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History as a theme in the shadow lines

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Abstract

The historical theme is the main subject of diasporic writers who care for their own culture and people in the foreign land. Amitav Ghosh is a diasporic writer who deals with history in a different perspective of adding fiction with fact artistically.

Keywords: Diaspora, history, nation, narration, fiction & fact

Introduction

The Shadow Lines, Amitav Ghosh comprehensively tells its readers the story of three generations of family spread over Calcutta, Dhaka and London. It lines up characters from different nationalist religions and culture in a closely knit fictive world. The novel is written against the backdrop of the civil strife in post-partition East Bengal and the riot-hit Calcutta. The events revolve round Calcutta and affect severely the family of Maya Devi and their friendship and the sojourn with their English friends - Prices and Thamma. During that time the writer's grandmother was in their ancestral city Dhaka. Amitav Ghosh stresses back to history describing the riots of 1964 which claimed the lives of his elder father. The death raised questions and posed a challenge to the concept of intercultural understanding and friendship in contemporary society divided by arbitrary demarcations of national boundaries. It will be analyzed later that when Amitav Ghosh writes about Calcutta he mainly focuses on its history and the socio-cultural issues of this cosmopolitan city. Ghosh himself is a student of history. Like Carl Mars Ghosh's handles history of Calcutta and its related areas as scientific study of the past history deals with real life, just like mine and yours. It deals with the people's decision and their ways of life. History is essential to turn the scars of past in to the smile of present day. This is possible only through a thorough understanding of the past. The freedom that is experienced today is an outcome of the sufferings and struggles of our ancestors and the mental and physical agony that they have undergone during the colonial era. It is important to bag the bygone age and turn it into living deeds on the part of the writer. Leo Tolstoy says, "as long as histories are written of individuals like Caesar, Alexander, Luther, Voltaire and so forth who have taken part in given events, and not histories of all person without exceptions who have participated in them, no descriptions of the movement of humanity will be possible without the conception of such force as complete men to their activities to a common end" (*War and Peace*, 434).

Intervened by the political, traditional, cultural and social milieu of post-independent Calcutta, Amitav Ghosh provides insight in to the relationship in his writings. Through small historical narration he shows the socio-cultural changes that take place within two or three decades. In his novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Ghosh projects Calcutta's heritage, tradition, past and moral values. By focusing on the issues of indentured labour of the past; Ghosh wants the modern society of Calcutta to take contingency of the struggle, blood and sweat of our ancestors into evolving and making the present society worth living. It will be analyzed later in details, how in the *Sea of Poppies* the suffering hardship and difficulties faced by the Indian people in the past, after the slavery –Abolition Act came into effect on 01 August 1835. Ghosh puts forth the factual era in the history of India in his fictions.

Amitav Ghosh analyses the gender issues in his fictions though he innovatively explores the Bengal renaissance deeply rooting himself in Bengali Bhadralog and Calcutta. The hierarchal male dominated and gender differentiated middle class Bhadralog society in Bengal was not

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intrinsically very different from, or much ahead of, its counterpart in other provinces of India.

Ghosh always goes back to past and returns to the root which is told earlier. His root is in Calcutta which is a land of culture, literature and it has a glorious history which had been severely influencing the socio-cultural and political history of India. As Ghosh is a post-modern novelist, he goes on recording the changing socio-cultural structures which exerts a profound influence on women and the man-woman relationship. The tradition oriented Indian society experiences a lot of change due to the impact of western culture. The patriarchal chauvinistic and indifferent male role is challenged. However, Amitav Ghosh gives stress on tradition and his characterization of women is stereotyped. Ghosh confirms to cultural and status codes while portraying women in his fictions. Brinda Bose in her *Amitav Ghosh: Critical prospective* (2003), says "writing in 1988 when educated, professional, urban woman in particular but Indian women in general have made significant interventions in spaces earlier dominated by men and have made enormous progress in articulating a revisionary, alternative reading of their history and position in the socio-political structure, Ghosh is still unable to represent them in any subject position other than that possessed by traumatized victims" (77).

When the fiction of Amitav Ghosh is analyzed with special reference to relationship, individuals in Calcutta or in other cities the problem of alienation comes to the point. Alienation is one of the greatest problems in city life which makes an individual stranger to himself. Other aspects of alienation include an individual's indifferent approach; he feels that he is not working for himself rather works for others; at last he is a forced laborer. Whenever he is at work he feels alienated. Such sense of alienation is found in the fiction of Amitav Ghosh. *The circle of reason* deals with modern man's problem of alienation, migration and the existential crisis in life. Anthony Burgess critically acclaim this picaresque novel where Aluis constantly on the run. Balam Bose is ironically portrayed as being irrational and rational increasingly obsessive and monomaniacally fixated with his neighbor Bhudav Roy. Throughout the first part of the novel *Satwa*, Balam shows an idiosyncratic regard for phrenology, carbolic acid and life of Lewis Pasture. Bhudev Ray, along with his sons, is intimately engaged in petty feuds with Balam. Inspector Das chases Alu through three parts of the novel-*Satwa*, *Raja*, and *Tama*. His one track pursuit of Alu results in disillusionment and he migrates to Europe. Reason triumphs and characterization takes a back seat. *The circle of reason* and the setting of this novel in Calcutta which is known for its holistic cultural background. Whatever Ghosh writes he is actually rooted in Calcutta while narrating the story sketching characters and portraying sceneries.

It is told earlier Ghosh and his family is culturally rooted, specifically located in a cultural milieu of Bengali Bhadralog. The Benagli characters are conscious of hierarchy and status. It may not be noted that the female characters in this novel are passive observers. The female characters in Ghosh's fiction seek their identity of their own and through their quest they became the sharpening and motivating forces in determining the contour of action. Their visionary quest, in fact may be seen as an attempt to understand the nature of what Tagore calls, "their life's deity that is Jivan Devta". The novel sets in Calcutta as it is

told earlier, if various the socio-cultural and gender issues of Calcutta of later 70s.

Ghosh's fiction doesn't go beyond Calcutta and its culture. When the Calcutta Chromosome is analyzed the city is the focus point of discussion. In this fiction the writer brings about a curious mixture of fact and fiction while analyzing the discovery of the malaria parasite by Ronald Ross in 1895. Calcutta is the place which provided Roland Ross a conducive environment and some faithful and devoted Bengali assistants like Morgan who did their best discover the reason of malarial fever. This British bacteriologist was more close to the perfume of Calcutta as he did his path breaking research in the city only. His memorial arch at the centre of his hospital is a part and parcel of Calcutta.

This novel is divided into two parts: August; Mosquito day and The day after. Both the first and second part deal with the story set in Calcutta. It is an attempt to rewrite the story of Roland Ross discovery of the life cycle of malaria Mosquito which causes the disease to human beings. A story is available in the history of medical science. Because such discovery bagged Roland Ross the Nobel prize for medicine in 1901. The first Nobel Prize for medicine goes to Ronald Ross for his coveted discovery of malaria parasite. But Ghosh attempts to retell the truth which is still unearthed behind the mystery of discovering malaria parasite. On the world Mosquito any 1995 Ghosh arrives at Calcutta and is in search of the enigmatic Calcutta chromosome. This Calcutta chromosome in freak chauvinism unlike the regular chromosomes it doesn't present in every cell which is not even symmetrically paired. This chromosome is not transferred from one generation to another. Ghosh fantasizes that this chromosome developed out of a process of recombination which is unique to every individual. This is located in the non-generating tissues, the brain. This can be transmitted through malaria. This is the stray DNA carrier that Morgan calls 'The Calcutta Chromosome - A unique, biological expression of human traits is neither inherited from the immediate gene pool nor transmitted into it' (207).

When Morgan arrives at Calcutta the very next day he disappears mysteriously. This is the focus of the fiction and all other strands of the narrative are connected to this pivotal event. Morgan was Ronald Ross's research colleague at New York who played a paramount role in finding out the malaria parasite. Some of his scattered incidents at Calcutta are woven into a fictional fabric.

In his fictions Ghosh analyses the historical significance of his family, his town, Calcutta and Bengal as a whole. He doesn't go beyond a century's back rather he focuses on the latter part of the twentieth century which witnessed the ups and downs of Bengal civilization in the pre-independent British reign and even after independence. His fictions like *the circle of reason*, *The Sea of Puppies* and *Shadow Lines* deal with the history of Bengal and India as a whole in which Ghosh mostly focused on Calcutta and portrays the socio-cultural and religious importance of the past. Study of history and heritage of Bengal helps planning strategy for contemporary and futuristic needs. But Ghosh facilitates portraying history to go through an ambitious planning for his readers. Those unaware of their past, progress and culture of civilization face some problems but history removes such obstacles by dealing with real life of past that provides lessons for present and future. Actually the history of Bengal and Calcutta is nothing but the decision and their

ways of life. It is essential for Ghosh to turn the scars of past into the simile of present. This is possible only through a thorough understanding of the unrevealed history of Bengal which Ghosh attempts to unveil through his fictions. The freedom that the Indians experience today is an outcome of the mental and physical agony that they had undergone during the British reign. It is important for Ghosh to bag the spirit of bygone age and turn it into living deeds.

The political, traditional cultural and social milieu of ancient Bengal's glorious history influenced Ghosh to write fiction giving stress on history. The writer provides insight into the relation between small human stories and big historical changes that takes place in Calcutta. His *Sea of Poppies* 2008 is a very popular fiction elaborating Bengal's heritage, tradition and past and moral values. By focusing on the issue of indentured labour of the past. Amitav Ghosh wants the modern society to take cognizance of the struggle blood and sweat of the freedom fighters into evolving and making the present society worth living. Like Gosh Michael Ondaatje, in his novels such as *The English patient* 1992, *In the skin of a lion* 1997, *Running in the family* 1982, has analyzed in details, about the history of his native land Srilanka and Canada describing about the indentured labour and their problems what Ghosh does in his *The sea poppies*. *In the skin of the lion*, Bobby Boulden, the hero faces an acute crisis working in the foreign land only for bread and butter. He couldn't understand the people with whom he worked, nor could he communicate well with others, as a result he couldn't keep the relationship with them. The same situation Ghosh analyses in his novel *The Sea of Poppies* about the indentured labourers who traveled from Calcutta to the other countries to feed their stomach.

Ghosh presents the character as puppy seeds which grow in large number from the field to form the sea where every single seed is ambiguous about its future. The sea puppies describes the sufferings, hardship and difficulties faced by the Bengalis in the past after the Slavery Abolition Act came in to effect on 1st August 1835. The act brought about a history change in the condition of the labourers. As a result a large number of people migrated from Bengal to Mauritius to work in the sugar cane field of that country. The sugar production, in Mauritius and other parts of the world could become cheap due the large availability of Indian particularly Bengal labours. As most of the people in Bengal and Calcutta were not able to feed their stomach once in a day they were compelled to travel other places to work as indentured labourers. However, they changed the economic status of their dream land by their own efforts, of course at the cost of their sufferings. Deeti is the brave woman and how does she face the situation after being forced to work as a contract labourer. Ghosh writes, 'hundreds of ... improvised transients many of them were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the country side' (290).

The agents who were collecting indentured labourers from Calcutta tempted the labourers with false promises of a lot of food and negotiable pay but when this laborers started sailing they were misbehaved by those agents. Kaula a strongly built hard muscled man who worked from sun rise to sun set has been discriminated. Kaula is a metaphor of indentured labourers of the overseas Indians, who worked round the clock in the foreign countries only for the square meals. These untold tragedies have been historicized in the

friction through the characters of Deeti and Kaula. Thousands of Bengalis migrated to work in different countries and they suffered a lot. These sufferings were repeatedly published in the Bengal gazette which is the first gazette of India. That made the other people conscious not to go further. Ghosh goes through the papers in archives and collects information for his fiction. Kaula witnesses a heart rendering scene in which eight Bengalis signed an agreement as they wanted to save themselves from sure death because of hunger. In the foreign countries the Bengalis indentured labourers were put in such hard circumstances of hunger and poverty. They are bound to work for twelve hours for their survival. The Indians working hard in the foreign land forgot everything; there culture, there tradition and caste. All the people from different caste were bound to work together as they face very hard time of their life. The duffader tells Kaula; "caste doesn't matter....all kinds of men are eager to sign up-Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamaras, and Telis. What matters is that they, being young and able bodied, are willing to work.

In India, emphasis was given on Brahmins as they came first in caste hierarchy but the company which was recruiting people in Calcutta for indentured labourers stressed on strong and stout people who could work for longer bearing pain and suffering. Caste was the concern but the workable persons were easily lured being assured of better payment. These indentured labourers of Calcutta and Bengal were transported to Mauritius by the ship Ibis. These coolies were gravely maltreated on board, as it is told earlier also. Ghosh says that East India Company was exploiting natural resources but after that it exploited human resources. The Ibis transported the people of different caste, culture, community and religion without caring about the condition of the standard of health of the labourers. But their bonds became stronger and stronger with the passage of time: reeking of defecation, disease and death the whole of the sea produces new and fragile communities bringing together Hindu peasants And Muslim lascars high caste and low caste wives and widows, black men and white men" (The Hindu, 01 January 2008 by Gopal Priyambada).

The historical aspect of the *Sea of Poppies* is that the writer describes and analyses the socio-economic conditions of the Bengalis during the British period. By that time Bengalis were struggling hard for squire meals everyday because natural calamities like flood and drought robbed off their crops. When the standing crops were destroyed people suffered from hunger. As it is reported from the sources of British Government from 1866 to 1940 more than one crore people died due to hunger and starvation. In order to escape from the clutches of death the Bengali people wanted to leave their native land in search of food and work. This was the situation which brought an opportunity to the industrially flourishing countries like Mauritius and Europe to recruit people from India to work in industrial and agricultural sector promising them better food and wage. But their predicament was parallel to that of slaves. This is the reflection of socio- cultural aspects of the history of India which Ghosh, as a student of history, experienced during his academic career even from his childhood days at Doon school. This pathetic condition of the Bengalis especially the people of Calcutta of the pre-independence times has been fictionalized in the writings of Ghosh. Delineating the exact socio cultural and economic picture of his native place Calcutta though the characters like Kaula.

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