

## HISTORY AND ITS CONSEQUENCE ON THE CHARACTERS AS SEEN IN AMITAV GHOSH'S SELECT NOVELS: A BRIEF STUDY

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History in Amitav Ghosh's works is not only a narrative of historical events but also a means of establishing an interconnection between the historical events and the ordinary individuals living during the times. The individual is hit by a historical impact and his story needs narration as much as to the country he belongs. Amitav Ghosh tries to reject the traditional mode of writing history and presents largely a re-visiting and a re-examination of history. Therefore it becomes necessary to understand how Ghosh uses facts and fiction in his writings. He presents the past of the nation as a subject matter that belongs to one and all – the aristocratic and the common people, the rulers and the ruled alike. Ghosh therefore displays the traumatic scene of Partition from the eyes of ordinary characters like Thamma *The Shadow Lines* and Kusum *The Hungry Tide*. Thamma, especially affected by Partition is a character very much part of the Indian and East Pakistan history. Kusum sacrifices her life for the sake of her people yet history has no place for her.

The lives and experiences of common people is that where Amitav Ghosh finds the key to a reconsideration or a re-invention of history. For example the Partition of the country has not only been a great set back in the history of the country but also a national and individual loss that was thoroughly damaging. It is an abrasion that has not yet healed in the hearts of people and to this day it remains a catastrophe that has found no cure. However at the end of all, the little yet diverse and heartrending stories of ordinary people that are usually results of an event of history fail to make a mark in historical records. What is documented and remembered is only public history in the eyes of the historic Partition that divided the country into two. Other than mention of great loss of lives and property, history has failed to follow and carry over stories of ordinary individuals seriously affected by this public history. Does any historian mention the impact of Partition on common people like Thamma *The Shadow Lines* or the refugees in *The Hungry Tide* who were made to pay the price of national history they have no share in? The answer is in the negative for it is only public history that has been found worthy of record while private history of an individual and family is conveniently sidelined.

Amidst the backdrop of the riots of 1964 that broke out in Khulna district, *The Shadow Lines* traces the unrecorded personal history of the Datta Chaudhary family who lost their son, Tridib in the riots. Though the Khulna riot finds very less significance as a historical event for

the world to remember, Ghosh's intention to give narrative space can be read in two ways. First of all, he attempts to show how a small event in history shatters ordinary people's lives and secondly he is able to highlight the element of transgression that transforms an ordinary event to be seen now in a new light. For example, the narrator is surprised that only a small column in the newspaper is dedicated to the event in history that brings about "a timeless moment in the tortured consciousness of the [Datta Chaudhary] family". Robi, the narrator's cousin wakes up at night with images of the killing of Tridib by the mob. Thamma, the grandmother loses all vigour and love for her native land, Dhaka, the country she wants to fight for liberation. The nationalist in her that devoted her love towards Dhaka almost comes to an end with this intrusion and inference of the public event into her private world. Again, the riot in Khulna may be a mere local riot that bears no consequence in comparison to the other great uprisings and upheavals in the world.

Furthermore, in making an effort to touch aspects of the past and challenging traditional views of history, Ghosh accommodates marginalised individuals and their stories thereby subverting great historical narratives for alternate views of history. Such a revisionist approach creates possibilities of an alternative perspective and reading of a historical event as may be seen in his novel *Chromosome* where Ghosh utilises Murugan's research titled: "An Alternative Interpretation of Late 19th Century Malaria Research: Is there a Secret History?" to support his standpoint and conviction. What Ghosh does through his character, Murugan, is to look at the malarial research as a discovery not solely made by Ronald Ross. Ghosh tries to draw attention to certain potential whereby the marginalised section may have played important aides to the historical figures of the time. Ghosh substantiates his claim through Murugan who was of the view that behind Ross were some catalytic people like Mangala and Laakhan, who drove Ross to carry out the research.

The fictional re-reading and revisionist approach of history, as seen in Ghosh's works should not be understood as a move to deny any historical event. It may subvert history and challenge traditional history but the purpose behind the whole effort is to merely re-examine and reinterpret existing events in history. Though Ghosh does not question the accuracy of conventional history, he certainly questions the lack of incomplete representation of the significant and the insignificant, the powerful and the weak alike. He therefore views history in its totality without being prejudiced or biased.

Amitav Ghosh is sensitive towards gender poise and stability in his presentation of re-examined history. Women, as many feminist historians point out, have been pushed to the margins or wiped out by male historians. History has a predisposition to disregard women and their involvement. However it is important to represent women in history in order to have a deep and balanced understanding of history. Ghosh's re-examination also helps restore women to history. Ghosh is responsive towards views, opinions and contributions of women characters, who are not only great historical figures but particularly ordinary middle class women. His works restore women's perspectives of the past into fictional narrative, thereby, remapping

their history.

Thamma in *The Shadow Lines* is troubled about the freedom of her country from the authority of the British rule and suppression. She is awestruck and spellbound by nationalism and freedom of her country even as a young girl in college. Her nationalistic passion and love for her country is seen in her deep-rooted desire to work with the freedom fighters, to cook for them, to wash their clothes, to run their errands, in fact to do anything that would be of help to them. Another woman character, Mangala in *Chromosome*, represents knowledge, strength and power. Mangala, the brain behind the malaria research is never given her due recognition for records only project the discovery of malaria made by Ronald Ross. Ghosh re-examines history by drawing in significant possibilities of the contributions made by Mangala who could have been the real discoverer of the malaria vector. Uma Devi in *The Glass Palace* emerges as a woman who lends her voice to the practice of non-violence for the fulfilment of her cherished dream of political freedom. Kusum in *The Hungry Tide*, sacrifices her life in the Morichjhapi incident, fighting for the cause of the refugees. Nilima (*The Hungry Tide*) is the woman who works for the development of the people of Lusibari, a town created by Sir Daniel Hamilton, to live in peace, concord and egalitarianism.

The voices of these common people that can no longer be cowed also reveal such an anxiety of not being heard to. The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* presents unpleasant effects of nationalism through his grandmother, who initially supports nationalist ideology, but later turns against it after Tridib's death in the riots. Hence Ghosh re-examines nationalism through a projection of post-independence loss of faith in nationalism springing from experiences of Partition, migration and displacement. Ghosh's postcolonial re-interpretation of the past also reflects or asserts a postmodernist disbelief in traditional history, an indispensable characteristic of re-inventing of history. Post-modernist school of history challenges traditional history and its grand narratives, as one that is too imperfect and constricted.

Ghosh is on a look out for right of entry and accommodation in the history of a nation of nationalistic fervor of ordinary people because nationalism is implanted not only in the hearts of the great and powerful but also the masses. They are equally mindful of the need to fight against imposing rule of the British government as their historical counterparts. Patriotism in his protagonists does emerge very distinctly. His central character is an ordinary man who wants to make his presence felt, his voice heard. Ghosh's sturdy assurance that nationalism also burns in the heart and spirit of unhistorical figures makes him give voice to their patriotic zeal. Hence his greatest and utmost concern in including history into his works of fiction is to bring to the fore ordinary individuals, who search for examples to create history for themselves. Refusing to allow his individuality to be inundated in the surge of history the ordinary citizen of a nation attempts to carve a place for himself in the period of history. Thus Ghosh's novels re-create the ordinary citizen as a distorted and transgressed entity.

A reassessment of history in the content of Amitav Ghosh may also be viewed from the

perception of characters that are lured and enticed by the coloniser's eminence and fascinating life styles. The colonisers have rooted themselves so strongly amidst the colonised that the latter anxiously wait for an opportunity to be of service to the former. Ghosh brings out the apprehension of the colonised in some characters. Arjun in *The Glass Palace* is wild with joy when he is recruited in the British Army. Arjun feels a great sense of accountability towards his office and also thinks that he represents the rest of the country by helping his colonisers. It is this misapprehension of the colonised, who has been duped by the coloniser that needs a reinterpretation of history. Ghosh may have intentionally brought in this characteristic only to accentuate the need to reframe the erroneous assurance and duties that the colonised have been led to. This is a mirage that needs to be broken and Arjun in *The Glass Palace* is brought face to face with this reality. Ghosh wants to illustrate the exploitation of the British and the snares that they have laid for the confused colonised other. Amitav Ghosh does accomplish in his attempt, when Arjun cuts off his relationship from his colonisers and sacrifices his life for his country. Thus it becomes critical to dissolve the temptation and setup faced by the colonised to serve the coloniser. Nationalist fervor has to be re-examined as an experience that is felt not only by historical figures but by unhistorical figures alike. They are allowed to emerge as heroic as their historical counterparts in their nationalist zeal. He re-examines history in a way that aligns itself with feminist historians and their sentiments. Ghosh's insightful approach to the marginalized sections of the society shows his concern for the presence of women and the subaltern subject in his texts. He depicts his women characters as strong willed, unwavering and gifted with leadership qualities. A re-examination of history is incomplete without presenting the space that Ghosh has carved out for his women characters. Thus the past cannot be segregated from the present, since effects of the past lie closely embedded in the present. Ghosh's works reflect a continuous process of communication between the present and the past. This reading of history has satisfactorily been dealt with by Ghosh.

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