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IDEA OF *SELF* AND *OTHERS* IN THE NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH: A STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THIRD WORLD PEOPLE

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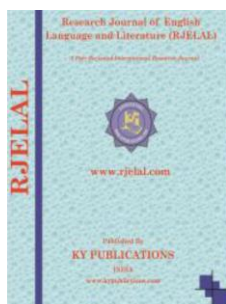
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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh is widely acclaimed for his major novels in which he has expressed his concerns for the downtrodden people of his society. His sympathetic attitude towards the marginal people can be perceived in his major novels. The problems of alienation, migration and existential crisis in life of unprivileged people are exposed in his writings. The voices of these people, their struggle and sacrifices have been treated with special attention by making them as the pivotal characters. Our aim in this paper is to analyze Amitav Ghosh's selected novels and to highlight his idea of "self" and "others" from the existentialist point of view. The selected novels for this paper are – *The Circle of Reason*, *The Calcutta Chromosomes*, *The Hungry Tide*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Sea of Poppies*. In these novels he has realistically delineated the pathetic and difficult condition of those people who are considered as "others" in the society.

Key Words: Concept of centre and margin, self vs others, struggle for identity, exploitation, existential crisis etc.

Amitav Ghosh has taken the theme of conflict between *self* and *others* prevailing among the postcolonial Indian people as the central aspect of his fiction. The stories of the common man, who have been the sufferers to the maximum of these historical upheavals or political crisis, have been taken as a subject of the fiction. These characters from the marginalized sphere are considered as the *others* in the society. By providing the centrality to the marginalized characters, Ghosh also answers the dilemma of the postcolonial intelligentsia regarding the ability of these neglected people of the society to speak. He assumes the role of narrator of a narrative for himself who doesn't become the representative; but allows the representations of

the common people by the same group by providing them stage.

In most of his novels, Amitav Ghosh seeks to provide the space for or re-instates the unrecorded, mostly neglected, silenced, voiceless or those who are overlooked by history and who are absorbed by the powerful. In his interview with Hawley (2005) Ghosh consents, "I have been deeply influenced by the ideas of the subaltern studies group. I think, I share some of the concerns of these groups because I am from the same milieu as many of the group members". So, we notice that Ghosh shows an abiding interest in marginalized and silenced individuals. He again says "my essential interest is in people and their lives, histories and

predicaments" (ibid). He negotiates the challenge of recovering and representing the story of these underprivileged people in an integrated manner. With his skill, he tried to amalgamate this subject and raised the issues related to them. He employs two methods to incorporate the discourse of subaltern writings. Firstly in his writings, both fiction and nonfiction the character of this marginalized group has occupied the central stage. Secondly, the stories and issues are construed as a representation of the issues of the neglected class of people. John Hawley rightly comments, "Ghosh's roots are in journalism and academic writing-investigation and analysis, a revelation of subterranean connections and patterns" (ibid).

Edward Said, a prominent scholar of post-colonialism, identifies a European cultural tradition of 'Orientalism'. Said in his book *Orientalism* has mentioned the theory of identifying the East as *others* and inferior to the West. He emphasizes construction of binary division between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident'. He mentioned that West as *self* who are considered to be the supreme the main source of knowledge and learning, while East as *others* who are mostly represented as a place of ignorance, superstition and illiteracy. The Orient exists as static, ignorant and cut off from the progress of Western history. They do not have even the capability to represent themselves and hence west as being superior take the responsibility of presenting orients, *others* in the form of literary text. These *others* are basically the marginalized group who are considered being the suppressed and muting for years.

Likewise, Foucault (February 05, 2015) stated that "History ceases to be the forte of those who exercise power". So, History will be the tool in the hands of elite and they projected their own perception while writing History. History written till now is one-sided, partial and biased. This kind of history is not able to show the true picture of the member of lower strata of society. The ruling class is having the control on these institutions and they constructed the *others* according to their own perception. West, powerful or the elite group cannot create history as they perceive the incidents or the events. History should be unbiased and

impartial. True history is not restricted to superior group but it is also related to common people. The victory in any war cannot be assigned only to the king or the leader but it is also the effort of the soldiers who fought in the battlefield or the persons associated to them the contribution of these marginalized group can never be ignored.

Therefore, we notice that Amitav Ghosh's writing truly exhibits the manifestation and implications of the term *others* in contemporary writings. Firstly, Ghosh in his works talks about the alternative histories and practices of people. Secondly, the so called *others* are considered as an approach that represent marginalized as they have the inability to speak and empowers them to represent the marginalized people and their issues. Telwani (2013: 113-127) also mentioned that, "Almost all of his works replete with the experiences of the marginalized characters. The mosaic of the characters in his works is characterized by the concept of *others* almost in his all works". These people of the third world countries have been neglected for a long time and considered as the sub-groups or secondary groups or subaltern created by the god. They think that these types of people are created for some other alternative purposes or to serve them.

In his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986), almost all the characters like, Shombhu Debnath, Rakhal, Toru Debi, Rajan, Karthamma, Jeevanbhai Patel, Haji Fahmy, Zaghoul were belonging to lower status of the society. In this novel, the struggle of these characters and their survival issues has been pen down. It is noteworthy that *The Circle of Reason* came into existence before the author's involvement with these underprivileged people of the society. However, it sets the writer's interest in the lives of people from marginalized class.

In his another profound work *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), Ghosh has provided agency to the underprivileged people and tries to take them to the centre of his study. Mangala and Lakhan though belonging to the margin helped Ronald Ross in discovery. Their practices seem quite contrary to the scientific research for Malaria but they provide

direction to the research by providing useful but scattered information leading Ross towards the final discovery. Thus, it establishes that the power established its discourse on the agency provided by the subaltern. In fact, they have their own mechanism to exist in the threats of the society that saves them from being eradicated. Here, Laakhan and Mangala achieved the positions of power as manipulators of knowledge.

Here, Ghosh managed to evade from the Western and Eastern gap, by formulating a plot in which these marginalized class people of the society helped in directing and producing the final results of scientific research. Tabish Khair has also highlighted the issue of subaltern agency in *The Calcutta Chromosome* as one of its essential constituents, "Such an intricate plot insists on not only the comprehensibility and agency of the subaltern, it also dismisses arbitrary and essentialist dichotomies between the West and India". For Khair (2005: 309), agency allows the subaltern to regain his silenced role in the narrative of history, "for history can be seen as the plotting of human experience and agency".

Besides, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) unfolds the events at Morichjhapi in 1979 and the consciousness for them which demarcate the post partition movement of persons from East Bengal to West Bengal. Telwani mentioned that "In *The Hungry Tide* Amitav Ghosh sketches the out-caste Dalit refugees from Bangladesh in Sunderban forests.....The Hungry Tide registers a response to the social and political concern of the marginal sections of the society" (2013: 113-127). Sushil Sarkar (2012: 55-56) also mentioned that the refugees who belong to the oppressed classes were forced to seek out a dwelling elsewhere. Morichjhapi incident took place when these refugees were fighting for the survival. They were forced to flee after the water and food supplies were cut off to the island. The Morichjhapi incidents and silence towards enthused Nirmal, a revolutionary, to write everything so that history can get known through the Kanai. This incident is brutally repressed by the government forces and aftermath Kusum is killed. Nirmal as a Marxist believed in rapprochement across class barriers that can bring depressed people, the *others* and the elite,

the *self* together. Morichjhapi incident, a brutal violence against them can be attributed to the indiscernibility of the low caste and class identity. The massacre, the tiger killing Kusum's father and Fokir's vulnerability to the state official are instances in the novel that depicted the marginalized people's predicament.

In this connection, Homi Bhabha (1994: 127-130) has emphasized the importance of relation of social power while defining these subaltern groups. According to his notion about the presence of these oppressed minority groups was vital to the self-definition of the majority group. Subaltern social group were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power. This can be well exemplified by Kusum in *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Kusum gives vision to Nirmal to see the entire movement of Morichjhapi to feel the agony, pain or sufferings caused to these refugees. This upheaval is from below or the subalterns which is being evinced by voiceless nobodies who want to be heard. For Nirmal, the cry of the refugees becomes a representative of all such communities without home. It becomes a cry for "not just themselves, but on behalf of bewildered humankind. Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong"? (254) Likewise, B. K. Sharma (2011) also stated that "Ghosh's major concern in this novel is to universalize subaltern history. These figures therefore are made the real heroes by their sheer power of resistance to unbearable odds and adversities rise to the status of real makers of history".

The Glass Palace (2000), a profound work by the same author is the story of the three generations consisting in several characters whose positions in the society keep on changing with the change of time and space. The King Thebaw, in *The Glass Palace* talks about the incomprehensible shift of power and margins in the society. The king status of ruler to exile itself is again an example of how people in center can shift to the margins; the royal family is reduced to the status of the marginalized people. Raj Kumar position also shifted from subjugated and oppressed to the center of power. The several other characters like Dolly, Mo Chao, Arjun, Kishan Singh in *The Glass Palace* mirror the locus of the author's interest in these suppressed

people of the society. Thus, we notice that Amitav Ghosh ponders on the force and nature of power of British Empire that was changing fates of thousands across the subcontinent. "What vast, what incompressible power, to move people in such numbers from one place to another-emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen. Why? Why this furious movement – people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile"? (43-44)

This novel also unexplored another aspect of Indian history. The history of Indian Army under British Rule is completely over sighted in the discussion of the colonial past in terms of what it meant for those who had joined British Army. In the novel, Arjun, Hardy these are the characters class and agency changes in accordance with time and space. The time span of the novel makes space for the monstrous manifestations of exploitation from the time of colonialism to the period of neocolonialism. "It is ironical that soldiers like Arjun as subalterns (subordinate officer) in the British Indian Army were fighting neither to defend nor to extend the territory of India. They were simply facilitating the British policy of colonial expansion. It is through the character of Arjun that Amitav Ghosh raises the issue of identity, colonialism and belongingness, most vocally. Ghosh points out the fact that Indians were also responsible for such exploitation of people and place".

Sea of Poppies (2008) is also a masterpiece on the records of subjugation and oppression towards the colonized people. Shouket Telwani stated, "Another novel by Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* unfolds in the north of the colonized India in 1938, on the eve of the British attack on the Chinese ports known as the opium war. Here Amitav Ghosh delineates a mosaic of different kinds of characters drawn from different corners of the planet- sailors, passengers, and marines for the ibis, a slaving schooner, convicts, criminals, coolies, girmitis; indentured labour..... these characters are exposed to experience sati, ship board mutiny jails, kidnapping, wretched life as of a dog, criminal justice etc".

Besides, *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is also successful in capturing the several incidents that not only delineates the strength of British power and its diffusion into various classes in Indian society but the position of doubly subaltern also. Deeti, the lead character in it represents the subjugated woman in Indian society during 19th century. It is her character that undergoes several upheavals and demands the questions on sati system, widow remarriage and safety of a woman within a family. These are the issues of Indian females in that scenario who are already known as doubly marginalized class. People like Hawaldar in *Sea of Poppies* on the ship were given utmost liberty to harass and torture their own people in the name of tradition.

The story of Kalua is also remarkable in this continuation. Kalua was beaten dreadfully on the ship by the Indians for getting married and spoiling a high caste woman. This incident can easily be quoted against imperialism that subverts the British proclaim of social reformation in India. In *Sea of Poppies*, there are several characters whose positions in the society keep shifted. King Neel and his family can be mentioned here as once the center of power and society turns as a marginalized on the ship. Deeti can also be quoted as once wife of high caste man in the form of woman or became victim by marrying Kalua.

Thus, we notice that Ghosh purposefully brings the underprivileged characters into stories and focuses on personal histories of these individuals. The marginalized characters help us perceive life, events and issues from their point of view. Mr. Ghosh with his rigorous mode of empirical research recovered the characters of the masters, possessing hegemonic power and of their slaves, sighing and crying under the burden of oppression, be it for their caste hierarchy or for the British power or for their gender status". So, we may sum up that Amitav Ghosh in his novels seek to generate the issues of center and margins, *self* and *others* to demonstrate the connotations and manifestations of the voice of the common people in contemporary writings.

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