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Tracing the Creative Journey of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

This article aims at tracing the creative journey of Amitav Ghosh, thereby justifying the claim that he is a transnational writer. Being a living writer at the peak of his creative output, Ghosh attracts the attention of research scholars and renowned critics throughout the world. The versatility of Ghosh is proved by the range of his works, which include fiction, non-fiction and essays. Also, an attempt is made in the article to depict the evolution of Indian Writing in English, in a nutshell and to highlight Ghosh's role in elevating its outreach to encompass world literature. Among his novels, *Ibis* trilogy has taken a considerable time of his writing career which indicates its importance in shaping his consciousness and even his career as a novelist. The impact of the *Ibis* trilogy on Ghosh is so powerful to the extent of making him consider the possibility of revisiting his characters in future.

Keywords: Consciousness, evolution, *Ibis* trilogy, transnational, versatility.

Introduction

“Like the opium that forms its subject, the narrative becomes increasingly powerful and addictive as it takes hold” (Chitra Sankaran, xii) writes William Darlymple showing his admiration for the narrative technique of Amitav Ghosh in his novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008). In fact, all the novels of Ghosh are the testimonies of his art of narration and powerful characterization. This paper attempts to trace the evolution of Ghosh as a world writer transcending the boundaries of nations. Attempting to trace the evolution of a writer's consciousness especially when he is at the peak of his creativity has its own limitations because of the unpredictable nature of his future works. Hence, this article does not give detailed biographical information of the writer and his works. Instead, the

focus is more on how his creative spirit gets shaped by the contemporary social and political climate. In an effort to create a space for him to facilitate a meeting point between anthropology and fiction, Ghosh often transcends the generic boundaries. It is evident from his novels that he is an international writer in its true sense, for his fictional and non-fictional narratives cannot be confined to a single nation. They, in fact, move across countries and even continents giving his works a transnational outlook.

Ghosh's works: A Panoramic View

Ghosh has written eight novels and three different anthologies of essays. Many of his novels are award winning ones. For instance, his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) which follows Indian characters from a Bengali village to an Egyptian town and later moves to an outpost in the Algerian Sahara, won him the 1990 *Prix Médicis Étrangère* Award. *The Shadow Lines* (1988) which traces the relationships between an Indian and a British family, won both Ananda Puraskar and Sahitya Akademi awards in 1990. Ghosh's medical thriller *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) was the winner of Arthur C. Clark Award in 1996. Similarly, *The Glass Palace* (2000), a saga of many families and their lives was given the Grand Prize for Fiction, Frankfurt eBook Award, 2001, while *The Hungry Tide* (2004) "a Conradian expedition, and a Forsterish collision between western assumptions and Indian reality, which throws in some Indiana Jones-style encounters with tigers and crocodiles", won the Crossword Book Award in 2005. But among all his novels the most notable ones are the *Ibis* Trilogy – of which the first instalment *Sea of Poppies* (2008) winner of Tagore Literature Award in 2012, was shortlisted for the 2008 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and *River of Smoke* (2011) was shortlisted for the 2011 Man Asia Literary Prize. Revealing Ghosh's ambitious attempt to remind his readers of the transformation of Hong Kong into a globally influential centre of enterprise, *Flood of Fire* was published in 2015. In addition to his fictional works, Ghosh also proved his mettle as a versatile writer by writing non-fiction such as *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (2005) which won the Asian-American Literary Award for non-fiction. After writing *In an Antique Land* in 1992, Ghosh did not attempt any non-fiction for a long time. Tabish Khair, in his article "Outside Imagination", believes that this is due to Ghosh's success as a major international novelist (*The Hindu*, July 23, 2016). Later, Ghosh ended this drought, bringing cheers to the admirers of his non-fiction, with the publication of *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, in 2016. *Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma* (1998), *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), are his essay collections. In recognition of his outstanding contribution to the Indian literary space, Amitav Ghosh was awarded Tata Literature Live! Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016. Ghosh's works, however, set in a larger-than-life canvas, transcend spatio-temporal dimensions and hence cannot be confined to the body of literature called Indian Writing in English.

Indian Writing in English: Its Growth at a Glance

Indian Writing in English, a much debatable term, has a relatively short but momentous history. It is claimed that Sake Dean Mahomed's *The Travels of Dean Mahomed* (1793) is the first work of this branch of literature. However, at first, most of the works of Indian Writing in English were biographies and political essays. But the scenario changed in the 1800's when many Indian writers tried to write in English. According to K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Rabindranath Tagore "was the one writer who first gained for modern India a place on the world literary scene" (99). Further, Indian freedom struggle helped in forming a "revolutionary brand of writing that voiced sentiments against the British empire"(English Litterateurs & Poets). During the 1930's and 1940's, Mulkraj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao established themselves as Indian English novelists. Their short stories, and novels reveal their social concern giving an Indian outlook to the works written in English. Later, Kamala Markandeya, Manohar Malgonkar established themselves as notable writers. The scenario, however, changed in the 1980's and 1990's with the introduction of Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Khushwant Singh, Vikram Chandra, Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh in the world of literature. Refusing to confine themselves to the national as well as racial identity, the Indian English writers of the modern times attempt to redefine the genre.

Among them the sixty year old Amitav Ghosh, has made a mark for himself. In fact, Ghosh has achieved what K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar said of the Indian novelists then:

"Notwithstanding the peculiar occupational ailments that beset the novelist in India, it is gratifying to note that the novel is a living and evolving literary genre, and is trying, in the hands of its practitioners, a fusion of form, substance and expression that is recognizably Indian, yet also bearing the marks of universality" (Iyengar 322).

Ghosh, so far, has written eight novels, winning several accolades. Now he is at the peak of his writing career, and has attracted the attention of renowned critics. This study catalogues the literary merit of Ghosh's novels and the critical attention he has received while trying to trace the factors that shaped his consciousness as a writer.

Characteristics of his Works:

The Kolkata born Amitav Ghosh has produced a wide range of novels. His father being a diplomat, Ghosh got the opportunity to travel far and wide, and witness different cultures. "My father had one of those jobs that took him to different places. I was often left to my own devices, and I always read a lot. That's where writing begins." (Lila Azam Zanganeh). Ghosh received his higher education from University of Delhi. His first

appointment was as a journalist. Ghosh got his doctoral degree in Social Anthropology, in 1982, from the University of Oxford. In addition to his knowledge in Anthropology, Ghosh's consciousness as a writer is shaped by the turbulent events happened in nineteen eighty four.

Recalling those turbulent days, Ghosh endorses that, "Looking back, I see that the experiences were profoundly important to my development as a writer" (qtd. by Hawley 2). Further Ghosh is also a renowned essayist who has mastered the art of reaching different audiences. Hawley observes that one should consider Ghosh's essays as a "motivating (factor) for his political, historical and anthropological works" (19). India's nightmarish experiences in 1984 echoes the Orwellian phantasm and this year can be considered a defining moment in Ghosh's life. The violence in Punjab by separatists, the attack on Golden Temple in Amritsar, the ensuing assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, the riots that followed it and the Bhopal gas tragedy shook the consciousness of many Indians and Ghosh is not an exception. Like the narrator of the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" who was reminded of reality by the harness bell of his horse, Ghosh is reminded of his responsibility as a writer. Talking about the use of historical contexts in weaving his plots, Ghosh reveals that his fundamental interest in people, "in individuals and their specific predicaments." He is interested in history only because, "it provides instances of unusual and extraordinary predicaments" (6). In this context, the response of Arjun in *The Glass Palace* (year) to a crisis in a particular historical circumstance, i.e. in the battle of Jitra, can be considered Ghosh's attempt to universalize the individual's experiences. Similarly being an anthropologist helped him to record conversations in a diary and it taught him, "how to translate raw experience on to page" (7).

Journey, especially sea journey, has a vital role to play in many of Ghosh's works. His passion for describing journeys comes involuntarily, and his special taste for describing sea journeys can be witnessed even in his early writings. In *The Circle of Reason*, narrating Alu's journey through Calcutta to Goa, Ghosh writes, "it was still dark, though the eastern sky behind them had turned scarlet. The sea, tinged with violet, was lapping gently at *Mariamamma's* sides" (183). Likewise, the following lines from Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* illustrate his urge to look beyond boundaries, "And then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage" (272). Admitting the influence his transnational journeys and Evans-Prichard's works had on him Ghosh calls both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka his home. Referring to Egypt he states that he was interested in historical connections in general and connections between India and Egypt in particular. Writing is the point of integration for Ghosh the Anthropologist and Ghosh the novelist. It is very interesting to note that Ghosh, despite

having been established as a renowned novelist, acknowledges the limitation of novel as a form. He feels that the “novel with its conventions of naturalistic dialogue, is most at home within monolingual speech communities” (*The Imam and the Indian* 78). This is significant in the light of the fact that Ghosh, in *Sea of Poppies*, brings together characters speaking different languages on board the *Ibis*. Ghosh’s imagination has got its own structure and is well defined. He says his research is driven by his characters. He reveals his interest in anything past, as past is both ‘unique’ and ‘unrepeatable’. Ghosh reveals that the ship episodes in his novels are a ‘sweetened version’ of reality.

Another hallmark of Ghosh is his extensive research to unearth the portals of history which hitherto escaped the attention of others. He tweeted, on the eve of the release of *Flood of Fire* (2015), that he found research aspect as an inspiring factor because, “fact is often much stranger than fiction” (AmitavGhosh@GhoshAmitav May 28, 2015). On being historically accurate Ghosh endorses that meeting with people of a region, talking to them and recording such conversations have contributed to much of the essential ingredients of his writing. This, he thinks is what Anthropology has done to him. He considers himself a “figurative writer”(Lila Azam Zanganeh May 15, 2011). He also states that much of his writing comes from ‘Balzac-ian source’. Discussing the contribution of the diasporic population worldwide, Ghosh feels that language is more important than location. According to Ghosh Indian Writing ‘speaks to people’ and Ghosh feels that Indians don’t seem to have ‘catastrophe awareness’. According to Ghosh, the world is one ‘nation-state’. Now that Indians are everywhere, he thinks such a distinction as ‘diaspora’ need not be made.

Similarly, Ghosh’s reputation as a world writer is further strengthened by his attempts to portray the world with blurred national boundaries. *The Shadow Lines*, as the title indicates, refers to the “curious nature of borders, the imagined yet all-too-real lines “that puzzled the narrator’s grandmother Mayadebi whose old home is in Bangladesh (81). *In an Antique Land* reiterates Ghosh’s idea that patriotism is not all about drawing imaginary lines, here, between Subcontinent and Palestine but also “the segregation of knowledge, histories, religious practices and language practices into separate units” (87).

Interviewer Vikram Khanna feels that Ghosh makes history come alive, both by recreating the language of the said period and digging into court documents, ship records, news reports and the works of little-known historians. According to Ghosh, one needs to be very resourceful, to lead the life of a writer. Diaspora interests him very much. Working on one of his earlier novels *The Glass Palace* shaped the first in the *Ibis* trilogy, *Sea of poppies*, admits Ghosh. And when Ghosh wanted to write about migration, he was wondering how people from the inlands in India started migrating, whereas the majority of the Chinese and the European migrants were from the coastal areas. This was how Ghosh got to know about the British expanding their poppy cultivation and what he calls

'colonial disruption'. People in this region had to grow poppies for the other job openings were shut by this 'colonial disruption'. As Vikram Khanna puts it, in Ghosh's view the history of interaction between East and West when looked at from an Eastern perspective is completely different from what the Western world informs. Giving credit to the Asian farmers, Ghosh points at the British as a controlling presence in the trade between various Asian countries, thus generating revenue to establish its supremacy. "In his non-fiction work, Ghosh has covered a breathtaking variety of events, places and people", says Vikram Khanna. The Andaman and Nicobar islands after the tsunami of 2004, the plight of Indian soldiers on the Siachen Glacier in Kashmir are some of the issues that Ghosh has written on. Calling his family 'early climate refugees', Ghosh thinks that being a Bengali prompted him to write about climate change. He also thinks that his stay at the Sundarbans provided him with the first-hand knowledge of climate change.

The Different Phases in Ghosh's Writing Career

Since Amitav Ghosh is at the height of his creative output at present it is difficult to divide his writing career into different phases at present. However, Claire Chambers, a specialist in South Asian Literature at Leeds Metropolitan University, categorizes Amitav Ghosh's fiction into three phases, viz. (i) his early works which include *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1989), *In an Antique Land* (1992) and *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), (ii) his mid-career which features *Dancing in Cambodia*, *At Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and (iii) his "most recent phase of which *Sea of Poppies* is one, with the other two in the trilogy in contention" (Claire Chambers). In fact, he has published *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* to make the trilogy complete spending considerable time of his writing career. Not only does Claire Chambers classify the different stages of Ghosh's writing career but compartmentalizes them into intermixtures of Indian subcontinent and Egypt, Indian subcontinent and the oil-rich Gulf as representing Ghosh's first phase, connections between India and other parts of Asia – his mid-career, and the ambitious Indian Ocean-centred global reach, respectively. The critic also identifies as Ghosh's theme the material geography of the Indian Ocean. In her view, Ghosh's writing is suggestive of 'a model of belonging' which is conceivable only at the cost of both ocean and international borders. She adds that Ghosh's recurring preoccupation with water, in most of his novels, is the result of his questioning the desire for cultural purity. She also notes that by drawing more attention to 'space' both in *In an Antique Land* and *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh only proves Foucault's indictment of Western accounts of history for its inattention to space, right.

Ghosh is usually viewed as a postcolonial writer. But, critic Yesapogu quotes Ghosh's claim that he does not know the meaning of the term Post-Colonialism in support of his theory. In his opinion, Ghosh's works serve 'as a crucial index' of the several themes of

‘post-colonial predicament’. In Yesapogu’s research article, Ghosh is certified with the unique credit of not only being the only writer reflecting the truth of Indian reality, but also the one writer carrying on his shoulders the responsibility of an ambassador for peace. Moreover, Yesapogu points at the difference between the Indian and the Western critics’ standpoint in understanding Ghosh. Saloni Mathur views *The Circle of Reason* as a novel that gives Ghosh the freedom “to experiment with magical realism”.

The Role of *Ibis* trilogy and its reception

Sea of Poppies, the first volume of Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy, an impressive and detailed account of the events leading up to the first opium war of 1839-42, throws light on opium production in India, enforced labour and its impact on the people of Bihar and the Bay of Bengal. The *Ibis*, a former slaving schooner repurposed as a transporter of opium, tracks Deeti, the chief character in the novel, up the Ganges, who travels on the black-water, with high hopes of starting a new lease of life, ignorant of the hardships that lie ahead. Through *River of Smoke*, Ghosh takes his readers to the opium’s destination, Canton, and highlights the growing tension between the Chinese authorities and the opium traders. In his third instalment *Flood of Fire*, Amitav Ghosh recreates “that tension – essentially between a state resisting an unfettered trade that has kick started widespread addiction in its population and a conjunction of personal and corporate interests messianically committed to the cause of free trade – culminates in full-blown conflict” (Lalami). Ghosh’s ambition is also to show how it redrew the map of the region, prompting, “the transformation of the backwater port of Hong Kong into a globally influential centre of enterprise” (Lalami). Making the narrative “simultaneously wrong-footing and delightful, riveting and diverting” (Lalami).

In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh introduces opium in the very first chapter. Nobody could have better taught the opium lesson than Ghosh, as he explains the British’s thirst for opium trade to manage the trade imbalances with China, when the British empire devised a strategy to stop spending silver in exchange for Chinese goods. By taking his readers back in time, Ghosh cultivates a historic sensibility.

“Now the factory’s appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asamicontracts*” (30).

Analyzing Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Francesco Cattani views the *Ibis* schooner as a ‘perfect example of Foucault’s heterotopia and endorses Paul Gilroy’s definition which accounts for Ghosh’s creation allowing himself to map a community’s ever expanding history and geography. (Cattani).

If, in *Sea of Poppies*, the emphasis was on ‘free trade’ and the responsibility of the colonizer civilizing the whole world, Amitav Ghosh lays bare, in *River of Smoke*, the fact that thousands of people in China could never do without opium, which the Chinese used for recreational purposes to an extent where the majority of the country’s population had become addicted to the drug. With thousands of crates of opium lying in ships offshore, to be sold to buyers in Canton, Ghosh describes the impending opium war through one of his characters in the novel.

“But the matter is not in our hands, Charles. Surely you do not think the traffic in opium would stop if we signed a pledge? Others will step in – because it is not we but the Chinese are responsible for the trade. It is they who love opium after all” (387).

In her high estimate of Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Jan Goldstein says that Ghosh’s “Artfully constructed fiction is offset by true, historical detail”. Furthermore, she opines that, by introducing to his readers shape-shifting and reinvented identities, Ghosh adds more variety to the imperialistic European world. According to Goldstein, giving feel and functionality to the ‘uncontainable chaos’ he changes it into ‘participatory chaos’, pushing his readers into a world where perfecting our understanding becomes highly impossible, as the action unfolds in *River of Smoke*, the second novel in the *Ibistrilogy* (Goldstein November 2014).

Ghosh, known for his ability to create a vast number of characters, differentiates between being a historian and being a novelist:

“the novelist’s approach to the past, through the eyes of characters, is substantially different from the approach of the historian. For me, seeing the past through the prism of a character allows me to understand some aspects of the past that historians don’t deal with” (qtd. by Kooria).

Having spent more than a decade on completing his *Ibistrilogy*, it is not surprising to see Ghosh creating a bunch of characters. However, a quick glimpse of Deeti’s shrine in *Flood of Fire* proves Ghosh’s fascination for characters. “Serang Ali, recognizable by his blood-red mouth; Jodu with his three eyebrows; Neel, with his journals; Raju, in his fifer’s hat; Kesri, who, by convention, was always drawn with a bundook” (607).

As a versatile writer, Amitav Ghosh has written about various themes in his fiction and non-fiction as well. Having spent a considerable part of his creative life on the *Ibis* trilogy, Ghosh, later gave a series of lectures on climate change, in the University of Chicago. At that time, he admitted that his obsession with *Ibis* trilogy will lead him to revisit some of the characters. “Someday I might return to the characters in the *Ibis* trilogy” (qtd. by Khanna).

Conclusion:

Born in India, a country known for its geographical and cultural diversity, and having travelled to different parts of the world, Ghosh enjoys the privilege of having first-hand experience of meeting different types of people who are politically, culturally and geographically divided. It is evident in his art of characterization. In addition, the choice of his themes, beginning from travel and diaspora, and moving to history, especially 'historical amnesia', and focusing on communal violence and its impact on individuals, makes him cross generic boundaries. Perhaps, the success of *Ibis* trilogy proved his extraordinary ability to create a world of the past and make the readers establish its connection with the present. His most recent publication *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, in 2016, indicates his interest, at present, lies with the immediate need for sensitizing people of the problem of climate change. He feels it can be achieved only by the interaction between science and arts. In his interview with Naomi Oreskes, the American Historian, he affirms that, "science can give us the facts, but art and literature must narrate real stories of climate change" (qtd. by Srivatsava Oct. 2016).

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