

Those Who Live at the Shoreline:

Life & Death of the Dalit Subalterns as seen in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2019) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (2002)

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ABSTRACT: For long, the tension between life and death has shaped our understanding of human existence. Nevertheless, thinkers like Agamben (1998) posit that power and politics also play an essential role in defining our lived realities. His concept of *homo sacer* illustrates how power dynamics systematically marginalize certain individuals, stripping them of their humanity and pushing them to the fringes of society. Even in modern democracies that profess to uphold rights, many remain invisible. This raises a critical question: Do these promises of autonomy truly extend to everyone? In this context, this paper explores the representation and lived experiences of Dalit subalterns in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2019) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (2002). By exploring these texts, the study aims to reveal how systemic marginalization impacts individual realities, ultimately challenging notions of autonomy in modern democracies and highlighting the broader implications of power and exclusion on human existence.

KEYWORDS: Bare Life; Dalits; Dehumanization; Sovereign Power; Subaltern; Thanatopolitics.



Introduction

In the preface of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2015), bell hooks employs the geographical metaphors of “center” and “margins” to illustrate the lived realities of exclusion rooted in social structures. She emphasizes that those inhabiting the margins are part of society and yet exist outside its core, a position that resonates deeply with the notion of liminality (hooks 2015). With this notion, the author explains that liminality is not just a physical state but a profound existential experience, characterized by a lack of defined status within entrenched power dynamics.

Audre Lorde’s poem “A Litany for Survival” (1978) reinforces this theme by urging those “who live at the shoreline” (1) to combat threats to their existence, highlighting the precariousness of life at the margins. The refrain “We were never meant to survive” (24, 44) succinctly encapsulates the struggles faced by those on the periphery. Lorde’s imagery of the shoreline poignantly reflects the tension between existence and annihilation, illustrating how individuals at the margins contend with systemic violence that perpetuates their liminal condition. The interplay of liminality and social position emerges as a central theme in this discourse, shedding light on how power dynamics shape lived experiences.

Lorde’s work compels readers to confront the stark disparities defining existence for those who reside on the margins of society. She, through her poem, illustrates how systemic injustices transform the body into a site of suffering, marked by fear and oppression. In “A Litany for Survival”, lines such as “learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk” (18) underscore the deeply rooted nature of this trauma, indicating that vulnerability, for the marginalized, is ingrained from birth.

This vulnerability leads to imposed silence and deprivation, creating a stasis that curtails expression and agency.¹

Through vivid imagery and metaphors, Lorde juxtaposes the living and the dead, highlighting how these associations shape the experiences of marginalized individuals. By contrasting the animate with the inanimate and movement with stasis, all imbued with fear and suppression, she reveals the complexities of identity formation within social hierarchies. This exploration of life lived in liminality challenges conventional notions of human life and death, prompting a closer examination of the disparities shaped by socioeconomic status. Ultimately, this portrayal emphasizes that societal forces not only influence individual identity but also intricately connect existence and death to power dynamics.

Navigating the Liminal Space: Dalit Subalterns in Literary Representation

This conception of liminality echoes in the context of postcolonial India, where the promise of fundamental rights and social upliftment sharply contrasts with the harsh realities faced by its subaltern citizens. In an interview with Steve Paulson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak astutely predicates that subaltern individuals are those who “may vote but have no access to the structures of citizenship” (2016), illustrating their inherent vulnerability within a state of inclusive exclusion. This liminal existence underscores how citizenship is intricately linked to life, death, and autonomy, prompting critical reflection on its impact on individual experiences and human development.

In his essay “The Subaltern as the Subaltern Citizen”, Gyanendra Pandey explores how the concept of citizenship can entrap individuals in a subaltern

¹ This is exemplified in the lines 20 and 21 of the poem.

status, as they are marked by their exclusion from meaningful participation. He defines subaltern citizenship as “the living of individual and collective lives, and the limitations on that living: about the potential of life... and the restriction of that potential” (2006, 4735), highlighting the complex interplay between existence and societal constraints. Pandey argues that subaltern citizens navigate a web of domination where basic survival is often elusive (4736), reflecting a reality in which their needs and rights are consistently marginalized. Being a subaltern citizen, rather than a full citizen, carries implications of exclusion and dehumanization. This analysis underscores the urgent need to rethink citizenship in light of these systemic inequities.

Literary works like Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2019) and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (2002) delve into the complexities of postcolonial life, shedding light on the experiences of subaltern individuals who navigate the margins of power and citizenship. These narratives uncover how subalterns, due to their caste and societal position, are relegated to a state of perpetual deprivation and marginalization, existing in a liminal space where the boundaries between life and death blur. In its ontological essence, in these novels, the subaltern experience can be seen as one that encapsulates a state of in-betweenness, where individuals are dehumanized and stripped of agency, living in a perpetual state of limbo where their very existence hangs in the balance.

Set in the Sundarbans, Ghosh’s novel, *The Hungry Tide*, first published in 2004, delves into the lives of those residing on the fringes of society, shedding light on a subaltern perspective that intertwines caste, class, refugee status, and land ownership. The novel configures the experiences in a space where “hunger and catastrophe (are) a way of life” (Ghosh 2019, 84). The physical landscape of the Sundarbans plays a pivotal role in highlighting the vulnerability of its inhabitants, who constantly grapple with threats to their survival in an inhospitable environment.

The narrative depicts a world vastly different from urban and rural spaces, where residents face perpetual challenges to their existence. The notion of liminality and precariousness of their existence permeates the narrative.

Ghosh employs a dual narrative technique that intertwines the past with the present. “The juxtaposition of these two narratives,” as Anuja Patel notes, “highlights the problems and issues of wilderness conservation and its related social costs in areas populated by the socially and economically unprivileged both in the past and the present” (2020, 365). This narrative framework marks continuity in how the island’s inhabitants, in both historical and contemporary contexts, are marginalized and overlooked by political structures.

Roy’s narrative of *The God of Small Things*, first published in 1997, is haunted by the refrain that “the tragedy began when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (Roy 2002, 33). The novel’s tragedy unfolds as power begins to dictate every facet of existence. In this narrative, the “Big Things” (the public forces) overshadow the “Small Things” in the village of Ayemenem. When the “Small Things” challenge the constraints imposed by the “Big Things”, the disruption of the established order results in brutal consequences. The forbidden affair between Ammu, a divorced upper-caste Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, an untouchable lower-caste man, tragically culminates in Velutha’s death at the hands of the police, an event that fades into oblivion. For Comrade Pillai, this becomes an “Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics” (2002, 14).

Despite the stark differences in the narratives of the Dalit subaltern characters, close examination reveals an intersection of deprivation, violence, and power present in both texts. This interplay resonates with Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1998), which explores the complex relationship between life, death, and politics, exposing the disparities in how individuals are included or excluded

from power structures.

***Homo Sacer* & the Subaltern**

Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories of bio-politics and bio-power, Giorgio Agamben illuminates the pervasive nature of power as a network that exerts control over individuals' lives and deaths to manage larger populations. He explores the blurred lines between natural life and political life, inclusion and exclusion, and the inside and outside to develop his concepts of *homo sacer*, bare life, and sovereign power.

For Agamben, *homo sacer* represents individuals who exist in a "state of indistinction", simultaneously included and excluded from the political sphere (1998, 6). The Italian philosopher draws out this concept from historical examples, such as the Roman law that excluded individuals from state citizenship through "juridico-political"² means (1998, 8). These individuals could be killed without consequence but could not be sacrificed in religious rituals. By designating the *homo sacer* as a sacred life, Agamben underscores how individuals can be stripped of their rights and protections, allowing the state to exercise control over their deaths and bodies.

In Agamben's view, the *homo sacer* represents a state of bare life, vulnerable to the whims of sovereign power and lacking the protections typical in both natural and political realms (1998, 9). This separation from natural life, due to the loss of

² As Agamben elaborates, "the concept of a life unworthy of being lived is clearly not an ethical one, which would involve the expectations and legitimate desires of the individual. It is rather a political concept in which what is at issue is the extreme metamorphosis of sacred life – which may be killed but not sacrificed – on which sovereign power is founded" (1998, 142). In *Homo Sacer* (1998), Agamben further illustrates this paradigm of a juridico-political concept through historical examples, notably the appropriation of euthanasia and eugenics by Nazi Germany as juridico-political mechanisms for the systematic eradication of individuals deemed unfit for societal inclusion.

political rights, contrasts sharply with sovereign power, which operates within and outside the law. Sovereign power encompasses not just the state but also various networks that exert control over the lives and deaths of individuals.

Agamben expands this discussion through the concept of thanatopolitics, emphasizing how sovereign power also governs death. This regulation reveals how power can eliminate populations deemed unworthy or threatening. By using the notion of the sovereign's "state of exception" as given by Carl Schmitt, Agamben illustrates how sovereign power can relegate certain individuals to a status of irrelevance, deeming their lives as disposable and unworthy. The sovereign power can allot a life through juridico-political concepts as a "life devoid of value" and a "life unworthy of being lived" (1998, 138). Here, Schmitt's example of concentration camps and states of emergency serve to delineate the boundaries of political relevance, perpetuating a system in which some lives hold greater value than others (Agamben 1998, 173).

For Agamben, sacred life is not a relic of the past; the state of exception persists in the present. Modern democracies, through the "valorization and politicization of life", evaluate some lives as "politically irrelevant" (1998, 139). In this context, Agamben argues, the life of an individual becomes a "sacred life...and can as such be eliminated without punishment" (ibid.). He asserts, "Every society sets this limit; every society – even the most modern – decides who its 'sacred man' will be" (ibid.). Overall, Agamben's exploration of *homo sacer* and sovereign power offers a provocative lens, shedding light on how exclusion and vulnerability intersect within the complex web of power and control.

The relationship between sacred life and the state of exception is powerfully reflected in the experiences of subalterns. The intertwining of juridico-political concepts, bare life, *homo sacer*, and sovereign power manifests in contemporary biopolitical governance, particularly in the subjugation and death of marginalized

communities such as the Dalit subalterns in India. Although the Indian Constitution guarantees equality and freedom for every citizen, the reality often diverges when the sovereign power exerts its dominance.

Engaging with Agamben's concepts of dehumanization and the state of exception alongside the literary portrayals of Dalit subalterns in *The Hungry Tide* (2019) and *The God of Small Things* (2002) suggests a critical examination of how marginalized identities are constructed and contested within power structures. This analysis reveals that the frameworks of human life and death are not merely abstract notions, but are deeply embedded in the socio-political context that determines who is deemed worthy of existence and who is rendered invisible.

Dehumanization of the Subaltern

To be rendered a *homo sacer* is to enter a state of dehumanization; arguably, one cannot devalue a human life without dehumanizing it. This is not an abstract idea, but rather relies on a socio-political context that allows society to normalize the subjugation, oppression, or even annihilation of certain individuals. Such acceptability arises when the inherent humanity of these subjects is systematically obscured. The subaltern, in this sense, often inhabits a state of liminality, existing within a paradox of inclusion and exclusion. They are framed through a lens of dehumanizing stereotypes that erase their complexity and agency. This positioning as inclusive-excluded figures in the socio-political landscape compels them to endure conditions that severely restrict their potential and humanity.

I

In *The Hungry Tide* (2019), Ghosh weaves a fictional narrative around the historical

forced eviction of approximately 10,000 refugees from the Sundarbans by the West Bengal government in 1979 — a tragedy marked by severe human rights violations, including murder and sexual violence (Halder 2019, 4). This real-life event serves as a critical backdrop, illuminating recurring themes of marginalization and power throughout the narrative.

Nandana Dutta highlights a recurring thematic axis in Ghosh's work, describing it as a "historiographic mode" that employs subaltern uprisings and characters to resurrect silenced voices and interrogate structures of domination (2016, 36). Through this lens, the subaltern citizens of the Sundarbans — both historically and in contemporary contexts — embody the consequences of postcolonial sovereign power, which relegates certain individuals to a state of bare human life, exposed to death and treated as less valuable than others.

The Morichjhāpi massacre and its resulting thanatopolitics amplify this plight, resonating with Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* within modern democracies. Ghosh emphasizes that the physical landscape of the Sundarbans is not just a backdrop; it is a living entity that profoundly shapes the lives of its inhabitants. The book's rich anthropological and ontological descriptions reveal the interconnectedness of the environment with the characters' psychological, social, and political realities.

As Ghosh writes, on the island, "life was lived on the margins of greater events", reminding us that "no place was so remote as to escape the flood of history" (2019, 82). This portrayal of a precarious land, fraught with lurking predators and scarce resources, prompts essential questions about existence in such a harsh environment, linking the struggles of its inhabitants to broader themes of survival, identity, and the relentless forces of history.

The history of the island's habitation can be traced back to Sir S'Daniel's utopian vision of society. As Nirmal reflects, "What he wanted to build was a new

society, a kind of country... Here people wouldn't exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land" (2019, 55). This dream attracted marginalized Dalits from across colonial India, seeking a place to reclaim their dignity and own land. However, Ghosh intricately weaves a narrative that reveals the futility of human settlement in the Sundarbans, where the land's inhospitable nature and lurking predators serve as insurmountable barriers to establishing a stable home.

The impossibility of truly inhabiting the Sundarbans is underscored by the constant threat of predators, inadequate infrastructure, and dehumanizing conditions. Ghosh's exploration portrays the inhabitants as living in a liminal space, caught in a perpetual struggle for survival. Fokir, one of the central characters, embodies this despair; his "skeletal frame" (2019, 49) serves as a testament to the harsh realities of life in the archipelago. Despite these hardships, characters like Kusum and the Morichjhāpi refugees regard the Sundarbans as home due to their shared experiences of deprivation and vulnerability.

The dangers of the terrain erase social prejudices, uniting the inhabitants in their struggle for survival. Yet, the absence of adequate support from political institutions forces them to fend for themselves. Government neglect of basic necessities like electricity and food underscores its failure to prioritize the residents' welfare. Although political structures exist on the island, they focus primarily on issues like tiger conservation, neglecting the urgent needs of the human population.

The plight of the Morichjhāpi refugees exemplifies the government's juridico-political tactics. As Ghosh describes, these partition refugees from the Bangladeshi side of the Sundarbans "had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited by both Muslim communalists and by Hindu upper castes" (2019, 124). Displaced into resettlement camps that resembled "concentration camps or prisons" (*ibid.*), they were treated as intruders, subjected to hostility and violence from locals. Ultimately, they clustered together to recreate a sense of

home, resisting their marginalization.

This quest for belonging and the agency with which the refugees fought for their lives, inevitably led to clashes with the political structure. Although they had voted the new government into power, this government stripped them of their rights, suspending laws that should have protected them and pushing them into a state of bare life. In this state of indistinction, the refugees were rendered invisible, seen as undeserving of basic human rights and treated as disposable entities, easily discarded in the name of conservation.

The dream of the Morichjhāpi refugees, much like S'Daniel's vision, was born from necessity and resilience. As Nirmal reflects, "This was not one man's vision. This dream had been dreamt by the very people who were trying to make it real... an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without" (2019, 181). The refugees sought to establish their own governance and community, caring for one another in the absence of state support. Yet, their aspirations were ultimately submerged by the political structure's greed and power.

This intersection of the refugees and the government in a state of indistinction reveals the complex power dynamics at play where one group becomes the *homo sacer*, stripped of rights and dignity, while the other asserts its dominance as sovereign power.³ Operating within a state of exception, the political apparatus in Ghosh's book transcends the confines of judicial norms by invoking a state of emergency, thereby suspending legal protections for the Morichjhāpi refugees. This suspension is justified through juridico-political concepts such as wilderness conservation and criminality, which legitimize the unlawful actions of

³ Drawing on Pindar's notion of sovereignty, Agamben notes that "the sovereign is the point of indistinction between law and violence, the threshold on which violence passes into law and law passes into violence" (1998, 32). This interplay creates a dialectical relationship characterized by the binary dynamics of oppressor and oppressed, domination and subordination that serve as central themes in subaltern studies.

the governing authorities.

Samira Esmeir, in his essay “On Making Dehumanization Possible”, elucidates the concept of “juridical humanity”, where the essence of being “subjects of human rights” (2006, 1544–6) is viewed as a mutable state, with individuals oscillating between being recognized as fully human and being relegated to a dehumanized existence. The author asserts, “We cannot perceive the dehumanization of an oppressed person unless we first accept the idea that humanity can be given or taken back” (2006, 1545). Agamben’s notion of *homo sacer* similarly illustrates how sovereign power governs life and death, positioning politics as the arbiter of who lives and who does not, rather than leaving these matters to natural or metaphysical forces.

The silencing of voices within legal and public spheres becomes an entrenched aspect of this political apparatus. In a state of exception, individuals find themselves stripped of agency, unable to articulate their defense. Power structures dominate public discourse, appropriating and distorting narratives that deny individuals their humanity. The Morichjhāpi refugees are depicted in the media as landgrabbers and poachers, when they are simply seeking a home: “They’re putting it out that we are destroying this place; they want people to think we’re gangsters who’ve occupied this place by force” (Ghosh 2019, 183). This misappropriation not only renders them voiceless in politics but also reinforces a societal structure where humanity is no longer synonymous with being valued and protected.

As sovereign powers facilitate the exclusion and dehumanization of the refugees, acts of violence occur with impunity. The political apparatus, alongside the Forest Department, wield disproportionate power over the life and death of the Morichjhāpi refugees. The imposition of Section 144 exemplifies the use of judicial-political power to exert absolute control over citizens’ lives. This law restricts

gatherings and heightens the refugees' vulnerability, barring aid and limiting access to food, leading to deaths from disease and starvation. The dehumanizing rhetoric surrounding this situation justifies their marginalization and, in extreme cases, extermination. The application of Section 144 and its aftermath during the Morichjhãpi massacre becomes emblematic of what Agamben describes as the oscillation of sovereign power, where "law passes into violence" (1998, 32). As Kusum, Fokir's mother and a resident of Morichjhãpi states,

The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust... Who are these people I wondered who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? [...] we live as human beings have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (Ghosh 2019, 284)

Ultimately, the subaltern narrative in *The Hungry Tide* (2019) unveils a world where power displaces humanity, intertwining life and politics with notions of valuation that can even result in homicide and death.

II

The physical landscape of Ayemenem in Roy's *The God of Small Things* (2002) is intricately intertwined with the deeply entrenched societal hierarchies and power dynamics that dictate the lives of its inhabitants. The spatial segregation between dominant and marginalized castes reflects ideological and social divisions, permeating the personal realms of those affected. In this novel, politics is defined in terms of power, and showcased as an influence that extends beyond the public sphere, infiltrating every aspect of personal life.

The untouchables in Ayemenem are relegated to the fringes of society, living out their existence on the margins of a space that continuously enforces

their exclusion. Rigid barriers between touchables and untouchables manifest in everyday interactions. As highlighted in the novel, untouchables are forbidden from and are ostracized in spaces inhabited by touchables. This insidious caste ideology erodes the humanity of lower-caste individuals. The book is explicit about the extent of this dehumanization:

They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchable touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha [...] in her girlhood, when Paravan were expected to crawl backwards with a broom sweeping away their footprints so that Bramhins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves [...] they had to put their hands over their mouth when they spoke to divert their polluted breath. (Roy 2002, 73–4)

For Velutha, a member of the marginalized Paravan community, his very existence is circumscribed by the oppressive caste system. It dictates the way he speaks, behaves, moves, and acts. Small acts such as the way Velutha speaks or carries himself are perceived as impudence by the touchable hegemony. Desirable qualities such as “lack of hesitation and an unwarranted assurance” in the case of a Paravan are “construed as insolence” (2002, 76). Despite Velutha’s aspirations and potential, his societal status bars him from accessing opportunities that would be readily available to the touchables. Mammachi herself, “(with her impenetrable Touchable logic)” (2002, 75), acknowledges that had Velutha not been a Paravan, he might have had the chance to become an engineer, underscoring the systemic barriers that impede his upward mobility.

Something that attracts Ammu to Velutha is their shared anger at the hypocritical world that marginalizes them. Velutha’s defiance of the hegemony and his hope to lead a better, protected life culminate in his participation in the Communist March and his membership in the Communist Party headed by Comrade Pillai. However, when Velutha reaches out for help to the political structure during a critical moment in the novel, he is met with abandonment. Abandonment for

Agamben constitutes the very moment where an individual life becomes a *homo sacer* (1998, 83). It is the unprotected status of Velutha that eventually allows the sovereign power to suspend laws and kill him.

The dehumanization of Velutha not only confines him to a life devoid of agency but also renders his death inconsequential, emblematic of the broader erasure of subaltern lives, experiences, and voices in society. The subaltern experience in the novels only goes on to affirm Agamben's notion of life when he borrows Verschuer's words to say that "politics gives form to the life of People" (Agamben 1998, 148). The very existence of the subaltern is subjected to erasure, dehumanization, and violence, culminating in a state of bare life where their value is negated. When the value of an individual's life is negated, they are eventually exposed to death and sovereign violence into a state where they neither hold any power of decision nor hold any power of agency, only the sovereign power does.

Thanatopolitics Surrounding the Subaltern

Political death involves the exclusion of individuals from the political community, effectively rendering them as bare life—or *homo sacer*. In this state, individuals are deprived of their political rights and protections, making them susceptible to violence and neglect without recourse to justice or legal recognition. A deep dive into subaltern perspectives demonstrates how power functions as an enabling body that makes it acceptable for one life to be valued and others negated. A look into the death of subalterns, then, reveals how power makes it acceptable for some to be killed and not others.

I

In *The Hungry Tide* (2019), a grim equation emerges around the thanatopolitics that surrounds the lives of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans; tigers in the Sundarbans can kill humans and authorities can continue leaving their deaths unrecorded and unnoticed. However, the inhabitants are prohibited from defending themselves against these deadly attacks, facing swift violent repercussions if they dare to harm a tiger. The disparity in value placed on human lives as opposed to that of the Bengal tigers is stark. The lives lost to tiger attacks are dismissed as inconsequential, a fact emphasized by the lack of protection and support from the social structures and political establishment. The inequality in the allocation of value and protection raises troubling questions about the legitimacy of the existing power structures. Why are human casualties easily marginalized, while exhaustive measures are taken to safeguard tiger populations? What legitimizes this asymmetry in protective measures, rendering human lives expendable in contrast to tigers? The selective imposition of laws within the Sundarbans, predominantly initiated in response to perceived threats to tigers rather than humans, further amplifies these ethical quandaries. Kanai's observation encapsulates this disconcerting reality: "It happens every week that people are killed by tigers...the killings are never reported... And the reason is that these people are too poor to matter... Isn't that a horror too – that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings" (Ghosh 2019, 325).

The novel perpetually accentuates this stark divergence in valuations assigned to the lives of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. Tigers, esteemed by the sovereign power owing to substantial funding allocated for their preservation, stand as emblematic of a system tailored to prioritize select interests. Within the Sundarbans's milieu, governance operates within a realm of exception and indistinction, where political interests often subsume ecological imperatives. Nirmal's elucidation exposes the hypocrisy underlying purported environmental

concerns, revealing a governance apparatus adept at oscillating between law and exceptionality to suit vested interests, “Morichjhãpi wasn’t really a forest, even before the settlers came. Parts of it were already being used by the government, for plantations and so on. What’s been said about the danger to the environment is just a sham, in order to evict these people, who have nowhere else to go” (2002, 230). While political actors may contribute to environmental degradation through exploitative practices, they simultaneously curtail the rights of the inhabitants to life and settlement in the name of environmental protection. Even in death, a politics of power value and disposability prevails, manifesting in a selective order where certain casualties are deemed inconsequential within the reigning legal order and certain lives are allowed to be killed because they are valueless while others lives are not.

The issue is not that tiger conservation is less important, but rather the dissonance between conservation rhetoric and the lived realities of the people. This reveals a hierarchical system that uses law to justify violence and oppression. Understanding the plight of the Morichjhãpi refugees and Sundarbans inhabitants requires examining these power dynamics, as their narratives expose a pattern of oppression perpetuated by political authorities. In this manner, the Morichjhãpi refugees become *homo sacer*, existing in a legal limbo, their deaths treated as neither criminal acts nor homicides. The Morichjhãpi massacre and its legacy in Indian history illustrate the complex interplay of life, death, power, and politics. Its erasure highlights the selective narratives that shape dominant historical discourses.

II

In *The God of Small Things* (2002), the death of Velutha serves as a stark illustration

of a death disguised as something other than homicide. Ammu's mother and aunt, perturbed by the implications of their tarnished reputation and honor in the wake of the village gossip surrounding Ammu's affair, falsely accuse Velutha of rape. They visit Inspector Thomas Mathew, who is not only a policeman but also a Congress politician who, contradictory from his role, personally and vehemently believes in the caste ideology. The intersection of personal belief with the legislative process, leads to the suspension of a just investigation and intervention. He sends rather "A posse of Touchable Policemen... Servants of the State... Deadlypurposed" (Roy 2002, 304), who ruthlessly beat the defenseless Velutha causing a death-in-custody.

But this murder only takes place after the Inspector has confirmed that Velutha is unprotected in the political sphere. After knowing that Velutha is a member of Ayemenem's communist group, he visits Comrade Pillai to ascertain the manner in which he can deal with Velutha. Crucially, Velutha's fate is sealed by the collusion of power structures, epitomized by Comrade Pillai's abandonment and Inspector Mathew's exercise of discretionary authority. A word from Pillai would have saved Velutha and a lawful investigation from the Inspector would not have caused his death. However, for both Pillai and Mathew, Velutha represents an expendable entity, devoid of inherent worth, with Pillai even contemplating the prospect of politically profiting from his death for "It was not entirely his fault that he lived in a society where a man's death could be more profitable than his life had ever been" (2002, 281).

Velutha's death is marked by the callous disregard for his life and rights. In his narrative, the haunting realities of caste oppression and systemic marginalization come to the forefront, echoing the profound injustices faced by those deemed inferior in society. The tragic unfolding of events within the History House encapsulates a narrative of fear and control, where discretionary authority

and violence is framed as a necessary act of safeguarding the community. The event in the novel is described as follows: “They were not arresting a man, they were exorcizing fear... After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak” (2002, 309). These lines clearly insinuate the thanatopolitics involving his death – Velutha’s murder is not only a symbolic exorcism of hegemonic anxieties but also a symbolic warning to the other caste-subaltern population, all intended to reaffirm the hegemony of the Touchable order.

Later, as Inspector Thomas Mathew states, “True, he was a Paravan. True, he misbehaved. Technically, as per the law, he was an innocent man” (2002, 314). After Velutha’s extrajudicial killing, the adults involved manipulate circumstances, implicating him in the accidental death of Sophie Mol. This distortion of truth underscores the systemic impunity enjoyed by those wielding power, further marginalizing the marginalized. Meanwhile, the twins, burdened with the weight of guilt, trauma, and memory, bear witness to the erasure of Velutha’s life and death from the collective consciousness: “In the years that followed, the Terror... would be buried in a shallow grave. Hidden under...the toy histories that rich tourists come to play with” (2002, 306). Roy’s poignant prose captures Velutha’s fate, consigned to the oblivion of history – symbolic of the triumph of sovereign power whose structural violence with impunity would go unmarked by the annals of time. Velutha’s unjust death serves as a severe reminder of the pervasive social structures that dictate the value of human life based on arbitrary distinctions of caste and privilege. The applicability and interplay of Agamben’s concepts of *homo sacer*, bare life, sovereign power, and thanatopolitics only expose the grim reality of our world where power permeates and dictates the very essence of one’s being, life and death.

Conclusion

In both *The Hungry Tide* (2019) and *The God of Small Things* (2002), the narratives powerfully illustrate the dynamics of thanatopolitics and the marginalization of subaltern lives within deeply entrenched social hierarchies. Characters such as Velutha and the Morichjhāpi refugees serve as poignant representations of those rendered as bare life. However, amid this systemic dehumanization, both novels also highlight the power of resistance that emerges from the struggles of these characters. Their acts of resistance not only challenge the *status quo* but also convey a crucial message that, even in the face of severe adversity, the subaltern possesses an agency that cannot be entirely extinguished. In these moments of resistance, characters contest their reduction to the position of homo sacer, asserting their right to be heard, recognized, and to exist beyond the silencing violence that seeks to circumscribe their identities. In this refusal, their resistance becomes a site of conflict, unveiling a dialectical tension where the external power that regulates life and death collides with the individual's struggle to reclaim agency. This tension, arguably, opens up a reconfiguration of what it means to be seen, valued, and to exist, raising the unsettling question of whether life and death are also constituted by an apparatus enmeshed in arbitrary power relations.

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