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Cultural Sustainability In Amitav Ghosh's Sea Of Poppies

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Abstract

The start of civilisation was the cause for the movement of people from their motherland to unpredictable alienated lands. This movement around international territories developed new concepts that paved the way for new engagements and standards for researchers. Wars, globalisation and colonialism are the significant ideological forces which are restructuring universal relationships. As individuals incorporate into new societies and redefine their identities in new environments, acculturation and cultural relativism saw the analytical method of comprehending contemporary processes of movement of people across borders. As the displaced create more complex relationships, they tend to regroup and congregate with others who have already moved to the alienated lands. Reforming, integrating and renegotiating are the prominent themes of the migrant groups that encounter new host environments.

Amitav Ghosh himself is not new to travel, and displacement and displacement occupy a unique place in the fictional works. Though his characters are commonly nomadic, they move from one place to another, and some establish diaspora. In alienated places, they as diasporic establish communities and collective homes; these communities are ever subject to change with time and place.

Keywords: Identity, displacement, cultural, nomadic, dislocation, transculturalism.

Introduction

Identity is mislaid when its essence is diluted and questioned in the present world of transnational and transcultural communication. The diversity of association one substitutes the sense of belongingness connected with identity possessed on account of inhabiting assorted geographical and cultural spaces.

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Amitav Ghosh portrays various characters in his writings, and these characters bestride cultures, cross territories and dwell in diverse lands. The fictions of Ghosh present the embarrassing situations of the displaced, whose lifestyles are entirely different from the former ones. Ghosh's prominent themes like migration, dislocation, and displacement, have always been given the chief priority and occupy the centre stage in his creativity. The major concern of Ghosh with the sense of belongingness or the loss of rootedness encountered by his characters discusses the issues of singular identity. The nomadic life of Ghosh strengthens the sustained treatment of the idea of identity in his writings. Ghosh's focus on the issues of migrated and displaced is evident thoroughly in his fictional works. The characters of Ghosh, from ordinary people to rich ones, from colonised people to contemporary individuals, encounter dislocation and displacement in their lives. What makes a significant impact on the notion of their selves are the geographical and the cultural dislocation. Various historical aspects like colonialism, trade and livelihood are the chief causes of the dispersal of characters who move from their homeland to alien places. Ghosh always offers a multifaceted approach to the issues of dislocation or displacement. The first production of Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* illustrates how many middle-class people move across the Indian Ocean in search of their livelihood. The fictional oeuvre of Ghosh revolves around various themes like displacement and dislocation, which change and challenge the sense of identity of the displaced. This paper attempts to critically investigate how the displaced characters encounter various changes and challenges caused by displacement and dislocation.

Cultural Displacement

Space plays a significant part in everybody's life. To an individual, space describes the personality and determines the social and cultural practices. It fixes one's designation and helps individuals adopt different personality characteristics. Space leaves a strong mark in case of displacement, and the physical and mental space gets changed. The meaning of space does not confine to a territorial phase, and It further expands to language, culture, and human relationships. Eventually, the intermingling of different cultures arrives at an imagined or psychological space.

Cultural displacement proves the adaptation of new culture in the migrated lands. Individuals can claim the cerebral shift from one culture to migrated culture. The cerebral displacement from own culture can be the result of various conditions. Some of them are ed with the cultural firmness, attractive benefits of other culture and the feeling of discovering self. The other characteristic of cultural shift is the oblivious adoption of the cultural values of other societies. The oblivious adoption is caused due to the long stay of the individuals or masses in other place. The culture of another place can be traced to the behaviour of diasporic people. Amita Ghosh's characters reflect cerebral and oblivious shifts, and Ghosh admits that cultural diversity is a basic condition of diasporic human life by employing the idea of cultural intermingling within societies.

Cultural diversity is the admitted form of pre-possessed cultural contents and customs engaged in a time frame of relativism which develops anodyne liberal concepts of multiculturalism or transcultural: cultural exchange or cultural humanity. Cultural diversity is a resultant outcome of the migrations across borders from one country to another. Ghosh characterises his characters as a hybrid, incorporating the culture of the native land and the foreign culture. Culture can be regarded as a mere porous array of intersections crossing from within the nation and beyond the borders. Ghosh has created his characters as the product of cultural hybridity, which evolves its dimension when people undergo removal from their cultural roots and adopt the new cultures in the migrated land.

Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* shelter protects people with broad cultural backgrounds, and the novel deals with multi-lingual communities and various cultures that indicate the existence of pluralism in society.

'Ibis' in the novel accommodated the bankrupt king, low caste chamar, convicts, a French woman, Englishmen and a gomusta to lascars. Those on board are amidst panic and apprehension, ready to move to a strange land. Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, says, "In the minds of these lonely gatherings of the scattered people, their myths and fantasies and experiences, there emerges a historical fact of singular importance"(200). The characters who never experienced anything in the foreign land are uprooted from their culture.

She had never seen the sea, never left the district, never spoken any language but her native Bhojpuri, yet not for a moment did she doubt that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction. The knowledge of this terrified her, for she had never set eyes on anything that remotely resembled this apparition, and had no idea what it might portend. (SOP, 8)

Ibis in *Sea of Poppies* becomes a place of people ranging from pawn brokers like Baboo Nob Kissin to indentured labourers. English sailors like Mr. Doughty, Mr. Cowle and the American Zachary Reid and Indian lascars like Serang Ali and Subedar Bhyro Singh were on Ibis, becoming a gathering of varied classes and professions. The gathering includes common village people, Indian and Bengali lascars, landlords, zamindar prisoners, opium cultivators, policemen, prisoners, and Americans. Uprooted from their homeland and cultures, they form their platform for a new society and distinctive culture. They found it very tough to adopt the alien culture of the ship. The new environment of 'ibis' was not comfortable for them.

Despite their difficult times, the migrants try to build bonds, cope with new environments, and put all their efforts into adjusting to prevailing conditions. The movement from one place to another gives rise to an understanding of the blurred purpose of migration which turns cultural displacement into cerebral cultural displacement. Experiencing the new environment and difficulties, they try to create and develop a culture to make their life comfortable and easy. On the ibis, the subaltern group forms a group that does not permit the segregation of race, caste, colour and gender to fragment the world of the homeless further. They refused the rigid divergences and variances in communities in which diversity becomes the most significant deciding factor. They all formed and developed a new society with new culture away from their categorised and orthodox culture.

Sea of Poppies represents the chances of a multicultural existence which has been exposed again among the subalterns during the difficult times. Much confusion about religion, superstition and caste occurs to these 'girmityas' before the multicultural journey begins. On Ibis, these people, irrespective of caste, race and gender, take up the journey with some hope. They have been instructed in the novel as "When you step on that ship, to go across the Black Water (Indian Ocean), you and your fellow transportees will become a brotherhood of your own: you will be your own village, your own family, your caste (SOP-314). The ship is where no social differences and religious discernments based on caste and colour are found. All the migrants with fellow travellers become one and equal. Deeti says, "From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings – jahaz-bhais and jahaz-bahens – to each other. There'll be no differences between us (SOP-356). That was so daring, ingenious and fair. This change of their narrow thinking to broad and clear views tells the new shift in their lifestyle, which was not found in their previous lifestyle.

Amitav Ghosh used the character Neel Rattan very meticulously to reveal the complexity of the elements of cultural displacement. The condition of Neel can be considered as cerebral cultural displacement. In *Sea of Poppies*, Neel was taken across the black water on Ibis, where he had encountered a bitter experience he had never imagined and faced in his lifetime and had to suffer such a disgrace by a man of his status. He had to stay with a man who spoiled his surrounding with shit and urine and had to do the job of sweepers cleaning the messy place. When he realises his actual position after the verdict, which was against that honoured title he once held, he opted to ignore the cultural precincts for his existence which

was the reality. Neel has to bear the cultural burden of ritual purity within him. As he has been brought up to secure and regard his body, the ritual purity was a burden to him. He was fastidious in terms of ritual purity. Displacement, which puts him under challenges Neel to look within and re-build his identity.

The Ibis had the travellers with different priorities desires and, some under bondage, some professionally moved, and still others like Paulette Lambourn, following impulses with incredible individual histories. She is the embodiment of both cerebral and oblivious cultural displacement. She could not relate herself to European hypocrisy, which she finds suffocating. Having been brought up by an Indian, she was fed with the Indian ways. In reality, she finds herself very contented with the Indian lifestyle and clothes. To pursue her desire, she flees the society of hypocrisy and joins 'Ibis' as an indentured labourer disguising herself as a niece of one of Burnham's employees. Ghosh, here, dismantles the perception of cultural identity by describing some characters who try to go with the culture of other nations, as if their own culture and are not comfortable with their own culture.

In *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh reveals the impact of Serang Ali on Zachary's lifestyle. Zachary's language and food habits are also vicissitudes as that of lascar. "Although startled first, Zachary soon found himself speaking to the serang with an unaccustomed ease: it was as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own tongue" (SOP-16). He adapted their unfamiliar flavour food habits.

On the serang's advice, Zachary also made a change of diet, switching from the usual sailor's menu of lobsouse, dandy funk and chokedog to a Laskari fare of karibat and kedgeriee – spicy skillygales of rice, lentils and pickles, mixed on occasion with little bits of fish, fresh or dry. The tongue-searing tastes were difficult to get used to at first, but Zachary could tell the spices were doing his good, scouring him insides, and he soon grew to like the unfamiliar flavours (SOP-23).

The adaptation of the cultural identity of the 'laskari' group in Zachary's restoration of identity raises its voice to the fluidity of cultural identity. The novel *Sea of Poppies* appropriately deals with the subjects of the indenture, transformation, migration and the transformation of individuals. The fluidity of cultural identity is one of the aspects of Amitav Ghosh's perception of cultural identity in his novel *Sea of Poppies*. He also deals with the themes of cultural hybridity and creole culture. A hybrid culture is formed as the transnational aspect of culture allows them to sustain connections with the various locations, past and present. The indentured labourers migrated to different places, largely British and French colonies. The formation of creole cultures occurs due to the prolonged and permanent stay of the indentured labourers in the colonies. Amitav Ghosh, in the novel, used the characters to illustrate the aspects of cultural identity clearly and portrays some of the characters as creoles by illuminating the characters' roots. Zachary and Ah Fatt are such characters as creoles and sons of parents from different roots and cultures, thus forming a creole cultural identity.

One of the primary concerns of the diasporic communities in sustaining their culture. And it is not like the indentured labourers are far from their cultural identity, but they have their own culture as solace. As the physical reoccurrence to their root is not possible, they wish to carry their cultural baggage to help sustain their past and self-identity. However, their emotional association with their roots will be sustained by abiding by their cultural identity. Salman Rushdie, in his *Imaginary Homelands*, states that "we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of mind" (10). On the Ibis, the marriage of Ecka Nacl and Heeru was held ritually as per their tradition. The ceremonies like 'tilak, haldi and phera' were performed as being executed in their culture. What made their marriage a success even without proper wedding arrangements was their spirit to retain their culture followed at the time of the wedding. Despite fears, complexities and difficulties, they productively sustained their individual cultural identities.

Amitav Ghosh's novels depict the coming together of diverse cultures and the abolition of all boundaries. Without relevance to space and circumstance, culture cannot be lived. Therefore, the

characters of Ghosh in his novels look for displacement either from cerebral or oblivious cultural displacement. Culture is either staged or imagined but not lived. For the characters of Ghosh, culture is neither staged nor imagined but lived in the true sense.

Amitav Ghosh describes how displacement leads to compromise with a new environment that sometimes drives people to construct identity. In the novel *The Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh illustrates how the indentured labourers and migrants try to apt themselves to the alien land's cultural matrix. They make some adjustments to the alien environment without losing their ties with their motherland and its people. Ibis is the axle that never allows people to think about their social caste, one of the most significant determinants of identity. The ship makes the boarded avoid their caste identity to converse with others with different caste and religions. The displacement helps them obtain commonality with others they have never chanced to converse within their homeland. The displaced individuals develop their new community despite caste, colour, religion, social location and social status. Ghosh clearly explains how a new community is formed based on the existential crisis encountered by the people in the alien land. Surprisingly, the displaced community establishes a sense of bonding and association, and this kind of communitarianism offers them a chance to establish their identity in a novel form.

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