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Narratology and History in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novel *River of Smoke* belongs to the genre of the historical novel. With the help of different narrative strategies, Amitav Ghosh in this novel has re-written history that covers the period of opium trade in Canton, in 1838. The story is about the struggle of Manchu Empire against the British Empire who made war on China in the name of free trade. Ghosh has re-inventing past through using different narratological devices while presenting the personal history with nation's history. He uses memory, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, authentic and official voices of historical personals, original documentation, edicts, Canton journals, Hukamnamas, proclamations, translators, letters, painting and drawings etc. to present opium war period in Canton. The novel moves in flash back in non-chronological order. There are analeptic movements, embedded stories, characterized by fragmented sequences, ellipsis, digression and jumbled chronology. The narrative is presented through third person omnipresent narrator along with first person character narrator. The point of views from which the story is told keeps on changing. Different perspectives of the colonized, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the sufferers, the marginals, of the colonizers and real historical persona present vivid account of the period. This shifting focalization also helps to present vividly the history of opium war period in Canton.

Key Words: Narratology, History, Canton, Opium trade and war, genere, Narrators, Non-chronological, Focalization.

Article

In his novels Amitav Ghosh wants to mirror different shades of history mainly through the eyes of oppressed rather than the dominating and oppressing forces in society. He thinks that history and narratives have basically the same function. One has to go through narrative to encounter the surface of the story just as one has to travel through history to encounter pre-history. He admits that he has always been fascinated by history.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *River of Smoke* belongs to the genre of the historical novel. With the help of different narrative strategies, Amitav Ghosh in this novel has re-written history that covers the period of opium trade in Canton, in 1838. The story is about the struggle of Manchu Empire against the British Empire who made war on China in the name of free trade. The British Government was backed by merchants and traders. They made war on China in the name of free trade. They were trading in opium which was produced as monopoly of the East India Company. They talked about free markets and trade but in fact the markets were not free at all as the Asian merchants couldn't compete with British merchant on equal terms. The merchants in Asia had a very long tradition. Even in the past they

were extremely competitive, extremely canny. They had the knowledge of local circumstances. Even when it was purely a matter of business they were often able to out-do the British traders and merchants. But the British maintained their control on business and trade by using their political and military power. It is through the omnipresent narrator or the character focalizers that we experience the historical period of opium war in *River of Smoke*. We observe through these characters and their memories about the world they lived in the foreign merchant's quarter of Canton, the cliffs of Mauritius, the inner sanctum of walled Chinese garden or the life on a vessel, from all perspectives.

The main story of *River of Smoke* is about the struggle of Manchu empire against the British Empire. On one hand the Chinese emperor is trying to ban the import of drug while the Western power who profits from this trade, resist this movement in the name of 'free trade'. The reader comes to know about different views through the serious arguments of the traders and the occasional oblique remarks of Hindustanis. This scenario has also its relevance in present too. A century and a half later material profit still provokes to attack the others.

Amitav Ghosh's novels *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosomes*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide* and two novels of *Ibis* trilogy – *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* have different period of history at their backdrop. There are different methods of dealing with past in these novels for example *The Shadow lines* and *The Circle of Reason*, may be called thoroughly memory novels while *Ibis* novels are about re-inventing and re-writing the past not only through memory, interior monologue, stream of consciousness but also through the authentic and official voices of historical personas ,edicts Canton journals, Hukamnamas , proclamations, letters, and memorials. It is only through the use of such aids i.e. the original voices in his narratives that Amitav Ghosh could adequately draw the portrait of the period effectively and emphatically.

Ghosh has paid attention to photographs, letters, historical documents, dictionaries etc. which are used as narrative aids. Ghosh novels internalize these various genres as he feels that the genre of text is wonderfully generous and capacious form. The paper discusses how Amitav Ghosh has used the narrative techniques to present vivid pictures of Canton in 1838. Here the main characters Bahram Modi, Ah Fatt, Neel, Robert Chinnery, Paulette and Zadig Bay remember their past life and incidents. They serve as the repository of memory and thus their memories are used not only to present their personal history but nation's history as well.

The open ended novel shows shift in narrator from omnipresent third person narrator to first person character narrator Neel who expresses his sorrow in the closing line of the novel :

I realize that if it were not for those paintings no one would believe that such a place had ever existed (ROS 553).

Here it is not only memory that may preserve historical events but art itself becomes the preserver of intense moment . Chinnery's paintings of Canton in flames become the testimonials of life of Canton during riots in future that he visions long before the event actually occurs. On micro level Deeti's drawings on the wall of her Memory Temple are also the preserver of personal history of the people inhabiting in that period.

The book is divided into three sections 'Island', 'Canton' and 'Commissioner Lin'. Each section comprises six unnamed chapters. The open ended novel *River of Smoke* leaves the reader awe

struck guessing what will happen next in the third part of trilogy. Amitav Ghosh leaves the novel open-ended, a technique that makes the reader free to interpret and guess what may happen next. He feels anxious to trace out clues as to what the ending means and what further action it leads to. *River of Smoke* follows the third sequel of trilogy *Flood of Fire*.

Ghosh has tried to project and reproduce the Canton different voices of traders, migrants, lascars, government officials, British officers, business men, botanists, horticulturists, and even painters. To replicate the opium trade and pre-war conditions in Canton, Amitav Ghosh has relied to great extent on original historical records to create an emotional and fictional response to the condition of sufferers. The novel's interest lies in horror and beauty with which Bahram Modi (the main protagonist in the novel) the Parsi opium trader comes to terms with his memories allowing the readers to share the pain and suffering of his life.

Amitav Ghosh wishes to present a subtext from a new critical direction. In this sub text he presents the history of the transportation of rare plants from Canton to other countries through the vessel *Redruth*. Ghosh fictionalizes history and presents different activities during the period of opium trade in China. It is a history conceived by Ghosh through intense reading of *Chinese Repository* and *Canton Register* – the journals of that period and other related material available as mentioned by Ghosh in his acknowledgement.

River of Smoke is a not a univocal narrative. It frames a series of inter-related stories from history presented by multiple narrators. The psychological effect of the opium war upon the psyche of the people sometimes outweigh the historical facts, which is presented mainly through main character focalizers Bahram Modi, Neel, Zadig Bay, Robert Chinnery etc. Thus, Amitav Ghosh's novel reveals the psychic sub-text that lie within and beneath the historical facts. This psychological presentation doesn't come within the compass of history which is related only with facts and figures. Through the characters of the novel the writer unfolds the effects of historical events in the lives of people. He presents the disturbed life that the people like Bahram, Ah Fatt, Deeti, Neel, Chinnery has to go through during the opium trade and war period in China. Through different narrative techniques the author offers an opportunity to readers to peep deep into psyche of the inhabitants, traders, officials and others in Canton and to know their past by reconstructing history.

As *River of Smoke* is set during an appalling period of opium trade between India and China and later on opium war between China and England the plot of the novel is manipulated not in a simple manner. Infact Amitav Ghosh's technique is to thread various narratives together and sometimes he has presented the memories of characters in present tense just to achieve vividness and accuracy of the events. All the meetings, conversations and discussions among traders and British officials are presented in present tense in the form of mimeses as if the whole drama is enacted before the audiences' eyes:

But Mr. Slade! ..., If freedom is merely a stick
for you to beat others with, then surely the
world has lost all meaning? ... you have not
once taken the name of commodity that
has brought us to present impasse

opium. (ROS238).

The way the events in the novel are presented in non-chronological order present the distinction between the plot and the story of the narrative. The story moves in flash back. There are analeptic movements in the novel so many embedded stories crop up throughout the narrative. It was a period when life of opium merchants, the officials, the artists, the painters and common men of Canton were adversely affected due to upheavals in political and historical scenario. The disturbed psyche of the people could only be depicted through the zig-zag pattern of the narrative. The memories of the past and worries of the future haunted the character like Bahram Modi and that's why Amitav Ghosh shows how the past may unconsciously impose on or interspersed with the present. In this way Ghosh includes his readers to participate imaginatively in the process of creation of narratives.

It is Ghosh's narrative strategy to place the reader within the text. The purpose is to invite him to participate in the reconstruction of the story, which is sometimes complicated with overlapping stories and non-linear order of incidents. In different analeptic movements Deeti remembers the whole scene of 'The Parting', Ah Fatt recollects and shares his childhood period with Neel, Paulette and Chinnery share the moments of their life they spent together in past and Bahram Modi recollects his past life he spent with his mother, his wife Shreebani, his mistress Che-mei and son Ah Fatt.

There are only two modes of narration in narratology irrespective of any language and these modes are 'diegesis' i.e. 'telling' and mimesis i.e. 'showing'. In 'telling' a story the writer/narrator often interferes, comments and gives information about the fictional material in the course of narrative. While in 'showing' the writer minimizes his /her presence in the narrative and it is upon the reader to experience and understand the narrative on his own. Both the modes of narration 'telling' and 'showing' are used though much preference is given to 'telling'. In *River of Smoke* the author resorts to 'telling' in a remarkable way as he wishes to impart and share maximum information of the period with the readers regarding opium trade and war, British power politics, and life in Canton. He constructs all types of characters – Bahram Modi, Zadig the traders, Paulette a botanist, Neel an exiled Raja and later a munshi, Ah Fatt an opium addict and Bahram's estranged son, Robert Chinnery a painter, Charles King, Mr. Jardin, Mr. Dent, Mr. Innings (the British and American traders and officials) and Commissioner Lin - a representative of Chinese Emperor. These are the people who are either affected by or may affect directly or indirectly the history itself. Some of them are those whose destinies are written by others and some are those who write the destinies for others as Mr. King appeals to Bahram:

I refer of course to you, Mr. Moddie, amongst
all of us it is you who bears the
greatest responsibility, for you must answer not
only to your own homeland but also to
its neighbours... our successors will not have to
live with the outcome of today's decision in the
same way that yours will. It is your children
and grandchildren who will be called into
account for what transpires here today (ROS470).

Commissioner Lin in his letter commands Captain Elliot and asks him:

... that he should give clear commands to the foreigners to obey the order, requiring them to speedily deliver up all the opium that is on board their store-ship.

Thenceforward all the foreigners will conduct a legitimate trade... (ROS 513).

Another important aspect of narratology is focalization. Time and again Bahram Modi recalls his past and remote past – his life with his mother before his marriage, his marriage with Shreebani, his business in past, his relations with Ah Fatt, his mistress Che mei and his life in Canton. He shares an incident with his friend Zadig Bay about his first meeting with Che-mei:

Her name was Che-mei, he told ZadigShe was scrubbing clothes in the flat stem of her boat. Her face was pert and lively, with glinting black eyes...(ROS 6)

Here the narrative which is presented mainly through the omnipresent narrator, shows Bahram Modi both as the character narrator, a middle aged Bahram Modi as well as the character focalizer- Modi as young man.

There is the use of third-person narrator along with first person character narrators which has special effects on the narration of the story that couldn't have been narrated otherwise. While first person character narrator narrates the inner psyche of the characters being one among them in the narrative or due to some proximity with other characters, the third person narrator on the other hand tells the story from outside by having a panoramic view of the whole as omnipresent narrator. He is the one busy in giving all details of the actions of others by using the expressions like 'he said', 'they think', 'he felt', 'she observed', 'he notices' etc. In *River of Smoke* by using third person narrative techniques the author prefers 'telling' most of the time rather than 'showing'. This gives more freedom to the narrator to make comments on both characters and events. He even enjoys the liberty of imposing his own view points on the reader. Throughout the narrative in *River of Smoke* the modes of narration 'telling' and 'showing' are used alternatively. The point of views from which the story is told keeps on changing throughout in the narrative. There is no straight forward story in the conventional sense as in the stream of consciousness novel.

Thus, Amitav Ghosh has not limited the narrative to the technique of stream of consciousness and interior monologue only but has also combined it with three fold traditional technique direct narrating, descriptive passages and conversation. Ghosh has used these techniques to enable his characters to dramatize their consciousness and the outward happenings and the situations. The mind of the main protagonist Behram Modi is poured out vividly through interior monologue and by using present tense. Here the thoughts of Behram Modi are presented by the omnipresent narrator:

... but at end of it he lets his annoyance show by asking: Are you sure you know what you are talking about? The old man... had smiled at him sweetly and answered: Why? Do you have any reason to think that your seed is capable of begetting a male child?But to actively deny his son's existence, to pretend that he had played no part endangering the life of his own child this was impossibly difficult. Fatherhood and family were a kind of religion to him... (ROS119).

Amitav Ghosh uses another skillful structural device to present the particular atmosphere of Canton i.e. the repetition of key words, phrases, idiomatic sentences and use of patois, pidgin or creole, the

languages of the period. The narrator uses certain idioms from different languages – Hindustani, French, English and even quotation from Seneca. For example, Mr. Slade points out:

‘But this is an instance when we would do well
to recall the words *fallaces sunt return specis* :
we must pay heed to the immortal Seneca; we
must look beyond appearances’ (ROS515) .

The character focalizer Slade also refers to the instances of past “where the seizure of property belonging to British subjects has provided the grounds for a declaration of war” (ROS515) that happened in 1622 and gives the example of British politics with Dutch and Spain. He emphasizes:

....I cite these examples only as precedents, because the history of commerce does
not exhibit any instance of so extensive a robbery as is being contemplated
by Commissioner Lin...(ROS 515).

This reflects the intense politics and seriousness of opium trade era in Canton.

The ‘Maidan’ in *River of Smoke*, has been used as metaphor which has its own role in the narrative. It is a place that becomes a mirror in the hands of all kind of narrators – omnipresent narrator, first person character narrator Robert Chinnery and different character focalizers. Reflection of the whole Canton life is mirrored through the Maidan which becomes a dynamic narrative instrument in the hands of the writer. It becomes the running motif throughout the text It has its own characteristics as any of the character in the novel and becomes the evidence or the testimony to all the happenings in Canton. Chinnery calls it to be the ‘heart and hearth’(ROS104) of Fanqui –town.

The ‘window’ is again another metaphor used as cam-cord or a binoculars by different narrators and character focalizers through which they could see the activities in ‘Maidan’. It has been considered as one of luxuries in accommodations of the Canton. Robert Chinnery writes to Paulette:

..I have been installed in the American Hong, in a room twice as large and far more
Luxurious..and nor I am deprived of the view that I had at Markwick’s, for here too I
have a window that looks out on the Maidan! I have indeed been singularly
fortunate... (ROS 529).

For Amitav Ghosh, literature has a function similar to that of history. The story, the theme, the title, the location, the language, the background , the selection of the narrators, characters, the modes narration, the plot, the dialogues and the movement of the narrative all work together to depict the period of opium trade and opium wars. The other narrative strategies like real characters from history, their prolonged and sometimes heated discussions present the live scenario of the period. Such discussions and conversations invite the reader into the hidden folds of the history as well as to understand the psyche or consciousness of the people living in this period that the narrator has created in *River of Smoke*.

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