

**OF SHADOWS AND MARGINS: (OVER) LOOKING THE
MARGINALIZED IN AMITAV GHOSH**

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Abstract

*Amitav Ghosh in his novels engages with the marginalized those relegated to the fringes, corners or margins of society. This paper attempts to illumine some shadows and margins where his characters dwell, see how they engage with their social reality and how they negotiate with the mainstream, the 'centre'. In Ghosh, women, the poor, the illiterate, colonial subjects, the religious ethnic minority, the displaced diasporan subjects typify the marginalized. This paper attempts to examine some Ghoshian characters like that of Tham'ma, May, Ila, Robi and Tridib in *The Shadow Lines*, Pia, Fokir and the populace of Mori Jhapi in *The Hungry Tide*, and Kalua, Deeti and the onboard sailors in *Sea of Poppies* and view them through the prism of marginalization.*

The paper seeks to delve into the politics of looking and overlooking, decode how they are overlooked by the power structures, note what rights are denied to them, analyse how the marginalized engage with the centre, consider whether they have a voice, probe into the problematic paradigm of marginalization and resultant deprivation.

Key words: Centre, marginalized, overlook, Other, difference

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Amitav Ghosh in his novels engages with the marginalized, that is, those relegated to the fringes, corners, or margins of society. The marginalized is placed in a complex web of hierarchies based on space ('centre' versus 'margin', urban versus rural, civilization versus 'primitive societies'), race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, culture, education, caste, language and such divisions. Marginalization is described as the act or the process of marginalizing. The Collins Dictionary defines marginalizing as 'to relegate to the fringes, out of the mainstream'ⁱ and to 'make seem unimportant'. Ghosh in his works delineates several characters who are marginalized or pushed to the periphery.

The marginalized reside on the fringes of society and their identity, their culture, their opinions, their feelings; their very existence is conveniently disregarded. They are positioned outside the mainstream culture and central social processes.

In analyzing three of his works, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* a host of remarkable characters emerge who may be viewed as the marginalized, the downtrodden, the outcasts or even the Other in society.

The policy of exclusion or hierarchical inclusion practiced by the dominant groups is an exercise in their hegemony and control. The assumed vantage position these authoritative bodies assign to themselves leaves the marginalized shaken, scarred and silent. Their identity is almost always negotiated in terms of their difference from the Centre, from their 'otherness', and their assumed 'aberration'. Stuart Hall raises a pertinent question when he asks, why difference is so compelling a theme and so contested an idea of representation.ⁱⁱ In cataloging the grounds that tend to address the question of 'difference' and its significance, he cites Sussure's theory that difference is said

to matter because it is essential to meaning; without it meaning could not exist. Difference conveys a message and helps to define a concept. For example, the concept of a 'Bengali' includes certain regional and linguistic features, and it also can be understood in terms of its 'difference' from its 'others'- a 'Bengali' is not a 'Gujrati', not a 'Keralite', not a 'Punjabi', not a 'Kashmiri', not a 'Tamil'. Derrida has established that there is always a relation of power between poles of binary opposition like white/black, men/women, majority/minority, educated/uneducated, urban/rural. Saussure believes that we need 'difference' because we can construct meaning through a dialogue with the 'Other'. In Bakhtin's study, meaning is context dependent and hence fluid. The exchange between speakers, interaction and interplay with another person assigns and modifies meaning. So what it means to be a Bengali cannot be fully appreciated till we know how a Bengali is perceived by its 'Others', the Punjabi, the Kashmiri, the Tamil, or the Gujrati. 'Difference' helps to designate positions to things within a classificatory system. What challenges cultural order is when things fail to fall into neat categories. This disturbing 'matter out of place' seems to transgress 'symbolic boundaries'. Recognizing 'difference' contributes to classify 'culture proper' and ostracize and reject anything that is 'abnormal', an 'aberration', or peripheral. It empowers 'difference' and makes it alluring as it is forbidden and outlawed. Ironically what is 'socially peripheral' often becomes 'symbolically centred'.ⁱⁱⁱ Another explanation for the importance of 'difference' is that the concept of 'Other' is fundamental to the constitution of the self. Stuart Hall succinctly sums up the ambivalence of 'difference' with both its positive and negative connotations: though it is essential for the production of meaning, formation of language, culture, and social identity, construction and definition of self, it also alarming with its potential of negativity, of disintegration, violence and animosity towards the Other.

The marginalized are essentially those who are 'different' from the mainstream, the Centre, the dominant majority, the powerful. It is this 'difference' that marks them out as a minority, or 'abnormal' or an 'aberration' or insignificant. It is easy and convenient to overlook or neglect the marginalized and their woes.

The voice of the marginalized is often silenced, lost, or rejected. The

denial of rights and privileges to the marginalized is implicitly accepted and justified. Ghosh touches upon issues of religious (in)tolerance and cultural identity which resonate more with personal experiences. He refrains from the 'us' versus 'them' categorical portrayal in his works. In his intermingling of the shadows with the sunshine, there is a blurring of the dividing lines between the Centre and the margin, an absorbing play of centre and margin, the Self and the Other, the dominant and the deprived.

The marginalized can be conveniently overlooked. Overlooking is the act of 'failing to notice' something, or 'ignoring' it or 'disregarding' it. It also suggests a vantage point, to look at something from a 'higher point', literally to 'look down upon' something. The marginalized are not simply pushed to the periphery on the same horizontal plane but they are also viewed as belonging to a lower or subordinate level where they can be overlooked. This overlooking could encompass a condescending 'watching over' or an indulgent 'overseeing', or as Merriam Webster Dictionary defines, it could be 'to look down upon from above'^{iv} or even to 'look past'. The marginalized are viewed as subjects who can be overlooked, disregarded, ignored or indulged condescendingly as and when it suits the whims and moods of the Centre.

In his works Amitav Ghosh identifies, recovers, restructures and maps the lives of the non elite, thwarted and marginalized people. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's cousin Ila is marginalized, as a brown woman, in the white society she wants to belong to. At school in London, she fancies the rich and handsome heart throb as her boyfriend, which reveals her longing to be accepted, recognized and included. In a telling school photograph, he is in the centre surrounded by laughing blonde girls while she is pushed to the corner of the frame, standing alone and looking gloomy and left out. She falls in love with May's brother Nick Price, a culturally dominant member of the native white elitist centre. The difference between them is essentially that of the centre and the margin. Being centred in society, he does not wish to be associated with the margin. As a school going kid, he refuses to protect her from racial bullying, and later as an adult, he continues to be ashamed of being seen with her in public, though he condescendingly allows her to share his private space. He overlooks her presence in most cases and his overlooking encompasses the

entire gamut of reactions from ignoring or disregarding, to failing to consider (her feelings, for example) to condescendingly looking down upon her racial origin, to even looking past her existence. Ila's urge to move to the centre, by marrying the culturally dominant native white Nick, is offset by her desire to erase her marginal position as a product of the third world. From the point of view of the oriental first world, India, the land of Ila's origin, is conveniently marginalized. Ila's derisive attitude towards the backward 'third world', its conventions, its values, its culture and mores is symptomatic of her own predicament. In exemplifying victim-turned-perpetrator syndrome, she hurls abuses at the marginalized 'third world' and looks contemptuously at the fringes of the Eurocentric world in a futile bid to shake off the signs of belonging to the margins.

In the wake of communal riots, Montu, narrator's school friend's identity as a Muslim gains prominence, from being a close friend belonging to the same neighbourhood, and attending the same school, he becomes the marginalized 'Other'. Negative stereotyping makes the school kids certain that Montu would be able to tell whether his people, that is, the Muslims, had actually poisoned Tala Tank. When the narrator is accused and taunted for being friendly with Montu, he denies that association, claiming falsely that he had not met Montu for months. From a part of 'us', the school mates, he had been forced into the 'them', the dangerous and violent enemy. In Calcutta riots, Muslims are marginalized, they are the minority, the Other. At the same time, in Khulna, Bangladesh, the scenario gets reversed, where Hindus, become the marginalized, the Other. Ironically it hints at the chimera of the centre and the margin, as the shadow lines of political boundaries get crossed, hegemonic domination gets altered, and the centred becomes marginalized.

The Hungry Tide interests itself with plotting the stories of the marginalized and voicing their concerns. The outcast refugees of Morichjhapi are powerless victims who try to seek shelter in the forests of the Sundarbans. Ghosh employs this historic tragedy to focus on the plight of the marginalized whom society not just overlooks but also ruthlessly pulverizes to serve its own selfish ends. The retelling of Kusum's (a Muslim, female, uneducated, subjugated refugee's) narrative through Nirmal's (Hindu, male, educated, elite

citizen's) diary is a reminder of the fact that the marginalized/subaltern customarily cannot speak, their voice cannot be heard, it can only be projected or reflected by someone else's, usually that someone who belongs to the centre. It has been argued that the Bengali '*bhadralok*' -- that is the English speaking, educated, rich, well connected, urban, Hindu upper caste, Bengalis-considered these islanders to be lesser mortals, and had systematically marginalized them for their social and economic inferiority. Ghosh also highlights the utter detachment many of the rich urban characters feel towards the refugees living in Morichjhāpi. In his journal, Nirmal refers to a conversation that takes place between his wife and a doctor from Calcutta about the situation there "Oh, these refugees!" said the doctor. "Such a nuisance" v Another instance of the attitude of the *bhadralok* (rich, urban, educated, elite, Bengali) to the *nimbritto* (here lower class, uneducated, impoverished refugees) is revealed when Kanai insults Fokir. According to Tomsy, Kanai's abuse stems from his need to assert his class-inflicted authority and reconstitute his social and cultural norms.^{vi} When he humiliates Fokir, Kanai becomes conscious of how ingrained his class and cultural dominance is within him. He inwardly acknowledges,

Sources whose very existence he would have denied: the master's suspicion of the menial; the pride of caste; the townsman's mistrust of the rustic; the city's antagonism towards the village. [Kanai] had thought he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past (326)

Piya, Indo American researcher from Seattle, without the ability to speak or comprehend the vernacular, is marginalized in the tidal land. She displays the characteristic feature of non belonging, of the 'matter out of place': as a brown woman, she does not strictly belong to the hegemonic 'centre' in America, as an American, she does not belong to the mainstream dominant Bengali culture in Sundarbans. The poor, illiterate Muslim fisherman Fokir neatly falls into the marginalized category on the basis of not only wealth, class, education but also his religious identity. She utilizes his services to pursue her research on the Irrawaddy dolphins, but metaphorically, the marginalized duo of Piya and Fokir can communicate effectively and connect on the water. Both suffer from

alienation and uprootedness, (Fokir exhibits the 'homeless-at-home' strain, so being a native, he does not show any kinship or attachment to his fellow fisherman community) and both ironically feel comfortable and 'at home' when they are on water.

The agency and the metaphor of water, is evoked in Ghosh, to suggest that when the marginalized are pushed into darkness, into the extreme periphery of society, and when even that margin is conceived of as giving them too much space, they are literally and metaphorically pushed into the water. Water becomes an all encompassing, all embracing agency, and ready to accept those who are disregarded and exiled from their land. It offers the deprived a new life, a scope to form new relations, and some of these relationships can only be conceived, coined, and condoned on water but would be unthinkable on land.

The agency of water establishes a connection with Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* which also seems to be flooded with the marginalized. The majority of the onboard sailors are 'indentured servants' from India being sent to work in British plantations across the world, particularly Mareech, island of Mauritius. Sailors, castaways, and convicts form the others who were being pushed over from the margins of land and society, into the water, that is, onto the ship, Ibis. They are the group whose identity 'does not matter' and whose life or death is equally insignificant. Society does not need them; in fact, society has already rejected or discarded most of them.

Deeti and Kalua represent the doubly marginalized in society, that is, people of 'lower' rank/caste in a colonized society. Deeti, wife of opium addict Hukam Singh, drugged and raped by her brother in law, Chandan Singh, is subjugated and marginalized in her own family. Chandan consummates the marriage to conceal the weakness of his impotent brother Hukam. As a widow, she is driven to become a 'Sati' to avoid alluring prey to the lecherous designs of her brother in law. The untouchable, 'lower' caste Kalua saves her from this enforced suicide, but they have to flee society for this transgression. Their marginality creates a bond of victimization between them, and a mutual dependence on each other. Interestingly they take turns in protecting and

helping each other. Kalua with his masculinity protects her, a woman, in a patriarchal society and she with her mental strength, her ability to take decisions, supports and protects him.

The fate of Neel Rattan Haldar, an impoverished Hindu Raja, who is tried for alleged forgery and is being deported as a captive, to Mauritius, follows the pattern of changing fortunes, and exhibits how the centre gets pushed to the margin. From the sunshine of his luxurious lifestyle, surrounded by poetry, western philosophy and dancing girls, he is exiled to the darkness of a congested prison cell with only one prisoner, a half Chinese, half Parsi, half Cantonese convict, the opium addict, Ah Fatt. Ah Fatt is also the unwanted, discarded addict, exiled and marginalized by society. A strange bond develops between the two, belonging to such contrasted backgrounds, one from the centre, the other from the margin, yet both condemned to a similar fate, and sharing the same space on the Ibis.

Jodu, a poor Muslim lascar (sailor) gets badly beaten up for daring to exchange amorous words with Munia, a Hindu girl. He faces religious marginalization among the predominantly Hindu indentured labourers. Zachary Reid, a second mate on the ship, is apparently white but actually of mixed origin, son of a slave mother and slave owner father. His case underscores the myth of the centre and the margin. Apparently he is a white man, so he is centred but racially examined, he is a mulatto, he is neither white nor coloured, neither free nor enslaved, he does not fit into neat categories, he does not belong, he displays the 'matter out of place' dilemma, which is so symptomatic of the marginalized.

Paulette, a French orphan, disguises herself as a native woman to escape from her foster British family. In a fate similar to Deeti's, Paulette faced with the indecent advances of her foster father, Mr Burnham, runs away to seek safety on the Ibis. Her disguise on the ship aids her in effacing the effects of her marginalized position. Without disguise, as a white woman, she could have been 'othered' and singled out more emphatically.

The turbulence of the Black Waters induces sea sickness which kills some of the passengers. The tossing of their bodies into the sea, shows how

inconsequential the lives and death of the marginalized is. Ghosh empowers Deeti with a voice as she leads the protests, demanding the customary last rites before handing over the bodies to the water. The authorities of Ibis conveniently overlook the powerless marginalized on board, whose concerns do not matter to them. When Bhyro Singh, uncle of Deeti's dead husband, assumes superiority, and seeks permission to lash Kalua for defiling a 'higher' caste woman, they allow him to perpetuate the monstrosity. They overlook the fact that she is his legally wedded wife, and she has given him her free consent. The white administrators on board are self appointed law keepers, moral guardians and the supposed controlling power. They occupy the Centre yet their inefficacy is exposed in the murders, mutiny, attempted rape, brutal floggings that take place on the Ibis. They overlook the downtrodden indentured servants and the other colonized passengers as if their existence is of no importance.

The rich tapestry of characters drawn by Ghosh represents a cross section of society with one thing in common, most of them are marginalized castaways, and they are people who do not matter, living on sea, pushed from the margins of the land into the water. On Ibis, they are again relegated to the suffocating, dark, underground part of the ship, the margins of the ship. Most of them are victimized, are trying to escape, to overcome subjugation and subtly crossing the rigid borders of caste, religion, language, race, class and nationality to forge human relationships that transcend and override such divisions. Through his textured characterization, Ghosh exposes the multiple layers of marginalization in society.

Ghosh's portrayal of the marginalized, his engagement with the Other, in itself, is a testimony to their existence, a vindication of their rights, an empowerment, a refusal to silence their voices, an estimate of their plight, and a recognition of their identity. Interestingly, his marginalized women exhibit an independence of spirit, overcome their social barriers and traumas, take their own decisions, and are ready to tackle the challenges presented to them. By foregrounding the marginalized, Ghosh assigns them centrality, allows them to either speak, or plots his stories on or around them. He valorizes their concerns and subtly points out the fragility of the notions of the centre and the margin.

The subjugated and the marginalized in Ghosh, assert themselves and subtly subvert the hegemonic forces and engage as active participants in the politics of power. He displays the fact that the overlooked marginalized can speak by granting them a voice. They are generally overlooked by the Centre but when pushed beyond the margins of land, onto the water, they subtly subvert the power equations and gain a voice. They engage as active participants in their discourse with the centre, demanding rights, resisting or even resorting to violence to maintain their basic human dignity, and emerging from the darkness of the corners and the margins to find their space under the sunshine of the centre.

ⁱ From The Collins Dictionary Web

<<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/marginalisation>>

ⁱⁱ Stuart Hall, 'The Spectacle of the "Other"', in S. Hall (ed) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage in Association with Open University, 1977. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱ Babcock, *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978. Print.

^{iv} Merriam Webster Dictionary, <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/overlook>>

^v Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2012, 275. Print.

^{vi} Tomsy, T, *Amitav Ghosh's Anxious Witnessing and the Ethics of Action in The Hungry Tide*, pub in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2009, 44: 53. Print.

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