

Postmodernist Way of Narration: Relevance of Letter Series in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

- Meenakshi De

Abstract: According to Marx, Ideology is a 'false consciousness', but Althusser, the French neo-Marxist believes that ideology is 'self-misrecognition', because the dominant class keeps the dominated class of people in such an 'illusory' situation that the human subject feels its existence and sees its image in the 'mirror' (mechanism) of dominant ideological discourse. This is the 'imaginary' dimension of human subject in Althusserian view. The purpose of this 'imaginary' representation is that the unpalatable truth of real condition of human relationship must be masked by some dominant mechanisms. But postmodernism challenges dominant authority and defies Enlightenment's grand narrative which suppresses the representations of diversified realities of the subjected people. Multiple realities can be manifested by introducing gossiping, diary writing, storytelling, letter writing, filmy version, and advertisements which are used as parts or tools for carrying counter-narrative mode in the fiction. The omniscient narrative stance tends to be subverted by the incorporation of meta-narrative structures. Letter writing is one of such narrative modes which, by challenging Grand narrative, tries to assert its existence by breaking down the 'imaginary' dimension of human existence. The present paper wishes to focus on how the letter series in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* act as the tool for postmodernist stance.

Keywords: Letter writing, Challenging dominant ideology, Metanarrative structure, Subversion, Breaking down of imaginary existential dimension.

I

Postmodern Theory and Ideology : Postmodernism argues that reality is not a monolithic structure, rather reality is constituted by diversified, heterogeneous, and nonsynchronous realities, because reality is not a single and fixed one, rather reality is plural in nature and different realities are always reacting with one another. The action and counter - action are always going on in the whole social system. The presence of the ruled and the dominated class creates an opposing force to the dominant class. Gradually this opposing force becomes so strong and forceful that the dominant ideology is directly challenged. Then what happens is 'the loss of the real'¹ as termed by Jean Baudrillard, the French Postmodernist. This 'real' is similar to Althusser's concept of 'imaginary' dimensions of human existence - it is that 'imaginary' dimension within which the dominant class tries to keep the dominated class. That's why Althusser views that ideology is not 'false consciousness'(as Marx viewed), rather it is 'self-misrecognition'² (Althusser, 2006, p.116). Althusser's 'imaginary' is not false or unreal,

rather it is in line with Lacan's concept of pre-linguistic stage of development when the child cannot attain the power to distinguish subject and object, self and other, but identifies and feels itself at once before the mirror. Therefore, it is a stage when "subject and object glide ceaselessly in and out of each other in a sealed circuit" (Eagleton, 2007, p.142). Eagleton illustrates Althusser's concept of 'imaginary' in such a way that in ideological domain, similarly, the human subject feels its existence and sees its image in the 'mirror'(mechanisms/different ideological state apparatuses) of a dominant ideological discourse. This is the 'imaginary' dimension of human subject in Althusserian view. Althusser in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* defines ideology as : "A representation of the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 2006, p. 109). In ideological circuit, what is represented as real relationship, is actually imaginary relationship, within which the dominated class is bogged down, and cannot come out of this deceptive and misrecognized identity. So, in *For Marx*, Althusser stated that "In ideology, the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation" (Althusser, 2005, p.234). But, interestingly, postmodernism tries to break this 'imaginary' dimension of human existence by violating this closed circuit ideological relation, and in this way postmodernism denies the fixed nature of reality and gives birth to multiple realities. This phenomenon is reflected even in narrative mode of writing. The Postmodernist narrative mode of using of parody and pastiche is the indication of the denial of the grand narrative mode and the defying of the authority. The omniscient narrative stance tends to be subverted by the incorporation of meta-narrative structures. The rejection of the distinction between 'high' art and 'low' art is one of the important characteristics of postmodernism. Multiple realities can be manifested by introducing gossiping, diary writing, storytelling, letter writing, filmy version, and advertisements which are used as parts or tools for carrying counter-narrative stance in the fiction.

Writing novel in the form of letter (which is called epistolary novel) was in vogue since the 18th century as evident in the writings of *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. The role of letter, as we see in the conventional epistolary novel, has undergone a change in the postmodern text, as letter in postmodern text functions as an alternative narrative mode. So, what role does the letter series in *River of Smoke* play? When two third portion of the novel contains letter narrative, the question comes naturally in the minds of the readers whether these letter narratives in the novel are introduced by the novelist in order to get relief of the monotony of the realistic third person narration, or it has any other purpose leading to the central purpose of the novel?

II

Letter Series in *River of Smoke* : Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011), the second book in 'Ibis' trilogy is a voluminous novel of over five hundred and fifty pages (publication in Penguin Books India 2011) containing three divided parts - Part one-Islands, Part Two - Canton, Part three - Commissioner Lin, with eighteen chapters and more than twenty major characters. The naming of the tripartite division

of *River of Smoke* denotes that the theme of the novel goes from the whole to the part, from the margin to the centre. The whole novel is not written in the third person omniscient narrative form. There are, in total, fifteen letters in the novel. Of all letters, fourteen letters were written by Robin Chinnery, the painter and the childhood friend of Paulette and a single letter was written by Mr. Charlie King to Mr. Elliott. That Ghosh has given a special importance to the letter series in the novel is proved by his design of writing each Chapter from 7 to 18 starting with Robin's letter to Paulette except chapter 16. All letters are written in such a printed form, which is easily distinguishable from traditional fictional narrative form. Here letter series carry several features -

- (i) Letters are very much informative. One purpose of the letter series is to provide the readers and Paulette with information.
- (ii) Letters are one-sided. All fourteen letters are written by Robin. Not a single letter was written by Paulette. Even in the last letter in Chapter 18, Robin wrote that he got Paulette's letter, but that letter was not revealed to the readers.
- (iii) Letters are very much informal. In these letters, Robin Chinnery addressed Paulette in different names, which reflects his loving relationship with Paulette.

The nature of these letter helps Robin to give a detailed description of Chinese paintings and plants of which both readers and Paulette are ignorant. The novelist wants to inform the fact that China was rich especially for its flora which was both medicinally and commercially valuable. For example, "*Camellia sinensis* - the species of camellia from which tea was plucked - accounted for an enormous proportion of the world's trade and one-tenth of England's revenues" (Ghosh, 2011, p. 101). Before Ghosh, no novelist did pay so much attention and importance to Chinese Flora which was the sole target for the Europeans who tried to transport plants from China to England and France.

The value of China's plants had not been lost on Britain's rivals and enemies across the Channel: the major physic gardens and herbariums of both Holland and France had also been endeavouring to assemble collections of Chinese flora - and for considerably longer than Britain - but they too had not had much success. ... Their gardeners and horticulturists were among the most knowledgeable and skillful in the world, and they guarded their treasures with extraordinary vigilance ... (Ghosh, 2011, p. 101).

That botany was central to the imperial enterprise and to the colonial expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries in the Eastern world was first fully unveiled by Ghosh in *River of Smoke*. The political and ideological purpose of the East India Company to corrupt Chinese social and economic system and to corrode the human potentiality of China by making her people addicted to opium is the ultimate aim of the Company. History says that the idea of exporting opium to China started with Warren Hastings (the first Governor general of British India) in 1780. Before 1780, China used to export enormous amounts of goods, but was not interested in importing any European goods. Therefore, Hastings planned that the only way of balancing trade was to export opium to China. In the 1780s, he sent the first shipment of opium to

China and within ten years the demand for opium increased. To satisfy the high demand of opium, the Malwa region in Western India started to grow poppies along with West Bengal and Bihar. In this way, the British East India Company targeted to wreak the socio-economic system of India and China. It is the ideology of the Company that it uses the words like 'free trade', 'democracy', and 'human right' in favor of the Chinese people, but under the garb of those words of human right the company tries to degrade morality, sincerity, and rationality of Human beings. When the British Govt. itself banned the use of opium in its own country, it provided India and China with opium for profit.

III

Role of Letters in *River of Smoke* as Postmodernist Metanarrative Tool : The letter series are posing an ideology of the Chinese Govt. and the novelist serves the purpose of exposing the ideology of the most powerful emerging country in South-East Asia. China, in the 19th and 20th century, became a dominant authority and started to change the position from the earlier view of orientalism. China represents an entity, a self-conscious and authoritative entity, which subverts the earlier notion of the West that the East is static, inert and dependent. China breaks this 'imaginary' misconception of the ideology of the West and builds its own ideology to challenge Europe. Letter series by its form and content create an opposing and challenging force to the grand narrative of the authority. Though the letters are written in a familial gossip approach, the content of the letters is not personal, rather the content is related to international affairs. The content of the letter is deliberately deferred by the novelist for the purpose of reaching the centre of the content that Chinese authority will not provide other countries with any information. Searching for plant ('*Camellia Sinensis*') and painting is a long journey to Robin, because, time and again, the Hongists, Punhyqua and Howqua, promised to give him paintings or the related information to the flower, but they did not disclose any information. What the Hongists painters did, did deliberately and consciously. Chan Liang or Lynchong, the Chinese painting authority was conscious of its own treasure trove and did not want to get it lost. Chan Liang's talk with Robin Chinnery was a talk similar to the level of bureaucrat :

I [Robin] told him [Liang] it was because my friends wished to acquire a specimen for a botanical collection. What would they pay? He asked me now, and I told him their intention was to propose an exchange, for they had with them an extensive collection of botanical novelties from the Americans. ... What plants do they have? Have you brought any with you? No, said I.... I'm not one to trust to the figaries of chance, Mr. Chinnery : I need to see the wares on offer. (Ghosh, 2011, p.310).

The above conversation between a British representative and a Chinese official proves that the Chinese authority is very much conscious of the wealth of its country so that the country may not be easily deceived by other powerful countries of the world. Ghosh in an interview spoke of the defence mechanism of China, "The Chinese were extremely knowledge-

able about the curative properties of their plant wealth and fiercely guarded their secrets. The British had been trying to steal the plant for a long time but could transplant them to India much later.”⁴ Ghosh informs through the letter series of Robin regarding China's practical stand point of challenging the whole Europe,

From then on the Chinese knew the Europeans would stop at nothing to seize their land-and one thing you have to say about the Chinese is that unlike others in the East they are a practical people. When faced with a problem they try to find a solution. And that over there was their answer: Fanqui-town. It was built not because the Chinese wished to keep all aliens a bay, but because the Europeans gave them every reasons for suspicion. (Ghosh, 2011, p. 380).

Naturally, as the design proceeds, the long journey for the searching of plant proves to be a failure. Robin at last informs Paulette, “But you should know the golden camellia was not among them. That is because his plant does NOT exist” (Ghosh, 2011, p. 536). This is the ultimate outcome of the letter series. Therefore, the present paper shows how the letter series, as a whole, form a challenging tool against the grand narrative mode making a metanarrative structure of informal and casual gossip between two persons, but promoting information of a nation. These letters are serving an ideological purpose, but posing themselves in such a way as if they are personal and detached from nation's ideology. So, the letter series work as postmodernist metanarrative mode as counter to conventional narrative mode used in canonical text. Here, the chief aim of Amitav Ghosh is to uphold an alternative reality which he satisfies through letters presenting letters as tool of counternarration.

Endnotes :

1. Jean Baudrillard used the phrase 'the loss of the real' in his book *Simulations* (1981, translated 1983) with a view to showing the loss of the real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth.
2. Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* was translated from French to English by Ben Brewster from London by New Left in 1971. But the above quoted passage is taken from 2006 Indian Edition.
3. Althusser's *For Marx* was translated from French to English by Ben Brewster from London by Verso in 1969. But the above quoted passage is taken from 2005 Indian Edition.
4. Amitav Ghosh, here, talks to Rinku Ghosh in Kolkata during his publication of *River of Smoke* about reconciling the spirit of enterprise with an inclusive and sensitive approach. The interview is collected from internet under the title “Corporate armies are the new East India Co.” on June 20, 2011, 10:37:21 PM.

References :

- Althusser, L. (2006). *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. , (trans. by Brewster, Ben) Delhi: Aakar Books for South Asia.
- Althusser, L. (2005). *For Marx*. , (trans. By Brewster, Ben) UK: Verso.
- Barry, P. (2007). *Beginning Theory*. UK : Manchester University Press.
- Eagleton, T. *Ideology : an Introduction*. New Delhi: ABS Publishers and Distributors: 2007.
- Ghosh, A. (2011). *River of Smoke*. New Delhi : Penguin Group.

