

Diasporic Consciousness in the Selected Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract. Diaspora is a psychological journey, a dilemma between homeland and new settlement nations. The migrant, journeying from place to place becomes a stranger in other land and this alienation makes an effect on identity, psychological peace and existential status. Amitav Ghosh, a novelist with an extraordinary sense of history and place, is indisputably one of the most important novelists of our time. Diasporic writing occupies a place of great significance between countries and cultures. Diasporic writings mostly become a response to the lost homes and to issues such as dislocation, nostalgia, discrimination, survival, cultural change and identity. Dislocation is one of the first feelings that haunt the diasporic community. When diasporic people find themselves dislocated from the home, society they are upset mentally and strive to remember and locate themselves in a nostalgic past. Amitav Ghosh shows a keen interest in projecting the diasporic life. Many of his narratives focus on the histories of exoduses and the individual's diasporic experiences. The blend of history and anthropology in Ghosh's novels helps him to bring out the present of the past in many aspects, including diaspora. He views the wars, politics, economy and other worldly affairs from the perspective of the common people who suffer under all these major events and changes.

Keywords : Alienation; dislocation; nostalgia; discrimination; cultural change; identity.

English language is the most important thing British left in India. India is a country with many languages and dialects. Even then English language became popular and a common dialect which helped unify Indian subcontinent during colonial and post colonial period. The affluent middle class used English language frequently. Likewise many Indian writers also used English language for their writing. The writers who lived in India as well as in other countries most commonly wrote in English language. Some of the modern Indian writers

are Anita Desai, Khushwant Singh, and Arundhati Roy et al. Among such writers, Amitav Ghosh has published various acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction. He was born in 1956 in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford, Alexandria. His works are *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), *The Flood of Fire* (2015), the three volumes of *The Ibis Trilogy*. Most of his works deal with historical issues. The non-fiction works are *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Dancing in Cambodia and at Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999), and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002).

The word 'Diaspora' derived from the Greek scattering of seeds, is used to describe population, migration and dispersal. Diaspora can be referred to people migrating from one country to another country due to various reasons such as seeking refugees, for example Jews went in exile from the homeland of Palestine. Thus diaspora refers to displaced communities of people migrating from their homeland. Somehow the thought process and the way of living of a diasporic community have influenced Amitav Ghosh's life and eventually the consciousness of a confused mind and sense of loneliness experienced by the migrated people can be seen in his writings. As V.S. Naipaul pointed out in *A Way in The World*, 1994 sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves. Amitav Ghosh travelled frequently in his youth, living in East Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, and India. His first novel *The Circle of Reason* deals with the life of a boy named Alu who lived in India and his adventure living in India and later, due to certain circumstances flees to Middle East. During his travel he meets various people from different nations. Thus this novel throws light on to the subject of exile, loneliness, migration, displacement. The visuals and situations the author encountered in his own life is seen in *The Circle of Reason*.

In *The Shadow Lines* (1988), he focussed on the encounter between two families, one Indian and the other English. The differences between them in terms of culture, geographical structures have been discussed. The boundary line between nations and families showed the readers the quest for self-identity existed in each one of us. The characters in the novel are caught between two nations and the

struggle to come of their artificially self-made personalities due to the influence of migration.

In an Antique Land is based on historical and anthropological research that Ghosh conducted in Egypt during the 1980's. The novel was based on the problems of Jewish settlers in Egypt. So to collect more information about the main character, a slave and for further research on the subject the author lived in Egypt for few years and he described about his experiences with his neighbours in a small Egyptian village in his fiction.

The Calcutta Chromosome (1996) is a science fiction set in three places, Calcutta, London and New York. It is also set in three different periods. *The Glass Palace* (2001) depicts the themes of displacement and quest for identity. Thus Amitav Ghosh's works mainly dealt with his own experiences. The major theme in his works is the diasporic influence which is evident from his own life. As Amitav Ghosh pointed out in one of Jash Sen's article, 'I really don't plot a novel. I just start with an idea I find interesting or a character and then I give myself plenty of loose threads that I don't cut off, so I can pick them up again later as part of the story, if it suits. Sometimes the thread resolves them into the narrative and sometimes they just remain loose ends. It's a mystery really, how the story evolves'.

Amitav Ghosh, a novelist with an exceptional sense of place and history, is one of the most popular novelists of the time. Ghosh has joined the famous novelists such as Monohar Malgonkar, Shashi Tharoor, Khushwant Singh, Salman Rushdie and Chaman Nahal and others with a sense of political and historical consciousness. One can identify the sense of historical reality, in Ghosh's novels. The idea of displacement, craving for strong identifications and race-relations, is the staple-stuff of Ghosh's novels.

The term displacement is associated with diaspora and has got the poignancy in the hands of Ghosh. In the novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), Ghosh used the magic realism in the literary scenario. The other novels like *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, *The Shadow Lines* and *In an Antique Land* are the famous novels of Ghosh.

The novel *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted and got the Man Booker Prize, 2008 and it was awarded the India Plaza Golden Quill

Award and the Crossword Prize. John Meleodh as considered Amitav Ghosh as diasporic writer along with Caryl Phillips, Bharati Mukherjee, Hanif Kureishi and others. The theme of displacement will be found in all the novels of Ghosh and it fills both the structure and texture in the novels.

The term 'Displacement' has got a vast connotation with respect to diasporic literature which involves the theme of a homeland, a place from where displacement took place and narratives of tough journeys undertaken because of the economic compulsions. The word diaspora came from Greek words 'dia' and 'speirein', etymologically means 'dispersal' and which involves two cultures and two countries are embedded in the migrant's mind, side-by-side.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the postmodernists. Postmodernism has developed and determined in the Indian novels by the novelists, especially Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh belongs to the International School of writing which deals successfully with the modern world with the post-colonial ethos without sacrificing the old histories of the lands. Ghosh blends fiction and fact perfectly with magical realism. Ghosh weaves the magical realistic plots with the themes of postmodernism. The Indian diasporic history can be broadly divided into three major phases based on the motive of their migration. The first phase started during the colonial time, particularly in the later half of the 19th century. During that time, many of the uneducated Indian indentured labours left their homeland to work in the sugar, rubber and teak plantations of the British colonies. In the mid-20th century, the second phase of migration took place. In this phase, the educated Indians started moving towards the developed nations, especially to the West for their economic development, and educational prospects. The third phase of migration occurred in the beginning of the 21st century when many of the Indians including the educated as well as the uneducated went to the developed nations in search of employment and earning. The Indian diasporic writers from all over the world started focusing on their homeland, the issue of migration and its effects, in their writings. For the Indian diasporic writers, it is India or the memories of India that become the materials to most of their literary expressions. Some of the important writers who are concerned with their homeland and the diasporic subjects in their writings are V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie,

Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai and Anita Desai.

The diasporic literature acts as a bridge between two different cultures as it commonly deals with the memories of home and the experience of the immigrants in a host country with their native culture. Thus this literature became an extended form of home return; many of the diasporic writers looking back at their homeland, its culture and its other aspects through their writings. Among them Amitav Ghosh is one of the important diasporic writers who captures all the consciousness of diasporic community in his writings. His approach towards the movement of migration in all his novels was unique. He never directed his characters towards the loss on the foreign country instead he observed their experimental lives and gave a positive touch. His novels are always in search of the root cause of migration that never comes to view. He opened the past and re-examined every socio-political activity in order to expose its actual effect on common people and their migration. Ghosh's novels deal with the themes of political struggles and histories that caused the diaspora, memories of homeland, transculturation idea of oneness and faceless human plights. He was very conscious on blurring the borders that divide India from its sub-continent. He expressed his vision of oneness or idea of the utopian world in most of his novels. There was a precise depiction of the reality of each and every stage in the lives of migrants in Ghosh's novels. As an Indian diaspora living in America, he was able to capture the outer and inner experiences of the people joining the exodus of migration and undergoing ineffable hardships. Both his fictional as well as non-fictional writings tend to project the restless moving across the continents, oceans and countries. Along with his universal ambition in his writings he never failed to offer a space to register the spirit of his homeland. Ghosh's one of the notable non-fictional works is *In an Antique Land*, history becomes alive in the pages of this chronicle. This work shows Ghosh as an anthropological historian to the literary world. He underlined some of the tragic events in the history of Asia, particularly India and the Middle East. It brought back the readers to the time of trade and commerce before the arrival of Vasco-de Gama in India. Ghosh recreated the forgotten period of history in this book to show how freely India was in collaboration with Arab and the Chinese World. By emphasising the

trust between a Tunisian Jewish merchant and his Indian helper. Ghosh displayed the bond of human relationship between the different parts of the world.

DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Diasporic consciousness expresses a person's diasporic experience and feelings. Almost all the diasporic communities face initial problems and sufferings, when they settle in a new land. Even though they try to adjust to the new environment, language, culture and the society, they will suffer from the psychological problem also. Alienation, identity crisis, loneliness, rootlessness, dislocation, nostalgia, cultural change, gender inequality, racism, homelessness etc... are Diasporic themes and problems included in Diasporic consciousness. Diasporic sensibility is not something permanent; it keeps on changing as time and place change. The evolution of the Diasporic sensibility is in terms of its continually changing consciousness and Expatriate writing is not only the nostalgic reminiscing of place but also of time. Time leads to the development of groups and sub-groups within the Diaspora. Diaspora is a journey towards self-realization, self-recognition, and self-knowledge and self-definition. Diasporic consciousness is chosen with special reference to novels of an independent writer, Amitav Ghosh, who won a prestigious place in Diasporic literature. Ghosh looks at Diasporic literature in a new perspective. Ghosh is one of the Trinity after V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie who popularized the Diaspora in Indian writing in English. He is an anthropologist, sociologist, journalist, novelist, essayist, travel-writer and teacher. Both his fictional and non-fictional narratives, move restlessly across countries, continents and oceans. Amitav Ghosh never writes the same type of novel but his novels are linked together by a number of common concerns. Travelling occurs in five of the history in different forms occurs in four of his works and the issues of hegemony are indicated by the wording of at least four of the titles. His novels are linked together by a number of common concerns like history sociology, travelling, anthropology, ethnography, society and historicity. Diasporic consciousness is analysed here with particular reference to his novels *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Glass Palace* (2000).

THE WORKS OF AMITAV GHOSH

Ghosh's first novel is *The Circle of Reason*, published in 1986. He was awarded France's Prix Medicis Award for this novel in 1990. It is a picaresque novel which concerns the adventures of Alu, a weaver from a small village near Calcutta, who leaves home to travel across the Indian Ocean to the oil town of al-Ghazira on the Persian Gulf and to African Sahara and then back to India. This novel has a Diasporic theme of sense of displacement, self-identity, migration, alienation, quest for home, rootlessness etc... Ghosh's fifth novel, *The Glass Palace*, in 2000, is a tale of three generations of a family. It is a historical novel. This novel won the international e-book award at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2001. It is a story about Rajkumar, who lands in Burma in rags but later becomes one of the richest timber traders in Burma. This novel also has many Diasporic themes such as self-identity, alienation, migration, quest for home, etc... Diasporic theory is an account of physical and psychological journey of an individual. Diasporic idea has come to find its apotheosis in the ambivalent, transitory, culturally contaminated, and *An Analysis on Life and Work in Selected Novels of Amitav Ghosh : Diasporic Consciousness* borderline figure of exile, caught in a historical limbo between home and the world. Travel implies impermanency to the experience of moving abroad. It can be called a temporary migration. The condition of migration brings out its role in the legitimization of otherness in postmodernist discourse. The migrants may suppress their recollections or sometimes passively allow them to be submerged; some of them may recollect the vision of the past while others keep uptodate with reality by means of extended return visits to their country of origin. The condition of migrancy is seen as a state of indeterminacy, of tentativeness, of in-between as Homi Bhabha would call it, The migrant is seen as the critical participant-observer into his/her own condition, enabling powerful insights to be made into the insider-outsider dichotomy and the real lived experiences of migration.

In The Glass Palace, Ghosh writes about the predicament of migrants. The novel covers the sad episode of the last king of Burma and his doomed family which is exiled to Ratnagiri in India. The family of kings and queens were left with no other alternative but to live among commoners. With the outbreak of a plague and less money to maintain servants there was no other alternative but to

allow the villagers to build a village around the compound of Outram House. Thus the deported Royal Family was forced to mingle with the commoners. This new way of life for the Royal Family may be summed up as follows:

The sense of exile results in a deep feeling of loss, ache, separation, yearning for recuperation and restoration. Migration proves to be a curse for these people while the same migration proves to be a blessing for Rajkumar, a face of colonizer in the guise of the colonized. Rajkumar succeeds in getting a major teak contract to a railway company. In the case of Rajkumar, migration transforms his character as he rises from coolie to a timber merchant. (*The Glass Palace*, 41)

Migration becomes an important theme of his novel as each journey serves to impact the identity of the traveller or the migrant.

DIASPORIC LONGINGS

Diasporic condition is the state in which longings and yearnings of the migrant are expressed. The concept of Diaspora stands steadfast in its claims towards the inevitability of nostalgia. Nostalgia has always been a useful compensatory tool to construct an alternative historical reality created by the images of the golden past, especially when there is discontent with the present socio-economic situation in any culture. Amitav Ghosh's fiction is expressive of an urge to find a context in which the characters try to transform the meaningless routine of life into a sensuous construct. The nostalgic sentiment comes handy to Ghosh to fill the narrative gaps that inevitably arise in the novel. In *The Glass Palace*, Rajkumar expressed his longing to return home. Throughout his life he yearned for one or the other thing. And when he was compelled to live in India he strived for the place he considered to be his homeland i.e. Burma. He admitted his granddaughter, Jaya that "for him, the Ganges could never be the same as the Irrawaddy" (73). His longings and yearnings do not end in his life span; it ends only with the end of his life. In *The Circle of Reason*, all the characters in the novel serve the purpose of highlighting the

nature of experiences of a migrant characterized by nostalgia and alienation. Alu took India with him to the countries and places he eventually calls home, intertwining his past with his present. He encountered the memories of his youth. Ghosh's writings replicate the current concern with the porosity of cultural boundaries. The characters in Ghosh's novels cross from within and beyond its borders. They do not dwell in distinct cultures but travel in cultural spaces that flow across borders. In *The Glass Palace*, the moment of Rajkumar, the eleven year old Indian's presence in Mandalay, the ancient walled city by the Irrawaddy River and seat of Burmese royalty, amidst the booming of English guns and the imminent imperialist threat is the first of the many indicators of the transfer of power and the transition in cultural positions. In *The Circle of Reason*, the story concerns the picaresque adventures of the protagonist Alu. It is also an allegory about the destruction of traditional village life by the modernizing influx of western culture, and the subsequent displacement of non-European peoples by imperialism. The multiculturalism of Lalpukur can also be seen as a mixed culture of Bruce Lee and Hindi movies, schools of kung fu, language mixed up with Noakhali, Burmese, and West Bengal accent, as Ghosh writes "the village is churning like cement in a grinder" (*The Circle of Reason*, 53). For each aspect of Lalpukur culture authenticates Diasporic movement from their different historical movements.

DIASPORIC TOUCH IN THE NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh, Srilanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria. His novels are *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies*, *The Ibis Trilogy*. *The Circle of Reason* was awarded in 1990. *The Shadow Lines* won Sahitya Akademi award and Ananda Puraskar award. *The Calcutta Chromosome* won the Arthur. Clarke award for 1997 and *The Glass Palace* won the International e-Book Award in 2001. *The Hungry Tide* was awarded the Crossword Book Prize in 2005. *The Shadow Lines* -by Amitav Ghosh explores the political and economic growth of India through the lives of two families, Bengali and English. This novel captures perspective of time and events that bring people together and hold them apart. The novel has an unnamed narrator relating the story of his experience and his uncle Tridib's experiences. Tridib is

considered to be the protagonist of the novel. Ghosh's novel is a useful resource to study both the challenges of diaspora as well as the strategies of negotiation. The politics of negotiation determines the multi-layered spectrum of responses to the diasporic space, and varied parameters exist in order to study these negotiations. In this novel Ghosh explains the sufferings of Tridib through the unnamed narrator. The distance draws him even closer and the homeland is elevated to a higher pedestal. He uses personal stories to shed light on the social, political and historical events. The characters keep turning back to the homeland-its sacredness, rituals, culture, and thus adopt various families' symbols to help them freeze the image of the homeland in their being. This novel is considered to be a successful novel which stands for its powerful imagination. Both Tridib and narrator are good with their dominant imagination.

INDIANNES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVELS

The writings of people who migrated to new lands are classified as diasporic literature. The thread of similarity runs these diasporic writers with their continuous involvement in representing their homeland in their writings. No doubt they all have the idea of home in their writings, but the concern and the perception on homeland felt by every one of the diasporic writers is somehow different. This variation can be observed through the analysis of how the home is perceived by the diaspora writers and the different generations of diasporas. The creative writings forming a part of diasporas document the shared image of homeland and the memories of it. These memories of homeland are sometimes the writers' own experience of the past but in many cases they are the experiences narrated to them by their ancestors.

As a diaspora writer he not only represents the migrants' lives in his novels but also articulates his own diasporic consciousness in his writings. There are many different ways for diasporas to look back at their homelands; among those Ghosh glanced at his homeland and its spirit by writing it in his novels. His novels in all aspects reflect his closeness towards his motherland. Indian elements in his novels have drawn the attention of many conscious readers and critics. Simultaneously, his practice of using Indian loan words in English also lends importance to the aspect of its Indianness to some extent.

Ghosh's adoption of many Indian words and terms into English as well as use of many Bengali expressions in his texts thus indicate how the spirit of India is interwoven with the content of his texts.

CONCLUSION

Indian writing in English has stamped its eminence by mixing up modernity and tradition in the production of art. Furthermore, the oral transmission of literary Indian works gained ground slowly. It formed an indelible mark in the heart and mind of the lovers of art. Amitav Ghosh is one of the postmodernists. Ghosh is immensely affected by the cultural and political milieu of post independent nation. Ghosh weaves the magical realistic plot along with postmodern background. Postcolonial migration to the foreign nation is yet another trait of postmodernism. Irony plays an important role in the postmodern fiction. Ghosh is very careful in using the vernacular transcriptions and English. Ghosh improves a rich and conscious tradition in Indian English fiction, a tradition which includes ShashiDeshpande and R.K. Narayan. In Amitav Ghosh's novels, *The Glass Palace*, *River of Smoke* and *Sea of Poppies*, the post-colonialism, postmodern traits and the treatment of diaspora are obviously present. Ghosh was a prolific Indian Bengali writer who belonged to the Diasporic community. All his novels are influenced by the effect of loneliness. The immigration and alienation as a fact holds a great place in Diasporic writings. All his novels explores the sense of nostalgia. The haunting effect of losing homeland is considered to be the main aspect of diasporic writings. The dislocation in the characters explains the great sense of diasporic sufferings.

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