

## **Amitav Ghosh Perspective on Subalternity & His Novels**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Amitav Ghosh is widely acclaimed for his major novels in which he has expressed his concerns for the downtrodden people of Indian society. In his major novels Amitav Ghosh's sympathetic attitude towards the subaltern can be perceived. The problems of alienation, migration and existential crisis in life of unprivileged class of the society are explored through his fiction. The voice of the subalterns, their struggle and sacrifices which went unnoticed in the annals of the history began to get a prominent voice in the fiction of Amitav Ghosh in a different way. Through his writings he provided subalterns center stage by making them as the pivotal character of his fiction so that they can raise voice against the oppressive forces of their society. My aim in this paper is to analyze Amitav Ghosh's selected novels and to highlight his perspective on subalternity. The selected novels for this paper are – *The Circle of Reason*, *The Calcutta Chromosomes*, *The Hungry Tide*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Sea of Poppies*. In these novels Amitav Ghosh has realistically delineated the pathetic and difficult condition of the subaltern. The evil faces of poverty, homelessness, exploitation and subjugation have also been exposed in Amitav Ghosh's novels.

**Key Words:** Amitav Ghosh, Subaltern, center, struggle, voice.

Amitav Ghosh has taken the theme of his fiction from the history, real events of life. The story of the common man, who have been the sufferers to the maximum of these historical upheavals or political crisis have been taken as a subject of the fiction. These characters from the marginalized sphere are in the main lead of his stories. By providing the centrality to the marginalized characters, Ghosh also answers the dilemma of the postcolonial intelligentsia regarding the ability of the subaltern to speak. He assumes the role of narrator of a narrative for himself who doesn't become the representative; but allows the representations of the subaltern group by the same group by providing them stage.

He in his fictions tried to provide the space for or re-instates the unrecorded, subaltern, silenced, othered, voiceless or those who are overlooked by history and who are absorbed by the powerful. In the interview with Hawley, Ghosh consents 'I have been deeply influenced by the ideas of the subaltern studies group. I think, I share some of the concerns of the Subaltern Studies group because I am from the same milieu as many of the group members'. Ghosh shows an abiding interest in marginalized and silenced individuals. Ghosh says 'my essential interest is in people and their lives, histories and predicaments'.

Ghosh negotiates the challenge of recovering and representing the story of subalterns in an integrated manner. With his skill, he tried to amalgamate this subject and raised the issues related to them. He employs two methods to incorporate the discourse of subaltern writings. Firstly in his writings, both fiction and nonfiction the character of this marginalized group has occupied the central stage. Secondly, the stories and issues are construed as a representation of the issues of subaltern class. John Hawley rightly comments: 'Ghosh's roots are in journalism and academic writing-investigation and analysis, a revelation of subterranean connections and patterns.'

### **Concept of Subaltern**

Before analyzing his novels from this perspective, it is important to undergo the concept of subalternity and the views of different thinkers. In the postcolonial view, concept of subalternity has incepted from the concept of self and other. Self-constructed these binaries and hierarchies to mute the Other. These are the constructions of the self to establish and preserve its hegemony over

the Other as well as to silent the Other. The concept of Other is a considerable and universal matter in which self-claims to be main and supreme and all the rest come under the concept of Other. The term Other is highly complex and relative that changes its significance in accordance with the context. The self tries to dominate the Other and tries to sideline the other from the mainstream of life and they are treated as marginalized. Their contribution is nil in respect to the growth of society.

Said a prominent scholar of postcolonialism, identifies a European cultural tradition of 'Orientalism'. Said in his book *Orientalism* mentioned the theory of identifying the East as Other and inferior to the West. Said emphasizes construction of binary division between the Orient and the Occident. He mentioned that West as self is considered to be the supreme the main source of knowledge and learning, while East as Other is represented as a place of ignorance, superstition and illiteracy. The Orient exists as static, ignorant and cut off from the progress of Western history. They do not have even the capability to represent themselves and hence west as being superior take the responsibility of presenting orients, Other in the form of literary text. These Others are basically the marginalized group who are considered being the suppressed and muting for years. The term, subalternity, highlight the quandary of those who are allotted 'sub' or 'secondary' space in the human society.

Subaltern is the term that refers to the inferior rank or person from the below strata of society. Antonio Gramsci first used the word subaltern in the essay 'On the Margins of History' that can be associated with the people of those group in the society who are the subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include the people who have denied access to hegemonic power come under this category like farmers, workers or woman. Gramsci claims that the history of the subaltern classes is as complex as the history of the dominant classes, although the history of the latter is usually accepted as official history. The history of subaltern group is generally fragmented and episodic, since they are always subject to the activities of the ruling class, even when they rebel. They have less access to the authorities of social, cultural, and political institutions as they have no power to represent.

Foucault stated that History ceases to be the forte of those who exercise power. So History will be the tool in the hands of elite and they projected their own perception while writing History. History written till now is one-sided, partial and biased. This kind of history is not able to show the true picture of the member of lower strata of society. The ruling class is having the control on these institutions and they constructed the Other according to their own perception. West, powerful or the elite group cannot create history as they perceive the incidents or the events. History should be unbiased and impartial. True history is not restricted to superior group but it is also related to common people. The victory in any war cannot be assigned only to the king or the leader but it is also the effort of the soldiers who fought in the battlefield or the persons associated to them the contribution of these marginalized group can never be ignored.

### **Subaltern Studies Group**

Studying history of these groups comes under the term subaltern studies. Subaltern Studies is considered as History from below. The formation of subaltern studies group is not a sudden or an abrupt phenomenon. Ranajit Guha initiated this group in 1982 when a collective of South Asian scholars in Britain especially Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, initiated publication of a book titled *Subaltern Studies*. The most prominent writers of the subaltern scholars are Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Gyan Pandey, Edward Said, Gautam Bhadra, David Hadriman, Shahid Amin, Sudipta Kabiraj etc.

Subaltern studies group focused on the concept of subaltern and the various aspects of subordination as a subject to study. But throughout succeeding volumes and studies the concept of subalternity underwent various shifts. There was the gradual change in the concept, divergence in interest and theories well reflected in the essays of the subsequent volumes. The new contributors ended up giving new form and substance to subalternity. Subaltern studies group sketched out the complex ramification arising from the composition of subordination and its wide ranging concern both with the visible history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity and with the obstructed attitudes, ideologies and belief systems- in short, the culture informing that condition. In other words, Subaltern studies defined itself as an attempt to allow people finally to speak within

the envious pages of elitist historiography and in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed.

Under the term Subaltern studies new trend of writing the events have been initiated. The subalterns have been given preference to make them audible to the world. Their sufferings, pains and muteness have been presented through the history. Various writers have tried to depict their condition and their miseries with the help of their work. The concerning scholars of Subaltern Studies Group tried to fill the gaps of history, which is written by elites or the west, by distinguishing, recuperating, streamlining and identifying the stories of non-elite, subjugated and marginalized people. The perception of other has been assimilated to understand them. This approach of assimilating the perception is required as till the time history has been representing the views of self which is based on their own understanding of the other.

Thus, the term Subaltern can be used as an umbrella term for all those who are marginalized and underprivileged and deprived off the voice to speak. The term subaltern refers to the suppressed group that belongs to the lower strata of life, or the woman, who have been intimidated for many years. Subaltern can be meant as overlooked, neglected, disregarded, and treated with unconcern and indifference.

## **Subaltern Studies & Amitav Ghosh**

Amitav Ghosh writing truly exhibits the manifestation and implications of the term 'subaltern' in contemporary writings. The issue of subaltern in his works is to be studied in two manners: first the concept of subaltern as an pretentious exercise, kind of parallel exercise that existed during colonial period but never taken note of, as meant by Subaltern Study Group. Ghosh in his works talks about the alternative histories and practices of people. Secondly subaltern as an approach that represent marginalized as they have the inability to speak and empowers them to represent the marginalized people and their issues. Telwani also mentioned that, 'Almost all of his works replete with the experiences of the subaltern characters. The mosaic of the characters in his works is characterized by the subalternity almost in his all works.'

The distinguished critic of subaltern is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak whose pivotal line is fully pertinent "Can the subaltern Speak?" suggests that silence is the critical characteristic of subaltern identity. Amitav Ghosh works strongly confirm to the notion that the subaltern can speak in contrast to Spivak's concept of 'subaltern cannot speak' if given a proper chance and with an appropriate employment of the discourse. Ghosh purposefully brings subaltern characters into stories and focuses on personal histories of these individuals. The marginalized characters help us perceive life, events and issues from their point of view.

In his first novel *The Circle of Reason*, almost all the characters be it Alu, Shombhu Debnath, Rakhal, Toru Debi, Rajan, Zindi-al-Aiffaha, Kulfi, Karthamma, Jeevanbhai Patel, Haji Fahmy, Zaghloul were belonging to lower strata of society and forming the subaltern group. In this novel, the struggle of these characters and their survival issues has been pen down. It is noteworthy that *The Circle of Reason* came into existence before the author's involvement with Subaltern Studies Group. However, it sets the writer's interest in the lives of people from marginalized class.

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh has provided agency to the subaltern and tried to extend the reach of Subaltern Studies Group. Mangala and Lakhan though belonging to subalterns helped Ronald Ross in discovery. Their practices seems quite contrary to the scientific research for Malaria but they provide direction to the research by providing useful but scattered information leading Ross towards the final discovery. Thus, it establishes that the power established its discourse on the agency provided by the subaltern. Subalterns have their own mechanism that saves them from being eradicated. Here, Laakhan and Mangala achieved the positions of power as manipulators of knowledge.

Ghosh managed to evade from the Western and Eastern gap, by formulating a plot in which subaltern helped in directing and producing the final results of scientific research. Tabish Khair has also highlighted the issue of subaltern agency in *The Calcutta Chromosome* as one of its essential constituents: 'Such an intricate plot insists on not only the comprehensibility and agency of the subaltern, it also dismisses arbitrary and essentialist dichotomies between the West and India'. For Khair, agency allows the subaltern to regain his silenced role in the narrative of history, "for history can be seen as the plotting of human experience and agency.' (309)

Telwani mentioned 'In *The Hungry Tide* Amitav Ghosh sketches the out-caste Dalit refugees from Bangladesh in Sunderban forests.....*The Hungry Tide* registers a response to the social and political concern of the marginal sections of the society.' The novel unfolds the events at Morichjhapi in 1979 and the subaltern consciousness which demarcates the post partition movement of persons from East Bengal to West Bengal. Sushil Sarkar mentioned that the refugees who belong to the subaltern classes were forced to seek out a dwelling elsewhere. Morichjhapi incident took place when these refugees were fighting for the survival. They were forced to flee after the water and food supplies were cut off to the island. The Morichjhapi incidents and silence towards it enthused Nirmal, a revolutionary, to write everything so that history can get known through the Kanai. This incident is brutally repressed by the government forces and aftermath Kusum is killed. Nirmal as a Marxist believed in rapprochement across class barriers that can bring subaltern people, the Other and the elite, the self together. Morichjhapi incident, a brutal violence against subaltern can be attributed to the indiscernibility of the low caste and class identity. The massacre, the tiger killing Kusum's father and Fokir's vulnerability to the state official are instances in the novel that depicted the subaltern as well as the marginalized people's predicament.

Homi Bhabha has emphasized the importance of relation of social power while defining subaltern groups. According to his notion about subalternity the presence of these oppressed minority groups was vital to the self-definition of the majority group. Subaltern social group were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power. This can be well exemplified by Kusum in *The Hungry Tide*. Kusum gives vision to Nirmal to see the entire movement of Morichjhapi to feel the agony, pain or sufferings caused to these refugees. This upheaval is from below or the subalterns which is being evinced by voiceless nobodies who want to be heard. For Nirmal, the cry of the refugees becomes a representative of all such subaltern communities without home. It becomes a cry for 'not just themselves, but on behalf of bewildered humankind. Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong?' (254)

B. K. Sharma stated, 'Ghosh's major concern in this novel is to universalize subaltern history. These subaltern figures therefore are made the real heroes by their sheer power of resistance to unbearable odds and adversities rise to the status of real makers of history.'

The Glass Palace is the story of the three generations consisting in itself several characters whose positions in the society keep on changing with the change of time and space. The King Thebaw, in *The Glass Palace* talks about the incomprehensible shift of power and margins in the society. The king status of ruler to exile itself is again an example of how people in center can shift to the margins, the royal family is reduced to the status of subalterns. Raj Kumar position also shifted from subjugated and subaltern to the center of power. The several other characters like Dolly, Mo Chao, Arjun, Kishan Singh in *The Glass Palace* mirror the locus of the author's interest in subaltern individuals. Amitav Ghosh ponders on the force and nature of power of British Empire that was changing fates of thousands across the subcontinent. 'What vast, what incompressible power, to move people in such numbers from one place to another-emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen. Why? Why this furious movement –people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile?' (43-44)

This novel also unexplored another aspect of Indian history. The history of Indian Army under British Rule is completely over sighted in the discussion of the colonial past in terms of what it meant for those who had joined British Army. In the novel, Arjun, Hardy these are the characters class and agency changes in accordance with time and space. The time span of the novel makes space for the monstrous manifestations of exploitation from the time of colonialism to the period of neocolonialism. 'It is ironical that soldiers like Arjun as subalterns (subordinate officer) in the British Indian Army were fighting neither to defend nor to extend the territory of India. They were simply facilitating the British policy of colonial expansion. It is through the character of Arjun that Amitav Ghosh raises the issue of identity, subalternity, colonialism and belongingness, most vocally. Ghosh points out the fact that Indians were also responsible for such exploitation of people and place.'

'What is so fascinating about *The Glass Palace* as a novel with its sweeping historical canvas is that, the Orient or the colonized or the subaltern is given a voice of its own. *The Glass Palace* contemplates about the effects of history on the lives of individuals from a subordinated perspective. It also foregrounds the lives of socially, politically, economically and historically insignificant characters.'

Telwani stated, ‘Another novel by Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* unfolds in the north of the colonized India in 1938, on the eve of the British attack on the Chinese ports known as the opium war. Here Amitav Ghosh delineates a mosaic of different kinds of subaltern characters drawn from different corners of the planet- sailors, passengers, and marines for the ibis, a slaving schooner, convicts, criminals, coolies, girmitis; indentured labour..... these characters are exposed to experience sati, ship board mutiny jails, kidnapping, wretched life as of a dog, criminal justice etc.’

*Sea of Poppies* is also successful in capturing the several incidents that not only delineates the strength of British power and its diffusion into various classes in Indian society but the position of doubly subaltern also. Deeti, the lead character in it represents the subjugated woman in Indian society during 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is her character that undergo several upheavals and demands the questions on sati system, widow remarriage and safety of a woman within a family. These are the issues of Indian females in that scenario who are already known as doubly marginalized class. People like Hawaldar in *Sea of Poppies* on the ship were given utmost liberty to harass and torture their own people in the name of tradition. The story of Kalua is also remarkable in this continuation. Kalua was beaten dreadfully on the ship by the Indians for getting married and spoiling a high caste woman. This incident can easily be quoted against imperialism that subverts the British proclaim of social reformation in India. This also speaks for the unwritten stories of doubly subaltern people- people who were lower in rank within a colonized society.

In *Sea of Poppies*, there are several characters whose positions in the society keep shifted. King Neel and his family can be mentioned here as once the center of power and society turns as a marginalized on the ship. Deeti can also be quoted here as once wife of high caste man is subaltern in the form of woman or became victim by marrying Kalua.

Ghosh purposefully brings subaltern characters into stories and focuses on personal histories of these individuals. The marginalised characters help us perceive life, events and issues from their point of view. The themes evoked in his works are in tune with the concerns of subaltern theory. B.K. Sharma delineated this in his book, ‘influenced by his association with the Subaltern Studies, Ghosh with his rigorous mode of empirical research recovered the characters of the masters,

possessing hegemonic power and of their slaves, sighing and crying under the burden of oppression, be it for their caste hierarchy or for the British power or for their gender status.’

To sum up, his depiction of the term subaltern generates following points: the investigation of and notion of origin, to trace their customs and identities to their native location, an absorbing play of center and margins, enmeshing of cultural identities , complexity of the very play and shifts of nucleus, a demonstration of the fact that the subaltern can speak for themselves can be spoken about either through making them speak their stories or by creating stories on and around them in his writings. Thus, his writings are a demonstration of connotations and manifestations of the term subaltern in contemporary writings.

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