

POSTMODERN TRAITS IN THE NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH

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Indian writing in English has stamped its greatness by mixing up tradition and modernity in the production of art. At the outset, the oral transmission of Indian literary works gained ground gradually. It created an indelible mark in the mind and heart of the lovers of art. The interest in literature lit the burning thirst of the writers which turned their energy and technique to innovate new form and style of writing.

Earlier novels projected India's heritage, tradition, cultural past and moral values. But a remarkable change can be noticed in the novels published after the First World War, which is called, modernism. The novels written in the late 20th century, especially after the Second World War, are considered postmodern novels. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee and Amitav Ghosh are the makers of new pattern in writing novels with post-modern thoughts and emotions.

Amitav Ghosh is one among the postmodernists. He is immensely influenced by the political and cultural milieu of post independent India. Being a social anthropologist and having the opportunity of visiting alien lands, he comments on the present scenario the world is passing through in his novels. Cultural fragmentation, colonial and neo-colonial power structures, cultural degeneration, the materialistic offshoots of modern civilization, dying of human relationships, blending of facts and fantasy, search for love and security, diasporas, etc... are the major preoccupations in the writings of Amitav Ghosh.

The elemental traits of post-modernism are obviously present in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. As per postmodernists, national boundaries are a hindrance to human communication. They believe that Nationalism causes wars. So, post-modernists speak in favour of globalization. Amitav Ghosh's novels centre around multiracial and multiethnic issues; as a wandering cosmopolitan he roves around and weaves them with his narrative beauty. In The Shadow Lines, Amitav Ghosh makes the East and West meet on a pedestal of friendship, especially through the characters like Tridib, May, Nice Prince etc., He stresses more on the globalization rather than nationalization. In The Glass Palace, the story of half-bred Rajkumar revolves around Burma, Myanmar and India. He travels round many places freely and gains profit. Unexpectedly, his happiness ends when his son is killed by Japanese bomb blast. The reason for this calamity is fighting for national boundaries.

Amitav Ghosh has been credited for successfully mastering the genre known as 'magical realism' which was largely developed in India by Salman Rushdie and in South America by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Ghosh is seen as "belonging to this international school of writing which successfully deals with the post-colonial ethos of the modern world without sacrificing the ancient histories of separate lands." (Anita Desai, 1986:149) Like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh perfectly blends fact and fiction with magical realism. He reconceptualizes society and history. He is so scientific in the collection of material, semiotic in the organization of material, so creative in the formation of fictionalized history.

Amitav Ghosh weaves his magical realistic plot with postmodern themes. Self-reflexivity and confessionality characterize fictional works of Amitav Ghosh. Displacement has been a central process in his fictional writings; departure and arrivals have a permanent symbolic relevance in his narrative structure. Post modernism gives voice to insecurities, disorientation and fragmentation. Most of his novels deal with insecurities in the existence of humanity, which is one of the postmodern traits. In The Glass Palace, the havoc caused by Japanese invasion in Burma and its effect on the Army officers and people -- a sense of dejection that deals with so much human tragedy, wars, deaths, devastation and dislocation (Meenakshi Mukherjee, p.153) – has been penned. In The Shadow Lines, Tridib sacrificed his life in the act of rescuing May from Muslim mobs in the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka. Pankaj Mishra describes Amitav Ghosh in the New York times, as one of few postcolonial writers, “to have expressed in his work a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of colonized people as they figure out their place in the world”.

Postmodernism rejects western values and beliefs as only a small part of the human experience and rejects such ideas, beliefs, culture and norms of the western. In The Hungry Tide, Ghosh routes the debate on eco-environment and cultural issues through the intrusion of the West into East. The Circle of Reason is 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. In An Antique Land, contemporary political tensions and communal rifts were portrayed.

Postcolonial migration is yet another trait of postmodernism. In The Hungry Tide, the theme of immigration, sometimes voluntary and sometimes forced, along with its bitter/sweet experiences, runs through most incidents in the core of the novel – the ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistani refugees who had run away from the Dandakaranya refugee camps to Marichjhampi as they felt that the latter region would provide them with familiar environs and therefore a better life. In Sea of Poppies, the indentured labourers and convicts are transported to the island of Mauritius on the ship Ibis where they suffer a lot. In The Glass Palace, Burmese Royal family, after the exile, lives an uncomfortable life in India. Rajkumar who piles heap of amount in Burma is forced to leave his home and business due to Japanese invasion.

Irony plays a vital role in the postmodern fiction. The writers treat the very subjects like World War II, communal riot, etc. from a distant position and choose to depict their histories ironically and humorously. In The Glass Palace, Amitav Ghosh weaves the characters of Queen Supayalat and Arjun with a tinge of irony. Queen Supayalat, even after being captured by the British forces, does not lose her pomp throughout the novel. The portraiture of the Queen is too ironic. Arjun, basically an Indian, is completely influenced by the western ideology. He imitates the West in his dressing sense and food habit. He is not aware of the fact that he is used as instrumental to inflict pain on his own people.

Temporal distortion is a literary technique that uses a nonlinear timeline. The author may jump forwards or backwards in time. In The Glass Palace, Amitav Ghosh uses nonlinear timeline. The memory links the past to the present and many of the characters. It helps to recreate a magical world. In The Hungry Tide, he shuttles between the Marichjhampi incident from Nirmal's point of view and the present day travels of Piya Roy, Kanai and Fokir. This time-travel creates an intricacy of sub-topics and plots. In his other novels, characters move round a

gyre of timelessness, yielding helplessly to the chasm in human relations and other postmodern perturbations.

The narrative style of Amitav Ghosh is typically postmodern. In The Shadow Lines, the narrative is simple. It flows smoothly, back and forth between times, places and characters. His prose in The Shadow Lines is so evocative and realistic written effortlessly as well as enigmatically with a blend of fiction and non-fiction. Throughout The Glass Palace, Ghosh uses one end to signal the beginning of another so that at one level, nothing changes but yet everything does. There is a strong suggestion of Buddhist metaphysics in his technique. Life, death, success and failure come in cycles and Ghosh uses the conceit of a pair of binoculars early in The Glass Palace to sensitize the reading in this perspective. Being a postmodernist, he makes use of very simple language to give clarity to the readers. Many Indians writing in English experiment with the language to suit their story. Ghosh also does it in The Hungry Tide using Bangla words like mohona, bhata and others, interweaving them with local myths like that of Bon Bibi and her brother Shaj Jangali, the presiding deities of the region. Though The Glass Palace and The Hungry Tide have their share of non-English lexical items, Sea of poppies in numerous places piles up the Indian (Bengali or Bhojpuri) or lascar-pidgin terms to the point where some readers might to some extent begin to get confused.

For Amitav Ghosh, language in the process of the production of art attains the status of diasporic representation – voicing him and thousands of other uprooted individuals. Language embodies the attempt to create family that has broken and dispersed in the mire of confused identity. Ghosh acknowledges it in The Shadow lines:-

You see, in our family we don't know whether we're coming or going – it's all my grand mother's fault. But of course, the fault was n't hers at all: it lay in the language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. (The Shadow Lines, 153)

This is a language that Ghosh believes in and this kind of language he tries to create in his work.

Postmodernists reject elaborate formal aesthetics in favour of minimalist designs. Amitav Ghosh does not give any significance for picturesque description and ornamental use of language. Tabish khair comments on this as

Ghosh is very careful in his use of English and vernacular transcriptions. He develops a conscious and rich tradition in Indian English fiction, a tradition that includes R.K. Narayan and Shashi Deshpande. The attempt is not to stage Indian Englishes. Ghosh avoids the aestheticisation of language. (p.108)

Postmodernists defend the cause of feminists. Uma, Amitav Ghosh's character, is a perfect example of this. Uma is a break from the traditional women characters. She is a political activist who travels around the country to dissipate the patriotic spirits.

Blurring of genres, one of the postmodern traits, can be witnessed in the writings of Amitav Ghosh. He disfigures by blending many genres. Girish Karnad rightly said about him, “ Ghosh uses to great effect a matrix of multiple points of view in which memory, mythology and

history freely interpenetrate A delight to read” (Indian Express). The Glass palace is not only a novel but also romance, narrative fiction, adventure fiction, and historical fiction. He combines all the elements of a novel to create fragmentation. Ghosh uses the romantic genre to chart the characters who reflect on the history of colonialism in Burma and the formation of the present Myanmar nation. It is also a narrative fiction that employs a complex spiral narrative structure to texture many characters’ identities and experiences in the world where we live in. It can be read in historical point of view, since it is portraiture of history and document of nation. Ghosh invents the third person narrator who relates a story in a spiral fashion that fictionalizes and makes real historical subject and event. The Calcutta Chromosome (1995) is “not only a medical thriller but also a Victorian ghost story, a scientific quest, a unique mixture of a ‘whodunit thriller’, and a poltergeist tale”. (Sudeep Sen,p.222)

To sum up, postmodernism, not having concrete definition yet, is a blooming and ongoing area. Even if it has its own features, it is very difficult to concretize these solid elements. Thus, this paper remains an attempt to apply the post-modern theory in Amitav Ghosh’s novels.

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