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Human Existence Precedes Essence in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *Flood of Fire*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh in his novel *Flood of Fire* with the assistance of factual descriptions of the world creates an appealing life picture before the eyes of the readers, which presents various sorrowful, unaddressed issues that is continuing from the distant past and is causing distraught in the present world. His concentration on human suffering elevates the existential thought with which man tries to frame meaning in the discourse of life. Ghosh's novel *Flood of Fire* is a thought-provoking novel in which he writes of human existence that precedes essence. In both the fields of science and moral, the freedom which the human mind recognizes, leaving behind the essence of the past, brings out new truths. The truths which the human mind approves are born from their own consciousness. The present paper focuses on the element of existentialism, where the human existence precedes essence with freedom. The novel clearly delineates the misconception of this notion in the present modern world. Ghosh cautions on human freedom bound with autonomy and insists on responsibility and authenticity which at instances is replaced by selfishness and greed.

Keywords: responsibility, authenticity, existential vision, situations, existence precedes essence, freedom.

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Flood of Fire* written in 2015 which is the last volume of the *Ibis Trilogy* is a thought-provoking novel that registers a good understanding towards life. The opium war fought against China for free trade is the background of the novel and the characters and their lives are connected with it. As Flynn in his book *Existentialism: A very Short Introduction* states that existentialism has infused itself right from the Hellenistic period "on ethical questions and discerning the proper way to live one's life" (1). Likewise, in this novel Ghosh's characters too suffer to find meaning in this everchanging world for life. The story not only brings out the consequences of war fought demanding free trade but

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also registers the consequences of it in human life. Ghosh, who cautions of the changing climatic conditions and its risk factors in his book *The Great Derrangement* has also cautioned the emerging world where human mind does not exhibit much concern on responsibility.

In the novel *Flood of fire* some of his characters struggle with dissatisfaction and dilemma. Ghosh's plot and narration reveal the consequence of irresponsible and unauthentic decisions taken in haste. He clearly depicts that life which has lost its order due to the mounting difficulties has paved way to individualistic decisions. Sometimes the existence that precedes essence mounts challenge in human life and the consequence of it is presented graphically by Ghosh. This individualistic decision made by human for a better survival lands the individual into dilemma and existential crisis.

The Ibis Trilogy which starts with the novel *Sea of Poppies* and narrates the painful life of Deeti, ends in the final volume *Flood of Fire*. As Nietzsche states in his *Birth of Tragedy* that “the experience of tragedy forces a culture to reconsider or revalue its values” (Spinks 14) similarly, Ghosh's grand tragic narrative circulates around the consequences of human thought that has ostracized humanism from its heart for better survival.

The shift from absolutism has its reflection on human behavior and each individual differs from the other in his approach towards life. Dissatisfaction becomes the major issue in the life of his characters but, their anxiety helps in taking decisions and paves way towards their future. Kesari Singh's passion to join the army of the East India Company faces its peril when he experiences the humiliation done to the soldiers. Zachary the black inmate of the *Ibis* is frustrated when, his relation with Mrs. Burnham gets broken and she reveals money as the reason behind it. Paulette's dissatisfaction in Bethel makes her flee to Mauritius, Mrs. Burnham stays with dissatisfaction in her married life as she marries Mr. Burnham. Captain Mee suffers as he could not marry Catherine (Mrs. Burnham) and holds it as a great trauma in his life. Neel the Raja of Raskhali stays dissatisfied as he faces life in its other form as a common man, with which his understanding is much less. The novel embeds the period of opium war with the mounting human greed that has caused several deaths and pain in the world.

The novel starts with the disappointment of Kesari Singh, a soldier of the Bengal Native Infantry's 25th regiment, taking lead in marching through the rice fields of Assam. His anxiousness to receive a letter, as a year has passed in hearing from his family ends in despair. The arrival of letters delights Captain Mee as he gets encouraging news of being nominated to head an overseas mission to a distant land but Havildar Kesari Singh's fate changes due to it.

Kesari Singh, the elder brother of Deeti, who strengthens his position in the battalion by arranging the marriage of his sister with Hukum Singh, has a great intension to rise to the position of a Jamadar. But the letter brings calamity when Subedar Nirbhay Singh reveals to him of his sister's betrayal and her run away from home with an untouchable after the death of her husband. When the Subedar talks to him about the death of Bhyro Singh and Deeti fleeing from home, he is shocked and thinks of his sister who is much empathetic in her understanding and who “had been gifted with powers beyond the ordinary” (FF 52). He muses how she can commit such a deed that would bring down the family and its honor in the society. Chandan Singh's disgraceful words calling her a whore makes him uncontrollable and he hits him on his face. The Subedar blames the unknowingly framed relationship with Kesari's family and insults him. He adds that he will inform the English officers, who always respect the decisions in the matter of family and caste that, he has been termed now as a pariah, an outcaste, and adds “in our eyes you are no better than a stray dog; you are worse than filth” (FF 174).

When Captain Mee is delighted with the opportunity to volunteer an overseas expedition, for which he was waiting for more than two years, he persuades Kesari to join him as he was asked to bring an NCO of his own choice with him. He also informs that the prize money would be encouraging. But Kesari who was tired of the distant journeys denies Mee's offer to join and says, “No, sir, too tired now sorry” (FF 27).

After meeting Chandan Singh and hearing to the message in the letter, Kesari changes his decision and he is left in a compulsion to accompany Captain Mee to an unknown land for better survival. He also senses his decreasing honor in the battalion and the impossibility of continuing his duties there. He also thinks of the difficulties to get transferred to the other units. His familial condition makes him think of the pension which he would be benefitted with, if he continues to work for few more years. Kesari's situation exceeds his prior thought to stay back and makes him rethink over his denial on the offer proposed by Captain Mee. He decides to move with Captain Mee due to the compulsion of his situation. He approaches Captain Mee and he gladly accepts him. Through these incidents, Ghosh reveals how time and situations act as the factors that instigate to make decisions in human life. He also registers how freedom in thought and action has become important for a better survival.

Ghosh brings anagnorisis in his narration when Madow Colver is revealed to Kesari as Kalua, the untouchable man, who has run away with his sister. Without sticking to the thought of racism, he approves Kalua's behavior and seeks his help to escape from Canton. By portraying a genuine soldier like Kesari escaping with the price money of Mee, without sticking to the rules and regulations of the army and losing the money to people who are deceivers and nothing more, Ghosh reveals how the existence of human surpasses the essence.

Zachary Reid who travels in the Hind with Kesari is portrayed as a modern subject of the emerging world and he tends to change himself as per the time demands. In the novel Zachary is the character, who is a typical example of "double consciousness" (APA 333). He is persuaded by people who impress him and he cannot be termed as good or bad. Taking the advice of his mother to praise at least two things in a day and by the encouragement of the lascar Serang Ali, he learns to benefit himself from the surroundings. His life takes a twist when his attraction to Paulette makes him help in the escape of Jodu and other convicts and is held up in the case.

Zachary suffers in India until he is acknowledged as innocent by the court. His difficulty mounts when he is asked to settle a sum of one hundred rupees and warned "that your mate's license will not be restored until the bills are cleared" (FF 10). His suffering continues until he gets an opportunity to work as a maistry in the Budgerow of Mr. Burnham. He feels very happy when Mr. Doughty puts before him the proposal. His calm life in the budgerow is triggered by Mrs. Burnham. Mrs. Burnham the Mem sahib, who thinks of finding the reason behind Paulette's run away from home, brings him under her control. She frames an illegal relationship with him and plays with his consciousness. Zachary is moved by the care and concern which Mrs. Burnham showers on him. His ideology changes totally due to Mrs. Burnham.

Zachary gets shocked when Mrs. Burnham ends their relationship abruptly. He is filled with grief when she reveals to him of the need of Mr. Burnham's money to continue her luxurious life. As Cathy puts forth about the idea of traumatic neurosis explained by Freud as "the experience that emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Cathy 2) this traumatic incident creates a big change in him and he tries to acquire wealth at any cost. He is stuck with dilemma when Mrs. Burnham rejects their relationship and counsels him to move on with his life. After hearing to her, his action takes a selfish turn and he thinks to rise high at any cost. He understands the power of money and he finds "a great disgust for the life he had led before – a life of profligacy and poverty, in which he has wasted his mind and body in pointless pursuits.... He longed to leave that life behind him but was again confounded by that hateful query: how?" (FF 251) A man who argues in length with Mr. Burnham on the matter of the Abolition of Slavery by the British and the continuing transport of coolies, a person who feels bad for the injustices done in the schooner *Ibis* to Jodu, Ah Fatt and Neel, and an empathetic person who argues on whipping Kalua when he was caught for the death of a Silhadar, changes himself to live his life. By leaving behind the tenderness and morals he determines to raise high without caring about the ethics of life.

Ghosh gives evidences of how Zachary sheds humanity to come up in life. He gains motivation when he hears from Doughty about Mr. Burnham and his past. Mr. Burnham's metamorphosis from a country born boy of a Liverpool timber merchant to a big business man widens his thought and provokes his

interest for a better survival. Ghosh's narrative reveals the impact of situations that changes a man and his approach. He states how Zachary uses the money and the advice of Mrs. Burnham as his investment to frame a better life. His narration explains how with the help of Nob Kissin, Zachary gets the accent of Mr. Burnham to travel in the *Hind* and is permitted to carry twenty chests of opium to sell it at his own liberty for profit. There starts Zachary's life which is much different from its past. But the authenticity which he gives to his decisions helps him to lead a life without any remorse. Through the character of Zachary, Ghosh presents how acknowledgement of the decision makes a man to continue without any dilemma at any point of time.

When he detects the relationship of Mrs. Burnham with Captain Mee, he threatens them of revealing their old relationship. Its Mrs. Burnham's letter, which he reads after her death, that presents him some insights towards life and he turns back to Paulette and thinks of reframing their relationship. But Ghosh leaves the readers in dilemma when Zachary at the end of the novel stands joining his hands with Merchant Chan, buys land along with Mr. Burnham, and is set to venture a new career with them as his partners.

In the novel Ghosh's women characters such as Paulette, Mrs. Burnham and Shireen carry out their life with good modernistic tendencies and freedom. With these characters Ghosh once again stresses the importance of authenticity. When Paulette finds dissatisfaction in Bethel and wants to live a life of dignity she flees from there courageously to an unknown place, Mauritius. Her courage to escape in the *Ibis*, her lonely accommodation in the ruins of 'Mon Plaisir' shows the courage with which she masters the pains of her existence. Ghosh brings out the power of sufferance that connects her to the life of Fitcher. She does not accept the offer of Fitcher until he reveals to her about his daughter Emile. She accepts to join Fitcher as a caring daughter in the *Redruth* and starts helping him in his endeavor of tending plants and preserving precious species.

Ghosh's female characters are bestowed with courage where their life is led by their own determination and is not governed by the rules of the society. Mrs. Burnham and her dissatisfaction in life encourage her to break the ethics of marriage and relate herself with Zachary and later with Captain Mee. Shireen being a woman brought up in a prosperous and orthodox environment is subjected to change herself as the family suffers because of the unpredictable loss in Bahram's business. When her brothers discuss on the decision made by the authorities of London and a better chance to get back Bahram's investment, Shireen a housewife who has not crossed the borders of her home town gathers her courage and says, "But what about me? She said, blurting out the first words that came to mind: What if I were to go myself?" (FF 43).

Shireen's determination to move abroad intensifies when she hears of the other life of her husband and his son in Canton. When she knows more about the boy and his sufferance in a tender age from Zadig Bey, her concern towards him intensifies. She becomes curious to see him and ponders over the matter very practically and also decides to move to Canton to meet him. In spite of various hindrances from the family, which has never allowed its women folk step out of their houses, she emerges out as a courageous woman to face the situation without any dilemma. Without hesitation she thinks of getting back the share to return the debts of the business men and to provide some benefits to her daughters. She moves to a place about which she has not even imagined in her dreams.

Ghosh portrays Shireen as a confident woman, who decides sensibly during times of neurosis and angst. Her disappointment is reduced when she hears from Zadig Bey about the concern that her husband carried on her and their family. She surpasses the old dogmatic thought as Simone de Beauvoir reveals that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Tidd 51). In spite of being brought up in a strict patriarchal background she emerges to the requirement without holding the old dogma of the Parsi Culture. With this Ghosh reveals acutely, that finding meaning at adverse conditions is in the hands of the individual.

Ghosh presents the new understanding in Shireen enhanced by her will. When Freddie dies, Shireen suggests burying him in the 'happy valley' next to his father and when puzzled Zadig questions, "But

what about Dinyar and the other Parsi Seths?” Her stern answer, “Let’s not worry about the Seth’s. What matters is what Bahram would have wanted. And in death at least I think he would have wanted to give Freddie the acceptance he could not give in life. It’s only right that Freddie should be buried beside him” (FF 548) reveals the sternness and authenticity which she gives to her decision.

Ghosh places Mrs. Burnham and her hasty decisions in parallel to that of Shireen to bring about an understanding on authenticity in life. When Shireen sticks to her decision, Mrs. Burnham suffers with existential crisis. Her condition becomes worse when Zachary compels her to agree to his intensions. Her requests to Zachary remain unheard and he replies sternly, “Oh but it is you who deserve all the credit, Mrs. Burnham. It was you who taught me cruelty – and as you know I am a quick learner” (FF 581). She feels hard when Zachary accuses her as the tutor of his reframed life from which turning back is impossible for him. She is afraid when he threatens her of revealing her relationship with Captain Mee. As Sartre in his *Existentialism and Marxism* talks of Mallarme and, “his sudden discovery on the reason the reason why suicide was efficacious was that it replaced the abstract, fruitless negation of the whole of being and the negativity of self-consciousness becomes real negativity” (174) similarly, Mrs. Burnham who could not find any escape from her own creation decides to meet death, before she is made shameful amidst the surrounding.

Life and its illogical flow and human decision towards it are evident at every mode in Ghosh’s Plot. Neel the Raja of Raskali is left in a miserable condition at a distant land for survival, after the death of Bahram. He visits Compton’s workshop to meet Zhong Lou-si who was in charge of a bureau to translate and gather information about India and East India Company. When Zhong Lou-si asks help in translating the information about India and the East India Company, Neel without any hesitation accepts the offer. He acknowledges that once he and his family were the supporters of the company but, at the end the company has left them with nothing. Being an Indian he is not hesitant to translate the Indian scenario to the Chinese. He understands the imperialistic attitude of the British and wishes to go against them without any hesitation.

The character Captain Mee, a sincere officer, in the Pacheesi Batallion who has several years of sincere service, feels his first defeat when Zachary comes and compels him to support the new business of selling essential things to Indian soldiers at high cost. His intention to live his lost life with Catherine transcends the ethics of the society and problems mount for both of them. A man, who has not succumbed to any situation, could not resist the threat of Zachary because of his secret relationship with Catherine, wife of Mr. Burnham. Finally, when Mrs. Burnham dies due to the threat of Zachary, he is unable to withstand the pain of her loss and shoots himself and dies.

Nietzsche talks of his interest in tragedy because it offers the supreme example of an art form that provides insights into the strength and weakness of a culture (Spinks 14). Like Nietzsche, Ghosh in his tragic story, presents the good and bad consequences of freedom in thought and recommends a deep understanding to it. His direct characterization provides enough details to understand the psychological behavior of his characters. Ghosh through his comprehensive plot presents how the traumatic incidents in the lives of Mrs. Burnham, Zachary and Captain Mee lead them to take decisions for their existence, ostracizing the rules of the society. He also presents how Kesari, Zachary, Neel, Paulette and Shireen authenticate their decisions and their approval of it from their consciousness makes them stick to it without any dilemma. Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* claims that we are aware to some extent of our freedom and the responsibility that comes with it, but we try to hide this from ourselves (74).

2. Conclusion

It is factual that human experiences and inner anguish build an intension to resist and transcend suffering. But how can the human mind overcome the traumatic sufferance that unknowingly presents itself during decision making? When the Lacanian psychoanalysis terms that, “the unconscious is the ground of all being”; Freud and his hope suggests, “for a return to the humanist model that placed consciousness and rationality at the center...by bringing the contents of the unconscious into

consciousness... could minimize repression and neurosis” (Klages 74) which in turn will result in humanism that does not find a hasty remedy for problems in life.

Accordingly, the first thing one need to do is to acknowledge the traumatic incident and understand the change it instills. As a caution towards this condition, Petit in his *Theory of freedom* insists that the individual is, “held responsible for what he or she did” and he is the master of his or her “own thinking”. He suggests that the choice should not descend from any, “hypnotic suggestion or an unconscious complex or childhood conditioning” (6). Hence Ghosh’s novel *Flood of Fire* stresses on freedom and responsibility when one thinks to transcend the essence for existence. Thus, one can overcome the dilemma due to existential despair and anxiety by knowing the limitations of Freedom and responsibility.

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