

New Historicism: Voicing the Subalterns in Amitav Ghosh's *The Flood of Fire*

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Abstract: *The Flood of Fire* is the last of the 'ibis trilogy' published in 2015 by Amitav Ghosh. The novel is set against the First Anglo Chinese Opium War of 1839-1841. The incidents in the novel move through a meandering zig-zag setting of India and China. The novel is a stark critique of colonial history of imperialism. Amitav Ghosh paints a broad canvas between Rangpur, Assam to Canton, Bombay, Calcutta, Nayanpur, Bihar, Barrackpore, Singapore, Hong Kong, Macau, Chusan, Guangzhou which finally ends in Mauritius. The novel deals with the lives of all the escapees of ibis and how do they find themselves again together grappling with their passions, desires, ambitions, insecurities, sexualities, destinies. Mostly all the characters sketched by Ghosh embark on a voyage which epitomizes their psychological journey unravelling their ups and downs, their transformation from being to becoming. In order to create a diverse and multicultural flavour to the novel, Ghosh spices the narrative with Bangla, Bhojpuri, Chinese, Urdu, Pidgin, Gujrati. The novel is written on an epic scale length of 605 pages with 21 chapters and 37 characters. Amitav Ghosh is using the historical material in ibis trilogy, *The Hungry Tides*, *The River of Smoke*, and *The Flood of Fire*. The method he employs is using the neglected events from national story in a concession to subaltern practice. He gives a new fictional framework to subaltern characters. His characters were ignored/ voiceless in the Grand Narrative –History.

Keywords: Opium War, history, diaspora, subaltern, new historicism

Introduction -The novel is based on the forgotten opium war between British India and China. Colonial India's largest export was opium and the largest importer of opium was China. The main character of the novel, Neel Rattan Halder, who finds himself in a translation office of Commissioner Lin, is one of the main persons in China who precipitate the Opium War. After seizure of Opium cargo of Britishers, "rumours had reached Canton that the English were planning to send an armed fleet to China." (FOF 45)

In the novel, Ghosh represents the caste biased society through the character of Havildar Kesri Singh of 25th Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry of East India Company. Through him, we get a critical insight about the oppression of Indian soldiers under the powerful dominion of Colonial hegemony. Under the British rule, how honest and loyal soldiers suffered and had to face the oppression by whose valour and heroism, British India ruled and conquered almost half of the world. The novel not only gives a deep insight into the atrocities of war but also represents entangled and complex human relationships with their intricacies, nuances, complexities. Different facets of human life are depicted-adulterous relationship between Mrs Burnham and Zachary Reid, the pious and true love of Shireen Modi and Zadig Bey, love-affair between Paulete Lambert and Zachary Reid, the illicit relationship of Bahram Modi and a Chinese woman, and also the affair of Catherine Bradshaw and Officer Neville Mee. These relationships are beyond the social acceptance because of caste, class, cultural clash. How can a black "mystery"- a carpenter-Mr Zachary Reid fall in love with a White Lady of the house, how can the daughter of a Brigadier-Catherine Bradshaw entangle with the son of a Grocer man-Mr Mee and how can a Parsi widow of Bombay can feel for a multiple married Coptic Catholic from Egypt. The novel creates a labyrinth of excruciating passion and dilemma representing the moral hypocrisy of the Colonial Society. The novel also criticises the imperial hunger in the name of "Free Trade" and double standard of so called white man's burden in the name of promoting

equality. The novel also talks about the time in the breaking of nation-submission of China to the British forces and admitting “But they had seized it already!” (Epilogue 609). Thus China has to compensate the British for the costs and injuries perpetrated towards them. They had to bear the injuries of their invasion. ‘So it was the Chinese who had to pay for the catastrophe that had befallen their country!’ (FOF 609)

The *Flood of Fire* is a novel about subalterns, downtrodden, poor laskars, oppressed havildars, oppressed women in different strata of society. Most of the characters are voiceless but Ghosh tries to supply voice to them through his narration technique. Few of them resist against the suppression while speaking out their desires and individuality. The novel swept into 1839, when Comissioner Lin banned the sale of opium and closed the channel to Canton which led Shireen Modi, a widow of Bahram Modi to undertake a sea voyage to China to claim her deceased husband’s profits. It was a very fearless step on her part as she was living in a very conservative Parsi family. She had to abide by the decisions of her brothers and her daughters’ husbands but despite their disapprovals, she went to China and later had her secret love with a Catholic Egyptian Zaidig Bey. She knew that she would not receive the support of her cousin, Dinyar at Hong Kong but still with her powerful resistance and reaffirmation, she made it very clear to Dinyar:

For there’s one thing you should know, Dinyar: if you and other sethjis make a great fuss and create a scandal; if I am driven away from here and forced to go back to Bombay- then you can be sure that many Parsi Families are going to find out that they have unknown relatives in China. And yours will be the first. (FOF 566)

She was such a courageous woman who wanted the grave of Ah Fatt to be placed near her husband’s grave believing in their eternal bond of father and son which he had to always conceal from his Parsi relatives but death fills all the gaps. Their graves were beyond societal

approval. Even after the discomfort received from Parsi community in China, she behaved in a radical way. Her belief in herself was also re-enforced by Mrs Burnham who believed that they had not done any duty for themselves and they had done a lot for others. Shireen is not an escapist who runs away from the harsh fact that her husband had an illegitimate relationship with a Chinese woman and also had a son, Freddie. The day she got to know about this new revelation about her husband, she had a craving to see Freddie. The questions of loyalty also weave in and out of the novel because some betrayals cannot be undone.

Discussion-The *Flood of Fire* gives voice to unvoiced women characters that are on a constant search for identity. Paulette though being a white woman is suppressed by her step-father but she tries to come out of his dominion rule, breaks the age-old shackles and enters into the ship called Redruth which is on its voyage to Botanical expedition. In the whole novel, readers can see the journey of women characters witnessing the fact that Amitav Ghosh knows the importance of women in each and every aspect of society though they were ignored in the mainstream history . After receiving a letter of Mr Reid stating “I owe you a great debt of Gratitude for refusing my sincere but rash offer of Matrimony” (296), Paulette had a sense of betrayal still she did not give up.

She was a woman of unflinching belief in herself though she got heartbroken on the death of Freddie. Due to her close involvement with Bahram and his illegitimate son, she hardly felt going back to India. She wanted to live her life on her terms and conditions. According to a critic, Anne McClintock, in this world women do two-third of the world’s work, earn only 10 percent of the world’s income, and own less than 1 percent of the world’s property. (Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory)

Neel was also asked to leave all his alliances with India and foreigners by Zhong Lou-si. He feels that loyalties and alliances cannot be broken as per one’s convenience. They are

what you feel from inside. He feels: “It is madness to think that knowing a language and reading a few books can create allegiances between people.....And to whom, in any case, do I owe my loyalties?” (FOF 83)

The novel is essentially a novel of war which establishes a direct link between the destinies of India and China. It also represents the adverse effects of opium as a “free trade” both on Indian and Chinese civilians. Bahram commits suicide under this opium impact and Freddie, a young lad also gets addicted to opium. Ghosh criticises how this free trade of opium leads to the exploitation and destruction of their native economies and to some extent, their cultures. He questions why this war with the sepoys, small time traders, opium addicts, poor laskars, havildars who witnessed history were nowhere mentioned in official accounts. In this giant war, approximately 400 soldiers from Bengal Infantry crossed the seas without having clear-cut idea about their future on the sea. How did they bear every climatic change, adverse situations, dense atmosphere, cold winters, summers full of humidity and the swarm of flies, Ghosh portrays minutely with his attempt to re-write a new history, a subaltern history. Capitalistic greed of company is beautifully explained by Babbo Nob Kissin who finds it akin to lead to *pralaya*, the end of the world. Captain Mee and Kesri Singh have to wait for every order about their every move from the Company. The weapons and ammunition, their regiment is provided with is of inferior quality. In damp environment, they stop working. Kesri Singh almost meets his death due to this negligence of East India Company. The soldiers crossed so far from their native villages on the sea being precarious about the remuneration and *batta* and most prominently about their life.

He gives voice to these voiceless, subjugated, invisible, and historically repressed characters, meditates on their silence, retrieves them from the shackles of past and finally achieves a swerve by simply righting the record. He brings the marginal characters in the centre, re-writes history by creating public consciousness about historical prejudices/ biases

and injustices up- surging a new history-subaltern history. The novel has been used by many post modern writers as a source of representational power because of the close relationship existing between fiction and history. Ghosh has been an active force in bringing the historical subalters to fictional practice to frame a subaltern history. His “grafting” of the subaltern historical method into the fiction has been received by critics so enthusiastically. He gives a very alternated and sophisticated version of subaltern practice that identifies a discursive basis in the vernacular, identified as the “other”. He is not just using the subaltern method but also take up the other side of even the subaltern narratives which has been an alternative to alternative histories, giving possibility to reparation. What interest the subaltern method is the silence- the silence of the subaltern against the mainstream, i.e. Havildar Kesri Singh remains silent throughout the novel, *The Flood of Fire*, despite knowing the fact that company is misusing the Indian soldiers, they were given less *batta* and facilities in comparison to British soldiers. Even the quality of ammunition was poor which were unable to work in damp weather. This marginalisation of Indian soldiers is well exhibited at many instances in the novel. He had to suffer in the hands of Bhairo Singh and Hukam Singh. He remains an unvoiced soldier throughout the novel. Even after the death of Captain Mee, he prefers to settle in Mauritius leaving his position behind as he found the whole system unable to understand his plethora. While reflecting on Captain Mee’s death, he says: “I was a waste, such a waste, of Captain Mee’s life-and his own too. And for what? A pension? A citation?” (FOF 602).

Conclusion-Traditional historians believe that history is progressive and it is a series of linear events having causal relationship. While analysing the historical writings, one can understand the canonised version of historical narrative. These histories are written from mainstream point of view eulogising the ruling class and the elite. The suffering of the lower classes has always been ignored. This canonized version of history is seen as a truthful

representation of the past. New Historicism took a partial break from these assumptions in the 1980s. New Historicism rejects the traditional historicist notions of continuity, progress. It seeks to read literary texts parallel to non-literary or historical texts. Thus new historicism not only rejects the historical critical paradigm but also unsettles the distinction between canonical literary and other kinds of less differentially valued texts. In this approach, it is defined that literary text is produced as a representation of real into imaginary.

According to this approach, the text is over-determining in nature whose source and reference is history itself. Thus the textual real is related to historical real, not just an imaginative creation of the mind of the writer. Thus New Historicism being more flexible adapts more and more radical disruptions of the past. In New Historicism, the historical narratives of the marginalised people have been significant because their narratives and stories were not documented in the archive of institutional power. The subaltern historian Gyanendra Pandey in *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* observes:

“Some of the most sophisticated writing in the social sciences continues to reduce the lives of men and women to the play of material interests, or at other times to large impersonal movements in economy and society over which human beings have no control...the emphasis placed on these factors often leaves little room for the emotions of people, for feelings and perceptions.” (37)

Stephen Greenblatt positing resonance and wonder states: “It is the function of New Historicism continually to renew the marvellous at the heart of the resonant.” By resonance, he means “the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which as metaphor or more simply as synecdoche. It may be taken by a viewer to stand.” (Resonance and Wonder 79)

One of the ways of promoting empathy is through the act of remembering and narrating stories. Postmodern critic Lyotard in his work “The Postmodern Condition” also talks about the dismantling of all grand-narratives including history:

“After the arrival of post structuralism and later post-colonialism on the academic scene, history in its institutionalised, canonical form has been repudiated and its objective truth claims have been questioned.” (509-10)

In this new approach, Ghosh enters into the fragmented world of ordinary and un-heroic characters languishing in alienated places but the major concern of his novels is to build a relationship between culture and history. He takes this approach into his novel by retrieving the historically repressed incidents and characters where the subalterns and repressed become the point of origin in his novels. Ranjit Guha has also pointed out the four effects of subaltern practice: it “challenges the univocity of statist discourse”, “puts the question of agency...back into the narrative”, makes audible other small voices and “interrupts the telling of the dominant version” (Guha 11-12). By bringing the forgotten opium war in a fictional discourse, he tries to give voice to historically repressed events and characters in the novel, *The Flood of Fire*.

The moral shift takes place in the novel which concerns about subaltern voice. Kesri Singh is adopted as the narrator of the story and the whole fiction speaks in his own voice. His grappling issues with company, Mr Mee, Bhairo Singh, Hukam Singh, war at Hong Kong, atrocities of environment over the sea, everything is discussed through his voice though he remains silent for his situations, repression and suppression. He also remains a cog in the wheel of Mr Mee and Ms Cathy Bradshaw’s relationship; can hardly discuss it with his captain, just being a mute watcher and spectator. He prefers to being displaced from his roots by voyaging over the sea and fighting in Hong Kong with China while being unsure about the

future possibilities of this decision. Thus Ghosh inaugurates this strategy for the postcolonial historical novel which are written against a subaltern historiography by building a new world, new terrain around silence and repression. In his novels, subalterns have intriguing development, their silence itself is a voice, critiquing the denial of voice to the subaltern (Can the Subaltern Speak). He always hears a story in a suspended moment of silence of Kesri Singh. His refuge in Mauritius with Shireen, Zadig, Paulette, is an epitome of his resistance against the atrocities of war and corrupt free trade of the capitalists.

Ghosh is not just using the history as a backdrop and taking historical figures as characters rather he adopts the historical moment- opium war as the primal scene of his narrative and retrieves the experiences that had been subdued in the grand narrative –history. Thus in the process, he intervenes into the established stories of the nation and making visible the stories of suppressed ones. He uses the subaltern material and mode and invites fiction's humanisation of the historical or a process of 'individualising history'. (Sircar) He reads history and this reading is full of compassion – the quality which intervenes in history full of injustices which is generated in his novels through the insertion of fictional characters which evoke empathy and compassion. This practice seems to address one question- how such fictional representation of history influences the writing of literature and particular complexity of postcolonial novel. Ghosh addresses and represents a forgotten historical episode-opium war between British India and China by giving a critique of subalternity by addressing the aesthetic issue of the experience which a fictional text might seek and be able to retrieve. As a result, subaltern text points to itself as both empowering and erasing.

He writes of the displacement to the mainstream which enables him to see all the locations, landscapes, events and situations which have been marginal to even subaltern history. He is moving in the territories which were even demarcated by the Subaltern History Collective, the migration history belongs to as much that of India as it belonged to China. In

postcolonial framework, the novel rewrites and reviews colonial history bringing subaltern history into the mainstream giving voice and acknowledgement to the neglected and suppressed characters and locations also and through the form of fiction, the complicated interest of subalterns has been aesthetically represented in a narrative pastiche which finally leads to the “return of the repressed”. This kind of fiction gives voice to subalterns while Spivak laments the inability of subalterns to speak, this special kind of sensibility is unique in subalterns in Ghosh who are premised in fictional practice –the play of repressions within repressions enables them to have an empathetic space created as subject/narrator of the fiction which defines what subaltern speaking might mean. This is particularly seen in the case of Kesri Singh who is silent but central and whose speech is articulated by interlocutors, not in the mode of speaking on his behalf but rather preferring the mode of self-expression.

Thus the writer in his postcolonial historical fiction, uses subaltern history not only to understand historical events which have been marginalised but he also offers a powerful critique of the limitations of subaltern history, especially in its choice of events to deconstruct mainstream historiography.

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