



## Interfacing with History: A Study of the Novels of Amitav Ghosh

DR. Rakesh Kumar Pandey E-mail: rakeshpandey1110@gmail.com

Received- 23.02.2021, Revised- 27.02.2021, Accepted - 03.03.2021

**Abstract:** *History like literature is considered a human construct which always has a scope for reconstruction. Literary expressions, however embedded in the idea of art and creativity, have seldom been able to evade history completely. The flight of the literary imagination has wings that often get stuck in the webs of the history. History is never without distortions. The artist goes one step further in justifying his/her work of art as independent of all accuracies and precisions. In the present context, the literary writers are seen to be transcending the boundaries of all kinds. Amitav Ghosh is one such writer who fits aptly in the tradition of emeshing history and literature. He adopts magic realism, history, anthropology, thriller, science fiction, medical science, memory, Indian and European myths and legends to write his four works.*

**Key words-** expressions, history, identity, expatriation, diaspora.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most promising novelists in the post- Rushdie period in the history of the Indian writing in English. Amitav Ghosh adopts the technique of magic realism, history, anthropology, thriller, science fiction, medical science, memory, Indian and European myths, and legends, to write his four novels. His canvas is so vast, so complex, and so interesting that his neglect by critics and scholars is lamentable. He is not an imitator, but an innovator, a combination of some rare fictional qualities. He is a post-colonial critic of contemporary events. With his four novels he has carved out an unenviable position in the history of Indian writing in English.

He was greatly influenced by his parents. 1 Ghosh, through his keen observation of his father and his colleagues, learnt about the subterfuges and silences of his father's generations. It is this aspect which has fascinated Amitav Ghosh. He has used these memories to construct the concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world, which is the dominant theme of The Shadow Lines. The blend of anthropology and history can be seen in some of his novels and non-fictional works, like, In An Antique Land and The Glass Palace.

Unlike some diasporic writers like Rushdie, Mistry and

*Associate Professor- Department of English, National P.G. College, Barahalganj, Gorakhpur (U.P), India*

Corresponding Author

critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, Ghosh does not believe in high-sounding theories of the west. Unlike them, his protagonists travel to the east rather than West. Alu, in The Circle of Reason runs to the Middle East. Like Alu, Bomma in In An Antique Land and Murugan in The Calcutta Chromosome are the subalterns.

The first frame characterizes the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan in as much as they offer "discourses of the nation" and have continued beyond independence, intersecting in different ways with the nationalistic upheaval that ended colonial rule in India. The second frame opposes the first and appears in its strongest form in the anti national and transitional allegories of Salman Rushdie's fiction. Rushdie has made a distinctive contribution to the story of Indian nation hood a third significant frame in Indian English fiction generates what critics call the "East-West theme" and this can be explicated with reference to the section of Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Anita Desai, and Amitav Ghosh.

"The identification between the public and private strands is so complete in Midnight's Children that it is not possible to separate them properly. It is this feature that gives unity to the novel. Moreover, the interaction of historical and individual forces has made the narrator what he is. Rushdie thus creates in Saleem a chronicler who provokes much of history he records and who enshrines in his personal heritage the identity of India himself".<sup>2</sup>

While Amitav Ghosh's novels have so far provided two very different versions of the clash of cultures. His narrative radically revises the usual connotations of displacement, exile, and alienation in cross-cultural fiction, besides unsettling the urban, upper-class, English-oriented milieu of most English novels. Like Rushdie, there is a fine bond of fantasy and



realism in the novel helped by myths and symbols. Indian myth and European myth meet and mingle in the character of Shombhu Debnath.

The fantasy-element is to be seen in Alu's appearance and disappearance takes on a symbolic significance. These grotesque boils start appearing sometime after the death of Balaram: For one night Alu showed him (Gopal) two boils, the size of duck's eggs, one on his leg and the other under his armpit - not ordinary boils but suppurating craters of pus, as though his flesh had gathered itself together and tried to burst from his body.<sup>3</sup>

These boils multiply till the whole of Alu's body is covered with them. Gopal has given us a clue to the origin of these boils. It is as if the spirit of Balaram and those of the oppressed masses which were crying out for justice and would not leave Alu alone till he has found some solution to bring relief to them. Miraculously these boils disappear at the end of the four days of meditation as Alu lies under the debris of the star. Ghosh follows Rushdie in introducing an element of magic realism in his novel, *The Circle of Reason*.

Amitav Ghosh, with his subtle humour and awareness of contemporary politics, ensures that private turmoil and crises are mirrored and intermeshed in public turmoil and crises. Catherine Candy writes about Rushdie's use of memory in some of his novels: "Midnight's children saw Rushdie using memory as the tool for recovering his part in Bombay. With his reconstruction of the city in the *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the reliance on memory becomes a personal and political necessity."<sup>4</sup> Effectively exiled not only from the India of his birth but also from the active and engaged life that was such an important source of ideas in his earlier work (*The Shadow Lines*), Rushdie has been obliged, more than ever, to construct an 'India of the mind'.

Thus, unlike Narayan and Anand, Rushdie and Ghosh construct an India of the mind, by use of their memory. The resulting texts are both a homage to the power of memory and also strangely - flat with the two - dimensionality of a largely cerebral reconstitution of 'reality'. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh evokes post - colonial situations, cultural dislocations and anxieties in the period between 1962 and 1979 and interprets the issues of fractured nationalities in close and telling encounters. But, in his third novel, *An Antique Land*, Ghosh proves himself to be an indefatigable researcher, a social anthropologist and a keen traveller as well. His canvas keeps on conquering new images, giving expression to new ideas and themes. In it he ventured on a technical innovation.

Within the parameters of history, he has tried to capture a story, a narrative, without attempting to write a novel. The anthropologist Ghosh is at his best in weaving a complex pattern of fact and fiction in both the novels. World War II, our independence, and the partition of our country have provided Amitav Ghosh with raw material against which he studies the historical truth, the meaning of nationalism and political freedom in the modern world - in *The Shadow Lines*. In *An Antique Land* Ghosh has used the mode of the autobiographical traveller's tale to study the past thousand years' history in the context of two continents - Asia and Africa. The Calcutta Chromosome puts forward the paradox that life finds sustenance through 'counter - science' through secrecy and silence and rejection of individuality.

The journey as a motif runs throughout the novel and unites characters cross its three parts of the continent in *The Circle of Reason*. What the novel celebrates is a quest. In typical fashion, a picturesque protagonist moves from Lalpukur in India to Al-Ghazira in Egypt to the little town of El-Qued in the north - eastern edge of Algerian Sahara. But this journey has the appearance move of withdrawal and retreat than of the bold adventures of Fielding's hero. It is a search for a transforming vision.<sup>5</sup> What Ghosh tries to show is that ultimately reason proves to be inadequate and he celebrates the triumph of human goodness. Through Mrs. Verma the author celebrates love that endures and nurtures humanity. She comes as a fresh shower of rain in the arid world of reason. There is a need to restore to man the qualities of the heart. It is the only way to become whole again in the wasteland of modern civilization. *The Shadow Lines* is to some extent about the meaning of family relationships in a disintegrating world. The metaphor of journey



pervades the novel and enables it to extend and to expand spatially and temporally (a journey, after all, takes place sequentially and in time). This is of course a traditional method for the novel that sets out to discover the relationship between imagination and reality. Paradoxically, though this subtext of geographical inclusiveness helps to situate the narrator very firmly in his specific cultural milieu Amitav Ghosh, a perceptive and intelligent anthropologist and critic, laments the loss of the fluidity of the medieval world, be it Egypt or India. It created a wedge between two cultures and his quest ends on a note of regret and anger.

His *The Calcutta Chromosome*, is a novel dealing with fevers, delirium and discovery or a quest for immortality. It is a melodramatic thriller. In this novel, Ghosh has universalized the specific through the concept of quest and journey. The notion of delirium, fever and discovery superficially associated with malaria is extended to the meaning of life having identical symbolic and symptomatic significance.

Thus, Amitav Ghosh's novels, a discourse on human quest, project characters engaged in individual search for truth, self - identity and self - knowledge. The spiritual and corporeal exploration, the promise of alternative words and visions, invariably compel them to shuffle between different geographic locations and points of time.

The personal odyssey takes shape through individual memory and recollections of others. In *The Circle of Reason*, the progress is carried on through the stages of Satva, Rajas, and Janas, and finally the circle is completed by a return to Satva or Reason; In *The Shadow Lines* one moves through the bomb - scarred London, riot - torn Calcutta and Bangladesh to view the outside world that affects the inside world and to learn the true value of man ; the story of education and journey continues in a different ensemble in *In An Antique Land*. Hence, the novelist uses the device of the story - within - a - story and the quest - within - a - quest. The narrator's journey both forward and backwards in time and space is in order to decipher intense meaning of life and existence. The concentric plot gives vivid effect of the meaning.

The themes of quest and journey are as old and eternal as the origins of men and women in this world. Amitav Ghosh has attempted to show how man can, and must learn to, bear that reality. He appears to have a good deal from Salman Rushdie:

creating a special physiognomy for symbolic meaning, magic realism, first person narrative, use of irony as a structural element.

Some scholars have discovered Vedantic thought underlying some of his work. His descriptions of Indian places and social and domestic activities have a ring of authenticity - it would be quite interesting to compare his depiction of Indian settings with his portrayal of the foreign lands. Above all his use of irony is quite distinctive ; his irony, directed against typical Indian follies - such as eccentric behaviour, superstition, etc. - often terminates in gentle humour, as in chances, or some insight rather than bitter satire, contempt or denunciation. These are some of the things by virtue of which he is generally credited with having dealt with the matter of India from the inside.

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