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Voicing the Subaltern in the Select Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh is a postmodern Indian English novelist, who mastered the art of narration with new styles and innovative techniques. His novels can be treated as socio-historic documents because in his novels he reconstructs the private history of the subalterns from the historical past and also voices their plight and sufferings. Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the private histories of the victims of public history and gives voice to these helpless and voiceless subalterns.

It can be inferred that, a close survey of the novels of Amitav Ghosh is an exciting experience, because it portrays the history from below. It shows the horrifying effect of history on the individuals and discusses how the historical incidents pushed the common people to the margins of the society and turned them into subalterns. It gives voice to the plight, sufferings of the subalterns.

Voicing the subaltern by Amitav Ghosh gives confidence to the subalterns of the contemporary society and boost up their morale. It also helps the readers to understand history in right way. It shall be apt to say that Ghosh successfully tries to bring the subalterns from the margins of the society to the centre.

Keywords: *Public history, Private history, subaltern, socio-historic documents, postcolonial aspects, postmodern traits, magical realism, travel motif, maximalism, non-linear narration, multiple narratives, voicing the subaltern.*

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is a postmodern Indian English novelist, who mastered the art of narration with new styles and innovative techniques. He is one of the English writers, who are sensitive to the incidents of history, issues of cultural significance and political importance. Amitav Ghosh is the most contemporary and convincing Indian voice in the present world of English literature.

Amitav Ghosh is an insightful and thought provoking writer, who tries to discuss many contemporary issues and tries to give valuable insights to his readers. About the essential insights in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes: "profound historical sense, a strong humanitarian drift, a witty but compassionate insight into man and his society, an attempt at interlacing the time past and the time present in the crucible of memory." (Beyond *The Shadow Lines*: 151)

Amitav Ghosh has incorporated different aspects of human life into his novels, and through his novels he tries to transcend the boundaries between a historian, researcher, social anthropologist, journalist and a traveller. In his hands the English novel has achieved the status of meta-form. Amitav Ghosh in an interview with Michelle Caswell observes:

"For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life - history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality. As I see it, the novel is a meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist, etc."

The Novels of Amitav Ghosh can be treated as socio-historic documents because in his novels he reconstructs the private history of the subalterns from the historical past and also voices their plight and sufferings. In this attempt of reconstructing the subaltern history and voicing the subaltern, he uses history, postcolonial aspects and postmodern traits as important elements of his narration.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the selective and successful writers of the present day in India. His writings include both fiction and non-fiction. His fiction covers mainly novels. As a novelist he has written nine novels *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and the three volumes of the Ibis trilogy; *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015).

For this proposed research the first six novels of Amitav Ghosh namely *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* have been selected to study and analyze how he voiced the subalterns in his novels by using history, post colonialism and postmodernism as narrative and critical tools.

2. Voicing the Subaltern by Amitav Ghosh

Under subaltern theory the word 'subaltern' is used in broad perspective as synonym for minorities, dalits, tribals, refugees, colonial subjects, the illiterate, helpless women and children whose voices and actions have been muted. Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the private histories of the victims of public history and gives voice to these helpless and voiceless subalterns.

According to this theory in *The Circle of Reason*, the illegal migrants in al-Ghazira like Alu, Zindi, Karthamma, Kulfi and others are subalterns because they don't have work permits and passports. They felt alienation and insecurity, and they kept on moving secretly from one place to another place. They represent millions of migrants in the Gulf countries struggling for their existence.

In *The Shadow Lines* the characters like Tha'mma shall be treated as subaltern because, she is a native of Bangladesh, who migrated to Calcutta during Indian Partition. Tha'mma as a widow struggled a lot in the alien land to settle and brought up her family. Tridib is a subaltern because he was a victim of the communal riots. He was killed in the streets of Dhaka while helping his grandfather.

In his next novel *In an Antique Land* Bomma, the Indian slave, who worked with the Egyptian merchant shall be treated as subaltern because he has no individual life. He spent his entire life in the service of his master and he has nothing personal. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* the characters Mangala and Latchman shall be treated as subalterns because they were talented Indian lab assistants worked with Ronald Ross. They are the actual master minds behind the Nobel Prize winning invention. They remained behind the curtains and their talents were unrecognized.

In *The Glass Palace* Rajkumar, Dolly, Saya John, Dinu, Neel shall be treated as subalterns because they were victims of the Second World War. During the war they lost everything, left Burma and migrated to their native places in helpless condition. In *The Hungry Tide* Kusum and the other settlers in the Morichijhapi Island shall be treated as subalterns because the economic blockade, police attacks made them helpless and voiceless. They didn't get any help from the outside world due to the imposition of section 144 in that area.

After the study of these novels of Amitav Ghosh in terms of subaltern, it can be felt that Ghosh seriously tries to voice the subalterns and their sufferings. John Thieme in his essay "The Discoverer Discovered" observes: "Ghosh appears to subscribe to the view that the western discourse silences alterity by denying its very capacity for utterance.... Gayathri Spivak asks the question 'Can the subaltern speak?' All of Ghosh's work to date seems to have been directed towards wanting to answer this question in the affirmative." (130)

Amitav Ghosh's voicing the subaltern can be studied in four different stages. First one is reconstructing private histories which were shadowed by the public histories. The Second one is different tools used by Amitav Ghosh in reconstructing these private histories. The Third stage is juxtaposing the public histories and private histories side by side to study how public histories showed horrifying effect on the individuals and made them Subalterns. The final stage is how Amitav Ghosh voiced these helpless or the voiceless subalterns.

3. Reconstructing Private Histories

In *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh writes about the effect of the Indo-Pak war of 1971 on the people of Lalpukur, a village on the Indo-Bangladesh border. In the post-war developments Alu from Lalpukur escapes to al-Ghazira. In this novel Ghosh reconstructs the private history of Alu and other migrants living in the Middle East to bring out the emigrational problems they faced.

In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh writes about the effect of Indian partition of 1947 on the common people like Tha'mma and the effect of communal riots of 1964 on the lives of helpless people like Tridib. In this novel he reconstructs the private histories of Tha'mma, to show how the Indian partition affected the ordinary people and in the same novel he reconstructs the private history of Tridib to show the plight of the victims in the communal riots.

In *In an Antique Land* Ghosh writes about the effect of the historical Indo-Egyptian trade of twelfth century on the life of common people like Bomma, Ashu etc. In this novel, he reconstructs the private history of Bomma, an Indian slave worked with an Egyptian merchant, Abu Ben Yiju during the Indo-Egyptian trade of twelfth century.

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh writes the historiography of Ronald Ross's discovery of Malaria transmission through mosquitoes. In this novel he reconstructs the private history of two Indian lab assistants Mangala and Latchman, who helped Ronald Ross in this discovery. This private history brings the shadowed lives of talented Indian lab assistants worked with their English masters.

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh writes about the effect of the Second World War on the millions of Indians lived in Burma then. In this novel he reconstructs the private history of Rajkumar and other victims of the Second World War to show how the Second World War made millions of Indians as helpless and voiceless.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh writes about the effect of the Morichijhapi incident on the lives of thousands of migrants like Kusum. In this novel he reconstructs the private history of Kusum and other migrants suffered in the Morichijhapi incident of 1979. Thus Ghosh reconstructs the private histories of the individuals, who became helpless or voiceless subalterns due to the horrifying effect of the historical incidents.

In the art of fictionalising the history Ghosh uses history against imagination or reality against fiction. He employs his imagination and creativity; his research abilities and enquiring mind in historicising the fiction. This fictionalised fact is an alternative reality which brings the private histories of subalterns into limelight, which was shadowed by the public histories. It can be analyzed that the novels of Amitav Ghosh help the readers in better understanding the history.

4. Different Tools used by Ghosh in Reconstructing Private Histories

In reconstructing the private histories Amitav Ghosh usually uses postcolonial aspects and postmodern techniques as tools in reconstructing the private history of the subalterns. In reconstructing the private history of the subalterns Ghosh has used postcolonial aspects like the uncanny, challenging stereotypes, valorisation of cultural identity, counter discourses, met narratives, hybridization and mimicry. They are helpful in bringing out the psychology and thinking of the subalterns. In this regard it seems Ghosh is influenced by the postcolonial theories of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha.

In reconstructing the private histories of subalterns and voicing them Ghosh uses postmodern techniques like magical realism, travel motif, maximalism. They help in preparing the ground for the reconstruction and voicing. The postmodern traits like non-linear narration, satires, metaphors, pastiche and multiple narratives are helpful in reflecting the alienation, insecurity, helplessness and voicelessness of their lives. Inter textuality in the form of documents, diaries, memoirs, letters, note book etc. play a key role in reconstructing the private histories and voicing the subalterns.

5. Juxtaposing Private History and Public History

Amitav Ghosh places public history and private history side by side and discusses the effect of the Public history on private history. He portrays individuals as victims of the historical events and brings out the horrifying effect and unhealed wounds they caused on the minds of the common people.

In his novels Ghosh discusses riots, violence, colonialism and partition but his main focus is on the helpless individuals or the subalterns who were crushed under the wheels of these historical incidents. Protagonists of his novels are not historical figures but ordinary people, who are the exemplifying figures for thousands of victims at that time of History.

Amitav Ghosh does not question the public history but through his writings he questions its biased nature and its lack of comprehensiveness. He questions the way it has neglected the private history of voiceless subalterns. He looks at the History not from the centre but from the periphery.

Historical facts in the form of public history and imaginary facts in the form of private history go hand in hand in parallel lines. The parallel narratives of public and private histories bring out certain new things into lime light, which were not documented by the Historians. Thus this juxtaposition of public and private histories brings the shadowed parts of the history into lime light and adds new facts to the existing historical facts.

6. Voicing the Subaltern

Amitav Ghosh voiced the helpless and voiceless subalterns by using history, postcolonialism and postmodernism. In *The Circle of Reason* he voiced the illegal migrants in al-Ghazira. The readers could listen to the plight and sufferings of them in the words of Zindi. At the end of the novel, the voice of the subalterns is heard through the words of Zindi as:

“I wondered what would happen to me if I died in a desert in a foreign land, without a house or friends to help me....I’m too old and Boss is too young....Boss and I are going back home, Alu. Boss is going to build me a house someday.” (*The Circle of Reason*: 454)

In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh voiced the plight of the refugee migrants during the Indian partition of 1947. He also voiced the plight of the victims of communal riots. Ghosh gave voice to the anguish of the migrants over partitions and communal riots through the words of the old man, who was killed in the communal riots:

“I know everything. Once you start moving, you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took trains. I said I don’t believe in India-Shindia. It’s all very well, you’re going now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere.” (*The Shadow Lines*: 237)

In *In an Antique Land* Ghosh voiced the silence of Bomma who remained in the darkness of history. We could listen to his silenced voice in the Geniza documents. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* Ghosh voiced the unrecognized talents of Mangala and Latchman through the research of Murugan. We could listen to Mangala and Latchman seriously discussing about transmission of Calcutta chromosome, in the research article of Murugan.

In *The Glass palace* Ghosh voiced the plight and anguish of the Indians in Burma during Second World War. We could listen to their voices in the words of Rajkumar. During the Second World War, Rajkumar lost everything in Burma, and he was forced to leave Burma and went to India. The readers could listen to the subaltern voices of the victims of the Second World War in the words of Rajkumar, when he said: “My father was from Chittagong and he ended up in Arakan; I ended up in Rangoon; you went from Mandalay to Ratnagiri and now you’re here too. There are people who have the luck to end their lives where they began them. But this is not something that is owed to us.” (*The Glass Palace*: 310).

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh voiced the plight and sufferings of the settlers in Morichijhapi. The readers could listen to the plight of the migrants through the words of Kusum, when she said: “the worst part is not the hunger and the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the Police making announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence was worthless than the dirt or dust”. (*The Hungry Tide*: 261) The subaltern voices of the migrants can be heard in their cries wafting across the water: “Amra kara? Bastuhara. Who are we? We are dispossessed.” (*The Hungry Tide*: 255)

About voicing the subaltern by Amitav Ghosh, Santwana Haldar observes: “With a piercing insight, he explores historical events that were sidelined in government records and upholds the issue related to imperialism and multiculturalism. An active member of the Subaltern Studies Project, Ghosh likes to present those events from the perspectives of the subalterns.” (308)

In this study of voicing the subaltern, four interesting observations can be made. The first one, in every novel wherever the story happens or whatever the theme may be, it is more about Indians and Indian sub-continent. The second observation is all the protagonists of his novels are the victims of the history. This shows Amitav Ghosh’s revisionist approach towards history. The third observation is most of the characters were on migration for different reasons and he writes about their problems as migrants. The fourth interesting observation is that all the protagonists are subalterns and the novelist tries to voice them. This shows the humanistic vision of the novelist.

7. Conclusion

The interesting themes, innovative narrative techniques, richness of language, portrayal of history, reconstruction of subaltern histories, discussion of contemporary social issues, subaltern voices of Ghosh's novels promote his position from Indian English writer to the status of World Writer. About the writings of Amitav Ghosh G. J. V. Prasad, in his article, "Rewriting the World: *The Circle of Reason* as the Beginning of Quest" rightly observes:

"With an anthropologist's sense of detail and a historian's grasp of facts and chronology and with a creative writer's curiosity about causation and effects and great narrative skill and imagination, Ghosh weaves together a pluralistic and self-reflective view of the world – one that challenges the smugness of accepted narratives and point of view and certainties of post colonial borders as well as generic boundaries." (56)

It can be summed up that a close study of the novels of Amitav Ghosh is a rewarding experience, because it provides a lot of knowledge and presents various new ideas and discusses many contemporary issues. It provides a lot of information and knowledge about different places, its people, and their culture. They are brilliant narratives of complexities of postmodern life. In this regard it seems that he is responding to Edward Said's call in *Culture and Imperialism*:

"The major task is to match the new economic and socio-political dislocations and configurations of our time with the startling realities of human interdependence on a world scale. We need to go and to situate these in a geography of other identities, people, cultures, and then to study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another, through un-hierarchical influence crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and of course, conflict." (402-3)

It can be inferred that, a close survey of the novels of Amitav Ghosh is an exciting experience, because it takes the readers into the depths of the historical past to show the shadowed parts of the history. It portrays the history from below. It shows the horrifying effect of history on the individuals and discusses how the historical incidents pushed the common people to the margins of the society and turned them into subalterns. It gives voice to the plight, sufferings of the subalterns.

It can be concluded that, a close analysis of the novels of Amitav Ghosh is an intellectual experience because they discuss social, cultural and subaltern issues and try to voice the subalterns. They provide the readers with many ideas and valuable inputs. They help the readers in understanding the history in right way.

Voicing the subaltern by Amitav Ghosh gives confidence to the subalterns of the contemporary society and boost up their morale. It shall be apt to say that Ghosh successfully tries to bring the subalterns from the margins of the society to the centre. In this regard Ghosh justifies the comments made by John Thieme in his "Foreword" to *Amitav Ghosh's the Shadow Lines: a Critical Companion*:

"Like Edward Said, Ghosh draws attention to the artificiality of the East-West binaries of Orientalism. Like Homi Bhabha, he demonstrates the hybrid, interstitial nature of cultures, as articulated through language. Like Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies scholars, he endeavours to recuperate the silenced voices of those occluded from the historical record." (251)

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