

The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study

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Abstract: *Amitav Ghosh is a postcolonial Indian writer lives abroad but his writings deal with the socio-cultural and historical aspects of India especially the West Bengal. His approach may be historical but displacement and its related problems have become the core issue of his writings. He could touch the basic problems of India stemmed from the displacement due to different economic issues. The present paper tries to touch all the aspects of his writings focusing the problematic issues that the writer has emphasized.*

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Fiction

The novels and short stories of Amitav Ghosh, the Indian Diaspora writer, focus on Indian culture and tradition. Mainly he deals with the of refugee, issues of development and the squalor of trafficking in flesh and so on and so forth. Ghosh has the capacity to move his readers through the pain of emotion.

"Hungry Tide", one of the important fictions of Ghosh, deals with the relationship of nature with men. The very title of the novel has a symbolic significance which is about hunger and tide. In the sea beach of West Bengal Ghosh looks at the sea and sees the waves which are converted into tides and ebbs. The imagery renders enough indications how life moves up and down just like the waves in the sea. If one thinks deeply about the natural phenomena in the seas he will find that sea is related with life and its activities Just like tide and web-one follows after another. Human life travels in the same direction witnessing scenes of pathos and sorrows. While struggling with the nature of life human being travels from one place to the other in search of food and employment but everywhere he faces life so hard and pathetic man enters into a rat race competition of getting his desired things. He does not hesitate to stoop low even achieving his dreams.

Again Ghosh goes on narrating the communal riots, violence and war-time crisis in Calcutta in *The shadow Lines*. In this novel, the novelist deals with history, sociology and anthropology to portray a realistic picture of Calcutta City, how it is gripped with multifaceted problems due to the Indo-Pak war in 1965. The phrase shadow line is very symbolic which means the international boundary that divides the East Pakistan and India. East Pakistan, the present day Bangladesh is the habitat of Bengali speaking people practicing Bengali culture. But this artificial line which is termed as shadow line by the novelist cannot divide the people, their culture and their attachment with each

other. In this novel the diasporic treatment of Ghosh is clearly exhibited and his and his nostalgic state for his native place always flashes in his mind. Though he in a foreign country his mind is in Calcutta and its culture. The basic culture of the Bengali's is the we-feeling and they all are united with the thread of Bengali culture. In case there are any problems with the people of Dhaka the people of Calcutta get shocked and vice versa. Through the treatment of history Amitav Ghosh shows his fertile culture which teaches him how to live a meaningful life embracing others in a bond of brotherhood and utterly rejecting violence. The philosophy of the novelist is that love breed's life and violence begets violence. At the end of *The shadow Lines* Tridip is murdered while trying to rescue a foreign lady. But Ghosh says this is not the death or murder rather it is a sacrifice to the life of a woman. Tridip, who is a real hero in this novel has been symbolized as a martyr who is great by virtue of his sacrifice for the sake of others. The Bengali culture is the culture of heroes because the heroes live for others and not for themselves. The great Indian heroes like Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Tagore and Deshabandhu Chittaranjan who hail from Bengal are great souls and widely respected for their contribution to their mother land and sacrificed their pleasure and leisure which were amply available at their feet. Amitav Ghosh takes his readers to a great height to understand the holistic culture to keep them away from bloodshed and violence that spread hatred among people.

Amitav Ghosh adopts a novel technique while narrating the story through an unnamed narrator. This unnamed individual is an important character and the spokes person of the cultural history of Bengal. He narrates about different characters and episodes from different perspective. He lets the readers enter the fictional world of Ghosh. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her *Maps and Mirrors in The Shadow Line* (2000), finds the

narrators consciousness “as a porous pace that absorbs other’s lives and other experiences until their colors leak into each other to reveal a pattern...the narrator remains not only the large lucid reflection but also agentive site where random shards memory of realigned towards some measure of coherence” p-260.

The unnamed narrator scientifically narrates the historical events of London in 1939 which he recollects from the memories of Tridip. He learns from Tridip how to streamline his imagination to weave stories taking the historical matters which could unite the readers with their culture. Tridip teaches the unnamed narrator in case a man is uprooted from his culture he is lost and there will be a question on his identity.

Here the teaching skill of Tridip is experimented in the mentor who is rapidly matured from a child to a full-fledged man going through the principles paved by the teacher. Ghosh wants to tell that mental socio psychological and sexual growth is possible through a teaching learning process which is seen in case of the unnamed narrator by the help of Tridip.

It is to say that these discussed novels of Amitav Ghosh may be different in Plot construction, theme and structure but the spirit of Bengali culture and history is the common matter which is focused in Calcutta. Whatever Ghosh writes is within Bengal, Calcutta and its history. The novelist is much interested in sociology, anthropology and history which he which he knowingly or unknowingly employs in his novel.

Ghosh’s fiction doesn’t go beyond Calcutta and its culture. When the *Calcutta Chromosome* is analyzed the city is the focus point of discussion. In this fiction the writer brings about a curious mixture of fact and fiction while analyzing the discovery of the malaria parasite by Ronald Ross in 1895. Calcutta is the place which provided Roland Ross a conducive environment and some faithful and devoted Bengali assistants like Morgan who did their best to discover the reason of malarial fever. This British bacteriologist was more close to the perfume of Calcutta as he did his path breaking research in the city only. His memorial arch at the centre of his hospital is a part and parcel of Calcutta.

This novel is divided into two parts: August; Mosquito day and the day after. Both the first and second part deal with the story set in Calcutta. It is an attempt to rewrite the story of Roland Ross discovery of the life cycle of malaria Mosquito which causes the disease to human beings. Are story in available in the history of medical science. Because such discovery bagged Roland Ross the Nobel prize for medicine in 1901. The first Nobel Prize for medicine goes to Ronald Ross for his coveted discovery of malaria parasite. But Ghosh attempts to retell the truth which is still

unearthed behind the mystery of discovering malaria parasite. On the world Mosquito any 1995 Ghosh arrives at Calcutta and is in search of the enigmatic Calcutta chromosome. This Calcutta chromosome in freak chauvinism unlike the regular chromosomes it doesn’t present in every cell which is not even symmetrically paired. This chromosome is not transferred from one generation to another. Ghosh fantasizes that this chromosome developed out of a process of recombination which is unique to every individual. This is located in the non generating tissues, the brain. This can be transmitted through malaria. This in the stray DNA carrier that Morgan calls’ The Calcutta Chromosome- a unique, biological expression of human traits is neither inherited from the immediate gene pool nor transmitted into it”(207).

When Morgan arrives at Calcutta the very next day he disappears mysteriously. This is the focus of the fiction and all other strands of the narrative are connected to this pivotal event. Morgan was Ronald Ross’s research colleague at New York who played a paramount role in finding out the malaria parasite. Some of his scattered incidents at Calcutta are woven into a fictional fabric.

In his fictions Ghosh analyses the historical significance of his family, his town, Calcutta and Bengal as a whole. He doesn’t go beyond a century’s back rather he focuses on the latter part of the twentieth century which witnessed the ups and downs of Bengal civilization in the pre-independent British reign and even after independence. His fictions like *The Circle of Reason*, *The Sea of Puppies* and *Shadow Lines* deal with the history of Bengal and India as a whole in which Ghosh mostly focused on Calcutta and portrays the socio-cultural and religious importance of the past. Study of history and heritage of Bengal helps planning strategy for contemporary and futuristic needs. But Ghosh facilitates portraying history to go through an ambitious planning for his readers. Those unaware of their past, progress and culture of civilization face some problems but history removes such obstacles by dealing with real life of past that provides lessons for present and future. Actually the history of Bengal and Calcutta is nothing but the decision and their ways of life. It is essential for Ghosh to turn the scars of past into the simile of present. This is possible only through a thorough understanding of the unrevealed history of Bengal which Ghosh attempts to unveil through his fictions. The freedom that the Indians experience today is an outcome of the mental and physical agony that they had undergone during the British reign. It is important for Ghosh to bag the spirit of bygone age and turn it into living deeds.

The political, traditional cultural and social milieu of ancient Bengal’s glorious history influenced Ghosh to write fiction giving stress on history. The writer provides insight into the relation between small human stories and big historical changes that

takes place in Calcutta. His *Sea of Puppies* (2008) is a very popular fiction elaborating Bengal's heritage, tradition and past and moral values. By focusing on the issue of indentured labour of the past, Amitav Ghosh wants the modern society to take cognizance of the struggle, blood and sweat of the freedom fighters into evolving and making the present society worth living. Like Gosh Michael Ondaatje, in his novels such as *The English Patient* 1992, *In the Skin of a Lion* 1997, *Running in the Family* 1982, has analyzed in details, about the history of his native land Srilanka and Canada describing about the indentured labour and their problems what Ghosh does in his *The sea poppies*. *In the skin of the lion*, Bobby Bolden, the hero faces an acute crisis working in the foreign land only for bread and butter. He couldn't understand the people with whom he worked, nor could he communicate well with others, as a result he couldn't keep the relationship with them. The same situation Ghosh analyses in his novel *The Sea of Poppies* about the indentured labourers who traveled from Calcutta to the other countries to feed their stomach.

Ghosh presents the character as puppy seeds which grow in large number from the field to form the sea where every single seed is ambiguous about its future. The sea puppies describes the sufferings, hardship and difficulties faced by the Bengalis in the past after the Slavery Abolition Act came in to effect on 1st August 1835. The act brought about a history change in the condition of the labourers. As a result a large number of people migrated from Bengal to Mauritius to work in the sugar cane field of that country. The sugar production, in Mauritius and other parts of the world could become cheap due the large availability of Indian particularly Bengal labours. As most of the people in Bengal and Calcutta were not able to feed their stomach once in a day they were compelled to travel other places to work as indentured labourers. However, they changed the economic status of their dream land by their own efforts, of course at the cost of

their sufferings. Deeti is the brave woman and how does she face the situation after being forced to work as a contract labourer. Ghosh writes, 'hundreds of ... improvised transients many of them were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the country side' (p 290)

The agents who were collecting indentured labourers from Calcutta tempted the labourers with false promises of a lot of food and negotiable pay but when this labourer started sailing they were misbehaved by those agents. Kaula a strongly built hard muscled man who worked from sun rise to sun set has been discriminated. Kaula is a metaphor of indentured labourers of the overseas Indians, who worked round the clock in the foreign countries only for the square meals. These untold tragedies have been historicized in the friction through the characters of Deeti and Kaula. Thousands of Bengalis migrated to work in different countries and they suffered a lot. These sufferings were repeatedly published in the Bengal gazette which is the first gazette of India. That made the other people conscious not to go further. Ghosh goes through the papers in archives and collects information for his fiction. Kaula witnesses a heart rendering scene in which eight Bengalis signed an agreement as they wanted to save themselves from sure death because of hunger. In the foreign countries the Bengalis indentured labourers were put in such hard circumstances of hunger and poverty. They are bound to work for twelve hours for their survival. The Indians working hard in the foreign land forgot everything; there culture, there tradition and caste. All the people from different caste were bound to work together as they face very hard time of their life. The duffader tells Kaula; "caste doesn't matter...all kinds of men are eager to sign up- Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamaras, and Telis. What matters is that they, being young and able bodied, are willing to work.

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