

## Thematic Concerns in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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### Abstract

Indian English Literature has attracted an extensive attention both in India and abroad. It is now realized that Indian English literature and commonwealth literature are in no way inferior to other literature. Indian English Literature has an abundant growth in the post modern period. It has been making great strides during the last two decades thereby attracts the international attention. The post modern writers had thoroughly contributed to the development of Indian English Literature. The old Indian Literature particularly Sanskrit Literature was well-known for its critical and religious writing. But the modern Indian Literature contains the modern form of literature. Indian English poets and writers have won world-wide acclaim during nineteen eighties and afterwards. Amitav Ghosh is one such writer who can be seen as the flag bearer of the fearlessness and liberty that the contemporary Indian writer in English embodies. His main thematic concern is using the travel motif to create a neutral space where barriers melt and borders are blurred. Before we come to an endpoint regarding the thematic concerns in Ghosh's novels, it is essential to take a brief glance at his chief concerns in his works. Throughout Ghosh's versatile career, his fictional writing has been accompanied by non-fictional work of all kinds: travelogues, reportage, academic articles, journalism and criticism. Marked by eclectic subjects, his non-fiction is bound by the same core themes and issues that animate his fictional writing. A clear demarcation between fiction and non-fiction is another of those artificial boundaries that Ghosh insistently interrogates, the overcoming of which constitutes one of the central threads running through the work. The major issues dealt with in his works range from nuclearisation, political crisis in Burma and Cambodia, pre-colonial commerce between India and Africa, to religious fundamentalism and anthropology and economics in local communities.

**Keywords:** Indian English Literature, Commonwealth literature, International attention, Contemporary vision, Journalism, Criticism, Fictional writing, Religious fundamentalism

We can say that Indian writing in English is the mixture of Indian and Western culture. One of the major twists appeared in Indian social milieu when British government ruled over India. The British influence appeared not only on economics, but on the entire political and educational system. The cultural transition was held after foundation of new education system in India. The major outcome of the new education system in India was English education. It exposed the new western culture and literature to India. The influence of western culture was clearly observed in the Indian context. Iyengar explores it –

Notwithstanding the peculiar occupational ailments that beset the novelist in India, it is gratifying to note that the novel is a living and evolving literary genre, and is trying in the hands of its practitioners, a fusion of form, substance and expression that is recognizably Indian, yet also bearing the marks of universality (Iyengar 2011:322).

The concept of Indian English literature has been established by the latter decades of post-Independence even though occasional pieces of imaginative construct occurred during the previous century. Bankim Chandra Chattajee's *Raj Mohan's Wife* or Nehru's *Autobiography* are the specimens that magnify the business of nationalism during the early part of the nineteenth century. This body of literary production has often been termed in a variety of ways- Anglo-Indish, Indo-English, Indian Writing in English etc. Whatever be its nomenclature, the fact that the Indian English literature has geared up its momentum due to the institutionalized teaching of English language imposed by the British Imperial system. Amidst the multiple lingual-groups, the notion of Indian literature opens up new vistas of controversy regarding its genuine authenticity. Since our country is divided into multi-lingual states, there has been a rich tradition of regional literatures produced in a regional tongue. Despite this fact, there hardly exists a body of writing that could be called nationally-integrated literature as such. The main contention to this question given by the scholars is attributed in negative terms as there is no nationally integrated language. One opines that conceptually literature rapport with culture and one may even argue if the people living in the country differing in their lingual, cultural aspects be called Indian, then why should we not call multi-lingual literatures as national literature? The growth of every literature can be determined on the criteria of its contribution to the articulation of the prime concerns of its source society, its contribution to the enrichment of the language it uses and its exploration of hitherto unknown facets of reality. In this respect, Indian literatures do show a profound and abiding sense of Indianness which remarkably separates it from other world literatures. In short, Indian English literature today

has earned universal acclamation due to its multiple social structure and pan-humanistic approach towards 'always -affecting affairs of humanity'.

Literary history of every country grows by the sensible men of letters that articulate ever-affective affairs of humanity in their stark realities. In the light of this statement, the writer conceives the world as it is rather than the world that ought to be. The referent point in this context is said to have been attributed to the 'novel genre', for it is the form that minimizes the fictional distance and readily amalgamates various lived paraphernalia in its multi-dimensional fabric. Inspired by the Booker winning novel *Midnight's Children*, the contemporary Indian English fiction boasts of many tales, told against the backdrop of varied experiences, events, places, norms and all those that suffice contours of Indian sense and awareness. The voice of Amitav Ghosh seems worth to be listened to, for, here is one that gives everything that the boastful book-shelves demand of. With him, novel has shed off its euro-centric corpus and emerged as a site for discovery: the discovery of the self entwined memories, homesickness, mirth, dislocation and all that the post-modernists perplex about. In one sense, his fictional world is a break away from the traditional story-tellers in his ability of transfusing reality in non-linear time-scheme and multitude locales. Amitav Ghosh is one of the most eminent Indian novelists of the Rushdiean tradition who have contributed extensively to Indian English fiction. Born in Calcutta on July 11, 1956, Ghosh, because of his father's service first as an army officer and later as a diplomat, happened to grow up in various countries including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, Egypt and England that served to provide him a firsthand knowledge about disparate societies and helped him form a perspective about them. He has contributed a lot to the world of literature. His works so far are: *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *Dancing in Columbia and at Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), *Flood of Fire* (2015), *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* (2002), *Incendiary Circumstances* (2006) and *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). Ghosh's reputation as a writer can be judged from a number of national and international awards he has won for his works: *Prix Medicis Etranger* for *The Circle of Reason*, the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Shadow Lines*, the Arthur C. Clarke Award for *The Calcutta Chromosome* and the Grand Prize for *The Glass Palace*, selected for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize also, *The Glass Palace* was withdrawn from the competition at its final stage on Ghosh's request which proves the sincerity of his anticolonial stand in the practical world as well. He was also a winner of the 1999

Pushcart Prize for the essay entitled “The March of the Novel through History: My Father’s Bookcase” published in the Kenyon Review. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Indian government in 2007. *The Hungry Tide* has been translated into twelve languages and *Sea of Poppies* has globally become very popular. *River of Smoke* published by Penguin Book India has been selected for the Man Asian Award 2012.

While analyzing Ghosh’s works in terms of themes we see subaltern voices are revealed not only through the theme of Diaspora but also through other major themes including nationalism, cosmopolitanism, socialism, war-caused violence, significance of the individual, search for love and security amidst cultural fragmentation, the role of narrative, memory and imagination. Now let us come across some of the works of Amitav Ghosh and try to uncover the themes.

The novel *The Shadow Lines* is a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning work by Indian writer Amitav Ghosh. This is first and foremost a memory novel which through recall brings hidden histories to the surface that becomes future histories. Apart from being a chief source of subaltern history, memory is also a reliable source since it is neither created nor mitigated. In the novel, memories/subaltern stories do not flow into one another in a stream of consciousness mode for they are separate and distinct. However, memory has its own limitations which become explicit in the novel when it fails to capture the aftermaths of the Second World War which are unimaginable and unknowable in their terrifying tragic essence. In this novel, Ghosh also debunks institutional history by providing the central place to the individual instead of historical events since the predicament suffered by the individual is his predominant concern. Tridib’s boyhood experiences in the wartorn London and his killing in Dhaka are the central points in the essential narrative. Sexual union between the narrator and May undermines the Western notion of culture as being separate and stable. At the same time, he situates most of the characters in the binary polarities of the coloniser and the colonised and those within the colonized themselves. Thus, *The Shadow Lines* is archaeology of subaltern voices that interrogate elitist history by revealing its suppressed and tragic effects on subalterns, and by making the historical look fictional and the fictional look historical.

*The Glass Palace* is a historical narrative of three colonised nations, serving as a counterforce to colonialism. Set in Burma (Myanmar), India and Malaya, the novel presents a subaltern story of three families: the first family consists of Rajkumar, his wife Dolly and their two sons— Neel and Dinu; the second, of Saya John, his son Matthew and Matthew’s daughter Alison and the third, of Uma’s brother, his son Arjun and two daughters— Manju and Bela. Spanning over three generations

from 1885 to 1996, it reveals the anti-subaltern and anonymous but catastrophic effects of the historical events which mainly include the British invasion of Burma, the First World War and the Japanese attack of Malaya and Burma during the Second World War. The novel has much to do with ethnography, a field of anthropology which consists of fieldwork—the process of observing, collecting detail and writing the report. Describing Burmese life and culture from the perspective of the ordinary people, Ghosh counters those Western ethnographers who portray a society from their own viewpoint. Before writing the novel, through his innumerable national and international enquires and meetings, and a wide-ranging literary and non-literary reading, Ghosh made an extensive ethnographic study of pre-colonial Burma and the other countries explored in the text:

In the five years it took me to write *The Glass Palace* I read hundreds of books, memoirs, travelogues, gazetteers, articles and notebooks, published and unpublished; I travelled thousands of miles, visiting and re-visiting, so far as possible, all the settings and locations that figure in this novel; I sought out scores of people in India, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand (Ghosh 2008: 549).

Man's struggle against the forces of nature is the nucleus of *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh discovers an extraordinary territory, the Sundarbans, for conveying his message on man and nature. In the fascinating yet dreadful Sundarbans, birds, animals and plants instinctly adapt themselves to the drifting land, water and weather conditions. The only exception is the human being who disturbs the delicate ecological balance for his self-centered ends and instigates the fury of nature. There are three groups of people portrayed in *The Hungry Tide*: extremely poor and credulous indigenous folk who depend on the land for their day to day lives; people in power who indulge in corrupt practices like poaching, cutting trees in mangrove forests etc and a handful of people, visitors who become residents and who show empathy finding and using many resources to alleviate the afflictions of the poor due to natural calamities and reconstruct their lives. As a social science fiction, *The Hungry Tide* is firmly anchored in our preoccupations with the value of our natural environment and the search of a more egalitarian, democratic and poverty-free society challenged and often threatened by modern manifestations of greed, immediate profit and ill-understood ecological considerations.

The nucleus of Ghosh's historical narratives is the echoing theme of connectedness among human beings in the face of social struggles, moral dilemmas and personal challenges. Human relationship is the most central value in *The Shadow Lines*, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. The need for social witfulness and human responsibilities is recorded through historic struggles of

individuals, societies and nations. The predicament of the individuals as well as the incidents that happen in the life of an individual anchors the base of *Sea of Poppies*. As for colonial history, Ghosh has fictionalised the events that happened in India during the imperialistic rule. The story is set in the year 1838, when Britain is set on maintaining the opium trade between India and China to strengthen its economic, political and cultural position. The story begins with the twin strands of indentured labour from India moving to the African coast and the cultivation and trade of opium to China that set into motion the Opium Wars. The novel is Ghosh's orientation towards human acts of reflection and depiction by the very nature of human beings caught in a crisis. The characters are extreme examples of the fragmented lives and bitter feelings that are beyond the normal existence. Although filled with adventure and interesting plot twists, *Sea of Poppies* prioritizes what makes a person 'human' in the face of crisis:

To take care of another human being – this was something Neel had never before thought of doing, not even with his own son, let alone a man of his own age, a foreigner. All he knew of nurture was the tenderness that had been lavished on him by his own caregivers: that they would come to love him was something he had taken for granted – yet knowing his own feelings for them to be in no way equivalent was born. It occurred to him now to ask himself if this was how it happened: was it possible that the mere fact of using one's hand and investing one's attention in someone other than oneself, created a pride and tenderness that had nothing whatever to do with the response of the object of one's care – just as craftsman's love for his handiwork is in no way diminished by the fact of it being unreciprocated? (Gosh 2015: 325).

Hence we see, Ghosh's fiction uncovers repetitive examples of the significant themes of boundary crossing and travel which chiefly include the subaltern class with each fiction including mass developments of people. A dream of a borderless space where all divisions blur and vanish predominates all the themes. Ghosh cautiously explores every circumstance and area, stressing the set of experiences behind it, on the whole his anecdotal works which are hard to arrange. His concern with the contemporary problems of exploitative power structures, communal strife, loss of faith in human values and hatred engendered by inequality in the capitalist system find their way into his fictional constructs. The apparently inconclusive and indefinite narratives represent the post-colonial temperament of desolation, but they stress the need of harmonious and undivided selves and societies. The nostalgic desire for syncretic culture based on the existence of similarities and continuities that

break barriers of culture from the defining principle of his fictional art. The thematic concerns that organize his fictional materials focus on the failure of cultural boundaries and the identification of rootlessness as the essential existential state.

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