

History of the Deprived in the Select Novels of Amitav Ghosh

S. Gnana Roselin, Ph.D. Research Scholar
Dr. Nirmala Manuel



Courtesy:

https://www.google.mu/search?q=Amitav+ghosh+images&rlz=1C1CHBF_enIN781IN781&tbn=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=GvauelIEMXyprqM%253A%252CZxOImVv79LJBwM%252C&usg=AI4_-kQs5M0sOC6sJPJJv7_367QZcc0bsQ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj2joKwt97eAhVPzBoKHRgbBLYQ9QEwCHoECAUQFA#imgrc=GvauelIEMXyprqM:

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is widely recognised for his major novels in which he has brought out his concern for his deprived section, subaltern, marginalized and helpless migrant. The problems of

these unprivileged class of the society are explored through his novels. The voice of the deprived section, the voice of the migrants, the voice of the subaltern, the voice of the colonised, their struggle and sacrifices which went unrecorded in the annals of the history get a prominent place in the novels of Ghosh but in a different way. Through his writings, he provides to the subaltern, the marginalized, the colonised, the downtrodden and the helpless migrant a centre stage by making them as pivotal characters. Ghosh provides them space so that these unprivileged groups can raise their voice against the oppressive forces of the society.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, the deprived, Ignorant, Colonised, Refugees and Marginalized

Introduction

The paper is analyzed under four categories. The first category is the representation of the Ignorant. The second category is the representation of the Colonised. The third category is the representation of the Refugees and the fourth category is the representation of the Marginalized.

History has failed to record the ordinary people's history. Only public history is considered worthy of historic record. The private history of an individual is conveniently side lined. Thus, history has failed to record the ordinary people's history. On the other hand, the creative writers compensate to come to terms in their novels with private histories. The creative writer, Ghosh takes it up as his duty and traces the lives of numerous Individual citizens who are affected by public history and records the ordinary people's history in his novels.

The first category is the representation of the Ignorant. It explores how ordinary people are affected by historical events. Ghosh attempts to bring out how an event in history shatters ordinary people's lives. He also points out that the history of the nation shallows up the story of the individual. Ghosh traces in his novel *The Shadow lines* the unrecorded personal history of Tridib who was murdered in the riot of 1964. He lost his life as a helpless victim in the communal hatred. After fifteen years later in 1979, the narrator in the novel attempts to recover the traces of the event in the Newspaper of the Nehru memorial library, New Delhi. The narrator does not find any mention of Tridib's death in the newspapers. He was surprised that only a small column in the newspaper was dedicated to the event in history, "Twenty-nine killed in riot" (223). Thus, Ghosh points out that, it seems private story was not at all important for the nation's memory.

The Shadow Lines is Ghosh's second novel. Ghosh has secured a place as one of the India's most celebrated author's in Indian writing in English. This novel straddles the border between history and fiction. His historical world is with restless narrative motion. Most of his characters are travellers. His major works direct their narrative force towards historical facts.

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* has both the historical and the fictional alike. The partition of the country and the Khulna riots are employed by Ghosh as events in history in the novel. It is employed to balance the consequences on his imaginary characters. The novel basically depicts the personal

lives of the middle-class people. The novel is focused on the major theme of the partition of India. It depicts its tragic effect on the ignorant people. It brings out the consequence it created on the minds and emotions of the people. Ghosh's point of view is that partition in nation does not solve the basic problems of people. It does not soothe the anguish of displaced persons. According to Ghosh, partition does not end the problems between people; instead the partitioned people face a lot of existential problems. Thamma, one of the characters in the novel, *The Shadow Lines*, inquires whether she would be able to see the boundary line – the line between, the two nations, India and East Pakistan.

Thamma's question is actually the author's observation on the futility of political boundaries and the purposelessness of the socio-political movements, resulting in the deaths of many innocent people. Thamma never finds any difference between the Dhaka she left years before and the place she has visited now as a foreigner. The question that she reiterates throughout her visit is "Where's Dhaka? Then Tridib Teases her". Thus, Thamma fails to understand the justification of creating two nations.

The most poignant memory in the novel is Tridib's death. Such an important memory lives in the minds of his relatives-Thamma, Robi and May Price. Robi, the narrator's cousin in the novel is disturbed and wakes up in his sleep with the images of killing of Tridib by the mob.

The character Thamma, Tridip's grandmother loses her love towards Dhaka. Robi, Tridip's brother get shaken by the violence of his brother's death. The incident affects him so deeply that he turns into a mute sufferer. He has only fragmented memories through nightmares.

Thus, Ghosh through the novel points out that freedom is a mirage. If freedom were possible through killing, then the character Tridib's death would have set him free. He understands that even the division and the subdivision of the continent cannot change the dismal situation. Both the narrator and the reader discover that the world is not a simple place that can be seen in an atlas. In the novel, the past, present and the future combine together erasing any kind of line of demarcation.

Thus, the ending of the novel leaves the reader with the sense that fact or fiction is but provisional. The novel *The Shadow lines* ends but not conclude. It raises serious questions about our roots, about our identities, and at the same time questions: Why war in the world? Why riots among nations? Why partition among countries? Why borders between nations? Why Shadow lines?

The second category is the representation of the Colonized. Ghosh in his novel *The Sea of Poppies* paints a picture of the human devastation caused by imperialism. Opium was grown in India during 1830 in parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and sold by the East India Company to China. The characters are surrounded with the presence of opium in their lives. This makes the title of the novel apt. Opium is produced from the poppies and every soul is living in the "sea" of

“poppies.” These poppies are the controlling factors of their lives. From the intake of opium to the cultivation and the trade of it is found in the novel. The colonised people are forced to grow opium in their farms. The British Empire in the novel is shown to be interested only in the trade of opium as it is a source for them for the generation of the profits. There is a prominent presence of the opium in the novel and we can say that it is the one and only factor which brings agonies in the lives of the characters. Deeti the protagonist in the novel is married to Hukum Singh, a high caste Rajput, who works for the British, always remains under the influence of opium and collapses his life in the opium packing factory.

The novel opens in a remote village. Deeti, the first character is introduced by Ghosh. Ghosh presents Deeti as a straightforward, religious lady, gentle mother and a competent housewife. The situation of Deeti’s life presented as pathetic, full of struggle for existence. She is married to an addicted husband Hukum Singh, a high caste rajput who works for the British and collapses at the opium-packing factory. In this factory, the smell of poppies makes the workers as slow as ants in honey and later on one by one passes away.

Deeti’s husband is a victim of the British two times over: A sepoy who served them in campaigns overseas, crippled by his battle wounds, he has turned to opium for the pain, which has crippled him further. You should know, he tells Deeti of his cherished opium pipe, that this is my first wife. She’s kept me alive since I was wounded: if it weren’t for her I would not be here today. I would have died of pain, long ago.

The character Deeti could not understand how “money is no longer treated as money”. But later she makes it clear that money has become capital to earn more money. When Deeti was informed about her dying husband, she rushes in terror through the Ghaziapur factory in search of her dying husband. She is terrified by the factory and the entire process of extraction of opium. She understands the potency of opium. She realizes the importance of the trade and the British secret strength. The European empire became very powerful and it led to territorial expansion. Thus, Deeti and her addicted husband Hukam Singh in the novel effectively portray the human devastation caused by imperialism.

Ghosh points out that opium ruined lives. It ruined the lives of the poor farmers. The food crops and vegetables were not cultivated. There were only poppies in all the farms. To feed their family the poor farmers took more debt. Opium broke the very fabric of the society. Hunger pressed them so much. So, in order to survive they get on the ship Ibis and sign the agreement to work on the farms in some unknown lands.

Ghosh thus juxtapose historical evolution of Indian society with the contemporary of Indian polity. He says colonialism has harmed Indian society. He believes it has brighter side too. Colonialism has amalgamated Indian ethos with the European sensibilities. He believes that on social level there was a synthesis of societies. It is the socio-cultural evolution of Indian subaltern society.

It is a saga of the struggle of the poor people of colonial India. Thus Ghosh has ventured into an ugly area of Indian history. Ghosh shows to the modern reader the colonial past.

The third category is the representation of the disintegrated refugees. Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* presents the eviction of thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island by the government of West Bengal in 1978-79. These refugees are affected by partition. They are from Bangladesh. Politics interferes into their plight. The government assured them that once in power they will allow them to settle in West Bengal but ironically once in power the government completely lost interest in the poor people. So the refugees settled themselves in the Sunderbans. There the government claimed that the area is a reserved area for the preservation of tigers and thus the refugees remain unwanted all over.

In the novel, *The Hungry Tide*, Nirmal's diary contains stories of the refugee's lives and their struggles in Morichjhapi. Nirmal's diary depicts individuals' pathetic condition. These poor refugees from Bangladesh live in concentration camps. It is also known as Permanent Liability Camps. There they meet with great opposition from the local people. The local people attack them with bows and arrows.

The character Nirmal documents the Morichjhapi incident. Regarding the incident AnnuJalais' article "Dwelling on Morichjhapi" is an authentic piece of history based on interviews with the islanders, brings out the politics behind the rehabilitation of refugees and the government's attempts to evict them from the area. They proclaimed that the refugees illegally occupied the forest area.

Morichjhapi is an island. It is a place reserved for Bengal tigers. In 1978, thousands of refugees were settled down there. They cleared the mangroves to build huts and bandhs. They are very poor people. They were oppressed and exploited by Muslims and upper caste Hindus.

The government of west Bengal viewed them as squatters, thugs, and land grabbers and so they ordered them to vacate. This incident resulted in a confrontation between the poor refugees and the government. It was alleged that the left front government used its party cadres and goons along with its police to disband the settlements.

This shows the heartbreaking condition of these Marginalized people. Kusum was killed by the police cordon. Thousands of people were killed in war. Kusum faced the brutality of the authorities evicted on her. She refused to leave the land. But she revolted against the war thrust on the people of Morichjhapi.

The novel thus institutes a democratic order. Ghosh decentres the colonial history. The novel thus brings out the subaltern history and the realities through innovative use of language. It also establishes a democracy of words. He also weaves the present and the past, the childhood and the

adulthood. The novel deals with contemporary issues. It throws light on the displaced and their resistance against the oppressive order.

The fourth category is the representation of the Marginalized. In the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* Ghosh tries to bring recognition to the local people. Ghosh through his character Murugan questions the malaria research conducted by the British Doctor Ronald Ross. Ronald Ross entered the Indian Medical Service in 1881. In India, Ross worked in many places like Mysore, Madras; he also served in Burma War and in the Andaman Islands. In India, mosquitoes engaged Ross one way or the other. When he stayed in Bangalore, he noticed more mosquitoes which constantly buzzed around the rooms. So, he formulated theories of malaria. Ghosh brings out certain possibilities whereby the marginalised people may have played important aides in helping Ronald Ross in discovering the malaria. The reason is, in his laboratory Ross pricked the fingers of the Indian people who came to him with fever and he spent hours peering through his microscope at their blood smears. When he was not getting Indian patients, he even offered a rupee for a prick. He even captured the mosquitoes and tried to induce them to bite malaria patients. He even put the patient under a mosquito net and released the mosquito to bite them. Thus, Ghosh substantiates his claim with the view that behind Ross were some downtrodden Indian people who worked with him and helped him in discovering the malaria. Ghosh's point is they are not acknowledged. Ghosh mentions these people's history as marginalised history and he points out that these marginalized people are not been given their due. Regarding the history of the marginalized people Gordon Scott comments as "The novel is in many ways clearly interested in the struggle to make the unknown known".

The novel revolves around the British Doctor Ronald Ross and his discovery of malaria, which took place in Calcutta. The novel introduces Antar. He is an Egyptian working in International Water Council, New York. He finds a damaged identity card, and tries to retrieve the details with the help of his powerful computer Ava. This powerful computer traces the identity card. It belongs to Murugan, a former colleague of Antar. Murugan mysteriously disappeared in Calcutta in 1995. Murugan had been researching on the British Doctor Ronald Ross discovery that malaria is transmitted through mosquito bite (1857-1932). Murugan believes that Ross's discovery had been helped by an Indian group.

Ghosh doubts about Ronald Ross's *Memoir* is that, particularly Ross's refusal to Supply any detail about his Indian people working with him in his laboratory, so Ghosh believes that there are possibilities, and so Ghosh constructs a story out of these silences. (62)

Ghosh points out; Ross has failed to acknowledge his local assistants' identity and contribution. Ross has given only a one-sided description of the discovery. Ghosh points out its ironical. It only reveals the suppressive collaboration of the Indian people by the British Doctor Ronald Ross.

In order to show the triumph of East over West and give words to the concerns of the marginalized, Ghosh gives voice to the marginalized. The Indian woman has the upper hand, in contrast to the privileged European scientist. And the fact that it is a woman, who spearheads the research work, implies the victory of Mangala. It may be perceived as an attempt by Ghosh to bridge the gap between the privileged and the Indian marginalized class,

Ghosh demolishes the false concept of class superiority. The characters Mangala and Laakhan are shown as Indian people who stood at the back of Ronald Ross as his backbone helping him. Ghosh brings the underprivileged to the focus of attention. Ghosh tries to bring recognition to the local people who help the spade work for all the grand discoveries.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Calcutta Chromosome*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Pub. 1996.
---. *The Hungry Tide*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Pub, 2004.
---. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: PUP, 1997.
---. *Sea of Poppies*. New Delhi: Viking, 2008.

Secondary Sources

- Dhawan, R.K. *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999.
Lobo, Norbert. *Migration and Migrants*. New Delhi: Mohit Pub, 2004.

S. Gnana Roselin

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Reg. No.10430
PG & Research Department of English
Holy Cross College (Autonomous)
Nagercoil – 629 004
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012.
Tamil Nadu, India
roselingnana02@gmail.com

Dr. Nirmala Manuel

Research Supervisor
Principal (Retd.)
Women's Christian College
Nagercoil – 629 001
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012
Tamil Nadu, India.