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Agitation of Relegated Identity: A Colonial and Postcolonial Approach in Selected Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract: The phenomenon of agitation of relegated identity emerges as the outcome of the consecutive subjugation of colonisers. The epistemological, cultural and psychological hegemony develops a mimic man, an identity which is relegated. Amitav Ghosh has deployed the concept of relegated identity and the resultant agitation of the characters in his novels. The plots and the characters of his novels in orbit a process of the conceptualisation of the concept of self and the other. Fanon mentioned certain stages that could help in understanding the novels of Amitav Ghosh with postcolonial approach towards the agitation of relegated identity of the colonised.

In the novels of Amitav Ghosh, the characters' apprehension of the self, and the confrontation towards imperialism, their agitation, the characters' fervent retort and the realization that their identity has been put in the margins as a relegated identity and the effort they put by glorifying their own culture are all manifested. And ultimately as an end of the process, the characters try to establish their own culture and root to find solace and strength.

Keywords: relegated, agitation, identity, colonial, mimicry, subjugation, confrontation, realisation.

To understand the concept of relegated identity, understanding of the term colonialism is obligatory. Colonialism is not an altogether a new phenomenon, “it has been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history” (Loomba 8). Colonialism refers to the infringement of people, other than the natives of the land, who come and stab to overpower and deracinate the established natives and establish themselves. In this process of colonization, they espouse various stratagems through which they can make place for themselves like trade, swag, conciliation, combat, carnage, enslavement and rebellions. So, colonialism can be defined as “the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods” (Loomba 8).

Thus, the resultant impact of colonialism were developed in the form of establishment of its power and hegemony, achievement of interests and leaving behind their legacies, and dissemination of its control. Leela Gandhi says, “Colonialism marks the historical process whereby the West attempts methodically to hide or contradict the cultural difference and value of the non-west” (16). The realization of the state of self motivated them to revolt against the unjust behaviour. They started realizing their status and the relegated identity. Therefore, it was protested by intellectuals.

The postcolonial studies and theories developed as a reaction and confrontation against colonialism and investigation of its effects on the colonized. Postcolonial studies dissect the colonial treatises, understanding about the practice of decolonization, restoration of the colonized and confrontation against the colonial truths. It was the colonised who were affected most in the cultural invasion because it is the colonized whose history, culture and political, social and economic milieu have been ransacked by the superior colonizer culture. As Frantz Fanon puts it, “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s head of all forms and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon 169). In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon asserted the stages that deals with the colonisers’ attitude their condition. In the first stage, the colonized internalize their masters by mimicking them. They cultivate

the desirability towards their life style or the living style, considering them as ‘civilized and refined race’. In the second stage, they have the realization of this discernment against like intellect. Their situation becomes ambivalent and they fall in a state of quandary and aberration. The disparity ripens as remonstrance against Euro-centrism. And in the third stage, the colonizers strive to authenticate their own culture and civilization by reviving a forgotten history and celebrating their past glory.

Though several of other issues, like racial discrimination, class, caste and regional domination, hegemony as of cultural, literary and linguistic, diaspora, feminism and globalization also befall in post-colonialism, yet more than any other concept, the reticence of the Eurocentric dominance is the key concern. This agitation involves in itself the outcome of the efforts of postcolonial intellectuals to recollect, retain and redirect their position as against the Western world.

Ghosh employed the concept of self and other and its consecutive impact upon the colonised and their identity. His treatment to the term deploys the element of colonial and post-colonial aspects. “The troubled legacy of colonial knowledge and discourse on formerly colonized societies, peoples, and ideas; the ambivalent relationship to contemporaneousness of the alleged developing or “Third” world; the formation and reformation of identities in colonial and post-colonial societies is meticulously explained in his fiction” (Yesapogu 126). The novels of Amitav Ghosh discussed in this paper are- *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Sea of Poppies*.

In *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh has penetrated the concept of mimicry and the humiliation involved in it with the character of Balaram. The example of Balaram focuses on the concept of hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence. Balaram, the uncle of Alu, represents the application of science developed by colonizers who truly represents the “ambivalence of colonial discourse” (Bhabha 121). The effect and acceptance of Science in this subcontinent is presented through the character of Balaram:

Balaram was educated in Colonial Indian Sub-Continent; he joined in Amrita Bazar Patrika in 1936 and became the dumping ground of West. In part one, the incident of 11th January, 1950 hints the inception of newer strategies in 3 year old infant India, by western world. A group of scientists including Madam Juliot-Curie visited India to open the Institute of Nuclear Physics. Being mocked at for his illogical questions to Juliot-Curies, Balaram, other than going into the main stream of the science chooses a tattered book from the street "Practical Phrenology" which is actually a pseudo-science. (Kulsum 187)

Balaram as an agitation towards his humiliation adopted the pseudo-science over science. His behavioral displacement substantiates imperial submission of "mimicry represents an ironic compromise" (Bhabha 122).

Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) discusses about the attitude of western world about third world. Orientals depend upon Occidents for their persistence. Said also asserted that Occidents opined that the Orientals have no liberated history or culture independent of their colonial master. In *The Shadow Lines*, the character of Ila, the narrator's 'white -washed' cousin truly manifests the attitude of the coloniser's feeling of abhorrence towards their own culture, in case of western nationalism. When Ila tells the narrator "nothing really important ever happens where you are" (115). This statement of Ila truly portrays Said's views. Ila's biased behaviour is the outcome of the control of the coloniser on the observance of the colonised. By a kind of debauched logic, it seizes to the bygone burdened people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. Ila's hatred towards her own culture and adoption of the culture of more refined civilization, her imaginary English house, English family, an English child with an English name are easily explainable under the light of Gramsci's idea of hegemony.

The Shadow Lines depict the element of mimicry that prevails in its characters. Colonialism creates the subjects "who are almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 89) "a practice encouraged by colonizers in an

attempt to create an identity for colonized peoples – in which the colonizers require colonial subjects to remember and repeat the norms of the occupying power” (Rossington & Whitehead 9). Ila is one such mimic who had lost her native roots and is always away from her roots, but she neither gets acceptance from the world she wants to identify herself with nor feels happy with her own culture.

Ila narrates the story of the blonde, pink skinned Magda to the narrator and ends by saying that Magda is saved by Nick Price, at which point she cries unaccountably. When the narrator explains that event to May, she says the fact is that Nick had never wanted to be seen walking with an Indian. May had earlier remarked that Nick felt the difference was in the skin. Ila’s tears were due to the rejection she faced from Nick, the alienation she suffered from being an Indian...Ila and Nick are the representatives of the West who abandon and forsake the Indian for the false pride in affiliating themselves to the West. Ila’s problem is what Bhabha calls “hybridity”. Ghosh portrays how the concept of white- pink cheeks, blonde hair, fair skin, blue eyes- affects the Asian who suffer discrimination because of the colour of their skin. (Jeyalakshmi 126)

The concept of self and other is also revealed through the comparison made between the two, the narrator and Nick Price. Nick has always been idealised to be better and more desirable. This comparison somewhere strengthens the concept that self is being defined in comparison to other.

The glass and mirror imagery recurs in the novel and emerges as constitutions of identity through the act of comparison or contrast. Self gets constructed either in relation to or in opposition of the other guided by either admiration or disaffection. The narrator observes that Nick Price had become ... a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass; growing with me, but always bigger

and better and in some way more desirable. (Guruprasad 50)

Thus, “Shadow lines are ... the lines of demarcation that separate colonizer and colonized, present and past, self and image. Ultimately they are the signifying acts that construct notions of discrete identity” (Thieme 257).

In her review of *The Glass Palace*, Meenakshi Mukherjee, says: “For all its vividness of description and range of human experiences, *The Glass Palace* will remain for me memorable mainly as the most scathing critique of British colonialism, I have ever come across in fiction.” *The Glass Palace* truly depicts the colonial and postcolonial discrepancies of British. British, in lieu of their kingdom to be expanded, mechanised the mind of Indian people so that they can utilise them in their favour. For this they superimposed their superiority and by providing them the same platform, they created men like their own. This would in return help them in consolidating power in the colonies. It is a true representation of British strident dogmas against the colonized. And in return, the colonisers unveils the epistemological and cultural hegemony levied by colonisers and try to attain the canons set by their rulers, as a step towards adoption of colonialism. Indian soldiers like Arjun or diplomats like Beni Dey are just pawns in their political game, part-objects who deceitfully identify their eminence. These people fail to apprehend the real intention or atrocities meted out to their country or people and felt pride by being associated with them, or being able to speak their language.

Ghosh further illusions the character of Beni Prasad Dey, the ICS officer. He also embodies an example of epistemological hegemony as a product of that. He was appointed in Ratnagiri, where the Burmese royals were held captive. The collector felt pride for his association with his colonisers and did not want any deviation in it. He followed or mimicked their way of behaviour or living style. “He dressed in finely cut Savile Row suits and wore gold - rimmed eyeglasses” (Ghosh 2001, 104). Dey integrated the colonisers as much in himself that he could not listen about their defeat or their obliteration from India, and defended the supremacy of Imperial power. Queen Supalayati asked Dey, “did

you ever think that we would live to witness the day when an Eastern country would defeat a European power?" (107). On this, Dey replied, "Britain's Empire is, by contrast, already more than a century old, and you may be certain, Your Highness, that its influence will persist for centuries more to come. The Empire's power is such as to be proof against all challenges and will remain so into the foreseeable future" (107). All his life he chased the rules of his masters but ultimately his identity was shattered and relegated, when he was terminated by the same Imperial power. In this case of bewilderment and crisis, he said to Uma, "I am to be the scapegoat for twenty years of neglect. My tenure here is terminated and I am to return to Bombay" (173). He chose not to live with his devastated identity. In the same way, Beni Dey not only felt prestigious to be associated with them but was also a subservient envoy. They are in fear of legging behind mimicking their masters. They are in constant dread of being left behind by their contemporary Englishmen. Uma remembers her husband mostly as a mimic man, a lackey of the colonizer: "There seemed never to be a moment when he was not haunted by the fear of being thought lacking by his British colleagues" (186). Commenting on the colossal power that the District Collector, Beni Prasad soldered, his wife, Uma says, "... the position had brought him nothing but unease and uncertainty... She remembered how he'd watched over the table, the intolerable minuteness of his supervision, the effort he had invested in moulding her into a reflection of what he aspired to be. There seemed never to be a moment when he was not haunted by the fear of being thought lacking by his British colleagues" (186).

The example of Arjun claims the same story of mimicry, ambivalence and retort. Arjun exclaimed with happiness after joining army. He says, "what makes me prouder still is the thought that Hardy and I are going to be that first Indian officers in the 1/1 Jats; it seems like such a huge responsibility- as though we are representing the whole of the country" (262). His association with his masters plunge apart him from his own nation's history – "Look at us! ... we're the first modern Indians; the first Indians to be truly free...we're the first Indians who're not weighed down by the past" (279). Arjun's pride of association is well reflected in his words to Dinu, "We understand

the West better than any of you civilians...we know how the minds of Westerners work” (280).

Ghosh also exemplified the racial discrimination done either by colonisers or the people belonging to higher society. The colonisers used the colonised by infusing their culture in them so that they never revolt against them. Even Arjun himself confessed that eating beef or pork “were small but essential battles and they tested not just their manhood, but also their fitness to enter the class of officers. They had to prove, to themselves as well as to their superiors that they were eligible to be rulers, to qualify as members of an elite.” But they never provided them equal position. The coloniser never wanted the colonised to equal them but rather pushed them behind so that they could never reach their equality. The inequality and injustice done to the coloniser is very well implicated when Arjun says, about the people like Hardy who cannot tolerate the discrimination done to the colonised people, to Dinu, “it’s so hard for them when they discover that this equality they’ve been told about is a carrot on a stick - something that’s dangled in front of their noses to keep them going, but always keep just out of reach” (284).

“Despite his initial incredulity, he discovers that the English officers treat them with suspicion whenever stories of insurgencies within the ranks of the army are heard and never forgets that they are different.” Arjun says to Dinu, “Whenever one of us doesn’t get an appointment or promotion, there’s always a mist of regulations that makes things unclear (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 284). Ghosh also represents the interpersonal experience of characters towards racism in *The Glass Palace*, such as Hardy being called a “stinking nigger” by Colonel Pearson, and Arjun and Hardy’s humiliating experience at a swimming pool in Singapore. The picture becomes clearer when Kumar stops him to enjoy bathing in the pool when the British are in it. He says:

“I should have warned you about this”, Kumar said with a mischievous smile. It’s like this everywhere in Malaya. In smaller towns, the clubs actually put up signs on their door saying, ‘No Asiatic allowed’. In Singapore they let us use the pool -it’s just that everyone leaves. Right now they’ve had to relax the colour bar a little, because there

are so many Indian army units here, but you may as well get used to it because you'll come across it all the time in restaurants, clubs, beaches, trains -he laughed' - we're meant to die for this colony - but we can't use the pools. (Ghosh 345)

Through the character of Arjun in *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh has shown the man who projects faithfulness in the Imperial rule and got shattered in due course of time when he comes to realize the reality of his position. Arjun feels that he was “used” instead of “employed” in the British army. Arjun has served the British Army for a major part of his life and feels deceived after the dejection faced by the same coloniser.

This intuitive understanding of the complex nature of the material basis of identity formation, which has been at the core of poststructuralist deconstruction of the humanist subject, leads Arjun to question the very shape of his loyalty to the British powers through his army duties. in the process of becoming a “good soldier,” Arjun drifts away from the preoccupations of his immediate family as well as from the cultural construction of identity which defines them and in the process he becomes the embodiment of the alienation through the cultural power of colonialism This is so because the possibility for independent thought was not present in the kind of training Arjun undergoes. (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 38)

The colonisers trained the soldiers in such a way that their identity is completely eroded out. They become mechanised tools in the hands of colonisers. Hardy, the friend of Arjun, always felt the pain of relegated identity in his heart. He could not relate himself with the culture of colonisers. He tells Arjun about this ambivalent position:

It was strange to be sitting on one side of a battle line, knowing that you had to fight and knowing at the same time that it wasn't really your fight —knowing that

whether you won or lost, neither the blame nor the credit would be yours. Knowing that you're risking everything to defend a way of life that pushes you to the side lines. It's almost as if you're fighting against yourself. It's strange to be sitting in a trench, holding a gun and asking yourself: Who is this weapon really aimed at? Am I being tricked into pointing it at myself? But when I was sitting in that trench, it was as if my heart and my hand had no connection—each seemed to belong to a different person. It was as if I wasn't really a human being—just a tool, an instrument. This is what I ask myself, Arjun: In what way do I become human again? How do I connect what I do with what I want, in my heart? (123)

The novel finds the imperial ingenuity in transforming the natives, docile to the imperial dictates by the erasure of their identity. Arjun's realization that he is like a clay-vessel moulded by an unknown "potter" in becoming a willing tool in the Empire's proclaimed mission of modernizing the "uncivilized" speaks out the loss of his identity. Arjun could not find an appropriate identity for himself, whether he is an Indian first or the soldier. And his identity is totally shattered from within when Alison tells him about her view regarding Arjun's position in the world, "Arjun you are not in charge of what you do; you're a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else's hands. Your mind doesn't inhabit your body" (376).

In *Orientalism* (1978), Said has propounded that colonisers treated themselves as superior race and propagated subjection and subjugation in favour of colonisers and according to the "binary typology of advanced and backward (subject) races" (206). The concept promulgated the colonized to be savage, primitive, inferior and incapable of looking after themselves ... and required to be controlled, exploited and tyrannized and even kill them in order to civilize them. The novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) exemplifies this discerning behaviour of colonisers. In the novel, Mr. Doughty shared his views on undeniable war with China and its impact on India as: "Indeed, humanity demands it. We need only think of the poor Indian peasant – what will become of

him if his opium can't be sold in China? Bloody hurremzads can hardly eat now: they'll perish by the crore" (Ghosh 2008, 385).

Baboo Nob Kissin is also a good embodiment of the victim of colonial racism, who possessed relegated identity and tolerated the unjust behaviour of his master to avoid clashes and to be in the good list. "They appreciated also his eagerness to please and his apparently limitless tolerance of abuse. Unlike, many others, he never took offence if a sahib called him dung-brained gubberhead, or compared his face to a Bandar's bunghole...insults he would endure with a detached, almost pitying smile (163-64). This behaviour of Baboo Nob Kissin manifests that he has assimilated himself as uncivilized and the oppressor as more refined and civilized.

The boastful behaviour of White man was well reflected consciously and unconsciously in the smallest of things. Not even the then situation of the coloniser and the colonised but also the discerning demeanour is also exposed in the novel. During Neel's trial, the judge declared that India had been "opened to the benefits of civilization... [the Englishmen were] chosen to burden with the welfare of such races as were still in the infancy of civilization" (349). By the time Neel's trial ended, it was very clear to him "that in this system of justice it was the English themselves – Mr Burnham and his ilk – who were exempt from the law as it applied to others: it was they who had become the world's new Brahmins" (353).

Rajnish Mishra describes the concept of colonialist approach towards the justification of slavery and then indentured labour towards subjugated race as Africans and Asians:

In *Sea of Poppies*, racialization and rationalization of history are shown at work through dialogues and narrative accounts. The black/ brown/ yellow races were the subject races to be marginalized and silenced effectively and to be effectively written out of the power discourse. After the slave trade was made illegal, merchants like Mr. Burnham quickly shifted to other lucrative areas. Only one similarity remained between

their old and new trades- profit generated out of shameless and inhuman exploitation of the colonies. The Africans were sold as slaves for profit and then the Indian were transported as indentured immigrants to generate capital to be used for supplying opium and finally subjugate the Chinese. Physical, psychological, mental, socio-political and economic subjugation of the native populations was the sole aim of the strongest class in the whole Empire: the merchant class. (Mishra 2011)

In the novel, the missionary-capitalist Benjamin Brightwell Burnham, the owner of the Ibis, voiced colonial supremacy. According to him, both slavery and indenture are justified and in the favour of Africans and Asians from indigenous dictatorship like local Zamindars. He justifies by validating the unlawful aspects of colonialism. “When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it- the Asiatic” (72).

The colonizers legalised and assigned a term free to the opium business and labour transportation. They validated it by asserting it as for the sake of the colonizers’ welfare. Mr. Burnham in his conversation with Neel commented: “Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ” (116). According to him the benefit of opium is God given, not only this, he considers it as a God given duty to share this benefit of opium-business with others.

All these arguments and counterarguments reflect the strategy of colonialism adopted by the British in India. But it is not that all colonizers can be blamed because of imperialism. Captain Chillingworth’s comments about colonialism can be considered as a step towards dismantling the binary opposition of colonizer/colonized. Captain Chillingworth is a perfect epitome of that type of character. Captain Chillingworth never supported the British people’s decision of war with China because of opium-trade. He denied the concept of civilization-making behind the opium-trade and commented: “We are no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols: the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some

higher cause. It is this pretence of virtue, I promise you that will never be forgiven by history” (262).

This discussion embodies the manifestation of Fanon’s views of the confrontation against the colonial unjust marked in reference to the novels of Amitav Ghosh. The mimicry, the realisation of one’s own position in respect to the colonised, their ideals, the situation of ambivalence and the hostility against this situation become the marked phenomenon in the characters of Ghosh’s novels.

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