

Human Dilemma and Pathos in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's fiction deals with some of the most relevant issues, concerning human emotions and relations in different social and political settings. His narrative ties the readers' delicate emotions with the indispensable emotions of the characters. His fiction has a universal appeal touching the heart of readers from all over the globe. He cleverly employs the themes, knitted wisely with the societal issues ensuing in the formation of literary magnum opus. Like a compliant scholar of the postmodern era, Amitav Ghosh propounds the conception of a piece of art that satiates not only the critical perspective of the literary critics but also the emotional thirst of the common readers. Being a journalist and a teacher as well, Ghosh has a close judgment of human suffering and pain and his psychological wisdom about fragile human relations is remarkable. In this research paper an attempt has been done to explore the themes of dilemma and pathos in the novels of Amitav Ghosh.

Keywords: dilemma, spellbinding, ethnographic, repercussion, kaleidoscope.

Discussion:

Amitav Ghosh deals with the most intense and elusive themes in his novels. His novels are an illustration of some of the most contemporary issues such as pain, partition, recurrent predicaments of estrangement, dilemmatic division, Diaspora and forced immigration of people. He depicts his characters trapped in substantial glitch of restlessness and isolation. He seems to have comprehended the underlying emotions of human nature, which, to an extent form the bed of his sufferings. Nevertheless, his treatment while dealing with the issues remains distinctive and spellbinding. There arises sympathy into the minds of the readers just like Shakespeare. His tragedies like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear* are the best depiction of human sorrow and separation. This comparison seems to be very unusual, but the way Ghosh interweaves these tools with his narratives, present sublimity to his works. He has been a journalist, novelist, traveller, ethnographer and a litterateur. His personality encompasses fine comprehension of human nature in different settings. He has explored different places in the world and along with that; he has unveiled human emotions in various social and cultural settings.

Amitav Ghosh is one such writer who boldly presents the historical themes and human suffering from the perception of the marginalized people. Diasporas, migration separation and colonialism with its repercussions are his key themes that underlie the main narrative. His characters are in constant search for the quest for liberty and individuality, the search of tranquility and consol. He has also revealed the stifle and gap of life devoid with accord and purpose. His novels are a depiction of human beings' perpetual and persistent plight or sufferings that he faces at every step of life. He portrays the

characteristic feature of the age: alienation and pursuit of people for their individuality, yet he boldly presents the confusion and dilemma of the common person. His protagonists are in constant search of freedom; from communal bars, self-realization etc. Ghosh unlike his contemporaries does not depict the events as a sole representation of the age; instead, he inculcates a delicate story within the frame of previous happenings. He has received education in India, Western countries and the Mediterranean countries as well. He has an extremely well researched knowledge of the religious and geographical conditions of these countries. Moreover, his ethnographic doctoral research gave him a chance to peep into the historical frame of the places.

The Shadow Lines, an extremely groundbreaking novel of the time exhibits the trial of partition and partition riots. The repercussions of this partition on the common people and especially the Dutta-Choudhary family and their English friends the Price family are devastating. Tridib, the protagonist and the narrator's uncle has acute and intelligent imagination. His world is either his room where he likes to make whirls of smoke of the cigarette and imagine different places of the world with his nephew, the narrator, or the roadside tea stall, which is his 'adda' or the hub where he astonishes the local people with his knowledge. He loves a girl named May Price who is English. However, destiny had decided something else for them. Tridib falls prey to a raged mob's cruelty during the riots taking place in Dhaka. Circumstances build up thus, that he finds himself between the swarm around. The raged crowd surrounds him and executes him to death. This event, though, finds its place in the end, yet arises a pain and pathos in the readers' minds and even after turning the last page of the novel one remains in the same grief for Tridib. Tridib is not just the narrator's uncle who meets his tragic end in the riots but he is the representation of the modern youth who believes in breaking the barriers of nations' fictitious borders and reaching out to the world and exploring it. Through Tridib's unrestrained imagination of visiting places, Ghosh supports the idea of one world, one nation and one religion. He criticizes the governments' policies of expansion and manipulating the anger and feeling of the people to meet their selfish motifs. Tridib is the visualization of the modern world. May, his beloved is also a person who has a rational thinking of oneness of people. The prototype of British imperialism has failed to mark its presence on her. The quality of sacrificing the life of the protagonist marks a characteristic of the Shakespearean literature, but Ghosh breaks the barrier of the effect of the colonial literature and depicts this event as an adverse aftermath of colonialism and partition. The title itself suggests the abstractness or the shadowiness of the borderlines that divide the people, families and most importantly, hearts too. To a broader sense one may think that *Lines* is a novel of only Partition, but what lies concealed is the shattering of fragile dreams and everlasting feeling of lament and repentance. Ghosh takes the risk of producing a poignant end to the novel instead of constructing a happy ending, which he could do very efficiently but that is the forte of Ghosh; to present a real picture of common people with real intense emotions set in the backdrop of real historical events.

Critics however, have evaluated his novel *The Shadow Lines* as an epigraph of the painful memories of the past and its effect on the common people. In this respect, R. K. Dhawan has stated; Within a few month, Ghosh started his new novel which he eventually called 'The Shadow Lines', a book that led him backward in time to earlier memories of riots, once witnessed in childhood. It became, says Ghosh, a book not about any one event, but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them (Dhawan 20).

The Glass Palace is another novel by Amitav Ghosh that acclaimed appreciation both from the readers and from the critics as well. One quality that segregates Ghosh from his peers is that he believes in changing with time. His themes are not repetitive. Ghosh keeps on experimenting with his narratives. Though the main settings lie in these events, yet the underlying theme keeps on changing. If *The Shadow Lines* emerges out with the themes of separation and problem of identity in the background of Partition and riots and cross-border anxiety then *The Glass Palace* comes out with the problems of child trafficking and plight of orphan children, selfishness and jealousy, struggle for identity and sense of nationalism or patriotism. Also in this novel Ghosh has shown a struggle not just for sovereignty but for self-identity as well, but in the backdrop of British invasion of Burma and the exile of King Thebaw and his royal family. Thus, Ghosh produces a fine blend of forming the backdrop of grand narratives interwoven with fragile human relations and plight of human suffering. *The Glass Palace* is the story of an orphan boy named Rajkumar Raha, his ‘transportation’ to Burma, his struggle for livelihood and how he develops into a timber merchant due to the British invasion and finally his doom due to the Japanese attack on Burma. Ghosh uses major political events as a medium to knit the fragments of the story but the main theme is the rise and fall of this poor boy Rajkumar. Pain, separation, death, lust, love, jealousy, patriotism, doom, friendship, selfishness, betrayal, loss of self-identity and breaking of relations are the main elements that rule the novel.

The interaction between man and nature has been a subject of interest to many writers. Amitav Ghosh has also shown this interaction in another novel *The Hungry Tide* but from a different point of view. This novel explores the presence of an ecosystem of a place called the Sundarbans, world’s largest delta formed between the Ganga and the Bramhaputra basin, situated somewhere in between West Bengal and Bangladesh. The place is a home to the local tribes and the refugees along with conserved species Bengal Tigers and for the mangroves as well. It is quite evident that the offers quite vivid diversity for both man, the beast and the flora to survive in the place. Ghosh sets the backdrop of his novel in the Sunderbans and utilizes the atmosphere of the place to set the mood of the novel. The bio-diversity of the place opens up the gateway of creating a serious narrative, showing the struggle between man and nature.

Struggle for self-identity and alienation are the characteristics of Ghosh’s novel named *The Circle of Reason*. This particular novel of Ghosh is a substantial allegory of extreme futility and eventual worthlessness of life. Ghosh has depicted the sense of alienation and oblivion of life through the characters of Balaram and Alu. Balaram belongs to Dhaka and settles in Lalpukar in Calcutta. Destiny turns him towards Calcutta because of an outbreak of the riots in Dhaka and eventually he stays in Calcutta for the rest of his life. He chooses to join the Presidency College there. Alu, the protagonist of the novel and Balaram’s nephew comes to live with Balaram and his wife Toru Debi. In fact, Toru Debi brought Alu to Lalpukar after the death of his parents. Through Alu and Balaram, Ghosh wishes to deviate the attention of the global readers towards the pathetic condition of the immigrants or the refugees, who are treated as a garbage to be thrown out as in the novel Ghosh describes their condition as, “vomitted out of their native soil years ago in carnage” (CR 59). Ghosh has beautifully described the life of the Diaspora, who only long for their own land and their own independent peaceful life. They do not require the dear jewels of the world, instead they long for a better crop and a bigger fish. He has raised the problem of suffocation and overcrowding through this novel, as Bala Kothandaraman in the

article Circular Reasoning: Amitav Ghosh's Rhetoric comments; "The different locals are small over-crowded places with refugee's population adding socio-cultural dimension as well as economic and political problems" (Kothandaraman 156).

Depiction of human suffering, indentured labour, Diaspora, dilemma and pathos are the tools of Ghosh's fiction. These tools are best crafted in his award-winning novel *The Sea of Poppies*. The novel represents the story of indentured labourers boarded on ship Ibis for their transportation to Mauritius. These labourers are the poor, innocent locales of the places where the British colonizers had invaded. Ghosh brings out the misery of these human beings, who are not even considered as humans. They are the slaves, and it is the right of the colonizers to use them for their needs. Besides, it is also the duty and responsibility of the slaves to serve their masters. Ghosh has excelled by far from his peers in dealing with the humanitarian socialistic issues in his fiction. The treatment given to these innocent labourers is very brutal and merciless. They make the slaves to starve for days; beat them callously and make them to live in the most inhuman conditions. The first part of this Ibis Trilogy, *The Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize 2008 and was the co-winner of Vodafone Crossword Book Award in 2009. This novel signifies the exploitation of the indentured and poor labourers. The British colonists transported them to work as slaves in the British colony: Mauritius. During the voyage, the labourers tried to set themselves free from the custody of the colonists. Murder, rage, defeat and brutal suppression govern the mood on the journey. The inmates tried to set themselves free from the clutches of the captain and the Subedar of the ship but faces failure. There is no ray of hope of freedom; yet the inmates sail into the sea with their bereavement. Now only hope for them remained their "jehaj-bhais" or the ship brethren. Thus, Ghosh also brings out the optimism of human beings even in the worst of conditions through this episode.

Amitav Ghosh has depicted the repercussions of public mayhem on the private commotion. His narratives compile both the torment of national as well as the individual distress under one roof exploring every aspect of human misery. His endeavor rests in drawing the attention of the world towards the affliction of the individual rather than pondering over inconsequential matters. His narratives trace the journey of an individual from the physical to the metaphysical. Ghosh's literature is like a kaleidoscope in the plumage of a peacock; displaying vivid colours of life and vivid representation of this plumage in different moods of the weather. He has possibly included every shade of human life and philosophy; be it diverse cultures, artistic language, sensitive characterization and realistic situations. In summation, Ghosh achieves an analogous picture of human suffering. He has managed to depict humans in their most awful situations and worst circumstances. It seems as if he has seen the individual affliction from proximity. His excellence lays in the fact that he has an inherent comprehension of human relations. He has been to many places in the world and has seen various cultures and civilization from immediacy. He is also a witness of some of the most crucial events of the World. This surveillance has given him an insight into the major events. Apart from this, he has also served as a journalist and a teacher as well that led him close to analyze the human perception and affliction towards the aftermath of these happenings.

Amitav Ghosh fulfils his social responsibility of a true litterateur: pursuit of the readers mind and introducing them with their ethical value system. India is quite rich in her heritage, culture and strong

roots of value system. The Indian writers portray extreme courage in depicting the world their art and culture to the world. Their protagonists are no famous persons; instead, they are the real men who entangled in real life situations and consequently taking their own decisions and facing their plight. They are strong-minded to portray their leading roles as genuine men who are prone to make errors but are also bold adequately to visage their fortune with decency. This outstanding dominance of combining conventional principles with those of contemporary beliefs out-stands the Indian modern writers from the group and puts them as forgers of innovative aspect of Indian writing in English. The modern novels exposed new storyline that gave a new-fangled element, new loom to the conditions of the society. Ghosh as an obedient child of the postmodernism has produced a literature, which opens the psychological aspect of numerous common men, who react to a situation according to his own wisdom.

Amitav Ghosh as a postmodern writer enthralls the readers with his righteous judgment of human accomplishment set in various social settings. His characters are genuine men of life portrayed in real settings. His narratives are no grand documents of great persons or false tales of their triumph. On the contrary, he keeps his protagonists facing some of the harshest conditions of life. Ghosh presents his characters entrapped in the tumult of time. He shows the dilemma that his characters depict in taking a decision, whether the decision proves to be beneficial or harmful. He has shown in his novels the havoc of wars and riots. He deals with some of the most contemporary predicaments like human trafficking and child labour. He has also brought up the class struggle prevalent in Indian society even today. Communal hatred bolted numerous people that broke many families. Repercussions of political happenings on the common people and their plight mark the fiction of Ghosh. His fictions also throw light on the breaking of the Indian system of marriage and intolerance plunging in it. Gosh has dealt with the problems of a global considering the social, political and geographical conditions of the time. He has been a witness to the world's most crucial times and so he naturally developed wisdom about these events. He employs the social events of the time but sees them from a common man's perception. Human sufferings and their everyday struggle to prove themselves worth of existence is a characteristic feature of the marginalized global poor people, which is a permanent concern in Ghosh's fiction. Treachery to one's country and relations is also present in his fictions. Alienation and worthlessness of life fills the atmosphere with gloom.

Amitav Ghosh has therefore touched every aspect of human psyche; be it his value system or his relations. His fiction truly serves the mirror of the society, agitating the mind and soul to think over. That is where the responsibility of a litterateur's artistic voyage rests to soothe the minds and to mix the souls. Amitav Ghosh was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 for his book *The Shadow Lines* and later The Government of India confers on him the award Padma Shri in 2007 for his services to literature and education. Thus, Ghosh stands out as a global writer, exhibiting a work of art falling in international standards and intellect.

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