

RIGEO



ISSN: 2146 - 0353

Review of International GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION



www.rigeo.org

“History Repeats in Altered Forms: A Hegelian Reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*”

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Received: 09.11.2021

Accepted: 30.11.2021

Published: 09.12.2021

Abstract

Ghosh, as both an anthropologist and novelist, explores the recurrence of historical pattern by connecting the past with the contemporary incidents in his novel *Gun Island*. He projects the repetitive occurrences of past history across different periods. He presents those incidents not as identical but as the transformed version of earlier events and examines the present crises as prolonged issues of the society in an altered form. The novel weaves the story with the threads of past and present incidents. Meanwhile, it intertwines the historical contradictions of gun merchant legend with the present crises. This paper entitled “History Repeats in Altered Forms: A Hegelian Reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*” analyses Ghosh’s *Gun Island* through the lens of Hegel’s idea of history repeats. Thus *Gun Island* presents the dynamic notion of history and interprets the unresolved pattern of connection between past and present. The novel suggests that the present-day crises are not unprecedented phenomena but the altered manifestations of historical recurrences.

Keywords: historical recurrence, philosophy of history, migration, climate change, and transformed crises

Introduction

Gun Island delineates the story of the gun merchant who lived in the 17th century. The gun merchant story functions to be the oral history of the 17th century landscape and human actions. It narrates how the people lived during that time. The trade system and migration are not new phenomenon in the present world. All these factors prevailed in the society already but in a different form. The present geographical condition of the island and migration are not new form of crises. The notion of globalization prevailed during 17th century through spice trade. These incidents are recurring in the present society in altered ways Ghosh portrays the historical incidents of the past and consequences of the intermingling factors of the present crises. These incidents narrate that humanity relives altered historical patterns and how the past surfaces over the present. This altered form of incidents and history of the past are analysed through the lens of Hegel's notion of the repetition of historical events in the present as altered events of the past.

Hegel states that history is not mere archive rather it influences the present and projects the incidents in an altered form in the contemporary society. It assures the fact that historical events reappear in a transformed way. Hegel's philosophy of history indicates that historical circumstances change yet the backdrop of history reappears. Hegel states thus,

what experience and history teach is this- that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it. Each period is involved in such peculiar circumstances, exhibits a condition of things so strictly idiosyncratic, that its conduct must be regulated by considerations connected with itself, and itself alone. (6)

Gun Island portrays the gun merchant story with the association to the crises of the contemporary milieu. Though the exact cause and circumstances vary for each setup, it is not completely different from one another. The novel takes the readers to 17th century and exhibits the relevance of history and humanity to the present world. It weaves the story with the threads of environmental catastrophe, globalization, modernity and political instability. It delineates the interconnected nature of past and present. As the text reads,

I discovered that the legend's place in the culture of eastern India was strangely similar to the patterns of its life in my own mind. The origins of the story can be traced back to the very infancy of Bengal's memory: it was probably born amidst the original, autochthonous people of the region and was perhaps sired by real historical figures and events... And in public memory too the legend seems to go through cycles of life, sometimes lying dormant for centuries only to be suddenly rejuvenated by a fresh wave of retellings, in some of which the familiar characters appear under new names, with subtly changed plot lines. (GI 7)

Deen hears these epics and past historical incidents and their present relevance in the contemporary milieu. It reminds the readers that history is not the archival of past incidents rather an intruder of the present. Here, in the *Gun Island*, Ghosh discusses the catastrophe. The gun merchant of the 17th century is forced to move from his native land. The circumstances that forced him to migrate were beyond his control. He is saved by the goddess Manasa Devi. He believes that he can exploit nature and move to another place thinking that his presence will not be traced by any one. He experiences different forms of calamities and encounters various poisonous creatures assuming that they are the servants of the legend.

In the contemporary society people belonging to the tide country are displaced due to several circumstances such as cyclones, flooding, sea level rise, and ecological degradation. Though time span and human beings change, context remains the same. Marx quotes Hegel in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “Hegel remarks somewhere that all the events and personalities of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” (9). Marginalized people are forced to suffer in various forms like migration, political injustice, human trafficking, and slavery. They become vulnerable to consistent suppression despite the change of era. The same context of different past actions occur in the present life and causes the same consequence of suppression.

Ghosh emphasizes this idea through a history professor who traces the previous incidents and relevance in the present society in the novel. He delivers his lecture denoting the incidents of past and their resemblance in the present. Though it seems to be difficult for the people to accept the reality, he proves it with enough reference. The presence of poisonous species in the past in search of the merchant denotes the habitat change of the animals. It was caused by the action of human beings. In the contemporary society people like Deen trace the presence of poisonous creatures in their living spaces. It indicates the different forms of natural disasters that affect human being. Cinta says “There you are! So you cannot say that this spider’s presence here is “natural” or “scientific”. It is here because of *our* history; because of things human beings have done. It is linked to you already – you have a prior connection with that spider, whether you like it or not” (GI 214). Though the audience remain reluctant to accept the reality behind this, It was proved later.

Deen witnesses the presence of the most venomous spiders in his surroundings and in the apartments. When the pictures of those spiders are sent to Larry, he observes that “The spider in

that picture is a brown recluse, *Loxosceles reclusa*. Its bite can be very painful; its venom is more potent, by weight, than that of a rattlesnake; it breaks down the skin and eats into flesh” (GI 203). The presence of such venomous creatures seem to be new for him but these things have already been witnessed by human beings like the gun merchant who lived in the past. Marx states that “The tradition of all the generations of the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (9). Though the presence of such creatures generates different meaning the context remains repetitive.

The resemblance of past history in the present world is traced in several ways. The trace of present in the altered form of past emphasizes the recurrence of past historical incidents. The gun merchant’s migration and the struggles during his journey are delineated in the novel. Those struggles align with the present crises endured by the illegal migrants. These illegal migrants lose control over their life. They are involved in human trafficking. The gun merchant was captured as a slave in the ancient time slavery prevailed. But in the present world the idea of slavery has been erased. Yet poor illegal migrants are involved in human trafficking, debt bondage, and exploitative labour system. Those people are not even considered as human beings and receive nothing at the end of their life out of their work. They experience extreme exploitation by their masters. Marx observes that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under given circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past” (9). This indicates the altered version of slavery in the present world.

Climate migration serves to be the resemblance of forceful displacement of the past. In the past, the natives were exploited extremely and displaced for the wealth of their imperial masters. But in the present society, human beings especially the subalterns are migrated due to various

circumstances. The subalterns become vulnerable to the economical crises and are forced to lose control over their life as they are considered to be commodities. Before colonialism ports and trade system were there as Cinta says that ““Spices were a big part of the Venetian economy; for centuries the city had a Europe- wide monopoly on the spice trade”” (GI 30). This indicates the trade system across countries before the arise of modern globalization. It prolonged during colonial period. After colonialism the trade system across countries were developed in the form of globalization.

Conclusion

Gun Island traces the repetition of ancient historical incidents in the contemporary society as transformed occurrences of past. Ancient act of colonial exile repeats in the form of migration, colonial spice trade is replaced by the notion of globalization and the cruelty of slavery prolongs through modern human trafficking and exploitative labour system. These incidents have not been demolished completely from the society rather they occur in different forms. Ghosh emphasizes Hegel’s idea of history repeats through the repetitive incidents of past in his *Gun Island*.

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