

The Phenomenology Of Subalternity: A Perspective on Amitav Ghosh's Representation of Subalterns in the *Hungry Tide*
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Abstract:

Subalternity has existed in academic circles as a field of study for over four decades. In this course of time, its definition has metamorphosed into several forms and shapes that it comes under criticism. David Ludden, in the Introduction to his book *Reading Subaltern Studies* makes the following statement:

Subaltern Studies does not mean today what it meant in 1982, 1985, 1989, or 1993. How did this change occur? Intellectual environments have changed too much to allow us to measure cause-and-effect in particular acts of writing and reading. Change has occurred inside the Subaltern Studies project, but ambiguously, as we will see, and how much internal change is cause or effect of external change is unknowable,

because inside and outside, subaltern subjects have been reinvented disparately. (Ludden 2) This problematizing leads the researcher to ask certain crucial questions regarding the identity of the Subaltern. In trying to establish Subalternity as a valid categorization, it becomes necessary for the Subaltern to become visible. This becomes important particularly when scholars of Subalternity like Gayathri spivak raise questions of whether the Subalterns can speak.

The recognition of the Subaltern voice takes a particularly curious path. It is primarily voiced by Subaltern scholars like Ranajit Guha and Spivak in their representation of the Subalterns in their theoretical endeavours. This has led Subaltern studies to spread like wildfire as a compelling and

relevant field of study in Academia. Technically this endeavour by the academicians to give voice to the Subaltern communities is laudable. However, there is also a flip side to this action. It is better understood by applying a phenomenological approach to Subalternity.

Phenomenology in general describes the evolution of the human consciousness by way of perceiving and absorbing experience. It follows that an object or experience is understood by a consciousness based on previous experiences. Therefore, every individual consciousness is constituted by the sum total of all the experiences it has absorbed thus far. The basic idea behind this field is that all things are perceived by the human mind depending on its previous constitution. By way of applying this idea to the present study, it can be inferred that Subalternity is perceived as a situation discussed extensively by academicians regarding people who are left out of Hegemonic power structures, usually in a

Colonial state. Apart from the inclusiveness that the term brings in, it is possible to note a pattern arising when the identification of the Subaltern is attempted. It appears to be primarily through the voice of someone who isn't a Subaltern. In other words, Subalternity seems to attain a proxy representative in its discussion for most of the time. It leads the researcher to ask whether the true Subaltern, if it is possible to be restrictive about that categorization, has been heard. Spivak's commentary inadvertently seems to lead one to such an inquiry. The initial question it raises is whether or not a Subaltern can be heard, or, as an adjacent strand of discussion, does the definition of a Subaltern imply that they, by definition 'cannot speak.'

The primacy of perspective is essential to this study because its insistence seems to either 'define' or 'redefine' aspects of living. In the case of subalternity, the impression created is that regardless of why the proponents of Subaltern Studies took up

this endeavour, the present visage that subalternity sports is evidently different. As a result, the field, in becoming inclusive, seems to have stretched its margins beyond its initial reasons for being. In India, for instance, Subalternity is usually seen to take on an angle emanating social cause. Ludden explains this by juxtaposing Subaltern Studies from various nations:

In the US, readers are generally encouraged to think about cultures in essentialist terms, in the ethnographic present; to see colonialism and nationalism as cultural phenomena; to disdain Marxism; and to distance academic work from partisan politics, a separation that bolsters academic credibility. But in South Asia, cultural change preoccupies scholars and activists, colonialism includes capitalist imperialism (which is still at work in the world of globalisation), Marxism is alive, and most scholars embrace politics in one form or another as a professional responsibility of citizenship. Such contextual differences

differentiate readings of subalternity. (Ludden 2,3)

If this possibility exists, there is certainly a need to be aware of the shifting definitions of the field of study and preventing it from diluting in course of time.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is one good example for study. The novel depicts the story of an expedition set in the Sundarbans where the characters unveil secrets about a shady past. The novel unfolds by revealing another narrative embedded within the primary one that speaks of the atrocities committed against the previous generation that settled and inhabited the Sundarbans. The novel seems to depict the nature of a Subaltern voice in almost being snuffed out by overpowering hegemonic power structures and the passing of time.

Apart from studying this novel as an artwork by a craftsman, it is necessary to consider the implications inherent that expresses certain aspects regarding subalternity. First

of all, it is clear that Amitav Ghosh chose the subaltern's voice to use as a background for his work of fiction. Several sources vouch for his interest in researching for his novels. Ghosh himself has said, "The research part, you're out there, you're visiting people. That's the fun part." (Ghosh) However, it is also clear that these people depicted in the novel have indeed faced troubled times. Their plight is denoted in the pages of refugee history going back to Bangladesh in the 1970s when people migrated initially from Bangladesh to the refugee camp in Dandakaranya and then to the Sundarbans amidst shifting refugee policies. The problem arose when it was made an issue that they had inhabited a Tiger reserve and that they were told to leave. In January 31st, 1979 as the Times of India stated, alleged firing by the police force of the Left Front Government had left quite a death toll, one that the pages of history would evidently hide over the years.

The burning question here is whether one has to wait for a well-renowned author like Amitav Ghosh to step up and produce a literary work for people to notice that a tragedy and a travesty of justice did indeed take place in the Sundarbans in the 1970s. This concern leads the researcher to notice the extent to which the subsumed voices have a visibility of their own. It is almost as if this incident would not have surfaced if not for Ghosh, and that too for the sake of hunting for material for writing a novel. It is possible to see Ghosh as a representative but it is also equally evident that the actual Subaltern's voice seems almost non-existent. The other concern is whether an author like Ghosh can be seen as a true representative if his material gain in writing his book is abounding. The author of the truly subsumed voice seems mostly represented and re-presented in the way Spivak denotes it, rather than speaking up for themselves, which would eventually be the goal of Subaltern Studies. Attempting to

ensure an 'insurgent- consciousness' and disallowing its reduction into an 'object of investigation' becomes an almost impossible task (Spivak 287). The conclusion that ensues is that a Subaltern's voice is not just suppressed by Hegemonic power structures, but also seems to be discreetly muffled by certain unwitting metanarratives.

It is necessary to acknowledge at this point that the perspective that this study concerns about is global in nature, that is, the image perpetrated by mainstream narratives, be it literary or non-literary. First of all, it may very well be a representative voice speaking for the Subaltern, but if every voice that is heard is a representative voice, the question arises as to whether the voice of the subjugated themselves truly surfaces. This surfacing meets its next stumbling block when mainstream narrativised structures distinguished by generic categorization in, once again, the mainstream global level exhibit prominence in their presence. Native narratives like folk songs or stories do not

surface as effectively as does mainstream literature in publicized book releases and readings. Commercialization, the third stumbling block, reduces narrative voices to commodities wherein if they do not attain material value enough to assure profit, it doesn't seem to permit a whisper, let alone a voice.

These muting aspects of our burgeoning global village seem to force Subaltern voices into ironically finding refuge in the pages of a global text. In terms of Phenomenology, The text perceived is a global one where the merging of local boundaries into a massive conglomeration of cultural multiplicities seems to either incorporate the local or leave it out. It is also only natural to notice its inclusiveness but its standards are on a global scale and any localized parameter is eventually brought into global standardization. Ludden makes this comment regarding Globalisation: Though globalisation circulates texts and ideas

around the world, it nonetheless divides reading environments. (Ludden 2)

This suggests that the shifting definition of a subaltern can also be a result of this global text. Marginalisation seems to become clearer only when centrality is defined in its context. Bringing varied contexts together might just be counterproductive to an endeavour, particularly in the case of Subaltern Studies where the context can define the tragedy.

Therefore, it is necessary to consider these perspectives for the purpose of retaining validity in studying subalternity. Perhaps the ‘large voice’ of the Global Text need not be the primary engine onto which all other voices and narratives need to hitch their wagons. For the local subaltern voice to exist, it is perhaps wise to be wary of the possibility that the Global text will eventually absorb subaltern voices and decontextualise them, resulting in a tragic loss, if the cause for the outcry still has not been alleviated yet. If the subalterns are

‘subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes,’ and since, in many cases, ‘the dominant language or mode of representation is appropriated so that the marginal voice can be heard,’ it becomes necessary to perceive the subtleties innately intertwined into the various avatars of overpowering narratives. Perhaps as J. Maggio comments in his research article ‘Can The Subaltern be Heard?’ we can come to the following conclusion:

If one takes this criticism of Western democracies seriously, then one would wish to somehow *allow* for the representation of the subaltern. Yet even this “allowance” is a Western convention, and it reinforces the notion that humans act upon the world through a Kantian-subjective will. For the subaltern to be included—accounted for—one must recognize their difference and their ability to communicate in non-Kantian ways. In fact, I would argue that we must use translation as a way to rip apart the

Kantian subject from the democratic notions of “representation.” (Maggio 438)

He even brings about a solution to Spivak’s predicament:

Yet Spivak, as if she is stuck in a Kantian/Cartesian loop, is still looking for the deliberate act of speaking, instead of attempting to *listen* to the subaltern in the many ways by which they communicate. I believe a dialogue *can* be opened with the subaltern. (Maggio 439)

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