

Narrative Voice in *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh in his entire oeuvre shows a strong historical and political consciousness. As a conscious historian, he takes up the cause of struggling masses against the imperial and unending hegemonic structure of coercion and seduction perpetuated by the colonizers. The novel *Sea of Poppies* moves from the period of opium production in the farms of Bihar to the making of opium balls in the factory for the opium trade to successive stages of oppression of the poor by both the colonizers and ironically by the Indians working as agents, mediators, middlemen, instructors, overseers and managers under them. Further, the novel depicts their condition as suppressed slaves and indentured labours on the slave ship *Ibis*. Amitav Ghosh's novels reveal his prime obsession with history. Indentured labours, migration, and mass movements are some of the main themes in *Sea of Poppies*. The different narrative voices, typology of narrators, characters and their narratives, conversation, dialogues and language are supporting factors along with the narrative techniques like memory, recall, stream of consciousness, interior monologue, etc. create the proper atmosphere of that specific time period of history. Let us see how in the novel undertaken here, Ghosh manipulates different narrative voices in the narrative to project the whole scenario and how he fictionalizes the fact of history and gives it a new dimension.

Keywords: Narrative voice, mimesis, diegesis, focalizer, narrator, omnipresent narration.

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh in his entire oeuvre shows a strong historical and political consciousness. As a conscious historian, he takes up the cause of struggling masses against the imperial and unending hegemonic structure of coercion and seduction perpetuated by the colonizers. The novel *Sea of Poppies* moves from the period of opium production in the farms of Bihar to the making of opium balls in the factory for the opium trade to successive stages of oppression of the poor by both the colonizers and ironically by the Indians working as agents, mediators, middlemen, instructors, overseers and managers under them. Further, the novel depicts their condition as suppressed slaves and indentured labour on the slave ship *Ibis*. Let us see how in the novel undertaken here, Ghosh manipulates different narrative voices in the narrative to project the whole scenario.

The novel opens with the omnipresent narration of Deeti's vision of the ship in the diegesis mode of narration. "The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen such a vessel before" (3). In the very beginning, reader's attention is arrested, and throughout the novel, this vision is seen again and again by Deeti. In chapter one, the omnipresent narrator introduces the main protagonist Deeti who later becomes the main character focalizer and consciousness. Here Ghosh uses stream of consciousness, interior monologues, recall, reminiscence, and flashback- the European devices of narration as in his other novels. At the same time, he follows the Indian narrative tradition of storytelling as in the novel the omnipresent narrator in a descriptive and in diegesis manner gives the summary, introduces the characters and then these characters reveal themselves telling many stories of their present and past. They as character focalizers also reveal other characters either through mimesis or diegesis, both in present and past. The same pattern is followed throughout the novel. Amitav Ghosh works the situation through the central consciousness of Deeti, Neel, Zachary Reid, Paulette, Kalua, Jodu and Baboo Nob Kissin etc.

There is not only physical spaces given by the novelist to the main characters but mental spaces are also given to them time and again as Deeti's interior mind is illustrated here by using interior monologue and stream of consciousness technique when she remembers her past. Deeti remembers the time when Kalua was humiliated and tortured by three thakurs in past:

Ever since the night of her wedding, Deeti had been haunted by images of her own violation: now, watching from the shelter of poppy field, she bit the edge of her palm, to keep from crying out aloud. So, it could happen to a man too? Even a powerful giant of a man could be humiliated and destroyed, in a way that far exceeded his body's capacity for pain? (57)

The novel presents a collage of uniquely delineated characters each having distinctive traits or characteristics and becoming instrumental in delineating the atmosphere of the period. The novelist projects Deeti as the main character focalizer as she is the most vibrant and vocal character who knows when, how and where to speak. She can take the decision not only for her own life but for others too. The first chapter starts with Deeti's vision of the ship. Then there are descriptive passages, mostly in diegesis form of narration describing her puja room, her drawings on the wall of puja room, her adverse circumstances, her exploitation by Chandan Singh, her manipulation and drugging of her mother-in-law to the extent of her death, her reactions when "assailed by the Shiladhars" (98) in Gazipore factory her assertiveness on the *Ibis* and the like. All this shows her to be a person who does not want to remain merely an object in the hands of circumstances. She is as assertive as any conscious person would be in times of difficulty. On *Ibis* her realization of her own identity, her decision to elope away with Kalua and leave behind her daughter Kabutri, her dominant presence on board, her compassion for inmates and her revolt against the wrongdoers on the ship shows her to be a vital block in the entire edifice of the gender assertion. She decides to leave her daughter behind for a better future though she is fearful of some unseen and unnamed that always haunt her. In an interior monologue, her fears are presented by the omnipresent narrator:

...how could she conceive that she would go to a place which was, for all she knew, inhabited by Demons and Pishaches, not to speak of all kinds of unnamable beasts? How could he, Kalua, or anyone else, know, that it wasn't true that the recruits were being fattened for the slaughter?" (205).

The multiple perspectives and plurality of voices give Ghosh a wider scope of analyzing and comprehending the incomprehensible and enigmatic colonial syndrome, the material reality out of which filters down the character's life resulting in anger, shame, revolt, transformation and sometimes loss of identity and loss of self. Neel finds his new identity in the Alipore Jail. The omnipresent narrator presents Neel's inner mind:

Raising the mirror to his face, Neel saw that his hair has been cut short and two rows of tiny Roman letters had been inscribed unevenly upon the right side of his forehead:
forgerer
alipore1838 (SOP292)

Here the small letters are symbolically used by the narrator to present Neel's altered identity - a new identity without the big lettered and big-sounding words 'Nawab' or 'Raja' - the symbol of his earlier royal, hegemonic and high position.

Along with interior monologues, recall etc. most of the time there are summaries and commentaries by an omnipresent narrator while presenting the scenes of Kalua's exploitation by the Zamindars, the conversations among Mr Burnham, Mr Dooty and others about the opium trade in China, Neel's arrest, Deeti's escape from Sati's pyre, Neel's court case, the one-sided arguments and decision of the judge against Neel, Neel's changed circumstances, his insult, humiliation and life in jail with Ah Fatt, chastisement lessons forced on Paulette by Burnham (for his own chastisement), the atmosphere of fear and chaos on ship created by Bhyro Singh and the Captain's laws, and Shiladhars' demand to hang Kalua, and escape of some after murders from *Ibis*. These are among the major incidents in the novel that speak volume of the misdeeds of those who are in hegemonic positions possessing their own ideology. They also represent the other and opposite voices 'from above'.

Throughout the novel, the authorial voice is evident as he mediates between the character and the reader by using myths, magic realism, visions, premonition, heteroglossia, folk songs etc. But his mediation is entirely different. He is neither overt nor obtrusive but highly controlled. Ghosh, as an omniscient narrator, ushers the readers into the novel though the entire narrative movement is controlled by him. Every experience and feeling of the characters are delineated through their filtering consciousness. Ghosh is not interested to project his self-individual voice but incorporates diverse voices in the narrative. As such in his novels, there is a network of voices at different levels, each presenting a distinct mode of consciousness. His voice (authorial voice) is amid the plethora of voices. The multiplicity of voices is the real hallmark of Ghosh's perfect craftsmanship and as a conscious craftsman and omnipresent narrator Ghosh exploits the role of narrator in a variegated manner.

In the novel, the omnipresent narrator, like a camera recording, presents graphic details of events and characters. The authorial periscope moves from outer reality into the minds of characters, enabling the reader to establish a personal relationship with them. The reader is thrust quickly into the psychological state of mind of the varied characters. Deeti is one such character who raises questions about the ill-treatment of Indian workers working in the

Gazipur factory. The omnipresent narrator presents Deeti as the character focalizer in her visit to the opium factory and shows the factory's gloomy atmosphere which is focalized through Deeti's eyes. All that she finds there fills her with fear, dread and sympathy for workers. The enormity of the factory and the shattered and astonished part of Deeti's self who has never seen such a place before is focalized from within and the visit is highly descriptive as if the reader is actually visiting the dark, gloomy and dim interior of the factory with Deeti. Here Deeti is the most reliable character who is in complete consonance with the omnipresent narrator who raises questions through Deeti:

Who would guess, in looking at them, how much time and trouble went into filling those vessels? So this was where they came, the offspring of her fields? Deeti could not help looking around in curiosity, marveling at the speed and dexterity with which the vessels were whisked on and off the scales. (93)

The omnipresent narrator brings forth the trials and tribulations of marginalized people. This enables the interplay of all the distinct multiple voices of major or minor characters in the novel. There are shifts from narrator to character focalizer and then to another character focalizer throughout the novel. The narrative function is performed sometimes by the major characters themselves in the first person. Ghosh wishes to make the reader watch constructively the character's point of view. As character narrators, they narrate their own stories in the first person. The novel has been narrated by the participating character focalizers who recount the events of their personal experience, betrayals, guilt, struggle, exploitation, fear, love, and separation. Ghosh as a narrator effaces himself and at times provides the inside views of the characters. Such a situation invites a critical mind to explore the relationship between the character and the narrator. The temporal position vis-a-vis the narrated events show them to be separated agents, Gerard Genette makes this distinction very clear when he writes that the two actants, the narrating 'I' and the narrated 'I' i.e. the narrator and character are separated by difference in age and experience. It is this very difference that authorizes the narrator to treat the character with a sort of condescending or ironic superiority. He further suggests that "the voice of the error and tribulation (i.e., the narrated I) and the suffering character could not be identified with the voice of 'understanding and wisdom' (i.e. the narrating I or the narrator in a narrative discourse)" (Narrative Discourse 252). In *Sea of Poppies*, these two 'I's are presented through not one but many character focalizers.

Deeti, the character narrator is different from Deeti, the focalizer in Gazipur factory. Deeti as a character focalizer remembers Kalua's humiliation scene. Thus, almost all characters are related to at least two time zones operating simultaneously. In the lines quoted in the previous paragraph regarding Kalua's humiliation by zamindars (93), the character focalizer is Deeti and the character narrator is also Deeti but her temporal and spatial position is different. In the previous one, she is a mute spectator having no courage and voice to revolt and in the latter one, she is Deeti with a reflective and understanding mind.

There is also the incorporation of the collective voice 'we' which is a way to make his novel multi-voiced. The plural narrative voice 'we' is an effective device in creating a sense of inclusiveness. Throughout the text, Ghosh as a narrator does not give any overt commentary on the behaviour of the characters. He manipulates the reader's response by resorting to a very subtle and complicated symbology. Even at the end, he maintains the authorial posture of reticence. Despite all the unfavourable situations on *Ibis* Ghosh sends a beautiful message of solidarity and oneness among the workers on boards through the motif of *Ibis* that represents the collective voice 'we'. The other important character focalizer is Paulette who like Deeti, is reflective, insightful, and compassionate and like her advocates the idea of kinship and oneness among the *Ibis* inmates by calling them "jahazbhais and jahzbahens" (527) on board. Deeti is awe-struck by her simple but forceful idea. There are "no differences between... [them] jahajbhai and jahajbahin to each other... children of the ship... [that is] a great wooden mai-bap, and adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties to come" (528) (Parenthesis mine). All this again is a representation of their collective voice 'we'.

Opium and *Ibis* work as important motifs in the novel and link three sections of the novel. Opium affects the life of all the characters directly or indirectly. *Ibis* is a place in the novel to show different characters and their voices, perspectives, beliefs, traditions, cultures and mindsets. The atmosphere on the ship is quite different from the atmosphere of the land. The migrants face cruel treatment. The snobbery of the British, the power politics that run through the English and also among the Indians assisting them, the harshness against the girmityas and the wretched condition of the girmityas on *Ibis* has been clearly shown in the following passage. Baboo Nob Kissin's translation of Captain Chillingworth's orders shows the atmosphere of fear on *Ibis*:

The difference is that the laws of the land have no hold on the water. At sea, there is another law and you should know on this vessel I am its sole maker. While you are on the *Ibis* and while she is at sea, I am your fate, your providence your lawgiver. This chabuk you see in my hand is just one of the keepers of my law. (404)

Such detailed episodes presented through the omnipresent narrator in both diegesis and mimesis modes of narration clearly indicate the desperate situation of the indentured workerson board who are filled with an ‘unspeakable dread’ (406). The Captain on *Ibis* expects submission and obedience from the helpless workers through the whip and their terrors and they are forced to do the hard task. Like the Jamindars (in the case of Kalua) and the British judge, the captain also considers him to be a lawmaker to give himself ultimate authority and thinks him to be worthy of propriety showing excessive pride and callousness.

The characters in the novel experience transformation from the beginning to the end of the novel. They seem to be victimized in the beginning but as the plot advances, each of them exhibits a strong sense of individuality. They endeavour to make new destinies and new identities for themselves. Deeti, Kalua, Paulette, Zachary Reid, Neel, Jodu, Baboo Nob Kissin and Sarang Ali, all undertake challenges and face ordeals on their way to a new destination set for either by their choice or circumstances. Their journey becomes a motif in the novel and they are constantly in the process of travelling, experiencing transformation.

Amitav Ghosh’s novels reveal his prime obsession with history. He fictionalizes the fact of history and gives it a new dimension. Indentured labours, migration, and mass movements are some of the main themes in *Sea of Poppies*. The different narrative voices, typology of narrators, characters and their narratives, conversation, dialogues and language are supporting factors along with the narrative techniques like memory, recall, stream of consciousness, interior monologue, heteroglossia, realism, magic realism, picaresque details, symbols, motifs, images and use of the genres like myth, folk-songs, etc. create the proper atmosphere of that specific time period of history. Thus, in his novel fact is fictionalized without any loss of grace and dignity which adds to the charm of reading.

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