

Amitav Ghosh's Selected Novels and Exploration of 20th Century

Biman Mondal
West Bengal.

The history of twentieth century literature is often nowadays written in two broad categories: one was Modernism and the other Postmodernism. They were the two large periods of the 20th century. Like modernist literature, postmodern literature is part of socio-cultural and historical development and it can be seen as a definite way of a depiction of the postmodern life and culture. It shows a crisis of identity of human being such as ethnic, sexual, social and cultural and its struggle for legitimization in a hypocritical society. This theme treated by other authors before, but it started to be treated much more systematically after the Civil Right Movement in the USA in the 1960's (Martin Luther King, ethnic and sexual/homosexual and lesbian minority rights), the Vietnam and student protests in Europe and the USA. While this movement led to democratization of the public life, more prerogatives, education and publishing opportunities for minorities in the Western countries, the East and Central European countries became much more authoritarian under the influence and control of the USSR, especially between the 1950's – 1980's. With a more employment, educational and public opportunities to find a place in the society, new authors representing minority ethnic in addition to quite well-established Jewish and Black-American authors, especially Native-American, Asian-American and Hispanic-American authors, gender (female), sexual (gay, lesbian) started to gain a prominent position in American literature, for example. Later similar development could be observed in British, Australian and Canadian literature in which the authors coming from different cultural background, usually former British colonies, started to appear Ben Okri, Kasugio Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, for example, in British fiction; or the representatives of formerly oppressed original inhabitants such as Collin Johnson, Kath Walker, Sam Watson and Kim Scott in Australian literature). In literary theory and criticism, it was especially the emergence of feminist and post-colonial theories which was a result of this development. At the same time, literatures in English, especially American literature, depicted a growing awareness of the negative effects of industrialization and commercialization of public life leading to the ecological crisis and consumerism. These authors expressed negative attitudes to the Western civilization and emphasized oriental vision and understanding of the world. We find the conflict between the Modernism and Postmodernism .A) When Modernism places faith in the ideas, values, beliefs, culture and norms of the West, Postmodernism rejects Western values and beliefs as only a small part of the human experience and often rejects such ideas, beliefs, culture and norms. B)Even Modernism tries to expose profound truths of experience and life but Postmodernism fears of the word 'profound', for such ideas are based on specific Western value system. C) When Modernism attempts to reveal depth and inner meaning beneath the surface of objects and events, Postmodernism likes to live on the exterior image and avoids drawing conclusion or suggestion and underlying meaning linked with the interior objects and events .D) When Modernism concentrate on central themes and united vision in a particular piece of literature, Postmodernism sees human experience as unstable ambiguous, fragmented, discontinues etc. E) Modern writers control the reader's response to their works but the Postmodern gives the freedom the reader in giving the meaning. Moreover, postmodern fiction is far too diverse in style to be a genre. Nor is it a historical label, like 'Victorian fiction', as to speak of the late twentieth century as the postmodern 'period' would be to misrepresent a great many contemporary writers whose work cannot usefully be related to postmodernism. I would prefer to think of postmodern fiction as a particular 'aesthetic' – a

sensibility, a set of principles, or a value-system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Postmodernism in Indian English literature refers to the works of literature after 1980. If Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) marks modernism, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Nissim Ezekiel's *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) mark postmodernism in Indian English literature. In this book, Dr. Bijay Kumar Das has analysed Postmodern Indian English literature genre-wise Poetry, novel, short story, drama and autobiography. This is a critical history of Indian English literature in the postmodern period, meant for students, researchers as well as teachers who seek an introduction to it. Indian literature in English has become the great one with the combination of tradition and modernity in the production of art. At the beginning, the oral communication of Indian literary works gained ground gradually. It created a deep-seated mark in the mind and heart of the lovers who like art. The interest in literature motivated the writers which lead their energy and technique to innovate new form and style of writing in literature. We have seen that earlier novels actually projected India's heritage, tradition, cultural past and moral values before the First World War. But a noteworthy 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 greatly 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 of the world that is passing through in his novels. Through the detail study of the novels of Amitav Ghosh we find some post modern traits such as 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. Even they are the major preoccupations in the writings of Amitav Ghosh. The fundamental qualities of post-modernism are obviously present in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. As per postmodernists, national boundaries are a hindrance to human communication. They are globalised. They believe that Nationalism causes wars. So, post-modernists speak in favour of globalization. Amitav Ghosh's novels centre on 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. He gets a lot of ideas from people of the different nations. Unexpectedly, his happiness comes to end when his loving son is killed by Japanese bomb blast. The reason for this tragedy is fighting for national boundaries. Besides this, Amitav Ghosh has been recognized for successfully mastering a new genre known as 'magical realism' which means the invisible force on human life and it 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." Like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh perfectly blends fact and fiction with magical realism. He reconceptualises society and history. He is so scientific in the collection of material, semiotic in the organization of material and creative in the formation of fictionalized history. Amitav Ghosh weaves his magical realistic plot with postmodern themes in a perfect hand. 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. 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 – 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. 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 invasion 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 characteristic 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 touch 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. 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 my entire grandmother’s fault. But of course, the fault was not 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. 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. 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”. *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”. Finally we come to conclusion that Postmodernism can be seen to have a distinct character of its own. Literature has been influenced by literary criticism, there is an academic context for literature and the enrichment of forms will be immense. To sum up, from the analysis we come to know that postmodernism does not have the concrete definition and it is a flourishing and in progress area. Although it has its own features, it is very complicated to concretize these fixed elements. Thus, my paper will be an effort to apply the post-modern theory in selected novels of Amitav Ghosh.

Works Cited:

- Berry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2002. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Circle of Reason*. London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1986.
The Shadow Lines, Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 1988.
The Calcutta Chromosome. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 1996.
The Glass Palace. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2000.
The Hungry Tide. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2005.
Sea of Poppies. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2008.

Snipp-Walmsley, Chris. "Postmodernism." *An Oxford Guide: Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*. Oxford: Oxford U. Press. 2006. 405-426. Print.