



Exemplification of History and Historical Fantasy in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract— Amitav Ghosh has won many accolades for his fiction that is keenly intertwined with history. His fiction is characterized by strong themes that may be sometimes identified as historical novels. His themes involve emigration, exile, cultural displacement and uprooting. He illuminates the basic ironies, deep-seated ambiguities and existential dilemmas of the human condition. He, in one of the interviews, has observed, "Nobody has the choice of stepping away from history" and "For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it can incorporate elements of every aspect of life-history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality". Amitav Ghosh's success as a historical novelist owes much to the distinctiveness of his well-researched narratives. He remarkably manifests a bygone era and vanished experiences to life through vividly realized detail. The novels are largely set against the backdrop of major historical events such as the Swadeshi movement, the Second World War, the partition of India, the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta, the Maoist Movement, the India-China War, the India-Pakistan War and the fall of Dhaka from East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. While focusing upon all his novels the paper aims at examining and elaborating Ghosh's historical touches and their implications. The paper also investigates the narrative techniques employed in his novels.



Keywords— Amitav Ghosh, Novels, History, Culture, Family, and Sexuality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ghosh's novels are *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In An Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004). *The Shadow Lines* won the Sahitya Akademi Award and *The Calcutta Chromosome* won the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1997. In 2007, he was awarded the Padma Shri by the Indian government. Ghosh's fiction has exhibited a remarkable geographical spread taking in for his novel, *The Circle of Reason* India, the Gulf region and Algeria; for *The Shadow Lines* India, Bangladesh and the United Kingdom for *In An Antique Land* India, Egypt and Africa; for *The Calcutta Chromosome* India and the United States; and *The Glass Palace* Burma, India and Malaya.

The cultural space for most of Ghosh's characters is huge. It is a vast borderless region with its hybrid languages and practices which circulate without national or religious

boundaries. Ghosh marked his debut as a creative artist with *Reason*. Its French edition won him the Prix Medici Estranger, one of France's most important literary awards. *Reason* is about history's victims, who are forced into exile by events beyond their control. It is a complex tapestry of stories of individuals whose lives overlap, pull apart, and separate. It is a story of obsession – obsessive rationalism that some embrace as science and others ridicule as insanity and obsessive manhunts. It is a detective story, a story of exile, a travelogue, a women's rights tract, a Marxist protest, a plea for humanistic camaraderie and so on. Commenting on the novel, Hanif Kureishi in "A Feast of Words" says that "*The Circle of Reason* is a huge, ambitious novel with a crowd of characters and themes, set in a number of countries, India, Yemen, Egypt and Algeria. It is like an immense pot into which scores of more or less random ingredients have been thrown" (40). It is a novel of exile/restlessness. In it, people from the old world are trying

to cope with the new one as Ghosh weaves four strands: “the social, the social economic, the political and the metaphysical”. (Sengupta, “An Allegorical Tom Jones” 29). It is a novel which weaves together nations and continents. It unites people of different nations. Claire Chambers in “Historicizing Scientific Reason in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*” says that “*The novel is ostensibly a bildungsroman describing the journey of Alu, a Bengali orphan, from the obscure village Lalpukur in Calcutta [...]. It incorporates elements of the picaresque, the novel of ideas, the thriller of the detective novel (with Assistant Superintendent of Police, Jyoti Das, trailing an alleged extremist, Alu, through several continents) and the Hindu epic*” (36).

The main narrative of the novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, involves a re-examination of the history of late nineteenth-century malaria research by a possibly deranged Calcutta-born man named Murugan (he is also known as Morgan) who works for an international public health company called Life Watch and uses an Americanized slang register, which characterizes him as a diaspora subject. Murugan has had a life-long obsession with the history of malaria research, which has led him to the conviction that Ronald Ross, the British scientist who was awarded the 1902 Nobel Prize for Medicine for his work on the life-cycle of the malaria parasite. Murugan believes that a secret history has been erased from the scribal records of the colonial society and medical historiography more generally. He has devoted himself to uncovering the hidden truth. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the Web assumes much the same role as weaving in Ghosh's earlier work, functioning as a synecdoche for the interpenetration of cultures.

The Shadow Lines is a narrative of three generations – the narrator’s Bengali family in pre-partition Dhaka and Calcutta and their English friends, the Prices whose histories encompass both world wars, the left Book Club and shades of contemporary London. It also sets out to illuminate the absurdities of borders and frontiers, the lines of disillusion and tragedy. It may be taken as the novel which includes the search for identity, the need for independence the difficult relationship with culture, and the rewriting of colonial past. It also includes issues of identity, freedom, and cross-cultural contradictions in the backdrop of communal violence. In *The Shadow Lines*, chronologically, the narration begins in 1939 when there was the outbreak of the Second World War and India was passing through colonial rule. The narrator was not born then. The narrator met May Price when she came to Calcutta on a visit. The next time the narrator met her was seventeen years later when the narrator visited London. However, the novel takes these seventeen years from the year 1962 to 1979 as the effective background of *The Shadow Lines*

against which Ghosh deals with postcolonial situations, cultural dislocations and anxieties and interprets the issues of fractured nationalities in close and telling encounters. The themes include immigration, cultural assimilation, friendship across borders, and adjustment to the altered face of the world. In *The Shadow Lines*, the opening section ‘*Going Away*’ introduces its characters – the narrator’s family of his grandmother, his parents, his grandmother’s sister Mayadebi, her diplomat husband, and her three sons; Jatin, an economist with the UN, Tridib; the narrator’s uncle and mentor, Robi, and her grand-daughter, Ila (Jatin’s child) who is always away with her parents. The narrator’s grandmother is a product of the past. She has within herself an unflinching faith in the sanctity of political freedom. She is an example of the historical forces and an understanding of the present. So, it becomes an autobiographical novel or a family saga /chronicle.

In An Antique Land is woven around the history of Egypt in the eleventh century. It was published in 1992. It is a subversive history. It is written in the form of a traveller’s tale/travelogue. It is packed with anecdotes. It provides magical, intimate insights into Egypt from the Crusades to Operation Desert Storm. It abounds in stories and also examines relations between the Indians and the Egyptians, Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Muslims. It is historicity in fiction. It looks at history from the angles of postcolonialism. It juxtaposes the characters of the twelfth century. It also deals with the time of Ghosh’s life and reveals two different civilizations India and Egypt with diverse cultures of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. In *Land*, Ghosh begins his account in Lataifa, the little Egyptian village where he stationed himself as an Oxford University graduate student in anthropology. Doctor Aly Issa, a Professor at the University of Alexandria, has brought Ghosh to the home of Abu Ali. It is there that he rents a room during his stay in Egypt. Ghosh does not especially relish living there, since Abu-Ali, in his mid-fifties is a somewhat overbearing small businessman. Ghosh describes him as “*profoundly unlovable*” (AL 23) but recognizes him as someone who prompts a rather fearful respect from the villagers. After a while, Dr. Issa arranges for Ghosh to move out of Lataifa to Nashawy, a larger town. Ghosh left Egypt in 1981, and it was not for another seven years that he could again turn his attention with any seriousness to investigating Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave. He had learned some Arabic to communicate with his hosts. He had also spent time learning Judaeo-Arabic, a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic written in Hebrew script that Ben Yiju had used. To his surprise and relief, he found that the dialects spoken in Lataifa and Nashawy in the twentieth century were not that remote from the “sounds” he was reading on Ben Yiju’s pages. He learns that Ben Yiju

had lived in a Roman fortress nicknamed "Babylon" situated in the southern section of Cairo referred to as Old Cairo or Masr, called by some "the mother of the world" (AL 80). It is also known as Masr al-Qadima, Masr al-Atiqa, and Mari Gargis. Fustat served as Egypt's capital for more than three centuries. Fustat today is attached to the metropolis as an immense rubbish dump. The Ottoman Empire had reduced it in importance, and then the Indian Ocean trade that had made Fustat significant was supplanted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by European navies.

CONCLUSION

Ghosh throughout his diverse and generally composite oeuvre attempts to find connections between seemingly unrelated subjects. Ghosh's fiction challenges the artificial shadow lines that have been erected to separate nations from their neighbours, fact from fiction, and academic disciplines from each other. His interrogation of boundaries accords with the preoccupation with hybridity, in-between spaces, and diasporas in postcolonial debate. He is concerned with highlighting filiations and connections which go beyond the (neo) colonial relationship, such as the persistence of pre-colonial trade connections between the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula or the existence of an Indian Community in Burma, which was almost entirely erased by nationalism/colonialism.

The perception of history evolves from the novel and Ghosh never attempts to bulldoze history into some other preoccupation. History retains its historicity, as a process which hinges on characters who are representative of important historical tendencies-whether it is Balaram the idealist bhadralok, or Bhudeb the lumpen Congressman who unnervingly talks of mass media and straight lines, or even Damanhourli the one-eyed fantasy of the fledgling bourgeoisie. History is refracted through different mediums: in the first part through ideas on science and change, and in the second section, through the Damanhourli story, as a narrative from which earthy lessons are to be drawn. The difference in historical understanding corresponds to the distinction between an intellectually cosmopolitan culture and a more rural one. Being memory, history is fashioned by the way people collectively look at their inheritance.

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