



Volume No: 1

Issue 1

September 2016

International Multidisciplinary Innovative Research Journal
-An International refereed e-journal of literary Explorations

ISSN: 2456 - 4613

IMIRJ, 1(1), 2016 [1-9]

DIASPORIC SENSIBILITIES IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH

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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. Amitav Ghosh, a novelist with an extraordinary sense of history and place, is indisputably one of the most important novelists of our time. It is an attempt to analyze the Diasporic sensibilities in his novels *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Glass Palace* (2000).

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

INTRODUCTION

Like other contemporary literary theories, Diaspora also has its own position in the wider angle of world literature. Diaspora has its separate history and

development in each country, but its meaning and concern is the same in every nation. Commonly, all the Diasporic communities are longing for something. The

term 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek word, 'Diaspeirian', that means 'dia'→ 'through' and 'speirian'→ 'to scatter'. It invokes images of multiple journeys. The notion of Diaspora is the image of a journey but not every journey. Diasporas are clearly not the same as casual travel nor do they normatively refer to temporary sojourns. Paradoxically, Diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, and putting roots 'elsewhere'.

Diaspora has been categorized by the ethnicities or nationalities into various kinds such as Jewish, Greek, Armenian, American, African, Chinese, Indian, etc... These are categorized by each of its culture and life style. Indian Diaspora has its independent space and identity in Indian writing in English. Its unique characteristics determine its separate status and reflect 'Indianness' in true sense. Indian Diaspora fiction in English comes out of writers settled in different countries focusing on their native land and their writings also expose their feeling in their works. 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. Diasporic space is the point at which

boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested in fictions. Huggan in his work *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, suggests,

The future of Indian Literature in English at the millennium seems indisputable, the reputations of its best known writers intact, its commercial success virtually ensured. Yet it remains a cause for concern that nearly all the recognized writers are located in the Diaspora. (77)

DIASPORIC SENSIBILITIES

Diasporic sensibilities express a person's Diasporic experience and feelings. 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. The evolution of the Diasporic sensibility is in terms of its continually changing consciousness and Expatriate writing is not

only the nostalgic reminiscing of place but also of time. Time leads to the development of groups and sub-groups within the Diaspora.

Diaspora is a journey towards self-realization, self- recognition, and self-knowledge and self- definition. “Diasporic Sensibilities” is chosen with special reference to novels of an independent writer, Amitav Ghosh, who won a prestigious place in Diasporic literature. Ghosh looks at Diasporic literature in a new perspective. Ghosh is one of the Trinity after V.S.Naipaul and Salman Rushdie who popularized the Diaspora in Indian writing in English. He is an anthropologist, sociologist, journalist, novelist, essayist, travel-writer and teacher. Both his fictional and non- fictional narratives, move restlessly across countries, continents and oceans.

Amitav Ghosh never writes the same type of novel but his novels are linked together by a number of common concerns. Travelling occurs in five of the essay-titles, history in different forms occurs in four of his works and the issues of ‘hegemony’ are indicated by the wording of at least four of the titles. His novels are linked together by number of common concerns like history sociology, travelling, anthropology,

ethnography, society and historicity. Diasporic sensibilities are analyzed here with particular reference to his novels *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Glass Palace* (2000).

THE WORKS OF AMITAV GHOSH

Ghosh’s first novel is *The Circle of Reason*, published in 1986. He was awarded France’s Prix Medicis Award for this novel in 1990. It is a picaresque novel which concerns the adventures of Alu, a weaver from a small village near Calcutta, who leaves home to travel across the Indian Ocean to the oil town of al-Ghazira on the Persian Gulf and to African Sahara then back to India. This novel has a Diasporic theme of sense of displacement, self-identity, migration, alienation, quest for home, rootlessness etc...

Ghosh’s fifth novel, *The Glass Palace*, in 2000, is a tale of three generations of a family. It is a historical novel. This novel won the international e-book award at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2001. It is a story about Rajkumar, who lands in Burma in rags but later becomes one of the richest timber traders in Burma. This novel also has many Diasporic themes such as self-identity, alienation, migration, quest for home, etc...

Diasporic theory is an account of physical and psychological journey of an individual. Diasporic idea has come to find its apotheosis in the ambivalent, transitory, culturally contaminated and borderline figure of exile, caught in a historical limbo between home and the world. Travel implies impermanency to the experience of moving abroad. It can be called a temporary migration. The condition of migration brings out its role in the legitimization of 'otherness' in postmodernist discourse. The migrants may suppress their recollections or sometimes passively allow them to be submerged; some of them may recollect the vision of the past while others keep up to date with reality by means of extended return visits to their country of origin. The condition of migrancy is seen as a state of indeterminacy, of tentativeness, of 'in-betweenness' as Homi Bhabha would call it,

The migrant is seen as the critical participant- observer into his/her own condition, enabling powerful insights to be made into the insider- outsider dichotomy and the real lived experiences of migration. (King et al 8)

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh writes about the predicament of migrants. The

novel covers the sad episode of the last king of Burma and his doomed family that is exiled to Ratnagiri in India. The family of kings and queens were left with no other alternative but to live with and among commoners. With the outbreak of a plague and less money to maintain servants there was no other alternative but to allow the villagers to build a village around the compound of Outram House. Thus the deported Royal Family was forced to mingle with the commoners. This new way of life for the Royal Family may be summed up as follows: "The sense of exile results in a deep feeling of loss, ache, separation, yearning for recuperation and restoration" (Shukla 7). Migration proves to be a curse for these people while the same migration proves to be a blessing for Rajkumar, a face of colonizer in the guise of the colonized. Rajkumar succeeds in getting a major teak contract to a railway company. In the case of Rajkumar, migration transforms his character as he rises from coolie to a timber merchant. Migration becomes an important theme of his novel as each journey serves to impact the identity of the traveller or the migrant.

JOURNEY MOTIF

Amitav Ghosh uses journey motif in his novel. It is not just shifting places in

geographical dislocation but observing, imbibing and experiencing life and its varied circumstances and learning from them. The novel *The Circle of Reason*, travels across the border, from a small village in Bengal, moving via Kerala to a fictitious state in the middle east, reaching in denouncement the Sahara desert. The novel symbolically deals with three phases of human life: 'Satwa'- symbolizes the search for wisdom, 'Rajas'- symbolizes the life of passion and 'Tama'- stands for darkness and destruction. This journey unites all the characters in various places. It is not an ordinary journey, rather a voice of the eternal reformer with a compassionate insight. Each journey of self-understanding originates in a physical voyage. Migration and travel dislocates a person from his homeland physically but psychologically they cherish old memories and culture from which their living style has emerged.

Diaspora is a notion regarding belongings to the homeland, identity quest and search for roots captured through the migrant's experience of displacement. The displacement from one country to another and acquisition of the ethnic culture as well as the native culture brings gradual dilemma and a sense of rootlessness in the migrant community. Due to migration, Diaspora is a

journey of identity and culture through time and space. Ghosh's novels are a relevant study in this concern because his characters float from place to place and experience Diaspora while revisiting the past, exploring new ethnicities and experimenting language. Identity for them is not a fixed essence. They are compelled to search for identities. They achieve new identity with their own abilities. They are very skilful to balance relations with the adopted country. They appear practical, melt into adopted culture and do remain grateful and honest to the adopted homeland. Their transplantation in the new soil is successful.

In the novel, *The Glass Palace*, Once Rajkumar landed in Mandalay his life-long search for places and identity begins. He developed his sense of belonging at the new place. He first finds his identity by working in Ma Cho's stall in the new land "it was Rajkumar's job to carry bowls of soup and noodles to the customers" (*The Glass Palace* 6). Rajkumar and Saya John moved into the teak business rising up slowly and steadily. First teak, then rubber plantation became the object demanded in the new market. The rags to riches story of Rajkumar reflected his own identity in alien land and other several Indian's identity, which made it big in Burma in the first thirty years of twentieth

century. In *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh wants to explore the protagonist's quest for self-identity and exploration. Alu attempts to fit himself into a world through a different process. He takes on his weaving profession and begins his search for identity. Diasporic writing is reflective of the individual's sense of ethnic identity as he/she comes in contact with a new identity. It brings into consideration this quest for identity arising out of the sense of displacement and dislocation.

DIASPORIC LONGINGS

Diasporic condition is the state in which longings and yearnings of the migrant are expressed. The concept of Diaspora stands steadfast in its claims towards the inevitability of nostalgia. Nostalgia has always been a useful compensatory tool to construct an alternative historical reality created by the images of the golden past, especially when there is discontent with the present socio-economic situation in any culture. Amitav Ghosh's fiction is expressive of an urge to find a context in which the characters try to transform the meaningless routine of life into a sensuous construct. The nostalgic sentiment comes handy to Ghosh to fill the narrative gaps that inevitably arise in the novel.

In *The Glass Palace*, Rajkumar expressed his longing to return home. Throughout his life he yearned for one or the other thing. And when he was compelled to live in India he strived for the place he considered to be his homeland i.e. Burma. He admitted his granddaughter, Jaya that for him, "... the Ganges could never be the same as the Irrawaddy" (*The Glass Palace* 544). His longings and yearnings do not end in his life span; it ends only with the end of his life. In *The Circle of Reason*, all the characters in the novel serve the purpose of highlighting the nature of experiences of a migrant characterized by nostalgia and alienation. Alu took India with him to the countries and places he eventually calls home, intertwining his past with his present. He encountered the memories of his youth.

Ghosh's writings replicate the current concern with the porosity of cultural boundaries. The characters in Ghosh's novels cross from within and beyond its borders. They do not dwell in distinct cultures but travel in cultural spaces that flow across borders. In *The Glass Palace*, the moment of Rajkumar, the eleven year old Indian's presence in Mandalay, the ancient walled city by the Irrawaddy River and seat of Burmese royalty, amidst the booming of English guns and the imminent

imperialist threat is the first of the many indicators of the transfer of power and the transition in cultural positions. In *The Circle of Reason*, the story concerns the picaresque adventures of the protagonist Alu. It is also an allegory about the destruction of traditional village life by the modernizing influx of western culture, and the subsequent displacement of non-European peoples by imperialism. The multiculturalisms of Lalpukur can also be seen as a mixed culture of Bruce Lee and Hindi movies, schools of kung fu, language mixed up with Noakhali, Burmese, and West Bengal accent. As Ghosh writes the village is 'churning like cement in a grinder' (*The Circle of Reason* 27). For each aspect of Lalpukur culture authenticates Diasporic movement from their different historical movements.

THE PSYCHE OF THE PROTAGONIST

Amitav Ghosh's fictional world has a unique narrative motion. His central figures are travellers and Diasporic exiles. By tracing the problems of displaced migrants the author points out the emotional trauma which focuses settlement to a place with varied perceptions. In his novel *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh, truly touches upon the various themes he would experiment with in his subsequent novels. Ghosh tries to

probe deep into the psyche of his protagonists to lay bare the impact of this displacement, on the minds of the characters. He traces the journey of Alu, his protagonist and later makes him share space with a group of migrants belonging to the lower economic strata in the society. Here he combines the themes of feminism with the migrant subaltern as a number of occupants in Zindi's house are women. This novel is about patterning, the various personal efforts at imposition of order on a chaotic world in order to come to terms with it, in order just to live. It is also about the aesthetic quest necessary for the motivation and survival of the artist in every soul in an inherently deadening, hostile, and uncertain environment.

In his novel *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh records the experiences of first such races living in British occupied colonies. Here the characters range from members of the Burmese royal family to commoners like Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John and Uma. All the characters are united by the rough winds of historical displacement, and it is the commoners who play a more vital and significant role in the attempts at bridging borders. Through the experiences of the widely travelling Rajkumar, Ghosh describes the suffering and tribulations of

the exiled victims of the breaking of nations and consequent displacement.

Ghosh's main objective in the novel is to direct the individuals to stand in close nexus with history which will ultimately liberate from the colonial burden on to achieving a unique Diasporic identity. Ghosh portrays the trauma of cultural dislocation, disorientation and displacement suffered by the millions of people in the postcolonial era. His characters suffer the trauma and try to come out of it without losing hope which is the driving force of life. This is an attempt to give value and substance to individual lives and this recuperation of individual histories and narratives, is an important element of Ghosh's works. His journey across borders of various kinds in his life and works shows Ghosh's abiding interest in the ways in which changes can be and are being wrought in understanding of the world.

Through the reading of these two selected novels one can understand that the Diasporic community gets both positive and negative images from the settled society. In the initial stages of their settlement almost everything seems to be problematic and the Diasporic individuals only get a negative view of the society. But later they derive

enough experience to face the sufferings in a bold way and tend to look at the better economic opportunities for their children. From this, it is understandable that the Diasporic community not only faces problems in the settled society but also enjoys the economical opportunity. So Diasporic experiences are like a coin which has both sides. The Diasporic people presented in the two novels are from different countries and settled in different lands in different times. Their characteristics, reasons for displacement, and economies depict their distinct nature. In spite of their similar feelings of loneliness and alienation, their life differs due to the above mentioned various factors. The study proves that the Diasporic communities represented in the novels are heterogeneous and it is therefore difficult to homogenize them. Both the novels end with the hope for life. Life begins with hope. Though they travel to many countries and suffer a lot with so many experiences, they have a positive key of hope to begin their new life.

CONCLUSION

If the immigrant goes by will, there is greater scope of adjustment as compared to the situation in which circumstances force him to leave his own motherland and move

into an alien country. In the former case, the Diasporic has nothing to lose in a nation, which gives him greater opportunities for personal betterment and at the same time freedom to wrap himself in his personal heritage. People moving in from the cosmopolitan cities of their native land and settling in a cosmopolitan atmosphere abroad are perhaps less uncomfortable comparatively. They succeed in making this miscellany a way of life and are happy by having managed to locate the commonality in diversity, championing all dissimilarities. But when they are forced or involuntarily move to host land they have to face these problems, which are analyzed in this research work. It depends upon a Diasporic individual. If they try to accept, adjust and adapt to this situation they can lead a happy life. If they fail to do it they have to face these problems. The persons, who can't bear this, may return back to their homeland (native).

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