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Ethnic Roots and Historical Halls: Morrison and Ghosh Rescuing the Cachet

Sanyat Sattar

1. Introduction

Some personal or collective histories can never be completely integrated into the continuum of one's emotional life. Such stories produced in traumatic times or in disastrous events are likely to remain only partially understood or accepted. The works of India writer Amitav Ghosh, who narrated his stories in testimonial form, offers that insight into trauma, as does the emotionally intense works of Toni Morrison. Ghosh being an Indian anthropologist and Morrison being a black female writer brings forth shades of various different elements of deep emotional havoc that the past had offered to these writers' own communities. The piece of history related to the enslavement of the American black people and with the colonization of the South Asian people, serves itself as a big source of understanding the horror that caused immense suffering in many layers, which Morrison and Ghosh has portrayed in their respective canvases.

While the works of Amitav Ghosh and Toni Morrison enable us to explore the tensions of an oppressive past in connection with the present and the future, they also invite us to participate, in Morrison's terms, in a ceaseless work of active "reconstruction of a world." Turning to the

past and to the histories that it holds can initiate necessary processes of remembrance of those whose relevance has been denied. It can also bring us closer to that part of history that may not be easily accessible. In this paper I want to investigate how and in what ways we may be compelled to address some of the traces of a ghastly past that Morrison and Ghosh have intently urged us to remember through their narrative requests. At the same time this also is an attempt to examine the means by which Morrison and Ghosh seek to reclaim their heritage and trace how they bring their respective ancestry to the fore. Morrison and Ghosh have always been aware of the facts and facets of the true history of their own people. History itself is the base of research of these writers. Morrison and Ghosh are like researchers, who investigate the history in their fiction, not only to tell a sad story, but also to tell the true story and to make it clear that these stories are inevitable in the history of African American and South Asian existence. The intention is not to create a universal pity towards the victims, rather to understand the forces, reconstruct the present accordingly and to reaffirm a respective position for the disregarded and victimized community. By analysing these issues I will finally show how Toni Morrison and Amitav Ghosh share a similar tone from their fundamental objectives of writing about their community.

2. The Notion of Americanness & Morrison

With her pioneering book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison chose to study the construction of whiteness from a literary historical perspective. In this book Morrison

describes whiteness as an absence rather than anything else. Even though it appears to be closely linked, this differs from the earlier definition of whiteness as being invisible. The latter has to do with whiteness seen (or better said: not seen) from a white perspective, whereas Morrison pays more attention to the involvement of African Americans in the definition of whiteness. In her book she often speaks of 'Otherness' and argues that whiteness more than anything comes from not being black. Morrison explains that the whole notion of American identity is based on her definition of the construction of whiteness. She points out in *Playing in the Dark* that

Deep within the word "American" is its association with race. American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen (47).

Morrison points out that there is a general assumption amongst literary historians and critics that "traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, African and then African Americans in the United States" (4-5). It means that black people are assumed to have played no significant role in the creation of American literature and therefore the establishment of what Morrison calls "Americanness". However, Morrison argues that an American identity could not have been formed without an Africanist presence, or American Africanism. Morrison describes the meaning of these terms as "an investigation into the ways in which a non-white, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and

the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (6).

Indeed like Morrison there have emerged number of other African American writers, who tried to underline the issue of African American identity and all its predicaments. In this lieu we can consider Alice Walker and her *The Color Purple*. Walker’s use of Black American Vernacular in the novel and the way in which Walker captures the life of the poor, rural Southern blacks is praiseworthy, yet the picture has some problems, which Trudier Harris, a renowned critic, in *Afro-American Fiction Writers after 1955*, protests among other things that the portrayal of Celie was unrealistic for the time in which the novel was set, that Nettie’s letters from African to America were really extraneous to the central concerns of the novel, and Celie and Shug’s sexual interaction represented the height of silly romanticism. Harris’ greatest criticism, however, is not levelled at the book itself but how it ”silences by its dominance.” In particular, she finds fault with the way in which the novel silences its critics, especially black women who, in Harris’ words believe that ”to criticise a novel that had been so universally complimented was somehow a desertion of the race and the black woman writer”(231). Harris finds fault with many of the novel’s aspects. Walker’s portrayal of black men, the dysfunctional black American family and the immorality of many of the characters mean that to people ignorant of the novel’s author, the whole novel can be viewed as a decent attempt by a Southern white male to reinforce the traditional sexual and violent stereotypes. Harris believes that the novel is set out as a fairy tale, with Celie as the passive and docile Snow White or Cinderella figure. Harris has no problem with the format, but asserts that as a fairy tale the story

must have *moral*. For Trudier Harris, the novel expounds the myth of the American Dream becoming a reality for black Americans, even who are 'dirt poor' and actually not being part of the American identity. The moral of this story is then, that black people have a minimally existent hope for a piece of that great American pie. So as qualifying as a fable or fairy story, Walker fails to project the initial and intended message that black people can rise up from those who try to smash them, as illustrated by Shug Avery and Mary Agnes, compared to Morrison, which is absolutely the opposite. It is actually Morrison who could address the issue more vigorously to establish the racial prestige in the land of America than anybody else. Morrison confirms that American identity is white, but argues that it could not have been formed without an Africanist presence. Therefore American identity, just as the classic literary novels, is not free of race. White writers created what Morrison calls an imagined Africanist persona that was fed by stereotyping, metonymic displacement (colour coding), metaphysical condensation, fetishization and a dehistoricizing allegory. Morrison argues that Africanness and Americanness are profoundly interwoven. The general assumption is that the American identity is white and Morrison is not contradicting this. She is, however, pointing out that the white American identity could not have been formed without an Africanist presence.

3. Indian Writers in English, the Debates & Ghosh's Indianness

In its early stages, the Indian writings in English were heavily influenced by the Western art form of the novel. It was in late seventies that a new breed of novelists and writers started to come on block. The

writings of Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh and Dominique Lepierre set the literature world on fire. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* won Booker in 1981. Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai repeated the feat when they won Man Booker in the year 1997 and 2006 respectively. However, one of the key issues raised in this context is the superiority-inferiority of Indian Writers in English as opposed to the literary production in the various languages of India. In his book *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, Amit Chaudhuri questions "Can it be true that Indian writing, that endlessly rich, complex and problematic entity, is to be represented by a handful of writers who write in English, who live in England or America and whom one might have met at a party"(43)? Chaudhuri feels that after Rushdie, Indian Writers in English started employing magical realism, bagginess, non-linear narrative and hybrid language to sustain themes seen as microcosms of India and supposedly reflecting Indian conditions. In recent times, the position of the Indian writer writing in English has undergone something of a transformation. By the time Arundhati Roy won the Booker in 1997, the 1980s era of welcoming postcolonial 'difference' had been replaced by an unease that postcolonial writers, rather than being marginal 'others,' had become the shrewd profiteers of a global economy. Institutional recognition of Indian English writers in the West is at its pinnacle. Within the span of less than a year, one writer received the prestigious Man Booker Prize and another was knighted. Kiran Desai and Salman Rushdie are part of a flourishing group of writers whose credibility has been cemented by illustrious awards, lucrative publishing contracts, and an increasing readership. Acceptance in the West, however, comes with a price for writers

practicing their art in a colonial language. Indian Anglophone writers share a sense that their reception in India has been less than adequate. Recognition and acceptance in the West co-exists with a mixed response back home, where Anglophone writers do receive some praise but are also routinely treated with a dose of suspicion if not hostility.

Ghosh set out to present a history of India in the twentieth century from an Indian perspective that evokes ideas of homeland, rootlessness and his own personal feelings towards India in many of his books. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay titled 'The Anxiety of Indianness' articulates a characteristic skepticism towards the perceived globalizing trend in post-colonial Indian writing: "The Indian novelists to be taken seriously are the ones not conditioned by the pressures of the global market." She nominates Amitav Ghosh, however, as a writer who will survive 'the boom'. Ghosh seems to have escaped the persistent stink of self-marketing, promotions and willful commodification that has pursued other contemporary Indian writers. Although over the past few years Ghosh has been residing in New York, and despite the fact that his childhood and early adult years were considerably more peripatetic than the other South Asian English writers, Ghosh is proudly Indian and he celebrates his Indianness in every possible way. He carries his race as nationality. It flutters before and above him like a standard, and he writes from that foundation.

In 2001, Ghosh learned that *The Glass Palace* had been nominated for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and had been named as the Eurasia regional winner. But Ghosh had not been consulted before the book had been nominated (publishers apparently often enter books in various

competitions without first conferring with their authors), and it subsequently became clear that had he been asked, he would have requested that the book not be entered into competition. When he learned that he had been nominated and had reached the final stage of judging, he simply requested that the book be withdrawn from the competition. The impact on the literary community was rather dramatic and became something of a *cause célèbre*. In his note declining the inclusion, he notes that among his objections is that the phrase itself “Commonwealth Writers”— “anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the realities of the present day, nor within the possibilities of the future, but rather within a disputed aspect of the past.” Ghosh goes on, “it seems to me that ‘the Commonwealth’ can only be a misnomer so long as it excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives” of the countries that are member states (Ghosh, *PEN*: 35). Much like Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his decision to write future novels only in the African language of Gikuyu rather than in English, and like the subsequent Asmara declaration that suggested that only native African languages be used by African writers, Ghosh’s public stand drew a lot of attention and comment—far more, perhaps, than he may have anticipated or enjoyed. Even if sometimes Ghosh is not involved in writing his own part of the world, or at least not primarily, significantly it is in the very act of dislocation that the fundamental nature of his Indinanness can also be found. In other words, this clear sense of nationality comes from the displacement that the living in the “Antique Land” provides.

4. The Rescue

Critics have universally recognized Morrison for redressing the limited perspectives of mainstream United States history by reclaiming the narratives of African American history, particularly from a female point of view. Morrison intends to reconstruct the black image in a way she knows and feels. Her writing effort to illustrate the richness of black culture includes black language, music, myths and rituals. The unique experiences of blacks, specifically those of black women, are treated with a distinctive voice in Morrison's works. They are brought from the margin to the reconstructed center. Through her novels, the silence of black people is broken; the void in white-male centered literature is filled. Although Toni Morrison does not regard herself as a feminist, her being a "black" and "female" still constitutes a particular perspective in her writings. She says when she views the world, perceives it and writes about it, it is the world of black people that best manifests her themes. Again, one of the most brilliant writers India can boast of, Amitav Ghosh is among the very few Indian Diaspora who has been able to recreate the essence of the Indian subcontinent without resorting to ridiculous hyperboles. This inherent Indianness however, in no way detracts from its universal appeal for Ghosh's wider appeal in his contemporaneity. Amitav Ghosh has certainly been breaking many glass ceilings. His work has the vividness of lived reality, which probably stem from his experiences as a journalist, academician, anthropologist and lecturer in different parts of the globe. While his multi generic novels have garnered tremendous praise his critical essays too are rigorously political and vigorously

fictional. Ghosh in his works has addressed a variety of issues from sectarian violence to nationalism, unerringly placing his work in the socio political framework of our times.

4.1. Morrison Addressing Her Community

In her article “Rediscovering Black History”, that served as a review of *The Black Book*, a book that she co-edited, Morrison criticizes the slogan ‘Black is Beautiful’. This slogan was created during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement. According to Morrison, the slogan was presented as a reaction to white values, but had the opposite effect. Morrison states that “the phrase was nevertheless a full confession that white definitions were important to us (having to counteract them meant they were significant) and that the quest for physical beauty was both a good and worthwhile pursuit” (Morrison, “Rediscovering”). Morrison has paid extensive attention to this subject in her novels, most of all in *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*. In *The Bluest Eye* a little girl’s life is dominated by the pursuit of blue eyes (meaning white perceptions of beauty) and it eventually drives her insane, because as a black girl she will never reach that goal. With *Tar Baby* Toni Morrison moved in a different direction than she did in her earlier novels. Instead of pursuing whiteness, Jadine, the protagonist, has actually more or less become white in *Tar Baby*. Morrison shows that black people have got a choice. It seems that Morrison is trying to say that even if blacks have a choice, or more choices than they did in the past, they should never give up their black roots in exchange for whiteness.

In her later works Morrison has moved further from the race issue.

Beloved and “Recitatif” show a departure from the quest for physical ‘white’ concept and a beginning of post-racial writing. With *Beloved* she goes back to post slavery days and tells the tragic story from an African American perspective. The novel can be seen as an answer to white versions of the history of slavery. According to Malin Walther Pereira *Beloved* “is not focused on correcting white versions of slavery” (Pereira, 76). Pereira states that the novel is more about focusing on black characters and keeping white characters as marginal as possible.

Her latest novel, *A Mercy*, released in the fall of 2008, can be seen as a next step in Morrison’s process of affirming a stronger positing for her community. The story is set in the seventeenth century. In a recent video interview with *The New York Times*, Morrison has explained that she chose this time period, because in the seventeenth century the United States was not yet a country, not even an idea. “It was just a continent where everybody was struggling; the Portuguese, the French and the Brits”, Morrison explains in conversation with *New York Times*’ Sam Tanenhaus. “I was looking for a time before black and slavery became married. Before racism became established[···]dividing the world up ethnically or racially was a deliberate and sustained event that grew. I wanted to write about what the world could have been like, before ‘that’ happened.” Surely Morrison is at the core of reconstructing the truth of American literature according the flow of time and history. Morrison’s themes affirm her true African American spirit, which she claims and reclaims in every possible ways and in every possible theme.

4.2. Ghosh Addressing His Community

At the close of her representative essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak draws the following conclusion: "The subaltern cannot speak" (104). In that paper, she reflects, "I suggested that the subaltern could not 'speak' because, in the absence of institutionally validated agency, there was no listening subject" ("Ethics" 24). This is exactly why she argues against violence in both epistemic and hegemonic terms. Similarly, Ghosh's answer for the question she poses can be supposed to be negative, although his narrator speaks of the riots not only for himself but for others, including his father: "And yet he knew, and they must have known too, all the canny journalists: everybody must have known in some voiceless part of themselves — for events on that scale cannot happen without portents. If they knew, why couldn't they speak of it?" (227) In this fashion, or in this fiction wherein "[k]nowing and not knowing are so intricately linked" (Mukherjee 259), he gets to discover the subaltern, rather than the nation, to be those unaware of "some voiceless part of themselves." It can then be said that speaking of what has really happened enables him to play an important role as an indigenous agent of those who cannot "speak of it." Thus Ghosh intends to give all unvoiced a voice of self-respect and confidence.

The British version of history glosses over the time when this country was the world's biggest drug pusher. Afghanistan now produces the poppies to supply Europe's heroin. But two centuries ago it was British fortune seekers in India who turned the banks of the Ganges into a sea of poppies and tried to force refined opium on the reluctant Chinese. They almost succeeded. Despite the emperor's decrees banning the drug

that dulled his subjects and addled his empire, British traders kept shipping out jars of opium to Canton, counting on the growing number of addicts to defy his orders. In the end, they used force – denouncing Chinese restrictions on free trade, and persuading London, shamefully, to wage the notorious opium wars. Against this background, *Sea of Poppies* paints a poignant picture of the human devastation of this trade. The fertile farms of the Ganges plain are blooming only with poppies – beautiful, deadly, denying the peasants the crops to sustain them and indebting them to moneylenders and landowners, themselves indebted to the buccaneers of the East India Company. Skilfully and seemingly randomly, Ghosh assembles those who will set sail in his narrative of the Ibis, an old slaving ship that is taking indentured labourers to Mauritius.

We follow the characters through clashes of caste and custom, ruled and rulers, generous sentiment and avaricious deceit, to the fateful ship. India in the 1830s is wonderfully evoked: the smells, rituals and squalor. The language, above all, brings home the genuine Indian identity: thug, pukka, sahib, serang, mali, lathi, dekko and punkah-wallah still retain, to English ears, echoes of the Raj. But the clothes – zerbaft brocade, shanbaff dhoti, alliballie kurta, jooties and nayansukh – or the ranks and offices – dasturi, sirdar, maharir, serishtas and burkundaz – are frankly incomprehensible. And that is Ghosh's trick: we clutch at what we can, but swaths of narrative wash over us, just as they did over those caught up in a colonial history they could neither control nor understand.

South Asia is a great nautical region. It is a history that has been forgotten. The whole nautical tradition that once was considered as a pride is lost today. The South Asians no longer think of themselves as

nautical people. And especially in India shipping has suffered terribly since independence. Once upon a time it was possible to travel to India all the way in boats in steamers, there was a very busy, thriving coastal trade, but since independence, because in India everything is based so much on Delhi, which is very far inland, our coastal shipping has died away, there is no shipping left on the Ganga, there is no shipping left on any of our major rivers. Once upon a time these rivers were alive with shipping, now very rarely do you see a ship on the Ganga. Apart from focusing the colonial past, in *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh also intends to address the forgotten river-culture of India.

Ghosh's recurring themes are: the role of the individual in the broad sweep of political events; the dubious nature of borders, whether between nations and people or between one literary genre and another; the role of memory in one's recovery of identity in the march of time; the role of the artist in his very own country and society; and finally the importance of narrative in shaping the history that is so close and familiar to him. Ghosh's fiction seeks to reclaim his country's heritage, to tell, in an Indian voice, a story of true heritage. Ghosh feels that the history of the last 200 years has been defaced largely and because of this it is his responsibility to reclaim a lot of it from the colonial archive.

5. Concluding Remarks

In bearing witness toward the histories of racial oppression and addressing the own community, apart from Morrison and Ghosh we can consider the works of J. M. Coetzee and Wilson Harris. Their work also enables us to acknowledge that which secretly unhinges the self, that

which fails to add up to a fully present subject, leaving us with a model of subjectivity in which the self, far from accruing a history and an identity like so much cultural capital, instead comes to an awareness of its infinite obligation toward others. The novels of Coetzee and Harris might be described as modes not only of mourning, but also of expiation, even if the possibility of absolution is necessarily deferred in Coetzee's work. In that they confront the phenomenon of 'survivors guilt', Morrison and Ghosh's novels might also be described as a mode of expiation. The structure of *Beloved* suggests that "some kind of tomorrow" for those who survived slavery is predicated on negotiating the claims of those who did not. In so far as *Beloved* is able to memorialize the "Sixty Million and more" that died during the Middle Passage and slavery, it functions as a mode of what I term cultural memory. Similarly, Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* makes the narrator of his novel recall his own experiences with a fondness, which can be considered as another emotive element of cultural memory. Cultural memory constitutes a healthy mode of mourning, which has as its aim the recovery of the subject.

It is possible to see the work of Coetzee, Harris, Morrison and Ghosh as ways of grappling with different forms of racial memory. Each attempts to relate a history of racial oppression that most of their readers are reluctant to confront. Coetzee gestures toward the story of oppression and torture that white South Africa would rather keep out of sight and mind. Harris, on the other hand, insists on the history of colonization that contemporary Caribbean society would prefer not to dwell on. However, Ghosh and Morrison returns to the history that South Asian and African American community finds itself unable to lay to rest.

What gradually becomes clear is that these racial memories cannot be exclusively reclaimed by any one section of the community. Disrupting the multicultural model of identity, racial history functions as the common origin and division of the various tribes that make up contemporary society. Thus, if Morrison and Ghosh proposes to sort out history as a positive mechanism in dealing with the trauma, then it certainly also sheds light on how to deal with the socio-political system of the contemporary society. Again, Morrison and Ghosh are always concerned with the tradition that they belong. Reconstructing the history to institute a true identity of the concerned community is one of the many reasons why Morrison and Gosh took a pen to write in the first place. With all their achievements, they state to employ their capacity to write about their people, being loyal to their backgrounds. Indeed there are number of writers in English literature who can claim to write about their ancestral past, but very few have actually taken this issue to aid and foster the community. Very few writers can actually be considered to be writing something that they feel to be obliged to write. For Morrison and Ghosh writing about their own people is more like a conduct mixed with humanity and responsibility, rather than winning name and fame. Both Morrison and Ghosh want to examine the past, which is not only 'reminisence', rather it has a special fundamental fuction to rebuild and reform the present positively. The past has very little to attain, but Morrison and Ghosh are looking back to the past not to feel bad, rather to feel proud. And pride is the vital attribute that the African Americans and South Asians should conquer at this 21st century.

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(Graduate Student)

SUMMARY

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Sanyat Sattar

The works of Amitav Ghosh and Toni Morrison enable us to explore the tensions of an oppressive past in connection with the present and the future, they also invite us to participate, in Morrison's terms, in a ceaseless work of active "reconstruction of a world." Turning to the past and to the histories that it holds can initiate necessary processes of remembrance of those whose relevance has been denied. It can also bring us closer to that part of history that may not be easily accessible. In this paper I want to investigate how and in what ways we may be compelled to address some of the traces of a ghastly past that Morrison and Ghosh have intently urged us to remember through their narrative requests. At the same time this also is an attempt to examine the means by which Morrison and Ghosh seek to reclaim their heritage and trace how they bring their respective ancestry to the fore. Morrison and Ghosh have always been aware of the facts and facets of the true history of their own people. History itself is the base of research of these writers. Morrison and Ghosh are like researchers, who investigate the history in their fiction, not only to tell a sad story, but also to tell the true story and to make it clear that these stories are inevitable in the history of African American and South Asian existence. The intention is not to create a universal pity towards the victims, rather to understand the forces, reconstruct the present accordingly and to reaffirm a respective position for the disregarded and victimized community. By analysing these issues I will finally show how Toni Morrison and Amitav Ghosh share a similar tone from their fundamental objectives of writing about their community.

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