

Culture and Dislocation from Subaltern Perspective from the Selected Novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

In the contemporary world, shifting one's root becomes a normal happening. Based on it several studies have emerged and one among them is Diaspora studies. In general, the term Diaspora denotes displacement, but at present the term Diaspora has various meanings and there is no clear-cut definition to understand it. I have analyzed the basic characteristics of Diaspora and the sufferings each individual character have gone through in their voyage of. Particularly, my paper highlights the sufferings of dislocation and cultural conflict from the selected novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Amitav Ghosh. Amitav Ghosh's "The Glass Palace", "Shadow lines" and "The Circle of Reason" and Bharati Mukherjee's "The Desirable Daughters", "Jasmine" and "Wife".

Key words: Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, culture dislocation, subaltern perspective

Introduction

A study by Robin Cohen gives nine basic characteristics of Diaspora community:

1. Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions.
2. Alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions.
3. A collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements.
4. An idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation.
5. The development of a return movement which gains collective approbation.
6. A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate.
7. A troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group.

8. A sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement.
9. The possibility of a distinctive yet creative and enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism (Cohen 1996: 515).

Robin is also of the opinion that among the nine features, all Diasporas will have only some of these features and not all of them.

No Homogenization

The Diaspora community and its features cannot be homogenized as different Diasporas are available. The Diasporas have been categorized based on the ethnicities or nationalities into various kinds such as Jewish, Greek, Armenian, African, Chinese, Indian, etc. Based on these categories, distinction has also been made in terms of culture and life style of each of these groups.

Three Phases of Indian Diaspora

The history of the Indian Diaspora can be broadly divided into three phases, based on the reasons of their movement.

The first phase of migration has started by the end of the nineteenth century, during the British colonization. Many uneducated people left their home land for the British colonies to work as indentured laborers in sugar plantations and in railroad construction. The second phase of migration occurred in the mid twentieth century, when educated people went to the developed nations to experience independence and for economic development. The third phase of migration took place by the end of the nineteenth century, and in the beginning of the twenty-first century. This time people's movement to the developed nations is for the sake of education and employment.

The second and the third phase of migrants are educated and they documented their life in the form of letters, memoirs, stories, poetry and fiction. Although the Diaspora life which is portrayed is to some extent realistic, yet it is also fictionalized. Emphasizing this point, Jasbir Jain refers to it as a split narrative. She further discusses the past and the present of Diaspora literature as being different the past has a different history', tradition', regional and colonial memories 'and 'political equations'and the present has different kinds of loneliness, isolation, social ghettoisation, success, affluence and recognition'. In spite of living in the present they co-exist in the past too (Jain 2004: 76).

Four Major Movements

S K. Sareen divides the history of the Indian Diaspora into four major movements as,

- (i) the indentured labor that built for the empire in South Asia and the West Indies;
- (ii) the seekers who went mainly to the West in search of security, freedom or identity;
- (iii) the aspirants who went again to the West in search of opportunities (money); and
- (iv) the re-migrants who, for self-preservation, had to move from where they had arrived from India to other locale such as the Ugandans to UK and USA and the Fijians to Australia. (Sareen 2004: 82).

Commonality: Sense of Guilt for Not Being Loyal to Both Societies

Even though writings of the Diaspora writers differ according to the reasons of their movement, the commonality among their writing is their sense of guilt for not being loyal to both societies. With such feeling their mind oscillates between the home country and the settled land. The tension of living in-between the two worlds is reflected well in their works.

Features of Diaspora Novels

Discrimination is the major problem faced by almost all the Diaspora communities. Regarding this aspect, Parekh states, “that no society can ever ensure full equality to all its cultural minorities” (Parekh 1998: 411).

All the novels talk about the basic features of Diaspora such as isolation, nostalgia and cultural clash. In Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and to some extent Ali’s *Brick Lane* double discrimination faced by a woman in the new land is described. As *Jasmine* happens to be an uneducated woman from the lower middle classes, she faces survival problems and gender discrimination. Whereas, in Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and in Sidhwa’s *An American Brat*, due to their economical as well as educational background, chances to face discrimination are less. *Jasmine* talks more about leaving of home country, problems of settling in a new country and the emergence of new identity in the new land. This novel focuses mainly on the initial stage of settlement and its problems. *An American Brat*, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* concentrate less on the description of entry into the new land and the suffering of isolation. The novels’ main focus is the problem of identity and cultural clash.

Indian Migration as the Major Focus

Much of the literature available on the Indian Diaspora pertains to Indian migration, their socio-economic and cultural experiences, experiences of adaptation and assimilation in the host societies. Biographer Fakrul Alam categorizes Mukherjee's life into three phases which correspond to her works. Her earlier works, such as —The Tiger's Daughter and parts of Days and Nights in Calcutta can be taken to be her attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage.

Bharati Mukherjee



Courtesy: <http://www.missnewindia.com/p/about-bharati.html>

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian settled in Canada who later moved to America with her husband. Her novel *Jasmine* is about the transformation experienced by Jyoti who turns into Jasmine first and finally Jane. “Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duff's day mummy and Taylor and Wylie's au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn't this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University Club today” (Mukherjee 1989: 127).

Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh is another famous diasporic writer who deals with the problems of immigrants. Amitav Ghosh was born on July 11, 1956 in Calcutta. He grew up in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, Iran and India. When he was young, he was brought up on the stories of Partition, Independence and the Second World War. In an article in the *New Yorker*, Ghosh remarked: —My mother grew up in Calcutta, and her memories were of Mahatma Gandhi, non-violence, Civil

Disobedience and the terrors that accompanied Partition in 1947. In all the stories his mother told him, Mahatma Gandhi appeared as “an incomparably vital and endearing protagonist”.



Amitav Ghosh

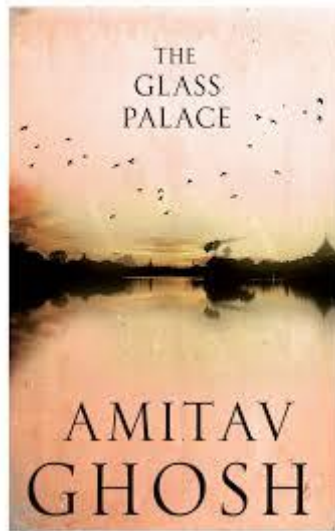
Courtesy: <https://www.amitavghosh.com/padma.html>

His father, a diplomat, narrated to him stories of the Second World War, about the Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army who fought against the Japanese and the Germans. “My father came of age in a small provincial town in the state of Bihar. He turned twenty-one in 1942, one of the most tumultuous periods in Indian History. That was the year the Indian National Congress, the country’s largest political party, launched a nationwide movement calling on the British to quit India, it was when Mahatma Gandhi denounced the Raj as a ‘position that corrupts all it touches’. And in that historic year of anti-imperialist discontent my father left home to become an officer in the British colonial army in India”.

Thus, history has become Amitav Ghosh’s prime obsession and his fiction is imbued with both historical and political consciousness. These memories have constructed the concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world, which is the dominant theme of *The Shadow Lines*—an interweaving of memory, history and contemporary life. Amitav Ghosh worked briefly with *The Indian Express* after his graduation from St. Stephen’s College, University of Delhi. Then he studied Social Anthropology at Oxford and worked as a lecturer in Anthropology at the Delhi School of Economics. In 1982, he received his D.Phil., in Anthropology from Oxford University.

Cultural Conflict and Dislocation

Amitav Ghosh's "*The Glass Palace*" contemplates about the effects of history on the lives of individuals from a subordinated perspective. It also foregrounds the lives of socially, politically, economically and historically insignificant characters. Like Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, it does challenge the notion of boundaries, euro-centrism and the ill-effects of Western expansionism.



This novel is partially based on the personal experiences of Amitav Ghosh's uncle, Jagat Chandra Dutta, who had been a timber merchant in Burma. In his 17 July 2000 interview with *Outlook*, Ghosh mentioned that his father's family had lived in Burma for several generations. Therefore, writing this novel is a way of re-claiming the personal history of his family for Amitav Ghosh. Amitav Ghosh has profoundly been interested in the history of Burma not only due to a personal urge to re-locate the history of his family but thereby to record a portion of history that might otherwise simply pass out of public record or won't remain accessible and audible to the world.

In the beginning of the novel, we come across a universal statement by the narrator-author as a post-colonial critic: "This is how power is eclipsed: in a moment of vivid realism, between the waning of one fantasy of governance and its replacement by the next; in an instant when the world springs free of its mooring of dreams and reveal itself to be girdled in the pathways of survival and self-preservation." (3).

In the constant flux of larger historical events, it is the individual histories of the postcolonial subjects that endure massive shifts in their fate. Ultimately, some of them survive, while most of them succumb to anonymity. *The Glass Palace* is a 'virtuoso demonstration' of Amitav Ghosh's

method of remembering the past, that is to say, not as an imperial chess game, but as biographies of otherwise unknown people. The application of Subaltern Studies, and particularly, its approach of reading 'history from below' to this novel is significant in the sense that it reveals the survival strategies adopted by ordinary individuals, families and collective groups at times of violent historical movements. The question that lies at the heart of this novel is, 'Whose life should be counted as significant and whose not?' In this context, Subaltern Studies may be of great help in the sense that its primary focus has always been on the masses rather than on the elites. As a victim of larger historical forces, the exiled King broods over his own fate and of his empire as a postcolonial critic. He ruminates:

"The King raised his glasses and spotted several Indian faces, along the waterfront. What vast, what incomprehensible power, to move people in such huge numbers from one place to another—emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen. Why? Why this furious movement—people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile?"(133)

Though treacherous and wicked herself, Queen Supayalat hurls severe indictment as a colonial subject, when the British officials visit Outram House to investigate the princess's marriage to a commoner. She grumbles: "Yes, we who ruled the richest land in Asia are now reduced to this. This is what they have done to us; this is what they will do to all Burma. They took our kingdom, promising roads and railways and ports, but take my words, this is how it will end. In a few decades, the wealth will be gone—all the gems, the timber and the oil—and then they too will leave. In our golden Burma where no one ever went hungry and no one was too poor to write and read, all that will remain is destitution and ignorance, famine and despair. We were the first to be imprisoned in the name of their progress; millions more will follow. This is what awaits us all: this is how we will all end—as prisoners, in shanty towns born of the plague. A hundred years hence you will read the indictment of Europe's greed in the difference between the Kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm."(5).

The Circle of Reason

Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, is a genre much developed in Latin America, a continent where the condition of the people is not conducive to novels of rational cause and effect. India, with its pullulating poor and its superstitions, has recently given us, though the

book was written in London, Salman Rushdie's "*Shame*," which belongs to the tradition of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Mario Vargas Llosa.

The hero of "The Circle of Reason" is named Nachiketa Bose, but he is called Alu, which means "potato." This is because of the shape of his head, knobby, bumpy and far too big. A deformed protagonist is to be expected in some brands of magic realism. He enters a fantasy that builds on a basis of misdirected pedantry when Alu's uncle Balaram sets phrenology to work on him.

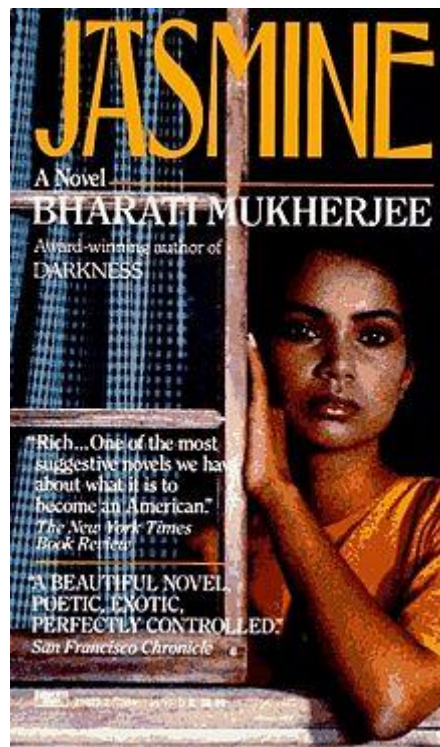
War comes, a plane crashes near the village, and the villagers cannibalize its remnants until blue-clad troops arrive to take these away. After the war, terrorism. Alu is suspected of burning the village and makes his getaway, pursued by a Police Officer named Jyoti Das. Das, true to Mr. Ghosh's image of the bewildering complexity of Indian men, is primarily an ornithologist, but he has to keep that quiet. ALU sails to the East African port of al-Ghazira on a derelict ship called the Mariamma, owned by a certain Hajji Musa, not a very good Moslem: "An almost empty arrack-bottle had been tucked with drunken parsimony into the waist of his lungi. At the end, the main protagonists" Alu, Zindi and Boss await at Tangier a ship that will take them home. The picaresque narrative, crammed with characters who would do well in Cervantes, comes to an end without having taught us anything.

The Shadow Lines

Through the novel *The Shadow Lines* Amitav Ghosh unfurls various notion as exhibited by the characters in different time span. Ghosh's unmitigated brilliance is ostentatiously manifested, as the Readers experiences different place and time throughout the novel. The —Sahitya Akademi award winner prudently erects his characters and farther experiments with them by placing them in an eccentric situation. The characters are well-defined and holds different notion of liberalism. The enthralling melodrama is portrayed in two parts Going Away and Coming Home. The protagonist Tridib is the narrator's uncle, and has a momentous impact on narrator's life. It is through Tridib's idiosyncratic, rational and detached eyes Anonymous narrator get the captivating picture of outside world and gradually Narrator was trained to contemplate through Tridib's vision; Evidently highlighting narrator's reliance on Tridib. The narrator was cocooned in the protective shell of his iconic figure Tridib.

Lack of Rootedness and Cultural Contradiction in Ila, later makes her pay the price as she was cheated by Nick Price. She shrugs off the past with her notion of freedom which was merely viable in her own Make Belief world. On the contrary, —Tha'mma belongs to the generation that uprooted themselves in 1947—. Ghosh has grandeurly maneuvered his juxtaposition of historical realism with the notion of freedom through the character of Tha'mma. Going back to the partition of Bengal, Ghosh showcases Tha'mma character as someone who was torn between her place of birth and her place of living. For Tha'mma freedom is something to be won through bloodshed and violence; Thus, lucidly manifesting her stereotype National Interest.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*



In *Jasmine* both physical and psychic violence reject the linear, logical and traditionally Western concepts of stable identity and control over destiny. Sati has also become a point of focus in theoretical discussions on the Oriental zing of Indian culture and undergoes “tangling” similar to other cultural artifacts. Both Said and Spivak cite sati as a major example of Western cultural misrecognition, namely for the English colonizers' tendency to forbid sati as it was seen as a barbaric act. Mukherjee, like Said and Spivak, asserts through *Jasmine* that sati can act as a vehicle for positive change for women, especially when it can be performed as an act of personal freedom or personal expression. Timothy Ruppel argues, “the narrative structure [of *Jasmine*] is that of a journey and passage, a liminal state, which places the third world inside the first world. In the

process, the narrator must continually remake herself to avoid the threat posed by enforced identity” (184).

The Desirable Daughters

In *The Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee skillfully moves the story back and forth between the dying society in India where Tara grew up and her American life with Rabi and Andy. When Tara decides to tell her stories, she writes about the Tree-Bride and the class of Calcutta girls born a century later. Bish does not understand. "What is the value of a passing moment?" he wonders. "What is the value of groups marked for extinction?" (92).

Bharati Mukherjee depicts a liquid society in her novels, ie a society in flux. It is a society of constant flow, the flow of migrants, the flow of machines, flow of criminals, flow of power structures, flow of people and commodities. Amidst all the confusions the message was brought out clearly and it is represented as a fascinating beautifully written work of art that exhibits vulnerability that cannot be missed out. Dimple's sense of her own identity (and marginality) frames all of her responses to her new environment, which consists generally of Indians, mostly Bengalis. That the ethnography of Indians, including "Americanized" Bengalis, constitutes —the experience of being abroad—is one of the many reversals of ideological positioning Mukherjee employs in *Wife*. When Jyoti and Amit discuss "guns and licenses" over dinner, Dimple "thought she had never really been friends with anyone before this, never stayed with someone for weeks and discussed important things like love and death. That's what America meant to her" (84-85).

Dimple's subservience reiterates a culture and ideology (both her own and American) that denies her the right to personal feelings and desires that serve her own interests, and which would allow her to forge her own identity. Brought up to defer to her father/husband's final authority to examine and judge her every emotion and behavior, she cannot serve as an agent of change on her own behalf, because she cannot comprehend any reason to justify her feelings. As an Indian woman, and held up as the symbol and repository of —virtue," it was her feminine duty to subjugate her feelings and desires to the will of her husband: —She wanted Amit to be infallible, intractable, godlike, but with boyish charm" (88-89).

Summation

Amitav Ghosh questions the arbitrariness of borders as well as debates the issue of loyalty to one's "true" identity, mainly through the characters of Hardayal and most prominently Arjun. Hardayal asks Arjun:

"Well, didn't you ever think: this country whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time—what is it? Where is this country? The fact is that you and I don't have a country—so where is this place whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time? And why was it that when we took our oath it wasn't to a country but to the King Emperor—to defend the Empire?(123)

As a masterpiece, this novel represents the recurrent themes that are found in almost all postcolonial novels—absurdity of wars, boundaries as 'shadow lines', colonization and its ill-effects, quest, dislocation, fragmentation or disintegration of identity, amalgamation, divided loyalties, the process of growing, exile, temporary settlements, etc. Looked at from the Subaltern perspective, this novel deals with the specific history of individuals, and thereby the collective histories of communities and nations in turmoil, rather than historiography generalizations.

Amitav Ghosh nevertheless succeeds in telling this forgotten history from below or from an alternative point of view. Such a novel as *The Glass Palace* can be categorized on the borderline territory between history and fiction. This novel deals with the history of losers and survivors, yet with the champions of humanity. It is a provisional world of constant meeting or gathering and separation.

Jasmine's narrative naturally places itself in the technological realm of hybridity as well as the role of cultural hybrid she adopts because of her resemblance to the cyborg way of adapting described in Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto". Haraway argues that women of color are to some extent cyborgs, more specifically what Audre Lorde describes in *Sister Outsider*. Sister Outsider within the United States, Haraway argues, is "a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities" (2293). More specifically, as an Indian Jasmine is representative of her native country's reputation of having remarkable skills in technological fields that originally were associated with the West. Aneju points out that Jasmine's exile from India "marks the place where all immigrants struggle with antithetical forces and then come to terms with a third, hybrid way of

existence that allows them to move back and forth between two worlds with the least possible dissonance—” (Aneju 73).

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