



Amitav Ghosh: A Cross Section of a Literary Rainbow

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Abstract

With a mark of intellect, Ghosh is distinctive among post-modern Indian writers in English who blends dramatic treatment with fine human experience to melt the frontiers of reality and fiction. Influences in his formative stages, like locales, education, travel and people etc., are palpable to the reader as his fine grain of experience resulted from the quantum of research invested. The distinctiveness claims from thematic variety and an eye for detail that makes the miniature into a self-explicatory expanse.

As Sangeeta Ray claims the amazing success of Indian novel in the Booker Prize list of the past twenty years, (*The Post-Colonial Indian Novel in English* xi) she asserts Indians' mastery in the genre which withstood the ordeals of scrutiny and global validation offering a retrospect of Indian Writings in English narrating the plights of the impoverished; denouncing the chauvinism in a stratified society; aggrandising the struggle and Gandhian ideals; asserting Indian womanhood and philosophising industrialisation and globalisation. Meenakshi Mukherjee theorises the advancement of Indian English novel from local to cosmopolitan as contemporary Indian writings in English depict the transitional conflict in the confluence of multiple cultures (*The Perishable Empire* 175). Huge royalties from

reputed publishers offered to Indian English novelist testify this metamorphosis.

Amitav Ghosh lustres the writer's galaxy with distinct themes and characters. Childhood in Calcutta, Dhaka and Colombo stimulated his cosmopolitanism as the three places with historical legacy affiliate with India where intense socio-political upsurge with divergent forces ensued socio-political maturity. Life in these locales seasoned Ghosh's sentience to delineate the serene and turbulent visage of humanity. Vibrant cosmopolitanism of Stephen's college spawned Ghosh' perspicacity, disposition and manners. A pleasant paradox lies in his cosmopolitan eliteness vivified the portrayal of masses with significance in his novel. His stint with *The Indian Express* during Emergency and lectureship in Delhi School of Economics tempered the writer in Ghosh.

Anthropology speaks about the zenith of a civilization and its nadir and the history of a nation points at the stimulant for those historical events. Amitav Ghosh's scholarship ripens his writing with distilled human experience ground in restlessness, agony, rupture, displacement, fatalism, resignation, frenzied utopian ambition and jubilation of advancements coupled with the frustration and refusal to compromise with the lacunae in existing set up. Ghosh captures this exquisiteness of human saga and the incessant fight against fate. His novels are animated multi culturally as his experiential knowledge in universities of Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria including Egyptian hamlets like Lataifa and Nashaway with versatility springing from extensive travelling where every sojourn concludes with a thesis about experiencing humanness.

Ghosh's appreciation is vivid yet balanced in treatment that removes baroque. His interviews describe the proximity he had with people of his novels. *The Hungry Tide* is multi-dimensional and profoundly researched with people and terrain echoing a medley of philosophies, borne afflictions and flickering hopes in the adverse weather beaten and tiger infested region. Piya and Nirmal's sentience represents the ruptured utopian prospects torn asunder by materialism and anthropocentrism. Constructed realism in delineation of Fokir and Tutul affirms author's keenness about mundane fisherman and philosophies of Moyana and Nilima suggest author's circumspection and acquaintance with people. An inference about pardonable ignorance of villagers of Egypt suggests writer's objective depiction where no enlightenment dispels their persistent insularity and no corruption defiles their hospitality at once. Samir Dayal lauds the fusion of academician and writer in Ghosh's articulation of the fragile subject in every day's life by being attentive to the ordinary ("The Emergence of the Fragile Subject" 105). The detailed depiction evokes immanent philosophy from trite in attire,

precise physical description, topography and the aura suffusing the area feature his novel.

Ghosh *defamiliarises* the routine to focus on the subtleties seldom overlooked. In the novel *Sea of Poppies*, the shrine, a common place in every Hindu home is *defamiliarised* (8-9). The magnified puja room minimises the godly element and speaks about Deeti's familial sentimentality. 'Papery poppy-petal discs' and 'charcoal portraits' and diagrammatic images *defamiliarise* earthly images in shrine place and metaphorical *defamiliarisation* of the ship provoke imagination. Ghosh employs such techniques in other novels elaborating the boat of Fokir; Piya drowning in water in *The Hungry Tide*; the boy haunting Murugan; loneliness of Antar in *The Calcutta Chromosome*; the teak forests in *The Glass Palace*; Thamma's regimentation and Trideb's esoteric nature in *The Shadow Lines*. Damodar Rao speaks of postmodern descriptive technique of Ghosh's metafiction where reality is mutated and every fragmented part is a hyperbolic dimension to convey the immediacy of experience of the reality through an ironic mode of narration, recreated magical world, and an uninhibited exhibition of narcissistic tendencies riveting the reader's attention to its own techniques and processes of creation ("Magic and Irony as Principles of Structure" 32).

Raj Kumar in *The Glass Palace*, Piya, Fokir and Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* or Mangala and Murugan in *The Calcutta Chromosome* evoke the mood, trait, philosophy and the reader probes into action without experiencing platitudes. The local colour in *The Hungry Tide* in the noisy railway station of Canning; the b-class town bazaar of Lusibari; the flood prone vulnerable embankments and the dull mud flats make the animate and inanimate imagery speak their own idiom. This imagery with elegantly minimal narration grips the audience with realism and originality. The reader's prescience is called for in the character's entry. Fokir's humility discloses the acquiescence of local fishermen to the forces of both nature and

government. The cosmopolitanism of Piya with Indian roots and American scientific temper, her adventurism and spirit of enquiry, her attire, the cold villainy of Queen Supalayat contrasting with the solemn impassivity of King Thebaw, the forecast of Raj Kumar's fortune in presenting him as wretched, the reversal of fate stimulates the reader's anticipation about the shifts in fortune.

The detail evokes an interesting picture out of mundane aspects invisible to a casual dilettante. The presentation of gravity and fallacy provokes introspection by the reader. In *The Hungry Tide*, Piya's stance in Canning railway station suffices the reader with the dynamics of her character. Her ease in a place from which her forbearers were alienated intrigues the reader about peoples' manners in detail. Raj Kumar's dress in *The Glass Palace* proceeding to claim the contract; the plight of the anthrax tormented elephant; Dolly's slide into spirituality; the description of cars, cameras, food, architecture reveal the author's care to detail. Cars in *The Glass Palace* speak about the striding modern trends into imperial and quaint Burma.

The detail is not simply an intellectual embellishment but is sharply ironical against the colonial consumerism. The colonial dressing is a post-colonial deconstruction of style 'orientalised' by the colonised subverting the colonial perseverance to attire. In Collector's residence Raj Kumar's clumsiness subtly subverts colonial dining practices and a mocks the cultural hegemony to anglicise Indian civil servants. Ila's craze for Nick in *the Shadow Lines* hints at frenzy for the western and the liabilities associated are revealed with the Nick's infidelity. Eagerness of Ila's father on Ila's wedding, honey moon and financing Nick's business is a hybridization of how an Indian father searches his daughter's contentment in money. The east encounters west in *The Hungry Tide* where Moyana finds Fokir and Piya's proximity as ominous to her marriage. Sonali in *The Calcutta Chromosome* sports a trendy

hairstyle and cigarette wielding modernity promotes feminist dynamism in the conservative Bengal society and subverts the feminist pride in emulating the male. Grigson's fixes Lutchman's nativity through pronunciation and this subverts the coloniser's notions in ascertaining the nativity through their pronunciation and mocks the simplistic notion of overlooking the mobility of people causing fluidity in pronunciation. Description of Mangala as 'ignorant' and 'harmless' subverts the colonial oversight of the intellectual mettle of the colonised. Murugan's portly exterior evokes the interior South Indian male countenance with smirks directed at him in jest is a deliberate subversive effort on the part of author to sustain the overt rustiness to heighten the contrast projecting him later as an unheeded genius. In *an Antique Land* the author arguing with Imam and the latter exalting the Europe advancement in weaponry is a critique of post-colonial slavish favouritism towards the coloniser in mistranslating coloniser's destructiveness as progress. The impudence of the guards with Piya is a salvo against current security ethics: a derisive subversion of Indian delusion and abject determinism to improperly profile the sexuality of western visitors and also a subversion of much hyped ethics Indian qualified by ethics. Subversion alludes malformed policing system, ill fed in the colonial policing system. Salvos aim the post-colonial governments' self-centred laxity and incompetence in maintaining status quo of this system. Attention to detail aims at the colonial or post-colonial agencies. Ghosh's punch is camouflaged in people's 'normalised' world views.

Ghosh in an interview with J. C. Hawley recollects the influence of Satyajit Ray and Marcel Proust, the former in connecting with people to overcome the splendid aloofness of an artist and the latter with his narrative technique which Ghosh calls alternative modernism. This specialises Ghosh's novels from the earlier and present works of literature. The shift of time

from past to present (analepsis and prolepsis) is prominent in his novels. The story opens in the midway, proceeds by informing partly about the characters and a flashback renders completeness. *The Calcutta Chromosome* repeatedly shifts from present to past and vice versa. The story starts as Antar stumbles on Murugan's identity and reader is informed about Murugan's death. As the story proceeds, we find Murugan, Sonali, Urmila in Calcutta and time flashes back to Mangala, Lachman and Ross during 19th century to again flash forward to Antar in present. The flashback rationalises the present and sustains the reader's curiosity about the prospective and retrospective implications of the event or action. The novel bears a logical structure as an argument has past as the premise to rationalise the present while human drama ratiocinates. Similarly, in *The Hungry Tide*, the novel abruptly begins in the Canning railway station with Piya and Kanai's meeting. Piya has a mother related flashback and Kanai's to the region with a flashback. Nirmal and Nilima have relevance to Fokir and Moyana expressed by a flashback. The author's craft runs the story by a partial revelation in one segment and revealing the philosophy behind a stance or opinion from the things of past. Nirmal's diary causes Kanai's arrival in *The Hungry Tide* and the mutilated ID of Murugan unfolds the story recalling Antar's encounter with Murugan. If suspense exists in linear narration, suspense is heightened in Ghosh's narrative technique to stimulate speculation from what is told.

Subha Tiwari's introduction devalues the detached talk, objective observation, impartial judgement and detached analysis of a writer to influence her/his readers preferring the writer's innermost self-experiences (*Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study* 1-2). Ghosh graduated in history from St. Stephens College, Delhi University and Mastered in Sociology from the same university. His education profoundly influenced his appreciation about the nation ransacked by the alien rule. He could gauge the

socio-political ramifications of colonialism and changing patterns of Indian social fabric. Colonial rule emaciated the robust Indian economic and social systems to subservience of colonial economy and the rule ended to exchange indelible hostile impressions between Hindus and Muslims. Untoward riotous incidents emanate from the chasm between these two groups instigated by sectarian groups. As natives of Dhaka, Ghosh's family bore the brunt of partition as he narrates the besiege of his house in his childhood (*In an Antique Land* 169). The incident hadn't faded before he witnessed violence in Delhi followed triggered by death of Indira Gandhi in 1984 (*The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* 46, 52-53). History and sociology apprise that such incidents are not ignorable sporadic mishaps but are linked with the past which was mishandled both by the British and their Indian counterparts. Lament is the main theme in his novels like *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow lines* pointing at the deep, bloody gashes in post-independence era in the name of religion; the birth of Pakistan and Bangladesh after a hasty schism; the displacement of innumerable to whom the umbilical cord is not tenuous; fate dictated desperation to be exiled from their place of birth with their identity uncomfortably tethered at once to two nations etc. It is not to revalidate history from author's perspective, but to portend a flare up at slightest provocation in future. His novels capture trauma but it is not the sole intention. A gesture is made to reconstruct Indian society and politics to prospectively eliminate such gruesome contingencies.

Ghosh is accurate and objective in dealing with political issues in India and abroad. Political developments bloom or wither as per the seeds sown in the past and these are poignantly represented with restraint in academic zest by the author. He speaks of artists' are individualistic with a global commitment to forge their role according to their own ideas and desires with forceful and

cogent expression (Hawley 11). History would be uninterestingly simplistic if it merely records events if 'what' and 'how' element eliminate the 'why' element which dictates the course of civilization. Human elements in his writings are the product of historical events to make the reader realise history. Brinda Bose says, "Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of reassessing its troubled antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of – or at least come into terms - with our troubled past" ("Footing History" 235). The skilful and dramatic interspersing of the history of a place suspending the reader's disbelief and making the fictitious element tangible. Raj Kumar's arrival to Burma represents the inevitable colonial degradation in exodus of indentured labour to South East Asia, Caribbean and Transvaal. An increase in Indian migrant employed in plantations suggests the growing of Indian element in Burma forcing the Burmese intolerance against Indians. Raj Kumar and family return to India from Burma justifies the cause and effect of incidents and the constructed realism overwhelms the incredulous reader.

Nirmal is the alter ego of Ghosh commiserating with the settlers of Sundarbans. Displaced by partition the desperate settlers entered into India after the 1971 war. Unsystematic rehabilitation forced them into the most uninhabitable regions of the world which precipitated Morichjhapa incident. The settlers were despaired by the communist overtures resulting in the ill-famed massacre. Ghosh laments through Nirmal and his big picture accuses the partition mongers and its facilitators. *The Shadow Lines* discusses the displacement induced by partition. The narrator in the streets of Dhaka sees his grandmother's native land through her eyes (214).

The grandson looks at the locales in his grandmother's memories and recollects her narrations. The lost heritage falls is the curse of partition. The notions of grandmother were too sensitive to dispel when she finds the partition

virtual (ibid 167). The title *The Shadow lines* echoes voices that are rueful of the partition, and the author's alter ego gives a lump in the throat of the speakers. Raj Kumar's tone is persistent when Dolly's advises him to leave Burma. Painful nostalgia, religion, race, identity and belongingness pervade in desire to return or displacement owing to xenophobia, war or partition with their epicentres in history and politics. They shifted the paradigm of relations with the land they once belonged to. Albertazzi praises the efforts of Ghosh as *The Shadow Lines* fictionalises all the major issues of post-colonial literature – the search for identity, the need for independence and the difficult relationship with colonial culture, the recreation of colonial past, creation of a new idiom and novel narration and the use of personal memory to understand communal past ("Crossing the Shadow Lines" 133).

Women in Ghosh's novels have a distinct intellect and maturity and parity with their male counterparts contrasting with the unsubstantial dream girl images in the erstwhile heroine representations. Ghosh's women do not assert their identity in male definitions and remain composed in turbulence and transport. They are educated and vigilant or otherwise have the womanly perspicacity. They are not mawkish in adversity but act realistically with inherent fortitude in their ventures unperturbed by the onslaughts of fate. Ghosh's women sustain polyphony in his novel. In *The Hungry Tide*, different views of women reflect variation in generation and cultural backdrops. Nilima sees tiger as a scourge considering the havoc it creates in the region. On contrary, Piya opposes anthropocentrism sympathising with the animals victimised ruthlessness. Balance is struck between the divergent views as the author doesn't override any one of them. Kusum lives in the lap of nature and her love for the land risks her life in the Morichjhapa incident. Kusum's belongingness is contrasted by her daughter in law Moyana aspiring for a better life in the hostile region. Piya's

conservative vision aligns with Kusum of erstwhile generation while Moyana's dreams align with elderly Nilima who laments the dreary conditions in Sunderbans. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Mangala possesses esoteric knowledge incongruent with her humble origin. Her silence is the secret keeping her knowledge inscrutable to the most advanced researchers of her time. Sonali represents the theatre of earlier times and her glittering aura still interests the elite of Calcutta. She symbolises an independent women sporting an out of way relation with Romen Haldar ignoring the curiosity of people with a dignified recklessness. Urmila is crushed in the grinding middle class life with responsibilities heaped on her. She represents the maltreated image of girl in a family with her mother lavishing on the sporting prospects of her son. She becomes the punch bag for her sister in laws who sneer at her late arrivals misconstruing the professional encumbrance of a reporter. Through Urmila, Ghosh subverts the middle class hypocrisy when she instinctively makes love with a stranger- Murugan. Urmila reacts to the burden thrust upon her by her family in view of her marriage. Dolly in *The Glass Palace* represents the women torn by the familial obligations and finds recourse in spirituality and through her Ghosh voices the muffled tones of imperial servants and the displaced identities – a mangled identity of being castaway in her own land in Burma after marrying Raj Kumar. Iconoclastic against the feminine salvation in the service of family she embraces nunnery at the end. Uma represents the bondage of husband's officialdom and later seeks a meaningful life in Indian freedom movement. Ghosh identifies many women who crossed the limitations imposed on them by the era to take the reins of their lives into their hands. She becomes the prototype for Indian political woman who broadens her perspectives through travelling. Her vibrancy contrasts with the serenity of Dolly. Ghosh subverts patriarchy through these two women who listen to their soul. Busaina in *In an Antique Land* modern Egyptian woman's financial independence

undaunted by her widowhood. An unnamed woman leaves Ama Taha is an image of resilience in the strict patriarchal social system of Egypt. The dancer in the novel represents the prototype image of male dominance symbolising woman as an object of pleasure. Ghosh universalising motherly affection amidst scorching Egypt when the mother of Ustaz Sabry enquires his good (149). Thamma in *The Shadow Lines* exemplifies headmistress cum mother who is constantly vigil about her children's welfare who veils her sadness of displacement behind her strict demeanour. Her simple question about partition is unanswerable and thought provoking. Ghosh's women defy the stifling dichotomous constructions against women. His women stand for virile modernity surpassing the barriers of age and place.

Violence is deftly Ghosh justified with its inevitability in the context with restraint heightening it. The coldness of Queen Supalayay, the bloodless violence of Princess splitting Sawant and Dolly bring out the bitterness of royalty. Violence evokes compassion when oosies are crushed by elephants and rushing teak logs. Communal violence in *The Shadow lines* and ideological violence in *The Dance in Cambodia*, the ethnic violence in Burma against Indians and the ignorance driven bitterness in Egypt against Indian ethos are vivified by the author with argument not to allege the perpetrator but evoke abhorrence against parochialism beleaguering the world. Violence against nature is worth mention for they unlike human beings are free from vehemence. Every drop of blood spilled, every tender feeling crushed, every collapsed hope and every dream ruptured represent poignantly about its futility.

Amitav Ghosh's characters are as varied as we find intellectuals from different quarters: Piya and Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* have expertise and Antar and Murugan are no less intellect contrasting with generic representation of subaltern. The lowest stratum of the society is vividly described with maturity well defined to

carve out fortune out of adversity. Amitav Ghosh elaborates nature and the nature-human relation and this is clearly palpable. The forests of Burma, desert regions of Egypt, the uninhabitable regions of sunderbans etc are presented with a picturesque resolution.

Amitav Ghosh is internationally acclaimed with his work translated into 19 languages. Ghosh was honoured with distinguished literary award of France *Prix Medicis Estranger* for the French version of *The Circle of Reason* (1986). Indian government awarded *Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award* (1989) and *Ananda Puraskar for The Shadow Lines* (1988). Ghosh received Arthur C. Clarke Award (1997) for *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) and the novel was filmed by Gabriele Salvatores. Ghosh received Pushcart Prize (1999) for his essay in the Kenyon Review. Frankfurt e-Book Award (2001) was awarded for his *The Glass Palace* (2000) and the novel was withdrawn by Ghosh when it was awarded the Best Novel in Eurasian category disagreeing with the term 'Commonwealth' and the stipulations of language. The Hutch Crossword Book Prize was awarded for *The Hungry Tide* (2004). *Sea of Poppies* was awarded Vodafone Crossword Book Award (2009) and Dan David Prize by Government of Israel (2010). *River of Smoke* was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize (2011). His contribution was honoured by Indian Government with distinguished civilian award *Padma Sri* in 2007. The Locarno Film Festival, Switzerland and the Venice Film festivals had Ghosh on their jury. His works are a repository of authorial intellect and make him the true representative of modern generation of Indian writers.

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