

The Study of Diasporic Sensibilities in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* and *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

The journey of Indian English Fiction since the appearance of *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chatterjee paving through the trio of Narayan, Anand and Rao, finally rested on the writers like V S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Tharoor, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Shyam Selvadurai, Rohinton Mistry, Bharti Mukherjee and so forth. These writers articulated the diasporic sensibilities featured with Dislocation of people owing to indenture and settlement, Nostalgia, Alienation, Discrimination and quest of identity, survival, imperial dominance, Cultural change, identity and existential rootlessness. The enunciated themes by these writers gave rise to so called Expatriate or Diasporic Literature of which Amitav Ghosh is deemed to be the exclusive entity. The research paper accentuates the role of Amitav Ghosh in Indian diaspora with post-colonial attributes, highlighting the notable sensibilities in his debut novel *the Circle of Reason* (1986) and his sixth novel *the Hungry Tide* (2004). His method of historicizing multiple space of Indian diaspora with an exploration of life and suffering of humans heralds an amalgamation of anthropological and historical consequences against the backdrop of Post-Colonial and Post-Modern studies.

Keywords: Diaspora, Marginalized, Dislocation, Amitav Ghosh, Identity.

Introduction

The term diaspora is derived from the Greek verb, 'Diaspeirian' which is meant for dia – 'through' and speirian – to scatter. The term was principally exercised for the cultural alienation and nostalgia experienced by the Jews in the wake of the Babylonian Exile that caused their mass dispersion and banishment from their indigenous territory, Israel. Thus, the evolution of diaspora is mainly associated with relative concepts of dislocation, hybridity and multiculturalism. However, there are multiple traces of the term referring to the national and

ethical variants like Jewish, Greek, Armenian, American, African, Chinese, Indian, etc. that are the gradual offshoot of this umbrella term.

The capacious quality of diaspora was recognized into the academics during the 1950s when a sense of pessimistic displacement was discerned into the migration of the people from their national territory to the other space in order to be exposed to a new identity, culture and a distorted dream to re-root in a particularly new territory. There may be numerous causes of diasporic sensibilities as colonialism, trade, labour migration, ties to ancestral land and so forth, however, the outcome is noticeable through the escalating issues of identity crisis, cross-cultural interaction, nostalgia for home, cultural hatred, marginalization, fragmentation and transformation of subjectivities. These outcomes led to the emergence of scholastic examination of authors and their diasporic sensitivities in the post-colonial period. The South-Asian diasporic literature began to be sought for the diasporic themes like cultural alienation, defencelessness, striving efforts for identity in foreign lands and a desperate yearning for the homeland. In Indian English Literature, the writers like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhaty Roy, Jhumpa Lahari nominated the diasporic themes the nucleus of their novels and highlighted the complicated issues of space, culture, identity, language and life. Graham Huggan in his work *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, says:

The future of Indian Literature in English at the millennium seems indisputable, the reputations of its best-known writers intact, its commercial success virtually ensured. Yet it remains a cause for concern that nearly all the recognized writers are located in the Diaspora. (Huggan 77)

The two novels of Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) ascertain the diasporic acumen of the writer accentuating the inadequacy and impediments of migrancy and migrant workers dragging them to the conflict of identity and space, that reflects the expatriate sensibilities against the perspective of identity crisis, existential status, struggle of restoration to root and the nostalgia for the homeland. Ghosh's novels have become a medium to articulate the growing internationalization of the world highlighting the anthropologic issues of human life, migration and historical aspects, moreover, a kind of journey peppered with the intersection of cultures and shattering of cultural boundaries. These dilemmas are reflected in the characters of his novels and the incidents that weave a diasporic plot in the context of anthropological, historical and post-

colonial themes. Robert Dixon says, ‘the cultural space that Ghosh resituates is a vast, borderless region with its own hybrid languages and practices which circulate without national or religious boundaries’ (Dixon 4).

Amitav Ghosh, the Bengali Indian author who holds a distinguished place in the contemporary Indo-Anglian Literature, was born on July 11, 1956 in Calcutta, in a Bengali family and grew up in India, East Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Iran. He was educated at the all-boys Doon School, where he edited *The Doon School Weekly*. After graduating from the University of Delhi, he went to Oxford to study Social Anthropology and received a Master of Philosophy and a PhD. Amitav Ghosh lives in Brooklyn of New York with his wife, Deborah Baker and their two children, Lila and Nayan. His novels are *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In An Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2012). The debut novel *The Circle of Reason* was awarded with one of the France’s top literary awards in 1990. *The Shadow Lines* won Sahitya Akademi award and Ananda Puraskar award. *The Calcutta Chromosome* won the Arthur C. Clarke award for 1997 and *The Glass Palace* won the International e-Book Award in 2001. *The Hungry Tide* was awarded the crossword Book Prize in 2005. Merely with his short array of nine novels, Ghosh gives not only an impression of cultural, geographical and emotional displacement but also a realized sensibility of Indian diasporic culture oriented towards lost origins, homeland, migration and transnational flows. Through his novels and non-fictional works, Ghosh has emerged as a new voice of postcolonial identity of subaltern and diasporic sensibilities resting heavily on the characters, traditions and dichotomies extending beyond the India’s actual boundaries. Ghosh was awarded the Padma Shri in 2007. In 2009, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 2015, he was named a Ford Foundation *Art of Change* Fellow.

Ghosh’s debut novel, *the Circle of Reason*, is divided into three sections ‘Satwa’, ‘Rajas’ and ‘Tamas’ derived from the Bhagavad-Gita. The symbolic connotations is Satwa – reason, Rajas – Passion and Tamas – Darkness. It is a picaresque novel that acquired France’s Prix Medicis Award in 1990. Rootlessness and the quest of identity as one of the most recurring issues of the Postcolonial literature, has been carved through the picaresque novel demonstrating the chronicles of the protagonist, Alu, a young weaver from a small village (Lalpukur) near Calcutta who is suspected of being a terrorist. Chased from Bengal to Bombay and on through the Persian Gulf to North Africa by a police inspector, Alu becomes

a medium for the reader to discern and relish the various cast of characters in their colourful epithets quite interlaced with humour, wisdom and a socio-political narrative tapestry. The rootless protagonist, Alu whose actual name is Nachiketa Bose and the other dispossessed characters are found to be enveloped in a symbolic quest of their identity as from darkness to light experiencing the coercive forces of migrancy and a dichotomy between the lost world and the world they are moving towards.

Alu turns out to be a hopeless wanderer after the massacre of carbolic acid in the village and being dispossessed from his uncle, Balram's house. After the allegations of Bhudev Roy, the ornithologist and policeman, Jyoti Das sets out in his search to arrest Alu who was given a new identity of a notorious criminal. To evade from arrest, Alu finally moves to a fictional town, Al-Ghazira to establish a new identity after being tormented from the other one. A migrant move to a new settlement puffed up with numerous dreams to find a newness, but the dreams shatter in the multiplicity of conflicts of space, culture and identity in which he is to be trapped ahead. Instead of being a respite from the socio-economic oppression and cultural deprivation in the homeland, it becomes a calamitous experience to sustain the lost identity and seeking the never-obtained identity in the fully new place.

The sail to Al-Ghazira was facilitated for Alu when he garnered the unanticipated amount of money from Gopal, a friend of Balram, which assisted him to become a boarder in the boat *Mariamamma*. His surprising gesture is found as:

The bundle was thrust into Alu's hands. Alu opened it and found the few clothes Gopal had bought him, Gopal's own copy of the Life of Pasteur and 8000 rupees. Gopal smiled in embarrassment. Your uncle had left it with me, to invest. It's yours now.... He bent down and touched Gopal's feet. (168)

The boat *Mariamamma* contains other migrants who are heading to the Middle East in quest of a secured future against their social, economic and cultural background even by risking their lives in a fragile vessel under the garb of illegal immigration. Alu finds other migrants who feel a promising haven in the small boat with him and soon they all become a community perceiving a mutual harmony of migrants. A group of women was also accommodated in the boat to be transported to Al-Ghazira and to be employed as sex workers under the supervision of Zindi didi who is an Egyptian. The members on the boat, the migrants, breathe a life of indeterminacy, a kind of in-betweenness as Homi Bhabha states:

The migrant is seen as the critical participant-observer into his/her own condition, enabling powerful insights to be made into the insider-outsider dichotomy and the real lived experiences of migration. (King et al. 8)

Ascertaining the news of the successful escape of Alu, the inspector Dubey and Jyoti Das get furious at their unsuccessful chase. Their furious and hegemonic interrogation to the prisoners shows their frustration at losing the protagonist from their grip. Reaching at the destination, many migrants settle in the household occupied by Zindi. She helps many members to settle in profitable employment considering them a part of her family. It is noted, Ghosh has "... defined her in a broader more human that transcends the boundaries between India and foreign" (Basu 153).

The long journey ventured by Alu and the other characters, shows the problem of marginal people ever oppressed and silenced by the diasporic dilemmas of living, survival, emigration and immigration. Alu's burial under the debris of the massive commercial complex where he works, creates a symbolic significance of the dilapidated condition of the indigenous culture of migrants. Though Alu is finally rescued, Ghosh successfully portrays a latent sign of instability, disorder and confusion to migrant life. Alu is presented as a centre around whom many other nomadic characters are encircling around with their specific characters and distinct diasporic element. Finally, under the infliction of the vicissitudes of fortune and the loss of his associates, Alu returns his home from his meaningless odyssey to the Middle East and Algeria and finds the past quite unproductive. However, the novel concludes with Satwa, a light of consciousness, suggesting a beginning for the characters – "Hope is the beginning" (457). The novel thus challenges the multiculturalism and dilemmas of identity with an ambivalence of tradition and modernity, nature and technology, East and West, and eventually Past and Present.

Ghosh's sixth novel, *the Hungry Tide*, accentuates the breaking down of artificial boundaries and the lives of the marginalized on an island that was dreamt to be made a utopia by a benevolent British man, Daniel Hamilton who acquired ten thousand acres of land in the tidal region of Sundarbans in 1903 to set up a community which would be undivided by caste, religions and nationality. A cross section of the society accommodated with marginalized, underprivileged, poor and landless began inhabiting there who had their past rooted to the parts of Orissa, East Bengal, Santhal Pargans, etc. The story revolves around the lives of three people and their cultural intersection. Piyali Roy, a young cetalogist of Indian origin and daughter of Bengali parents who had immigrated to Seattle, America, comes to Sundarbans to study the rare Irrawady dolphins. Fokir, a young local fisherman who saves Piya and helps her to find the signs of the rare species of dolphins and finally, Kanai Dutt who is a translator, good at speaking six languages and the owner of a successful translation

business in Delhi. He comes to the island of Lusibari to visit his aunt Nilima to discover the latent reality of the package left by Nilima's husband, Nirmal.

In 1950, Nirmal and Nilima Bose had come to Lusibari, almost eleven years after Hamilton's death. The utter destitution and decrepitude had distressed the whole island. It was the time when Nilima established a Women's Union which soon institutionalized into an NGO Badabon Trust.

The people of the tide country have tolerated a cultural displacement and gradually drifted into a sort of cultural appropriation promulgated by Nirmal and Nilima. The characters like Kanai, Piyali, Nirmal, Nilima, Horen, Kusum have faced the pain of cultural displacement and complications of identity crisis as they have symbolic connotations reflecting the idea of border crossing. This cultural appropriation is the integral part of the marginalized population that is introduced by Western and some selected enlightened people irrespective of their born-culture and rooted-conventions as Ghosh relates:

The Union Nilima had founded, on the other hand, continued to grow, drawing in more and more members and offering an ever-increasing number of services – medical, paralegal, agriculture. At a certain point the movement grew so large that it had to be reorganized. (81)

The countrymen on the Sundarban forest are deeply associated to the forest's myths, customs and rituals. Every change introduced by nature or its agents, is opportunely accepted by the natives. The settlement of the human being in forested land is a challenge as beautiful nature is harsh and vengeful making humans strive for food and life. As Ghosh states in novel, "The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later" (Ghosh 7).

Ghosh intends to highlight the universalization of subaltern history through Nirmal and his journal as the journal is read by Kanai, it unfolds the political crisis and partition of Bengal in 1970s and the communal riots that forced many people to leave Bengal. The influx of these refugees was directed to Morichjhapi- an island owned by government for the conservation of tigers. Bearing the loss of their dignity, identity and community, these under-privileged and marginalized people were forced to live in exile whose plight goaded on Nirmal to materialize his dream of a revolutionary utopian society. As Nirmal uttered:

I felt something changing within me: how astonishing it was that I, an ageing bookish school master, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without. (171)

These marginalized people being exploited by Muslim communalists and upper caste Hindus, came to Morichjhapi in 1978, cleared the mangroves to pitch their huts and bandhs and, eventually, settled there:

Earlier that year a Left ministry had taken power in west Bengal and the refugees may have assumed that they would not face much opposition from the state government. But this was a miscalculation: the authorities had declared that Morichjhapi was a protected forest reserve and they had proved unbending in their determination to evict the settlers. Over a period of about a year there had been a series of confrontations between the settlers and government forces. (119)

Nirmal meets the people of this island and weaves a dream to enroll himself in their struggle, to teach their children about myths and geology for which he is vehemently protested by Nilima. The dreams of seeking a permanent establishment comes to an end when government kills the settlers in a war like situation in which Kusum was also killed. Kusum has been used by Ghosh as a character to represent the plight of women in the marginalized community and to tell the tale of the dispossessed settlers in the island. Kusum's father was attacked by a tiger and was dead in the forest. She is shown as a childhood friend of Kanai. Horen rescues her from the trap of Dilip who misguided women to get a job and trafficked them for prostitution. As Horen tells, "If Dilip had his way, she (Kusum) would end up either in Calcutta's red light district or, worse still, in some brothel in Bombay" (100-101).

Ghosh fiction oscillates from historical backdrop to humanitarian drift challenging the geo-cultural boundaries and pronouncing those victims, inflicted by history, who are known as migrants, marginalized and homeless. This novel reconciles the notions of sociology and anthropology of which Ghosh is unopposed master. The characters like Nirmal, Nilima, Piyali, Kusum, Kanai, etc. tours through the cultural spaces and diasporic sensibilities emerged from their migration and endless transnational odyssey.

Conclusion

Expatriate writing is not a new-fangled theory in Indian English Literature nor it is the 20th century trend. Literary history manifests migrants or expatriates as T. S. Eliot who moved eastward, across the Atlantic; W. H. Auden who moved west in the opposite direction. To add more, Sylvia Path, Ezra Pound, Seamus Heaney also left their places of origin and settled somewhere else at the time when diasporic sensibility was not much cited in literary theory. In both the novels Ghosh describes the aspirations, defeats, disappointments and miseries of the dislocated people.

Ghosh' *The Circle of Reason* is not only an exemplar of postcolonial and diasporic literature but also a post-modern work as the novel subverts the notions of religion, science and reason through the well knitted characters like Balram who, profoundly obsessed with phrenology, western ideas and *the Life of Pasteur*, established the Pasteur School of Reason; Balram's wife Toru Debi whose distrust in her husband's intellect presents a farcical treatment of his authority and reason; Alu and Dr Uma's realization of the futility of foreign science exhibited through the way Alu burns the book with the corpse of Kulfi on the pyre; and finally the ways in which the religious and traditional rituals of Hinduism are subverted through the fake pundits and the different opinions of Dr Uma and Dr Mishra about Kulfi's funeral rites. On the other hand, *The Hungry Tide* exhibits a post-colonial theme of marginalization and suffering of the marginalized, coloured effectively with historical background, who seek a promising land in the Sundarbans. John C Hawley writes about Ghosh's style: ". . . but first and foremost, and over-riding all the main ideas that inform his work are the stories, the Dickensian proliferation of characters whose lives engage us and who take us to some richly imagined places and times" (1).

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