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## Postcolonialism in Amitav Ghosh's Novels

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### **Abstract:**

Amitav Ghosh has become a prominent figure in the landscape of Indian writing in English. Amitav Ghosh has shown an exemplary promise and has given a new direction to the Indian novel in English. Although Amitav Ghosh does not like him to be categorised as postcolonial or Commonwealth writer, yet one cannot deny that he raises a strong voice against eurocentrism. Ghosh's novels are open to judgment for himself and readers. The performance instead of exhuming colonial corpses, digs up a new identity for us, connected or unconnected to the past and because of that his novels come under the postcolonial study.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Colonial discourse, nationhood, diaspora identities, experimentation of language.

Indian English literature in recent times has generated widespread interest in it all over the world. India speaks of her own culture, traditions and modernization through Indian Writing in English. Indian English fiction has a long history but its real global recognition was from the time of the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children* in 1980, and its world-wide praise through the Booker Award. The year 1980 holds the most significant position in the growth and development of Indian fiction in English. It is during this period that Indian English novelists earned honours and distinction in the Western academic world.

Rushdie's novels which became internationally successful created a group of young Indian novelists who followed the footsteps of Rushdie. These novelists are called "Rushdie's Children"; among these novelists the most talented ones are Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Allan Seally, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Farrukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry and Firdaus Kanga. In the words of R.S. Pathak:

“Amongst 'Rushdie's Children' there emerge two clear-cut groups of novelists: those who treat literature as a thought-about effort, and those who regard literature as amateur self-expression. Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Allan Seally, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga and Farrukh Dhondy belong to the first group while Upamanyu Chatterjee represents the other” (17).

The prominent feature of the 1980's Indian novelist was the quest and assertion of his identity, while seeking his individual identity, a writer creates his national identity also. The interaction of historical and individual forces became important issues which had an impact on the national life and personal lives of individuals. Another feature was the medium of

expression; the novelists wrote in a language that was not their mother tongue. Experimentation in technique and language became necessary as Indian writers tried to Indianize and acculturate the English language. Vikram Seth says, "the English language has been taken over, or taken to heart by people whose original language historically it was not"(46).

The quest for identity, national and cultural issues, subversion of history and experimentation of language are the prominent features of 1980's. According to John Charles Hawley:

One pivotal trend is the *indigenista*, or Indian-centered narrative. This was a literary form of political protest concerned with questions of indigenous socio-economic, cultural, and racial marginalization (235).

Amitav Ghosh has emerged as a great literary figure among the present-day novelists. A keen interest in anthropology makes his novels interesting as well as informative.

He gained tremendous recognition with the publication of *Circle of Reason*. History is easily interwoven into the narrative framework and Ghosh attempts a comparative study of Asian and African, Indian and Egyptian, Jewish and Islamic cultures. The subversion of history repeatedly surfaces in Amitav Ghosh's novels. He skillfully and artistically uses English as a medium of his literary oeuvre.

Amitav Ghosh has become a prominent figure in the landscape of Indian writing in English. Amitav Ghosh has shown an exemplary promise and has given a new direction to the Indian novel in English. He does a lot of research before writing his novel.

Before analyzing Amitav Ghosh as a postcolonial writer let's understand the term postcolonialism: postcolonialism literally refers to the period following decline of colonialism. It signifies the end of domination by European empires. Although the term postcolonialism generally refers to the period after colonialism, the distinction is not always made. John McLeod in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* makes the distinction between hyphenated post-colonialism and postcolonialism. He says:

"The hyphenated term 'post-colonial' seems more appropriate to denote a particular *historical* period or *epoch*, like those suggested by phrases such as 'after colonialism', 'after independence' or 'after the end of Empire'. However . . . thinking about postcolonialism got just in terms of strict historical periodisation, but as referring to disparate forms of *representations*, *reading practices* and *values*. These can circulate *across* the barrier between colonial rule and national independence. Postcolonialism is not contained by the tidy categories of historical periods or dates, although it remains firmly bound up with historical experiences" (5).

The specific issues of postcolonialism are - 'Colonial discourse' 'the nation in question', 'diaspora identities'. These issues introduce the major areas of enquiry within postcolonialism.

The field of postcolonial studies gained relevant importance in the late 1970's. It made us 're-interpret' and 'interrogate' the literatures, quoting Meenakshi Mukherjee:

“Post-colonialism is . . . an emancipatory concept particularly for the students of literature outside the western world, because it makes us interrogate many aspects of the study of literature that we were made to take for granted, enabling us not only to read our own texts in our terms, but also to reinterpret some of the old canonical texts from Europe from the perspective of our specific historical and geographical location” (3-4).

The term postcolonial suggests that colonialism was the decisive episode of modern history that established the dominance of Western power and knowledge over all 'Others'. The myth acquired a dimension once this internalization is done in which the colonized views himself through the mirror of the colonizer. The myth of the inferiority of the colonized gulps the basic of the social, religious and cultural life of the colonized. Bhabha Says:

“Colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative in which the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality” (76).

Having been thrown out of the history making process, the colonized loses interest in his selfhood and accepts the myth of his intellectual, social, cultural, religious and even physical inferiority.

This term also indicates the fall out of colonialism. The postcolonial literature gained much importance with the publication of *The Empire Writes Back* in which the postcolonial literature shows that the periphery is speaking and the centre is listening. However, the intellectual power centre is still to shift. In Aijaz Ahmad's words, there is still only a limited range of "authorized questions" set by the intellectual centre that may be answered in the works of postcolonial literature and one of the central issues that may be addressed is the concept of 'nationhood'. As the myth of inferiority is created in the minds of the colonized and through the education system the colonizer gets it internalized by the colonized. Aijaz Ahmad comments :

“The essential task of a 'Third World' novel, it is said is to give appropriate form (preferably allegory, but epic also, or fairy tale, or whatever) to the national experience. The range of questions that may be asked of the texts . . . must predominantly refer then, in one way or another, to representations of colonialism, nationhood, post-coloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruptions and so forth” (124).

Thus, the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which the past had been devalued.

Preoccupation with the colonial past is a persisting phenomenon in postcolonial writings. The tendency to remap the cartography of the nation's political and cultural past is a vital concern in them. A detailed analysis of the novels of Amitav Ghosh shows that the issues he raises in each of his novels are relevant to the postcolonial study. In his novels the present seems to throw light on the past and unfolds its vividness. His writings deal in the epic themes of travel and diaspora, history and memory, political struggle and communal violence, love and loss, magic and science and politics and philosophy interwoven in such an intricate way that it is difficult to maintain a boundary line between one idea and another. Experimentation in language is another major issue in his novels. Ghosh's language also attains the status of a diasporic representative. It voices thousands of uprooted individuals. It embodies the attempt to create the family, which has broken and dispersed in the mire of confused identity.

In *Sea of Poppies* the use of language ranges from nautical jargon to even Bhojpuri. Ghosh justifies his stand of experimentation of language in an interview in which he was asked that using nautical and the sailor's language would not be difficult for the readers to understand, he answered:

“I think most of it is understandable in context but say for example I use a phrase from the nautical language, now if I say it to you in English would you understand what I said? No, of course you wouldn't, now if I say it in Bajao Tirkat. It's the same, as nobody today knows what it is.”

Although Amitav Ghosh does not like him to be categorised as postcolonial or Commonwealth writer, yet one cannot deny that he raises a strong voice against eurocentrism. In one of the interviews when he was asked that his work has been readily incorporated into 'postcolonial' literature and how does he feel about being regarded as a postcolonial writer, he replies:

“I must say, I have no truck with this term at all. It's a term one's begun to hear in the last five or six years, and I don't know a single Indian writer of my acquaintance who doesn't detest it. It completely misrepresents the focus of the work that I do. In some really important ways, colonialism is not what interests me. What is postcolonial? When I look at the work of critics, such as Homi Bhabha, I think they have somehow invented this world which is just a set of representations of representations. They have retreated into a world of magic mirrors and I don't think anyone can write from that sort of position” (214-215).

He does not characterize his work. In a letter to Commonwealth foundation, he requested his name to be withdrawn from the list of nominees for the commonwealth prize for literature for the year 2001 for his novel *The Glass Palace*. He made his stand clear by writing:

“As a grouping of nations collected from the remains of the British Empire, the Commonwealth serves as an umbrella forum in global politics. As a literary or cultural grouping however, it seems to me that “the Commonwealth” can only be a misnomer so long as it excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries (it is surely inconceivable for example that athletes would have to be fluent in English in order to qualify for the Commonwealth games).

So far as I can determine, *The Glass Palace* is eligible for the Commonwealth Prize partly because it was written in English and partly because I happen to belong to a region that was once conquered and ruled by Imperial Britain. Of the many reasons why a book’s merits may be recognized these seem to me to be the least persuasive. That the past endangers the present is of course undeniable; it is equally undeniable that the reasons why I write in English are ultimately rooted in my country’s history. Yet, the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are also open to choice, reflection and judgment. The issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of “the Commonwealth”. I therefore ask that I be permitted to withdraw *The Glass Palace* from your competition.”

It is quite obvious from the letter that the acceptance of the Commonwealth award would contradict the anticolonial spirit of his book. The rejection of the category foregrounds the right to self-representation denied to a part of the world for too long. It thereby signifies the writer's identification with the experiences and aspirations of his nation and indeed with that of the whole postcolonial world. The issue of language is of vital importance in his rejection of the Commonwealth nomination. The fact that the Commonwealth refuses to acknowledge literatures in languages other than English foregrounds its politics of discrimination. He makes the point that the use of the colonizer's language need not and should not be viewed as a sign of complicity with the politics of colonialism.

Amitav Ghosh was surprised by the reaction of media from his withdrawal from Commonwealth. He feels that:

“..... but it goes to show that these issues are still very much alive. I think commonwealth games are fine, commonwealth secretariat is fine, if it wants to be a political body, its fine. I don't have any problems with that. But my objection is that when it starts intervening in culture, it's a real issue because why should it intervene in culture? What would we say to a nato prize for literature? What is the point of that? And especially when it's

structured in such a way that it's explicitly promoting the English language at the expense of others. I mean one of the great lessons we learn from being in contemporary India is to learn the protocols of a multi-dimensional, multi-cultural, multi-lingual society. It's like in India if someone were to say that we would push one language at the expense of all others."

However, Amitav Ghosh detest to be called as postcolonial writer but when he says that the past is open to choice, reflection and judgment gives his assertively towards the issues of postcolonialism. He raises the issue of language which again is a major concern of postcolonial studies. Nivedita Majumdar opines:

"It marks his solidarity with the numerous writers writing in the vernacular in India and throughout the postcolonial world" (256).

Amitav Ghosh like other postcolonial writers shows the futility of boundaries and false nationalism in *The Shadow Lines*. National identity not only marginalizes all other identities and relationships, contradictions and contesting identities within the nation:

"Riots, unlike war, do not affirm and assert national identity, instead they question its validity. They point to the presence of social and political tensions that lie outside the homogenizing logic of the nation. And that which contradicts the all-encompassing ideology of the nation is all too often relegated to a chasm of silence. And yet, if there is any one thing, that characterizes and distinguishes the recent history of the subcontinent, it would have to be the ominous implications of the religious identity. To the extent that nationalist historiography marginalizes this fact, it falsifies the history of the region" (213-214).

This re-writing of history and re-interrogating the past is the main element of postcolonialism.

In *The Glass Palace* Ghosh shows that the claims of the colonizers to rule over the people in the name of progress is unjustified. He presents Burma as a prosperous nation before the advent of Britishers, their concept to educate people to raise standards to be called as civilized proved hypocritical. Burma was a golden land but these Britishers ruined its wealth and prosperity to fill their imperial design. They showed barbarous behaviour in guise of proving that these savage people are to be civilized.

In *Sea of Poppies* the justified myth created by Britishers that they are superior class and God chose them to rule is again contradicted. The way Amitav Ghosh presents the history in *In An Antique Land* opens the issue in postcolonial study. All his novels deal with dislocation, emigration and diaspora. Ghosh says to Dipesh Chakrabarty:

"I was much struck also by your re-configuration of the role of the family in Indian fiction. I agree substantially with your observation that this should not be read as a "compensatory

move”. But as a writer myself I’d like to take this a step further. Two of my novels (*The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*) are centered on families. I know that for myself this a way of displacing the ‘nation’. In other words, I’d like to suggest that writing about families is one way of not writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities). I think there is a long tradition of this, going back at least to Proust-and its something that Jameson, Anderson (and even Bhabha) never seem to take into account.”

His novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a medical thriller which colours the issue of the malarial fever with mysticism and mystery, supernatural and superstition, calling it the theory of science and counter science, the East-West encounter and showing the Indian knowledge of science is far ahead than the colonizers. *The Circle of Reason* raises the issue of reason deriving from three gunas: Sattwa, Rajas and Tamas. It signifies the need of eligitaririan society with no economic disparity. ‘Money’ treated as impurity. *The Hungry Tide* concentrates on environmental issues with sub-themes of refugees, scientific knowledge and real knowledge. It counter attacks the knowledge or research done in the West with the illiterates of Indians. The finding in the novel comes that the knowledge of illiterates is incomparable with Westerners.

The themes, sub-themes, issues and plot in all his novels feed to an open discussion and research in terms of postcolonial study which take four major subjects like social and cultural change, misuses of power and exploitation, colonial abandonment and alienation and use of English language in literature. Postcolonial perspective emerged as a challenge to the colonialism which was the abuse of native people. The postcolonial perspective attempts to illegitimate the idea of establishing power through conquest. After independence is achieved the large power ceases to control them as a colony, the settlers still seem to continue imposing power over the native. The question of new cultural identity arises. Amitav Ghosh successfully brings the Indian postcolonial literature into the world.

The jury of Dan David Prize remarks:

“ Ghosh’s work provides a transnational understanding of the self seen as the intersection of the many identities produced by the collision of languages and cultures; displacement and exile - lives torn between India [Images] Burma, England [Images], and elsewhere; families torn by the violence and psychological turmoil of the colonial rule and post-colonial dispossession; a globe wracked by two world wars and their ancillary bloodshed.”

The jury also recognised his contribution in fiction:

“Distinguished equally by its precise, beautifully rendered depictions of characters and settings, and by its sleeping sense of history unfolding once generations against the back drop of the

violent dislocation of peoples and regimes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”

They added:

“This is most evident in *The Glass Palace* (2000), which traces the life story of Rajkumar, a self-made young man who builds a fortune in the teak and rubber trades, and spans a century of Indian and Burmese history, from the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty to British rule, through the Japanese invasion during world war II, and beyond.”

The jury acknowledged him as a postcolonial writer and the award was given for his novels with a special mention of *The Glass Palace*. Acceptance of this award has generated controversy.

Amitav Ghosh as a postcolonial writer expresses a feeling of dislocation and exile, these people are neither refugees nor people banished from their country, but choose to leave their native country like Alu in *The Circle of Reason*, Nabeel in *In an Antique Land*, Rajkumar in *The Glass Palace* and Deeti in *Sea of Poppies*. There are relevant differences between an exile on one side, and an emigrant, dispossessed, refugee, immigrant, or migrant on the other side. All these categories somehow overlap; a more or less common factor of the psychological attitude of many people belonging to all these categories is the mood of the exile, characterized by home-sickness, anguish, and a feeling of eradication.

Theorists of postcolonial discourse like Fanon, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, Bhabha and others raise these issues prominently and Amitav Ghosh truly justifies all these issues in his novels to such an extent that he is included very much as a postcolonial writer

The thought provoking, stimulating novels of Amitav Ghosh become metaphors of this time and give an allegorical political message for all multi-cultural, multi-racial nation states striving for existence in the postmodern world. Inclusiveness, harmony and tolerance seem to be the lessons of history that Amitav Ghosh is trying to import through his complex but gripping novels. The style of Amitav Ghosh's writing, in all probability, represents the purpose of his oeuvre to attain a trans-socio-temporal-spectrum. In his writings, he demonstrates the nature and interstitial nature of cultures, as expressed through language Ghosh's writing strikes a strain of conscious between the root and the uprooted self of the diasporic individual. Postcolonial literature can be traced in a multiple nationalistic scenario, mostly starting from the mid '40s, with emergence of authors like Ghosh we enter a whole new phase of postcolonial dilemma- the diaspora. "An avalanche of familiar and not so familiar jargons is bound to fall through diaspora, sense of rootlessness, postcolonial depression, cultural clash, subalterism etc".

Ghosh's novels are open to judgment for himself and readers. The performance instead of exhuming colonial corpses, digs up a new identity for us, connected or unconnected to the past and because of that his novels come under the postcolonial study. Ghosh's writing never had a strict demarcation between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction'. He always

combined several roles- that of novelist, journalist, scholar and historian, and one of his fundamental preoccupation as a writer has been to recover lost histories. He is therefore one of the greatest postcolonial voice in Indian English Literature.

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