

DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES AND SEA OF POPPIES*

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Abstract

Diaspora is a psychological journey, a dilemma between homeland and new settlement nations. The migrant, journeying from place to place becomes a stranger in other land and this alienation makes an effect on identity psychological peace and existential status. Diasporic writing occupies a place of great significance between countries and cultures. Diasporic writing mostly become a response to the lost homes and to issues such as Dislocation, Nostalgia, Discrimination, survival, Cultural change and identity. Dislocation is one of the first feelings that haunt the diasporic community. When diasporic people find themselves dislocated from the home society they are upset mentally and strive to remember and locate themselves in a nostalgic past. Amitav Ghosh, a novelist with an extraordinary sense of history and place, is indisputably one of the most important novelists of our time. As a writer of Indian Diaspora, Amitav Ghosh presents multiple viewpoints of the dispersed people of different nationalities. In his hands novel becomes an artistic tool for social betterment.

Keywords: Diaspora, Amitav Ghosh, Migration, Identity, Nostalgia, Cultural dislocation, Cultural diversity, homeland.

Introduction

Diaspora is a psychological journey, a dilemma between homeland and new settlement nations. The migrant, journeying from place to place becomes a stranger in other land and this alienation makes an effect on identity psychological peace and existential status. Amitav Ghosh, a novelist with an extraordinary sense of history and place, is indisputably one of the most important novelists of our time.

The diasporic literature act as a bridge between two different cultures as it commonly deals with the memories of home and the experience of the emigrants in a host country with their native culture. Thus this literature became an extended form of home return; many of the diasporic writers looking back at their homeland, its culture and its other aspects through their writings. The Indian diasporic writers from all over the world started focusing on their homeland, the issue of migration and its effects, in their writings. For the Indian diasporic writers, it is India or the memories of India that become the materials to most of their literary expressions. Some of the important writers who concern their homeland and the diasporic subjects in their writings are V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai and Anita Desai.

Among them Amitav Ghosh is one of the important diasporic writers who captures all the Consciousness of diasporic community in his writings. His approach towards the movement of migration in all his novels was unique. He never directed his characters towards the loss on the foreign country instead he observed their experimental lives and gave a positive touch. His novels are always in search of the root cause of migration that never comes to view. He opened the past and re-examined every socio-political activity in order to expose its actual effect on common people and their migration.

In his novels Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of nationhood and Diasporas, ideas that involve relationships between individuals belonging to the same or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend *The Shadow Lines* of political borders.

The idea of an Indian Diaspora as a transnational social community/group is based on the intimate psychological feeling of being Indian and possessing the social values of Indian heritage is the basic requirement.

Diaspora is a journey towards self-realization, self-recognition, self-knowledge and self-definition. There is an element of creativity present in the diasporic writings and this creation stands as a compensation for the many losses suffered. The diasporic writings have also helped in casting a new aura around global India and have also contributed in building a novel image of India abroad. All this helps in strengthening bonds between various countries and they begin to relate through historical, cultural, social, traditional and economic ties. Indian writers mingled with the subject of diaspora.

Almost all the Diasporic communities face initial problems and sufferings, when they settle in a new land. Even though they try to adjust to the new environment, language,

culture and the society, they will suffer from the psychological problem also. Alienation, identity crisis, loneliness, rootlessness, dislocation, nostalgia, cultural change, gender inequality, racism, homelessness etc. are Diasporic themes and problems included in Diasporic sensibilities. Diasporic sensibility is not something permanent; it keeps on changing as time and place change. Ghosh looks at Diasporic literature in a new perspective. Ghosh's novel is well known for its intimate portrayal of the constant diasporic community who was willingly or forced to lose the status and face many struggles under the British colonialism. Nevertheless, in the journey of the migration Ghosh manifests how the migrants closed down the caste system. Diasporic writing is distinguished by a "dislocation from" and "relocation to" a foreign region. Many people are migrating from their country for economic growth causing trouble for themselves and nation too.

Amitav Ghosh was greatly inspired by the political, cultural and social environment of post independent India. The works of Ghosh are reflecting the political, historical, cultural events and social consciousness are marked by themes that go side by side with colonialism. The term displacement is associated with diaspora and has got the poignancy in the hands of Ghosh.

The Chief Characteristics of Diasporic Writings

The chief characteristic features of the diasporic writings are the quest for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt etc. The diasporic writers turn to their homeland for various reasons. Indian Diasporic writings help in many ways and is a powerful network connecting the entire globe. Diasporic literature helps in the circulation of information and in solving many problems too. It helps to re-discover the commonality and inclusiveness of India. This literature works as a channel to strength the bonds between the different states of India and of India in relation with the other countries at large. Diasporic opinion helps to break through the past alienation and isolation which caused much injustice and abuse of human rights.

This literature has helped in providing a link between India and the rest of the world. And this coming together and closer has helped creating tremendous self confidence with a combative spirit. The awareness that they are articulate, artistic, talented, creative, practical and adaptable has also dawned upon them.

Diaspora Theory with its various features has influenced the literature of every language of the world. This literature is widely known as Expatriate or Diasporic Literature. Diasporic Literature is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are

associated with native culture and background. In this wide context, all those writers can be regarded as diasporic writers, who write outside their country but remained related to their homeland through their works. Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation.

Generally, diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. A diasporic text can be investigated in terms of location, dislocation and relocation.

The changing designation of home and accompanying nervousness about homelessness and unfeasibility of going back are recurrent themes in diasporic literature.

The Shadow Lines

The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh explores the political and economic growth of India through the lives of two families Bengali and English. This novel captures perspective of time and events that bring people together and hold them apart. The novel has an unnamed narrator relating the story of his experience and his uncle Tridib's experiences. Tridib is considered to be the protagonist of the novel. Ghosh's novel is a useful resource to study the both the challenges of diaspora as well as the strategies of negotiation.

There are many characters in this novel and they are connected to each other through the relationship or family or friend. The narrator has his grandmother who is known as Tha'mma and his parents. Mayadebi and her husband live in England.

Away' in which the narrator presents the relationship of two families- The Datta-chaudhury of Bengal and The Price family of London. A.N. Kaul illustrates this relation in his essay "A Reading of The Shadow Lines":

"Towards the end of the story also cross the newly created frontier between India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), engaging or acknowledging along the way the proximate presence of the other foreign countries and continents through the Indian diplomatic and the UN postings of Datta-Chaudhuris." (Kaul, *SL* 300)

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* published in the year 1988 deals with varied issues related to diaspora and history. The structural division of the novel in two parts, Going Away and Coming Home symbolizes displacement as the ambivalent meaning of home. The glorious memories of Calcutta and Dhaka are beautifully pictured by the characters longing for their homeland.

The novel is has the background of the Second World War, the partition of India (of Bangladesh), the communal conflict in Bangal and Calcutta in 1964. The novel focuses on the political decision taken by then government in India and the aftermath of it. The novel also has nationalistic concerns. Various stories in the novel are representative of the theme of diaspora, nationalism and partition. The past home memories act as a recurring background throughout the novel.

The novel spans over three decade and have three generations of characters. So the novelist has lot of scope for the free movement in terms of time and space. This novel captures perspective of time and events that bring people together and hold them apart. In this novel Ghosh explains the sufferings of Tridib through the unnamed narrator. The distance draws him even closer and the homeland is elevated to a higher pedestal. He uses personal stories to shed light on the social, political and historical The Characters keep turning back to the homeland-its sacredness, rituals, culture, and thus adopt various families' symbols to help them freeze the image of the homeland in their being. This novel is considered to be a successful novel which stands for its powerful imagination.

Sea of Poppies

Ghosh novel *Sea of Poppies* portrays imperialism and the migration of the indentured labourers of North India; specifically to Mauritius. Migration takes place due to various reasons and in the Indian context the migratory movements were governed by historical, political, economic reasons including higher education, better prospects and marriage. However, the Indian community has shown greater sense of adjustments, adaptability, mobility and accessibility. The sense of homelessness which every immigrant suffers is genuine and intense; but in recent times it has been seen that this concept has been minimized and made less intense through their social networking and sense of solidarity.

The novel *Sea of Poppies* revisits the Indian diaspora and a represents their hopes, fears, and aspirations in the appearance of a historical saga. In such historical improvements, the transportation and the recruitment of indentured workers from India became a commercial venture for the Britishers' imperialism. *Sea of Poppies* is a historical novel which opens in 1838 on the eve of the opium wars, sets in Eastern India and the Bay of Bengal.

In the novel, Amitav Ghosh mentions the different diasporic vista in the early Indian diaspora. The main aspect of the novel is the loss of the homeland, national and cultural identity and subaltern conscious because of the migration, how the labourers try to find a new identity in a foreign land, exemplified by the slave-schooner Ibis. In *Sea of Poppies* we

can see some of these oppressive trading strategies of the British traders.

Sea of Poppies points a moving picture of the human devastation by British colonial rule and its lopsided policies. The story is told in an appealing somewhat modified, lingo of the period, when British English mingled with Indian English, and dallied with dozens of other dialects, from ships lore to pirate talk of the lascars to the pidgin of the Chinese and all the other verbal music of the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. The novel presents two basic forms of colonial suppression and deprivation: The illegal plantation of poppy crop and the opium trade between British authorities and China in 1830s.

Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *Sea of Poppies*, investigates into the construction of identity. The characters try to transform all internal and external forces that shape their identities mainly their historical background, their family ties and at last memories. Ghosh explores the possibility of formation of identity on the basis of new affiliations and relationship during the journey of people away from home. It is interesting to see that 'routes' which suggests sailing away from 'roots' can offer new way of constructing an identity. The Ibis, former ship-slaver ferries motley of indentured labourers, convicts, a deposed Zaminder accused of forgery, to the colonial outposts in Mauritius. The passengers on the ship hail from diverse sociocultural backgrounds and they come up with their own cultural ethos.

These people have their own distinctive identity based on their social affiliations like caste, creed, social status etc. Displacement offers an opportunity for the downtrodden people to forgo their traditional social identities in order to fashion a new identity based on their common experience of suffering and difficulty in the journey to uncertain future. The displacement therefore acts as a kind of liberating force for the marginalized people like Deeti who have been suffering under an oppressive identity imposed on her by the society. The strict social and patriarchal system debars her from forging any relation with her lover Kalua even though she is subjected to suffering and neglect. The Ibis carried people from all walks of life and from a variety of social, ethnic, linguistic background. In the face of new condition created by their displacement because of the prospect of job, freedom from constraining social system, the passengers on board invent new names and histories for themselves. Thus Aditi becomes Deeti, her lover Kalua transforms into Maddow Colver, a French woman becomes simultaneously Paulette as well as Putli..

The configuration of a new society of diaspora people on some other land is an act of creation and this is how civilization progresses. Societies are formed and Cultures are

developed.

The ship becomes 'new home' for the migrants. The ship is a shelter to migrant people. As the ship was leaving behind their life and time and moving ahead, so the life of its inhabitants was changing. This is how old treaty is getting weak and past is tamed to construct fragmented identities in to new. This has been well exemplified in the Sea of Poppies when Bahram Modi realizes that journey away from home provides new persona. To quote:

“In Canton stripped of the multiple wrappings of home, family, community, obligation and decorum, Bahram had experienced the emergence of a new persona... he had become Barry Modie... but when he made the journey back into his wrappings... yet it was not as if anyone aspects of himself were more true or authentic than the other” (Ghosh *SP* 52)

One can also discuss language factor in diasporic novels. A physical displacement makes deviation on the standard norms of language and experiments neologism and includes vernaculars along with that.

Conclusion

In the study of Ghosh's novels *The Shadow Lines* and *Sea of Poppies* we can say that Amitav Ghosh mentions the different diasporic vista in the early Indian diaspora. The main aspect of the novel is the loss of the homeland, national and cultural identity and subaltern conscious because of the migration, how the labourers try to find a new identity in a foreign land, exemplified by the slave-schooner Ibis. In *Sea of Poppies* we can see some of these oppressive trading strategies of the British traders.

Thus Ghosh was a prolific Indian Bengali writer belongs to the Diasporic community. All his novels influenced by the effect of loneliness. The immigration and alienation as a fact holds a great place in Diasporic writings. All his novels explore the sense of nostalgia. The haunting effect of losing homeland is considered to be the main aspect of diasporic writings. The dislocation in the characters explains the great sense of diasporic sufferings.

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