

**Identity Politics in Amitav Ghosh's Writing : A Postcolonial Study of *The Shadow Lines* and *Sea of Poppies*.****Rajkumar Bera**

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**Abstract:**

The present paper is an attempt to explore the identity politics from postcolonial point of view in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and *Sea of Poppies*. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh has interwoven and scrutinized the impacts of colonialism on the culture and society of two main neighbouring cities, namely Calcutta and Dhaka. Presenting a thorough political and cultural change, the novel throws the light on initial awareness of the social, psychological and cultural inferiority enforced by colonizer and displays struggle of subaltern people for ethnic, cultural and political autonomy. Throughout the novel, the writer explicitly and implicitly emits sparks or traces of postcolonial principles to show his interest in depicting the aftermath of colonization especially in the era after the emancipation. This paper aims to explore the overall structure of the novel through postcolonial approach regarding the application of some postcolonial elements such as obscurity, identity crisis, essentialism, otherness, nationalism, unbelonging etc.

In Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, the challenge against global condition and ever-increasing cultural multiplicity is delineated through a panorama of characters who migrate to an alien place in a ship called the *Ibis*. In a colonial backdrop, Ghosh draws attention to the historical consequences of imperialism leading to migration and displacement of people. This paper focuses on how the characters face their identity problem while reconstructing their new identity. Cut off from the older personal, familiar and national ties, these migrants forge new identity with a sense of pain, agony and dilemma.

**Key words:** Postcolonialism, Identity, Imperialism, Ibis, Essentialism, Otherness

## **Identity Politics in Amitav Ghosh's Writing : A Postcolonial Study of *The Shadow Lines* and *Sea of Poppies*.**

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The question of identity has become a very broad and influential concept in the postcolonial and postmodern eras wherein an individual must search for new methods of representation to challenge the global conditions and ever-increasing cultural multiplicity. The concept of identity has proven to be remarkably fluid and changeable, acquiring its own meaning their intentions and priorities. The traditional terms of which individuals can define themselves and their place in society have been blown out. In other words, the postmodern era challenges long established ideologies and values related to individual and family. Identity is now multi-faced and constantly, reconstructed by choice whereas individuals identities in traditional societies were fixed and stable.

The current era of globalization and the post colonial era has rendered the assumption of fixed identity as absolute and recognized that identity is a multilayered and changeable notion. The spaces in which the human beings inhabit are not fixed and homogeneous but heterogeneous and malleable. Consequently, individuals' are assigned to reconstruct their image and adopt multiple identities which altering existing ones.

Since the commencement of the novel *The Shadow Lines*, the problem of identity is deeply felt. This problem is not merely confined to characters, but places and locations as well. In the opinion of the narrator, the identity of a location is normally formed and established by the means of stories, photographs, maps and memoirs that can be invented by one's imagination. This procedure (imagination) seems like a psychological process by which one can successfully indulge his or her suppressed fancies and gratify the whims they have been looking for but failed to attain in real life. Identity potentially involves 'essentialism' and 'othering', two other significant terms in post colonialism.

Essentialism, in definition, is the essence of whatness of something. Regarding race, culture, or ethnicity, essentialism refers to the practice of different groups in making decision what is and isn't a particular identity. Practically speaking, essentialism tends to ignore discrepancies within groups to maintain the status quo or with the aim of obtaining power. In essentialism, all sides involved, colonizer or colonized, resist their standpoints. In this novel, despite few characters, the majority of characters involved tend to retain and preserve their own already held status and seldom dare to welcome changes or even choose among multiple options they may come across. So, it can be named as an element of defiance, resistance and

confrontation to achieve, keep or choose what is believed to be theirs. Trideb says “Everyone lives in a story... because stories are all there to live in, it was just a question which one you choose...” (Ghosh 182)

Otherring, as another postcolonial element, is the social or psychological way in which one group excludes or marginalizes another by declaring them ‘other’ to emphasize that what makes them dissimilar from or opposite of another lies in this otherness, and it depends on the way they represent others, especially through stereotypical images, showing behavior which is repeated without variation, and is irrespective of circumstances. Tridib is a perfect example of such otherness: he has used his education for personal liberation and has conducted his life based on his own choices, and is therefore, happy the way he is. Unlike others, he views the world as a mosaic of interconnected locations devoid of border. To him all places of the world are parts of each other without slightest degree of superiority or inferiority. His power of visualization that was later taught to the narrator and opened a new horizon of the world in him, makes him distinct from the others.

The concept of otherness, in this novel, is twofold with double meanings, and hence moves nearer to the concept of ambivalence regarded as another element in postcolonial texts. Otherness does not necessarily mean being different or dissimilar, but is sometimes meant ‘another identical image’. The narrative undermines the imagined differences between Dhaka- as a newly created nation – and Calcutta through the application of mirror. These two cities are so culturally and socially identical that looking at one is sufficient to claim that the other is being looked at too. Such looking glass border emphasizing the similarities of these two towns is deeply rooted in an ancient history of the past when people could travel without showing passport or identity card:

“the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, where the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines—so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the invented image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free –our looking-glass border.” (TSL- 233).

In addition to Tridib and narrator, Ila is also one of the unique characters who is naturally different from the others. Despite her numerous travels around the world, she is unable to invent a place in her mind as she believes all places are the same, and this baffles the narrator with the myself of differences’ (Ghosh 31). To her, just the physical existence of a place is a matter of significance. She is mentally incapable to recall the past and when asked the reason, she shrugs and replies; “It was a long time ago, the real question is, how you remember” (Ghosh 19). This answer dejects the narrator as he seems that his cousin (Ila) has no concept of place and fails to invent one in her mind and that she completely relies on the invention of others:

“I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine,

neither more nor less true, only very far apart. It was not her fault that she could not understand, for as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all.” (TSL 21)

Travelling and exploration of boundaries is the writer’s main purpose. Having underlined the concepts of alterity and otherness, the writer focuses on nationalism, emphasizing that the shadow lines we draw among ourselves, people, and nations is not only an absurd illusion, but also can be a source of bloody violence. These shadows, appearing in the form of national boundaries, manipulate private and political spheres, and meanwhile display people’s struggle to overcome artificial borders.

However, it is helpful to look at the issue of identity from cultural perspective, for the novel clearly shows that cultural formations are the sites within which one’s nationality or individual identity may be constructed. Surely, the narrator, Tridib and the grandmother – despite their differences in age, location, ideology and varying perspective on reality, share an innate Indianness, even, a conceptual formulation of nationalism, which Ila, the Indian located in the West can not envisage, and so cannot be a part of. Here what Benedict Anderson has to say about the nation is quite illuminating. It (the nation) is an imagined political community. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each live the image of their communion. This makes it possible for emotional affinities to transcend some disruptive dissonances, thereby making space for a sense of nationness and nationalism. The narrator’s grandmother, for instance, is one such character who conforms to this thinking and for whom the nation is a clear market of identity. She is a votary of the nation in a clear market of identity. She is a votary of the nation in a sense in which none of the other characters are. In fact, she represents a legitimate view of the nation against which the viewpoints of others like those of Tridib, Ila and the narrator, may be perceived. Although she lives in the frozen past, the reality of nationhood is largely stable in her case. A fervent and militant nationalist, she worries about her old uncle dying in a country not his own, almost abandoned and alone in old age. She tells her son: “It doesn’t matter whether we recognize each other or not. We are the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone and now, at last after all these years; perhaps we will be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred” (TSL – 129). It is clear what she cares for the ties of blood and nationhood and is prepared to let go the bitter memories of family feuds. It is interesting to note that the terrorists fascinated her and she wanted to act like them for her freedom. In response to the narrator’s query, if given a chance would she have killed the English magistrate, she says: “I would have been frightened... But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom; I would have done anything to be free” (TSL-39).

In postcolonial texts, the term ‘Diaspora’ refers to the voluntary or imposed migration from the native homeland with the aim of deciding whether or not to alter identity, language, and culture. As far as the concept of Diaspora is concerned, both (narrator & Ila) are diasporic, having experienced displacement from their native homelands across the globe, but in different ways: one physically, the other imaginatively. The narrator holds the belief that

“a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination; that [Ila’s] practical, bustling London was no less invented than [his own], neither more nor less true, only very far apart.” (TSL- 21)

*Sea of Poppies* is a novel in which varied characters are brought into proximity on Ibis, the former slave-ship, where their fates become intermingled and as a result they form a bond and a sense of solidarity emerge among them. The novel mainly revolves around the characters belonging to different environments, shaped by different circumstances. The main characters of the novel are: Deeti (a hapless wife who elopes and marriage a chamar after her husband’s death), Kalua (a chamar with whom Deeti elopes with and marriage), Zachary Reid (an American Mullatto and the second mate of the ship, Ibis), Paulette (a Frenchwoman, adopted by an English family and escapes from them to join Ibis in the disguise of an Indentured labour), Neel (the Zamindar of Raskkali; the victim of the conspiracy played by the representatives of the British Empire), Mr. Benjamin Burnham (the owner of the ship Ibis, the representative and the mouthpiece of the British Empire and the adopter of Paulette), Jadu (a Muslim who joins Ibis as a lascar and a brother figure of Paulette), Baboo Nob Kissin (Mr. Burnham’s Gomasta), Ah Fatt (a prisoner who becomes the companion and the mate of Neel). All these characters are surrounded with the presence of opium in their lives. The colonized people are forced to grow opium in their farms. The British Empire in the novel is shown to be interested only in the trade of opium as it is a source for them for the generation of the profits. There is a prominent presence of the opium in the novel and we can say that it is the one and only factor which brings agonies in the lives of the characters.

The novel explores many themes like colonialism, migration, journey, loss of identity and transgression. The process of migration of the indentured labourers from the social, economic, cultural as well as psychological conditions is one of the main themes of the novels. There indentured labourers escape from their respective conditions and get assembled on the Ibis to be migrated to the Mauritius Islands. Migration also results in one’s loss of identity. Coming from different backgrounds, the indentured labourers become jahaj-bhais while migrating. The instances of the loss of identity are found in case of Deeti, Kalua and Paulette. They embrace a new identity by adopting new names in their new guest Deeti becomes Aditi, Kalua becomes Madhu and Paulette becomes Pugli. In case of Neel, he loses his caste and stature because of the wrongs done on him by Mr. Burnham.

The indentured labourers are also called the girmityas or coolies. The indentured labourers are like the slaves but the prominent difference between the Indentured labourers and the slaves is that the indentured labourers sign the bond willingly where as the slaves are forced, captured, sold, hired etc., to work for their masters. But, they share similar type of relationship with their superiors. The relation of slave with his master and the relation of indentured labourer with his recruiter is similar in nature. The masters and the recruiters decide the fate, the plight and the conditions of their subornating entities. And the slaves and the indentured labourers are bound to follow what is demanded of them because they are “owned” by their superiors and even their existence has no reality except in relation to their superiors.

In the novel *Sea of Poppies*, we, first of all, encounter with the Indentured labourers when Deeti goes to take her collapsed husband back from the factory, with the help of Kalua. Deeti and Kalua get introduced with Ramsaranji, the head of one group of girmityas.

Deeti enquires Ramsaranji about the people who have been marching with him. He tells her that they are girmitiyas.

Afterwards, Deeti and Kalua's life take a drastic change. As Deeti elopes with Kalua, a chamar, after the death of her husband, she has to choose a different course in order to save her and Kalua from the representatives of the Patriarchal society as well as of the caste system. Thus, in order to save themselves from the exploits of these powerful institutions, they sign themselves as the indentured labourers. When they become indentured labourers, they are gathered in a vessel before being shifted to Ibis, the slave ship, with the other migrants or indentured labourers or girmitiyas. Thus, it is on this vessel that Deeti and Kalua encounter with other indentured labourers. In order to hide their identity from others, Deeti and Kalua adopt the fictitious names Aditi and Madhu. They introduce themselves as belonging to the chamar caste. On the vessel, Deeti gets introduced with Heeru, Sarju, Munia, Ratna, Champa, Dookhanee, etc. All of them share their tales of woe. It is clear in the novel that all of them have been forced to join the indentured labourers, forced by their situations and circumstances. Their stories describe the hardship faced by them in their lives.

The indentured labourers must adapt to the environment of the ship without any resistance or they are given warning that they will be beaten to death if they show any kind of misconduct. When a small riot happens on the ship Captain Chillingworth appears 'holding a tightly-coiled whip'. He lectures them about the rules of the ship.

"The greatest and most important difference between land and sea is not visible to the eyes. It is this—and note it well ... the difference is that the laws of the land have no hold on the water. At sea, there is another law and you should know that on this vessel I am its sole maker. While you are on the Ibis and while she is at sea, I am your fate, your providence, your law giver. This chabuk you see in my hand is just one of the keepers of my law." (SP-404)

The indentured labourers are unable to leave their past fully behind. They are in a sense of belongingness with the homeland. When they come on board Ibis and embark on their journey to Mauritius, they become nostalgic. Ultimately, such sense results in identity-crisis.

Ghosh portrayed the separation and parting from the homeland as if a bride is parting from its family and home. A bride and the indentured labourers share the same plight of separation. The labourers start singing the songs of departure of the bride by correlating their situation with it:

*Kaise Kate ab  
Biraha ki ratiya?  
How will it pass  
This night of pasting? (SP-398)*

However, in order to re-establish their connection with their roots, they perform the wedding ceremony presents the Heeru and Ecka Nack while on the ship. The whole of the wedding ceremony presents the fact that on the strange tides, they have formed relationships



but the relationship of solidarity, the relationship of accord and harmony. During the wedding various ceremonies are performed by the indentured labourers. Their performances and their unification obliquely hint at their attempt to get the ground of homely identity.

Thus, the novel *Sea of Poppies* presents confusion, tension, colonization and identity crisis faced by the indentured labourers belonging to different strata of the society. Ghosh, in this novel, depicts the powerful institutions which by vesting in their superior and powerful entities, grant them the privilege to utilize their power to subjugate and dominate the lives of those subjected to it.

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