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AMITAV GHOSH AND HIS TREATMENT OF SUBALTERN SENSIBILITIES

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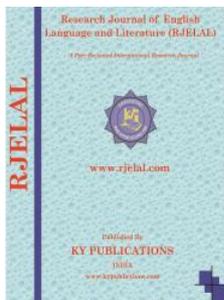
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ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses its attention upon the relation between subaltern and Amitav Ghosh's writing and for this purpose his novels *The Circle of Reason*, *In an Antique Land* and *The Slave of MS. H.6* are taken into consideration. Ever since the start of his literary career, the mixture of different culture and depiction of the traces of unforgotten history has always fascinated him. The amalgamation of cultures, traditions, and languages has remained the key features of Amitav Ghosh's writings. As far as his treatment of subaltern sensibilities is concerned, Ghosh has remained a beholder of cosmopolitan world view and has accomplished the task of illuminating the forgotten pages of history with a completely new viewpoint. All these notions has been given a voice in the course of this research paper.

Key Words: Subaltern, rootlessness, quest for identity, migrancy, diasporic nostalgia

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is hailed as one of the most notable novelist in the genre of recent Indo-Anglican fiction as well as a ground-breaking writer in Indian Diaspora for establishing many benchmarks. The name Amitav Ghosh is credited and appraised for many things such as for being an essayist, journalist, anthropologist, novelist and teacher of English Literature. It would not be wrong to state that Amitav Ghosh is a gem, gifted and blessed author of Indian writing in English and he is the touchstone of genius, versatility and eternal as well as incessant source of inspiration. He is a role model for amateur, ambitious and budding writers of Indian Writing in English language. He is a widely read and travelled man and the experiences he gained from his travels to Egypt, Iran, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, United States, and United Kingdom have made a permanent mark in his comprehensive and burgeoning writing career.

Because of Ghosh's travels around the world, the influence of socio-cultural heritage of India as well as of the world can be seen in the vulnerability and sensibility depicted in his novels.

Amitav Ghosh has received numerous awards, honors and due recognition for his exceptional and exemplary contribution in the field of fiction, non-fiction, travelogue, history, anthropology and journalism. He has authored seven volumes of fiction and five volumes of non-fiction. Most of the novels authored by him turned out to be best sellers and he has been crowned with a number of coveted awards.

The novels of Amitav Ghosh are postulated by personal, nonconformist and extraordinary contrived themes on the issues and aspects of subaltern, pre-colonialism, colonialism and post-colonialism, modernism and postmodernism. Both

his fiction and non-fiction are loaded with homogenous amalgamation and blend of multicolored cultures, traditions and languages and the major thematic preoccupations of his writings are based upon impressive themes of travel, opium war, migration, historical facts, communal riots, political turmoil, corruption, caste politics, love, loss, travelers, diasporic exiles, struggle and strife.

In the present context the new Indian English fiction, especially after the eighties, is free from the self-consciousness, shallow idealism, and sentimentalism that characterized the works of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, or Mulk Raj Anand. In this regard, Amitav Ghosh's fiction is exemplified with contemporary Indian ethos with all its pressing and realistic concerns which is evident with well thought analysis of various problems persisting in Indian society. The problem of rootlessness and identity, migrancy and the quest for root along with the diasporic nostalgia for a lost world have always fascinated Amitav Ghosh. One of the distinctive features of Indian postcolonial studies is the socio-political inequalities and marginalization which finds adequate literary attention in his work. In this paper, I would like to focus Ghosh's treatment and projections of the voices of the subaltern that adds to his works an additional vibrancy and intense human flavor. With the help of his major works, I would like to substantiate how Ghosh attempts to justify that the plight and oppression of the disempowered or the subalterns becomes a pressing issue in the globalized world and to the development of a modern welfare state. Ghosh has a cosmopolitan world view and he accomplishes his task of illuminating the hitherto unlit pages of history with his cultural, transnational and transcontinental networking.

To start with, I would first like to throw some light upon the word 'subaltern' actually stands for. In the current scenario, Subaltern has made its powerful mark in the realm of postcolonial studies along with socio-political discourse and covers multi-dimensional issues pertaining to social, cultural and economic contexts. It stands for the presentation of people who are oppressed and exploited on social, political and geographical grounds. As a term, it bloomed in later part of seventies. It was then used

as a mention to colonized people who were humiliated and browbeaten by their colonizers. With due course of time, the term grew in prominence as it suggested a whole new perspective about the colonial history which was represented through the viewpoint of colonized rather than their masters.

Ghosh, as a novelist, entered into the realm of fiction with *The Circle of Reason* published in 1987. In his debut novel, Ghosh has interwoven a well structured narrative with wide ranging thematic concerns. In this novel, Ghosh has constituted a complex pattern of stories which are quite notable for putting together the lives of people in places such as rural Bengal and remote Al Ghazira with a beautiful play of linguistic verse and technique. The novel, as a whole, brings to the limelight the problem of forced or conditional migration. The narrative exposes the plight of disposed people who embark on a journey towards Al Ghazira with a hope of finding a utopian community. These ill-fated people are represented by the protagonist Alu and by a group of woman sex workers who form their new community, based upon the elementary human concern, in the boat Mariamma. They all share the common concern: to achieve their due importance in the remote land of Al Ghazira which was not permitted to them back in their homeland.

In this novel the marginalized women characters who are led by Jindi are depicted as the victims of male dominance and prevailing social malpractices. The boat, for them, is like a blessing as it consoles them with a temporary interval from their painful past and uneven future. Ghosh has designed this narrative in such a manner that the main marginal characters are introduced to each other in this temporary shelter. In this group of marginalized people, there are some other characters such as Rakesh and Professor Samuel who come to the boat with different motives and different social backgrounds. In this regard, Youmna Siddki in her essay "Police and Postcolonial Rationality in *The Circle of Reason*" (Siddki 175-211) has attempted to highlight the various reasons which can be held responsible for the problems of marginalization especially in postcolonial rationality.

Ghosh's next novel *In the Antique Land*, published in 1992, in its sincere efforts directs its focus upon the matter of fact exploration and the presentation of ignored voices of downtrodden people of medieval times. It also tries to highlight the dark aspects of business trade between India and Egypt. This novel can be hailed as the best example of Ghosh's laborious research experience obtained in Egypt. As a matter of fact, Ghosh is quite interested in investigating the facts behind the process of human development and this he achieves by diving deep into the pages of history which are kept hidden by Western or colonial authorship. In one such research, Ghosh once revived an eight hundred years old manuscript written in the Hebrew language. The manuscript was containing the details of a trade-exchange between India and Middle East during the medieval ages. The document was also containing the information of a Jewish merchandiser named 'Abraham Benuzu' and his slave 'Bomma' from India. This slave was given an official name 'The Slave of MS.H.6.' As this information kept Ghosh captivated, he started getting more details about this source. Ghosh was actually successful in recovering many enlightening facts about this meager slave and his role in making his master prosperous. To his surprise, Ghosh also found that apart from this master-slave relation, there existed a harmonious relation between Benuzu and Bomma. All this proximity and the phenomenal slave trade given a way into *In an Antique Land*.

The novel, as a whole, constitutes the plot in a very thought-provoking manner and presents a perfect blend of travel writing and social science. The narrative moves in time, backwards and forward, and covers a time frame of 12th century Egypt. In his review on *In an Antique Land*, Robert Irwin has congratulated Ghosh for his unique technique of evaluating contemporary Egypt with its 12th century version. (Irwin 7) In addition, Ghosh has his own experience of field work in a remote hamlet of Lataifa, Egypt which becomes another line of theme for this novel. His experiences have helped him to enrich the narrative with the description of day-to-day life of village people. Ghosh has attempted to depict the real aspect of day-to-day life of its villagers through his interactions with

them. He has witnessed and was a part of their daily encounters with the difficulties of life.

The realm of Western history has remained silent to various episodes of their colonized past. Through this novel, Ghosh has made an attempt to construct these forgotten incidents again. For this he has made the old Cairo document his base work and it is through this document that he came to know about many thought-provoking and heart-rending facts of this trade root. By doing so, Ghosh has brought the many facts into light about the traditional and Eurocentric formation of colonial history that is orthodox and favors only one side.

Ghosh's next novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*, published in 1996, is hailed as a sci-fi construct and centers upon the theme of the discovery of malaria parasite by an Englishman 'Sir Ronald Ross'. Ghosh's main concern, in this novel, is to highlight the contributions of some of native Indians without which Sir Ross would not be able to make this discovery. In this way, Ghosh has glorified a hidden aspect of history which without subaltern participation would never be possible. This is a fact, like many other hidden ones, which is interpreted by the colonizers by neglecting the subaltern role.

As a whole, this novel is a beautiful construct presenting the real aspects of glorious research conducted by British neglecting the native's contributions in it. The plot of the novel travels in time from past to present and from present to past. In addition, Ghosh has also given way to several associated links of colonial history which are now forgotten. In the absence of these links, this discovery would have remained just a dream. This discovery of missing connections has helped him a lot in depicting the real plight of the subaltern people.

The novel opens in New York of near future and the opening section depicts the scene of Antar (who is a clerk) struggling for settling wills with his intelligent computer named Ava. Now this computer is depicted as having a mind of its own and assists Antar in his reporting to the International Water Council which is the main body. As being equipped with artificial intelligence, Ava is even capable to assess whether Antar is paying full attention to his

work or not, and in such situations also helps him in completing his assignments. One fine day, Ava found a strange document which she was not able to decipher. It was basically a burned ID card of someone named Murugan, whose missing report was filed in Calcutta back in 1995. Murugan was then recognized as a colleague of Sir Ronald Ross assisting him in his discovery of malaria's medicine. At this point, Ghosh has given a twist to the western version of history by emphasizing upon the fact that there were some Indian natives who have contributed at ground level for this glorious discovery. These native people were kept out of margin so that the western history could highlight the significance of Sir Ross's research. The natives were led by Mangala who is depicted as an illiterate woman but had full control over their working. She was, in fact, regarded as a priestess of a cult which was actively fighting against malaria. Other than Mangala, there was another important figure named Lakhan without whom Sir Ross would have ever been successful as all the drug experiments were conducted upon him. But as the fate would have wanted, he also went missing like other links of the story so that the western history can alter their contribution for this glorious discovery affecting many lives on the planet.

As a matter of fact, the colonial history of the west has always depicted their colonial counterparts as lands which are completely infused with lack of knowledge, superstitions, and rigid and baseless religious principals. At add fuel in this, they even consider it their responsibility ascribed to them by God to uplift the lives of the colonial natives by introducing reforms in the name of making them civilized. For this, they have their own self-framed standards according to which they regard their colonies as uncivilized and primitive. But, while doing this, they willingly ignore the existing roots and systems of knowledge form their version of history by disregarding the achievements made by these colonial natives. Thus through this novel, Ghosh has attempted to recreate history by insisting upon the actual facts which are hitherto kept hidden from the annals of western history. In his attempt, Ghosh has claimed our righteous place in the pages of western discourse of history by presenting the

factual contributions of us which is as glorious and superlative as the western effort. In the light of the above mentioned observation, it would not be wrong to say that Sir Ross's discovery of malaria virus will not have been possible if we remove the Indian contribution for making it a success. The Calcutta Chromosome thus summon the idea that we must try to find the facts behind the presented/given version of history before embracing it as a complete truth as the history is always written by those who remained victorious.

As a concern towards the subaltern history, most of Ghosh's novels revolve around the themes of globalization insisting upon the good as well as bad impacts of trade policies and resulting large scale migrations. In the realm of the western discourse, this is considered as an achievement as they were just civilizing Asians and Africans but in their sincere efforts they have actually forgotten the annihilation they have caused to these countries. It was, and still is, the unbroken spirit of the people who have received every blow with smile and stood on their feet again. Most of Ghosh's novels especially 'The Shadow Lines' along with 'Sea of Poppies' represent this unconquered spirit in a microcosm and support the fact that no borders can separate people as they are connected through memories and emotional links that even exist after man-made divisions of land. Regarding the presentation of subaltern in his novels, Bibhash Choudhary has suggested:

"In Ghosh's novel, an inclination on the part of the characters can always be felt to in their attempts to carry their cultural history, which they consider very important to their personalities. Even in moments of extreme crises, these aspects depicted through wide array of characters certainly leave their mark in the course of entire narrative." (29)

The above mentioned observation made by Bibhash in itself gives an idea regarding the projection of subaltern sensibility in Ghosh's novels as most of his characters are framed form Indian context instilled and infused with Indian responsiveness. As being a social anthropologist,

Ghosh has deeply studied the facts before penning them in his novels. His facts are actually based and reinforced by his intensive research which he made at grass-root level. For this, he dived deep into the realm of history and came out with many illuminating facts relating to the exploited living conditions of colonial natives.

In nut shell, I would like to conclude by insisting upon the importance of cultural paradigm within the colonial communities which is displayed and projected by Amitav Ghosh in almost all of his novels. In his sincere attempts, Ghosh has actually attempted to give voice to the destruction caused to the colonial territory, culture, ecology, language, and consciousness in the hands of colonizers who have always altered and modified history for their own personal benefits as they were always interested in showcasing their Eurocentric mentality. In his novels, Amitav has always depicted true facts of history by mingling them with his art of narration. In his hands, history finds a new life through his expert narrative skills and is capable to appeal our consciousness. By doing this, he has at least given expression to those hidden facts of history which were hitherto kept hidden from the pages of history.

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