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VISION AND VOICE OF AMITAV GHOSH- A STUDY

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most well-known Indians writing in English today. Born in Calcutta in 1956, he grew up in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran and India. After graduating from St. Stephen's College, Delhi, he went on to earn his D.Phil in Social Anthropology at Oxford in 1982. Ghosh has taught in a variety of areas including anthropology, sociology, South Asian culture and comparative literature at Delhi University, University of Virginia at Charlottesville, Columbia University and University of Pennsylvania among others. In 1999, Ghosh joined the visiting faculty of the department of Comparative Literature at Queens college in the City University of New York. Ghosh worked as a journalist for The Indian Express during the Emergency, before he wrote his first novel. Proficient in the languages of Bengali, Hindi, English, French and Arabic, he published his first article "Ethnology" in 1984.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, voice, vision, history, myth, multiculturalism

Ghosh has written more than twenty-five articles in such publications as The New Yorker. The New York Times, The New Republic and Granta. Ghosh's first novel, The Circle of Reason created waves when it was published in 1986. Crafted using the modernist mode of absurdist magic realism, it was highly acclaimed and has been translated into several European languages. It was awarded the Prix Medicis Etrangere, a renowned French literary award. The promise that this novel held out was more than fulfilled by his second novel, The Shadow Lines published in 1988, which won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1989 and the Ananda Puraskar award in Calcutta. In 1980, Ghosh had been to Egypt to do field work in the fellaheen village of Lataifa and the work he did there resulted in his third book In An Antique Land published in 1992. This book is partly non-fictional, dealing with the history-fiction interface which is fascinating as well as culturally significant. Ghosh's fourth book, a science fiction thriller, The Calcutta Chromosome won the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke award for 1997 and is soon to be filmed by Gabriel Salvatores.

In addition, Ghosh was a finalist in the reporting category for the National Magazine Awards, the most important magazine prizes in the United States of America, in 1999, for a story he wrote the previous year for *The New Yorker*: "A Reporter at Large: India's Untold War of Independence." He is the winner of the 1999 Pushcart Prize, a leading literary award, for an essay that was published in the *Kennedy Review*: "The March of the Novel through History: The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase". "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" which was published in the July 17, 1995 issue of *The New Yorker* was honoured as one of a group of the Best American Essays. Ghosh's two short stories "The Imam And The Indian" and "An Egyptian In Baghdad" were published in *Granta* in 1986 and 1990 respectively. His non-fictional books *Dancing in Cambodia*, *At Large In Burma* and *Countdown* published in 1998 and 1999 respectively, are excellent examples of fascinating reportage and masterpieces of travel and interpretive writing.

In the words of Professor David Palumbo-Liu, who teaches Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* in a number of his classes, at the Department of Comparative Literature, Stanford University:

[He] is one of the most important and engaging literary figures in the world today Intensely historical and imaginative, his essays and novels treat the intense contradictions between increased cultural fluidity and hybridity and co-existence of old and new traditions, that confound and excite our contemporary age (Nadira Hira).

The paper study takes a critical look at Ghosh's novels in terms of themes as well as narrative structure and attempts to relate them to the genre of Indian fiction in English, in all of its social, cultural, political and metaphysical connotations. This paper does not seek to pigeonhole his works into any one of the current streams categorising Indian fiction in Andhra University, Visakhapatnam English - post colonial, modernist, postmodern, expatriate, migrant, diasporic, absurdist magic realism etc. - but tries to take a holistic view of Ghosh's fiction as seen from some of these points of view.

The rationale that has dictated the choice of Amitav Ghosh's fiction as the subject of a doctoral study, needs some explanation. Uma Parameswaran's dire prediction that the future of Indian English Literature appears bleak, that it is destined to die young, whether true or not, is suggestive of the conflicting and contradictory status of this branch of Indian Literature. She sets A.D. 2000 as the dirge date for Indo-English literature. This prediction probably derives from the view of the diminishing importance of English and the English-speaking minorities in the erstwhile colonies of Britain. The result of this change is that the writers of this branch of fiction in India find themselves at the crossroads. On the one hand, the Indian writer in English always suffers from the lurking fear of being either patronized or marginalised in the English-speaking West. On the other hand, he is also aware of being swamped by the regional writers in his own country. Added to this professional insecurity, there is the very real threat to the class he belongs to.

English in India being a language of the elite, writing in English can only be about the urban elite and the privileged, for the urban elite and the leisured class. This entire class - of writers and those about whom they write - is shaken today by the upsurge of the masses. Though this upward movement of the masses, determined to overthrow authority by fair or foul means, began with independence itself, it became volatile in the eighties and nineties as social historians document

(S.R.Raghava, DP.Mukherji). Consequently, the urban, Western - educated elite class began to lose its hold on power, political as well as social. The Indian writer in English, is a part of this shaken class, "desperately groping for some space of his own"(C.N.Ramachandran 54). Perhaps the very decision of an Indian writer to write in English, poses certain inescapable corollaries about the writer's audience and choice of subject. Without arguing either for 'nativity' or against 'foreign audience' one can easily agree with Ram Sewak Singh that:

It is difficult to believe that English is not an Indian language. The time has come when this literature should be judged on its merit, setting aside the question whether it is patriotic or chauvinistic to write in a foreign language. It is one of the rights of a writer to choose his medium of expression for the inner creative urge ... (181).

It is in the light of this view that the present study of Amitav Ghosh's fiction has been taken up. The vigour and vitality of his fiction is largely dependent on the fact that it is firmly embedded in his native soil. He belongs to the mainstream of Bengali artistic endeavour in so far as his work is set in the same sociological milieu, embodying the same historical and geo-political compulsions. This is true of his three predominantly fictional works - *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Further, he writes of and about a cross-section of society of which the English language is a part of the intellectual equipment.

His language is therefore unobtrusive, unselfconscious and by and large not unnatural. Although Ghosh has to his credit only four novels (one of which - *In An Antique Land* - is partly non-fictional) the astounding, profundity, scope and range of his novelistic vision and the originality of his fictional voice warrant an in-depth study. Perhaps because Ghosh has only been publishing his work since 1986, critical studies of his work are limited. An attempt has been made, to fill this void, by R. K. Dhawan in his book *Andhra University, Visakhapatnam The Novels of Amitav Ghosh* - a collection of critical essays published in 1999. Given his varied range of interests - anthropology, journalism, comparative literature, cross-cultural studies - Ghosh's work is bound to be of contemporary value, relevant to various disciplines of study. This thesis purports to analyse his fiction in terms of its vision and its voice; in other words, it attempts to study his experimentation with narration as well as his original approach to the social, political and cultural themes of his novels. Ultimately it attempts to show the extent to which Ghosh has succeeded in realizing the great ends of literature - the heightening of perception and awareness, the extending of sympathy and the attainment of maturity by living, in Socrates's famous phrase "the examined life" (Rita G.Shaw).

Circle of Reason and *The Shadow Lines* are set against the backdrop of the educated Bengali middle-class environment and its interactions with different cultural traditions. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the character of Phulboni is perhaps a symbol of the debt Ghosh owes to his forbears, particularly Bonophul and Phanishwamath Renu. In all of these novels, the hybrid Anglo-Bengali subjectivity seems an apt vehicle for the portrayal of crosscultural interactions. Cross-cultural interactions and studies of this phenomenon have become an important and absorbing feature of the contemporary world. The renewed vigour in the exploration of the self and the 'other', identity and difference, is very much due to a set of circumstances caused by technological advance which has made neighbours of strangers. Technology has 'killed the distance'; the dialectical relationship

between the Self and the Other, is no more perceived as a purely abstract or theoretical concern.

One of the paramount problems of learning about culture in the modern era is that of understanding how individuals, as well as whole societies cope with bicultural and multicultural contexts, that is, with situations in which differing cultural norms and ideals are found together. Very few nations or individuals can now remain in ignorance for long, about details of the dominant cultures of the world, which, as it happens, are drawn from the original colonial powers. The essential movement of peoples and cultures is now however, much more of a two- way process as Lloyd Fernando points out in his excellent article "A Note From the Third World Towards the Re-definition of Culture"(Narasimhaiah 1964). The peaceful migration of peoples - Asians and Africans- towards the national territories of their former aggressors is one of the most interesting cultural phenomena of the post-World War II years. Poles, Yugoslavs, Indians, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos and others have shifted to new homelands carrying with them their cultural values including language, customs, food preferences and world views. Most people today then, all over the world are united at least in facing the problem presented by different cultural norms co-existing, easily or uneasily, within the boundaries of their respective nations. The movement of people across continents - and the resulting cultural displacement - forms the basic thematic context of all of Ghosh's novels. The plight of the migrant labourer in the Middle East as portrayed in *The Circle of Reason* and in *In An Antique Land* or of Asian immigrants in America and London as in *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Shadow Lines* are etched in poignantly sympathetic and ironic tones. Ghosh portrays the diasporic phenomenon in its contemporary connotations.

The diasporic aesthetic is evoked by him metaphorically, in line with the view of critics like Stuart Hall for whom

"diaspora does not refer to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea" (Mongia 119).

He views this as the old, hegemonising form of ethnicity. The diasporic experience as viewed within this framework is defined, not as essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. This is a process that Ghosh's protagonists, Afu in *The Circle of Reason* and the nameless narrator in *The Shadow Lines* undergo. The surge of an over-whelming nostalgia for lost origins, for times past-as seen particularly in *In an Antique Land* where Ghosh recreates an idealistic past of cross- cultural assimilation - is one that can neither be fulfilled nor requited and hence is "the beginning of the symbolic of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery"(Hall 120).

Although Ghosh currently lives in New York, he is not an expatriate in the strict sense of the term. The major part of his life was lived in the sub-continent; however, he has been constantly shifting between India and another home abroad, turning his sojourns home into hectic periods of creative activity. Thus his fiction does exhibit some of the classic features of expatriate writing as enunciated by R.K. Dhawan and L.S.R.K. Shastri in *Commonwealth Writing • A study in Expatriate*

Experience and by Viney Kirpal in *The Third World Novel of Expatriation* The expatriate consciousness manifests itself in a variety of ways: a sense of loss and dispossession, a feeling of remaining straddled between two cultures and anxiety to belong - either to one's native cultural milieu or to the new environment, an assertion of one's nativity or immigrant status, an attempt to turn one's liminality into strength, an agenda of multiculturalism, an active interrogation of all notions of belonging, an insistent celebration of "unbelonging and an ultimate urgency to prove oneself (Vijayasree 224). At the heart of this consciousness lies the issue of identity or self-definition which is thematised and explored in a wide range of fictional tropes such as anonymity or namelessness as in *The Shadow Lines* (where the narrator remains anonymous throughout), search for home (which takes the form of a quest, for Alu in *The Circle of Reason*), interrogation of contemporary notions of nationalism and renewal of family ties (as in *The Shadow Lines*) and a dialectic of cultural difference which privileges an agenda of multiculturalism (as in *In an Antique Land*). A persistent preoccupation with and a deliberate reconstruction of the original guideposts of identity - name, family, community, country - a prominent feature of expatriate writing, is very much in evidence in Ghosh's fiction.

Living abroad for long stretches of time, these writers suffer a break with the family and its protective fold, a situation that is fraught with considerable intensity of emotion for the Indian writer in particular, as he belongs to a culture in which the family happens to be the most important support system. Indian expatriate writing is therefore characterized by attempts to reassemble the fragments of a family history, to narrate interesting family sagas (as in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, Firdaus Kanga's *Trying To Grow*) along with an attempt to recreate the community's history through myth, memory and legend (as in Boman Desai's *Memory of Elephants*. Allan Sealy's *The Trotter Namal* Following in this trend, *The Shadow Lines* is largely the saga of a middle -class Bengali family, and history - both national and of local communities - is evoked in all of his novels.

The past holds a powerful influence on the imagination of these writers. An obsessive preoccupation with the past, an insistent backward glance, appears to be the common concern underlying all of these aesthetic formations. As Fredric Jameson puts it : "Psychologically the drive towards unity takes the form of an obsession with the past and memory"(130). A retrieval of the usable past and an analysis of the community's history and heritage are important structural devices not merely of expatriate writing but of post-colonial writing in general. This device is utilised with scholarly and creative skill in all of Ghosh's novels and particularly in *In An Antique Land* and *The Shadow Lines*. While writers like Rushdie and Tharoor, for whom personal memory gets more Andhra University, Visakhapatnam and more blurred with time, take a leap into the timeless, merging myth and history, fact and fiction, creating new post-colonial political allegories such as *Midnight's Children* and *The Great Indian Novel.*, Ghosh brings a scholarly sobriety to bear upon his works, which sets them apart. Homelessness is aestheticised through the tropes of journey and quest and travelling becomes a metaphor for the human condition. There are no secure Malgudis in Ghosh's world; his characters are on a perpetual move and eternal quest and his novels are largely discourses of and by wandering people, which is perhaps, in part, a fallout of Ghosh's migrant status. In the words of Edward Said: "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home ; exiles are aware of at least two and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness that - to borrow a phrase

from music - is contrapuntal" (55).

Viewing life and experience contrapuntally, these writers realize that difference does not imply any hierarchical structuration but merely points to a co-existence of multiple cultures, worlds, realities. The very idea of belonging is being abandoned as "bad faith, as mere myth of origins" (Ahmad 129). The logical consequence of such an aesthetic is that all concepts of centrality and umsonance are questioned; in other words, a strong Andhra University, Visakhapatnam impetus towards decentering and pluralism, a typical postmodernist stance (Vijayasree 227). Ghosh displays a keen sense of awareness of the possibilities of this literary aesthetic in all of his novels. Thus *The Shadow Lines* presents a counter-narrative of the nation, *The Circle of Reason* questions Western and Eurocentric concepts of science and Reason and *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *In An Antique Land* present Eastern alternatives to Western ideas of historical and scientific progress. interdisciplinarity or strategies of intervention often provide the discursive practices for the narrativisation of this "contrapuntal" vision.

The practice of crossing frames is naturally the best vehicle for the depiction of this vision of heterogeneity and Ghosh's novels are excellent examples of this. Thus, history and anthropology combine to produce *In An Antique Land* and the history-fiction interface characterises *The Shadow Lines*. The postmodernist subgenres of absurdist magic realism and fabulist writing or faction blend, with remarkable ease, in Ghosh's novels, with characteristically Indian narrotological devices such as story-telling and the cyclical frames of time and space. A mixing of genres perhaps gives the author the freedom to cross the agility of boundaries and maybe recognized as a novel and effective medium for the portrayal of the multicultural reality of the contemporary world.

Clifford Geertz has talked eloquently about the "Blurred Genres" as a phenomenon which is widespread today: It is difficult to label either authors (What is Foucault - historian, philosopher, political theorist? What is Thomas Kuhn - historian, philosopher, sociologist of knowledge?) or to classify works (What is Steiner's *After Babel* - linguistics, criticism, culture history? What is William Gass's *On Being Blue* - treatise, Causerie apologetic?). And thus it is more than a matter of odd sports and occasional curiosities, or of the admitted fact that the innovative is, by definition, hard to categorize. It is a phenomenon general enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map - the moving of a few disputed borders, the marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes - but an alternation of the principles of mapping.

Ashis Nandy has suggested that the uniqueness of Indian culture lies not so much in a unique ideology as in the society's traditional ability to live with cultural ambiguities and to use them to build psychological and even metaphysical defences against cultural invasions. Probably, the culture itself demands that a certain permeability of boundaries be maintained in one's self-image (Nandy 107) It is this "strategy of survival, the clue to India's postcolonial world view," (Nandy 107) that Ghosh's vision seems to reflect. In his interpretation of cultural, social, political and historical realities, Ghosh links strands that most remain oblivious to, and thus reveals the complex nature of the tapestry of society one that we are only beginning to understand. In the words of the critic Tapan Kumar Ghosh:

"A profound historical sense, a strong humanitarian drift that defies geo-cultural boundaries and moves towards cosmopolitanism, a witty but compassionate insight into man and his

society, an attempt at interlacing the time past and the time present in the crucible of memory- these are the essentials of Amitav Ghosh's fiction (Dhawan 151).

These, together with his brilliant art of construction that weaves together public events and private lives, and balances complex sets of issues with rare deftness, his ingeniously structured web of history and mythology, politics and philosophy and, above all, his evocative use of an indefectible prose that stands out for its lyrical grace and transparent clarity, have established him as a significant new voice among the recent Indian authors crafting fiction in English.

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