

The Concept of Subalternity in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh



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Abstract

The concept of 'subalternity' occupies an important place in the writings of the post colonial literature. Basically, the term 'subalternity' is a postcolonial term which emerged from the Subaltern Studies Group. The Subaltern Studies Group or Subaltern Studies Collective is a group of those South Asian scholars who are interested in the postcolonial societies. This group was formed to publish the subaltern studies under the areas of the Oxford University Press at the University of Sussex in 1979-80. The word 'subaltern' was used by the scholars of this group for the first time. In the modern times, *Subaltern Studies*, as an academic discipline, has given a new point of view on the history of the colonized from the view point of colonizer. At present this collective has gained a worldwide fame. That is why the influence of subaltern studies can be observed in Latin American studies, African studies, cultural studies and the other areas. Amitav Ghosh in his works seems to be the whistle-blower of the subaltern sections of society which are always subjected to the atrocities of the elite groups. Ghosh as a novelist of remarkable genius captures the readers with his art of storytelling. He regenerates history past and present through his unique mixture of fact and fantasy. He makes use of facts from history in order to form the basis for his imaginative tale of the downtrodden people or the subalterns.

Keywords: Subordination, Colonialism, Marginalised, Mainstream, Exploitation and downtrodden.

Introduction

'Subaltern Studies' occupies an important place in Indian historiography which is important to study the requirements of all the subordinated people like peasants, workers, lower caste women and dalits whose presence were never registered in history; obliterated, occluded and ignored. In India, *Subaltern Studies* came to light in the 1982's as a result of Ranajit Guha's efforts. It has given a distinct perspective on the history of the colonized from that of the colonizers. The subaltern sections which are always forced to remain mute and voiceless are now the subject to the activity of the elite groups even when they rebel and rebound. The dominant groups have always exploited the society in different ways. With the passage of time this school has developed a broad concept of itself. Hence the impact of subalternity can be observed in Latin American studies, African studies, cultural studies and the other areas. The theme of subaltern has always found an unmistakable echo in the world literature especially in the works of post-colonial writers. The writers like Eric Stokes, David Arnold, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Ranjit Guha, Gyan Prakash, David Hardiman, Ajay Skaria, Mamata Kalia, Gautam Bhadra, K. Sivaram Krishnan Mulk Raj Anand, Valmiki, Prem Chand, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gayatri Spivak are those thinkers who have contributed significantly in the field of subaltern studies.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study is to define and describe the concept of Subalternity from the historical point of view and contextualize it in Indian socio-political conditions. This paper will analyze the concept of subalternity in the selected novels of Amitav Ghosh in order to provide an analyzing of Indian society which in turn will help to create better society where subalterns are treated with in dignified manners. Finally, the study would explore, with special reference to the subaltern texts, how subaltern can represent, revitalize and reinforce Indian society and get rid of the tyranny of hegemonic power structures.

Review of Literature

Dalal, Meenakshi in her Ph.D thesis on "Thematic patterns in the novels of Amitav Ghosh" discusses how Ghosh's novels including the subaltern class present recurrent patterns of the major themes of boundary crossing and travel. Paul, Dharam in his Ph.D thesis on "Subaltern voices in literature_ a study of select novels of Amitav Ghosh" makes an attempt to explore subaltern voice, focusing on the social life styles, religions, cultures, costumes, social life-styles of the common men. In her thesis "Postcolonial Concerns and the Historical Imagination in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh", R..Sha Begum talks about Ghosh's two ways of studying history: unconventional reading of the past and study of history from the perspective of the undocumented newline history.

The Concept of Subalternity

The term 'subaltern' is derived from Latin. It combines the two Latin words 'Sub' (under) and alter' (other). Some British scholars associate this term with British ranks like 'subedari' and 'subaltern'. In the same way *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* also defines subaltern as "any officer in British army who is lower in rank than a captain" (1541). Thus in the military sense, the term 'subaltern' was used to denote the soldiers who were inferior in their ranks. But the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci was the person who used this word in the non-military sense for the first time. He used this word for those groups in society who had no political power and voice. That is why this term seems to be a synonymous of proletariat. In the modern times, the term subaltern is used to describe all kinds of persons such as women, farmers, dalits, tribals and labourers. Hence it is due to Gramsci's efforts that this term has acquired so much approval in the post colonial studies. In this way, Indian History has been upgraded with many perspectives emerging from the subaltern group. After Gramsci, there is an array of thinkers who have defined this term in their own point of view contexts. Gayatri Spivak explains subalternity in a scientific manner. She considers it as a space of difference. To her everything that has no access to the cultural imperialism is called a subaltern. Spivak says that women are doubly marginalized – firstly by colonization and secondly by the Indian men within their community. Ranjit Guha defines subalternity on the political and the economic grounds. He projects subalternity in its multiplicity. To him the main objective of the subaltern studies, as he makes clear in his book *Subaltern Studies Vol.1*, is "to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies" (7). Homi Bhaba makes it clear that the majority of the groups have always suppressed the subaltern groups. Bhaba explains this term in the light of hegemonic power structure and struggle against social exclusion. He lays emphasize on the importance of social power. Marxist historians have already analyzed the colonial history from the view point of proletariat. But this school does not follow the ideology of caste and religion as crucial factors in Indian History that is why it is challenged. Thus the concept of subalternity

which came from the postcolonial literature seems to undo the effect of colonialism on cultures. Its chief concern is to give voice to the voiceless. From the Post-colonial perspective, the subaltern refers the persons who are socially politically and geographically outside from the mainstream of life.

The Concept of Subalternity in Amitav Ghosh's Novels

In the context of Subaltern Studies, Amitav Ghosh has a sound reputation. Born on 11 July 1956 in Calcutta, Amitav Ghosh belongs to a Bengali Hindu family. His father Lieutenant Colonel Shailendra Chandra Ghosh was a retired officer of the pre-independence Indian Army. He was given away the Padma Shree by the Indian government in 2007. He was also elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2009. At present he lives in New York with his wife Deborah Baker.

Amitav Ghosh wrote a series of novels including *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), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). The features of subalternity are to be found in almost every novel by Amitav Ghosh. Subalternity has also been presented in literature in multiple ways by other writers. Ghosh has also presented various sections of people in multiple ways in his fictional works. So these fictional works cover a wide range of social issues including science, religion, nationalism, history, myth, philosophy, memory, political struggle, communal violence, love, loss, velour of forefathers and family disputes. The motto of these works seems to eradicate the social evils and to establish an ideal society. On the other hand, Ghosh's encounter with colonial subservience encourages him to write about socio-political independence in the contemporary Indian literature. That is why his novels deal with the lives and struggles of the people belonging to the marginalized section of the Indian society.

The Circle of Reason is the first novel written by Amitav Ghosh. It was published in 1986. As the title of the book suggests, it is a book which has been written in defense of reason, logic and rationality. In India irrationality is prevalent in the forms of religion, superstitions and prejudices. So the dominance of irrationality in its multiple forms hardly allows any fresh thinking. Basically it is an episodic picaresque novel divided into three parts. The main plot of the novel revolves around an orphan boy having a potato-shaped head called Alu. In the first part, he is brought up at Lalakpur by his uncle Balram Bose who is a village schoolmaster. Bose has a special regard for scientific knowledge such as phrenology. Unfortunately Balram is trapped in a local feud with his neighbour Bhudeb Roy.

As a result of it his house is bombed. Alu, the only survivor, runs away from there and is closely followed by a young Indian policeman Jyoti Das. In the second part, Alu along with other illegal migrants finds himself to be trapped into the Gulf emirate of Al-Ghazira. He lives there at Taffaha, the home of an

ageing courtesan named Zindi. Like other illegal migrants Alu is forced to work there as a labourer. Unfortunately, one day a half finished shopping mall collapses on him. Fortunately, he escapes and reprises the ghost of his uncle by beginning on an idealistic project to establish a money-free commune. He is miscalculated by the state authorities. When he is on a shopping trip, his community is attacked by them. Many people are killed or captured. But Alu, along with Zindi and other friends is able to escape from there and is followed by Jyoti Das. The third part of the novel takes place among the dunes of Saharan Algeria with Alu, Zindi and their companions. Still Jyoti Das is following them but now she has given up the idea of arresting them. After the death of one of their companions Alu and Zindi decides to come back to India which determines their future. In this way, the novel focuses on the themes of colonization, re-colonization and decolonization.

Amitav Ghosh's Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is one of the most prominent novels written in English. The novel narrates the story of three generations of the narrator's family and the novel is set in Dhaka, Calcutta, and London and Delhi. The novel is written against the backdrop the Second World War, the partition of India, and the communal riots in East Bengal and Kolkata during 1963-64. The novel is divided into two parts "Going Away" and "Coming Home". The first part covers the time period from 1939 to 1962 and the second part covers the time period from 1962 to 1979. There are two families in the novels- The Datta Chaudhary Family and the Princes Family. The Chaudharies live in Calcutta and the Princes family resides in London. These families get united in the bonds of marriage in spite of their caste, class, religion and region. Amitav Ghosh in this novel, describes the pathetic plight of a middle class Bengali family which is drawn into violence and riots. These riots are caused due to the theft of the holy relic. Tardib's childhood experiences and getting killed in a communal riot during the World War are the striking points of the novel. This novel focuses not only on the historical events but also follows the subaltern-centric vision. Ghosh raises the voice of those subalterns who are always suppressed by the majority groups. So there is Th'mma, the grandmother of the unnamed narrator who narrates the subalterns' history of the nationalists and its consequences on the individuals. Through the character of Ila, the novelist highlights the issues of diaspora and racism. As far as the title of the novel is concerned, it seems to be subjective as well as objective. In fact *Shadow Lines* is chronological study of the subaltern voices which raises voice against the elitists.

Ghosh's famous work *In An Antique Land* which was published in 1992, is an ethnography in the form of narrative. This narrative is divided into two parts. The first part of the narrative records the novelist's autobiographical research trip to Egypt as a young researcher. The second part presents the history of 12th century Jewish merchant named Abraham Ben Yiju and his slaves Ashu and Bomma.

Yiju belongs to Tunisia and arrived in India in 1130 AD via Egypt and Aden. The story of the novel revolves around the life history of Bomma who is an Indian slave of Yiju and is traded between Aden and Mangalore on the Malabar Coast. Looking back at the annals of history from the perspective of a subaltern named Bomma who has always been voiceless; the novelist has tried to give him a voice and identity. Thus the structure of the novel is woven around many themes including historical and cultural displacement, alienation and subordination.

The Calcutta Chromosome (1995) is one of the most experimental novels thrown up by Amitav Ghosh. The novel opens in a New York apartment where Antar, an Egyptian computer clerk is serving with his super intelligent computer named Ava. Antar recounts his encounter with L. Murugan, an employee of Life Watch Company who disappeared in Calcutta. On the surface level this novel revolves around the topic of malaria but it is not as simple as it seems. Ronald Ross made a discovery of the deadly female mosquito on 20 August 1897. Except this fact Ghosh has totally diverged from the known accounts of this event. Like *Shadow Lines*, this novel is also divided into two parts- August 20: Mosquito Day and The Day After. L. Murugan who is a science freak, arrives in Calcutta in search of enigmatic Calcutta Chromosome on the World Mosquito Day (20 August 1995). But he disappears the very next day. So the story of novel lies in the events of these days.

The major part of the novel deals with the events that took place in Calcutta in 1995. The laboratory where Ronald Rosss discovered the cause of malaria is also situated in Calcutta. Calcutta seems to be a symbol of colonization. In the whole world, it was only India with all its dirt that nurtured mosquito to make the discovery successful one. Through this event the novelist exposes that it was a political conspiracy of the west against India to make it subordinated one. This novel shows that the western confidence which guided the post colonial nations was totally misplaced. As the novel accelerates, one can find the past as a symbol of subordination. That is why Murugan prepares an article against malaria research entitled '*Is There a Secret History?*' After some time Murugan writes another article entitled *Certain Systematic Discrepancies in Ronald Ross's Account of Plasmodium B.* But all the scientific journals rejected his paper. Again he starts to publish his ideas about Ross's discovery in *The Other Mind*. He believed that there was a big conspiracy behind malaria research. In other words, it was the conspiracy of the western society against those who were original and genuine in their research works. The theme of silence also symbolizes subordination in different manners. Phoolboni, one of the greatest writers of Bengal, is considered the chief protagonist of this cult of science. This team includes the other subordinated people such as Mangla and Laakhan. In this way through this novel Ghosh raises the voice of less known or less fortunate people.

The Glass Palace (2000) is a historical novel by Amitav Ghosh. Just like *The Shadow Lines* the

story of the novel is extended up to three generations. The structure of the novel is woven in the large canvas of time, space, distance and geographical entities. The setting of the novel revolves around Burma, Bengal, Malaya and India. The novel was written against the backdrop of the Second World War. Focusing mainly on the earliest twentieth century, the novelist projects a wide range of social issues within the framework of changing economic scenario of India and Burma. So there are many characters and many stories which are interlinked to each other. Divided into seven parts, this novel is basically a story of an Indian orphan boy who is transported in Burma by an accident. The stories of the other families connected to this main plot. The name of this Indian orphan boy is Raj Kumar. The final part of the novel narrates the stories of the scattered families after the second world war. Thus *The Glass Palace* presents the colonial impact on the social, political, economic and cultural set up of the countries like India, Bangladesh and Burma.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that like any committed novelist, Amitav Ghosh has projected the grim reality of Indian society in his novels. The chief concern of his novels is to make the subalterns speak through their subordination. The concept of subalternity as a subject of writing has always been controversial and challenging. But Ghosh gives a new

direction of thinking the subaltern. He has also interrogated the western sense of knowledge and science and gives an alternative history of India. He is always against oppression and exploitation in all forms.

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