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**AMITAV GHOSH AND THE THEME OF SUBALTERNITY**

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**Article Received:** 20/06/2024

**Article Accepted:** 24/07/2024

**Published Online:** 25/07/2024

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.6.146

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**Abstract:**

Amitav Ghosh's literary works including fictional and non-fictional works represent both the colonial and postcolonial society. They also highlight the patterns of history, subalternity, and issues of crossing national boundaries, the meaning of political freedom and impacts of globalization and dynamics of displacement in his unparalleled style. Amitav not only describes the realistic picture of certain sections of the society and narrates their struggle to overcome their pathetic situation in order to overcome their humiliation. He focuses on the fight of the subalterns for their cultural and social identity and their tussle to move them from margin to the centre. Amitav's innovative textual experiments offered new insights and interpret the complexity of colonial and postcolonial domains. The present paper tries to focus on the subalternity in his select novels viz *In An Antique Land*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide*.

**Keywords:** colonial, postcolonial, subalternity, globalization, humiliation

**Introduction:**

Amitav Ghosh is the first recipient of Jnanpith award in English literature and the 54<sup>th</sup> Jnanpith awardee in the series. He was the recipient of Padma Shri award, Central Sahitya Akademi Award, the Ananda Puraskar and international awards like *Prix Medicis etranger* and France Arthur C. Clarke Awards. His creativity can be divided into two main streams fictional and non-fictional. Some of his fictional works are *The Shadow Lines*, *The Circle of Reason*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, *Sea of Poppies*, and nonfictional works include *In an Antique Land*, *At Large in Burma*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *Countdown*, *The Great Derangement* and *Imam and the Indian*. His works question different roles, freedom extended to the marginalized and the subalterns. They enquire into the identity of subalterns in the hegemonic society.

The voice of the subalterns, their struggles and sacrifices, which had gone unacknowledged in history, began to take centre stage in Amitav Ghosh's literary works in a new way. They were made as prime figures in his writings by making them the central character of his narrative, allowing them to speak out against the repressive

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forces of their society. Amitav has realistically depicted the miserable and terrible position of the subalterns in these novels. The horrible faces of poverty, homelessness, exploitation, and oppression are also highlighted. Amitav shows concern to the subalterns who were not given priority in the history. His characters are the representative of subalterns as they suffer because of their insignificant position in the society. They are ill-treated and humiliated in the hegemonic society.

The characters like Alu, the orphan in *The Circle of Reason*, Rajkumar, the orphan street boy, and the servant maids in *The Glass Palace*, the slave Bomma in the *In an Antique Land*, Nirmal and Piyali in *The Hungry Tide*, Murugan, Mangala and Latchman in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Amitav not only describes the realistic picture of certain sections of the society and narrates their struggle to overcome their pathetic situation in order to overcome their humiliation. He focuses on the fight of the subalterns for their cultural and social identity and their tussle to move them from margin to the centre. Amitav's innovative textual experiments offered new insights and interpret the complexity of colonial and postcolonial domains.

Amitav's writings deal in the epic themes of travel and diaspora, history and memory, political struggle and communal violence, love and loss, while all the time crossing the generic boundaries between anthropology and art work. 'In An Antique Land' by Amitav has two parts in which the first part is autobiographical in its narration. It is an account of his anthropological research trip to Egypt, which describes his cultural isolation in the antique land and the second part is about Bomma, the Indian slave of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant from Tunisia. In his effortless time travel strategy adopted while narrating in this novel as a protagonist, he himself actually goes to Egypt. It took nearly 10 years for Ghosh to find out the association between Ben Yiju and their personalities and also their respective backgrounds in the course of establishing this link between Ben Yiju and the slave Bomma. He recurses to mutual interaction between Literature and History. Amitav learns Arabic in Tunisia which helped him a lot in deciphering the colloquial dialect Judeo-Tunisian Arabic which was a medieval dialect of Arabian language written in Hebrew script to rebuild the story of Abraham and his Slave Bomma of Tulunadu by the help of letters between Abraham Ben Yiju and his three business Associates Khalaf-ibn-Ishaq, Yusuf-ibn-Abraham and Madmunibnal-Hasen-ibn-Badar. In the year 1132 AD Ben Yiju reached and settled in Mangalore and married Ashu who was Nair by caste. Based on the three letters in the name of the Slave, Prof. Goiteion suggests the name to Bomma which was supposed to be derived from Brahma the creator of the entire cosmos as per Hindu mythology. But Prof. Viveka Rai of Mangalore University explains that the Slave was from a matrilineal community of Tulunadu, having practice of worshipping spirit Deities known as Bhutas and suggested affirmatively that name of the Slave was Bomma.

The interesting and astonishing fact was that slave Bomma works for Two dinars per month, but discharging great responsibility by going across the Ocean to faraway lands and executes transcontinental maritime business with highly valuable

goods. Ben Yiju treats Bomma with utmost respect and calls him Sheik in the later years clearly depict the rise in social status of the Bomma. That is from an ordinary Slave to a respectable and honest person who helps in the promotion of business thousands of miles away from Mangalore. Though Ben Yiju a patriarchal Jew from Egypt and Bomma from a matrilineal cult of Tulunadu were in good understanding and enjoyed the companionship. During 12th century business thrived between Egypt and India, irrespective of Linguistic and Religio-cultural differences and both Ben-Yiju and Bomma had proper understanding and mutual trust among them. But this trade links with India were shattered, when was Vasco-da-Gama landed in India in 1498. The Death blow caused by this event exterminated the times of Ben-Yiju, his wife Ashu and his Slave Bomma.

Amitav Ghosh was indignant to the military force used by the Portuguese to seize the trade over Indian Ocean and their monopolization and the subsequent colonization that gave a death knell to maritime trade. Raising consumerism also affected the age-old socio-cultural structure in Egypt and this pained the Amitav Ghosh who is very much interested in Egyptology. He employed a type of social research called Ethnography by virtue of which he lived for some time in Lataifa and he visited Egypt for three times. During his stay in Egypt, he studied their culture from the close quarters. He experienced the cultural clash and also experienced the opinions that evoked the cultural confrontations between the two Nations namely India and Egypt. Amitav Ghosh felt sorry for the disappearance of the times of Ben-Yiju and Bomma forever on the Earth.

Amitav Ghosh comments on the impact of consumerism and the apparent shift in the behaviour of fellaheen and change in rustic way of living and rapid change that made them consumers of the modern-day technological gadgets and also turning of their behaviour to be named as consumer behaviour. After 7 years when Ghosh went back to Egypt, he found major changes in the two villages, Lataifa and Nashawy. He finds the TV, food processor, a pair of calculators, a transistor radio a couple of cassette players as an object of change in the house of Abu-Ali and also instead of the old dilapidated house a brilliantly painted three-story building was found and in the place of an old moped, there appeared a Toyota truck.

This changed world in Latifa and Nashawy is not only confined to the Egypt but is also observed in India and other parts of the world this disruption of old-world offended Amitav Ghosh and he points out to the contemporary world. During the end of his second visit to Egypt, before going to Cairo he wants to visit the tomb of Sid-Abu-Hasira but he was abruptly taken by the police and interrogated by the police officer. This police officer was unable to understand the motto of Amitav Ghosh but learnt about Ben-Yiju and Bomma reveals that these two men of the past had an obscure history and interlaced histories linked to the countries India and Egypt and in the same way Interface of Jewish, Muslim and Hindu Religions.

But the police officer was reluctant to understand the sentiments of Amitav Ghosh and brushes out that these superstitions and beliefs will disappear as the development progress. Ghosh quits the place thinking that this is indeed a heavy price for the progress and development encroaching all the parts of the world.

The novel concludes with Ghosh's last visit to Egypt in 1990 that is after, 3-weeks after the invasion of Iraq over Kuwait. One Mr. Nabeel was optimistic and he hopes that he will earn enough money to renovate his house. Thus, it can be concluded that this book is the brilliant presentation of changing civilisations fading cultures and under the influence of pre-empting, so called progressive development and change of times. As far as the genre of the book we can cite, the statements of the Amitav Ghosh on the book- In An Antique Land in an interview— "No this time I'm not writing a novel. Not even a sociology, history or Belles letters based on historical research. My new book cannot be described as any one of these it's a strange sort of work within the parameters of history. "I have tried to capture a story, a narrative, without attempting write a historical novel. You may say, as a writer I have ventured on technical innovation". (Dhawan 24).

Amitav Ghosh unearthed the story of slave Bomma which was masked by the annals of prominent history which mentions about Crusader Army. The silence of Bomma (In an Antique Land) is audible in the voice in the Geniza documents.

The plight and anguish of the Indians in Burma during Second World War is wonderfully portrayed in *The Glass Palace*. The novel contains a proliferation of characters which include the privileged as well as the subaltern. The royal family- Thebaw, Queen Supayalat and the Burmese princesses; and commoners like Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John and Uma are united ironically by the gales of colonial displacement. These protagonists forced by the rough historical winds are displaced from Burma to India, Malaya, Singapore and back again, each time involving a pattern of panic, crowded mobs and soldiers on the march as already illustrated in the very opening of the novel. They are narrated in the words of Rajkumar. Rajkumar says: "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).

The story of the novel *The Hungry Tide* centres on two principal characters named Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi and Piyali Roy, an Indo-American scientist and their encounter with the people of 'tide community'. Kanai visits his aunt Nilima, an activist in a Non-Government Organization. Nilima maintains a hospital in the island. Piyali Roy comes to the same place to study the life of dolphins. Both Kanai and Piyali were of the common interest to study the life of oppressed sections of the society. They meet an illiterate inhabitant of the region Fokir who was ready to be their guide during their stay. The readers could listen to the plight of the

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migrants through the words of Kusum in *The Hungry Tide*. This is clearly explained in the words of Kusum, "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).

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" (Haldar, 308).

Ghosh has given the subaltern agency in *The Calcutta Chromosome* and attempted to broaden the scope of the Subaltern Studies Group. Despite being subalterns, Mangala and Lakhan assisted Ronald Ross in his discoveries. Their actions appear to be in direct opposition to scientific Malaria study, yet they help to drive the investigation by supplying vital but scattered information that leads Ross to the final discovery. As a result, it establishes that the power discourse is based on the subaltern's agency. Subalterns have their own mechanism to protect them from extinction. Laakhan and Mangala ascended to positions of prominence as knowledge manipulators. Ghosh was able to bridge the Western and Eastern divide by devising a plan in which the underclass assisted in the direction and production of scientific research's final findings. "History can be seen as the plotting of human experience and agency and agency allows the subaltern to reclaim his silenced role in the narrative of history." (Khair 309)

Amitav's 'The Hungry Tide' is on the socio-political concern of the marginalized sections of the society. The novel marks the post-partition movement of people who moved from East Bengal to West Bengal. When the Morichjhapi event occurred, these refugees were battling for their lives. After the island's water and food sources were cut off, they were forced to escape. Nirmal, a rebel, was inspired by the Morichjhapi incidents and the silence around them to write everything down so that history could be remembered through the Kanai. The government forces ruthlessly suppress the event, and Kusum is slain as a result. As a Marxist, Nirmal believed in reconciliation across class lines in order to bring the poor, the other, and the privileged, the self, together. The Morichjhapi event is a violent attack against subalterns.

Amitav Ghosh ponders the British Empire's might and essence of power, which changed the destiny of countless across the subcontinent. 'What immense, inexpressible force it took to shift so many people—emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, and policemen—from one location to another. Why? Why are people being transported from one area to another, forced to drive rickshaws, and forced to sit blind in exile?' (43-44) Another part of Indian history was also examined in this work. In discussing the colonial past in terms of what it meant for those who had joined the British Army, the history of the Indian Army under British Rule is completely overlooked. In the narrative, Arjun and Hardy are two characters

whose class and agency shift over time and space. The novel's timeline allows for the grotesque manifestations of exploitation from colonialism to neocolonialism to be explored. It's paradoxical that subalterns (subordinate officers) in the British Indian Army, like Arjun, were fighting neither to defend nor to expand India's territory. They were only assisting the British colonial expansion policy. Amitav Ghosh most vocally raises the topic of identity, subalternity, colonialism, and belongingness through the character of Arjun. Ghosh tells out that such exploitation of people and location was also carried out by Indians.'

Amitav through his works provide enough material to read subaltern history as a counter discourse to national identity. He challenges the social stigma, hegemonic society and fight for the rights of the subaltern people. His ideas try to dethrone the considerations of the canonised opinion foisted by colonial rules. He considers migration and dislocation are the results of the colonials and a curse to the oppressed people who can be named as subalterns. He further asks the validity of borders on the earth which divide the people into two groups, native and subalterns through his works. He raises his voice in support of the subalterns who are often pushed forcibly to the margin and made them marginalized sections of the society.

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