

The History of the Voiceless in Amitav Ghosh: A Selective Study

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That Western colonialism and imperialism owe their former success and durability as much to the Europe's all-out invasion of the colonial societies as to the different world view of the ruled has been regularly pointed out by writers and critics alike, such as Said who in *Culture and Imperialism* notes that "the durability of empire was sustained on both sides, that of the rulers and that of the distant ruled, and in turn each had a set of interpretations of their common history with its own perspective, historical sense, emotions, and traditions" (11). This article, therefore, aims at a selective study of the colonial/post-colonial interpretations of this 'common history' from the viewpoint of the colonized, always rendered voiceless in the European accounts of the history of colonialism and imperialism, in one of the most prominent Indian writers in English, Amitav Ghosh, as an inheritor of a legacy of humiliation and defeat of the colonial history. Thus, each of the four novels to be studied in this context—*The Circle of Reason* (1986), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004)—offers protagonists who often excavate the histories and passions buried under the solidified substructure of European imperialism.

The beginning of *The Glass Palace* (*Palace*), where the quiet and serenity of a Mandalay market and fort is broken with the thundering cannons of the British invaders, in a way represents the essence of imperialism in Ghosh that involves the greed

and ruthlessness of the Europeans although they justified their imperialistic aggression as a civilizing or modernizing mission. This imperial greed, aroused by the vast wealth of the Burmese teak, not only usurps the economic system but also the sovereignty of Burma. After sending King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat to exile in India as a punishment for refusing to hand over the great natural wealth of their country to the British voluntarily, the British embark upon a process of far-reaching consequences—the substitution of a 'glorious' history of the imperial Europe for the 'barbaric' history of the colonized. The gradual and total erasure of the history of the colonized, of their prosperity and of their rich culture is brilliantly symbolized by the transformation of the Burma Palace by the English in *Palace*:

The British occupation had changed everything: Burma had been quickly integrated into the Empire, forcibly converted into a province of British India. Courtly Mandalay was now a bustling commercial hub; resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency hitherto undreamt of. The Mandalay palace had been refurbished to serve the conqueror's recondite pleasures: the west wing had been converted into a British Club; the Queen's Hall of Audience had now become a billiard room . . . the exquisite little monastery in which Thebaw had spent his novitiate had become a chapel where

Anglican priests administered the sacrament to British troops. (66)

Besides this description that readily reminds one of a colony of parasites, Ghosh also shows how the British ruthlessly erase every aspect of the history of the colonized, especially the ones that could remind them of their former autonomy and thus could unite them against the invading colonizer. Thus the British not only refuse any Burmese visitor in the house of the exiled Royalty, but also ensures that the King, even in his death, is unable to go back to Burma as his coffin is forcibly taken away from his family and buried with a monument built over it to banish him forever into the foreign soil; while Beni tells Uma that the British “want to make sure that the King is forgotten. They don’t wish to be cruel; they don’t want any martyrs; all they want is that the King should be lost to memory—like an old umbrella in a dusty cupboard” (136).

However, if it is teak in Burma, then in *The Circle of Reason (Reason)* it is oil in al-Ghazira that attracts the Western greed to that prosperous kingdom where a similar episode of imperialistic aggression—a ‘bad dream’ in Rajkumar’s terms—is repeated. Once the British came to know “that al-Ghazira was just a speck of sand floating on a sea of oil” they sent a resident to the island to “make the Malik sign a treaty which would let the British dig for oil”. But Malik, as he “had seen what had happened to the princes of India and he had sworn he would never let himself be reduced to their state” (248-9) refused to sign any such treaty. He also had to face a similar fate for this resistance to the Western greed like the Royalty of Burma; as he underwent a

humiliating defeat that led to his imprisonment till death in his own fort. However, here too the British ensure that the people of al-Ghazira forget about him, about his resistance to the British, and the role the migrant traders like Nury or Jeevanbhai played in that resistance, especially their final attempt that killed Nury, ruined Jeevanbhai and sealed the fate of al-Ghazira. Gradually the history of the defeated is erased; the tigerish Malik is labeled as ‘mad’ by the Europeans while his submissive brother is presented as ‘progressive’; and eventually a time comes when the inglorious ground of the final battle becomes the site chosen for the most ambitious market complex in the country to be built by a eunuch, Jabir, who betrayed the old Malik to the British in the final battle and in turn was rewarded amply by the conquerors.

Ghosh, in *Reason*, also reviews history to narrate the long-forgotten account of the rich contributions of the pre-imperial societies towards a common goal of the betterment of human civilization through the history of cotton. Cotton, as Balam tells Alu, was gifted to the world by India whereupon it gradually became a valued product in every society it traveled to while being enriched by the contributions of these; thus while Indian cloth reached the graves of the Pharaohs, cloth from China reached India whereas, “even the English were handed down their word, like so much else that raised them to civilization, by the Arabs, from their *kutn*” (56). Balam also remembers to inform Alu that the first calculating machine built by Charles Babbage in the mid-nineteenth century was actually inspired by the system of punched cards used by the Chinese since 1000 BC.

However, this magnificent history of a shared culture starts to take an unprecedented turn when the machines in Lancashire made mass production of cloth possible thereby enslaving Africa and America to strangle “the very weavers and techniques they had crossed oceans to discover” (57). By the time Balaram tells Alu the history of cotton we realize that it is not a history written by the Europe that customarily celebrates the Western civilization as the sole bearer of the mantle of progress and modernity and relegates the colonized to primitiveness and barbarity; but that this is a history that demonstrates that the West was indebted to those very civilizations for its progress and success that it later invaded as barbaric and savage and thus in dire need of Western guidance: “It is a gory history in parts; a story of greed and destruction. Every scrap of cloth is stained by a bloody past. But it is the only history we have and history is hope as well as despair” (57-8).

In *In an Antique Land (Antique)* also Ghosh indicates the tendency of the West to monopolize history in the way Cairo/ Maşr had been denominated as Egypt by the Europe. As Ghosh informs us, Cairo/Egypt was always known as Maşr, derived from a root that means ‘to settle’ or ‘to civilize’: “It is the name by which the country has been known, in its own language, for at least a millennium, and most of the cultures and civilizations with which it has old connections have accepted its own self-definition.” But Cairo too had to experience the imperialistic practice of the erasure of the history of the colonized in every aspect, starting from the place’s very name: “Only Europe has always insisted on knowing the

country not on its own terms, but as a dark mirror for itself”, thus naming it Egypt, derived from a root that refers to the indigenous Christians in Maşr. As Ghosh goes on to add, the Oxford English Dictionary, quoting from the Bible, defines ‘Egyptian darkness’ as ‘intense darkness’; or ‘Egyptian days’ as ‘the two days in each month which were believed to be unlucky’ (32). Ghosh next reconstructs the events leading to the destruction of the thriving and peaceful trading culture across the Indian Ocean by the Portuguese in a way inconceivable to the Indians, Arabs, Africans and Persians who engaged in the trade:

the peoples who had traditionally participated in the Indian Ocean trade were taken completely by surprise. In all the centuries in which it had flourished and grown, no state or king or ruling power had ever before tried to gain control of the Indian Ocean trade by force of arms. . . . the rulers of the Indian Ocean ports were utterly confounded by the demands and actions of the Portuguese. . . Unable to compete in the Indian Ocean trade by purely commercial means, the Europeans were bent on taking control of it by aggression, pure and distilled, by unleashing violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores. . .

Soon, the remains of the civilization that had brought Ben Yiju to Mangalore were devoured by that unquenchable, demonic thirst that has raged ever since, for almost five hundred years, over the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. (287-8)

It is these rewritings of histories and the partial recovery of the lives marginalized by the dominant history like the migrant Jewish trader Ben Yijû, his Indian wife Ashu, and his Indian slave Bomma, that once again remind us of Balaram's words, "history is hope as well as despair" as although the lost history is never recovered fully, we nevertheless get a glimpse of that extraordinary past. Likewise, when Ghosh travels to Mangalore in Malabar, he is aware of its past glory as "one of the premier ports of an extremely wealthy hinterland" and also of the ensuing tragedy when the wealth of Malabar was to attract the "much less welcome attention of the European maritime and colonial powers and it was in the course of the struggles that ensued that Mangalore came to lose virtually every trace of its extraordinary past". Nevertheless, Ghosh also observes that "Mangalore does not treat its lost history as a matter of crippling melancholy" as the city has reclaimed its prosperity and 'ancient connections' with the Arab world in a large number of expatriates in the Persian Gulf (245).

In *The Hungry Tide (Tide)* on the other hand the legacy of the Eurocentric writing of history is shown to be inherited by a neo-imperial state government in its selective remembrance of its colonial past and the creation of a history of its own liking in the independent India on the name of environmentalism. When in the colonial days in India Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scotsman, had a vision of building a model society—without divisions and differences—he bought islands in the Sundarbans and populated it with poor settlers from the neighboring places, who came lured by the free land he offered, to

live in nightmarish conditions among the predators and tempests and floods. The islands that were named after colonial masters or Sir Daniel's relatives as in Hamilton-abad, Jamespur, Annpur, Emilybari and Lusibari etc.—nevertheless continued to present a scene of death, misery and underdevelopment. However, much later in an independent India, when a group of Bangladeshi refugees leave the inhuman conditions of their camps in the central India and arrives at one of the islands in the Sundarbans—Marichjhāpi—following their dream of a new life and new society, a post-colonial state government refuses to let them settle in there, as it is apprehensive of losing the grant from the Western countries that want Marichjhāpi to be turned into a reserve forest for tigers. The observation of the writers of *The Empire Writes Back* appears uncannily fitting in this context:

While the roots of contemporary environmentalism may lie in colonial damage in both settler colonies and colonies of occupation, neo-colonialism often in association with the colonial past, continues to produce clashes of interests between 'the West and the Rest'.

This is the case, for instance, in areas of land and food scarcity, where the well-being of humans and endangered species may be at odds. . . . Ironically, as the anthropocentric Western drive responsible for so much land and species degradation yields place to more bio-centric paradigms of 'the human place in nature', formerly colonized subaltern groups are accused of insensitivity to animals and land as they are driven by economics from their own (often bio-centric) pre-colonial world views and

practices into competing for survival by means of the very industrial and agricultural capitalism which dispossessed them of their original way of living. (213-4)

However, as there follows a seemingly unending battle between the state government and the settlers and when it appears the popular opinion and court of law would counter government's decision, some goons are sent to the island who unleash unspeakable horrors upon the settlers by burning their huts, sinking the boats, laying waste to their fields, raping women and murdering them and other settlers and throwing their bodies into the rivers to erase every trace of their existence in the island. Very soon people forget the episode, there are no witnesses left to tell the tale, and even those who remember parts of it refuse to discuss it. But Ghosh, as he does in all his novels, tries to reconstruct the history and brings it back in the pages of Nirmal's diary that brings back to life the settlers' dreams of a new life in Marichjhāpi, their Herculean enterprise on the island, their resistance to the attempts to evict them and above all Kusum's words in her last night on Marichjhāpi, on earth:

"the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. 'This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world' Who are these people, I wondered, who loves animals so

much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? . . . this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human being could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived—by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil." (261-2)

Alongside the voice of the suppressed as recorded in the diary of Nirmal, what Ghosh also presents to the readers in this novel is the legend of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai that has been absorbed by the people of the Sundarbans as part of their culture. But as Ghosh shows us, this legend, that reminded one of the rich cultural interaction at a point of time between the Sundarbans and the Arabia from where came the tiger-goddess Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli, was never allowed to be properly and proudly placed alongside the mainstream history of Sir Daniels and Lord Cannings in these islands that acknowledged only its European masters.

This attempt by Ghosh to retrieve a forgotten past undoubtedly appears significant in a post-colonial world that has gradually become aware of this cleverly suppressed history of the marginalized as Yeats puts it: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (qtd. in Said

Culture 286). Ghosh, in his unique approach to the history of the colonized, carefully points out how the brutal and deliberate actions of imperialism not only imposed a history of their liking on the colonized but also erased the native history such as the history shared by Egypt and India, or the history of cotton in the ancient world, the brutality of the imperialistic British army during its invasions and crushing the mutinies and resistance in the colonies, or the way the British pushed the Burmese Royals into oblivion, denying every contact of them with Burma even in death.

However, Ghosh also declines to present the colonized only in terms of their defeat and degradation just as he does not blame the defeated for their history of defeat. At the same time, he does not glorify either the defeated by portraying them as tragic heroes—the Burmese Royals, the old Malik, Jeevanbhai, Jabir, and Kusum are neither presented as heroically tragic in their defeat, nor are their defeat presented as the culmination of their history. Rather the novels present them, their protests, and their eventual defeat as the expressions of a multilateral human history that defies uniform explanations of events. Thus the Indian Ocean traders being vanquished by the Portuguese in *Antique* does not necessarily mean that the conquered were essentially inferior, but that the traders adhered to a unique culture of non-violence that the West could never conceptualize. Although like any other post-colonial writer Ghosh too is concerned with the history and humiliation of defeat—“this has really been our history for a long, long time: the absolute fact of defeat and the absolute fact

of trying to articulate defeat to yourself and trying to build a culture around the centrality of defeat” (qtd. in Mondal 38)—unlike a great many others, like V. S. Naipaul for example, he refuses to view the defeated as responsible for their defeat and thus to justify their subjugation by a superior, civilizing force.

To conclude, although a sense of a ‘world beyond repair’ is prominently visible in Ghosh, his response to this sense of loss and defeat is once again quite remarkable as his characters probe deeper and try to retrieve the lost world to examine its worth and value with the forces responsible for the loss, while the outcome of this examination at times make them mourn for the loss of such a colossal magnitude. While a still powerful Eurocentric world view and history, along with an irretrievably erased history of the marginalized threaten to raise doubts about the possible success of Ghosh’s attempts to retrace the past in these novels, the novelist addresses these doubts in a unique way in *Tide*. Thus we find in *Tide* that Kanai loses the diary of Nirmal—the only account of an event where the dream of a marginalized group and their struggle to live differently were crushed by a neo-colonial authority—in the turbulent sea in the Sundarbans. As the diary is swept away by the tides, Ghosh seems to suggest that the possibility of recovering the history of the subaltern might always remain a mirage; although with Kanai—a migrant translator, and thus the only person capable of attempting such a recovery—coming back to the Sundarbans to rewrite the lost diary from his memory also ensures that the subaltern will eventually be heard.

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