
INTRODUCING AMITAV GHOSH

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh is a writer who hardly needs an introduction, and yet he could never be introduced by saying that he needs no introduction. In today's globalized world the word 'Diaspora' occupies a very crucial position. This term which was initially used to describe the Jews living in exile from the homeland of Palestine, now refers in general to any minority community living in exile and it involves a sense of dislocation from the homeland and also stories of harsh journeys undertaken either because of religious execution, political pressure or financial benefit. Derived etymologically from the Greek term "diasperien" where "dia" means "across" and "sperien" means "to sow or scatter seeds," the word is primarily associated with the dispersion of the Jews. Originally the word was used to describe the botanical phenomena of dispersal of seeds. For our own use it would be enough to signify that it is a voluntary or forced movement of the people from their homelands into new region.

Keywords: Diaspora, Bildungsroman, Nationalism, Subalternity, Nihilism, Transcendental

Amitav Ghosh is a writer who hardly needs an introduction, and yet he could never be introduced by saying that he needs no introduction. His fictional works, though relating a story, are resistant to classification. Because in the novels of Ghosh, history, travel, science, nationalism, mystery and discovery blend together to produce the narrative. All these strands are woven inextricably using such narrative techniques/modes which make the narrative different. And almost all modern – day writer have made attempts to do this precisely – to try and present 'something different' and decrease fiction's tendency towards any consistent pattern. It has been reiterated with stress that this change in the literary scenario began with the publication of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, "the book that had a seminal influence in triggering the boom in Indian Writing in English."¹ Ghosh himself, "born out of the Post – *Midnight's Children* revolution"² openly owes his indebtedness to Rushdie, along with Naipaul, Marcel Proust, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Ford Madox Ford.

In today's globalized world the word 'Diaspora' occupies a very crucial position. This term which was initially used to describe the Jews living in exile from the homeland of Palestine, now refers in general to any minority community living in exile and it involves a sense of dislocation from the homeland and also stories of harsh journeys undertaken either

because of religious execution, political pressure or financial benefit. Derived etymologically from the Greek term “diasperien” where “dia” means “across” and “sperien” means “to sow or scatter seeds,” the word is primarily associated with the dispersion of the Jews. Originally the word was used to describe the botanical phenomena of dispersal of seeds. For our own use it would be enough to signify that it is a voluntary or forced movement of the people from their homelands into new region.

Displacement, whether it be forced or self – imposed, is always perceived as a calamity. Yet what is notable is the fact that writers in their displaced state generally excel in their work. It seems as if the transitional atmosphere acts as a stimulant for these people. These writings written in dislocated circumstances are frequently termed as exile literature. To some extent Diasporic Indian Writing is also a part of exile literature. It has been the root cause of the emergence of a large number of writers. Joyce in his Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man writes:

“When the soul of a great man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight [...] I shall try to fly by those nets.”³

In an interview with Nikhil Padgaonkar for Doordarshan, Edward W. Said reflecting on the condition of exile opines:

“I think that if one is intellectual, one has to exile oneself from what has been given to you, what is customary, and to see it from a point of view that looks as if it were something that is provisional and foreign to oneself. That allows for independence – commitment – but independence and a certain kind of detachment.”⁴

The Indian diaspora has been the outcome of a scattering of population. Many writers have contributed to the rich tradition of Indian diasporic writings. Ghosh is one of the renowned figures in English literature chiefly known for his diasporic writing. He is the most cosmopolitan among the contemporary Indian English writers whose written corpus cannot be categorized in a particular genre and “the most pervasive element in Ghosh’s fiction is dismantling of the borders of nation – states and genres.”⁵ As a fiction writer he holds a key position in the history of Indian English literature. He has emerged as a powerful voice among the writers of the Indian diaspora. He is a living embodiment of one of the principal themes: the journey of Indian diaspora. Along with V. S. Naipaul and Bharti Mukherjee, he is one of the prominent writers who has taken exile, loss of identity and the problem of immigration as his subjects.

He is the one who has emerged as one of the foremost writers “in not just the Indian, but the global fiction scene.”⁶ Almost all his novels focus on the arbitrary nature of national borders. In one of the interviews conducted by John Howley he says “I distrust the lines that people draw between fiction and non – fiction. I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded.”⁷ His writing deals in “the epic themes of

travel and diaspora, history and memory, political struggle and communal violence, love and loss, while all the time crossing the generic boundaries between anthropology and art work.”⁸ The thing which defines Ghosh’s writing is “the distinctive way in which his works manage to hold together a global, ecumenical perspective while focusing on highly individual, often contested and marginalized histories, such as those of refugees, Indian sepoy under the British Raj, the “lower” caste Othered and voiceless women.”⁹ He uses English language in a skillful and artistic manner. English is “almost a default language”¹⁰ for Ghosh. His writing style can well be compared to a flowing water with its various moods.

He carries away the consciousness of his readers through many parts of the world. His “keen interest in anthropology, in places of today and yesterday makes his novels interesting as well as informative.”¹¹ During the period of his writing he travelled many a place like the ancient land of Egypt, London and Dhaka before and after partition. As a result, coming and going occur frequently in his fictions. Not only this, his fictions are beyond the barriers of time and space. In his novels “yesterdays, today and tomorrows fuse into one.”¹²

Amitav Ghosh, a pioneer of English Literature in India, was born in Calcutta on 11 July 1956 in a Bengali Hindu family, to Shailendra Chandra Ghosh, a retired diplomat in the Indian army. He is one of the most widely known Indians writing in English today. In the days of his childhood Ghosh accompanied his parents to East Pakistan, Iran and Sri Lanka and so studied in different locations as Dehra Dun, New Delhi, Alexandria (Egypt) and Oxford (England). He did his schooling from The Doon School, his bachelors in history from St. Stephen’s College, Delhi University, Delhi and his master’s in sociology from Delhi University. In order to complete his higher studies, he went to England where he received his Ph.D. degree in social anthropology at Oxford University. After the completion of his doctorate he had a yearning for pursuing his career in writing so he worked for the Indian Express newspaper in New Delhi. In 1999, he became a part of the faculty of Queen’s College, City University of New York, working as a distinguished professor in comparative literature. Then in the year 2005 he joined as a visiting professor to the Department of English at Harvard University. In the literary cosmos he is highly acclaimed for his fictions, travelogues and journalism. He has penned seven novels and four volumes of essays. Apart from this, he has also tried his hand at other prose writings, such as newspaper articles, articles in magazines, commentaries, and essays. So, it is said that Ghosh has “established himself as one of the finest prose writers of his generation of Indians writing in English.”¹³

Amitav Ghosh’s debut novel, *The Circle of Reason* (published in 1986), which won him the prestigious literary award Prix Medici Etranger for its French version, is a novel that meticulously examines philosophies of reason. “It is a suspenseful drama about a young weaver, Alu, who is on the run from his Bengali village, having been falsely accused of being a terrorist.”¹⁴ The novel tells the story of this orphan Alu (Nachiketa Bose) “whose extravagant cranial dimensions and contours earn him the lasting nickname “Alu” (meaning “potato”), who

comes to live with his eccentric uncle Balram in a village in West Bengal”¹⁵ after losing his parents in car accident. The only remarkable thing about this orphan is his extraordinary head. It is “extraordinary head, huge, several times too large for an eight eight year old, and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps.”¹⁶ (03) People talk about his head in different manners, but it is Bolai da, who gives Alu his lifelong name as well as part of his identity. Bolai da says “No, it’s not like a rock at all. It’s an Alu, a potato, a huge, freshly dug, lumpy potato. So Alu he was named and Alu he was to remain” (03). Alu is something which is always rooted in soil and therefore in identity. But here the situation is just reverse. We find Alu running from pillar to post from the beginning of the novel till the end. But Alu is not the only character with whom the novel deals, rather it deals with the entire humanity. The novel like Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales is full of vivid characters. These characters are as diverse and as colorful as the epithets with which the author adorns them.

The novel describes all the characters with visual details and thus creates picaresque effect. The novel can also be studied as a bildungsroman as it describes the journey of Alu, a Bengali orphan from the village Lalpukur to Calcutta, Kerela, the Middle East and Algeria. Ghosh is definitely as natural a weaver of words as Alu is of cloth. This quality of Ghosh has well been projected in the novel. The entire novel deals with the modern man’s problem of alienation, migration and existential crisis in life.

Ghosh’s second novel entitled *The Shadow Lines*, published in 1988, is a significant contribution in the field of Indian English Literature and has received more critical attention than his other novels. “*The Shadow Lines* is, in a word, brilliant. Brilliant in how it has been conceived, brilliant in its execution...language, structure and spirit have coalesced to produce a work of lyrical beauty.”¹⁷ It is a Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel in which Ghosh has recalled the people and events that dominated his childhood in Calcutta in the 60’s and later in Delhi and London. The novel has also been listed in the curricula of several universities around the world. It is “strongly aware of the ideology of nationalism and its shortcomings in the subcontinent.”¹⁸ The ‘lines’, in the title of the novel, symbolically represent all such lines that divide nations and people in the name of nationalism, religion, language and caste but the epithet used before the word ‘lines’ states candidly that these lines are illusionary or unreal. So the author calls them shadow lines. Thematically the novel is quite unique as it deals with present day sensitive issues like the partition, riots, war and national boundaries. It narrates the history of an Indian family that lives in Calcutta, but has its root in Dhaka. If thought psychologically, “the book roots personality and identity in childhood”¹⁹ and “the narrator stands out as an adult rooted in his childhood experiences.”²⁰

Since there are frequent visits to the past, memory plays a dominant role in *The Shadow Lines*. The narrator most of the times is found pondering over his memories. We come to know about other characters through his memories. It would be quite apt to say that “the book is written on an emotional plane, underlining and explaining the small, universal truths of life.”²¹

Winner of the 1997 Arthur C. Clarke Award for the best science fiction text, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, is a fascinating novel of Amitav Ghosh. The novel is a beautiful blend of science, religion, myth, nihilism, transcendental philosophy, Indian superstition, logic, rationality and many more things. But there has been a controversy over the matter “whether it is in fact science fiction, however this genre defines itself.”²² It became a table talk discussion because it focuses more on the past rather than on the future, which is supposed to be the common temporal setting of science fiction.

Again though it examines malarial research held in the 1800s, it furthers no idea about science and scientific experimentation. Paul Rosenberg of ‘The Christian Science Monitor’ puts this thought in this way: “But as a novel of ideas which science fiction at its best usually is *The Calcutta Chromosome* is less successful. Ghosh imagines a wholly different way of seeking knowledge indirectly, based on the supposition that knowing something changes it.”²³ But it is quite unfair to blame a writer for not doing something which was not his intention. Defending himself in an interview with Paul Kincaid, Ghosh justifies turning to the past for his science fiction locale. He asserts: “Science and science fiction are old passions of mine....it is a pity that science fiction seeks to project into the future; it is just as interesting to project into the past.”²⁴ The beauty of the novel lies in the fact that it has multiple stories embedded in the main story. On the primary level no doubt the book appears to be about malaria, it seems to be an endeavor towards rewriting the story of Ronald Ross’s discovery of the life cycle of malaria mosquito and the way it causes the disease in human beings. But on reading the novel minutely we feel that except for the fact that Ross discovered the deadly female mosquito on August 20, 1897, Ghosh has totally deviated from the known events.

Divided into seven different sections, and published in 2000, *The Glass Palace* by Ghosh is a superb contribution to the world of novels, which won the Grand Prize for fiction at Frankfurt International e – Book Award in 2001. It is a true projection of the writer’s mindset for he has given a fictional flesh to his own thinking. Ghosh himself being a diasporic personality, “his itinerate and diasporic existence from his childhood onward would perhaps provide a clue to the pervasive occurrence of diverse and eclectic themes in his fictional writing, all clustering about the notion of the diaspora.”²⁵ The novel can be viewed from different perspectives. It can be read as an epic because of its grand theme and grand style and also as a post – colonial novel. Though the narrative seems epic in scope, beginning with British invasion of Burma and then following deposition of Burmese monarchy, it also brings into light the rise and fall of the fortunes of Rajkumar, the Indian entrepreneur. So it is said that “Ghosh spins his tale with harrowing precision and insight, leaving the reader with a lingering disquiet about how the forces of history can irrevocably alter the lives of ordinary men and women.”²⁶ Thus it can be said that written in a linear cum non-linear pattern *The Glass Palace* is a multi-dimensional novel.

Set in the Sundarbans, *The Hungry Tide* is a fabulous novel by Ghosh published in 2005, which won him the Hutch Crossword Book Award. Compared to *The Glass Palace* it is limited

in scope but is as passionate in probing the human condition as is *The Glass Palace*. The main focus of the novel is “on the plight of a displaced people, refugees from neighboring Bangladesh, a forgotten people fighting against odds to survive in a small secluded island.”²⁷ The erosion of borders between nations or genres has been a recurring feature of all the writings of Ghosh. He always stands against the border and genre concept. So, we find *The Hungry Tide*, like his previous novels *The Circle of Reason* and *The Calcutta Chromosome* challenges the conceptual boundaries. This is the reason that Ghosh chooses Sundarbans as the setting of his novel *The Hungry Tide* because here “there [were] no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea”²⁸ (07) and here everyone was on equal plane. The novel, to some extent, is based upon the personal experiences of Ghosh. Apart from this Ghosh also lays emphasis on the creation of “deep communication”²⁹ in this novel. Amitav Ghosh in an interview to the UN Chronicle offers the following opinion on literature in a globalized world:

“I think the world has been globalizing for a long time. It is not a new phenomenon, but one that has achieved a new kind of intensity in recent years. The only real barrier to a complete uniformity around the world is not the image but language. Images can be exchanged between cultures, but the domain where globalization has truly been resisted is that of language. We can send e – mails, which can be instantly translated, but that is shallow communication. For any kind of deeper, resonant communication, language is essential. All such communication is always deeply embedded in language.”³⁰

The *Ibis Trilogy* is as yet an incomplete historical collection by Amitav Ghosh. The first two novels of the series has already been published entitled – *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011). The *Trilogy* has been named after the ship *Ibis* which is on board and on which most of the characters meet for the first time. In his recent tweet Ghosh has announced that the third book of the *Ibis trilogy* will be named *Flood of Fire* and will supposedly be published in spring of 2015.

Sea of Poppies, “an epic saga”³¹, and the first volume of the *Ibis Trilogy*, narrates the colonial history of a period, namely the early nineteenth century. Set in north India and the Bay of Bengal in 1838 at the time of the First Opium War, the novel has medley of characters. While on one hand we have characters like Deeti (the upper caste wife of an opium addict, Hukam Singh) and Neel (the hapless Bengali aristocrat), on the other side we have characters like Kalua (the low – caste ox – driver) and Ah – Fatt (a half – Parsi, half – Chinese opium addict). But the destinies of all these characters of distinguished classes become one, the moment they begin their journey on *Ibis* and sails from Calcutta to Mauritius. The journey metaphor which is quite frequently seen in most of Ghosh’s writing, “is once again used to great effect in this novel to examine many issues”³² and “are close to Ghosh’s heart.”³³ The novel was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won Vodafone Crossword Book Award in 2009. Ghosh has employed many innovative techniques to make the novel enchanting and spellbinding.

Ghosh's seventh novel entitled *River of Smoke*, which is the second part of the *Ibis Trilogy*, was published in 2011. Though the book was written after *Sea of Poppies* but it is not necessary to go through the books in sequence. For though they form a sequence, they stand as independent creations of Ghosh. On a personal level Ghosh himself told an interviewer regarding the second book of the trilogy once that his sole purpose behind this research was learning Cantonese. *River of Smoke* is a novel that has been "woven on the warps of history with woofs of individual lives".³⁴ It is the tale of a city called Canton at the time of Opium war. The story begins with Deeti, the matriarch of a large clan, who gathers once a year on the island of Mauritius to celebrate its history. It so happened that having been parted in the storm on the *Ibis*, the array of characters anyhow survived and was reunited. How they reached Mauritius in different ways has been recorded in Deeti's shrine on a series of panels. This place i.e. Deeti's shrine is also known as 'memory temple' or *smriti ka mandir*. There is a multiplicity of characters and the narrative is carried by multiple voices that show the author's command over sophisticated dialogue. On the whole it is a superb work of art.

It is evident thus, that this Indian novelist and anthropologist has a rich oeuvre. His contribution to the world of fiction has been recognized both in India and abroad as he has won numerous literary prizes and is generally recognized as one of India's leading novelists. Ghosh's interest in history, science, travel, nationalism, subalternity and discovery form the content of his stories which are bound together by the gripping vine of the narrative technique which he uses with the excitement of an experimenter and the finesse of an immaculate craftsman.

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