



Home and the World: Cultural Identity in Amitav Ghosh's Novels

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Abstract:

This research article examines Amitav Ghosh's exploration of cultural identity in *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*, with particular emphasis on the relationship between home and the world in postcolonial contexts. Through a close textual analysis of the two novels, the study investigates how migration, displacement, colonial history, and socio-political realities shape the characters' perceptions of home, belonging, and cultural identity. It further explores the role of historical memory, personal experiences, and cultural interactions in the continuous reconstruction of identity. While *The Hungry Tide* presents the Sundarbans as a liminal space where ecology, history, and memory redefine notions of home, *Sea of Poppies* extends this exploration through the experiences of migration across the Kala Pani, highlighting the emergence of hybrid and transcultural identities. The study argues that Ghosh portrays home not merely as a geographical location but as an evolving cultural space shaped by movement, adaptation, and intercultural encounters. By examining the dynamic relationship between home and the world, this research contributes to postcolonial literary studies by demonstrating how Ghosh reimagines cultural identity as fluid, inclusive, and continually negotiated in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Cultural identity, Migration, Colonialism, Globalisation, Space, Belonging.

Introduction:

Native land, homeland, motherland, fatherland - which is the "mot juste" (the right word) for describing a place where one lives, earns his/her bread, where one has his/her family, social and cultural life, more appropriately, where one belongs? "Is home a place? A memory? An ideal? An imagined space? (192), asks Susan Friedman. The paper attempts an analysis of "home" and the "world" as presented by a writer of Indian origin who has chosen to make America his own home. In the diasporic writers' "struggle for a place in the new world," and their longing for the homeland they have left behind, one feels a sense of déjà vu as we have already encountered such 'angst' or 'anhaga' of the exile in Anglo Saxon poems as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.

"Oft him anhaga are gebideth" (often the exile is plagued by solitude) (Whitelock 160)

So, the question of dislocation, relocation, home, assimilation and multiculturalism become the dominant themes of the expatriate writers. Amitav Ghosh, an Indian-born expatriate writer, explores the relationship between home, migration, displacement, and cultural identity across geographical and historical boundaries. In *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*, he challenges the notion of homeland as a fixed geographical entity, portraying it instead as a fluid cultural construct shaped by memory, migration, and intercultural encounters. His characters negotiate multiple identities, demonstrating that home is continually reconstructed through experience rather than confined to a single place. Thus, Ghosh's fiction bridges home and the world, presenting cultural identity as dynamic, inclusive, and constantly evolving in response to historical and transnational experiences.

Objectives:

The primary objective of this research is to examine the portrayal of cultural identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*, with particular emphasis on the relationship between home and the world in postcolonial contexts. The study aims to analyse how migration, displacement, colonialism, and globalisation influence the formation and transformation of individual and collective identities. It further investigates the role of geographical and liminal spaces, such as the Sundarbans and the Ibis, in shaping the characters' sense of home, belonging, and cultural identity. The research also explores how historical memory, socio-political realities, and personal experiences contribute to the reconstruction of identity across shifting cultural landscapes. By examining Ghosh's nuanced representation of home, displacement, and transcultural encounters, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on cultural identity and identity formation in postcolonial and global literary contexts.

Scope and Methodology:

This study focuses on Amitav Ghosh's exploration of cultural identity in *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*, with particular emphasis on the relationship between home and the world in postcolonial contexts. The scope of the research includes an in-depth analysis of the novels' characters, settings, and narrative strategies to examine how migration, displacement, colonialism, and globalisation shape the concepts of home, belonging, and cultural identity. It further investigates the significance of geographical and liminal spaces, such as the Sundarbans and the Ibis, in influencing individual and collective identities, while also exploring the role of historical memory, socio-political realities, and intercultural encounters in the reconstruction of identity.

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, employing close textual analysis supported by insights from postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and environmental humanities. By interpreting Ghosh's novels through an interdisciplinary framework, the research integrates textual interpretation with historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts to provide a comprehensive understanding of how home, displacement, mobility, and cultural interactions shape identity in an increasingly interconnected world.

Literature Review:

Brinda Bose, in her essay *Footnoting History: The Diasporic Imagination of Amitav Ghosh*, argues that Ghosh masterfully integrates historical and political realities into his fiction through themes of migration, memory, nationalism, and diaspora. She observes that his narratives recover marginalised histories while exploring the complex relationship between place, history, and identity. Bose further emphasises the significance of the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* as a dynamic cultural space that shapes the characters' sense of belonging and identity (Bose 238).

Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, conceptualises identity as fluid and evolving within the "in-between" or "Third Space," where cultures intersect and negotiate new meanings. His theory provides an important framework for understanding Ghosh's characters, whose identities are continually reconstructed through migration, displacement, and intercultural encounters. Similarly, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that home is not merely a geographical location but a cultural and imaginative construct shaped by memory, mobility, and historical experience (Friedman 192). These theoretical perspectives illuminate Ghosh's representation of home and belonging in both *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*.

Recent scholarship has further expanded the understanding of *Sea of Poppies* within postcolonial studies. Kambhampati Rajes examines the novel as a powerful exploration of

colonialism, migration, and the experiences of indentured labourers, emphasising how displacement reshapes identity and creates new forms of cultural belonging. Likewise, Paul Stasi interprets *Sea of Poppies* through the lens of postcolonial modernism, arguing that Ghosh reconfigures history, mobility, and transnational experience to challenge conventional narratives of colonial modernity. These studies reinforce the novel's significance in understanding cultural identity as a dynamic and evolving process.

Christopher Rollason highlights Ghosh's ability to combine historical authenticity with compelling fictional narratives while foregrounding the experiences of marginalised communities. His critical observations on the Morichjhapi refugees in *The Hungry Tide* and Ghosh's engagement with colonial history provide a useful framework for understanding cultural displacement and identity formation. Likewise, *Sea of Poppies* has attracted critical attention for its representation of indentured migration, diasporic consciousness, and the emergence of hybrid identities, demonstrating Ghosh's sustained engagement with the cultural consequences of colonialism and globalisation.

Building upon these critical perspectives, the present study examines how *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* negotiate the relationship between home and the world through migration, displacement, historical memory, and intercultural encounters. It argues that Ghosh presents cultural identity as fluid, transcultural, and continually reconstructed through the dynamic interplay of place, history, and human experience, thereby contributing to contemporary debates in postcolonial literary studies.

Results and Discussion:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is set in the Sunderbans, a region where nature's dominance plays a key role in shaping the story. The novel examines the micro-culture of the tide country, which consists of the islands in the Ganges delta, located south of

Kolkata and near the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The sense of place is a central theme in the narrative, as noted by the Economist review. Ghosh himself emphasises the importance of setting in his works, stating that *“a novel must always be set somewhere, and within the evolution of the narrative, this setting must play a part almost as important as the characters themselves”* (Testimony 6). Brinda Bose further explains that Ghosh’s writing incorporates historical and political elements, exploring both prominent and marginalised themes in modern history, such as nationalism, internationalism, migration, memory, and nostalgia (238).

In an interview, Ghosh explained why he prefers fiction over history, stating, *“I think the difference between the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about the human history. It is about finding the human predicament”* (Shadow Script 30). This perspective drives Ghosh’s exploration of his characters’ inner lives, particularly those who exist between cultures, navigating the divide between two lands separated by time, space, and geography. Through these characters, Ghosh seeks to redefine the present by delving into and understanding the past.

Set in the present day, the novel weaves elements of history into the narrative, creating a connection between past and present. The plot focuses on two outsiders to the Sunderbans: Kanai Dutta, a businessman from Delhi who operates a translation agency, and Piyali Roy, a cetologist of Bengali descent from the U.S. Their interactions with the local community and each other form a central part of the story. Kanai is visiting the Sunderbans for the second time, staying with his aunt Nilima, an NGO activist who runs a hospital on one of the islands. During his visit, Kanai is tasked with reading the journal of his late uncle Nirmal, a Marxist intellectual deeply devoted to the idea of revolution.

The narrative shifts between Kanai's present-day experiences and his reading of his uncle's journal, blending past and present in a meaningful way. A key theme that Ghosh explores in the novel is the fleeting nature of national and ethnic identities. The many names for the Sunderbans— "bhatirdesh"—serve as a symbol of this transience. In his journal, the late Nirmal reflects on the changing landscape, noting,

"In this place that I had lived for 30 years, the birds were vanishing, the land was being reclaimed by the sea... what would it take to submerge the tide country? Not much—a minuscule change in the level of the sea would be enough" (*The Hungry Tide* 215).

Small wonder, then, that shortly after the publication of *The Hungry Tide*, an event of the magnitude of the tsunami struck several South Asian countries, claiming thousands of lives, washing away homes and homelands, and reshaping the physical geography of continents and islands. In the process, mapped spaces were altered, while borders and boundaries were rendered fragile and uncertain. The tsunami-stricken world continued to reel from the devastation and the loss of life, leaving thousands without even the ground beneath their feet. The post-tsunami physical evidence of impermanence lends striking support to the theory recorded in Nirmal's journal: the world's continents once existed as a single landmass, and not only the continents but also the Earth's crust has remained in constant motion. Why, then, should human beings become so attached to geographical boundaries or entangle themselves in rigid, geocentric identities? This is one of the questions raised in *The Hungry Tide*. From the atomic to the cosmic, nothing in the universe offers any guarantee of permanence.

The novel is thoroughly researched, blending history and ethnography, with Ghosh's background in anthropology informing this approach. He delves into various cultural aspects

of the tide country's small community, exploring the relationship between its natural environment and human struggles, a theme that Piya, Fokir, and, to some extent, Kanai also try to understand. The key geopolitical and historical events of the tide country and its inhabitants are revealed through Kanai's reading of his uncle's journal.

Years earlier, Nirmal recognised that in the *"tide country, the wheel of time was spinning too fast to be seen."* He observed that in other regions, it could take decades or even centuries for a river to change its course, and epochs for an island to form. However, in the tide country, constant transformation was the norm (*The Hungry Tide* 224). Further, Nirmal's diary recounts the great storm of 1737 in which

"2 dozen ships sank nothing... nothing escapes the maw of the tides, everything is ground to fine silt, becomes something else. It was as if the whole tide country was speaking in the voice of the poet-life is lived in transformation." (*The Hungry Tide* 225)

Another significant element woven into the main narrative through Nirmal's journal is the suffering of the Bangladeshi refugees, the marginalised "wretched of the earth," who attempt to settle on the island of Morichjhapi but face persistent opposition from government authorities. They refer to themselves as "bastuhara," meaning those dispossessed of land. Their painful question, *"Where do we belong?"* strikes a chord with Nirmal, the idealistic revolutionary, who sees it as echoing the "deepest uncertainties" within himself. He struggles with his own identity, wondering, *"Who was I? Where did I belong? In Kolkata or in the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?"* (*The Hungry Tide* 254). As Nirmal navigates between the powerless and the powerful, the privileged and the oppressed, and the centre and the periphery, he finds himself caught in a liminal space. However, the limits of this in-between space become clear when the settlers' rebellion is crushed, leaving

Nirmal disoriented and ultimately leading to his downfall and death. Thus, the theme of negotiation—between conflicting forces—emerges as one of the novel's central themes.

That change is the law of nature is what the late Nirmal had proposed to teach the settler students of Morichjhapi- a lesson which dates back to prehistoric times-where history and mythology converge:

I decided I'd tell them the story of the Greek Goddess who was Ganga's mother. India was far, far away then in another hemisphere. It was attached to Australia and Antarctica...there were no Himalayas then...no Jamuna, no Ganga, no Saraswati, Brahmaputra. (*The Hungry Tide* 181)

Thus, the legacy of history and myth is such that its reverberations are felt years and generations later. Nirmal and Kusum in the earlier generation, and Fokir and Piya at a later time, break through class barriers that bring them together on some level.

Piyali Roy, the cetologist felt an affinity for the marine mammals and studied field biology as it offered her a different kind of life to be on her own, to have “*no fixed address, to be far from the familiar,*” (*The Hungry Tide* 219) as she was only too aware of the dangers of what Homi Bhabha calls “the fixity of identity.” (9) Her father, a first generation Indian believed that Indians, Bengalis in particular even when abroad always have their eyes turned homewards. He decided not to make that mistake, “to fit in.” She, like Fokir, had to go through the burden of growing up without a mother who she feels should never have strayed too far from home. In Seattle, “*she had no one - no friends, no servants, no job, no life,*” while her father was the “*perfect immigrant -driven, hard-working and successful.*” (*The Hungry Tide* 219) Her mother fell through the cracks and died of depression and subsequently cancer.

Despite her Indian roots, Piya, who speaks neither Bengali nor Hindi, depends on Kanai as a translator and cultural mediator. Although his assistance is at times inadequate, it becomes essential in the wider context of globalisation, which enables individuals like Piya to cross linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries and reach places such as the Sundarbans. Her presence in the Sundarbans thus reflects the movement of people across cultures and borders in an increasingly globalised world. Though the novel ends ambiguously, it suggests the possibility of bridging cultural divides. Both Kanai and Piya embark on the task of reinterpreting their experiences in the Sunderbans, despite having lost their original records—Kanai's uncle's journal and Piya's cetological data. They both attempt to reconstruct these memories, and in an unexpected turn, Kanai relocates to Kolkata to be closer to "the real India." Piya, who initially struggles with guilt over Fokir's death, decides to continue her research in the Sunderbans and learns Bengali, choosing to embrace the local culture over her American identity (*The Hungry Tide* 220). The possibility of a future connection between Kanai and Piya remains open, and their paths are destined to cross again. In the novel's final chapter, "Home, an Epilogue," Piya unexpectedly refers to the tide country as her "home," a statement that surprises Nilima so much that she drops her spoon in disbelief. "*Did I hear you right? Did you say home?*" (*The Hungry Tide* 400).

The Hungry Tide is structured around interconnected narratives: Kanai's and Piya's stories, the lives of characters like Nirmal, Moyna, and Fokir in the present, and the past conveyed through Nirmal's journal, all of which "converge and diverge and reconverge." The novel challenges simplistic binaries and avoids rigid categories such as insider/outsider, margin/centre, local/global, past/present, home/unhome, self/other, speech/silence, and tradition/modernity. Instead, Ghosh attempts to blur these distinctions, creating an "overlapping of the domains of difference." The silences from marginalised voices near the

novel's conclusion do not signify finality but instead suggest the possibility of continued resistance in the future.

The Hungry Tide has lost its symbolic figure in Fokir, but the novel's recurring theme of translation suggests that the ideal of mutual understanding remains within reach. By the end of the story, both Piya and Kanai seem to evolve into new multicultural citizens, able to feel at home in even the remote and rural environment of the tide country. Ghosh's novel thus opens up unexpected possibilities, reinforcing the idea that ethnic, cultural, and territorial boundaries are simply "shadow lines." As global citizens, we must learn to communicate across these lines, "think transculturally," and build new connections. In this way, the N.R.I. (non-resident Indian) can transform into a true M.R.I. (multi-resident Indian), grounding themselves in cultural diversity and establishing their identity in a world without borders.

While *The Hungry Tide* explores cultural identity through ecological space and the conflict between history and memory, *Sea of Poppies* extends this exploration to the experiences of migration, displacement, and diaspora. Through the voyage of the Ibis, Ghosh demonstrates that cultural identity is reconstructed as individuals cross geographical, social, and psychological boundaries, transforming displacement into an opportunity to create new forms of belonging.

The central characters in *Sea of Poppies* experience cultural identity as a fluid and evolving process shaped by displacement. Deeti, Kalua, Neel, Paulette, and other migrants leave behind rigid social structures and begin reconstructing their identities during their voyage aboard the Ibis. Crossing the Kala Pani symbolises not merely geographical movement but also a profound cultural transformation. As Deeti observes, "*On the other side of the Black Water there was no caste... all of them were jahajis together*" (*Sea of Poppies* 538). This statement illustrates how migration dissolves traditional hierarchies and enables

the emergence of a new collective identity. Ghosh suggests that identity is not inherited through birth but continually reshaped through shared experiences and cultural encounters.

The Ibis functions as a symbolic space where diverse cultures intersect and interact. People from different castes, religions, races, and linguistic backgrounds are compelled to coexist, creating a multicultural environment that challenges conventional notions of identity. The novel describes the ship as "a world in itself" (*Sea of Poppies* 390), emphasising its role as a microcosm of colonial society. Within this liminal space, rigid social distinctions gradually lose their significance, allowing new identities based on mutual dependence and shared experience to emerge. Ghosh thereby demonstrates that cultural identity is dynamic and negotiated rather than fixed.

Ghosh redefines the concept of home by portraying it as an emotional and social construct rather than a permanent geographical location. For many migrants aboard the Ibis, exile initially signifies the loss of homeland; however, the formation of new relationships gradually creates an alternative sense of belonging. Deeti's vision of a future beyond caste oppression reflects this transformation: "*There was nothing to lose by crossing the Black Water*" (*Sea of Poppies* 529). The statement signifies her rejection of an oppressive past and her willingness to embrace a new cultural identity. Through this transition, Ghosh argues that home is continuously reconstructed through human relationships rather than confined to a particular place.

One of Ghosh's significant contributions is his representation of the jahaji community. The migrants aboard the Ibis transcend traditional divisions of caste, religion, and ethnicity by establishing new kinship ties based on shared suffering. As the narrative notes, "*From now on, we are jahaj-bhais and jahaj-behens*" (*Sea of Poppies* 538). This declaration symbolises the emergence of a new collective identity forged through migration and displacement. The

novel thus challenges essentialist notions of identity and emphasises solidarity as the foundation of postcolonial cultural belonging.

Colonial oppression compels individuals to renegotiate their identities in response to changing historical circumstances. Characters such as Neel Rattan Halder lose their inherited social status and are forced to redefine themselves outside traditional structures of privilege. Reflecting on his altered circumstances, Neel realises that "*the old life had vanished forever*" (*Sea of Poppies* 432). This realisation illustrates the irreversible transformation brought about by colonial displacement. Ghosh suggests that identity is neither static nor predetermined but evolves through historical experience, loss, and adaptation.

The analysis of *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* demonstrates Amitav Ghosh's profound engagement with the relationship between home and the world in shaping cultural identity. While *The Hungry Tide* portrays home as a contested space where history, memory, and ecology intersect, *Sea of Poppies* expands this vision by presenting migration and displacement as forces that redefine belonging beyond geographical boundaries. In both novels, home is not merely a physical place but an evolving cultural space reconstructed through experience, adaptation, and intercultural encounters. Ghosh challenges fixed notions of identity by presenting it as fluid, hybrid, and continuously negotiated in response to historical and social realities. As an expatriate writer, Ghosh successfully captures the inclusive and pluralistic spirit of India, demonstrating that cultural identity transcends national borders. Although he has made another home abroad, his creative imagination remains deeply rooted in India, enabling him to bridge home and the world through narratives that celebrate diversity, resilience, and shared humanity. Thus, his novels affirm that identity is not confined to a single homeland but is continually enriched through movement, memory, and cross-cultural connections.

Findings:

The study finds that cultural identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* is fluid, dynamic, and continually reshaped by migration, displacement, historical memory, and cross-cultural encounters. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans emerges as a liminal space where ecology, history, and memory influence the characters' understanding of home and belonging. The novel demonstrates how historical events, particularly the Morichjhapi episode, and personal narratives, such as Nirmal's journal, contribute to the reconstruction of cultural identity. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh extends this exploration by portraying migration across the Kala Pani as a transformative experience that dismantles rigid social hierarchies and facilitates the emergence of new collective identities among the jahajis. The Ibis functions as a multicultural space where caste, class, religion, and ethnicity are renegotiated, reinforcing the idea that identity is not determined by birthplace but continually reconstructed through mobility and shared experiences. Collectively, the novels affirm that home is not merely a geographical location but an evolving cultural space shaped by history, memory, adaptation, and human relationships.

Limitations and Research Gaps:

This study is limited to two of Amitav Ghosh's novels, *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*, and it therefore does not examine his broader body of fiction, which offers further perspectives on cultural identity, migration, and globalisation. The research adopts a qualitative literary approach based on textual analysis and does not incorporate empirical methods, reader-response studies, or comparative cultural perspectives. Although the study examines the relationship between displacement and identity, it does not extensively explore related dimensions such as gender, language, diaspora, or transnationalism across Ghosh's wider oeuvre. Likewise, while the ecological significance of the Sundarbans is discussed in

relation to identity, the broader ecocritical implications of Ghosh's fiction remain beyond the scope of this study. Future research may undertake comparative analyses of Ghosh's later novels or investigate the intersections of cultural identity with ecology, diaspora, memory, and globalisation from interdisciplinary perspectives.

Conclusion:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* offer profound insights into the relationship between home and the world in shaping cultural identity. While *The Hungry Tide* presents the Sundarbans as a contested space where ecology, memory, and history redefine the meaning of home and belonging, *Sea of Poppies* extends this exploration through migration, displacement, and intercultural encounters that transcend geographical and social boundaries. Together, the novels demonstrate that cultural identity is not fixed but is continuously reconstructed through historical experiences, mobility, adaptation, and human relationships. By portraying home as an evolving cultural space rather than a permanent geographical location, Ghosh challenges essentialist notions of identity and highlights the emergence of hybrid and transcultural identities in the postcolonial world. As an expatriate writer, Ghosh successfully captures the inclusive, pluralistic, and borderless spirit of India while remaining deeply connected to his cultural roots. His narratives bridge home and the world, illustrating that belonging is shaped not only by place of origin but also by memory, movement, and shared human experience. Thus, this study contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by demonstrating how Ghosh reimagines cultural identity as a dynamic and evolving process in an increasingly interconnected world.

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