Research Article

Foregrounding Marginalized Voices: Amitav Ghosh's Narrative Strategies and Postcolonial Critique in The Ibis Trilogy

T. Rama Krishna[1], Dr. Gujju Chenna Reddy[2]

[1] Research Scholar, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh

[2]Professor, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, Andhra

Corresponding Author: T. Rama Krishna

Abstract

The research examines representation of societal outcasts in Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy. This paper situates the Ibis Trilogy in the Ghosh's opium trade historical narratives dealing with the Anglo-China opium trade, particularly focusing on the 19th century geopolitics. As a postcolonial theorist, the author examines the intersection of dispossession, dispossession, and resilience. Ghosh blends the experiences of diverse marginalized characters, such as the Bihari peasant widow Deeti and the dispossessed Bengali zamindar Raja Nil ratan Halder. The research focuses on the complexity of Ghosh's narrative systems, which include a non-linear narrative and maritime pidgin languages, and how he uses them to embed these characters in the historical record. The novel critiques the hegemonic structures of power and the political and cultural dimensions that determine the fate of the marginalized. Moreover, the narrative reveals the covert ecological consequences of the colonial opium economy: the devastated soil and ecology resulting from forced monoculture of opium poppies. In the end, the paper shows how Ghosh uses amazing historical fiction to criticize and redefine boundaries, as well as build a metaphorical utopian society on the ship Ibis, articulating the silence and frustration of a subaltern community trapped in the complexities of history, colonialism, and disorder.

Keywords: postcolonialism, globalization, marginalization, third world, Amitav Ghosh.

1. Introduction:

Ghosh has uniquely impacted literature on the dual concepts of "nation and the self" and "personal and national identity" which has the place him in the world of literature where he has won awards including the Jnanpith award in 2018. Ghosh has primarily focused on the history of the Indian subcontinent. In all of Ghosh's literature, one thing has become definitive and singular: the silence and the frustration of a subaltern community trapped in history and disorder. Other novels of Ghosh show the interlinked colonial and postcolonial history of the Indian subcontinent while portraying the socio-political and historical sufferings of the unnamed the unsung.

The Ibis Trilogy: *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*. The trilogy depicts the 1830s Indian Ocean region and the first skirmishes of the First Opium War. This historical time frame is significant, as all three books in the trilogy deal with the growing, producing, and trading of opium, as well as the booming trade and the tense politics and ecology of the time.

The main aim of the trilogy is to detail the treatment of outcasts in society. I will also examine the rest of Ghosh's work, as it will display the intersection of class, caste, and

transnational capitalism and help in the trilogy. The vast narrative structure of the trilogy is the result of the author's outstanding historical research that, for example, the days of the opium trade and the first opium war, was blended with commerce imaginative storytelling.

2. Nar Language, Temporality, and Historical Reconstruction

Ghosh's creativity in storytelling–which contributes to the distinctiveness of his scholarship–is closely integrated with the use of underrepresented voices. Ghosh also excels in blending truthful accounts of history with historical fiction. Ghosh's distinctive style incorporates many languages and dialects to showcase the complexities of history and culture of the early colonial period. He incorporates dialects of Bhojpuri, Bengali, and Pidgin English. These pidgin dialects serve as a lingua franca for colonizers of all nationalities, especially on the seas. Murshed Haider Choudhury discusses how this narrative style enriches the storyline by emphasizing the different characters and the diverse settings across the trilogy.

Cultural integration and blending can be seen through this type of hybrid language, which fosters a sense of belonging within the marginalized community on the ship:

"Dyé-koné, you can imazinn how this news affected us all and the gra kankann that was caused, with the lascars lamenting the death of Serang Ali, the girmitiyas mourning for Kalua, and Paulette weeping for Jodu, who was like a bhai to her, and for Zikri Malum too, because he was her hombo and she had set her heart on him. I was the only one there; let me tell you, whose eyes were dry, for I know better. Listen, I whispered to your Tantinn Paulette, don't worry, they're safe, those five; it was they who pushed the boat back in the sea, so they'd be taken for dead and quickly forgotten".

Citing this example from the novel River of Smoke as a dialogue demonstrates the full extent of hybridization and cultural integration as evidenced by the language used.

The use of local vernacular ("Dyé-koné," "gra kankann," "Tantinn," "bhai," "hombo") evokes a more representative reading of the identity and flexibility of the lascars and the girmitiyas (indentured laborers) and Paulette. All these figures are interconnected through a shared lens of experience and a universal language of necessity and survival.

Ghosh's approach is a conscious challenge to hegemonic history, and he is interested in history that does not flow like a river, rather the "fish's point of view", where history is the water and "only characters can" carry a novel. In the new writings, used in *The Shadow Lines*, he illustrates a technique where memory serves as the narrative trigger. The novel engages in a non-linear timeline as a means of apparent a chronicity to transform disparate temporal and spatial elements into a coherent stretch.

In his historical reconstructions, Ghosh, an anthropologist by training, forges new accounts based on historical events that include the everyday person. He points out that he is not distorting a historical event but offering a different interpretation by giving the event a familial or personal angle. He emphasizes how those events impacted the powerless, the everyday. He accomplishes this by the unexplored device of memory, especially that of a diary or a memoir to legitimize the unrecorded histories. This commitment to the personal is important because Ghosh thinks there can be no single, canonical version of the truth or of the facts. Truth and reality, he believes, must be multiple. He pushes against the large historical narratives by employing a plethora of smaller narratives created by 'little' people.

Ghosh's methodology includes the subversion of epistemological hierarchies. The research proposes using Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Ghosh's narratives subvert Orientalist traditions by depicting the colonial exploitation of identities as a form of mutually influenced negotiation. River of Smoke exemplifies this by weaving together multiple narratives and different points of view. Characters Neel Ratan, Paulette Lambert, and Zadig Bey produce insights into the lives of the marginalized during the historical periods of colonial exploitation.

This emphasis serves as a critique of the "self-evident" meta narrative of capitalism and universalism.

Ghosh's earlier title *The Calcutta Chromosome* epitomizes the subversion of colonial knowledge by focusing on the gaps, omissions, and silences in the officially sanctioned historical record. The research on this title notes Ghosh's interest in Ross's withholding of any information about his Indian laboratory workers. Ghosh constructs a story because of the omissions and silences, thereby illustrating the impact of cultural imperialism and giving narrative form to the unrecorded contributions of the colonized.

3. The Integration of Economic and Ecological Systems in Colonialism

In the Ibis trilogy, Ghosh captures the integration of economies and ecologies in the visualization of imperialism from a postcolonial perspective. Ghosh focuses on the globalization of the economy in the Asia of the nineteenth century. The description of the opium trade as a swelling lucrative trade, and the profit made from the exploitation of power and resources inequality within imperial systems, Ghosh captures the inequitable resource extraction of the opium trade.

The opium trade ecological and agricultural systems disruptions, soil devastation, and degradation of traditional farming systems. The trilogy's portrayal of the extractive, exploitative colonial logic as a driver of the planetary crisis situates Ghosh in the critical narrative of the adverse consequences of European colonialism. According to Avantika Porwal and Parul Aggarwal, the trilogy also examines the profound impact of imperialism on the interdependence of human communities and the non-human world. That novels draw from personal accounts of the oppressed is what makes this type of critique possible. In Sea of Poppies, the economic, social, and environmental repercussions of forced poppy cultivation—a critical cash crop for the British trade—are devastating, as Deeti's account demonstrates.

"In the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare – it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs if they possibly could."

Cited in the previous line, this passage demonstrates one of the critical insights of this study. Deeti's account resonates deeply with the ecological critique of this study. By forcing the cultivators to grow a monocrop of opium and to abandon subsistence food crops, the colonial system deconstructed the food security system. It also dismantled the home-thatching system, thereby leaving people more exposed to the destructive elements of nature and the violence of human indifference. Ekta Bawa and Shaifali Arora clarify that Ghosh employs characters like Deeti to demonstrate the impact of nature and human life that results from environmental devastation caused by activities like the forced cultivation of opium.

In addition to the physical and environmental harm, the novels also portray the psychological and social destruction that the commodity inflicted. Opium facilitated the expansion of the British colonies, but the poison also ruined lives, "entire families," "dissipate[d] every kind of property," and "destroyed man himself." River of Smoke captures the addictive nature of opium, describing how it first "raises the animal spirit," but then entrenches the habit and "slumbering smoking" closely resembles a "corpse" that is frail, decrepit, and demon-like. Ghosh portrays the deep cultural and ethical deterioration caused by colonial economic policy by depicting China's descent as a morally corrupted, opium-dependent state.

4. From Colonial Displacement to Ecological Crisis

The historical fiction Ghosh writes in the Trilogy lays a foundation that extends into the more explicit ecological critiques he has published later, such as *The Hungry Tide*, alongside his non-fiction works, *The Great Derangement*.

According to Ghosh, the modern novel fails to capture the sudden, non-linear, collective ramifications of climate disruption. Ghosh is correct in noting that climate change is unable to violently 'intrude upon the habitual routines' of the everyday life and the modern novel sequence of events depicting individual 'moral adventure' and everyday life. Ghosh thinks that 'the future will be amazed' given how we depict the environment in our stories. One of Ghosh's key contributions is his use of storytelling as a method of unchaining the unthinkable ecological backwardness of our time. It is no coincidence that this mirrors Rob Nixon's idea of 'slow violence' — a term that describes gradual, hidden, and dispersed spatial and temporal violence.

In novels like *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh integrates the environment as a character. Vishwa Bhushan's assessment is that *The Hungry Tide* 'illustrates an early post-anthropocentric sensibility' and 'the physical environment' Ghosh describes 'acts as a unifying force, a vital connective tissue between the plants, animals, and human life'.

The Sundarbans (meaning "Beautiful Forest") is described in the novel as one of the richest eco-regions in the world. It is Piya Roy, the cetologist, who studies the varied composition of the estuarine ecosystem, where river and sea waters interpenetrate and create hundreds of ecological niches. This landscape is home to far more fish species than *"could be found in the whole continent of Europe."*

The narrative uses myth and indigenous cosmologies to innovate on Western reason. The people of Lusibari revere 'Bon Bibi''the goddess of the forest'and while the character Kusum composes myth when she says, *"I called her too, but she never came, Bon Bibi,"* her trauma of loss suggests betrayal. This contrast uses myth to invoke the literary forms appropriate to the representation of planetary distress. Displacement, both ecological and human, is a prominent theme in all of Ghosh's writings. Dispersed colonial bodies in the Ibis Trilogy are echoed in today's environmental crises, as loss and the consequential search for home are integrally connected. In the Ibis Trilogy, the bodies of the indentured are traced across the Indian Ocean. This is a counterpart to the modern suffering migrants in Europe, who disguise themselves as victims, and economically, are seen as 'heroes' in their home country.

Throughout *The Hungry Tide*, memories of the evictions of the refugees from the island of Morichjhapi illustrate the complex entanglement of memory, loss, and the human need for a place, and the trauma associated with losing a place, to identify with. Piya's ethical return to the Sundarbans to partner with local fishermen so that the burden of conservation wouldn't fall on the poor who wouldn't be able to afford it is remarkable. The decision to identify with the ecosystem—*"For me, home is where the Orcaella are, so there's no reason why this couldn't be it*"signals a more radical embrace of ecological justice and a more post anthropocentric worldview.

The narrative techniques employed in Ghosh's texts critiques, unrelentingly, the idea of the self and the concept of borders that are seen as inhibiting the flow of human interaction.

The Shadow Lines intricately addresses the relationships between borders, identity, and memory in the context of the Partition of India while also having the audacity to question the very principles of division and the order. The character Jethamoshai's refusal to leave his ancestral home in Dhaka offers a fundamental critique of political lines: *"Once you start moving you never stop. … suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here."*

This line, in reference to a period of communal strife, starkly confronts the idea of permanence that seems to cling to nationalist borders. The novel starkly demonstrates how, in the absence of clear borders, the dominating shadow borders turned individuals in their own homeland into foreigners, rendering an individual's home the most unsafe place in the world. The trauma is tied directly to an event that is distant in space, thus, challenging the belief that

"distance separates." Shared history connects those who, in the most physical sense, are far apart.

5. Conclusion

By repeatedly relating events to family and personal situations, Ghosh anchors his critiques on politics and the environment in something physical rather than something abstract, and therefore, distant. Starting with the Ibis Trilogy and continuing with his recent works that address climate change, Ghosh compels readers to grapple with the cultural, conceptual, and narrative collapse that characterizes the Anthropocene. He shows that narrative, while certainly one of the least pressing human faculties, is nonetheless important for the empathy and comprehension of coexistence that need to be collaboratively worked on to achieve cultural integration and a viable future.

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