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Displacement and Alienation in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

The themes of displacement and alienation are prominent in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, exploring the lives of individuals caught between cultural, geographical, and historical divides. His works, set against the backdrop of colonialism, migration, and globalization, frequently depict characters struggling to find identity and meaning within shifting landscapes. Ghosh's narratives, such as *The Shadow Lines*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies*, portray displacement as both a physical and psychological experience, examining the complexities of identity in a multicultural world. Through vivid storytelling and complex characterizations, Ghosh underscores the impact of forced migration, loss of cultural roots, and the ongoing quest for belonging. The sense of alienation faced by his characters serves as a reflection of the broader socio-political conflicts and environmental challenges, highlighting how personal and collective histories intertwine. Ultimately, Ghosh's novels reveal how displacement and alienation shape the human experience, leaving an indelible mark on the characters' sense of self and their connections to the world.

Key words: displacement, alienation, identity, migration, colonialism, belongings

Amitav Ghosh's select novels depict the displacement of people as the direct fight off a number of historical factors like European colonialism, Partition of the subcontinent, World War II, and British invasion of Burma. The migration of the individuals is generally explained in terms of certain imperatives like 'push' and 'pull' factors. The push factor refers primarily to war, ethnic cleansing, riot, violence, and poverty. These factors force people to abandon their home in order to settle in an alien place. This kind of displacement creates a traumatic sense of dislocation. The migrants fail to integrate themselves in an alien land. However, the pull factors are variables that attract people from other locations because they offer positive opportunities or amenities. Economic globalization and technological advancement have created opportunities for guest workers. In the select novels of Amitav Ghosh, the migrants are uprooted from their place of origin.

The Circle of Reason (1986) is 'The Prix Medicis Etrangere' Award-winning novel. The title of the novel refers to the dislocation of the characters. It is preoccupied with the theme of 'reason'. In other words, the theme of Reason is subverted in the narrative. The critic Dr. Bala Kothandaraman says 'The title of the novel 'Circle' has structural ramifications, not the least of which is a subversion of its own ultimate concern – Reason' (156). The novel can be considered as a diasporic entity. It deals with the themes of history, culture, identity, displacement, islocation, alienation and migration. It is an ambitious, fantastic narrative, set partly in the India of British Raj and partly in the Middle East and North Africa. It is a complex tale of a young Indian boy Alu and his adventures in India and Abroad.

Alu is the protagonist of the novel. He is a weaver from a small village near Calcutta. The characters in the novel travel from one place to another place for better work and better future. In the novel, Ghosh traces the journey of Alu and later makes him share his space with a group of immigrants who belong to the lower economic strata in the society. *The Circle of Reason* is a novel about many places, displacement and exile. Ghosh chooses a circular pattern for this novel, taking clues from Indian philosophy. Ghosh takes his inspiration from The Bhagavad-Gita to name the three sections of the novel. The novel can be considered as the commentary on re-writing the lessons of Hindu philosophy rather than re-considering and establishing a hierarchy of qualities. The narrative constantly debunks the apparent clarity of distinction among these three concepts. Amitav Ghosh freely mixes past, present and future in the novel. The novel basically tells three stories. The first part deals with the story of Balaram Bose. He is a rationalist and is influenced by the life of Louis Pasteur (French microbiologist). Balaram is idealistic to the extent of being inhuman. He does not mix

with the people in Al-Ghazira. Alu is a nephew of Balaram. He is the only one to survive in the family. In the first section „Satwa: Reason“, Ghosh sees the alienation of science from rationalism in the Indian society in all its glorious irony. In this section, the lines of conflict between reason and bigotry are drawn with perfect precision.

The second section, ‘Rajas: Passion’ moves forward through Alu. He is the nephew of Balaram. He is the only survivor of Balaram’s family. He brings his community to death and destruction by his attempt to create a co-operative community which tries to dispense with money and trade. The third section, „Tamas“: Death“ structures itself around Mrs. Verma, who rejects rational thinking. She tries to create an Indian model of community life in the desert. Despite this, she is deserted by others. The novel moves on with the characters: Alu, Zindi, Jyoti Das and Mrs. Verma. Jyoti Das is a police officer. He tracks Alu and considers him as an extremist. These three parts (Satwa, Rajas and Tamas) are in search of new horizons, hopes which are not fully formed and imaginations yet to be filled. Hope is their only asset.

The novel is a tale of the adventures of Alu. Balaram Bose is Alu’s foster- father. He is impressed by the ideas of the scientific reasoning, the impact of the Western World and the books of Louis Pasteur. Balaram wants to set the village free from the ideas of myth and superstition. He purifies the whole village by making use of carbolic acid. In the process of purification Balaram, Toru Debi, Maya and Rakhal are burnt to death and Alu is left alone. He is charged with sedition and extremism by the police. To escape from the police and the forthcoming punishment, he runs away from Lalpukur to Calcutta, from Calcutta to Kerala, from Kerala to the imaginary Gulf country and from Al-Ghazira to Algeria through Alexandria, Egypt, Lisbon, Tunis and El Oued. In the course of his journey, he comes across many diasporic men and women and faces varied immigrant experiences, events and situations. K. Rathiga in her work, ‘Displacement of Women and Sense of Exile in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*’ says:

Journey or travel is one motif that forms an integral part of all his novels. While in *The Circle of Reason*, it is a group of migrant labourers, in his later novels we witness mass exodus or migration where entire communities are displaced. Ghosh feels very deeply indeed about such victims of history who are forced into exile by circumstances beyond their control.

The novel is about the migrant or diasporic consciousness where the chief characters cross the geographical and emotional boundaries of their nations to define themselves. The movement away from home implies a movement away from harmony. The Foreign country may appear to be a land of dreams from the native home but it is just an illusion. The discourse of a home is an important landmark in the diasporic themes. Sensitivity for the home is one of the most crucial aspects of diasporic life. *The Circle of Reason* is the story of the victims of history who are forced into exile by incidents beyond their control. It occupies a unique place in the field of postcolonial literature. It depicts the conditions of people who have been displaced from their native lands. Amitav Ghosh foregrounds in the novel the various socio-economic problems faced by the Indian diaspora in abroad due to illegal migration.

The novel demarcates about migration, diasporic feeling and rootlessness. The characters in the novel do not belong to any place but are constrained to travel and form new habitat to cope with loneliness and sense of void that surface due to displacement. The concept of home itself is a matter of qualm, there is nothing in this novel that can ordinarily be called a 'home'. Uncertainty towards the place of origin or destination can be marked as the prominent feature of this novel. The characters in the novel are disposed to travel in general. The novel goes back and forth from Bangladesh to Calcutta and from the Middle East to Kerala. The story moves in a very indeterminate air. This perplexing environment does not allow them to feel the stability of home in their life. The novel can be called an endless saga of restlessness, uncertainty and change.

Alu is a nomadic character who comes to Lalpukur. This may be treated as the beginning of the journey as he moves to Calcutta, Al-Ghazira and Middle East. Throughout the novel, he has been disposed to the journey without having any longing for home. Balaram himself belonged to East Bengal (Dhaka) and moved to Lalpukur at the time of partition. He made his dwelling in Lalpukur and tried to settle himself there. The other characters Kulfi, Chunni, Karthamma, Professor Samuel and many others find their dwelling at Ras. Lalpukur becomes a diasporic place after the partition. As most of the villagers are refugees, they are in agony of losing their home. They engross all their vigor in discerning what they have lost and how they have become almost have-nots. They just have the memory of the rich and the lavish life left over in the other part of the border. The emptiness and misery of their new lives make them melancholic. Amitav Ghosh says:

The reason was that the people of Lalpukur were too melancholy. Vomited out of their native soil years ago in another carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away, they had no anger left. Their only passion was memory; a longing for a land where the green was greener, the rich whiter, the fish bigger than boats; where the rivers' names sang like MeghMalhar on a rainy day – the Meghna, the Dholesshori, the Kirtinosh, the Shitolokhkha, the majestic Arialkha, wider than the horizon. (*TCOR* 63)

The first approach refers to the journey of diaspora. Ghosh has depicted the journey through the character of Alu. The second approach refers to the characters who belong to diaspora but find their home at a new place. Balaram and other characters are depicting this. The third approach refers to the melancholy and agony involved with the loss of home. The people of Lalpukur are associated with this agony. *The Circle of Reason* begins with a description of Alu, who is present in all the three sections of the novel. It is episodic in nature and can also be called a picaresque novel. The episodes are only loosely connected. Alu is the only constant factor who lives a life by trial and error method. In a typical picaresque fashion, Alu moves from Lalpukur in India to Al-Ghazira in Egypt and then to a small town in the north-eastern edge of the Algerian Sahara. The journey does not bring any kind of satisfaction or success. Alu's real name is Nachiketa Bose. He loses his mother and father in a car accident. Alu comes to Lalpukur from Calcutta to live with his uncle Balaram and his aunt Toru-debi. Nachiketa Bose comes to be known as Alu because of his head. People begin to talk about his head differently but Bolai-da says that Nachiketa Bose's head resembles a potato which is known as Alu in Bengali. From that day onwards, he is named Alu and his original name is almost forgotten. Alu displays an amazing ability to pick up various languages. But he cannot speak properly. Balaram decides to teach him the art of weaving instead of sending him to school for formal education. Alu settles in Lalpukur and he is admitted in Bhudeb Roy's school. Roy's son Gopal bullies Alu. Hence, Alu is forced to leave his school. Shombhu Debnath is a humble man in Lalpukur. He teaches Alu the art of weaving. Alu becomes perfect in the art of weaving. This gives the novelist an opportunity to give a historical perspective to the skill of weaving.

In conclusion, Amitav Ghosh's novels offer a profound exploration of displacement and alienation, depicting these experiences as both personal and universal struggles deeply rooted in historical and socio-

political contexts. Through rich narrative landscapes and deeply resonant characters, Ghosh highlights the human cost of forced migration, cultural dislocation, and environmental upheaval. His characters grapple with the loss of identity and homeland, illustrating the complex dynamics of belonging and estrangement in a globalized world. Ultimately, Ghosh's works emphasize resilience amid dislocation, revealing that even in the face of alienation, individuals seek connection and meaning, bridging gaps in culture and history. His narratives invite readers to consider the persistent impact of displacement on the human psyche, the interconnectedness of personal and collective histories, and the ways in which identity is constantly reshaped by movement across borders. Through his compelling stories, Ghosh not only chronicles these themes but also underscores the transformative potential of empathy, understanding, and the shared human desire for belonging.

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