Study of Subalternity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*

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Amitav Ghosh is one of the few post-colonial writers who has expressed in his work 'a growing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of colonised people as they try to carve out a space in this vast world. His novels voice almost all post-colonial concerns of our period, namely, 'the search for identity, the need for independence and the difficult relationship with colonial culture, the rewriting of colonial past, an attempt at creating a new language and a new narrative form and the use of personal memory to understand communal past.' (Albettarazi:-http//w.w.w.lingue.unibo.it/postcoloniai-studies-centre/-postcolonial linee d. ombra. Htm**.)**.

Ghosh's novels overtly or covertly represent the recovery of the subalterns, giving voice to the marginalized consciousness. In this process he challenges the western intellectual and imperialisticculture and shows the very limitations of the post-colonial theory. The present chapter will trace out various colonial and post colonial interpretation of personal, cultural and national identity and other such constructs and concerns through Amitav Ghosh's texts.

Fernando Coronil writes that 'subalternity is a relational and a relative concept; there are times and places where subjects appear on the social stage as subaltern actors, just as there are times or places in which they play dominant roles.'(Coronil: 2000: 44) The focal image in Coronil's words is that of acting or performance, an image that re-casts these subaltern figures as choreographers of their own movements on the social stage upon which they perform.

To start with Ghosh's first novel **The Circle of Reason**, it is a story of flight and pursuit, very much an adventure story that involves the elements of magic realism. Like all other novels of Ghosh, 'this novel also does not have fixed setting. We move between Calcutta and Lalpukar and then on to Mahe, Al Ghazira, Algeria via Kerela where it

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reaches its denouement in a desert of shifting sand dunes.' (Dutta: 1999:39) And all the while it travels through environments which are never entirely rural or urban. At the same time even ideas also does not provide fixed and stable attitude. It combines within itself an uncompromising restlessness with a poise and control that suggests peace rather than longing. Each idea evolves from the story, posing a challenge to the earlier one and itself qualified by a succeeding understanding. Even basic elements like time are not uniformly patterned. Even though it is an epic of restlessness yet the calm.

Contrary to his critics, Ghosh is celebrating a tolerant, inclusive multiculturalism far removed from that of the western metropolis, and established long before the hybridizing cosmopolitanism promoted by the cultural logic of globalization under late capitalism. This novel foregrounds some historical events, such as Indian struggles of the 1930s, the Bangladesh war of 1971 and the international tide of migration to the Middle-East of the 1970s onwards. However, the novel is mainly concerned with the period of British colonization of India. Throughout the novel explores various elements – pre-colonial, colonial, post- colonial and the creation of certain kind of knowledge/discourse. Within the broad framework Ghosh problematizes the 'Science is West and Tradition is East' dichotomy and in the process breaks down the myths by interrogating the status and worth of different branches of science in India. Balaram's fascination with science generates much of the novel's debate about the materialistic scientific reason of the west: whether it is tied to its cultural origin or is it possessed of a universal validity? Balaram takes the latter position, arguing that 'science does not belong to countries and reason does not belong to any nation. They belong to history to the world.'(CR: 54). Given this obvious naïve viewpoint, Balaram is frequently presented in an ironic way. Balaram is a product of western education and despite his fervent Indian nationalism; he has internalized the notion that western science transcends national boundaries in its search for truth. However his universalizing approach also problematizes western science in which Ghosh complicates the science/tradition dichotomy, going beyond a simplistic East- West axis.

Balaram considers Pasteur his model and shapes his life since childhood with scientific temper and rationalistic outlook. But the intrinsic contradiction between the internal and external realities throws the life out of gear on many occasions. The Life Pasteur is an important motif

in the novel and both Balaram and his nephew Alu interpret it has presenting Pasteur as the epitome of reason. For instance the following speech of Balaram would show how he admired this reverend scientist:

"Do you remember why he left his promising studies in crystallography? It was because the brewers of France came to him and said: What makes our best rot? It was that question, asked by simple people, which led to the discovery of what he called the 'infinitesimally small'- the Germ, in other words. […] Who did the silk farmers of Europe go to when disease struck their silkworms […]? Who but Pasteur? They went to him and they said: Save us. And when he saw their wretchedness not all the powers on the earth could have kept him from answering. That is why the world still has silk. " (CR: 49)

Throughout the novel scientific reason which Balaram celebrates is contested by other voices. His friend Gopal, for example historicizes the practicality of reason and views it as source of power, contending that '[e]ven reason discovers itself through events and people.'(CR: 38)

Again this novel can also be perceived as an allegory about the destruction of traditional village by the modernizing influx of western culture and the subsequent displacement of non- European people by imperialism.

Anthony Burgess read the episode as a satire on the Western imperialism: 'While Alu stands for tradition, Balaram 'stands, in his demented way, for progress.' (Burgess: 2006:6). Certainly the novel is a satirical statement over those diasporic Indian intellectuals who enthusiastically embrace the theories of the west, and it is surely significant that his greatest heroes are French.

Again when Balaram reduces the village of Lalpukar to rubble in his efforts to apply the western theories to Indian life and Alu gets buried in the collapsed building Star, Ghosh seems to contrast mobile trading culture with the modern oil company that threatens to subsume it. Rakesh and Ismail two of Alu's friends try to make a search for him and get them lost in the ruins and postmodern space of a concrete dome and collapsed glass. 'It was the handiwork of a madman – immense steel girders leaning crazily, whole section of the glass dome scattered about like eggshell.'(CR: 232).

'The voice heard by the rescuers in the chapter 'A Voice in the Ruins' turn out to be a transistor radio accidentally switched on during the collapse of the building, which echoes through the ruins.'(CR: 232)

The 'Voice' concisely evokes the aesthetics of post-modernism: the loss of affect, the de-centering of the bourgeois subject, the loss of inferiority and the relentless commoditization of culture.(Dixon: 1996:17). Alu, the Indian weaver is trapped inside postmodernity like jonnah inside the whale, and when the rescuers reach him, they find him lying beneath a slab of concrete that is kept from crushing him by two antique sewing machines(CR: 260).

This emphasis on the tenuous nature of human existence offers a powerful context for the book's concentrated focus on characters like Fokir who come into life and pass away without rippling the waves of official history. As far as the records are concerned, they are simply among the legions of unimportant individuals like Alu in **The Circle of Reason**, Bomma in **In An Antique Land,**Laakhan in **The Calcutta Chromosome**, grandmother's poor relations in **The Shadow Lines,** or Kishan Singh in **The Glass Palace**. They are voiceless nobodies. Yet Ghosh spills a lot of ink on their behalf, as if to record their personal histories with as much vigor and detail as he did in recovering his own childhood memories in **The Shadow Lines.**

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