



Research Paper

History and Imagination in the novels of Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

History cannot be read only from the point of view of great figures of history but history can and must be read from the point of view of ordinary hapless people who are made to face the effects of history in their lives. History can be interpreted in numerous ways. Here a litterateur is provided that space to make use of history in a way that suits his/her imaginative purposes. Amitav Ghosh uses his imaginative creativity to narrate little stories of ordinary people through narrative styles like a diary, a memory and a Memoir. In doing so, Ghosh re-reads history through the lens of unhistorical figures but figures that faced the weight and burden of events in history. Through his fictional works, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Hungry Tide*, a glimpse of the stories and lives of ordinary people are being imaginatively created by Amitav Ghosh.

KEYWORDS: history, imagination, memory, diary, memoir

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“The English word ‘history’ is derived from a Greek word *istoria* meaning inquiry, research, exploration or information. In a broad sense, history is a systematic account of the origin and development of humankind, a record of the unique events and movements in its life. It is an attempt to recapture, that which is, in a sense, lost forever” (Sreedharan 1). The question that must be pondered upon is whether history should always be regarded as one that only records the life of historical figures. Does history then mean that it records only the lives of kings and queens? E.H.Carr’s definition of history must be greatly considered as he defines history differently when he says: “History means interpretation” (23) This suggests that the past can be read differently and in myriad ways. Carr’s definition of history allows for a different reading and interpretation of history, hence making it conceivable to read history differently. By this it may be deduced that there are and can be different perspectives and dimensions of history. A historian’s interpretation of the past is only one possible interpretation of the past.

E. H. Carr further writes that it is important to perceive “history as a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (30). It is this unending dialogue between the present and the past that allows literature to study these recorded events in history in a different way.

Literature reflects a writer’s personal observation and interpretation of life. This becomes even more interesting when the use of history and historical events are made available by a writer. Like a historian, a litterateur also interprets and decodes history to suit his objective and purpose of creativity. A litterateur makes an attempt to interpret history from a different point of view giving history a different perspective. A litterateur’s interpretation does not mean that he/she is questioning the integrity of a historical event or record. Rather, he is attempt is to read the past as one that also regards the lives of historically unimportant insignificant people.

Amitav Ghosh uses his imagination and views how a writer’s imagination helps him reach higher levels of perception far beyond those of the historian. He rereads history in the light of his narrative skills that incorporates the real and the unreal, the factual and the fictive. Ghosh prefers to read history from the point of view of the marginalized people through a juxtaposition of the historical and the unhistorical characters. He provides his unhistorical characters a space to voice their concern and even participation in events in history.

The terms ‘history’ and ‘imagination’ operate in diverse spheres with history as a body of knowledge presents an empirical documentation of actual past events while imagination “. . . traditionally, the mental

capacity for experiencing, constructing, or manipulating ‘mental imagery’ (quasi-perceptual experience)” (Thomas). If history stands for rationality imagination stands for a-rationality. It is this experience of history and imagination that a reader comes across when reading Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Amitav Ghosh.

Like his contemporaries, Amitav Ghosh’s fictional works make parallel presentation of the historical and the fictional. Though the narrative space that Ghosh gives to history, it is fiction that occupies the centre stage. For example, *The Shadow Lines* has both the historical and the fictional alike. The Partition of the country and the Khulna riots are true events in history that Ghosh uses in the novel to balance with their consequences on his imaginary characters whose fate criss cross with episodes from history. In doing so, “He [a writer of fiction] is not free to distort history; factual accuracy has to be adhered to” (“Introduction” 15)

Amitav Ghosh does not distort a historical event. Instead he offers a new interpretation of the event by giving it a familial or personal slant. In presenting the real against the unreal, Ghosh presents a different appeal and perspective of the past. The focus of Amitav Ghosh is not on the events themselves but on the impacts of historical events on helpless ordinary citizens of the country and the connection that these events of history may have had on their lives. He uses certain methods in order to bring about a connection between the two worlds of history and imagination. He uses memory, a diary and a memoir as mosaics of narration to reconstruct history and imagination.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh presents a perfect amalgamation of the private lives and public events through the memories of his characters. Memories of London during World War II as explained to the narrator by his uncle, Tridib, stories of East Bengal before the Partition of the country that his grandmother, Thamma tells him, foreign travels to Cairo, London, Paris, Florence and many other countries are stories that Ila shares with the narrator. One of the most distressing memory in the novel is the death of Tridib that lives in the minds of Thamma, Robi and Mary Price. Robi remembers his brother’s death vividly: “I remember it (Jindabahr Lane, Dhaka) because my brother was killed there, he said in a riot – not far from where my mother was born. Now do you see why I remember? (Lines 243). Mary Price lives with this guilt: “I thought I’d killed him. I used to think: perhaps he wouldn’t have got out of the car if I hadn’t made him, if I understood what I was doing ... he must have known he was going to die.” (Lines 251).

The narrator traces memories and connects a series of events to search and ultimately unravel the connections between the death of Tridib and the communal clash that took place in Dhaka. The newspaper record at the Teen Murti House Library takes his memory back to the nightmare bus ride as he was returning home from school and the events that took place in Dhaka. It may not be wrong to state that at the heart of *The Shadow Lines* is the other side of history that Ghosh recreates through memory as a narrative technique.

Other than memory, Amitav Ghosh also restructures history through another mode of narration like the diary as seen in his other novel, *The Hungry Tide*. This narrative through a diary creates an awareness of the kind of torment that ordinary citizens are subjected to due to historical events. Nirmal’s diary contains stories of the lives and struggles of the refugees in Morichjhapi. While historical records can only depict the plight of people during the Partition, Nirmal’s diary records individual sufferings and angst during the Partition. Nirmal’s diary is a presentation of the divide between the haves and the have not showcasing the rich as more privileged and fortunate than the poor section. While the upper castes and elites could settle themselves in Kolkata, the poor low caste Hindus were moved to areas outside West Bengal, to live in the harsh and inhospitable dry forest regions called Dandakaranya, in Orissa and Chattisgarh.

Nirmal’s diary also throws light on the history of migration of people who are made to live in concentration camps known as Permanent Liability Camps and are met with great opposition from the local people. To add to their woe, politics interferes with their sad plight. The CPI (M) who promised to bring the poor refugees back once they are in power, completely lost interest in these poor people once in power. While the poor refugees moved out of Dandakaranya and settled themselves in the Sundarbans where they faced even greater challenges as the government claimed that the area is a reserved area for the preservation of tigers. The refugees remained unwanted everywhere. Nirmal’s diary unfolds stories and narratives that have been preferred to be buried and forgotten. Ghosh uses Nirmal as his mouthpiece in the hope of bringing to light what is left untouched and unknown when Nirmal ends his diary thus:

I will hand it to Horen in the hope it finds its way to you. I feel certain you will have a greater claim to the world’s ear than I ever had. . . . Your generation will, I know, be richer in ideals, less cynical, less selfish than mine (Tide 278)

The Morichjhapi incident that took place in 1979 at the wake of the Bangladesh independence had severe repercussions on thousands of people especially the poor forcing them to be homeless and reduced to creatures even below animals. Ghosh is not ready to wipe out from the minds of millions of people and from pages of history, the eviction, migration, loss, distress, trickery and even death the poor refugees were subjected to. Being conscious of the situation of the refugees, Ghosh takes a stand and is anxious to tell their stories to the

world. Through his fictive imagination, Ghosh creates ordinary fictional characters that are filled with stories of historical events as felt and experienced by them.

While a diary represents unhistorical writings a Memoir presents the historical view. In his novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh does not authenticate Ronald Ross's Memoir of 1923. Rather he subverts the Memoir. Ross's Memoir throws a lot of light on the presence of a possible aid and assistance of an Indian helper in Ross's research. What is interesting for Ghosh in the Memoir is that; The silences and omissions, particularly Ross's refusal to supply any detail about his Indian laboratory workers, suggest fascinating possibilities, and Ghosh constructs a story out of these silences (Claire, "Postcolonial Science Fiction" 62).

There are hints in the Memoir of the role and aid of an Indian who assisted Ross in the malaria work that Ross wished to sideline. A lot of the connections came from his servants whose names he was always vague about: "Next morning, the 16 august, when I went again to hospital after breakfast, the Hospital Assistant (I regret I have forgotten his name) pointed out a small mosquito seated on the wall with its tail sticking outwards" (Chromosome 66).

What is ironical is that Ross does not acknowledge his local assistants' identity and contribution giving only a one sided description of the discovery. This is ironical as it reveals the hierarchical suppressive collaboration of the colonizer with the marginalized colonized people in making possible the breakthrough in the world of medical science. Here Ghosh attempts to topple this hierarchy as seen below:

Throughout the novel, Ghosh accords far greater agency to Ross's laboratory assistants than the great man [Ross] – who once described Indians as "swarming and dying million" – would ever have countenanced. (Claire, "Postcolonial Science Fiction" 64)

The Calcutta Chromosome does not only contain stories of the discovery as known and read in historical records but also diverts itself into stories with direct links to the scientific research of malaria. These are stories that contain some hidden truths behind historical reality. The character of Murugan who is obsessed with the history of malaria led him to the conviction that Ronald Ross was no solitary genius. He believes that there is a secret society that helped Ross's scientific discovery yet the contribution made by the society has been completely ignored and have never found space in the recorded history of medical science.

Thus, what comes across in the reading of the fictional works of Amitav Ghosh is the idea that Ghosh constructs little histories of ordinary people that have been drawn out of events in history. The silenced stories that have never found space in any historical records are narrated with an imaginative fervor by Ghosh as possible happenings and experiences of people. He steers clear from conventional narrative techniques and substitutes his narratives with memory, diary and a memoir as techniques of narrative little histories of ordinary people. Amitav Ghosh's narrative medium impinges on the need for an alternative perception of history. This need is based on Ghosh's belief that there cannot be only one legitimate version of truth and fact. Truth and reality must be read from the point of view of all. Every individual has his or her version of truth and reality to share. Ghosh challenges grand narratives with diverse little narratives by little people. Consequently whether it is narration through memory, diary or even memoir, Ghosh's imaginative use of them to authenticate unhistorical records is interesting.

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