

Treatment of Subaltern and Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction from the Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

*I am writing this paper from my inner interest in the suffocating and vulnerable life-status of the subaltern and their diasporic movement throughout the world. The dominating attitude of the hegemonic world towards these less privileged people, who are always suffering from their identity crises, and who are making a wide-wide diaspora, strikes my mind like other intellectuals, and seriously inspires me to make a scholastic analysis on these two vital issues of postcolonial studies—subaltern and diaspora. I have made a strict academic investigation into the historical pursuits of the subaltern and diaspora, and found the reasons for the world-wide emergence of the subaltern group in our modern civilization, and their endless struggle for life through their diasporic movement. Following a well-known method (see Research Methodology), I have made a speculative analysis on the subaltern crises and the 21st century socio-political interpretation of diaspora. Thus, I have found the subaltern in the very miserable condition from which they are trying to get out through their diasporic movement. In this paper, I have selected Amitav Ghosh's two books, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *In an Antique Land* (1993), to discuss the issues of subaltern and diaspora through the fictional and historical analyses of his fiction from the postcolonial perspective (see Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 2004).*

Keywords: *Subaltern, diaspora, binarism, dislocation, indigenous, historiography, weaving, cosmopolitanism, licentiousness, and disappearance.*

Introduction

After the end of western colonization, the world has got two new peripheries— settler colonies and colonies of occupation. From both the colonies, a huge number of natives migrate themselves into different western countries including Caribbean region, sometimes because of the pressure of social and political upheavals in local and regional circumstances, and

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sometimes by their own choice. At the same time, some of the natives of the occupied colonies migrate themselves into the settled regions. Both the types of migrations have been made just to change the current social and economic status of the migrants. Amidst this wave of migrations, the Europeans also push their own peoples into the settler colonies to increase European settlements outside Europe. The subsequent emergence of this worldwide migration creates 'Diaspora', a social and political movement of the 'Subaltern' throughout the entire world. The subaltern has to earn the second class civic status at their foreign set-up, and repeatedly face troubles with their indigenous identity. The 'binary relationship' between the masters and their subjects in all corners of the world creates this vulnerable group of peoples. On the other hand, the continuous process of imperial aggression of the West upon the natives of the old colonies, who are still living at their old homes, and that upon the lives of the non-European settlers creates an insoluble problem of 'binarism' in the whole world. This problem, directly or indirectly, thwarts the smooth progress of globalization in the twenty-first century. Based on this master-servant relationship, the subaltern has raised their sharp voices against the discriminations of the so-called social, cultural, and political institutions of today's world regarding equal rights for the total human beings. These victimized people of voice raising have been already identified as a new race of destabilization with a new national and political identity, distinct from the local and regional elites, but not fully alienated (see Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 2004).

Objectives

The principal objective for this paper is to trace the vulnerable condition of the subaltern and their links with diaspora. The other objective is to promote these two vital issues of the postcolonial study—subaltern and diaspora—to the postcolonial literature taught in the Department of English at the university.

Research Methodology

In this article I have followed MLA method. I have gone through the texts of Amitav Ghosh which I have chosen for the primary source. For the secondary source of the substantial discussion and analyses, I have gone through some books of criticism on Amitav Ghosh's fiction and postcolonial discourse.

Postcolonial Identity of Subaltern and Diaspora

The current civilization is divided into two factions – the so-called savage or indigenous people and their so-called civilized ex-ruling people. This division has been created by the West to make a marginalization between the colonizers and the colonized. The class difference between the civilized and the savage is so high that the relationship between these peoples has been formed and developed being based on the dependence of the ruled upon the mercy of the rulers. This 'ambivalent relationship' gradually breeds 'binary culture', which ultimately obstructs the smooth running of social and political development where the question of civilization is itself a far-reaching rolling stone. The indigenous peoples of less privileged classes constitute the 'subaltern group'. The term 'subaltern' bears the meaning of 'inferior rank' which is first adopted by Antonio Gramsci. He refers to the subaltern classes

to those groups in the society who are subject to the 'hegemony' of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers, and other groups who are denied access to hegemonic power. Gramsci is interested in the historiography of the subaltern classes, since the history of the ruling classes is realized in the state, and since history becomes the history of states and dominant groups. For studying the history of the subaltern classes, he outlines a six-point plan which includes (1) their objective formation; (2) their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations; (3) birth of new parties and dominant groups; (4) formations that the subaltern groups produce to press their claims; (5) new formations within the old framework that assert the autonomy of the subaltern classes; and, (6) other points referring to trade unions and political parties. Gramsci claims that the history of the subaltern classes is as complex as the history of the dominant classes, although the history of the latter is usually accepted as 'official' history. The history of subaltern group is generally fragmented and episodic, since they are always subject to the activities of the ruling class, even when they rebel. They have less access to the authorities of social, cultural, and political institutions as they have no power to represent (see Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 2004; Gramsci 1971; Guha 1982).

The term 'subaltern' has been adapted to post-colonial studies from the work of the Subaltern Studies Group of some South Asian scholars, such as Ranajit Guha, Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, David Arnold, David Hardiman, and Gyan Pandey -- who aim to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies. Ranajit Guha is the chief projector of Subaltern Studies which is used as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, office, or in any other way. Another objective to form the Subaltern Studies Project is to redress the imbalance created in the academic works by a tendency to focus on the elites and the elite culture in South Asian historiography. This scholars' group aims to examine the subaltern as an objective assessment of the role of the elites, and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role recognizing that subordination cannot be understood except in a binary relationship with dominance. The goals of this group stems from the belief that the historiography of Indian nationalism, for instance, has been dominated for a long time by elitism, such as colonialist elitism and bourgeois- nationalist elitism, both of which are the consequences of European colonialism. Guha observes that such historiography suggests that the development of a nationalist consciousness is an exclusively elite achievement either of colonial administrators and their policy or culture, or of elite Indian personalities and their institutions or ideas. What is clearly left out by the class outlook of such historiography is a politics of the people, which is an autonomous domain that continues to operate when the elite politics becomes outmoded. The difference between the elite and the subaltern lies in the nature of political mobilization. Elite mobilization is achieved virtually through the adaptation of British parliamentary institutions, while the subaltern relies on the traditional organization of kinship and territoriality or class associations. Popular mobilization in the British colonial period takes the form of peasant uprisings, and the contention is that this remains a primary locus of political action despite the change in political structure. And, this is very different from the claims of elite historiography that Indian nationalism is primarily an idealist venture in which the indigenous elites lead the people from subjugation to freedom. Despite the great diversity among the subaltern groups, Guha observes that the one invariant feature is a notion of resistance to elite domination (see Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 2004; Gramsci 1971; Guha 1982).

Guha's observation is very pragmatic. The failure of the bourgeoisie to speak for the nation means that the nation of India fails to come into its own, and it is the study of this failure which constitutes the central problem of Indian historiography. Actually, the concept of 'subaltern' is meant to cut across several kinds of political and cultural binaries, such as colonialism versus nationalism, or imperialism versus indigenous cultural expression, in favour of a more general distinction between the subaltern and the elite, because this subaltern group is invariably overlooked in the studies of political and cultural change (see Guha 1982). The real concept of 'subaltern', however, comes in the limelight of post-colonial studies when Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak takes the subaltern issue in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She thinks that this question is one that the Subaltern Studies Group must ask. Firstly, her criticism is directed towards the Gramscian claim for the autonomy of the subaltern group. She argues that no amount of qualification, such as the diversity, heterogeneity, and overlapping nature of the subaltern group which is conceded by Guha, can save the Gramscian claim from its fundamentally essentialist premise. Secondly, she again argues that no methodology for determining who or what might constitute this group can avoid this essentialism. The subaltern is a group of vulnerable people defined by its difference from the elite. This is a true definition of 'subaltern'—she observes. To guard against the essentialist views of subalterneity, Guha suggests that a further distinction has to be made between the subaltern and dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels. But, according to Spivak, Guha's attempt to guard against essentialism, by specifying the range of subaltern groups, serves still further only to problematize the idea of the subaltern itself. The task of this research is to investigate into identification, and measurement of the specific nature of the degree of deviation of the dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels from the ideal subaltern status which historically situates it. But, Spivak asks what taxonomy can fix such a space? She thinks that for the true subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself. Spivak, thus, explains her position, and clears that it is really difficult to construct a category of the subaltern that has an effective voice which is clearly and unproblematically identifiable. She wants to locate the problems of the category of the subaltern by looking at the situation of gendered subjects and of Indian women in particular, for both as an object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern does not have any history and cannot speak, it, as a female, is even more deeply in shadow. Spivak examines the position of Indian women through an analysis of a particular case, and concludes with the declaration that 'the subaltern cannot speak'. It is an interpretation which means that there is no way in which the oppressed or the politically marginalized groups can voice their resistance. But, Ashcroft and his fellows strongly believe that Spivak's target is to draw the concept of an unproblematically constituted subaltern identity, rather than finding the subaltern subject's ability to give voice to political concerns. The study of post-colonial discourse itself is the search for such a voice. But, in most of the cases, this type of subaltern voice is suppressed by the dominant voice. Theorists like Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault, on the other hand, would not like to simply reverse the categories of the oppressed (subaltern) and the oppressor (elite) without critiquing the process by which such simple binaries have come into being in the first place. They are worried, at the same time, about the dangers of creating new indigenous elites who will act merely as the neo-colonial puppets for the old forces of the colonizing power. Spivak also

draws the attention to the dangers of assuming that it is a simple matter of allowing the oppressed forces to speak, without recognizing that their essential subjectivity has been constrained by the discourses within which they are constructed as the subaltern (see Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 2004; Guha 1982; Spivak 1985b).

The term 'diaspora' originates from the Greek word meaning 'to disperse'. It is the central historical fact of colonization – the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions. Colonialism itself was a radically diasporic movement that involved the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans and non-Europeans over the entire world including the settled regions. As a result of colonialism, two types of colonies were created – 'settler colonies' and 'colonies of occupation'. The natives from the colonies of occupation joined the migrated Europeans in the settler colonies. Settled regions were developed historically as plantations or agricultural colonies to grow foodstuffs for the metropolitan populations. Thus, a large-scale demand for labour was created in many regions where the local population could not supply the need. In this way, a slavery-based economy was developed in different regions, such as in the two continents of America and South Africa. The slaves, who were shipped to the plantation colonies in the Americas, were virtually taken from West Africa through various European coastal trading enclaves. Some slaves from East Africa were sold by the Arabs into British colonies, such as India and Mauritius, while some enslaving of Melanesian and Polynesian peoples occurred in some parts of South Pacific to serve the sugarcane industry. After the slave trade was over, especially when slavery was outlawed by the European powers in the first decades of the 19th century, demand for cheap agricultural labour in colonial plantation economies was met by the development of a system of indentured labour. Under indenture agreements, this system involved transporting large populations of the poor agricultural labourers from the richly populated areas, such as India and China, to the areas where they were needed to serve plantations. These slaves and labourers, at length, made temporary or permanent settlements over the whole world for better fortunes. Thus, the wide-spread practices of slavery and indenture resulted in the world-wide 'colonial diaspora'. In addition to make settlement in Europe and the Americas, Indian populations formed some substantial minorities and majorities in colonies as diverse as the West Indies, Malay, Fiji, Mauritius, and the colonies of Eastern and Southern Africa. Chinese minorities also found their way under similar circumstances to all these regions, as well as to areas across most of South-East Asia, including the Dutch East Indian colonies, and American dominated Philippines. The three post-colonial scholars--Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin--observe that the descendants of the diasporic movements generated by colonialism have developed their own distinctive cultures which have emerged from their deep indigenous roots. In countries, such as Britain and France, the total population now has got substantial minorities of diasporic ex-colonial peoples, who have hybridized their indigenous cultures modifying their own institutions and values (see Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 2004).

Dislocation is another significant phenomenon of diasporic movement that occurs as a result of imperial occupation. It is a result of transportation of peoples from one country to another by slavery or imprisonment, or by invasion and settlement, which is the consequence of willing or enforced movement from a known to an unknown location. The term, that means uncanny or unhousedness, is used to describe the experience of those peoples who have willingly or forcefully moved from their imperial home to the colonial margin. But, it affects

all those who, as a result of colonialism, have been placed in a location that, because of colonial hegemonic practices, needs, in a sense, to be reinvented in language, in narrative, and in myth. Some recent critics of the diasporic and migrant experience, such as Thompson, Nelson, Rajan and Mohanram have argued that dislocation is a feature of all invaded colonies where indigenous or original cultures are, if not annihilated, often literally dislocated. They moved off from what was their territory. Thus, it occurs basically for the diasporic peoples who are metaphorically dislocated--being placed into a hierarchy that sets their culture aside, and ignores its institutions and values in favour of the values and practices of the colonizing culture. The major area of post-colonial studies acknowledges the psychological and personal dislocations that result from this cultural denigration. It is against this dislocating process that many modern decolonizing struggles are instituted. Diasporic communities may all be affected by such a process of dislocation and regeneration too (see Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 2004; Thompson 1987; Nelson 1993; Rajan and Mohanram 1995).

Postcolonial analyses of Subaltern and Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction

Amitav Ghosh is a Bengali Indian author best known for his work in English fiction. He holds a place of singular distinction in the contemporary Indo-Anglian literature. He has started writing in the 1980s, and strengthened the new English fiction for his new themes and techniques that deserve freshness and vitality. He was born in Calcutta on July 11, 1956 in a middle class Bengali Hindu family. His father, Shailendra Chandra Ghosh, was a retired lieutenant colonel of the pre-independence Indian Army, and subsequently, a diplomat. He grew up in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Sri Lanka, Iran and India with his diplomat father. After graduating from the University of Delhi, he went to Oxford to study Social Anthropology and received a Master of Philosophy and a PhD. Amitav Ghosh lives in Brooklyn of New York with his wife, Deborah Baker and their two children, Lila and Nayan. He has also residences in Goa and Kolkata of India. After completing his PhD, he decided to pursue his career in writing. First, he worked as a journalist with the Indian Express newspaper in New Delhi. He has taught English and Comparative Literature at the Queens College, City University of New York, Columbia University, and Harvard University in the USA. For his distinguished contribution to the literary world, Amitav Ghosh was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Ghosh has now turned to writing full-time, and split his time between the United States and India (visit Amitav Ghosh: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia; Amitav Ghosh: Encyclopaedia Britannica; see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

In his fiction, Amitav Ghosh brilliantly deals with the postcolonial identity of subaltern and their diasporic movement. In his essay, "The Diaspora in Indian Culture" Amitav Ghosh tries to see Indian diaspora from cultural and political points of view. He observes that the huge migration from this subcontinent that began in the mid-19th century is not only one of the most significant demographic dislocations of the modern world; it represents nowadays an important force in global culture. The diasporic culture becomes increasingly a factor within the culture of Indian subcontinent that becomes an important social, political, and literary force in its own way. And, this is self evidently true of its material culture which now sets the standard for all desirable in the metropolitan areas. Ghosh goes on to relate the relationship

between diasporic populations and their mother countries in history that is maintained through the reproduction of political and social institutions. The movement of diasporic peoples for establishing their rights has now become the centre of world consciousness which gradually gets its speed. We hope that the leading western world would compensate for its past by accommodating these settlers along with their own peoples through providing them with all sorts of social, cultural, and political facilities (see Ghosh 2002).

Ghosh's fiction brims with interesting sites set against the fascinating historical backdrops. A profound historical sense, a strong humanitarian drift that defies geo-cultural boundaries and moves towards cosmopolitanism, a witty but compassionate insight into man and his society are the major phenomena of Ghosh's fiction. History's victims who are forced into exile by events beyond their control casts a deep shadow on Ghosh's mind. For this reason, his fiction reflects the recent concern of sociologists and anthropologists with the porosity of social, cultural, and political boundaries. His characters do not occupy discrete cultures, but dwell in travel in cultural spaces that flow across borders drawn around our modern nation-states. His fiction, thus, shows that diasporic cultures are not oriented towards lost origins or homelands, but are produced by the ongoing histories of migration and transnational cultural flows. Being a trained anthropologist with a doctorate from Oxford, Ghosh's fiction shows strong evidence of that anthropological training in its careful observation of characters and their historical surroundings. In this way, Amitav Ghosh makes an implied comparative sweep of the cultures and ages of his characters through the strict academic and philosophical investigations. Literature is always an attempt to reveal an unknown world. Ghosh's fiction is, thus, involved in that unique experiment of quest and discovery that unfolds the deepest site of mystery (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

The Circle of Reason is the first novel of Amitav Ghosh, which makes a complex tapestry of stories of those diasporic individuals whose lives overlap, pull apart and separate, and find each other again in new contexts. A renowned post-colonial critic Robert Dixon observes--the novel is set within the paradigm of classical ethnography. It is an allegory about the destruction of traditional village life by the modernizing influx of western culture, and the subsequent displacement of non-European peoples by imperialism (see Dixon 2003). Claire Chambers observes that the image of the changing India, both in social and political circumstances during and after British colonization, such as the non-cooperation movement of 1920s and the nationalist struggle of 1930s for the independence of India, and later India's independence and partition in 1947, the independence war of Bangladesh in 1971, the international tide of migration to the Middle East of 1970s and onwards, provides the author with a vital source of his story of *The Circle of Reason* (see Chambers 2003). The opening section of the novel is set in the village of Lalpukur, about one hundred miles north of Calcutta. The village is settled by the refugees from East Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947 and then during the War of Independence in Bangladesh until its victory in 1971. The village, apparently a symbol of traditional India, is itself a product of diaspora. For Ghosh, even societies that appear to be static and traditional are always diasporic. The textual description of Lalpukur speaks of the diasporic scenario of the village: "[T]he people of Lalpukur were....[v]omitted out of their native soil years ago in another carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away....[when their] borders [were] dissolved under the weight of millions of people in panic-stricken flight from an army of animals" (59-60). Lalpukur, with its mixture of technologies, its blend of Hinduism and Bruce Lee movies, is not a site of

tradition, but of hybridization, says Ghosh. The word, 'carnage', here relates the battle of influence between the two influential men of Lalpukur - Balaram and Bhudeb Roy - over the possession of the village that results in the death of Balaram and his circle except Alu. And, the word, 'another', presumably refers to the War of Independence in Bangladesh. Alu, the protagonist, at the age of eight, comes to sleepy Lalpukur from Calcutta to live with his uncle Balaram and aunt Toru-debi after the death of his parents in a gruesome car accident. Balaram and Toru-debi decide to look after Alu, since they have no children of their own. At fourteen, the boy stops attending school, and takes up weaving as his profession. He is able to pick up various languages, including English, to communicate with the world. The history of weaving has got no single national root; it follows complex international routes. It is not a traditional craft which, in a binary sense, is opposed to western science; but another part of a diaspora that unravels the distinction between the Orient and the Occident (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

Alu's apprenticeship as a weaver, as Anthony Burgess observes, stands for tradition; while Balaram in his demented way stands for progress. Balaram is a village school master. He is obsessed with western ideas, which is being epitomized by his passion for phrenology and the writings of Pasteur. But, his establishment of the Pasteur School of Reason alternatively bores and terrorizes the villagers spraying carbolic acid throughout the village in the name of 'purification'. Anthony Burgess observes, the episode satirizes western imperialism (see Burgess 1986). Balaram's enthusiasm for Reason, on the other hand, may be a satire on those diasporic Indian intellectuals who enthusiastically embrace the theories of the West. It is significant that Balaram's greatest heroes are French. But, Ghosh's novel deconstructs any simple opposition between tradition and modernity, or between discrete oriental and occidental cultures. If Balaram's interest in Reason is part of the influx of foreign ideas into the village of Lalpukur, that village is not the symbol of an Indian tradition which can be placed in simple opposition to the West (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

Part one of the novel ends with the death and destruction of Lalpukur, from where Alu narrowly escapes the deadly dangers as well as the clutches of his enemy, Jyoti Das, an Assistant Superintendent of Police, who is trailing him as an alleged extremist. However, while Balaram reduces the village to rubble in his efforts to apply European theories to Indian life in part one, Alu, in part two, joins a tide of diasporic Indians drawn to the rich oil economies of the Middle East. Part two of the novel is set in al-Ghazira on the Persian Gulf where Alu resumes his craft of weaving with the help of Zindi al-Tiffaha, an Egyptian brothel owner, who was abandoned in her youth by her husband in Alexandria for her alleged barrenness. By this time, the new concrete building--the Star--in which Alu works as a labourer collapses accidentally. Robert Dixon thinks that the collapse of this building can be read as an allegory of the effects of post-modernity on the traditional societies of the Middle East (see Dixon 2003). Ghosh contrasts the collapsed building with the traditional market place--the Souq: "[T]he old bazaar's honeycomb of passageways...obscur[ed] every trace of the world outside....Nor did any but the most alert in the Souq feel the soil of al-Ghazira tremble when the Star fell" (193-94). However, the Souq does not represent a discrete culture rooted in one nation. Rather, it is part of a network of trade routes, confirming Balaram's argument that the act of weaving produces not one world, but many. Alu, however, begins weaving again at the loom of his Egyptian neighbour, Hajj Fahmy, who once abandoned his traditional craft for the more profitable construction business. As part of his revival of

weaving, Alu learns Arabic as he had to learn English earlier. His landlady, Zindi plans to install Alu as her manager when she buys the Durban Tailoring House from another diasporic Indian, Jeevanbhai Patel. Patel is a Gujarati Hindu from Durban in South Africa who has come to al-Ghazira after marriage which his parents disapprove (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

Zindi's house in al-Ghazira is now full of refugees of different histories and occupations whom she hopes to divert from their old business to the now-declining cloth trade. They are, besides Alu, Professor Samuel whose Theory of Queues seems vaguely reminiscent of Balam's obsession with phrenology and carbolic acid; a recently widowed, young Kulfi; Karthamma and her baby Boss; a travelling salesman, Rakesh; a drunkard, Abu Fahl; an old tailor, Forid Mian; a rich merchant, Jeevanbhai Patel; a wealthy teetotaler, Hajj Fahmy; handsome Zaghoul the Pigeon; and Kulfi's lover, Mast Ram. Zindi chooses al-Ghazira for her latest business centre, because it is a merchants' paradise, right in the centre of the world, being conceived and nourished by the flow of centuries of trade. Persians, Iraqis, Zanzibari Arabs, Omanis, and Indians have fattened upon it and grown rich. Robert Dixon observes that like the village of Lalpukur, the Souq of al-Ghazira does not represent a stable authentic culture, but a network of trade, centuries old, which unfurls like a cloth through a vast, borderless region (see Dixon 2003). Zindi, thus, leads a diasporic community formed by the Indians and the Egyptians that brings a historic connection between the two different nations. As homelessness is the basic problem of diaspora, Zindi and her circle cannot stay at a certain place for long. They have to move from one place to another to chase their fortune. At one stage of her floating life, she wants to get back to her native village with her company. But, her family rejects them only because of her current neglected social status, even though it had been her money over the years that had built homes for her brothers and their wives. Then the team decides to move from al-Ghazira to Algeria where they meet another small group of Indian emigrants formed by Mr. and Mrs. Verma, Dr. and Mrs. Mishra, and Miss Krishnaswamy-- a nurse. Dr. Uma Verma is a microbiologist as well as daughter of the socialist Hem Narayan Mathur, who has meanwhile sunk into obscurity. Dr. Mishra is a surgeon as well as the son of Maithili Sharan Mishra. Jyoti Das joins this diasporic Indians, at length; but, later he heads to a new life in Europe. In their bohemian life and career, Mast Ram, Kulfi and Hajj Fahmy die. Zindi, Alu and the baby Bose continue their migration to the West, and stop at Tangier from where they turn back happily again towards al-Ghazira. The story of the medieval trading culture between India and Africa-- that transcends national origins, and unites the peoples of these two worlds--does not end here. Rather, it continues in Ghosh's third book, *In an Antique Land* (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

All of us inhabit an interdependent early-twenty first-century world which is marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries (see Rosaldo 1992). Ghosh's third book, *In an Antique Land*, echoes the relationship between diaspora and mobile trading culture in the two ancient continents--Asia and Africa--which seems reminiscent of the interdependent business and culture of today's world. *In an Antique Land* is not a novel like *The Circle of Reason*. It is possibly a travelogue with a strong narrative drive, or a study in social anthropology, or an authentic scientific description of the culture of human society presented in the form of fiction. Whatever may be its status as a literary genre, besides Ghosh's own experiences in Egypt, the book tells the story of his anthropological search for the two Indian slaves of the medieval era, Bomma and Ashu. Bomma was a

lifetime companion of Ben Yiju, a medieval Jewish merchant of Tunisia. Ashu was Ben Yiju's maid-cum-converted wife. Bomma came of Bhuta-cult community of Tulunad, a Tulu-speaking region spread over the parts of present Kerala and Karnataka states of south and south-west India. Ashu came of South Indian Nair community of Kerala state. Bomma and Ashu were both a man and a woman outside Ben Yiju's own community with whom he established business and marital relationship. This relationship paved the way for making a new history of cross-bred culture between Asia and Africa during the medieval era. According to historical research, Ben Yiju arrived at the Malabar Coast from Cairo sometime before 1132 via Aden, and freed the slave-girl Ashu with whom he stayed there for some seventeen years after a supposed marriage. Malabar Coast locates in South India lying on the narrow coastal plain of Karnataka and Kerala states between the Western Ghats range and the Arabian Sea. However, Bomma initially appears, as Padmini Mongia observes (see Mongia 2003), in the written record in a letter written in 1148 by the merchant Khalaf ibn Ishaq to his friend, Abraham Ben Yiju. The letter, bearing the catalogue number MS.H.6 of the National and University Library in Jerusalem, was published in the Hebrew journal *Zion* in 1942. While making a scholastic search for the Slave of MS.H.6 as a young doctoral student in Anthropology at Oxford, Amitav Ghosh first encounters Bomma in 1978 in the Library of the University of Cambridge in a book of translations titled *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* written by Professor S.D. Goitein. This initial encounter provides Ghosh with the impetus to track Bomma's trail--a trail with virtually no signposts, but a journey that Ghosh meticulously shares in his book. From being merely a name and a greeting of subaltern status, Bomma, through Ghosh's efforts, gains a geographical home, a personality, and a professional life. The documents of Bomma-Ben Yiju story came from the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra outside Cairo in Fustat. Geiza was a wide-spread customary storehouse of Ben Ezra congregation in which all sorts of medieval documents were stored for more than seven or eight hundred years. Ben Yiju belonged to the congregation of this synagogue which he joined while he moved to Cairo from what was known in the medieval times as Ifriqiya and is now Tunisia. During the British colonization of Egypt the wealth of these documents was soon spread in Europe, and the single largest collection was housed at Cambridge. It is within these documents that Ghosh first encounters the Slave of MS.H.6, and tracks down the marital and business relationship of the Jewish merchant with the two Indian slaves (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

Though Ghosh's trail is labourious and incomplete, he traces the human relationship of the medieval mercantile society being based on his speculative search for the diasporic history of the subaltern of this sub-continent. The pre-colonial world Ghosh creates in his book challenges many of the assumptions we make about it. Ghosh richly creates the medieval world of Bomma and Ashu as a vital, cosmopolitan one that puts to shame our current notions of cosmopolitanism. Intermarriage between communities and peoples is just a small instance of that cosmopolitanism. Speaking of the unusual linkages between the Tunisian Ben Yiju, his Indian wife Ashu and his Indian slave Bomma, Ghosh observes that the confluence that brought them together ended with the coming of Vasco da Gama in 1498: "Within a few years of that day the knell had been struck for the world that had brought Bomma, Ben Yiju and Ashu together, and another age had begun in which the crossing of their paths would seem so unlikely that its very possibility would all but disappear from human memory"(286). Upon the arrival of the Portuguese in India, the control of the Indian

Ocean trade went to their hands, which had not till then been subjected to control through the force of arms. For centuries before their arrival in 1498, peoples had traded on the Indian Ocean respecting the laws of peace that governed the waters, being careful not to allow the militaristic nature of land-battles onto the laws of water. The Portuguese changed the trend. The medieval world of trade between Egypt and India had been running smoothly and graciously when it was interrupted by the Portuguese and brought under a system of military dominance. That single shift led to a new set of rules which governed trade. These new rules of dominance and autonomy altered the history of the world. Ghosh says, this radical alteration of the older structure leads to the 'unquenchable, demonic thirst that has raged ever since, for almost five hundred years, over the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf' (288). Ghosh, thus, tries to trace out the difference between the medieval trade world and his own through the intertwined histories of Asia and Africa (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

The synagogue to which Ben Yiju belonged was made up of some very cosmopolitan individuals who had close ties with the Indian trade that paved the way for his arrival in Mangalore. Mangalore--a flourishing trade centre in the medieval era-- is the chief port city of Karnataka which is often used as a staging point for sea traffic along the Malabar Coast. As business on the Indian Ocean between Masr (Old Cairo) and Mangalore was flourishing in the 12th century, Ben Yiju visited the Malabar Coast and did not return to Aden for nearly two decades. Soon after his arrival in Mangalore, he freed the slave-girl Ashu with whom he developed a sexual relationship and raised a family breeding two children--a son named Surur and a daughter named Sitt al-Dar. Citing from historical reference Ghosh notes that India, in the fifteenth century, had "a reputation as a place notable for the ease of its sexual relations....Public women [were] everywhere to be had residing in particular houses of their own in all parts of the cities, who attract[ed] the men by sweet perfumes and ointments, by their blandishments, beauty and youth; for the Indians [were] much dedicated to licentiousness....Any man [might have] enter[ed] into this locality, and select[ed] any girl that please[d] him, and [took] his pleasure with her" (228). Ben Yiju seized this opportunity and, at last, married the girl Ashu who was 'probably beautiful' (229). Ghosh observes that "Ben Yiju did indeed marry Ashu, for only a marriage of that kind -- with a slave girl, born outside the community of his faith -- could have earned so pointed a silence on the part of his friends. Ben Yiju probably converted Ashu to Judaism before their marriage. However, the conversion may have signified very little either to Ashu or to Ben Yiju's friends and relatives. It is also possible that their liaison was modeled upon the institution of 'temporary marriage'--a kind of marital union that was widely practised by expatriate Iranian traders"(230). Most probably, that is why when Ben Yiju left Malabar Coast to go back to Aden in 1149, he only took his two adolescent children with him, leaving behind his wife Ashu alone. His son, afterwards, died, and his daughter married her cousin in Sicily in 1156. Ghosh comes to know that from 1143 onwards, Ben Yiju's homeland of Ifriqiya had come under successive attacks from the Christians, and further was ravaged by disease and famine. Most of the members of his family, by this time, had relocated to Sicily without his knowledge. And, most probably, sometime during this period his son Surur died. Three years after his arrival in Aden, Ben Yiju had apparently moved to Egypt, and at that point disappeared from further historical records. With his disappearance, Ben Yiju's wife Ashu had also vanished into history's anonymity. With the historic disappearance of Ben Yiju and

Ashu, Ghosh ends his scholastic search for this subaltern woman. But, he does not feel tired of his further anthropological search for Bomma's deep-rooted subaltern origin (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

As a field trip of his PhD research, Ghosh travels to Mangalore in 1990 to see if he can learn any more about the medieval slave Bomma. He meets Professor Viveka Rai, an expert on Tulu folklore and philology of Mangalore, and collects some wonderful documents about Bomma and his origin. Citing from the text, Shyam S. Agarwalla observes that the "research of Ghosh on Bomma reveals one more aspect of Indian culture, centred in and around Mangalore, embedded in the Tulu culture of the area. First of all, there were various groups and clans in Tulunad. Secondly, despite diversity in social hierarchy, they spoke Tulu for one, and 'they also followed matrilineal rules of inheritance for certain kinds of property' (251). Thirdly, they shared in the worship of certain spirit-deities known as Bhutas. There were also many untouchables among them. The Indian history speaks of the assimilation of the Dravidians and Aryans, their living in peaceful co-existence in South India, since time immemorial. Ghosh is in trail of religious and cultural roots of the slave. The Aryans (Brahmins) practiced the folk-region of the high Sanskrit tradition and the Dravidians followed Bhuta-cult, the local form of worship. There were Brahmin temples as well as Bhuta shrines" (Agarwalla 1999:167). Agarwalla's observation echoes Ghosh's investigation: "There was no contradiction in this, of course, for to them Bhutas and Sanskritic deities represented aspects of divine and supernatural power that shaded gently and imperceptibly into each other. Indeed, under the benign cover of this shade, there was a good deal of trafficking between the two pantheons: some Bhuta deities would occasionally appear within the mists of high Sanskritism, while others fell from favour and vanished into the netherworld" (252). Citing from the text, another critic, Tapan Kumar Ghosh, also adds that the name 'Bomma' relates the slave to the Bhuta-cult--the worship of spirit-deities which is still practised in certain areas of Tulunad. The name was derived from the name of a deity of the Tulu myth, 'Berme or Bermeru, the principal figure in the pantheon of Tuluva Bhuta-deities' (254). 'Berme' or 'Bermeru' was not the same as the Brahma of classical Sanskritic mythology (see T.K. Ghosh 1999). But, in course of time, 'with the growth of Brahminical influence, the Tulu deity Berme had slowly become assimilated to the Sanskritic deity Brahma' (254). Ghosh concludes that "the name Bomma in the Tulu language probably stretched back to a time before the deities of Tulunad had begun to assume Sanskritic incarnations: in all likelihood it was a diminutive of 'Berme', the figure who stood at the pinnacle of the Tuluva pantheon of Bhuta-spirits...the Slave of MS.H.6 had been born into one of the several matrilineal communities which played a part in the Bhuta-cult of Tulunad... It was thus that Bomma finally came of age and was ready at last to become a protagonist in his own story"(254). However, the name "Bomma had once had wide currency within Tulu culture...and even until a generation or so ago it was commonly encountered in and around Mangalore. Over the last few decades it had passed out of general use as a personal name, but it was still preserved in the titles of various groups and clans in Tulunad" (250-51). May be this ethnography of Bomma's origin is not convincing enough; but, Ghosh's trail about this medieval slave, no doubt, gives some wonderful clues of Indo-African mercantile culture of the medieval era (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

We may conclude Bomma-Ben Yiju story with the witty observation of Tapan Kumar Ghosh: "Amitav Ghosh's search for the origin of the slave (Bomma) provides the readers (us) with a wonderful study in social anthropology and a valuable 'insight into the uses of history' (270). The story takes the readers back to an antiquated world in the Middle Ages when, despite religious, social, and geographical divisions, 'a culture of accommodation and compromise' (288) had spread over a wide area in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent that made the crossing of the paths of the Jewish merchant and his Hindu slave (Bomma) possible" (T.K.Ghosh1999:157). The relationship between Ben Yiju and Bomma was "probably more that of patron and client than master and slave....[because] in the Middle East and northern India....slavery was the principal means of recruitment into some of the most privileged sectors of the army and the bureaucracy. For those who made their way up through that route, 'slavery' was thus often a kind of career opening, a way of gaining entry into the highest levels of government" (259-60). Although most of the Geniza documents, in which Bomma figures, refer to him as Ben Yiju's slave, the actual terms of his service were completely different from those which the word 'slavery' suggests today. The medieval concept of slavery was totally different from the contemporary notion. Ghosh mentions that, "in the Middle Ages institutions of servitude took many forms, and they all differed from 'slavery' as it came to be practised after the European colonial expansion in the sixteenth century. In the lifetimes of Bomma and Ben Yiju, servitude was a part of a very flexible set of hierarchies and it often followed a logic completely contrary to that which modern expectations suggest" (259-60). In the Middle East and India during the medieval period, slavery was used by merchants and traders as a means of recruiting apprentices and agents. The slaves recruited in this way were often given a share of their firm's profits. They "could generally be sure of obtaining manumission, and even of attaining the rank of partner or shareholder" (260). Not only that, in the medieval world "slavery was also used as a means of creating fictive ties of kinship between people who were otherwise unrelated. Amongst the Jewish merchants of medieval Cairo, for instance, as with many tribes in Africa, slaves were sometimes gradually incorporated into their masters' households and came to be counted as members of their families" (260). Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* hints that Bomma, in absence of his master, eventually assumed the control of Ben Yiju's business interests in Aden, and then, assumed the title 'Shaikh' (see Dhawan 1999; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005).

Conclusion

Ghosh's search for the origin of the subaltern and their diasporic movement gives us a new direction to the rapid development of post-colonial studies. His speculative research for the subaltern and diasporic ethnicity of Alu, Zindi, Bomma, and Ashu surely paves the way for bringing a change in the contemporary attitudes of the hegemonic world. We hope, the painstaking study of his fiction, thus, opens a gateway to the new world where peace and harmony will be replaced by the current confronting scenario of the social and political upheavals.



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