

Multiculturalism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and *In an Antique Land*

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Abstract. Multiculturalism is a liberal ideology that embraces cultural and ethnic diversity within social, political, and economic frameworks. In a multicultural society, specific groups and their cultural expressions receive official recognition, protection, and resources. Recently, terms like plural society or cosmopolitan society have been supplanted by multicultural society. This concept is a response to the post-modernist challenge against state legitimacy and the dominance of a single culture in advanced capitalist countries. Emerging in the late twentieth century, multiculturalism became a significant literary, academic, and socio-political movement, influencing fields such as literature, art, media, education, and social and legal policy. In a multicultural society, distinct identities are preserved and contribute to overall development. Diaspora literature often reflects multicultural themes. Amitav Ghosh, a notable author, has elevated Diaspora literature by intricately weaving the political, historical, and social facets of India into his narratives. His works are deeply rooted in history and explore complex human relationships. The central characters in Ghosh's novels are often travellers, with migration playing a pivotal role. These characters grapple with the emotional trauma of displacement and nostalgia but eventually find ways to adapt to their new environments, embracing and celebrating their own cultures. Ghosh's narratives suggest that cultural boundaries have expanded, rather than shifted, creating new spaces for home cultures. Understanding an author is essential to fully grasping their fiction. In Ghosh's case, his intricate portrayal of multicultural experiences and the nuances of migration underscore the broader themes of adaptation and cultural integration, making his work a testament to the evolving dynamics of multiculturalism.

Keywords : Diaspora; multiculturalism; migration; integration; adaptation.

Multiculturalism in *The Shadow Lines*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, published in 1988, explores the potential for creating a multicultural world. The novel illustrates how diasporic displacement can lead to a deeper understanding of

cosmopolitan culture. The unnamed narrator presents various cultural identities through the novel's main characters: his grandmother Tha'mma, his cousin Ila, and his uncles Tridib and Robi. Growing up in a bourgeois family in Calcutta, the narrator embodies the adaptability of a metropolitan and bilingual culture. His interactions with his cousin and uncles living overseas and his time in London for research contribute to his cosmopolitan outlook on issues of nation and culture.

One of the most influential figures in his life is his grandmother, Tha'mma, a fiercely independent modern woman who represents cultural identity. Despite her relocated identity, Tha'mma adapts to her present culture, though she experiences confusion due to the disparity between her birth identity and her current one. *The Shadow Lines* highlights the blending of various cultures, portraying a world where East and West intersect, and family ties persist. The novel showcases a modern attitude combined with Indian manners and Bengali culture in three forms: in Dhaka, Calcutta, and abroad. Ketaki Datta notes :

Amitav Ghosh brings the East and the West together on a platform of friendship, especially through characters like Tridib, May, the narrator, Ila Datta-Chaudhuri, Nick Price, and Mrs. Price. Here, sensitive issues like the Partition of Bengal underpin the themes of friendship, relationship rifts, and communal tension. Hidden truths are eventually revealed. (126)

Amid the backdrop of post-partition and Hindu-Muslim riots, Ghosh expresses his views through Tridib, who sees himself as a person without boundaries or borders, considering the world a home to diverse cultures. This perspective is influenced by his family's global experiences. Tridib's father was a diplomat, frequently abroad, while his brother Jatin worked for the U.N., living in Africa or Southeast Asia. This globetrotting background instilled in Tridib an early understanding of a multicultural society.

Tridib's links to the West are further established through his grandfather's connections, as described in the novel:

Tridib had been to London with his parents many years ago, when he was a boy...the Price family in West Hampstead were old friends of Tridib's family because Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawson, had lived in India during British rule and was friends with Tridib's grandfather, a judge in the Calcutta High Court. (98)

Tridib's perspective in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* can be compared to Manto's character in "Toba Tek Singh," as both characters share similar views on nationhood. Tridib, described as "a man without a country" (186), opposes borders and fences, considering them as mere illusions that separate cultures. He is fascinated by the idea of love and affection transcending these artificial boundaries, believing that one doesn't need a permanent place to belong.

Ila Datta Chaudhuri embodies a multicultural identity. Her father, Jatin Datta Chaudhuri, works as an economist for the United Nations, which requires him to move frequently between countries. Nivedita Majumdar aptly describes Ila as "a globetrotting, cosmopolitan activist for politically correct causes" (Majumdar, 248). Ila spends a significant part of her childhood and later her college years in London. Her upbringing across different cultures gives her a fragmented identity—part Indian, part British. This dual identity makes her feel out of place in both Indian and British cultural settings. Rajeshwari Sunder Ranjan notes, "Ila is the post-colonial cosmopolitan of the twentieth century... For Ila, too, there is no natural 'home'; she must find or create her own place in the world... lives in London because she wanted to be free, a freedom that is really rootlessness" (Ranjan, 289).

Ila experiences an identity crisis, constantly shifting as she moves from one place to another. Her foreignness attracts the narrator to her from childhood. Ila's identity is stuck in-between, belonging to neither place completely. Her diverse cultural background sets her apart from others. Ila's marriage to Nick, who comes from a different cultural background, represents a bond formed across cultural lines. However, their relationship is fraught with tension, as Nick seeks variety in his relationships, leading to Ila's suffering. Shweta Saxena explains, "Ila's illusion of a happy married life with Nick soon receives a jolt when she

gets to know that Nick invites a Martinique woman to their flat in her absence..." (34). Nick admits he likes "a bit of a variety; it's his way of travelling," reflecting his imperial attitude towards women and relationships.

In the novel, Ila and Tridib illustrate contrasting views on culture. Tridib advocates for a multicultural society, falling in love with a woman from across the sea. The story of Tristan, a hero "without a country," who loves a woman across the seas, mirrors Tridib's own beliefs and experiences. Thus, *The Shadow Lines* showcases the complexities of cultural identities and the possibilities of transcending boundaries to create a multicultural world.

Lydia Yaitsky notes, "At the heart of the novel is the enigmatic Tridib, Ghosh's twentieth-century reimagining of the Arthurian Knight Tristan, who profoundly influences the narrator's life and vision, teaching him to perceive the world multidimensionally through the power of imagination" (Yaitsky, 163). The romance between Tridib and May parallels the legendary love story of Tristan and Isolde, demonstrating an acceptance of love that transcends cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries. Tridib's devotion to May, a woman from another country, reflects a deep appreciation for multiculturalism.

Tridib is a philosophical character who believes that imagination can transport a person to various places. He holds that through reading and knowledge, one can travel beyond physical borders and seas, suggesting that the mind should not be confined. Tridib's influence on the narrator is profound, serving as a mentor who imparts a vision of the world that embraces multi-ethnicity. Tridib's teachings provide the narrator with the ability to imagine and accept diverse cultures.

Rituparna Roy explains, "Tridib is the narrator-protagonist's idol, a person with whom he completely identifies and whose life fascinates him to the point of obsession. The narrator's intensely imaginative inner life is, indeed, Tridib's enduring legacy." (33) As the narrator reflects in the novel, "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with." This legacy of imagination and acceptance of cultural diversity shapes the narrator's worldview, underscoring the novel's theme of multiculturalism and the transcendence of traditional boundaries.

The second part of the novel, *Coming Home*, explores the complex love-hate dynamics between different ethnic groups. On one hand, it depicts the cordial relationship between Ukil Babu and Khalil's family, as illustrated by the care Khalil and his family provide for Ukil Babu. On the other hand, it presents the tragic death of Tridib at the hands of an angry mob. The novel states, "Khalil and his family look after Ukilbabu," while also showing Jethamoshai, who initially was so orthodox that "he wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of his food." (47) However, the old man evolves into a more unconventional figure over time. Jethamoshai believes that nations like India and Pakistan are imaginary constructs, asserting that once a person begins their journey from one place to another, it continues indefinitely. In this way, Jethamoshai embraces the vibrancy of a heterogeneous society and chooses to stay in his birthplace.

The Shadow Lines presents a vision of multicultural imagination. Ghosh portrays a multicultural society through his central characters, offering a realistic and apt depiction of the blend of various cultures in India. The novel highlights people's simultaneous love for multiple cultures. Tridib stands as a beacon of multiculturalism, with his imagination and love extending across the sea, making him a citizen of the global village. His attachment to his roots keeps his imagination alive through the narrator's perspective.

Multiculturalism in *In an Antique Land*

In an Antique Land by Amitav Ghosh is an attempt to recover a specific fragment from the lost history of medieval times, exploring themes such as social and cultural change, alienation, and the challenges of understanding problems from another person's perspective. Ghosh emphasizes that cross-culturalism is achievable only when different cultures are open to each other, requiring patience and the courage to embrace the customs, rules, linguistic patterns, and dress codes of another culture.

Ghosh traces migration, cultural evolution, and hybridized history through the journey of a 12th-century Indian slave named Bomma, his Jewish master Ben Yiju, and their merchant associates, offering a mysterious glimpse into everyday life in contemporary rural Egypt. In his quest to learn more about Ben Yiju and Bomma's past, Ghosh relies on

historical sources to support his descriptions. The book recapitulates the story of an Indian slave who might otherwise have been lost to history.

Two Indians visit Egypt in this narrative: Ben Yiju, a Jewish trader originally from Tunisia who arrived in India around 1130 A.D., married a Nair woman, and bought Bomma, who traveled with him to Egypt; and Amitav Ghosh himself, who first came to Egypt in 1980 while pursuing his doctorate at Oxford. Ghosh traveled to Egypt to investigate the origins of the MS-H6 slave trade.

In an Antique Land by Amitav Ghosh can be seen as a travelogue, but it primarily focuses on themes such as cultural integration and hybridity. The novel weaves together narratives of travel, cultural blending, and gender dynamics, telling the story of Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave Bomma through the perspectives of Abraham's family, the Hindus and Muslims of India, and the Jews of Egypt. The chronological shifts in the novel are presented through accounts from the 12th century.

The author highlights the significance of hybridizing literary forms, illustrating how colonialism has influenced perspectives on the West and East. *In an Antique Land* also serves as an ethnographic travelogue, where Ghosh challenges the lingering imperial discourse in the postcolonial world, offering a nuanced critique of the cultural and historical interactions shaped by colonialism.

When a group grows, it becomes larger and stronger, seeking to establish dominance, particularly over weaker sections of society. If the weaker sections submit, they are integrated; if not, they are suppressed, oppressed, and labeled as untouchable, 'impure,' 'uncivilized,' and barbaric. Thus, the dominant group defines the culture of the weaker sections. In *In an Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh explores this dynamic between Egyptian and Indian cultures. He illustrates how Indian culture is often viewed through a colonial lens, despite India's superior economy, military, and infrastructure compared to Egypt. However, Indian cultural practices are perceived as impure.

Ghosh, as an Indian in Egyptian settlements, finds himself isolated and unable to counter the colonial narrative that portrays his culture as inferior. He critically examines the knowledge produced by structures of dominance, economic strategies, and imperialism, focusing on the ongoing impact of Western paradigms on India. He emphasizes

connections beyond colonial relationships, such as pre-colonial trade between the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula.

As a Bengali Hindu in an Egyptian village, Ghosh parallels his experiences with those of Abraham Ben Yiju, a 12th-century Jewish trader from Tunisia who settled on the Malabar coast, married a Nair woman named Ashu, and befriended a low-caste slave, Bomma. This comparison highlights the historical and ongoing prejudices shaping relationships between different cultures. Despite formal independence, India and Egypt remain mentally bound to the West. Ghosh delves into the life of the Jewish slave and reflects on his experiences in Nashawy, a small Egyptian village. He discovers a strong social affinity between these two previously colonized nations. The book narrates his travels between Egypt and India, emphasizing that while they might be considered 'Third World' today, both nations are ancient lands with advanced civilizations in their long histories.

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