



Homeland through Dislocation in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh



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Abstract :

Diaspora may be defined as a group or groups of people dislocated from homeland and then, getting re-rooted in numerous homes on the unfamiliar soil, being emotionally involved to each of them through some harmony and constant crave for their roots back 'home'. Diaspora can be understood as consequences of imperial dominance, the displacement of people through slavery, indenture and settlement. It not only involves geographical dispersal of significant number of people, but also the "identity, memory and home which such displacement produces" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin *The Empire* 218). The various forms of displacement, such as exile, diaspora, relocation, have been forcefully investigated in both postcolonial theory and Indian literary scenario. The offshoot of colonialism has centred its focus on postcolonial contemplation. Diaspora narrative brought about copious change in the cultures, epistemologies and politics of the post colonial world. In due course, Diaspora shed off its particular phenomenon assuming dissimilar and heterogeneous aspects in its features. The issues of Diaspora writers such as his affiliation to homeland, culture and his identification captured my notion for investigation. It is pertinent to quote the opinions of some experts to bring my point at home: Diaspora refers to legal or illegal practice of border crossings; and after being dispersed diasporas remains transitionally linked with a real or

symbolic homeland (Clifford 304-05). Diaspora studies are, generally, concerned with cultural dislocation, examining the effect of displacement in relation to a new constitution of cultural meanings (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin *Key Concepts* 75).

Keywords : Diaspora, nostalgia, cultural dislocation, homeland, identity

Research Paper

Diaspora literature comes from the margins, entering the arenas that it is allowed to occupy. There has been steady flow of novels and short stories from Indian writers residing abroad while their hyphenated identities and longing sense of homeless, rootless personality emerge from their works. It is a normal tendency among the writers initially about their own experiences riding on the wings of their creative acumen, the works of diaspora focus on the issues of dislocation. Their writings reflect their nostalgia as they write about their existing home embracing their roots and their past that is homeland. Extremely sensitive about Indian cultural background, they connect to Indian history, culture and identity. V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Pico Iyer, Amit Chaudhari, Vikram Chandra, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Hanif Kureishi are some of the writers contributing to Diaspora Literature. The texts of diaspora writers reflect journey between source culture to target cultures, between homelands and diaspora until the two overlap and merge.

Although Amitav Ghosh's diasporic affiliations are not as clear or straightforward as those of the other novelists. All migrants who have made their homes in other geopolitical spaces, Ghosh's embrace of the diaspora aesthetic is evident in his fundamental rejection of the purity of cultural identities and the idea of the coherence of 'home'. Ghosh himself has argued that the Indian diaspora is not so much predisposed to 'roots', the desire to return to the 'homeland', as it is to 'routes', the ability to recreate a distinct culture in discrepant locations ('The Diaspora in Indian Culture' 73-78). Life odyssey of Amitav Ghosh, his affiliation to multiple locations, humanitarianism and cosmic psyche, have worked as an inspiring force for exploring the perceptions of homeland in dislocation.

Like Rushdie, Ghosh's concern for historical affiliation with homeland stories shows his deep-rooted bonds with Indian ethos. The wide canvas of Indian life has been sketched successfully through writing. The native culture, predominantly Bengali, has often found centrality in his fiction. In other words, Ghosh's life, experiences, observation and inner psyche has been reflected in his writing. The nostalgic feeling for the homeland exhibits in the telling of its stories can be seen as function to (re)claim India as homeland. Homi Bhabha

in *The Location of Culture* states that the belonging is affiliated to these locations but the longing for the homeland reflects through memory and nostalgia. Amitav Ghosh chooses natural themes such as occurrences in an individual's life, conflict between nation and people, the role of memory in one's recovery of identity in the march of time, the feeling of nostalgia, the problems of migration, the sense of longing, love towards native land and the nature of adaptability in the place of settlement. Ghosh's novels reflect the spontaneous act of crossing boundaries — travels, migration, exile due to various reasons. The rooted characters immigrated in new socio-political, cultural and economic milieu continue their perennial quest for home. Dislocation results in the fate of homelessness, or constructing homes in memory.

Ghosh's novels foreground the longing sense of homeless, rootless persona; reflect protagonists' nostalgia about their existing home embracing their roots and their past that is homeland. One of the major concerns of the characters is the journey between source culture to target cultures, between homelands and diaspora until the two overlap and merge. His characters put themselves in an everlasting quest for selfhood, as they move from almost all familiar Indian ambiances to a completely different kind of locale in which they have sometimes to be a compulsive life. The characters upholding the idea of distinct homeland unsettled themselves relegating to the sense of insecurity—uncanny. The displaced individuals straddled on two polemics, either they could acculturate themselves or trapped in a hostile ambience.

The characters' homeland lingers in their inner psyche even if they get displaced in a new land. The memory and longing for home in a shifting cultural paradigm rings a sense of rootlessness. *The Circle of Reason, The Shadow Lines, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide and Sea of Poppies* are tampered with travel motif with generations and individual's sense of longing for home. Diasporic fate of characters brimmed with problems of home revealed through rootlessness, nostalgia, memory and alienation. The characters get reprieve or a sense of relief from tense situation generated out of displacement in hostland through the memory of past home. The flashback technique has been adopted by Ghosh very brilliantly to intensify the problems of home. However, the aggressive imperialism, colonialism and capitalistic fervour threatened the idea of fixed, distinct home for individuals. Some immigrants showed the sense of unavoidable dislocation who withdraw into themselves in isolation and derive a sense of release recollecting the past walking down the memory lane. Prof. Makarand Paranjape in his seminal work *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts*, succinctly depicts consequence of physical and psychological alienation saying: “the

homeland becomes so far that the motherland remains frozen in the diasporic imagination as a sort of sacred symbol, almost like an idol of memory and imagination” (9). As this home-place occupies a vital and dominant place in one’s livelihood, great writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai have taken this complex issue of ‘belongingness’ and search for home in their writings.

Ghosh delineates an array of victims of diaspora who stand basically detached, yet strongly attached to the nostalgic past. Consequently, they develop a sense of insecurity and as they encounter a counter culture, they attempt to resurrect their nostalgic homes. Ghosh’s characters never hold on with attachment or to be called a home, there exists only movement from one place to another in search for security and love. Ghosh himself has argued that the Indian diaspora is not so much predisposed to ‘roots’, the desire to return to the ‘homeland’, as it is to ‘routes’, the ability to recreate a distinct culture in discrepant locations. The novel, *The Circle of Reason* offers nothing, which we would normally call home. Initially located in a refugee village, the story refers back to Bangladesh and Calcutta, finally moving to the Middle East via Kerala where it reaches its denouement in a desert of shifting sand-dunes. In addition to it, Ghosh’s characters derive their sense of consolation from home memories. When characters attempt to make their living; they are drawn towards their homeland, an image of the form that condenses the character’s desire. For Ghosh’s characters like Alu, Jyoti Das, Rakesh and Prof. Samuels, home in a form of domesticity are undeniably alluring for these characters long for a perfect home. He was much aware that the attractions of domestic security could pull characters back from the realm of very different – potentially more adventurous or exciting life. But at the beginning of the novel, Ghosh points out that the secure home proved entrapping and oppressing for those characters.

Ghosh has presented in his fiction many instances of cropping up a deep longing for homeland. While drawing instances of this nostalgic intricacy, he attempts to establish the point that the reminiscences of the past help immigrants to reprieve from the present miseries. Home memories are generated only in those immigrants who refuse to acculturate themselves in the existing cultural space. In a realistic framework, they kindle the home memories, which naturally help them overcome all obstacles and strengthen the individual to extremely difficult circumstances. The instances of search for roots-home through memory, longing and nostalgia amply pervades in the novel, *The Shadow Lines*. The structural division of the novel in two parts “Going Away” and “Coming Home” symbolizes displacement as the ambivalent meaning of home. The glorious memories of Calcutta and Dhaka are beautifully pictured by the characters longing for their homelands. The past home memories act as a recurring

background throughout the novel. In this novel, Tha'mma and Ila are physically and culturally dislocated due to partition and globalization and they recover their home through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. In addition to the deep rooted attachment and longing, one could see the depth of his past always peeping in the present. The novel shows that memory of every individual is measured against the intensity of how much one shares his past experiences with others.

When the home gets shifted with colonial and political circumstances, the characters suffer a sense of loss and isolation. In spite of their attempts to accept new place as their home, their heart longs to get associated with their land of birth. Ghosh has made his narratives a vehicle to delineate this fact. *The Shadow Lines* highlights nostalgia which is an intrinsic part of history. In the novel, one could trace the longing of 'home' from the character Tha'mma, the grandmother of the narrator. Reminiscence of her childhood in Dhaka keeps haunting Tha'mma, who has been living in Calcutta for about two decades. Even though she makes conscious efforts to accept Calcutta as her home, her heart remains in the land of her birth. The engrossment of the protagonists in the idea of the imagined home and the ultimate survival in the new place is the chief concern of the novel that the novelist wishes to bring home.

The characters displaced in the new lands are naturally haunted by some sense of desperation and loss and eventually develop an urge to walk down the memory lane, the homes where they once lived becomes their 'imaginary homelands' (Rushdie) which provide succour and respite. The novel *The Glass Palace* vividly underscores the need for the reconstruction of more than one home for being a successful immigrant. The protagonist, Rajkumar, stresses that home is an original stable establishment, which will help to reconfigure new home as one move across cultures. He generates from his home memory the origin to continuity and a sense of preparedness to negotiate new cultures. This sense of nostalgia helps the other characters to form a new community. While some of them experience comfort there while the others are not.

Ghosh shows through his novels how political upheavals make people refugees or immigrants and its resultant diasporic living with a longing for imaginary homeland. Home is identified with the affiliation of language and surrounding environment. The intense sense of exile arouses the deep pangs of homelessness. Ghosh's fictional characters in *The Hungry Tide* are genuinely dispossessed who long to find a home to gain the rest and security. Home in this perfect form, nostalgically reminiscent for Ghosh is a refuge from the unhappy realities of the outside world. Refugees from Khulna district of Bangladesh could not accommodate

themselves in resettlement camp in Central India because there was nothing which could bind them there. Their destiny had turned them rootless, homeless so they preferred to settle in tide country, which binds them with its eco-culture and dialect. The uprising of Morichjhapi is the principal result of the event of the partition, which is reflected in *The Hungry Tide*. Consequently, the refugees jostle along the border of India and Bangladesh. To live outside homeland is a kind of exile, which Kusum and the settlers of Morichjhapi experience.

Amitav Ghosh has shown that home can become a tool for the reconstruction and reinterpretation of a person's experiences. The reflection of a globalised world in the novel, *The Hungry Tide*, where migrations, whether anchored in individual choice or not, does not diminish the desire to locate the 'self' in a 'home' is a fine example. At the end of the narrative, both Piya and Kanai are situated at the threshold of their respective search for home *vis-a-vis* the tide country. Therefore, home, for both Kanai and Piya, becomes a medium to restructure and reinterpret their experiences in the Sundarbans. In order to facilitate their respective endeavours, both Kanai and Piya decide to move their base away from New Delhi and Seattle respectively.

The writer wishes to bring to the fore the fact that sometimes original home may be oppressive and full of hateful and uncanny experiences and the diasporic exile and migration provides an opportunity to reconfigure the oppressive and restricted original home in new adopted land. In *Sea of Poppies* the *girmityas* on the ship are victimised by the socio-cultural, political, economic and racial factors. These factors forced them to migrate to escape from the 'uncanny' homeland hoping to live a free life more egalitarian sans constrictive decayed socio-political system. On the ship the *Ibis*, passengers from various sections had the story of exploitation, torment and deprivation at the back. The place of their origin had never been the place of their self-satisfaction. The diaspora place that is ship becomes the place of their self-satisfaction and self-development. It is also to be noted that the memory and nostalgic feeling of lost homeland never desert them and prove boon to cope with the new dilemma of life. The characters try to connect the past with the present memory willfully, old ties with new association and moves to their destinations with a strong degree of ambivalence. They create their imaginary home in the journey on the *Ibis* – the relationship patterns, stores, rituals, cultural rite, nuptial songs etc. The old home was replaced with new world but more egalitarian and humanistic. The sea becomes their new nation (home), the shipmates form a new bond of empathy and understanding. They leave behind the structure of caste, community and religion rename themselves as '*jahaz-bhais*' and '*jahaz-bahens*' is suggestive of new adoptive homeland. Exile proved a kind of reprieve in their lives.

However, the past home memories could not be easily snapped even it is uncanny experience. The novel represents the notion of floating home with memory in a nostalgic way. Home as a memory cropping is not brimming from the clash with the present dilemma. It is not a kind of escape from the harsh realities of present life. Nevertheless, it takes a safe refuge in some ties in the form of belongingness with homeland. Ghosh himself admits in *The Hungry Tide* that he had been greatly occupied with his earliest linkage of memory with the tide country. Ghosh himself webbed the memory of homeland in *The Hungry Tide*. The nostalgic feelings might have inspired him to reprieve in penning down the story and its vivid memory.

In Ghosh's novels, a nostalgic pattern beautifully linked to the psyche of those characters who, either happen to stay abroad or travel for a while. He generates a sense of displacement and disillusionment by making use of a ship or the river imagery. Like the movement of the ship, the psyche of displaced characters is shown to be tossed a while and especially during those moments, they drift off into nostalgic memories. These memories emanate from their homes and the landscapes in which they were born and brought up. Hence, these immigrant characters are helplessly linked to the home memories, which eventually give them respite. Ghosh, perhaps, wishes to establish the fact that the moment the characters encounter a hybrid culture, they find themselves very difficult to acculturate or reprieve. This pattern of home memories stands pivotal in his novels. The past home memories practically nourish and sustain a hopeful, if not a successful living.

It is concluded that in terms of home, Ghosh's characters cherish the longing for homeland hoping to eventual return to original home. Significantly, like other diasporic writers, Ghosh's characters are sensitive towards their homeland. Homelessness doesn't affect the ties with original culture; even in the alien land. The root culture contributes to visualise life as a successful immigrants. Ghosh reflects not only his awareness of re-construction of multiple homes in alien land and blurring of boundaries of distinctions.

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