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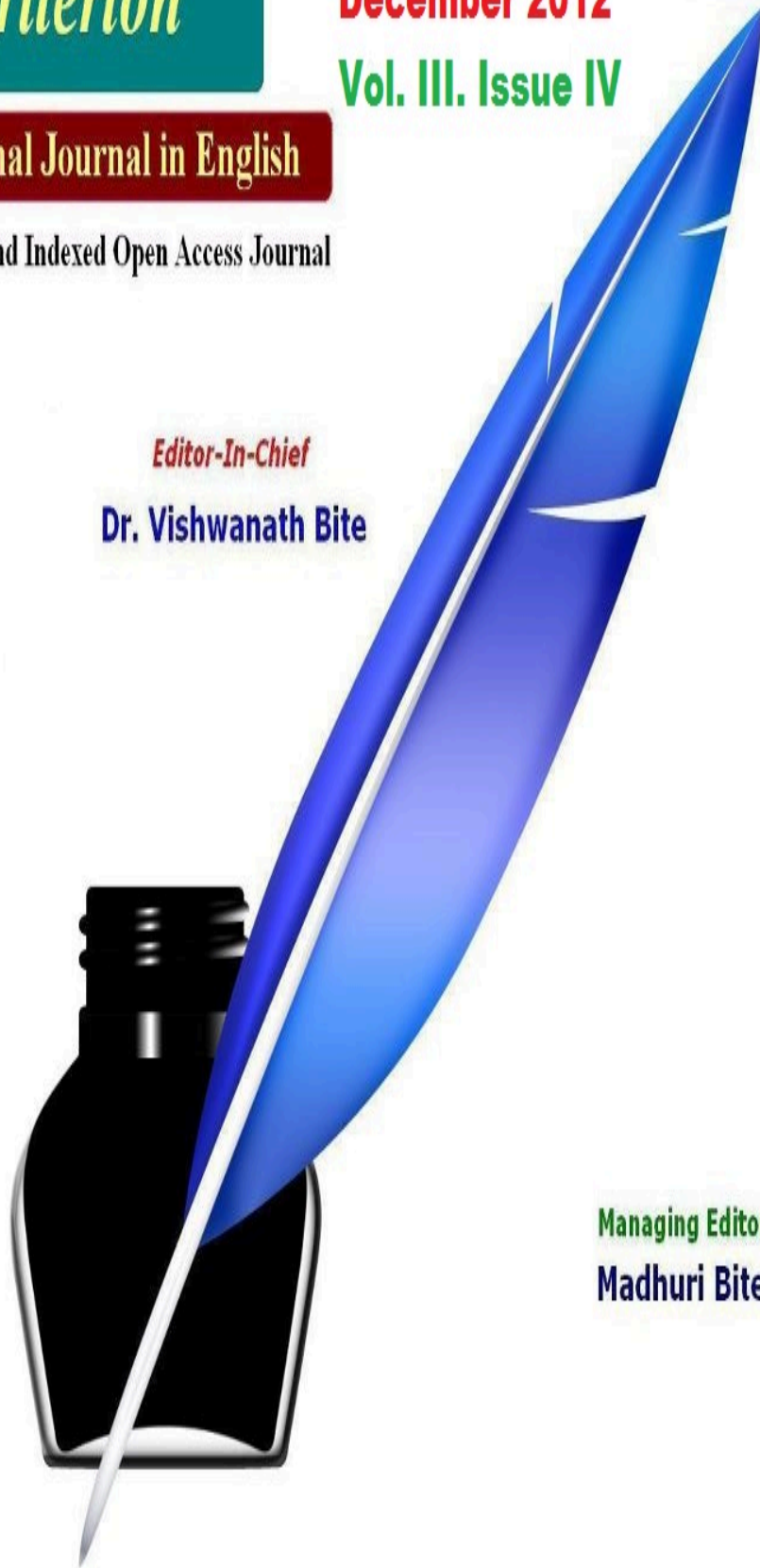
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Problems of Cultural Plurality in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction

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The emergence of a nationalist ideology and its eventual hegemony in the colonies was a by-product of colonization and the popularisation of scientific temper and bourgeois liberal ideology it triggers. The nationalist ideology betrays a sort of ambivalence, when it confronts the colonial political dominance, mainly because of its association with colonial ideology. Both colonialism and nationalism draw inspiration from modernism. The paradoxical situation, defining the postcolonial period is precipitated by the thin borderline that separates the colonizer and the colonized. This situation gives rise to a cultural fluidity which Homi K. Bhabha aptly calls an "in between" position – a cultural space that is neither inside nor outside the colonial ideology. The ambivalent attitude operating as an inherent contradiction in the nationalist project has its genesis in the colonial discourse itself. Exploring this intrinsic complexity Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write :

In order to maintain authority over the 'other' in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate self, yet at the same time it must maintain sufficient identity with the 'other' to valorize control over it. The 'other' can, of course, only be constructed out of the archive of 'the self', yet the self must also articulate the other as inescapably different. Otherness can thus only be produced by a continual process of what Bhabha calls 'repetition and displacement' and this instigates an ambivalence at the very site of imperial authority and control. (*Empire* 103).

The liberationist agenda of nationalism is based on the process of dismantling of the colonial apparatus and the construction of a new social order. But the emancipatory project and revolutionary fervour in nationalist ideology have lost the cutting edge because of inherent infirmities which call for compromises. In its anticolonial struggle, the nationalist ideology seeks to put in place a new social order that represents the aspirations of the dominant political group engaged in the anticolonial struggle and in the process formulates its own hegemonic project displacing the existing pluralities of the indigenous society. Thus nationalism, in effect becomes the site for the construction of a new hegemonic discourse, "which replicated the old colonial structures in new terms" (Said *Culture* 269). Though it assimilated modern rational ideas and tried to modernize the customs and attitudes, it found it difficult to accommodate the orthodox feudal forces or withstand the pressure from dominant structures. The surviving spirit of colonial hegemony caused degeneration in the socio-cultural sphere which along with the tormenting experiences of cultural displacement generates an irredeemable sense of loss and disillusionment among the postcolonial individuals. Ashcroft and his co-authors explain this overwhelming sense of loss thus :

A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation or 'voluntary' removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model (*Empire* 9).

The ambivalence in the colonized subject leading to a search for identity is the outcome of the colonial occupancy. Homi K. Bhabha sees "The colonial presence as always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (*Location* 107). This ambivalence is the driving force behind the quest for identity among the postcolonial subjects. Moreover, the disillusionment is so potent as to put existence at stake where everyone has to become part of the quest to invent one's real identity.

Amitav Ghosh weaves his fictional patterns around the material conditions of postcolonial societies shaped by the colonial process, the struggle for liberation and the brutalising degenerate socio-political developments that followed independence. New nation states and national boundaries emerged as a result of struggle for freedom in different parts of the world. But the disquieting reality that takes the sheen off the positive result of the historical struggle for liberation is the birth of homeless wanderers. These people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, and their condition articulates the tensions, irresolution and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.

Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1993) presents his urge to rediscover the syncretism and hybridity that prevailed in the precolonial cultures through the fictional exploration of the cultural implications and possibilities in the Egypt-India relationship. Ghosh's personal voice seems to be reverberating through the scholar-teacher Ustaz Sabry who says :

Our countries were very similar for India, like Egypt, was largely an agricultural nation, and the majority of its people lived in villages, like the Egyptian Fellaheen and ploughed their land with cattle. Our countries were poor, for they had both been ransacked by imperialists, and now they were both trying in similar ways, to cope with poverty and all other problems that had been bequeathed to them by their troubled histories. It was a difficult task and our two countries had always supported each other in the past. (*IAL* 134)

There is a psychologically validated theoretical concept that travels provide tremendous release from the monotony and morbidity of the angst and anguishes of existential politics. A sort of levity and lightness of being is experienced by the traveller who enjoys "perfect liberty to think, feel, do just as one pleases" (Seth 33).

In Amitav Ghosh's fictional world journeys are not represented merely as an impassive movement through space, but rather as an expression of the urgent desire for discovery and change. It is the metaphor of man's primordial quest to expand his awareness into realisation. Ghosh presents himself as a traveller interested in men, places and scenery in *In an Antique Land*. Journey forms the core of the narrative in *In an*

Antique Land, which is essentially a travel story. It is built upon the scholastic search into the life and times of Bomma, the Indian slave who worked as a business representative in Eden for a Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju. What turns this travelogue into a colourful and warmly human picture of people and places, both medieval and modern is Ghosh's basic interest in men and manners, places and history. Driven by inquisitiveness, the narrator turns to the small villages of Lataifa and Nashaury and to the Mangalore Coast in Malabar showing the similarity of sociocultural tradition of India and Egypt. *In an Antique Land* undertakes the exploration of trade relations and socio cultural practices of ancient civilizations, and also exploits the possibilities of the practice of slavery as a spiritual metaphor. It is an emblem of the quest of the devotee for God.

Conceived against the backdrop of the civil-strife in post-partition East Bengal and the riot rent Calcutta, the fictive world of *The Shadow Lines* emanates from a crucial point of intersection in the evolution and growth of the narrator and the nation. Public happenings and personal lives are amalgamated with locales shifting and merging between Calcutta, Dhaka and London. Focusing on the story of three generations of the narrator's family spread over the Indian and the British subcontinents, the novel culminates in a search for the vital concerns to keep up the strength and sanity of contemporary society. In the family saga, on the one hand is the narrator's household consisting of his parents and his grandmother and on the other are the grandmother's younger sister Mayadebi, her husband who is a diplomat and their three sons Jatin, Tridib and Robi. The narrator's family is settled in Calcutta while Mayadebi's except for Tridib keeps on roaming the world. Proximity breeds intimate friendship between Tridib and the narrator, with the latter being benefited by the rich mnemonic fund the former imparts to him. The resourceful and imaginative Tridib spurs the narrator to experience the creative powers of memory and imagination. Thus at a very early age itself the narrator becomes an imaginative traveller of distant locations, beyond the limits of his mind and experience. He is enamoured of Tridib who had propelled him to "imagine the sloping roofs of Colombo" (*TSL* 31) and had said "we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly" (*TSL* 31). These imaginative experiences cleanse him of the narrow nationalism fostered and promoted by his grandmother. Having severed off the particularity of his origin, the narrator's psyche absorbs cross-cultural interactions. He contrasts the cross-cultural perspectives of Ila and Tridib :

I tried to tell her, but neither then nor later did I even succeed in explaining to her that I could not forget because Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib's room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta. I used to listen to her talking sometimes with her father and grandfather about cafes in the Plaza Mayor in Madrid or the crispness of the air in Cuzeo, and I could see that those names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridib had pointed them out to me on his tattered old Bartholomew's Atlas, had for her familiarity no less dull than the Lake had for me and my friends; the same tired intimacy [...]
(*TSL* 20).

An element of cultural diversity is introduced into the fictional fabric with the friendship between Prices in London and Tridib's family established by the meeting of

Mrs. Price's father Lionel Tresawsen with Tridib's grandfather Chandrasekhara Dutta Chaudhury. Tridib's first meeting with May Price was in London when she was an infant. But later a romantic relationship develops between them through correspondence transcending the shadow-lines of national and cultural boundary. The strong relationship between Tridib and May and the abiding intimacy between their families at a time when their respective home countries were in an antagonistic relationship, is employed by Ghosh as a quest inherent in human psyche for seeking invisible links ranging across the realities of nationality, cultural segregation and racial discrimination. By celebrating this synthesis of culturally diverse personnel brought together by the all pervasive love and empathy, Amitav Ghosh challenges the validity of geographical boundaries in the contemporary situation.

The span of history between 1962 when the narrator first met May Price in Calcutta on the Price's visit to Mayadebi's ancestral home and 1979 when he again met her in London is the effective background of the novel. Against this background, Amitav Ghosh evokes cultural dislocations and anxieties in interpreting the issues of ruptured nationalities in close and telling encounters. The trauma of emotional rupture and stifled human relations is caught alive in the novel along with the damaging potential of the mental blockade instilled by politics.

The all engrossing fear he witnesses everywhere seems to reduce man to nothingness. Ghosh says :

It is like the fear of the victims of an earthquake, of people who have lost faith in the stillness of the earth. And yet it is not the same. It is without analogy, for it is not comparable to the fear of nature, which is the most universal of human fears. Nor to the fear of the violence of the State, which is the commonest of the modern fears. It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. (*TSL* 204).

With these fears and anxieties, deeply ingrained, the fictional world of *The Shadow Lines* provides a paradigm of the contemporary consciousness in search of self-identity and self-knowledge. The characters of this novel, like the narrator, Tridib, Ila, May and the grandmother who are incessantly being tormented by the stifled thoughts of the past, display a multiplicity of voices involving a variety of discourses and language to recount their experiences which itself is a search for meaning and reason. Girish Karnad is all praise for this narrative technique while commenting on the episode of the grandmother in *The Shadow Lines* being regarded a foreigner to Dhaka, her birthplace, after the partition. In his review "World within World", Karnad writes:

The grandmother's visit to the ancestral home along with Tridib and his English girl friend is surely one of the most memorable scenes in Indian fiction. Past and future meet across religions, political and cultural barriers in a confusion of emotions, ideals, intentions and acts leading to shattering climax. (3).

The narrator-protagonist turns inwards in search of meaning out of the prevailing human predicament which is irrational and absurd. The whole novel can be looked upon as the narrator's quest to explore his own consciousness and to identify the moral and intellectual milieu which have generated it. The explorative quest he undertakes is

unaffected by preconceptions or predetermined categories and along with his own psyche it surveys those whom he feels as extensions of his own self.

Tridib is no less than the mirror image of the narrator. He is the protagonist's initiator and guide in the quest for identity. Overtly silent though he is, Tridib never shirks from action at the proper instant. He insists on the necessity to see the world through one's own imagination lest one should be forced to accept another's invention. The protagonist recognizes his influence on him thus : "Tridib has given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with" (*TSL* 20). The story of the growing up of a boy who lives in the shadow of the man he idolizes is the story of the individual self imbibed into public and private experiences. As the novel progresses, he transcends the rooted and well defined status of an individual to get identified with the depersonalised contemporary consciousness. Ghosh makes the character himself admit : "I knew that a part of my life as a human being had ceased, that I no longer existed but as a chronicle" (*TSL* 112).

This depersonalised contemporary consciousness is the product of postcolonial disillusionment seen in countries with a colonial history. The confrontation between the oppressor and the oppressed invariably prevailing human predicament which is irrational and absurd. The whole novel can be looked upon as the narrator's quest to explore his own consciousness and to identify the moral and intellectual milieu which have generated it. The explorative quest he undertakes is unaffected by preconceptions or predetermined categories and along with his own psyche it surveys those whom he feels as extensions of his own self.

The protagonists of Ghosh's novels, from *The Circle of Reason* to *The Glass Palace* are portrayed to experience their past as discursively separate and opposed to the present. These innocent victims of the social and political unrest created by the whirlwinds of colonialism and its aftermath, share almost the same emotional phenomenon in spite of changes in their time and milieu. As a result, alienation remains a constant factor throughout their life, incessantly driving them to quests for their real identity. The subversive quests portrayed in the novels celebrate the ultimate triumph of the native spirit, proclaiming the demarginalisation of the subaltern.

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