

**AMITAV GHOSH'S "HISTORY" IS A THRESHOLD IN RE-
CONSTRUCTING NATIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: A STUDY**

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ABSTRACT: *As is well-known, history is often shaped by the socio-political perspectives of the Colonizers and therefore, the narratives generated by colonial history must utilize both the author's imagination and empirical or factual research to create a broader view of historical reality. Amitav Ghosh, one of the most promising Indian writers writing in English has amazingly blended "history" with fiction which is profoundly attached to the re-construction of identity of the people in our postcolonial world. Indeed, one of the important concerns of historical reconstruction in modern third world literature is re-imagining the cultural cartography through the re-formation of national and cultural identities in the wake of emerging nation-states in the post imperial era. This paper clearly indicates how colonial history is incisively connected to the question of reforming national and cultural identity in today's postcolonial reality.*

KEYWORDS: postcolonialism, history, national and cultural identity, east-west trope, geographical boundary, globalization

INTRODUCTION

As a major diasporic writer writing in English, Amitav Ghosh was mostly up grew up in India, Bangladesh and Srilanka while studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria. This author's cosmopolitan imagination absorbs ideas from across the world, but he is also firmly anchored in the culture of the Indian subcontinent. Ghosh thus writes from an international perspective focusing the postcolonial predicaments in the South Asian regions. A significant proportion of Ghosh's literature focus on the cultural history of India affected by nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, diaspora and the traumatic experiences of exiles and dislocations. Though Ghosh's chief interest lies in rendering history with fictions, but he also has successfully connected history with anthropology, ethnography, geography, politics, international relations and recently climate change issues in almost all his fictions and nonfictions. Since 1999, Ghosh has spent more time in New York, where he has taken a series of university teaching posts, but the focus of his fiction has remained on Indian life and the implications of its history. It should be noted that his novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) emerged out of the stories told by his father and uncle who had in reality fought with the British-Indian army in Burma in the Second World War. In most of the fictions, Ghosh's "history" usually appears to be an inseparable part of his fictitious characters along

with its close interaction with the fragments of his own imagination. Fiction draws up the lines of differentiation between private and public versions of history and takes up the first version which may also be termed micro or “human histories”. This paper brings to light how Ghosh’s “history” is a “human history” that becomes the entry point into the national and cultural identity in the wake of colonialism as well as in our postcolonial reality. It also explains how Ghosh’s works explore the legacies of imperial past that has impacted the construction of contemporary identities. His portrayal of the politics of identity includes the debates about the reliability of history, arbitrariness in demarcating national boundaries, the East-West trope, and clashes of civilizations or cultures. In a sense, Ghosh is travelling in the West [but not with the West] with his roots in the East. Or, in the words of Robert Dixon, we might call that “travelling in the East” from routes to roots.

History of the Colonial Grip and the Aftermath: Most of Ghosh’s novels are based on the fictional rendition of history rewriting of archives and facts through the portrayal of imaginary characters so the segments of Indian, South Asian and world histories are projected through his fictional imagination. While *The Shadow Lines* (1988) covers the partition history of the British India, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) challenges the Eurocentric accounts of the history of science and conveys the conflict of East and West. Ghosh’s first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) rewrites the history of colonial subject-master relation, and critiques nationalism and globalization, and, *The Glass Palace* (2000) fictionalizes the history of Burma, India, and to some extent Malaya in the grip of two contesting empires—British and Japanese. More generally, Ghosh presents the issues of nation-states, identity paradox, and cultural conflict on the space of history spreading over pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial relating to countries like India, Bangladesh, Burma, Malaya, and some parts of the Middle East. One of the objectives of this article would be to argue that this author holds a growing fame due to his ability to work in a diverse arena that never deals simply with post colonialism, rather, Ghosh’s interests vividly encapsulate the role diaspora, history, anthropology, ethnography, geography and politics in most of his works. In the pre-colonial period, people of the different parts of the globe lived in contact zones through trade and travels, as illustrated *In an Antique Land* (1992) while in the colonial period they were dispersed and divested of their roots as we find in *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Glass Palace*, and *Sea of Poppies* (2008). It is worth mentioning that the author has spent more time in New York holding a series of university teaching posts, but the focus of his fiction has always remained on Indian life and the implications of its history. As an Indian, this attitude of Ghosh simply demonstrates his un-bending nationalistic feelings for his national and cultural identity. This paper also clarifies how Nationalism has emerged to check the growth of capitalism and industrialism in the postcolonial era because, after imperialism, the idea of forming nation-states with a fixed geopolitical boundary becomes a reality. This also raises the question whether geographical boundary reflects the boundary in the mind. To Ghosh, a person conceives nation and nationalism through a series of

memories, not only by geographical locations and such views can aptly be described by Benedict Anderson's phrase "imagined communities".

In fact, Ghosh's characters live in imaginary cartographies and suffer from the anxiety of their nationhood, or, for most of them, anxiety of Indianness. Many of his novels also interrogate whether new nation-states can be viable amid the conflicts and troubles whose seed was sowed in the imperial past. The condition of post imperial Burma as projected at the end of *The Glass Palace* (2000) can be an example in this context. The country suffers in the hands of two colonial powers– the Japanese and the British– which ultimately leave the country in the grip of military autocrat. To Ghosh, constructing identity is always the key point in the clashes of cultures and civilizations. Thus, India's socio-cultural evolution due to the contact with the European sensibilities has been discussed vehemently in most of Ghosh's novels. The city of Calcutta, which is also Ghosh's birthplace, has been discussed frequently in his novels as a centre of Bengali cultural and intellectual pursuit, which has also influenced Ghosh in treating the issues related to history and identity. Once the capital of British India and the second most important city in the British Empire, Calcutta lost its status when the capital was moved to New Delhi. But the past of the city as traffic of Eastern and Western ideas helps create an imaginative geography of the city in Ghosh's major novels in different ways. To Ghosh, the city is more than a social and physical environment. It is an indicator of global cultural "contact zones." To quote from Anshuman A. Mondal, "the city is both a metaphor for the knowledge/power relations initiated by colonialism, and the stage on which Ghosh re-enacts what has been called 'the battle for cultural parity' that the Bengali cultural elite have waged ever since." How the characters in the post colonial era suffer from the anxiety of their nationhood and the anxiety of Indianness and how the new nation-state's sense of unique geographical identity is affected amid conflicts and troubles whose root was propagated in the colonial past is the prime objective of the novels discussed in this article. Through these novels Ghosh has explained how identity crisis creates some inherent problems to those once colonized countries in South Asia. Due to the complex and indecisive nature of national identity people in postcolonial era suffer from an urge to sustain themselves in sphere of trade, economy and cultural ambiguity since their strength is drained up in various ways like military intervention, artificial bordering, communal disharmony and unhealthy nuclear weapon competition. If we investigate the colonial history minutely, it becomes clear that the economic drawbacks, identity crisis and interference of foreign policies in South Asian countries hinder the progress of new nation state's fruitful involvement in Globalization, which in due course appeared to be the practice of Neo-colonialism.

Ghosh, through many of his works of fiction or nonfiction clearly conveys that, the history of economic disasters, exile, partition, ecological exploitation, destruction of edible crops land, cultural uprooting and the forceful intervention of European colonizers have severely affected the healthy growth of socio-economic life of post-colonial people. The reference of Ghosh's *The Ibis Trilogy* is utterly fitting here; three

novels comprising of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2012) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). In these novels Ghosh has created dozens of animated characters emerged from diverse backgrounds who moved from the Bihar to China, and then to Mauritius. The themes were based on the British opium trade with China in the 1830s to the First Opium War. It is 1839 and China has embargoed the trade of opium, a most profitable business and the British Foreign Secretary has ordered the colonial government in India to undertake a mission for an attack to re-establish the trade. The co-option of Indian labor and soldiers, by the British Empire underpins much of the trilogy. Ghosh has identified the system as self-consciously a replacement for slave labour and explains “It is strange that people don’t put together that India was to the 19th century what Africa had been to the 17th and 18th: a global sink of labour.” Another striking point Ghosh mentioned is the degree of corruption specially at the time of Opium War. If we read between the lines, we would see the opium war was one of the first to be fought in a complete public and private partnership. The merchants were given contracts to provide services and provisions to the soldiers and they made out like bandits. Paying off British generals, and bad provisions probably killed more soldiers in China than did the Chinese army. One of the objectives of Ghosh’s writing behind this trilogy novel is to identify the disastrous impact of Opium Trade which had accelerated the complete devastation of agricultural lands, destruction of edible crops land, and the annihilation of environmentalism or ecological balance in India, resulting massive addiction, respiratory diseases and widespread hunger. These novels related to history and the exploitation of indentured labours also reflect the awful plights of the refugees, dislocated, migrants, factory workers, destitute, banished and rootless people all over the world. An admiring quote from the historian Christopher Clark is “Puzzlingly, there is no military history of the first opium war,” and Ghosh has also explained his idea of history and fiction following Clark’s comment ‘The difference between writing fiction and writing history is that fiction doesn’t commit you to one view. That is why I was never a historian or an academic. I don’t think theoretically. What interests me about history is that there are so many alternative ways of telling it. I have had my life and experiences and I have my opinions. But I have also forced myself to see the world through, say, the eyes of an opium trader, and that is one of the great strengths of historical fiction. It encourages you to step out of your skin and see the world from other points of view.’ These actually add up to an extremely broad-swathe story about the wave of globalization that swept through the world in the early 19th century. The East India Company in fact compelled the Indian farmers to grow opium in their crops land, ruining the traditional agricultural economy, and is dumping the drug in China, compelling thousands of Chinese to become addicts. Hence, the British see “free trade” as part of their religion, establishing that idea in India and China as their Protestant ethic.

Appropriation and Adoption of the Theory of Post-colonialism in Ghosh's novels:

Post colonialism, postcolonial literature and theory all are concerned with the situation of former subject nations and cultures whose histories have been irremediably altered by the experience of colonialism. Thus, postcolonial literature exhibits the results of colonialism. Through the word 'post' means 'after' 'symbolically means the end of the British colonization as well as the independence of colonized people. Numerous writers have sprouted up after the end of colonization who are basically termed as post-colonial writers. Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh are notable among them. Ghosh's novels attempt to present the colonial, pre-colonial and postcolonial predicaments along with his successful depiction of diasporic history of contemporary people. In many works of literature, especially those coming out of Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent, we meet characters who are struggling with their identities in the wake of the establishment of colonies. For example, the British had a colonial presence in India from the 1700s until India gained its independence in 1947. Obviously, the people of Indian subcontinent and the characters of their novels are found dealing with the economic, political, and emotional effects that the British brought and left behind. This is also true for literature that comes out of colonized nations and evolves from those events linked with emotional and political histories. In fact, Ghosh's major novels exhibit exactly what happened to the people who were dislocated and treated as 'marginalized' in the colonial era. Postcolonial theory derived from much the same empirical assumption as multiculturalism, that of the collapse of European imperialism, and of the British Empire in particular. Thus, what multiculturalism meant to the former metropolis, post colonialism meant to the former colonies. Ironically, "Postcolonialism" was initially very much the creation of 'third world intellectuals' who are mostly living in America and working in literary studies within first world universities. The key figures of postcolonial theory are Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Edward Said is Palestinian while Spivak and Homi Bhabha are Indians, all of them work at American Universities. According to Ashcroft (Ashcroft, 1989), the central *postcolonialist* argument is thus that postcolonial structure has entailed a revolt of the margin against the metropolis, the periphery against the centre, in which experience itself becomes 'uncentered' 'pluralistic' and 'nefarious'. Milner and Browitt (2002) state that the origins of postcolonial theory can be traced to Said's *Orientalism*, an impressively scholarly account for not of the 'the Orient' itself but how British and French Scholarship had constructed the Orient as 'Other'. *Orientalism* (1978) is considered the foundational work on which post-colonial theory developed and Edward Said could be considered as the 'father' of post-colonialism. His works focus on exploring and questioning the artificial boundaries or the stereotype boundaries, that have been drawn between the East and West, specially as they relate to the Middle East. Said focused specifically on our stereotypes of Middle-Easterners. However, these same ideas can be extended to include how we view all 'others' while Postcolonialism lies in the gap between the mentality of 'us' and 'others' and this simple generalization lead to the

misconceptions and miscommunications which are often the basis of post-colonial studies. According to Homi Bhabha, the objective of colonial discourse is to understand the colonized as a population of degenerate types based on racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. Bhabha's works including *The Location of Culture* (1994) focus on the politics, emotions, and values that exist in the space between the colonizer and the colonized. In other words, cultures are more than 'us' and 'other' and they are the sum of their histories. Bhabha likes to use the word 'hybrid', meaning composed of mixed elements to describe post-colonial people and experiences. In doing this, Bhabha emphasized on the collective effects of colonialization on people and cultures. To define the theory of post colonialism more clearly, Gayatri Spivak introduced a word 'subaltern' in her *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), where she opines that the "subaltern" is not just a classy word" for 'oppressed' or for 'the other' who is not getting a piece of the pie... In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern- a space of difference'. Spivak rejects the idea that there is pre-colonial past that we can recover. A nostalgia of lost origin, roots, and a native culture is a flawed project because there is no pure 'pre-colonial past' to recover which has been changed by colonialism. What we can do is only to understand the 'worlding' of the 'third world'. Spivak's concept of 'worlding' is a process through which the local population was 'persuaded' to accept the European version of reality for understanding their social world.

Though Ghosh criticizes the proponents of Postcolonial theorists straightforwardly and sternly rejects his stance as a postcolonial writer in many of his interviews, yet most of his novels deal with the troubled legacy of colonial experience and the discourse on formerly colonized societies, people and ideas. The fact is that the ambivalent relationship of so-called developing 'third world,' and the formation and reformation of identities in colonial and post colonial societies are meticulously explained in Ghosh's major fictions, which are not strictly postcolonial in nature rather connected to the postcolonial strain on third world people. Nationalism, according to Fredric Jameson becomes significant for third world people to protect their "radical difference" in the political and cultural spheres of postcolonial societies. Post-colonial criticism has initiated significant changes in the discourse of nationalism of colonized countries. It offered genuine criticism of the evolution of the feeling of Nationalism. All the novels of Amitav Ghosh need to be re-examined considering Nationalism and Colonialization. For instance, Ghosh's notable non-fiction *In An Antique Land* (1992) is a true attempt to uncover the connection between the past and present. The writer presents his own experiences that he spends his time in the Egyptian towns and villages in order to tracking and rebuilding of the mediaeval lives of a Jewish trader Ben Yiju and his Indian Slave Bomma. The most fascinating part of the Ben Yiju's story is his relationship with the slave. Mostly the slave Bomma appears through the letters written to and by Ben Yiju. Ghosh's hunt for the origin of the slave pulls the readers to the world of anthropology and history. He sows the seeds to visualize the utopian world of our ancestors to know about them. This journey of

inner world takes the reader to analyses the Middle Ages' religious beliefs, social conditions and geographical divisions of Middle East and the Indian subcontinent and it made the crossing of the paths of the Jewish merchant and his Hindu slave possible. It is a colorful world presented in the style of a traveler's tale. "Cairo is Egypt's own metaphor for itself". (*In An Antique Land*, 32). Cairo Geniza lie at the core of this novel in the shape of a traveler's book. The book in fact tries to present the history of various nations brings to limelight the people of Egypt who have lost their cultural privileges. Ghosh states that he begins to use Western theories to uncover a history that is part of his own heritage. Ghosh's another significant novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) is set in Burma, Bengal, India, and Malaya, spans a century from the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty, the last ruling dynasty in Burma (currently Myanmar) through the Second World War to modern times focusing mainly on the early 20th Century and exploring a broad range of issues ranging from the changing economic landscape of Burma and India. Ghosh presents the background of India under the colonization and examines the burdened years of the Second World War and India's struggle for independence. He made it clear in a lucid way how Burmese Royal family at the advent of the British Empire lost their dignity, culture, and rights representing the Indians in different colours. The most interesting point of both the novels is that the author utilizes Western methods to uncover history, but no major character is European. His perception is always the viewpoint of a suppressed that tries to understand, react and arrange the circumstances according to his thoughts. *The Glass Palace* portrays the barbaric and dictating nature of the British that begins in 1885 at Burma through the humiliating treatment on Burmese Royal family that makes them exile. In fact, *The Glass Palace* refers to the Burmese royal palace at Mandalay, it was a magnificent hall where the Burmese monarchs held audience. But at the same time, Ghosh introduced The Glass Palace in his novel as a small photo studio which derived its name from its original, as a reminder of the old days when Burma got its freedom. The book describes the character of Rajkumar, how he encounters his life's sufferings despite being orphan and becomes a rich teak merchant. The unique thing about the book is it never mentions directly the British's rule. They are shown in a backdrop of the scenes but never brought into the character's list. In the essay, *The Road from Mandalay: Reflections on Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace*, Rukumani B. Nair very appropriately observes Rajkumar's symbolic as well as real orphan-hood which implies that he has to invent A family where none exists(National Identify and Family genealogy(166). As Rajkumar has no relation to call as father or mother or brother, he finds solace in his life by finding the relations in his life. In Saya John he finds a father, in Matthew a brother, and in Dolly, his soul mate. He is an Indian by birth, wants to look after himself at an early age, sojourns at Burma for the better prospects, comes to India to seek out the girl whom he had met when he was only a child . He went back to Burma in search of his root and again returns to India in old age after his fortune has been destroyed by war, and his elder son and daughter-in-law were killed. Finally He has to leave the land of Burma as he is not a Burmese, and yet, that has been his home and all his life. As Robert Dixon comments in *Travelling in the West: The Writing of Amitav Ghosh*, "This cultural space is a vast, borderless region with its

own hybrid languages and practices which circulate without national or religious boundaries". Ghosh clearly portrays that the British may boast themselves in keeping the royal families of India and Burma alive, but the way these prince and princesses are kept and treated, it questions the basic ideology of the Western civilization and the British's morale code of treating prisoners or colonized, which the ruling power boasts of. Through the world revolving around him, Ghosh exactly shows how colonialism is a process where people and values compromised. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* the subaltern figures like Magala Laakhan by their 'counter-science' challenge the autonomy and universality of Western science. They give rise to the debate about the nexus of knowledge and power by questioning Eurocentric knowledge. The major part of *The Circle of Reason* deals with the characters who, being dispersed by force or by economic necessity, live exiled life in the imaginary city state 'Al-Ghazira' in the African part of the Middle East, and reflect on man-made borders and passport which hinder free human movement. The arbitrary partition between two Bengals and the quest for cultural identity is justifiably reflected in *The Shadow Lines*. The dispersed people of two Bengals live half of their life imaginatively in their lost home and the other half in present geographical reality. The characters of *The Shadow Lines* are divided into three groups – one living in Dhaka, another living in Calcutta and the rest choosing a third place like London. A good number of Ghosh's characters like Rajkumer, Soya John and the Collector in *The Glass Palace* try to appear like the English but fail to discard their roots. Thus they give rise to hybrid identity as colonial mimic men challenging both Englishness and Indianness as envisaged by Homi.K.Bhaba in his essay *Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse*.

India is a country which continues to suffer from 'internal colonialism' even after the demise of colonial power; especially women in India are the victims of internal colonialism as well as external one. The victimization of women in 'internal colonialism' went on unabatedly in silence acceptance. Post-colonial criticism has also revealed and questioned the patriarchal mechanism in victimizing women by creating the passive images of contemporary women. The protagonist in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is confronted by the horrifying future carrying the burden of innocent past life in India. There is a juxtaposition of the life spent in India and the life being lived in the northern Bihar. In the process of living in northern Bihar the protagonist Deeti annihilates the conventional images of motherhood. Here Ghosh presents the juxtaposition of pre-colonial India and post-colonial India successfully and accurately. The story opens by introducing the Deeti, a religious mother and wife. Her husband is a crippled opium factory worker named Hakam Singh. Deeti discovers that on the night of their wedding, her mother-in-law drugged her with opium so that her husband's own brother could rape her and she could not understand Hakam's impotency. Subsequently Deeti's brother-in-law turns out to be the actual father of her daughter that rendered her married life an utterly humiliating. When Hukam dies, Deeti sends her daughter Kabutri to live with her relatives as she finds herself facing death through the Hindu ritual *Sati*, a self-sacrifice on the funeral pyre of dead

husband. Deeti considered it better in order to avoid further abuse by her brother-in-law. But finally, she becomes able to reject this option when the opportunity to flee with Kalua, a lower caste man from a nearby village, arises. The pair becomes indentured servants traveling on a ship, the Ibis. It is pertinent to observe that in the larger struggle for independence, the very crucial aspect of the independence of women is excluded. It is from this perspective that Partha Chatterjee in his influential book *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World* (1986) considers nationalism as a derivative discourse. He considers that idea of Nationalism is in complicit with the elite sections of the society. Thus, Postcolonial criticism has also revealed how the individual identity and subjectivity of women's life is exploited and undermined by the national leaders in their struggle for freedom.

CONCLUSION

Hence, most of the novels of Ghosh are found revolving around diasporic history and cultural identity of the subjugated or conquered, so arguably his most recurrent landscape in his novels appears to be the historical space. A consistent development of his themes falling between history and identity such as historiographic reconstruction, cultural eclecticism, identity paradox, nationalism, globalization, and East-West entanglement. It is worth mentioning that Ghosh has personally visited those countries depicted in his novels as he firmly believes in the worldly engagement of fiction as art. Though he denies having any direct theoretical alignment with his works, yet his novels are essentially entangled with postcolonial concerns.

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