

The Role of Culture and Politics in the Selected Works of Amitav Ghosh

Dr. S. Barathi

*Assistant professor, Department of English
Bharath Institute of Science and Technology,
Selaiyur, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600 073*

ABSTRACT

Twenty First Century has witnessed tremendous changes in the field of literature, where the Diaspora writers have carved a niche. Specifically, at present, there are many Indians who have migrated to foreign lands due to various reasons. Though they have settled in an alien land, they often nostalgic, i.e., mentally live in the land where they were born. Thus, Diasporas become culturally displaced, and it is reflected in Diaspora literature. The present paper deals with the portrayal of culture and the role of politics in shaping the culture of diaspora with reference to the works of Amitav Ghosh. The reason for selecting Ghosh's works is due to the fact that they contain plenty of references pertaining culture, politics and also religion. As a renowned anthropologist Ghosh uses the knowledge in his field to showcase the culture of the natives. The research also pertains to how politics influence people of a country is analysed in the selected works of Amitav Ghosh.

Keywords: Diaspora, Culture, Cultural displacement, Adaptability, Religion, Politics

I. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh is a Gyanpit Award winner and a diapora writer of the 21st Century. His works had been widely acclaimed by his readers across the globe and is considered as one of the significant diaspora writers of the present generation (Mondal, 2011). The specialty of his works is that it majorly deals with the culture of the native people as well as the cultural clashes and cultural inadaptability in the alien land. Many of the works of Ghosh details the complexity of the life of diaspora in the alien land. The present paper is an overview of Ghosh's portrayal of culture in his various works. Also, it highlights the writer's views on the political scenario of his country.

Background studies:

There are several critical research works on Ghosh's early as well as later novels. Most of these research papers look at the works as an immigrant sensibility, quest for self, alienation, travelogue, etc. There are a few critics who had noted the vitality of culture, religion and politics among the diaspora. So, the present research is an attempt to foreground the role of culture, religion and politics among the diaspora. Most of Ghosh's works carries references to food culture as in *The Hungry Tide*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and *In an Antique Land*. Besides, there are researches conducted on the dislocation of diaspora, immigrant sensibility, etc. Thus it is quite evident that Ghosh primarily deals with culture and history of people. As a renowned anthropologist, he is curious to read not only the culture, but also the history and nature of people he comes across, which is reflected in his works. While talking about the career of Ghosh as a writer, he has produced travelogues, reports, research and academic papers as well as critical articles. What makes Ghosh special is that he mixes fact with fiction. (Mondal, 2011) The major concern in Ghosh's novels is the representation of gender. But this is overlooked by many western critics, who find history, culture, religion and politics dominate over the other themes. On the contrary, many Indian critics view Ghosh's writings as gendered. For instance, in an interpretation of *The Shadow Lines*, the researchers consider it as a "critique of nationalism ... an undesirable nationalism with femininity" (Mukherjee, 2000). The use of gender here is not to signify "womanhood" but to represent the tradition and culture of the nation and its people. The Indian Express comments on Ghosh as "A writer of formidable learning and intelligence" and further explores his non-fiction *The Imam and the Indian* and states that "He explores the connections between the past and present, events and memories, people, cultures and countries that have a shared history" (368). The above statement proves Ghosh's mastery of history and anthropology along with his narrative skills that has won him wide readership.

Diaspora and Culture:

Burneau on "Diaspora", states that as a widely applied term to represent "all forms of migration and dispersion of people" (35). It also refers to the migration and settlement of people in an alien land. (Bhaba, 18) and the concept of diaspora is closely related to multiculturalism, transnationalism and hybridity (Ang, 141). All these above definitions show that diaspora is prominently migration from native land to a foreign land which may be for various reasons, such as, in search of a livelihood, to safeguard themselves from their national threats, in search of a better and prospective life, etc., whatever may be the reason for migration, the migrants initially face many issues in the alien land. Some of the common issues faced by the diaspora are, Nostalgia, Identity crisis, Cultural shock, Alienation, Immigrant sensibility and Quest for self.

Most of Ghosh's works talk about culture and as an anthropologist he has focussed more on human behaviour and culture over other elements. Another noteworthy point here is the writer's use of metaphorical language that goes with the flow and often astounds the readers. India today appreciates Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* as "a dark elegiac elegance" and praises the novelist as "in search of distant frontiers ... where ancient, telluric currents of ancestry continue to alter the script." A researcher rightly points out in a review on the novel as "linguistic and scientific, Anglophone and Bengali speaking" it is looked at more from an eco critical view than cultural view. Thus there is a need to look at the novel from the angle of culture. The Asian Age acknowledges his work *Dancing in Cambodia and other essays* as a "grand study of two societies..." (*Dancing in Cambodia and other essays*, Review). This possibly could aid in conducting a deeper

study of culture in the selected novels. In his prose, *The Imam and the Indian*, Ghosh talks about migration, "... their grandparents and ancestors and relatives had travelled and migrated too, in much the same way as mine had, . . . because of wars, or for money and jobs, or perhaps simply because they got tired of living always in one place"(5-6). The above lines demonstrate the reason for people to migrate to foreign lands. In the sixth part titled "the Human comedy in Cairo" he explains how some people like Mahfouz live in "... imaginative universes-a small, distinctive group within the tumult of modern Egypt" (65). This distinctively bears the mark of a local diaspora.

Cultural displacement and Cultural Adaptability:

As first generation immigrants people face the above mentioned issues. But later on, when they mix with the mainstream people, they overcome the challenges by adapting themselves to the foreign culture as well as mixing with the mainstream people. Also, there are instances where these immigrants form groups among themselves and finally overcome their troubles either by adapting themselves to the foreign culture or carving a niche for themselves. Some of Ghosh's works such as *In an Antique land*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* all deal with the culture of the diaspora people and their adaptability to the alien culture. E. B. Taylor on culture states it "as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (178). The above definition about culture is applicable to all communities including the diaspora. The culture of diaspora is an amalgam of native culture they had brought with them and the alien culture to which they had adapted. Though, they adapt to the alien culture, as in the case of *the Hungry Tide*, the diaspora people feel culturally displaced in their native land. This is seen when Piyali Roy's food habit, which is more westernized. Thus, the protagonists in Ghosh's works remain alienated from their own society. In *Calcutta Chromosome* the writer presents a picture of the diaspora culture as well as the lives of Indo Anglicans in Calcutta. Characters like Murugan and Antar stand for diaspora, whereas, Mrs. Aratounian represent the Anglican culture of Victorian Age Calcutta.

Other cultural elements:

In Egyptian villages there is a belief that envy can affect them. There were stories that are spun over this idea. For the villagers, "livestock amounts to a representation of ideas of growth and increase" (119). The malicious glance of a person at the livestock is thought to bring evil to the livestock. In addition to this, there is also envy on household and about envious people.

Cultural Shock:

The writer also reveals that it was a great cultural shock for the Jews who came to know that in India, it is a common have concubines, as their religion never approved concubines. This, he states in his essay in "The Imam and the Indian", in the section on the slave M.S. and his owner Ben Yiju, who is a Jewledish business man settled in Mangalore, India. While tracing the origin of the slave, Amitav had come across another character, a female who is mentioned only once. First, the writer thought of her as a female slave, but later on after further research, he concludes that she might be the wife of Ben Yiju. But, there was no mention about her in the letters written by Ben Yiju's friends, who enquire about his slave Bomma and also his children, but not about the Indian woman. This shows that they did not approve of this relationship with a foreign woman. Also, it is possible that Ben Yiju just made a formal contract with the woman

by giving money to her brother. Further, there are some details that prove the woman is from a Nair family.

Religion:

His *Calcutta Chromosome* is regarded as a science thriller by *The Times*, where in it is stated that “With its range of astonishing characters, advanced computer science, religious cults and wonderful portraits of Victorian and contemporary India, *The Calcutta Chromosome* expands the scope of the novel”, thus it is clear that the novel has a religious flavour apart from the regular cultural aspect. The craftsmanship of Ghosh is well wrought through his vivid portrayal of history and culture. Apart from showcasing the culture, Ghosh in particular discusses the ethnic food he had during his travels. Similarly in the essay “A Tibetan dinner” he recollects how he had momos at Delhi as a student. Now in the US, the same dumpling with a minor variation, he feels as “. . . historic bit of food: one of the first genuine morsels of Tibetan nouvelle cuisine” (15). In his other novels too, one could quite often identify references to food. “. . . the slave of MS. H. 6” is quite interesting and here the author discusses the puzzling deity of the Tulus.

Matrilineal Society:

The Tulus in India are a community that follows a matrilineal pattern. Ghosh observes that, “All the castes that participate fully in the Bhuta cult are governed to some degree by rules of matrilineal succession” (187). On the contrary, the Tuluva Brahmins are patrilineal, and dominant over the other Tuluva castes. Thus in the Tulu region there are different sects and communities that follow different tradition and culture. For instance, among the four major Tuluva castes, the Bhants are ranked the highest, own most of the lands in Tulunad. Also, while tracing the origin of the slave of MS. H. 6, named Bomma, Ghosh identifies that “. . .he was born into one of those matrilineal Tuluva castes” (192) connected with Bhuta worship. All the above demonstrate that India is a multicultural society with different cultures and beliefs.

Politics:

History and politics often remain inseparable. This is evident in the case of “Baburnama” reviewed by Ghosh. The voluminous book at length describes the emperor’s feats, personal experiences that it is considered as the first “true autobiography in Islamic literature” (87). It is a narrative of self-discovery. The book as the writer analyses is full of nostalgia and longingness to reach his native which never happened. The artistic and cultural achievements observes Ghosh, has often been an “official grandiosity” and nothing else. He further remarks, “This exaggerated political emphasis on Mughals probably contributed to the escalation of the Babri Mosque controversy” (104). Thus, he intertwines the past and the present and highlights how culture and politics are bound together. In *Count Down* the author in an interaction with a local at Pokran, came to know the real situation, wherein the young man states, “The only people who benefit from these tests are the politicians . . . They bring no benefits to anyone else in the country” (5). This proves the fact that even certain actions done under the banner of bringing welfare to the society or country has not served the cause. The politicians simply use such technological feats to boast and did not care for those who were affected by such tests. Since the people of Pokran were tolerant they never raised any issue in public forums, which had been a major advantage for the politicians. Here, Ghosh observes the implication of nuclear

tests as India's thirst to increase its status quo, but it might ultimately turn against its own people.

In an Antique Land, is a monumental work of Ghosh, where the protagonist was in search of a particular slave's letters and travels to as far as Egypt. There in that alien land, people had a false belief that all Indians are Hindus. As a nation following Islam, they consider the protagonist, who is a Hindu, as an outsider. The Book Review states the book *In an Antique Land* as a combination of "fiction, travel writing and anthropology to create a single seamless work of imagination, Ghosh characteristically make us rethink the political boundaries that divide the world and the generic boundaries that divide the narratives" (*In an Antique Land*, Book Review). Thus, those people try to make him understand that their religion is modern and the best. Not only this, they also have a wrong notion about the politics in India, all these are vividly portrayed by Ghosh.

II. CONCLUSION:

To sum up, Ghosh's works on the whole revolves around the culture of people. As an anthropologist the author has keenly observed the nature and behaviour of people in various societies are reflected in his works. As a renowned anthropologist, Ghosh has made a thorough study of human nature and culture in relation to the society. The culture of a nation is always dependent upon its past history as well as the present political situation. These elements are thoroughly analysed in his works and thus, it represents not only the culture of a nation, but also of the diaspora.

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