

Postmodernism in Amitav Ghosh's Novels

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Amitav Ghosh

Courtesy: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/amitav-ghosh>

Novels of Amitav Ghosh

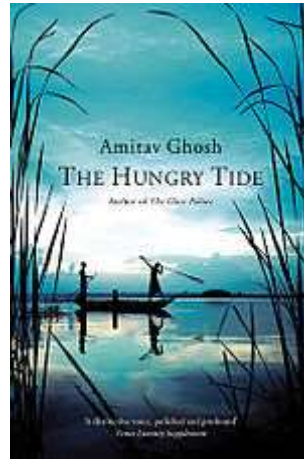
Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta on 11th of July 1956. He grew up in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Sri Lanka, Iran, Egypt and India. After graduating from the University of Delhi, he went to Oxford to study Social Anthropology and received a Master of Philosophy and Ph. D. in 1982. *In an Antique Land*, the novel, which was published in 1983, was primarily the result of his work in Egypt. He has also been a journalist. He has written a number of novels such as *Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011) etc. He has also stayed in New York and taught at Columbia University. Anita Desai states that, “Ghosh has chosen to inhabit the real world rather than the artificial land of fantasy, and makes one watch his development as a novelist.”¹ (169). His novel, *The Glass Palace* was an international bestseller that sold more than a half-million copies in Britain. *The Hungry Tide* has

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been sold for translation in twelve foreign countries and is also a bestseller abroad. Amitav Ghosh lives in New York City with his wife, Laura Riding and two children.



Radical Changes Brought in by Post-modernism

English fiction from 1990 onwards was influenced by the wave of postmodernism which brought radical changes in the Indian English fiction. Postmodernism was a continuation of modernism, a revolt against authority and significance. The remarkable change that was prominent in the novels published after the First World War, is called, modernism and the literature written in the late 20th century, especially after the Second World War, is considered postmodern literature.

The term *postmodern literature* is used to describe certain characteristics of post-World War II literature and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Ruth Prasad Jhabwala and Amitav Ghosh are the makers of new pattern in writing novels with post-modern thoughts and emotions.

Indian Writing in English – Juxtaposing Tradition and Modernity

Indian English literature has stamped its greatness by juxtaposing tradition and modernity in the production of art and literature that created an ever shining mark in the minds and hearts of the art lovers. The interest in literature burnt the thirst of the writers which turned their all efforts to innovate new form and style of writing.

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Focus of This Paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine how Postmodernism has determined and developed the Indian novel and novelists, especially Amitav Ghosh. He belongs to the International School of writing that successfully deals with the post-colonial ethos of the modern world without sacrificing the ancient histories of the separate lands. Amitav Ghosh perfectly blends fact and fiction with magical realism. He weaves his magical realistic plots with postmodern themes.

Amitav Ghosh – A Post-modernist

Amitav Ghosh is one among the postmodernists. He is immensely influenced by the political and cultural milieu of post independent India. Being a social anthropologist and having the opportunity of visiting alien lands, he comments on the contemporary issues through in his novels. Cultural fragmentation, colonial and neo-colonial power structures, cultural degeneration, the materialistic offshoots of modern civilization, dying of human relationships, blending of facts and fantasy, search for love and security, diasporas, etc... are the major preoccupations in the writings of Amitav Ghosh.

Global Rather Than National

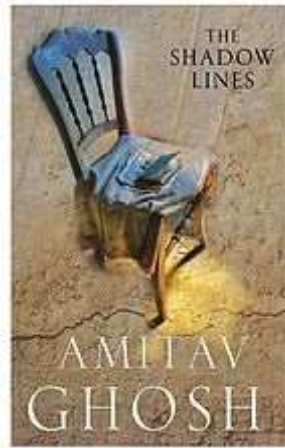
The post-modernism elements are abundantly present in Amitav Ghosh's novels. As per postmodernists, national boundaries restrict human communication and Nationalism leads to wars. So, post-modernists speak in favour of globalization. Amitav Ghosh's novels focus on multiracial and multiethnic issues; as a wandering cosmopolitan he roves around and weaves them with his narrative beauty.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh makes the East and West meet on a pedestal of friendship, especially through the characters like *Tridib*, *May*, *Nice Prince*, etc. He stresses on globalization rather than nationalization. In *The Glass Palace*, the story of half-bred Raj-kumar revolves around Burma, Myanmar and India. He travels to many places freely and gains profit from his travels. Unexpectedly, his happiness ends when his son is killed by Japanese bomb blast. The reason for this calamity is fighting for national boundaries.

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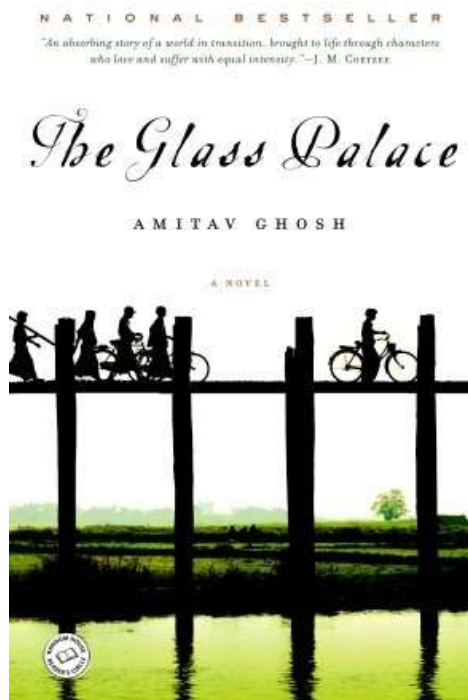


Magical Realism – Weaving Fact and Fiction with Magical Realism

Amitav Ghosh has successfully mastered over the genre called ‘magical realism’ which was largely developed in India by Salman Rushdie and in South America by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Ghosh belongs to, *“This international school of writing which successfully deals with the post-colonial ethos of the modern world without sacrificing the ancient histories of separate lands.”* (Anita Desai, 1986:149) Like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh perfectly weaves fact and fiction with magical realism where he re-conceptualizes society and history. Amitav Ghosh is so scientific in the collection of data, semiotical in its organization and creative in the formation of fictionalized history.

Post-modern Themes Dealing with Insecurity, Disorientation and Fragmentation

Amitav Ghosh weaves his magical realistic plot with postmodern themes. Self-reflexes and confessions characterize the fictional works of Amitav Ghosh. Displacement is the central process in his fictional writings where departure and arrivals have a permanent symbolic relevance in his narrative structures. Post-modernism gives voice to insecurities, disorientation and fragmentation. Most of his novels deal with the insecurities in the existence of humanity, one of the postmodern traits.



In *The Glass Palace*, the havoc caused by Japanese invasion in Burma and its effect on the Army officers and people -- a sense of dejection that deals with so much human tragedy, wars, deaths, devastation and dislocation (Meenakshi Mukherjee, p.153) – has been penned.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Tridib sacrificed his life while rescuing May from Muslim mobs in the communal riots of Dhaka in 1963-64. Pankaj Mishra describes Amitav Ghosh in the New York Times, as one of few postcolonial writers, “*To have expressed in his work a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of colonized people as they figure out their place in the world*”.

Rejection of Western Values, Beliefs

Postmodernism rejects western values, beliefs, ideas, beliefs, culture and norms of the life. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh routes the debate on eco-environment and cultural issues through the intrusion of the West into East. *The Circle of Reason* is an allegorical novel about the destruction of traditional village life by the modernizing influx of western culture and the subsequent displacement of non-European people by imperialism. In *An Antique Land*, contemporary political tensions and communal rifts were portrayed artistically.

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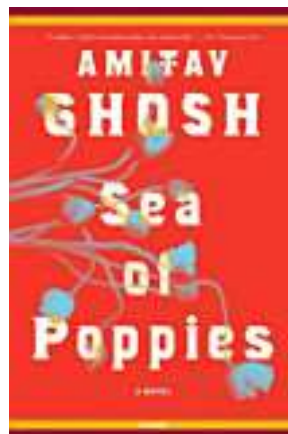
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Postcolonial Migration

Postcolonial migration is another postmodernism trait.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the theme of immigration, voluntary or forced, along with its bitter/sweet experiences, runs through the core incidents of the novel – the ruthless oppression and massacre of East Pakistani refugees who had run away from the Dandakaranya refugee camps to Marichjhampi as they felt that their destination would provide them with familiar environments and therefore a better life.



In *Sea of Poppies*, the indentured labourers and convicts are transported to the island of Mauritius on the ship Ibis where they suffer a lot.

In *The Glass Palace*, Burmese Royal family, after their exile, live uncomfortable lives in India. Raj-kumar who had accumulated huge heaps of amounts in Burma, is forced to leave his home and business due to Japanese invasion.

Depiction and Employment of Irony

Irony plays a vital role in the postmodern fiction. The postmodernism writers treat the very subjects like World War II, communal riots, etc. from a distant position and project their histories ironically and humorously.

In *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh weaves the character of Queen Supayalat and Arjun with a tinge of irony. Queen Supayalat, even after being captured by the British forces, does not lose her pomp throughout the novel. The Queen is portrayed ironically. Arjun, basically an Indian, is completely influenced by the western ideology, imitates the West in his dressing sense and food habits. He never becomes aware of the fact that he is being used as an instrumental to inflict pain on his own people.

Multiple Realities

Temporal distortion (multiple realities) is a literary technique that covers information from several alternative timelines. The postmodern author jumps forwards or backwards in time.

In *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh uses nonlinear timeline through the memory that links the past to the present and many of the characters. The *Temporal distortion* helps to recreate a magical world.

In *The Hungry Tide*, he shuttles between the Marichjhampi incident from Nirmal's point of view and the present day travels of Piya Roy, Kanai and Fokir. This time-travel creates an intricate web of sub-topics and plots. In his other novels, characters move round gyre of timelessness, yielding helplessly to the chasm of human relations and other postmodern perturbations.

Amitav's Narrative Style

The narrative style of Amitav Ghosh is typically postmodern.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrative is simple that flows smoothly, back and forth between times, places and characters. Amitav's prose in *The Shadow Lines* is so evocative and realistic written effortlessly and enigmatically with a blend of fiction and non-fiction.

Throughout *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh uses one end to signal the beginning of another so that at one level, nothing changes but yet everything does. There is a strong suggestion of Buddhist metaphysics in his technique. Life, death, success and failure come in cycles and Ghosh uses the conceit of a pair of binoculars early in *The Glass Palace* to sensitize the reading in this perspective.

Simple Language with a Mix of Indian Words for Specific Purpose and Concepts

Being a postmodernist, he makes use of very simple language to give clarity to the readers. Many Indian English writers experiment with the language to suit their story.

Amitav Ghosh practices this technique in *The Hungry Tide* using Bangla words like *mohona*, *bhata* and others, interweaving them with local myths like that of Bon Bibi and her brother Shaj Jangali, the presiding deities of the region.

Though *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* have their share of non-English lexical items, *Sea of Poppies* in numerous places piles up the Indian (Bengali or Bhojपुरi) or lascarpidgin terms to the point where some readers might to some extent begin to get confused.

Diaspora Representation

For Amitav Ghosh, language in the process of the production of art attains the status of diasporic representation – voicing him and thousands of other uprooted individuals. Language embodies the attempt to create family that has broken and dispersed in the mire of confused identity. Ghosh acknowledges it in *The Shadow lines*:

You see, in our family we don't know whether we're coming or going – it's all my grandmother's fault. But of course, the fault was not hers at all: it lay in the language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a

word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. (*The Shadow Lines*, 153)

This is the language that Ghosh believes in and tries to create in his works.

Rejection of Elaborate Formal Aesthetics

Postmodernists reject elaborate formal aesthetics in favour of minimalist designs. Amitav Ghosh does not give any significance for picturesque description and ornamental use of language. Tabish khair comments on this as

Ghosh is very careful in his use of English and vernacular transcriptions. He develops a conscious and rich tradition in Indian English fiction, a tradition that includes R.K. Narayan and Shashi Deshpande. The attempt is not to stage Indian Englishes. Ghosh avoids the aestheticisation of language. (p.108)

In Defense of Feminism

Postmodernists defend the cause of feminists. *Uma*, Amitav Ghosh's character, is a perfect example of this. *Uma* is a break from the traditional women characters. She is a political activist who travels around the country to dissipate the patriotic spirits.

Blurring of Genres

Blurring of genres, one of the postmodern traits, can be witnessed in the writings of Amitav Ghosh. He disfigures by blending many genres. Girish Karnad rightly said about him, "Ghosh uses to great effect a matrix of multiple points of view in which memory, mythology and history freely interpenetrate ... A delight to read" (*Indian Express*).

The Glass palace is romance, narrative fiction, adventure fiction and historical fiction. He combines all the elements of a novel to create fragmentation. Ghosh uses the romantic genre to chart the characters who reflect on the history of colonialism in Burma and the formation of the present Myanmar nation. It is also a narrative fiction that employs a complex spiral narrative

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structure to texture many characters' identities and experiences in the world where we live in. Being a portrait of history and document of nation, the novel can be read in historical perspective. Ghosh invents the third person narrator who relates the story in a spiral fashion that fictionalizes and makes real historical subject and event.

To Sum Up

To sum up, postmodernism, not having concrete definition yet is a blooming and ongoing area. Even if it has its own features, it is very difficult to concretize these solid elements. Thus, this paper remains an attempt to apply the post-modern theory to Amitav Ghosh's novels.

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