

THE NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH: A THEMATIC STUDY

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A historical survey of the Indian English novels shows that from time to time the configuration of the novel has changed, reflecting the changes in the age, context and perception of the writer. Amitav Ghosh is one of the foremost novelists who made a distinct mark on the world literary scene with their rich cultural heritage and skilled language control and most importantly their thematic concerns. In literature, craft may be important but sincerity is supreme. Solidity and validity come only when things get marked with the writer's characteristic point of view. Detached talk may be good philosophy but it cannot be good literature. Ghosh writes out of conviction. Each of his books is driven by his commitment to certain personal opinions and his own specific world view. In the present study, an effort has been made to reach out to the substance of the novels written by Amitav Ghosh.

For Ghosh, colonization and the related process is a permanent referent and he cannot extricate himself from this paradigmatic cast. This perspective is always in his mind as a guiding principle. The theme of novel is a tightrope walk for him. He talks of the double standards of the west and still the unhygienic conditions in India, corruption as life style and other evils do not go unnoticed by him. At no cost does he ever pawn his freedom to think. Whatever the temptations, he keeps himself unattached and rational research and thinking is what he indulges in.

Ghosh is an innovative experimentalist and he experiments extensively with the form of his novels. Basically, however, it is his themes that automate his works. Themes are the driving force of his novels. Each novel of Ghosh is horn out of a certain theory. He may be writing a travelogue a novel or a book of essays but certain entrenched ideas for hits respective themes prod him on. He has been true to his themes, true to his ideas and true to himself, lie does not restrain himself from commenting on politics, wars, economy and other worldly affairs. Ghosh has shown remarkable sincerity. He has not been very diplomatic in his statements but he has displayed remarkable sincerity in-his adherence to his beliefs.

Ghosh gave the Indian English novel new thematic dimensions His themes have rich and varied interpretations. In his novels, Ghosh concentrates on the aspect of theme and its innovative techniques and has successfully harnessed a foreign language to a sensibility that is essentially Indian as well as modern. A narration should thrive on bizarre happenings and out of the world events since, for the narrator, reality itself is surrealistic and defies description. Amitav Ghosh created the magic web of fantasy to capture reality in his novels. His innovative energy and comic irreverence replaced the earlier trend of earnestness and realism. The primary goal of his fiction is the penetration into the depths of the theme and reduces the characters and events to the level of structural strategies, strategies that resembles the genius of a painter much different from the skills of a photographer. The theme is conveyed to the readers by a medley of devices,

an ironic mode of narration recreation of a magic world, and an exhibition of narcissistic tendencies.

Amitav Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* marks a break from the traditional themes of the Indian English novels and the form and structure of the well made novel, showing life as a journey larger than death. *The Circle* makes death find its identity in the horror and sadness which embalms this process. *The Circle of Reason* is a skillfully constructed novel with the folk tale charm of *Arabian Nights*. Stretching from a remote village in Bengal to the shores of the Mediterranean, this is a neatly sculpted work of a master craftsman. In *Magic and irony as principles of structural: a reading of The Circle Of Reason*, K. Damodar Rao shows how immediacy of experience of the reality is conveyed to the readers by a blend of various devices, namely irony, magic and exhibition of the self. This is a book written in defence of reason, logic and rationality. In practical situations, logic hardly works India is a place where irrationality is pursued almost like religion. *The Circle of Reason* is a revolt blind pursuit of the senseless and the irrational rationality is the driving force of this apparently irrationally structured novel.

Colonisation, re-colonisation, neo-colonization and de-colonization are recurring thoughts in Ghosh's world. Ghosh compulsively turns to this perspective. A new kind of thinking order is required which assimilates both traditional Indian views with western sense of rationality. Actually many folds exists within the Indian view of taking the Sanskrit Brahmanical cult as authentic will perhaps mislead us. It is plurality and co-existent views that provide richness to Indian thought.

Actually *The Circle of Reason* is a beehive of activity. The novel tends itself to interpretations at two levels. On the surface, according to S. Sengupta, *The Circle of Reason* 'might give the impression that it is a picaresque novel set in the contemporary milieu. It does have a heroic hero and records various adventures befalling him and his interaction with the host of other characters as he moves from one country to another.

The movement from one country to another is not merely a narrative device to widen the scope of the novel. It is used to present travel as a metaphor for human life.

Amitav Ghosh's second novel *The Shadow Lines* at the outset establishes a rhythm which sets the tone, mood and tenor of the narrative. This book is, by common consent, Ghosh's best work. It is a family saga which is a roller coaster ride through the currents of history. *The shadow Lines* in the opinion of A.N. Kaul, is concerned with the theme of crossing frontiers-especially those of nationality, cultural and language. While the theme is an old one in fiction, Amitav Ghosh gives it a new twist, in his novel, which covers three countries-India, East Pakistan and England. In *The Shadow Lines* Amitav Ghosh acknowledges no separate regional or cultural realities because for him, all such demarcations are shadow lines, arbitrary and invented divisions.

The theme of *The Shadow Lines* is the agony of displacement, the sense of alienation in the adopted land and the constant dream of a return to one's land. D.K. Pabby points out that the real sorrow of the partition as portrayed in this novel is that brought an end a long and communally shared history and cultural heritage. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh brings out the futility of drawing lines across a nation to two nations, one having an East wing, which is separated from its West wing by over thousand miles. Amitav Ghosh evokes post colonial situations, cultural dislocations and anxieties in the period between 1962 mid 1979 and interprets the issues of fractured nationalities in close and idling encounters. Ghosh with his expanded horizons and imaginative understanding of the world caught up in the vortex of violence and murderous rampage, stresses on the urgency of, preserving the memories of saner and humane transactions for cultural self-determination and inter-personal communication.

The wartime London, the burning Dhaka of the post partition period and Calcutta of the riots are vividly created in the novel. Discussing the theme of violence, N. Eakumbaram examines how violence cracks the mirror of life in the fictional world of the novel. Tridib, the narrator's cousin is killed in the communal riot. Ghosh also focused on the changing middle-class ethos in India during pre and post Independence era. The lives of the character in this novel are determined largely by the idea of freedom and this idea is shaped by the history of the times. The *Shadow Lines* has an extraordinary density of narrative texture. The story emerges in layers and each layer is a fusion of private lines and public events, all linked into a thematic unity. One can always recognize a character in this book. This book is an unremarkable combination of a variety of world views.

The novel *In An Antique Land* bears testimony to Amitav Ghosh's interaction with at least four languages and cultures spread over three continents and across several countries. His canvas keeps on conquering new images, giving expressions to new ideas and 'homes. About the theme of this book, Ghosh said, "No this time I'm not writing a novel. Not even sociology, history and belles letters based on historical research. My new book cannot be described as anyone of these. It's a strange sort of work, within the parameters of history; I have tried to capture a story, a narrative, without attempting to write a historical novel. You may say, as a writer I have ventured on a technical innovation." We can see the anthropologist Ghosh at his best in weaving a complex pattern of fact and fiction in this novel.

In An Antique Land is a successful resuscitation of medieval Egypt and Mangalore. The novelist makes a comparative study of the two oldest cultures and civilizations of the two most important continents Asia and Africa, represented by India and Egypt. The novelist inquisitive mind reconstructs the historical Indian-Egypt relations over a period of time. World war second, Indian independence and the partition of the country provided to Ghosh the raw material for his novels against which studies the historical truths. The 1964 riots are described in *In An Antique Land* from the other side of the border. Ghosh has drawn a divisionary between war and riots, Europe and the Indian subcontinent to show how all violence whether committed in the name of nationalism or freedom has to be given no other colour. Ghosh draws and remarks a number of sources and traditions that stand a variety into concerns and historical situations.

The novel is clearly written in the picaresque style of Amitav Ghosh. In the episodic structure of the book, the author himself is the protagonist and is referred to as 'Ya Amitab' by others? Ghosh seems enthralled by Egypt and its history. The bulk of the novel constitutes the three visits of Ghosh to Egypt. He views the scene with an exceptional intelligence and unbiased perception. The idea that all divisions are unreal an artificial appears again and again in this novel of Ghosh. The novel *In An Antique Land* is spun around ancient Indo-Arab trade links where history and myth are interwoven.

In his novel entitled *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Amitav Ghosh makes a unique experiment by combining various themes and techniques. He blends literature, science, philosophy, history psychology and sociology into one organic whole. The resultant product is a complex, fascinating and highly imaginative story of quest and discovery that weaves together past, present- and future into an intricate texture. The novel has two major strands of storyline: the first narrates the life story of Antar, Egyptian computer clerk working on his super-intelligent machine Ava in the early 21st century to locate the whereabouts of the India-born American scientists L. Murugan who had mysteriously disappeared in Calcutta in August 1995; the second revolve around Ronald Ross's discovery of the malarial parasite in 1902.

The novel reads like science-fiction with multiple characters and swift turns into plot. This great thriller is the work of a social anthropologist rather than that of a detective novelist. In order to render entertaining tale into a serious one, Ghosh pushes in arguments and ideas which are forever blocking and undermining the relational view of science and the Universe.

To unravel the enigmatic in design of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, is like un-layering any onion to find the core. This deliberate inversion is almost as if Ghosh is exercising the gloom which had crept upon him in the writing of the novel. In this book Ghosh looks at the direction of magic, conspiracy and silence to overturn the logic of Europe's conquests of the East. It is essentially a novel of ideas, it works like a brain leaser undermining conceptual certainties and reads the as a mighty conundrum, their questions and problems are given conjectural answers. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is the novelist's attempt at questioning and countering the monopoly of the West over scientific discoveries and inventions. He has tried to deconstruct the aura around Ronald Ross, British scientist, who discovered the cause of malaria.

Besides offering sharp insights into lands and their histories, geographies and politics as a travel writer, Amitav Ghosh happens to be an anthropologist who done the garb of a storyteller. His non-fictional writings start with *Dancing in Cambodia At Large* and *Burma* which gives impetus to de-colonization in its own way. The book proves one thing that the colonizer on the dictator cannot kill people. Even in impossible situations, civilizations, culture and the spirit of people and live. The book is very satisfying in this way; a nation lives in its culture and not in governments.

Amitav Ghosh is an anthropologist who studies life, art and culture as also social and political institutions of the visits. *Dancing in Cambodia at large* in *Burma* is an excellent work of a social historical chronicler. It is a travel work that demonstrates the writer's perceptions about situations in Cambodia and Burma- Both countries practiced the politics of extreme isolation in the recent past. This fascinating travelogue is an imaginative rendering of complex responses of a scholarly researcher and sensitive writer of the agonizing process of the evolving of a nation for two South Asian countries- Cambodia and Burma in their post colonial phase. According to D.K. Pabby, 'Amitav Ghosh has presented, by implication, a prophetic vision for India in the context of the complex process of national reconstruction. Actually this book is not just a travelogue; it is an important political document that draws its raw material from history, sociology and politics.

Thematically speaking, displacement has been a central concern of Ghosh's work. Coming and going, departures and arrivals have been relevant symbols of his narrative structure. Travel is a very complex psychological process. Travelling can be either real or fictional or a Combination of both. Only a writer who has a proper sense of time and distance can write a good travelogue. Ghosh views the two countries, Cambodia and Burma in their historical perspectives. The time has toughly flown in these countries and Ghosh has successfully grasped the chaotic realities of this present Cambodia and Burma. As a perspective author and politically alert observer, Amitav Ghosh has tried to comprehend Cambodia and Burma and their respective recent past of isolation. The countries had been colonized earlier; both had traumatic dictatorial regimes and both the countries had practiced the politics of the iron curtain in the recent past. "Ghosh tries to reconstruct the scenario during the regime of isolation." The book is a significant social-historical chronicle. mbodia and Burma in their post-colonial period.

Countdown a small book, Ghosh's next creation, expresses the nuclear lobby in India as well as in Pakistan. The book is spontaneously written. The occasion that compelled the author

to write about is, India's nuclear explosions were the historic test that took place on 11th May 1998, followed promptly by Pakistani tests. Ghosh feels that reasons behind this nuclear testing are not related to the security of either nation. It is indeed sad to note that our region is dominated by 'stunt' politics, which seldom cares for the peace and prosperity of people. The book grows into a mild satire on this petty politics. The book also satirizes on Pakistan's social, political, economical and religious conditions.

Countdown is a kind of shock for readers of Ghosh. Earlier, he had depicted double standards shamelessly followed by the controlling powers of the world. He has always resented the treatment meted out to India by the Western World. But here he takes an introspective look. He is viewing Indians rather ruthlessly. It is, however, in this spirit that self-criticism can always lead to healthier altitudes and better practices. The book also satirizes in showing the mess in which we have placed our country. It boldly points out the glaring leadership crisis in India. Ghosh cannot conceal his severe disappointment.

The Glass Palace is the most popular novel, of Amitav Ghosh. He has conceived in this novel a monumental epic. This is a book about European greed and the cruelty of colonization. The novel is an intricate one and covers almost three generations. The British come to rich lands like India and Burma and with an insatiable greed, drained them of all resources. The royal family suffered most. The kings and queens were reduced to puppets and with the end of the royal way of life the whole idea of sumptuousness died. Luxury, connoisseurship and abundance ended. And alluring phase of human existence was damaged. This is the main theme of this fascinating picaresque novel. The Glass Palace has acknowledged the mediocrity, meanness and weakness of human nature.

In The Glass Palace, Ghosh has changed his style and subject matter. This book is again about geographical entities, space, distance and time. Many stories have been woven together. It is a saga of many families, their lives and their connections with each other. Changes, make-shift arrangements and temporary homes, appear again and again in this novel. Ghosh has given the contemporary flavour to this novel. The process of colonization and the state of the colonized are very relevant thought-components of this novel. The Glass Palace is an attempt to locate in time and nations such a people a beleaguered group" of races, inhabiting British occupied territories in Southeast Asia. Amitav Ghosh weaves into the life of his central protagonist, the bewildering and often poignant accounts of a family scattered through post imperialistic dislocation in various parts of the Asian continent, as he charts the complex sociological and political repercussions of such the disbanding through the experiences of loss exile and the search for a homeland.

While Ghosh does not make any pretence about the nature of the narrative in that, The Glass Palace, is nothing if not the discourse of post colonial subjects, the easy sliding of the imagination at once into and away from historical reality and the authors attempt to remap the history of three crucial South Asian countries, Myanmar India and Malaysia, all sides of the Empire through the late 19th and the 20th centuries. By his own admission, all this resulted in a novel in which the account of places and times necessarily forced to 'create a wholly fictional world'. The idea of the nation as metaphor of loss, and has been more symbolic of a unitariness that the physical entity which is society, finds elaborate figuration in the turbulence of cultural cross-overs and conflicting histories that make up the central concern of Ghosh.

The clash of cultures or what in another sense maybe viewed as the ironic conflation of nationalities is dramatically introduced in the novel. While barriers and boundaries seem to define the psyches that attend the making of nations and nationalities in The Glass Palace, the

author seems to collapse these margins and is metaphorically, at home everywhere. Meenakshi Mukherjee aptly remarked, "His success come from being an individual is not conditioned by the pressure of the global market and who remains unlettered by the burdens of otherness.

Ghosh is acutely conscious of the claims of history and genealogy even upon his imagined characters. *The Glass Palace* is a long-winded Bildungsroman constructed around the life of Rajkumar in Burma. Malaysia and India, and, on a more subterranean level, and acknowledgement of those changing parameters from the history of colonial India through its post independent nationhood that determine the personal and psychological identities of the author himself. *The Glass Palace* is likely to be somewhat disappointing for in denying the colonial subjects, their total otherness. The reader rearticulates his identity and takes a less oppositional and more liberal view of the colonizer-colonised relationship. *The Glass Palace* seems to be one of acceptance of the psycho-historical and Geo-political circumstances contingencies that led to the emergence of the national idea in India or for that matter the liberation of Burma from British occupation. The need for the post colonial to converse with that world, as it were, prevails over the other blind need to resist the old world.

The Glass Palace brings together history, fiction, autobiographical records and memories. Ghosh has stated that the "issues of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace*". The colonial experience and its memories are loaded with a sense of pain and suffering of the large number of people who lived through those phases of history. Ghosh re-constructed the history of Burma's transition from a kingdom to a republic, between 1885 in 1995 in *The Glass Palace* and calls it 'unqualifiedly a novel' of a 'wholly fictional world.

Amitav Ghosh has carved for himself a niche of distinction in contemporary Indian fiction in English and has attained great international re-known. A humanitarianism that challenges geographical and cultural boundaries a witty but merciful insight into the problems of man in society and an attempt at interweaving the past and the present are characteristic features of Ghosh's fictional art. For a reader the books of Amitav Ghosh provide a way of looking at the world. Many things are clarified and so many intricacies of human life have been revealed.

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