aufhebung* is nothing other than a strategy of concealment, not the incorporation of difference into identity, but the denial of difference for the sake-of positing a fictive identity. (Butler 183)

For Nirmal to effectively recognise the other then would entail an interruption of his subscription to the functioning of the juridicial laws that constitute the ideal subject. The other as a product of projected interests would need to be identified as the radically other and not be woven into a narrative that denies difference. The gap encountered by the self cannot be bridged with a recourse to negation.

In so far as we follow shame as an inter-subjective dialectic between the self and other, its need to act upon the conditions that prompt its appearance, to change them or gain recognition from the other, the self is bound to encounter failure. The formulation of the dialectic that functions by granting recognition to the other and claims that the mere act of securing recognition is an answer to social inequities remains unsatisfactory as long as recognition is granted on the terms of the oppressor.[5] Shame does mark a potential interruption to oppressive practices but is inadequate as the mere interaction between subjects, without a greater radical understanding of the subject's role in service of larger structures of power and laws. To the extent that shame can constitute an ethical challenge, it must do so by being borne as a civilisational albatross across the neck.

[5]See Anita's Chari's critique of the Politics of Recognition in "Exceeding Recognition." *Sartre Studies International*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 110–124.

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