

Under XIIth Plan, UGC
Minor Research Project

Executive Summary

on

Travel as a Re/Discovery in the Post-Colonial World:

A Reading of the Select Works of Amitav Ghosh

File No. : 23-1464/14 (WRO)

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Sanctioned Amount : Rs. 70,000.00

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Objectives of the Study:

Following are the objectives of the study:

- To trace and accentuate the travel motif in the select works of Ghosh.
- To destabilize the Eurocentric discourse of travelogue.
- Travel as a way of self-discovery as well as discovery of the subaltern.
- Themes of quest and discovery are indispensable to the journey motif, are vital to Ghosh's novelization.
- The study will also focus on the literary merits of Ghosh's select novels from literary angle.
- To explore Ghosh as a curious traveller who performs actual travels to various areas and imaginary journeys by means of his real life and fictional characters to both metropolitan centers and as well as peripherals.

Methodology:

This study will undertake the empirical methodology for research, in order to meet study objectives.

Chapter One

Introduction

Travel is an archetypal symbol of quest and discovery; it involves exploration and stepping into the unknown worlds in order to come to a better understanding of the self and environment. Amitav Ghosh is an erudite traveller who investigates space (geography) and time (history) and dwells deep into discursive archives and narratives. Ghosh's writings focus on migration during the pre-national space, which was continuous and permitted boundary crossings, as well as on colonial post-colonial spaces. All his fictional journeys portrayed through his personal and transnational experiences. Ghosh's writings have been highly influenced not only by his training in

history and anthropology but also by his experiences as much as travelled figure. Crossing and recrossing borders, mingling with socially and culturally other, and attempting to listen to, and giving voice to the marginalized are the forte of his corpus. His novels provide him the opportunity to travel into the hidden recesses of history. Ghosh is concerned with himself as a traveller and researcher. His travel writings encompass ethnography, which includes description of peoples, their nature, customs, religion, forms of governments and language. Travel writing of Ghosh explores the nuances of anthropology. There is no comprehensive study or project executed on the concept of travel in the works of Amitav Ghosh. When it comes to theme of travel and its key role in the fictions and nonfictions of Ghosh. Stray articles on the travel theme are recorded, such as K C Belliappa's "Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land: An Excursion into Time Past and Time Present*", Indira Bhatt's "The Journey Motif: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*", and Robert Dixon's "Travelling in the West: The Writing of Amitav Ghosh". The theme of travel in Ghosh's works needs to be explored. I have opted three novels to explore the travel theme for my minor research project. The novels for this research are *In An Antique Land*, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers and Discovery*. The two principal concerns of the study are to trace and accentuate the central motif of travel in the select works of Ghosh and to present the way the postcolonial writer draws on this motif in order to destabilize the Eurocentric discourse of travelogue.

Chapter Two

In An Antique Land

Migration: Traveling Indo-Arab Interchanges and Encounters:

Ghosh's travel writing has shifted the focus from the clichéd dialectics of East/West, colonizer/colonized, and metropolis / peripheries to portray the cosmopolitan dimensions of postcolonial societies. This new discipline critiques the Eurocentric discourse of travel, in which voyagers are destined to travel in a one-way direction from

the metropolis to the peripheries. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* remarks, "it was the West that moved upon the East, not vice versa" (73). Hence, the movement of people is not just from the center to periphery: rather characters are free to move everywhere, either within the periphery or to the center. Besides, the travelers are not merely noblemen, great scholars, ambassadors, merchants, missionaries and historians, they are also common people. Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* criticizes the European canonical discourse of travel. He interweaves the journeys of his characters to include unusual places such as Yemen, Egypt, India and Tunis. In other words, Ghosh involves his travelling characters in a confrontation with the discourse of the European travels. Throughout this chapter, the study covers two kinds of movements. The first one is the discursive travel of the writer, in *In An Antique Land*, in an attempt to unravel the identity of an unknown slave, called MS H.6. This chapter portrays the dramatic situation of those migrants who journey there for the sake of acquiring more wealth and thereby get entrapped in the exploitative nets of capitalism. This section of the project sheds light on the expansion of Western power, which has acquired the wealth of eastern societies throughout history.

The discovery of Geniza documents enables Ghosh to trace the cultural interconnection that links Indo-Arab people for centuries throughout the book, the author reveals how the Arabs and Indians have bonds via trade relationship and intertwined travels that have linked the two locations since the twelfth century onwards. Ghosh achieves this goal by using double narrative technique to relate the events together. The book sets with travel and ends with movement, but journeys are destined to peripheries such as India, Yemen, Egypt and Tunis. The significance of these journeys is that they show that common people do travel too, not merely to the metropolitan cities of the west, but to other peripheries within their milieu. Finally, Ghosh seems to enhance the idea of living in a cosmopolitan society peacefully, having communal understanding among all people of the globe without taking into account religious discrepancy, race, and chauvinism.

Chapter Three

The Shadow Lines

War and Violence: Discovery of the Self:

The traumatic events of war have always proved to be destructive, leading to large scale diaspora, displacement and a subsequent crisis of identity in war-stricken nations. Therefore, it is in times of war that national, cultural and political borders are recharted and remapped. The violent shift of poles influences the process of construction of identity. Nevertheless, the trauma of war, from one perspective, is illuminative in the sense that it sets the problematized people on a journey, back or forth, to redefine themselves and their positions with respect to the new circumstances, hence quest and discovery. This chapter focuses on this aspect of war and investigates the way Ghosh's characters react in times of violence to the discovery war provides them with. In *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the narrator achieves his self discovery through the violence of riots, which are the small-scale forms of war. The epic dimensions of *The Glass Palace* (2000) address the morbid symptoms of colonialism in the Anglo-Burmese war and the two World Wars and their impact on the three nations of Burma, India, and Malaya. Taking *The Shadow Lines* as Ghosh's particular version of *bildungsroman*, the first part of this chapter shows how the violence of riots and in-Partition redraws national, political and psychological lines.

This chapter proposes to read *The Shadow Lines* not as a merely journey across the lines, as many critics have posited. The shadowiness of the lines renders them illusory, yet inevitable. Therefore, Ghosh's novel can be more properly approached as a journey both across and along the lines. Ghosh journeys across the lines to investigate the way they can be violated. Paradoxically, he also moves along the lines which violently inflict themselves on people's lives politically, culturally and psychologically. It is out of this redemption and violence that the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* attains his *bildung*.

Chapter Four

Calcutta Chromosome

The Subversion of Eurocentric Discourse: The Representation of the Marginalized:

Ghosh in his novel *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery* (1996) novelizes his journey to a completely different world, that of science and scientific discourses. Whereas in his previous works, Ghosh engages himself with the discourse of history, subverting the official history through familial memory, in these two novels, he targets scientific archives which are apparently the most objective and at the same time one of the cornerstones of Western (colonial) claims to civilization. This chapter argues that in both novels, just as in the previous ones, the novelist draws heavily on the journey motif in an endeavour first to call into question the colonial hegemony and secondly to reinscribe two parts. The chapter focuses on *The Calcutta Chromosome* and Ghosh's journey into the hidden recesses of the metropolitan scientific archives. This chapter argues that Ghosh's experience and skill as a traveller target the Eurocentric discourse of science in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh's scrutiny takes issue with the devastating policies of postcolonial nation-States like India under the pretext of globalization. In this chapter the characters are enmeshed in journeys between Asia, Europe and the United States. Ghosh's archival excursion into the history of the discovery of malaria opens up an alternative narrative which dramatizes the limitations of colonial scientists in opposition to the success of the native "counter-scientists". Accordingly, the other technique that Ghosh deploys to challenge Western standards is deconstructing the literary criteria. In this novel, the narrative norms are delegitimized; almost all major characters like Miinigan, Phulboni, Sonali and Urmila become narrators in one way or another. The silent figures like Laakhan, Mangala and Antar haunt all over the novel, so they are no longer at the margins because of their silence. Ghosh accords each character an equal share in the process of development of the plot. In Barat's words, "the constant shifts in points of view and

time-sequence erase the boundaries between hunter and hunted and make them equally part of the same mystery, the same conspiracy, the same quest" (221). Almost all characters in *The Calcutta Chromosome* are both questing and quested figures, hence their odyssey through different forms of narrative, be it scientific or counter-scientific. In this way, Ghosh draws upon the potentials of travelogue, mainly quest and discovery, in an attempt to subvert the so-called civilizing mission of the West which is basically founded upon science and scientific discourses.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Ghosh's globalism is far different from the hegemony of globalization that has engulfed today's postcolonial nation-states, chaining them once again to Euro-American discourses and their untraceable phenomenon of neo-imperialism. In a recent interview with Priyamvada Gopal, when asked about his concerns for "historical dispersal and globalization", Ghosh asserts, "Cosmopolitanism and cultural exchange existed long before the European expansion" (2). Ghosh's characters are global in the sense that their subject-positions are not confined to any politico-cultural hierarchy. They flow freely in intercultural spaces which have proved a threat to the totalitarian policies of the nation-states. This impulse helps Ghosh to keep up pace with the most contemporary issues of his time and context and thereby gives him a prominent stance in the literary scene of not only India but of the whole world.

Following are the findings of the study:

- The present research suggests that the basis of this broadened outlook lies in Ghosh's experiences both in travelling and travel writing, under the influence of which he has learned to cross borders and lines.
- Fusing travelogue and its potentials like quest, discovery, and shuttling back and forth in time and space with the precision of anthropology and the

peculiarity of history renders 'Ghoshian' text a hybrid. This hybridity itself stands for his stylistic crossing and recrossing of generic barriers.

- Redrawing the generic borders, Ghosh not only experiments with various narrative strategies but also displays their limitations. Through such limitations, he shows the arbitrariness of the conventional genres and thereby strikes at the politico-social paradigms that support such categorizations.
- Consequently, Ghosh's stylistic experimentations with different genres lie in complete compatibility with his politico-social thematic interests. In this way, form and content merge together in Ghosh's fiction in order to single out his conduct as a globally recognized novelist.
- This book also focuses on the way Ghosh achieves this harmony by discussing the generic hybridity in his novels.
- Drawing on the findings of the previous chapters, this study concludes that Ghosh's fiction stretches the domain of Indian literary context beyond its local borders and to the global sphere.
- Ghosh's hybridizing style of narration, his cosmopolitan characters, his critical concerns with both local and global themes, and above all his transcending the boundaries and territories, all take him out of his narrow provincial setting as an Indian postcolonial novelist and accord him the status of an international writer, one whose works address a global audience and attend to universal issues.