



SUBALTERN VOICES: A MAJOR ISSUE IN THE WORKS OF AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

Subaltern history acquired fame not as a mode of writing history but as another form of postcolonial criticism. During the last fifty years various works of subaltern histories and cultures have been published providing several fragments of methods, theory and concept of subaltern. Having gained wider connotation with time, it is now used for the oppressed, the exploited and the discriminated who are subject to dominance on the basis of race, gender, caste, color, rank, region, or in any other form: "The term subaltern is used to denote the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or in any other way" (Sen 203). Gramsci adopted the term subaltern to refer to those groups in society including those of peasants and workers who are governed by the hegemony of the ruling classes. He calls the subaltern class the emergent class consisting of the much greater mass of people who are deprived of "hegemonic" power. Amitav Ghosh is one of the most distinguished Indian novelists of the Rushdiean tradition who have contributed significantly to Indian English fiction. As a subaltern novelist he endeavors to reveal historical, political and cultural realities as well as the oppression, discrimination and exploitation of the common people that have been suppressed or hidden by Western history. Ghosh explores the paradigm of human relationship constructed across the transient divisions of territory, religion and social class, and around this relationship, which is marked by antagonism as well as harmony; he weaves an interesting tale of history, colonialism, folklore, ecology, migration, love and grief. As a subaltern historiographer Ghosh focuses on the cultures, religions, customs, social life-styles, experiences and thoughts of the ordinary people and for the construction of their oral histories, memory serves as a major source. These voices evoke conflicts and contradictions in the subalterns' historical relationship with the elite characterized by the power interplay of dominance and subordination.

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INTRODUCTION

Exploration of subaltern voices in history, anthropology and literature found an effective platform and marked a historic moment when the series entitled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* was published by Oxford University Press, Delhi, in 1982. The subaltern school embraces the Gramscian type of Marxism, and over the years it has been influenced by various theories and concepts like feminism, anthropology, post-Marxism, postmodernism, post structuralism and especially post colonialism, with an emphasis on decentralization of Europeanized histories, mainly of the countries with a colonial past. The critics argue that subaltern history acquired fame not as a mode of writing history but as another form of postcolonial criticism: "There is, indeed, a rather widespread impression, at least outside India, that subaltern studies is a mode of doing postcolonial

practice, and that expertise in postcolonial 'classics' with a modicum of knowledge of some European masters, fully equips the reader to understand subaltern history" (Lal 187) During the last fifty years various works of subaltern histories and cultures have been published providing several fragments of methods, theory and concept of subaltern. The British word "subaltern" means someone of inferior military rank; it combines the Latin terms for "under" (sub) and "other" (alter). Having gained wider connotation with time, it is now used for the oppressed, the exploited and the discriminated who are subject to dominance on the basis of race, gender, caste, color, rank, region, or in any other form: "The term subaltern is used to denote the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or in any other way" (Sen 203). Sumit Sarkar employs the term for tribal and low-caste agriculture laborers and share-croppers; M.H. Abrams

Associates it with postcolonial studies

"The subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European

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discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who *employ this discourse*." (Abrams and Harpham 238). Guha states that subalterns are those inferior people who have been left out of the historiography of colonial India, and differentiating them from the elite of India states that subaltern classes and groups constitute the "mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people" (Guha 40). Gramsci adopted the term subaltern to refer to those groups in society including those of peasants and workers who are governed by the hegemony of the ruling classes. He calls the subaltern class the emergent class consisting of the much greater mass of people who are deprived of "hegemonic" power. The subaltern's criticized the colonialist, nationalist and Marxist historiographers of Indian nationalism for their elitism—an ideological legacy of British rule in India. In the very first volume of the series Guha in the chapter "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" (37-43) points out that these historiographers suffer from prejudice and discrimination towards the subaltern classes.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most distinguished Indian novelists of the Rushdiean tradition who have contributed significantly to Indian English fiction. As a subaltern novelist he endeavors to reveal historical, political and cultural realities as well as the oppression, discrimination and exploitation of the common people that have been suppressed or hidden by Western history. Amitav Ghosh has written fictional as well as non-fictional works. Ghosh's aesthetics in its theme and concept embraces many postmodern and postcolonial characteristics. His works are the creation of postcolonial predicament of dislocation, which is one of the major characteristics of postmodernity.

Ghosh's extraordinary oeuvre of fiction and non-fictional essays hangs somewhere between the warm security of locations and the terrifying if exhilarating promise of imminent dislocation, sometimes with a foot in each but most often balanced precariously at the moment of disjunction. This moment is predicated upon not just the significance of the loss of location also upon one's consciousness of the process of losing that precious 'lived sense of place,' a distancing that Ghosh identifies as the catalyst for the possible birth of the novel. (Bose 13)

In Ghosh's novels, subaltern voices are revealed not only through the theme of Diaspora but also through other major themes including nationalism, cosmopolitanism, communalism, war-caused violence, significance of the individual, search for love and security amidst cultural fragmentation, interdisciplinary and the role of narrative, memory and imagination: "the role of the individual in the broad sweep of political events; the dubious nature of borders, whether between nations and peoples or between one literary genre and another; the role of memory in one's recovery of identity in the march of time; the role of the artist in society; the importance of narrative in shaping history" (Hawley 5). For him history is interesting only because it offers "unusual" and "extraordinary" situations which his character shares with other people but responds to it in his own unique and particular way as is noticeable in Arjun's predicament at the battle of Jifra in *The Glass Palace*. For this purpose, he prefers fiction to anthropology although much of his writing has been influenced by his training as an anthropologist in Egypt where he exhaustively recorded his observations about

its indigenous traditions, cultures, religions and its people. Ghosh's central concern is to focus on and empathies with the historical individual whose contribution; sacrifice and culture have been suppressed and silenced by the dominating voice of history.

Ghosh's novels subvert history by revising it as the relation of the individual to his past, thus treating history as one of the narratives. His novels, mostly allegorical, as are *The Shadow Lines* and *In an Antique Land*, militate against the scientific notion of history. In them memory plays a significant role in the reconstruction of history which serves to question the so-called objective, impartial metanarratives on freedom, nationalism, knowledge and development: "The public chronicles of nations are interrogated ... by highlighting on the one hand the reality of the fictions people create around their lives ... and on the other by recording the verifiable and graphic details of individual memories that do not necessarily tally with the received version of history" (Mukhejee 263). Ghosh "prioritizes the mythical form of history whereby all versions of a given historical event are considered equally valid. He places the individual at the center of society and thus defies the forms of collective identity created by institutional history. Besides, the past is seen in continuum with the present and not as a monolith.... And Ghosh seems to be arguing that the continuum can be maintained only when it is expressed through fiction and not through historical documents" (Pandit 135).

Ghosh's second novel *The Shadow Lines* focuses on the history of the narrator's Hindu family whose fate is irrevocably affected after the formation of East Pakistan, forcing them to leave their home town Dhaka for Calcutta. The narrative begins its journey in 1939, just before the breaking out of the Second World War, but the catastrophic events take place in 1964 which are recalled by the narrator in 1979 when he becomes mature enough to understand their meaning. The novel reveals the catastrophic effects of arbitrary, cartographic demarcations that become the source of communal violence; it also demonstrates the fictitiousness of culturally demarcated borders as well as the artificial binary between the colonizer and the colonized in favor of a liberal humanism and communal harmony. *In an Antique Land* is subversive history that defies the barriers of nation, time and genre. It has two narratives and the larger is a travelogue in which Ghosh, engaged in anthropological research in Egypt, describes his social observations and cultural experiences of living in two Egyptian villages.

The Glass Palace represents the resistance and subversion of the subaltern to imperialist epistemology; it makes a critical reinterpretation of colonialist history and concept by challenging the notion of nationalist, racial and cultural boundaries. Based on such postcolonial assumptions and interrogations, it is an imaginative construction of history which explores the cultural and economic exploitation of three colonized countries: Burma, India and Malaya. The novel focuses on the private events which blend with the public events: it is a grand narrative of three families spanning three generations which have to suffer the catastrophic effects of colonialism/destructive nationalism. It unfolds a varied, vast and interesting panorama of the struggles and sacrifices of innumerable commoners as well as subaltern characters. *The Hungry Tide* concentrates on the story of three main characters: Piya, Fokir and Kanai. The novel reveals Ghosh's

concern for individuals, pitted against the fury of nature and the broad sweep of history, for a historical individuals like Kusum whose revolutionary spirit and popular concerns are capable of transforming various characters and influencing the lives of her companions. Ghosh explores the paradigm of human relationship constructed across the transient divisions of territory, religion and social class, and around this relationship, which is marked by antagonism as well as harmony; he weaves an interesting tale of history, colonialism, folklore, ecology, migration, love and grief.

Thus, an attempt has been made to explore subaltern voices in Ghosh's above mentioned four novels. As a subaltern historiographer Ghosh focuses on the cultures, religions, customs, social life-styles, experiences and thoughts of the ordinary people and for the construction of their oral histories, memory serves as a major source. These voices evoke conflicts and contradictions in the subalterns' historical relationship with the elite characterized by the power interplay of dominance and subordination. They serve to refute the claim of elitist historians that during colonial India the Indian National Congress represented as a plural but unanimous body and that the Indian elite played a hegemonies role or exercised a cultural dominance instead of a capital-based dominance. As a subaltern historiographer Ghosh attempts to restore the agency and autonomy of the ordinary people by rectifying the biases and discriminations characteristic of nationalist and colonialist history and by concentrating on the suppressed or hidden realities of their histories, religions, cultures, life-styles, attitudes, memories and dreams.

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