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AMITAV GHOSH: THE NOVELIST AS A HISTORIAN

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Abstract

Since the late 70s and early 80s literary critics seem to have become increasingly interested in the relationship between literature and history. Exponents of New Historicism believe that literature and history are inseparable. History is not anymore a coherent body of objective knowledge which can simply be applied to a literary text in order to discover what the text does or does not reflect. Now literature is a vehicle for the representation of history with acumen foresight into the formation of historical moments not as a passive mirror reflecting history but as an active one in dialoguing through a process of continuous dialectics in order to shape, re-shape, and constitute a historical change. Amitav Ghosh, one of the most successful Indian novelist and anthropologist believes that a writer can be a historian cum ethnographer. Moreover, this belief is reflected constantly and concretely in his writings, for example his very first book, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) is concerned with the larger historical and global movements. Ghosh establishes the overall retrogressive movement via dialectical images concerned with themes of travel through the porosity of cultural cum religious boundaries in both the past and the present. This trend continues until his most recent book, *Flood of Fire* (2015), the third book of his Ibis Trilogy. This paper, citing some of the books of Amitav Ghosh, endeavours to prove that the novelist can play the role of a historian who not merely states records the past but also can rewrite history and develop interest and historical consciousness in the present.

“... A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.” - T.S. Eliot

In this ephemeral world where everything gets washed away by the tides of time, the desire to record things and thereby carve a miniscule niche in the timeless times is always there in man and the cave paintings dating back to the Palaeolithic Age some 40, 000 years back serve as a concrete proof to this. History, thus born is an interesting and intriguing subject for narratives since the time the first storyteller gathered his clan round the fire to tell a tale. Till date, historical fictions capture the imagination of readers around the world as they breathe life into dry facts and serve as time tunnels transporting them to another age.

The discipline of history is said to have had a close association with the learning and teaching of literature. History is treated as the background of literature and it is taken for granted that novelist can play the role of a historian. The writer Leon Edel in *Henry James, the Middle Years: 1882-1895* observes that James' main argument was that, "the novel; far from being 'make believe' actually competes with life, since it records the stuff of history..." (122). James observes:

It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regards himself as an historian and his narrative as a history. It is only as a historian that he has the smallest *locus standi*. As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere; to insert into his attempt a backbone of logic, he must relate events that are assumed to be real. (13)

James perceives that claiming historical status for the novel is the "only effectual way to lay... to rest" (James 1343) the lingering suspicion towards fiction in the Victorian era. Still the validity of novelist being a historian is constantly challenged by critics under the spell of the Hegelian notion of history as a totalising narrative with an evolutionary teleology. For Hegel, history is the medium of rational self-consciousness that marks the beginning of modernity and its overarching unity gives it an aura of objectivity, which a novelist is unlikely to possess. However, it is now recognised that history's claim to objectivity is not tenable. History exists as a narrative and the act of narrativisation implies use

of fictional techniques and this makes historical narratives verbal fictions that have much in common with literary narratives. Foucault's critique of Enlightenment rationality helps us grasp the undercurrents of history that constitute it as a site of subjectivisation.

Sir Walter Scott, Tolstoy, Proust, Faulkner and many other novelists have successfully recreated history through their novels. In the context of Indian languages, historiography, and autobiography, the novel emerged in the nineteenth century against the backdrop of colonialism and nationalism. In his path-breaking essay, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography in India', Ranajit Guha shows how historiography of Indian nationalism has been dominated by 'colonist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism'. Subaltern historians believe that parallel to the domain of elite politics, 'there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principle actors were... the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country- that is people'. Historians such as E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill and Rodney Hilton have extended this vocabulary of 'history from below' in various ways. Though literature and history differ from each other on the surface, their narratives share certain modes of enunciation and 'enplotment' — the interiority of the self, which the autobiography charter is made possible by memory and its ability to reconstruct the past. The same could be seen at work in the novel where relationships are explored at the levels of the social and the political. Many Indian novelists like Manohar Malgonkar, Kushwant Singh, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh are known for writing with a strong historical sense.

Over the last decade or more, Amitav Ghosh has emerged as one of the foremost writers in not only the Indian but also the global fiction scene. *The New York Times Book Review* says that 'No writer in modern India has held a novelistic lamp to the subcontinent's densely thicketed past as vividly and acutely as Amitav Ghosh'. What defines Ghosh's writing is the distinctive way in which his works manage to hold together a global perspective while focusing on highly individual and often marginalised histories, such as those of refugees,

ian Sepoys, "lowered" caste, Othered and the voiceless women. Ghosh's summate skill as both storyteller and interpreter of various histories is revealed in the way his narratives effectually counterpoise vignettes of human drama that occur in these distinctive locales against epic backdrops that sketch global issues of capitalised "History" without taking away the significance from her.

Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, published in 1986, is a story of obsession- obsessive rationalism which some people embrace as science and others mock as insanity. The book is an early example of the novelist's tendency to push the limits of the genre, after all *The Circle of Reason* is at once a detective story, a story of exile, a travelogue, a woman's right appeal, a Marxist protest, a plea for humanistic camaraderie etc. It tells the tale of the weaver boy, Alu, who is pursued by police mistaken for a terrorist. Though history is not the main theme of the novel, Ghosh doesn't lose an opportunity as simple as Alu weaving in his loom to give historical details about the skill of weaving:

India first gave cotton, Gossypium Indicus, to the world. The cities of the Indus Valley grew cotton as early as 1500 B.C. But soon cotton was busy spinning its web around the world. It has King Sennacherib of Mesopotamia in its toils by 700 B.C. and before long it has found its way to Herodotus in Greece. (12)

He adds historical perspective to the passage by not stopping with giving mere events or states of being but goes on to analyse the idea behind the loom, the idea that has united people and also has divided them at times. He also makes an obvious anti-colonial note against the monopoly of Lancashire cloth.

His *The Shadow Lines* (1988) highlights the theory of Post colonialism. The complex plot of the book encompasses the story of three generations of the narrator's family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London. The novel presents a vivid picture of the civil strife in post-partition East-Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta raising questions against arbitrary demarcation of national boundaries. Ghosh, who is also a demographer and anthropologist, deftly employs various narrative techniques and knits his plot in such a way that the reader is absorbed in the

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lives and events narrated in the novel in spite of the fact that he uses non-linear mode as well as chronological shifts and leaps in the text of his novels.

Reconstructing History is a narrative style of the postcolonial writers in their attempt to make meta-narratives of history that are easier to understand. The basic idea that reflects in Ghosh's recent writings is that history, like culture and knowledge is not an absolute independent thing but a construct which can be remade with intuition. Ghosh shows his conviction about fluidity of history in his letter 'Conscientious Objector' written to withdraw his *The Glass Palace* from the competition for Commonwealth Writer's Prize.

He writes:

That the past engenders the present is of course undeniable, it is equally undeniable that the reasons I write in English are ultimately rooted in my country's history. Yet the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute feeling of time — we are also open to choice, reflection and judgement. (Journal of Commonwealth Literature 21)

In his *The Glass Palace* (2000), Ghosh presents the theme of the fall of empire of Burma during the period of pre-independent India and how the change of rule of empire affects the royal princely families. The theme of mass-migration of people of Burma to Calcutta during the Second World War and the interactions between the British and the Japanese is also developed in the novel. In his successful manipulation and brilliant handling of socio-cultural and historical materials like events, race, ethnicity and nation, Ghosh attempts an interlacing of time past and present in defence of a civil society and progressive nationalism. Ghosh in a very scholarly manner presents in the novel, the historical details, the plight of the common man and woman caught up in the whirlwind of history and outcome of war in a way that it transports the reader to another time and gives the reader a good understanding of history.

In his novel *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh probes into one of the world's most hostile zone of topography and into a period of parenthesis in the subcontinental history with a historiographer's reasons and a naturalist's insights. Tracing the

The three books (*Sea of Poppies* 2008, *River of Smoke* 2011 and *Flood of Fire* 2015) which are complete novels in themselves recount the Opium trade orchestrated by the British Empire and the resultant Opium wars with China. As the plot unravels, the reader is taken deep into a history of conflict, loss, remembrance and redemption. The long-forgotten history of the poppy in the 19th century, the forced cultivation of 'flower of forgetfulness' in India resulting in famine, the massive British opium factories, the flourishing narcotic trade conducted by colonial businessmen, the forced trade of opium with China, the Opium Wars, its Indian connection and the dizzying effects of opium on everyone who came in contact with it are brought back to life in Ghosh's trilogy. He also vividly presents the plight of the Indian Sepoys in the British Army, the precarious lives of the South Asian sea-faring Lascars, the *grimyitas* or indentured labourers who were transported across the 'Black Waters' to work in British plantations and the demeaning experience of exiled and deported Indian royalty. Though Ghosh abhors the idea of being labelled as a 'postcolonial writer' one can clearly see the post-colonial agenda in his writing and he does not shy away from telling the reader which side of the colonial debate he stands on. The compelling historical narrative of *The Ibis* Trilogy is almost always presented through the eyes of silenced subaltern characters like the voiceless widow Deeti who narrowly escapes Sati, the untouchable Kalua, the wronged and deported Rajah Neel Rattan, the inmates of the prison schooner *Ibis*, the homeless and wandering young girl Paulette, Ah Fatt, the Chinese bastard child of a Parsi businessman, Kesari, a Havildar in British army and the like giving his readers the history from below.

Butterfield says, "A true historical novel is one that is historical in its intention and not simply by accident, one that comes from a mind steeped in the past." Amitav Ghosh is clear about his aims as a novelist. He shares the view of Henry James that, "as the picture is reality, so the novel is history". Curiosity, passion, objectivity, in-depth knowledge of the subject and extensive research- some of the most important requirements of a good historian is innately found in Ghosh. The arduous research he has done for his books, the countries he has travelled to gather precise details and the countless hours he confesses spending pouring over sepia-tinted and wrinkled documents in libraries across the world has paid off richly as the tireless research gives his novels veracity, a strong empirical basis and enables him to capture history in all its varying nuances. Ghosh with a subaltern historian's historical consciousness and a Proustian overdrive outstrips the history book in the telling of history. In his books one does not hear an author narrating history but one sees, feels and hears history speaking for itself.

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