

Subaltern's Voice in Amitav Ghosh's Flood of Fire

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ABSTRACT:

Flood of Fire is the finest story and final part of Ibis trilogy is nothing short of a masterpiece. It sets against the first Anglo Chinese Opium War of 1839-1841. Ghosh paints a broad canvas of colonial history of imperialism and different shades of life which revolves around Rangpur, Bombay, Calcutta, Bihar, Assam to Canton, Singapore, Hong Kong, Guangzhou and ends in Mauritius. The finest story of escapist passengers of Ibis and how do they find themselves again together with ambitions, insecurities, passions, sexualities and destinies. He sketched the voyage epitomized their psychological journey unrevealing their ups and downs and create a diverse multicultural flavor in the novel. He uses Bangla, Chinese, Gujarati, Bhojpuri, Urdu, Pidgin languages to narrate the Ibis story. He paints the dives of subaltern characters and their ignored voice in the history.

Keywords: diaspora, identity, marginalized, subaltern, voiceless.

Flood of Fire is based on subaltern voice, illicit relationship and the forgotten opium war between British India and China. He represents the caste biased society by portraying the character of Havilder Kesri Singh, who is working in Bengal Regiment of East India Company. Colonial hegemony has shown the humiliation, oppression of loyal, honest

soldiers under the powerful domination of Britishers. It gives a deep insight into atrocities of war, illicit relationship between different race complex human relationships with their intricacies, nuances and complexities. Human life especially subaltern peoples' life has been depicted adulterous relationship between Mrs. Burnham and Zachary Reid, the pious and true love of Shireen Modi and Zadig Bey, love affair between Paulette Lambert and Zachary Reid, the illicit relationship of Bahram Modi and a Chinese women and the affair of Catherine Bradshaw and Officer Neville Mee.

Human relationship is beyond the social acceptance because of caste, class and cultural clash. Mr. Zachary Reid fall in love with white lady of the house, Catherine Bradshaw entangle with the son of Grocer man, Mr. Mee. Characters in the novel are perfect symbol of the moral hypocrisy of the colonial society. It criticizes the imperial hunger in the name of 'Free Trade' and double standard of so called white man's burden in the name of promoting equality. The story is about subalterns, downtrodden, poor laskers, oppressed Halvildars and oppressed women in different strata of society. Some of the characters are voiceless but Ghosh tries to give voice to them through his narrative technique. The story of voiceless community has evocatively portrayed in the novel in the amazing locations like: Calcutta, Bombay, Mauritius, Singapore, Guangzhou, etc, of the 19th century and the incredible events up to the First Opium War.

Commissioner Lin banned the sale of opium and closed the Canton channel in 1839. Shireen Modi, a widow of Bahram Modi travelled by vessel to China to claim her deceased husband's profits. Her husband had an illegitimate relationship with a Chinese woman and also had a son, Freddie. She knows the harsh fact of Opium war, Opium business in China. She got to know about this new revelation about her husband; she had a craving to see Freddie. Though the subaltern in the novel are from different strata; they are loyal with their owners.

Zachery Reid, a young sailor, dreams of his lost love and of a way to make his fortunes. His chance comes when the wealthy opium merchant, Mr. Burnham gives him the job of a lifetime even as his wife provides Zachery with other allures. Havildar Kesri with his Captain Neville Mee, to lead a regiment of Indian volunteers in the upcoming war. He prepared for the battle among his ill-quipped band of men, who doesn't know about Chinese war or sailing in unknown land.

The novel gives voice to unvoiced women characters that are in constant search of identity. Paulette though being a white woman is suppressed by her step-father but she tries to come out of his dominion rule, breaks the age-old shackles and enters into the ship called Redruth which is on its voyage to Botanical expedition. Ghosh has focused on the journey of women characters witnessing the fact that women were ignored in the patriotic society & mainstream history of society. After receiving a letter of Mr. Reid stating "I owe you a great debt of Gratitude for refusing my sincere but rash offer of Matrimony" (296), Paulette had a sense of betrayal still she did not give up. She was a woman of unflinching belief in herself though she got heartbroken on the death of Freddie. She knows about Bahram's illegitimate son. She was hardly thinking about going back to India that's why she lives her life on her terms and conditions. The famous critic, Anne McClintock rightly says about the women, "In this world women do two-third of the world's work, earn only 10 percent of the world's income, and own less than 1 percent of the world's property" (Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory).

The novel has direct connection between India and China on the basis of Opium War which affects on destinies of Subalterns. The adverse effects of opium as a "free trade" symbolized through Indian and Chinese civilians. Bahram commits suicide under this opium impact and Freddie, a young lad also gets addicted to opium. Ghosh has projected and

criticizes on this free trade of opium which leads to the exploitation, physical harassment and destruction of their native economies and their cultures.

Captain Mee and Kesri Singh are the best example of exploited characters. They are very eager to leave the Company because the weapons and ammunition, their regiment is provided with is inferior quality. They stopped their working due to damp environment. Kesri Singh almost meets his death due to this negligence of East India Company. The soldiers left their family and their native villages for the remuneration, *batta* and betterment of themselves and their family.

He gives voice to the voiceless, subjugated, invisible, and historically repressed characters, meditates on their silence, retrieves them from the shackles of past and finally achieves a swerve by simply righting the record. He brings the marginal characters in the centre, re-writes history by creating public consciousness about historical prejudices and injustices up- surging a new history-subaltern history.

Subaltern remain silence against the mainstream i.e. Havildar Kesri Singh remains silent throughout the novel. British Company is misusing the Indian soldiers; they were given less *batta* and facilities in comparison to British soldiers. Even the quality of ammunition was poor which were unable to work in damp weather. Marginalized Indian soldiers became the victim of humiliation at the hands of Bhairo Singh and Hukam Singh. Havildar remains an unvoiced soldier throughout the novel. Even after the death of Captain Mee, he prefers to settle in Mauritius leaving his position behind as he found the whole system unable to understand his plethora. While reflecting on Captain Mee's death, he says: "I was a waste, such a waste, of Captain Mee's life-and his own too. And for what? A pension? A citation?" (FOF 602).

Ghosh has projected the fragmented world of ordinary and un-heroic characters languishing in alienated places. The major characters have concern with to build a

relationship between culture and history. He takes this approach into his novel by retrieving the historically repressed incidents and characters where the subalterns and repressed become the point of origin in his novels. As Ranjit Guha has also pointed out the four effects of subaltern practice: it “challenges the univocity of statist discourse”, “puts the question of agency...back into the narrative”, makes audible other small voices and “interrupts the telling of the dominant version” (Guha 11-12).

The moral story of subaltern voice takes place in the novel. Kesri Singh is adopted as the narrator of the story and the whole fiction speaks in his own voice. His grappling issues with company, Mr. Mee, Bhairo Singh, Hukam Singh, war at Hong Kong, atrocities of environment over the sea, everything is discussed through his voice though he remains silent for his situations, repression and suppression.

In his novels, subalterns have intriguing development; their silence itself is a voice, critiquing the denial of voice to the subaltern (Can the Subaltern Speak). He has mentioned a story of suspended moment of silence of Kesri Singh. His presence in Mauritius with Shireen, Zadig, Paulette, is an epitome of his resistance against the atrocities of war and corrupt free trade of the capitalists. In the novel, he mentioned about the displacement of mainstream society which enables him to see all the locations, landscapes, events and situations of subaltern locality.

Ghosh has visited to several places, territories in India, Mauritius, America and China. He projected the postcolonial world for readers to enjoy the beauty of nature, society and people from different strata. He rewrites and reviews colonial history bringing subaltern history into the mainstream giving voice and acknowledgement to the neglected and suppressed characters and locations in the form of fiction. His complicated interest of subalterns has been aesthetically represented in a narrative pastiche which finally leads to the “return of the repressed”. In his novels, Ghosh gives voice to subalterns while Spivak laments

the inability of subalterns to speak, this special kind of sensibility is unique in subalterns in Ghosh's novels. This novel shows the repressions within repressions enables them to have an empathetic space created as subject which defines what subaltern speaking might mean. This is define through the character like Kesri Singh who is silent but central and whose speech is articulated by interlocutors but preferring the mode of self-expression.

Thus as a writer, he uses subaltern history not only to understand historical events but also marginalized people. He has thrown the light on the limitations of subaltern history, especially in its choice of events to deconstruct mainstream historiography and society.

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