

SUBALTERN DIMENSIONS IN AMITAV GHOSH NOVELS: A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WOMEN CHARACTERS

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Mr. MOHAMED MEERAN

*Full-time Research Scholar, Research Centre in English**Saraswathi Narayanan College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India*

The colonial creation of the binaries such as “I” and the “other,” the “colonizer” and the “colonized,” the “oppressor” and the “oppressed,” the ruler, and the subject, the native and the settlers, the working class or middle class, the lower class and also most importantly the “subaltern” became the subjects of postcolonial studies. Western people’s imposition of their own superiority on the colonial people and colonized people’s sufferings get the attention of postcolonial scholars. Amitav Ghosh is one of the writers from India, who writes about the pain and woes that the people of India especially the subaltern experience in the colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial periods.

Thomas Babington Macaulay, in the “Minutes of Indian Education,” (2nd February 1835) writes about Western superiority in a dramatic way and criticizes Indian history and their tradition and their modernity. He claims that Western science and education are “rational” and Indian science and education are “irrational.” According to him Western languages are languages of science and knowledge. Macaulay says very clearly that he just wants a group of Indian people to be imparted the knowledge of science and technology through English language and in turn they will work in future as the representatives of Western colonizers. That group of people belongs to the “elite” class of the society who has power, wealth and Western education. That “elite” society, which includes the privileged people, repeats the same actions of the colonizers even after the independence.

The historiography of the nationalist movement in India was also determined by the “elite class.” According to Ranajit Guha, “the historiography of Indian Nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism- colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist

elitism" (Guha 39). Here he refers to the elite class, colonizers and the native privileged bourgeoisie class. This clearly shows that the subaltern group is left out in the historiography of India. In fact, subaltern was born both inside and outside the domain of colonial governance and nationalist politics. Thus the politics of power is introduced by the Western colonizers and has been continued by their successors.

The voice of subaltern people, their capability of speaking and their history are important issues in subaltern studies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," argues that the subaltern cannot speak because others are "speaking for them" (Spivak 91). According to her to recover the voice of the "subaltern" is quite impossible. And even it is impossible for people to represent subalterns who are in a privileged position of the society. Yet another critic, Morris argues that some scholars believe that by digging afresh into the archives they will be able to somehow recapture the authentic voice of the subaltern.

Based on the two contradictory observations of Gayatri Spivak and Rosalind C. Morris, it can be argued that Amitav Ghosh has read between the lines to understand the subaltern sensibilities of the women characters of his novels. The women in Indian society are oppressed for their gender position but the subaltern women are doubly subjugated for their low caste or low class order and also for being women. The subaltern people are silenced and the voice of them is 'silence'. Therefore, Amitav Ghosh is not ready to leave out women characters in his novels while dealing with the subaltern or hidden history of these people from the mainstream historiography.

The women characters namely, Kusum, Nilima, Piyali, Moyana of Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* are the victims of both patriarchy and subalternity. Kusum is a girl from Sateleja, an island of Sundarbans. Her father was killed by a Tiger while foraging for firewood. He had no permit for that; hence Kusum's mother didn't get any compensation from the Government. They left the land for not getting any means for living. A land owner from that village sold Kusum's mother to a brothel house in the name of a job. Then he tried to do the same to Kusum. At this juncture Horen, a man from the village saved her and kept her under the custody of Lucibari.

Kusum's mother is sexually exploited by men for her poor condition and for being a woman. But Kusum is not like her mother. She tactfully escapes from the trap of the land owner from sexual harassments. Though, Horen gives her life, she becomes widow when Horen falls sick and die soon after their marriage. So with her son, Fokir, she goes to Morchijhapi Island, her native place. There she participates boldly in the protest when the Leftist Government tries to drive away the settler of the island in the name of ecological preservation. Though Kusum is suppressed, Amitav Ghosh has given her 'voice' to articulate her inner emotions:

The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown a flourish. (Spivak 308)

Moyana, who is an educated woman, is made to marry an uneducated Fokir, because she is a woman and there is nobody to think about her inner feelings. Moyana is self assertive. Therefore, she boldly takes a decision of rearing her little son all alone, after the death of her husband, Fokir. However, being poor these women characters though possess 'will power' yet to face the atrocities meted on them for their subaltern condition.

Nilima belongs to an aristocratic family with a good education background and based on the reforms of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, prepares a suitable ground for women to play active role outside their limited family circle. She marries Nirmal out of her choice and settles at Lusibari. She runs a NGO to support the local widows. Yet she never crosses the limited family circle and so dies very soon after her husband's death which happened in Morchijhapi massacre. Another privileged woman in *The Hungry Tide* is Piyali. She also like Nilima, chooses her profession in researching the river dolphins of the Sundarbans region. Piyali is aware of the danger behind her scientific venture, yet she boldly selects the very dangerous profession. In fact, it is their desire for continuous reaffirmation that made them strong. They never lose their faith in the essential grandeur of their existence.

Deeti is most pathetic character in Ghosh's novel, *Sea of Poppies*. She has almost loses her life as she has faced suppression in multiple forms. Deeti is pushed into poorer economic condition from her poor condition due the British imposition of the voiceless peasant of Deeti in India to grow poppy in the fields. The poppy cultivation does not profit the peasants and so they become very poor. The poppy cultivation even spoils the crop rotation. Hence, Deeti also like other peasants is pushed into a subaltern position because of colonizers atrocities on them.

Being a woman, Deeti also faces oppression in the hands of her own family men. The patriarchy of India pushes women, subalterns. Married to Hukum Singh, a crippled worker in the Ghazipur Opium Factory, the unfortunate Deeti figures out that on her wedding night, she was drugged with opium by her mother-in-law, so that her brother-in-law could consummate the marriage in the place of her infertile husband. This brother-in-law is the real father of her daughter, Kabutri. So he often gives her sexual torture. In order to escape from his trap she enters into her husband's pyre. Fortunately, she is saved by a low-caste man, Kalua. He gives shelter to her in his hut:

Gender ought not to be conducted as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow. Rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. (Butler 140)

In order to kill Deeti and Kalua her infuriated brother-in-law searches for them. He thinks that Deeti by eloping with the low-caste man has spoilt the purity of their high-caste. Driven by poverty, the caste system, and subaltern position in her own house and in the society for her position as a woman, Deeti decides to turn into indentured labourer. So she boards the Ibis along with Kalua which takes the poor Indians and Lascars as indentured labourers to Mauritius to work in the British colony.

Another women character in the novel who suffers the stings of patriarchy is Paulette. Paulette is an English woman who becomes an orphan in her young age after her father's death. So she was adopted by Burnhams. When she is in her teens, her own adopted father, Mr. Burnhams tries to seduce her. She escapes from this trap. Then Mr. Burnhams tries to marry her to his friend who is of the age of her father. Hence she runs away from the house and becomes a refugee in the Ibis. Thus, Ghosh, in *Sea of Poppies* shows the subaltern condition of not only the poor Deeti but also the privileged Paulette.

In *River of Smoke* also the women's subalternity is delineated by Ghosh. The important women characters in this novel are Chi-mei, Shriineen and Paulette. As an uneducated woman Shriineen has no other option but to depend on her husband, Bahram. In fact, they have no cordial marital life and for them sex is an aid only to bear children. Being rich and pious, Shriineen strictly follows the Indian social and religious norms and so she could not understand the sexual needs of her husband. Though she does not know about Bahram's extra marital relationship, on behalf of her, the readers get sympathy at for her subaltern condition in her own home for being a woman.

The second pathetic woman character in this novel is Chi-mei. Being a boat woman the Chinese government does not offer them to get education and to do a decent job. She is also a young widow and has a little daughter. She resides in Canton. In Canton the foreign women are not allowed to enter in because the local Chinese women are used by the foreign traders to gratify their sexual needs. So Chi-mei has no other option but to do prostitution. Luckily, she becomes the sweet-heart of Bahram who considers her as his wife and he comes to know the meaning of sex only through her. He keeps in her in good condition. Even Bahram wants their son, Ah Fatt to get education. But being a fisherman, he has no right to study but to hold the fishing rod. This subaltern condition of women and their children in Canton has been painfully brought out by Amitav Ghosh through Chi-mei.

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