

Marginality and Creative Energy: Reading the Prospect of Post-Colonialism through the Ibis Trilogy

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Abstract Post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and by re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. It achieves its distinct definition through the processes of abrogation and appropriation. According to Bill Ashcroft the act of appropriation in the post-colonial text issues in the embracing of the “marginality as the fabric of social experience” (*The Empire Writes Back* 103). Set against the Opium trade leading to the Opium wars Amitav Ghosh’s Ibis trilogy delves deep into multiple discourses of marginality in dealing with the shared fate and facts in the lives of the motley array of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts. Deeti’s shrine (memory-temple) and Neel’s journals (archive) provide Ghosh the sound blend of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the “affective” and “analytic” histories. By thus exploring the “unprecedented source of creative energy” (to quote from *The Empire Writes Back*) of the marginalized the Ibis trilogy affirms what Bill Ashcroft in his book *Post-colonial Transformation* has described as the “constructiveness and dialogic energy of the post-colonial imagination” (5). The history of the Ibis connects people from Calcutta to Canton, from Hooghly to Hong Kong and eventually reminds us of the common burden of the past. Ghosh’s fiction, due to the advantages open to it because of its very fictionality can imagine borderless blend of share and care, a blend which the material reality of our times demand so hungrily. If post-colonialism is “a language which grasps the global and the local by understanding of the complexities of imperial relationship” (to quote from *Literature for Our Times: Post-colonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century*) a study of the issue of marginality in the Ibis trilogy is alone sufficient to show that this language of post-colonialism is ever alive as it can endearingly embrace fictionality, historicity, and

material reality by virtue of its inclusive interrogation, immaculate investigation and ingenious imagination.

Key words abrogation; appropriation; marginality; post-colonialism

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Post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and by replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. It achieves its distinct definition through the processes of abrogation and appropriation. According to Bill Ashcroft the act of appropriation in the post-colonial text issues in the embracing of the “marginality as the fabric of social experience” (Ashcroft et al. “Empire” 103). Post-colonial writing explores marginality as an “unprecedented source of creative energy” (Ashcroft et al. “Empire” 12) as the multiple discourses of marginality “intersect in a view of reality which supersedes the geometric distinction of centre and margin and replaces it with a sense of the complex, interweaving, and syncretic accretion of experience”(Ashcroft et al. “Empire” 103). Post-colonial theorists have acknowledged Amitav Ghosh’s work as “a crucial index of many of the themes, issues, and problematics that constitute the multidimensional nature of the post-colonial predicament today” (Mondal 2). Ghosh’s Ibis trilogy delves deep into the multiple discourses of marginality through the exploration of the shared facts and fates of the lives of the motley array of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts.

Marginalization and Post-colonialism

The term marginality was first used in the sociological field in an essay by Robert Park in 1928. It was described as an experience resulting from the overlapping involvement of different cultures in the lives of immigrants. In a similar vein critics like Stonequist have applied the term to understand the experience of hybrid identities hovering between two cultures. According to Janet Macini Billson, the term marginality is used in the social context in three ways: first, to refer to cultural marginality, the dilemmas of cross-cultural identities and assimilation; the second to social marginality, describing the tensions which occur when an individual is restricted from belonging to a positive reference group; and the third to structural marginality which includes social, political and economic exclusion. The term has acquired growing and extensive significance over the years as it has been closely attached to the concept of power, a concept that has evolved over the

years theoretically as well as practically. The Ibis trilogy, forging ahead with the historical power-play around opium reveals that while the habit of taking opium can make one powerless, the habit of trading in opium can make others powerful. In the Epilogue to the trilogy Ghosh says that he has actually embarked on the “task of writing a history of the Ibis community” (Ghosh, “Flood” 608). A number of reviewers of the trilogy have noted Ghosh’s works as an attempt to capture a whole panorama of world history through the wrong end of the telescope. This so called wrong end is the post-colonial perspective of looking at history, of interpreting it, deconstructing it, defamiliarizing it. Human history, as we all know, is at its root, the continuous struggle over power. Those who have attained power at various stages of civilization have always gained easy access to resources and advantages which have normally been denied to those who have been powerless. The latter have been inevitably marginalized. The worst manifestation of the exertion of power and the extreme form of marginalization are seen in the politics of exclusion. Modern thinkers like Fisher therefore argue that the term exclusion has the potential to provide wider scope for analyzing the complex dynamics behind the situation of disadvantage. Marginalization or exclusion is thus not confined to mere lack of means as people can be excluded on the basis of their race, gender and age etc. Any study of marginality thus unveils the poor plight of the oppressed and thereby explores the power structure that is responsible for creating or manufacturing the conditions of the centre and the margin; both of which, however, are not fixed or permanent. The issue of marginality, when considered in the perspective of post-colonialism, exposes both the power and the resistance to it in the colonial discourse. Because marginality can take various forms and multiple expressions, any post-colonial attempt to write of the marginalized from the point of view of the marginalized inevitably shows why post-colonial criticism, in moving with the times has become, in the words of Graham Huggan, “irresistibly plural: multi-sited, multilingual, cross-disciplinary” (Huggan 17).

The Memorial to the Marginal

Quite expectedly, the Ibis trilogy starts its journey with a subaltern woman Deeti who is unlettered and uneducated. An unfortunate widow, she escapes from the pyre with the help of a low-caste chamar Kalua and together they come to the Ibis. This sati woman, rescued by another marginalized man slowly attains an identity as well as voice of her own. She feels that she is “free now to create a new destiny” (Ghosh, “Sea” 178). With experiences and maturity Deeti’s sensibility and sensitivity so much change that the care for her own sibling is gradually globalized

into care for “ship-siblings—*jahaz-bhais and jahaz-bahens*” (Ghosh, “Sea” 356). She can courageously ask for “a little izzat, some respect” (Ghosh, “Sea” 414) for her shipmates. Deeti experiences too much of too many things so that when she ultimately settles in Mauritius she is left with magnificent memories. This subaltern woman cannot write but she can paint because “being unlettered, it was the only way she could keep track of her memories” (Ghosh, “River” 10). Deeti thus builds up a memory-temple by painting the incidents and persons associated with the Ibis. Her experiences coupled with her extraordinary visionary power manifest themselves in her paintings. Deeti’s memory-temple complements Neel’s archive which is an indispensable source of information in the trilogy. Neel, who had once been the zamindar of Raskhali, was accused of forgery by Mr. Burnham and was ordered to be transported to the penal settlement on the Mauritius Islands. After his escape Neel starts recording his experiences in his journals. His fascination with words, love of reading and extraordinary empathy bring him closer to a wide variety of persons and officials — from the opium-addicted Ah Fatt to Compton and his teacher, from the old lama in the Buddhist monastery of Honam Island to Commissioner Lin. He listens to everyone, reads everything and carefully preserves everything. A notable example of his will to preserve is evident in his invaluable collection of Robin Chinnery’s letters and paintings sent to Paulette. Such wide range of acquaintances adequately enriches his narrative, his ‘archive’, the debt to which Ghosh acknowledges in the Epilogue to the Ibis trilogy.

Resistance amidst Transformation

Not only Deeti, almost all the other marginalized figures in the trilogy undergo change or transformation which is one of the important motifs in post-colonial writing. In *River of Smoke* Nob Kissin asks Neel, “But ships and the sea have a way of changing people, would you not say, Anil babu?” (Ghosh, “River” 396). When the world around changes rapidly under the opium wars Compton says, “Everything has changed. To survive I too will have to change” (Ghosh, “Flood” 533). A champion of free trade and commerce, Mr. Burnham tells others that very soon “China will be changed beyond recognition,” a change which will be their ‘legacy to history’ (Ghosh, “Flood” 437). China does change beyond recognition as at the end of *River of Smoke* Neel, while showing Deeti a picture of the Fanquittown in flames tells her, “The place was changed beyond recognition...no one would believe that such a place had ever existed” (Ghosh, “River” 552-3). Time changes, lives change and change the identities. Such changes in the lives of the others empower them emotionally, intellectually or economically. Neel works as

Anil Kumar Munshi under Seth Bahmram, reading journals and collecting news, a job that empowers him immensely. Baboo Nob Kissim, once a temple's custodian of Nabadwip, realized very early that the ship Ibis would be the instrument of his transformation. Shireen Modi the devoted wife becomes 'a different person' and witnesses a 'new incarnation of herself' (Ghosh, "Flood" 267) when she arrives in China and wholeheartedly bestows her affection on Ah Fatt, son of her husband's mistress in Canton. Deeti-like she shows resistance to tradition in her decision to marry Zedig Bey: "I will probably never again be able to enter a Fire Temple: that will be the hardest part. But no one can take my faith from me, can they? And may be, in a few years, people will forget" (Ghosh, "Flood" 523). With the flow of capital, of lives, of identity, flows Ghosh's narrative and his-stories. Zachary Reid who had once been a ship's carpenter eventually becomes a partner in Burnham's firm by developing in himself sheer selfishness and hypocrisy, by becoming "a perfect embodiment of the kali-yuga" (Ghosh, "Flood" 606), a "man of the times... a man who wants more and more and more and more; a man who does not know the meaning of 'enough'" (Ghosh, "Flood" 582).

Everyone of the marginalized characters has his/her own story in the trilogy — from Havilder Kesri Singh to the fifer boy Dicky, from little Raju to Ashadidi, from Munia to the dying subaltern woman Sarju who on her deathbed on the Ibis privately gives Deeti seeds of the best Banaras poppy and says, "I want to be remembered in your shrine" (Ghosh, "Sea" 451) — as a result of which there are "so much telling and so many tongues" (Ghosh, "Sea" 400). Amidst so many stories the discourses or rather counter-discourses of resistance are strategically projected. When Havilder Kesri Singh gets disillusioned with war and asks Baboo Nob Kissin the real cause and achievement of so much death and destruction, the latter replies that in the epoch of apocalypse, the kaliyuga, the English have come to China and to Hindustan because "these two lands are so populous that if their greed is aroused they can consume the whole world" (Ghosh, "Flood" 509). This religious man believes that today "the great devouring" has begun by the English. Colonial machinery is thus expressed through post-colonial metaphor. To take another example, when Paulette forbids Freddie to smoke opium by saying that he will become a slave to it, Freddie says, "Opium will not make you slave... It is they who are slaves, ne? Slaves to money, profit?" (Ghosh, "Flood" 473) Again, in *Sea of Poppies* when the judge pronounces his sentence, it becomes "laughably obvious" to Neel that "the English themselves... were exempt from the law" as it was the English "who had become the world's new Brahmins" (Ghosh, "Sea" 239). This post-colonial discourse comes from a man who is out and out marginalized,

a situation that his wife Malati aptly describes as “nothing to preserve and nothing to lose” (Ghosh, “Sea” 269). We can recall at this point the Ethiopian proverb that James Scott uses as an epigraph to his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* : “When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts”. Scott elaborately discusses the resistant discourses lying in the rumors, gossips, folktales, songs, gestures, and jokes of the victims of subordination, all of which constitute the “hidden transcript” — “ a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced” (Scott 85, XI).

The examples above are evidence of resistance lying in the ‘hidden transcript’ that the creative historian Amitav Ghosh decodes and places together with the official/public transcript voiced by persons like Mr. Burnham who emphatically declares that the opium war will be fought for “freeing a quarter of mankind from tyranny; of bestowing on the people of China the gift of liberty that the British Empire has already conferred on all those parts of the globe that it has conquered and subjugated” (Ghosh, “Flood” 436). People like Bahram Modi are easily deluded by such diverting discourses and enjoy them thoroughly but there are moments of his awareness of the truth like when Burnham talks about the process of persuasion of the British parliament to interfere in the free trade Bahram cries out, “Democracy is a wonderful thing... It is a marvelous tamasha that keeps the common people busy so that men like ourselves can take care of all matters of importance. I hope one day India will also be able to enjoy these advantages — and china too, of course” (Ghosh, “River” 404). When the Chamber of Commerce strategically refuses to protect Mr. Innes, Bahram, with a smile, thinks that there is no “language like the English for turning lies into legalisms” (Ghosh, “River” 349). The narrative thus subtly shows the interconnections and intersections of discourse, language, truth and power; all of which are potential sites of conflict and contradiction. This breeds plurality and multiplicity as a result of which the narrative thrust of the Ibis trilogy is centrifugal, not centripetal. Ghosh the creative historian shows us how post-colonial theory and practice can “embrace difference and absence as material signs of power rather than negation, of freedom not subjugation, of creativity not limitation” (Ashcroft et al. “Empire” 166).

Conclusion

Deeti’s shrine (memory-temple) and Neel’s archive provide Ghosh a sound blend of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called “affective” and “analytic” histories which together “constitute the condition of possibility for the globalization of capital

across diverse, porous, and conflicting histories of human belongings” (Chakrabarty 71). Ghosh has been able to do this because literary writing or writing in the marginal space between literature and history can “authorize otherwise forbidden entries into the intellectual battlefield of European thought” (Ashcroft 99). Critics like Arjun Appadurai have therefore emphasized the immense power of the imagination of literary writing which can contribute to the “construction of social and moral maps for their readers” (Appadurai 58). Ato Quayson, like Appadurai insists on the transformative capacity of literary imagination which can envision alternative realities, identities, histories and thus can have profound effects on the interpretation of social facts. By exploring the creative energy of the marginalized, by liberating the marginalized as an appropriated subject, the Ibis trilogy affirms what Bill Ashcroft in his book *Post-colonial Transformation* has described as the “constructiveness and dialogic energy of the post-colonial imagination” (Ashcroft 5). The history of the Ibis connects people from Calcutta to Canton, from Hooghly to Hong Kong as it lays bare the power, pain and the glory of an earlier era of globalization when people started coming into contact and collision, shaping histories all the while through their pettiness, their privations and their passions. Ghosh’s fiction, due to the advantages open to it because of its very fictionality can imagine borderless blend of share and care, a blend which the material reality of our times demand so hungrily. When Neel witnesses the exploit of the British fleet he realizes for the first time in his life that such battlefields shape our identity: “He understood then why Shias commemorate the Battle of Kerbala every year: it was an acknowledgement that just as the earth splits apart at certain moments, to create monumental upheavals that forever change the terrain, so too do time and history” (Ghosh, “Flood” 388). Clearly the emphasis is on change, fluidity, heightened understanding and increased awareness beyond the boundaries of binaries, forgetting the fences of fixities. If Post-colonial studies in the twenty-first century exhibits, to use Ashcroft’s memorable metaphor, a “convivial critical democracy” (Ashcroft et al. “Literature” xvii) then Ghosh’s Ibis trilogy is truly a celebration of this. If post-colonialism is a language which grasps the global and the local by understanding the complexities of imperial relationship, a study of the issue of marginality in the Ibis trilogy is alone sufficient to show that this language of post-colonialism is ever alive as it can endearingly embrace fictionality, historicity, and material reality by virtue of its inclusive interrogation, immaculate investigation and ingenious imagination.

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