

Fluid Identity and Fixed Nation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*

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Abstract:

This research paper focuses on the conflict between fluid identity and fixed nation-state in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* from the perspective of Blue Humanities. The sea merely as a geographical feature, this paper suggests that Amitav Ghosh uses the concept of the sea to signify the themes of migration, displacement, labor mobility, hybridity and transnational identity in his novel *The Circle of Reason*. This paper employs the theories developed by Steve Mentz, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Homi K. Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and Edward Said and their analysis. The major theme is that the ocean space defines the boundaries of nation, culture, and identity. By exploring the movement through the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea made by Alu, the novel shows how colonialism, global capitalism and exploitation of migrant labor have continued to exist after colonization. The sea becomes a way to move, place for sharing memories and negotiation of identities. In this paper, Amitav Ghosh redefines the postcolonial world as an interrelated system of maritime networks rather than a set of distinct nation states.

Keywords: Postcolonial Literature, Blue Humanities, Sea Metaphor, Transnational Identity, Oceanic narrative.

Introduction:

Postcolonial literature arose as an alternative to imperial histories. It gives voice to the colonized society and highlights their struggle for identity. While the beginning of postcolonial literature gave land-based stories, contemporary writers use the ocean as their source. Land based and ocean-based stories have similar narratives, but they differ in setting, symbolism, and perspectives. Both stories narrate the struggles of human desire, love, conflict, and survival. It explores people's identity, memory, and cultural values and reflects the historical, political, and ecological realities. Land narratives focus on stability, permanence, and a sense of place, but ocean narratives highlight the movement, circulation, and connections among the different worlds. Land typically represents ownership and boundaries, while the sea

questions the fixed identities and national borders. Oceanic stories emphasize uncertainty and change because the sea is fluid. This paper explores how Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* uses oceanic narratives not just as backdrops, but as an important element that challenges the rigid borders of nation-states and reveals the fluid, transcultural histories of the subaltern. Rather than functioning as a barrier between nations, the ocean is presented as a dynamic space which connects people through their culture, history, and across geographical boundaries. Ocean becomes central to human experiences and serves as a powerful metaphor reflecting the complexity of human life. It represents birth and death, hope and desire, freedom and confinement, memory and forgetting, journeys and homecomings. The sea is not just a geographical place; it serves as a space where human feelings and identities develop histories. The sea can be compared to human life; calmness of the waves symbolizes peace and stability, while storms symbolize the sufferings, crisis and uncertainty of human life. It also reflects the depth of the human mind. While the sea is used as a metaphor in the novel, this study focuses on the relationship between fluid identity and the fixed nation-state. Ghosh shows that political borders try to create stable national identities, but migration across the ocean constantly reshapes both individual and collective identities. Through ocean movement, the novel questions the idea that identity comes from your birthplace or from your citizenship. Instead, it portrays identity as a dynamic process created by displacement, cultural encounters, labor migration, and historical change. The sea becomes a place where rigid national boundaries lose their power and fluid identities arise through ongoing movement. These ideas are a key to blue humanities, which sees the ocean as a force that shapes culture, history, and literature.

The term Blue Humanities gained prominence mainly through scholar Steve Mentz. In his book *In the Introduction of Blue Humanities*, he argues that water is not merely a geographical feature or a backdrop for human activity. He writes "The blue humanities put water where the land used to be" (Mentz, 24). It is understood that water does not remain a passive background but functions as a central force in shaping culture and history. Moreover, water becomes an active participant for Mentz, and so he writes: "The blue humanities explore how water functions in and across multiple scales" (Mentz, xiv). The researcher finds the ocean as a creator of history, meaning, and identity. In "Allegories of the Anthropocene," Elizabeth DeLoughrey highlights that the ocean acts as a historical and cultural medium, not just a geographical space. She states, "My work has been concerned with what I have called an "oceanic turn" in recent decades, which complicates the limits of the nation-state through recourse to the trajectories of migration, diaspora, and the global flows of empire, capital, and culture" (DeLoughrey, 138). This view indicates that the sea connects people instead of dividing them. It shows centuries of migration, diaspora, trade, and imperial expansion, where languages, labor, memories, and cultures have circulated. Therefore, the nation-state is just one part of a larger network of transoceanic histories

and global relationships. DeLoughrey adds, "The fluidity of the ocean is a space in which authors have made these mergers increasingly apparent" (DeLoughrey, 30). She argues that the ocean is not only a physical space but also a literary medium. Its fluidity and lack of borders allow writers to depict the connections among identities, histories, and cultures. By placing narratives in oceanic environments, authors reveal the complex ties between migration, colonialism, and cultural exchange that go beyond the fixed boundaries of the nation-state.

The ocean is viewed as a repository of collective memory. Literary texts often portray the sea as carrying memories across generations and connecting the past with the present. This research utilizes Homi K. Bhabha's Hybridization and Third Space. "The meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha, 38). Bhabha suggests that no culture is completely pure or permanent. Every culture change through interaction with other cultures. As people move across borders and meet different traditions, they create new cultural meanings and identities. This process produces hybrid identities that exist between cultures rather than belonging entirely to one. Hybrid identities development from cross cultural interactions that the maritime realm may give rise to dynamic identities. "All forms of culture are continually in the process of hybridity" (Bhabha, 38). He conveys that cultures keep changing constantly due to the impact of culture interactions. No culture can remain separate. Owing to the movements of the population, cultural interaction takes place which leads to the formation of new hybrids in culture. It is known that culture serves as a lens through which power is displayed, traditions are shattered, and analysis of social life takes place.

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy extends the idea of sea as a transnational domain of fluidity and intercultural relationships. He states, "The Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (Gilroy, 19). Gilroy argues that identity cannot be fully understood by examining a single nation or ethnic group in isolation. Instead, the experiences of the African diaspora were shaped by movement across the Atlantic Ocean. This movement produced fluid, transnational identities that extend beyond national borders and rigid cultural categories. The Black Atlantic symbolizes an interconnected cultural network in which identities are continuously created and transformed through migration, cultural exchange, and interactions among diverse communities rather than being confined within the boundaries of a single nation or the notion of a pure, homogeneous ethnicity.

Gilroy further emphasizes the significance of mobility through the image of the ship: "The image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise..."

(Gilroy, 4). He reimagines the Atlantic Ocean as a dynamic historical and cultural space where slavery, migration, and cultural exchange continually shape human lives. Rather than functioning merely as a geographical divide between continents, the Atlantic becomes a space of connection and transformation. Within this oceanic framework, the ship serves as a powerful metaphor, carrying not only people but also their memories, ideas, traditions, and histories across Europe, Africa, America, and the Caribbean. As a site of encounter and transformation, it illustrates how diasporic identities are formed through shared historical experiences and continuous cultural exchange. Gilroy challenges conventional notions of identity and belonging that are based solely on a single nation or a fixed ethnic origin.

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said explores the emotional and psychological consequences of exile and displacement. His ideas are particularly relevant to understand the experiences of characters who are displaced through migration across the sea. He observes, "The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever" (Said, 173). This quotation highlights the paradox of exile although displacement may create opportunities for personal growth, intellectual development, and material success; these achievements remain inseparable from the enduring absence of one's homeland. The loss of familiar landscapes, cultural identity, and a sense of belonging cannot be replaced by success, making exile a lifelong condition rather than merely a change of residence. Said therefore presents exile not as a problem that can be overcome but as a defining feature of modern human experience, in which belonging remains permanently fractured. He thus challenges the belief that personal achievement can compensate for the loss of one's homeland, emphasizing that no accomplishment can fully restore the emotional and cultural connections severed by displacement.

Said further explains the profound nature of exile by stating, "Exile is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (Said, 173). He defines exile as a permanent separation from one's homeland, creating an irreparable rupture between the individual and their native place. This separation leaves an enduring emotional and psychological scar that shapes the exile's identity throughout life. At the same time, Said argues that this painful condition also provides a distinctive critical perspective. Because exiles can never fully belong to either their homeland or their adopted society, they develop what he calls a contrapuntal vision: the ability to perceive multiple perspectives simultaneously, question fixed identities and dominant ideologies, and resist rigid forms of nationalism and totalitarianism. Thus, while exile produces a lasting sense of separation and displacement, it also sharpens intellectual awareness and enables a broader, more critical understanding of culture, identity, and belonging. These theories work in conjunction to demonstrate how the sea serves as a metaphor for

migration, identity, cultural negotiation and diaspora that this research paper tries to explicit through the novel *The Circle of Reason*.

The novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) is the debut novel by Amitav Ghosh. It tells the story of Alu, who is orphaned and raised by his uncle Balaram in a small Bengal village named Lalpukur. Balaram, a quirky teacher with passion for science and rationalism, teaches Alu from the works of Louis Pasteur, as he believes that reason and cleanliness can change the world. But as Balaram becomes rivals with the local school head Bhudeb Roy, he finds Balaram and Alu falsely accused of terrorism. A bomb blows up Balaram's home and kills his family, thus forcing Alu to run away. Alu's escape leads to a long journey over the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, thus transforming the narrative into the maritime migration. He first reaches Calcutta and then embarks on a ship to the Gulf, where he meets people from different cultures, languages, and religions. Thus, the sea in the story serves not only as the means of transport but also as the intermediary space where one alters their identity through travel. Alu gets the chance to stay with Zindi in Al-Ghazira. Zindi runs the place for the needy migrant workers. After being part of the project that collapsed, Alu tries to form a new economy the working on the base of cooperation and not profit-driven, in the light of Ghosh's criticism of capitalism and the issue of exploitation. In the end, the group is again forced to run due to the political violence activity that started around them. The final part of the novel happens in Algeria (North Africa). Alu manages to meet Dr. Uma Verma and a society of Indians who are away from native. There he learns that migration is not a temporary situation but the only way people get accustomed to living with changes. The death of Kulfi and the fire that burns the legend of Pasteur mean that Alu has finally broken the bonds with his past and has got a new identity. The climax of the novel shows that Alu, Zindi, and Boss are going to Tangier and Jyoti Das who investigate the case of the bomb exploitation gives up the case.

The sea is a vast expanse that has long held an important place in literature, serving as both physical setting and symbolic space. Its vastness, unpredictability, and ability to connect distant lands make it a lasting image through which writers explore human experiences, historical changes, and cultural intersections. It has been such a powerful challenging human during their journey. The journey may be both physical and spiritual. When the sea is used to present spirituality, the writers make the sea a metaphor. The metaphor is a literary device that conveys deeper meaning by representing one idea through another. The literature metaphors help to express abstract concepts like identity, exile, freedom, transformation, and memory through symbolic images. And these, the sea stands out as one of the most powerful and versatile metaphors. Due to its fluidity and limitless nature.

Many literary works use the sea as the primary setting which includes Moby Dick, The Old Man and the sea, Life of Pi, and Sea of Poppies, where it shapes the story and influences the journeys of the characters. The sea symbolizes migration, uncertainty, resilience, cultural exchange, and quest for identity. This metaphorical significance is central to Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*, where the sea represents transnational migration, displacement, labour mobility, and the other effects of colonialism and global capitalism. Ghosh uses the ever-changing waves of the sea to symbolize the fluidity of human life, reflecting continuous moments, uncertainty, adaptation, and transformation.

In this novel, Amitav Ghosh discusses how global capitalism exploits the labour of subordinate migrant workers and presents migration as a transnational event that goes beyond the nation-state, employing the sea as a metaphor. The other theme of the novel is the migration of birds; this serves as a symbol of the natural ease with which movement can take place and thereby challenging the rigidity of political borders. The circular form of the narration mirrors the cyclical character of migration as a historical process and the constant movement of people across the ocean. The research paper maintains that Amitav Ghosh uses the sea as a metaphor for the historical continuity of colonial and global capitalist exploitation while showing migration as a transnational process determined by economic necessity, displacement and labour mobility. By means of this sea as a metaphor, Ghosh reveals the limited autonomy of migrant workers and their essential function in supporting the global capitalist economy.

Through a century and a half the same lights have shone in one part of the globe or another, wherever money and its attendant arms have chosen to descend on peoples unprepared for its onslaughts, and for all of those hundred and fifty years Mariamma's avatars have left that coast for those lights carrying with them an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital (Ghosh, 203).

The above quotation presents the sea as a place of historical continuity in which the colonial systems of exploitation continue to exist through global capitalism. The "lights" stand for the various center of capital accumulation which always draw in poor migrant labourers, and "Mariamma's avatars" indicate the generations of ships that have carried Indian workers across the Indian Ocean to the petrochemical economies of the Arabian Gulf. These ships serve as symbols of ongoing migration in which the labour of the subordinate classes is exploited to meet the demands of global capitalism. As a result, the sea serves not only as a geographical route but also as a metaphorical space of dispossession, linking Indian migrants to transnational labour systems in which they remain economically disadvantaged.

Moreover, Ghosh strengthens this oceanic metaphor by means of the novel's circular narrative structure. Circular narrative structure is a narrative technique in that the ending returns to the beginning, which creates a sense of completion and has continuity. Ghosh employs a circular narrative structure as the protagonist's journey has the theme of interconnectedness. The circular form suggests that human life is cyclical rather than linear. The repeated appearance of birds, ships, and people reflects the cyclical patterns of the sea, implying that migration is an ongoing historical process rather than a linear journey with a definite end point and also the migratory birds travel along natural routes across seas without regard to political boundaries, ships carrying migrant workers also cross the oceans in response to economic pressures. This similarity highlights the limited degree of agency that migrant workers have; their movements being shaped more by the requirements of global capitalism than by individual choice. Hence, the sea comes to stand as a metaphor for historical continuity, transnational mobility, and the persistent cycle of displacement, labour, and survival in the modern world.

In *The Circle of Reason*, the sea also functions as a metaphor for uncertainty and continuity of human existence. By situating the characters in ever changing oceanic environment. Ghosh doubts the fixed notion of home, identity, and belonging which implies the movement that has become a fundamental feature of the modern world. In this novel, Alu, the protagonist continuously moves from one place to another. The novel follows his journey across different regions which emphasize the migration, displacement, and the fluid nature of home and identity. This continuous movement is symbolically reflected in the sea. The ocean acts as a witness to numerous human journeys, transporting stories of loss, resilience, hope, and adaptation from time immemorial.

Ghosh mentions that borders are not permanent division, but it acts as a flexible construction influenced by history, politics, and human mobility. His novel shows that sea functions as a living archive of linked lives, in which individual experiences overlap with broader historical and global developments. In this novel, Alu's voyage across the Arabian sea echoes the historical movement of Indian migrant workers to the Gulf, while the multicultural communities of Al-Ghazira demonstrates how individual lives interact with wider histories of globalization and Indian ocean mobility. Thus, the sea records interconnected human experiences rather than merely serving as a geographical space. The novel presents an ocean-based view of the postcolonial world and stress the human identity is constantly shaped by movement, encounter and change rather than being determined by fixed geographical or cultural boundaries.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* demonstrates that the sea is not merely a physical entity but a dynamic space through which the relationship between fluid

identity and the fixed nation is explored. It also used as a powerful metaphor for migration, displacement, cultural interaction, and historical continuity. Through Alu's voyage across the ocean, Ghosh challenges established the notions of nations, identity, and belonging. He depicts the sea as a dynamic area in which cultures come together, histories intersect, and new identities are created. The novel stresses that migration is not a single occurrence, but a continuous process shaped by colonial histories and global capitalism; the ocean functions as a living record of the movements, struggles, and hopes of migrant communities throughout time. The novel changes its emphasis from land-based stories to ocean-based stories by understanding human experience. The thoughts of Steve Mentz, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Homi K. Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and Edward Said collectively demonstrate how the sea can act as a metaphor for cultural mixing, exile, transnational movement, and cultural change. Ultimately, Ghosh presents the sea as a place that is full of both uncertainty and possibility, in which identities stay flexible and are kept connected. This also indicates that as people migrate from one place to another, their identities become fluid, continuously reshaped through movement, cultural encounters, and changing social environments. The present study indicates that *The Circle of Reason* makes an important contribution to Blue Humanities by illustrating the ocean as a metaphorical and historical force that transforms postcolonial perspectives on migration, memory, and human life.

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