

The Metaphorical Significance Of Displaced Individuals In Amitav Ghosh's Novel: The Circle Of Reason

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Abstract: This paper entitled "The Metaphorical Significance of Displaced individuals in Amitav Ghosh's novel The Circle of Reason" makes an analysis of the displaced individuals who dangle between fulfillment and frustration while negotiating cultural values. The psychological ramifications of history and culture are borne out of an encounter within a new culture. One significant aspect of his novels is that they are all centered on love which knows no barriers.

Amitav Ghosh makes an analysis of the displaced individuals and shows how these individuals can be categorized as those who either attempt to acculturate themselves or who feel that they are trapped in a hostile ambience. He emphasizes that the native Indians are victims of colonial and monarchical carriage vomited out into their native country. The novel The Circle of Reason illustrates this as the narrator and the other characters are forced to look back at such horrified historical events. Alu is the protagonist who has an amorphous head looking like a potato. The mangled shapelessness of his head is the metaphorical signification of an individual having been specifically and irrevocably fixed in the traumatic, colonial and monarchical history.

Keywords: displaced individuals, dangle, negotiating, psychological ramifications, acculturate, metaphorical signification

In the Indian scenario, ever since the 1930's there has been an increasing strain on the part of the creative artists to portray a world enriched with life's experiences, characterized by a unique social mobility. Herein becomes the relevance of "diaspora", a term which has been associated with expatriate literature. Diasporic literature traverses barricades in order to clinch a new selfhood. It defines and sometimes redefines variegated contacts of time and space.

According to Gurbhagat Singh, "Expatriate writing, in its theory and practice, is the work of exile who has experienced unsettlement at the existential, political and metaphysical levels. With this experience, he/she unsettled the philosophical and aesthetic systems. The phenomenon of exile has emerged in our times due to uneven development within capitalism and due to the movement forced by colonial powers. (21) Consequently, this situation paved way to a kind of mix-up, out of dislocation and displacement. The immigrant experience became an inevitable history. In this regard the Indian diaspora speaks of an Indian displaced from his native

soil. Today in the Indian literary context, diaspora has become as inevitable as it is significant. It could be demonstrated further how the claims of diasporic identity conceptualize the role of hybridity and multiculturalism as the strategic way of living.

The conditions encountered by the diasporans oscillate between an acculturation of the mainstream or the rejection of it. Diasporic literature records how the characters attempt either to adapt to the new situation or simply come off the system. There is a sense of strain since the occupant of a new culture already is blessed with an old one. S(he) has his or her own culture, religion and literature and language. Consequently, a conflict of culture emerges. Diasporic writing is thus reflective of the individual's sense of ethnic identity as s(he) comes in contact with a new identity. It brings into consideration, this quest for identity arising out of the sense of displacement and dislocation. Like many of the contemporary literary theories, the term "diaspora" evolves as something which is associated with many relative concepts like hybridity,

multiculturalism, etc. Diaspora could be seen as the result of the process of colonization by the white people, who, by the beginning of the 20th century has annexed major parts of the earth as colonies, proletariats, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealth. It is a well known fact that the entire bulk of diasporic writing concentrates on the ideas of hybridity and migrancy. Immigrant experience is closely linked with hybridity and in a globalized world where one witnesses a fusion of cultures, the immigrant individuals become hybrid ones, since they encounter only blurred boundaries. They are sure victims of what Bhabha defines, “. . . neither the one nor the other” (37).

This migrancy which is inclusive of a sense of displacement and the resultant fragmentation and discontinuing of the individual could be regarded as a pivotal issue in diasporic literature. Consequently, the migrant or the displaced individual is uprooted from the homeland only to be relocated in another land and has to go a quest for identity which is peculiar now. Thus, diasporic studies have garnered a new significance.

With the emergence of Amitav Ghosh (1956 ---) diasporic literature took on a new perspective. Amitav Ghosh has been aware of the impact of politics, historically generated on the lives of common people. He posits the view that human relationship is the quintessence of all living. Hence, all the entire bulk of his fiction stands deep-rooted in its stress on human relationship. Amitav Ghosh is known for his mastery over the historical past, from where he excavates events that turn out to be the raw ingredients for his fiction. Also, his sense of history delivers a different message. It is to a greater degree posing his patriotic fervor and subjective understanding of the Indian mind. Amitav Ghosh expresses his concern in a psycho-social perspective, that is, he deliberates his issues as standing in steadfast relationship of the man, his inner-man and his community. As John C. Hawley writes: “. . . but first and foremost, and overriding all the main ideas that inform his work are the stories, the Dickensian proliferation of characters whose lives engage us and who take us to some richly imagined places and times” (1).

Amitav Ghosh is well aware of the ever changing scenario of the Indian pluralism and the cultural multiplicity. His fiction reflects his vision. His fiction brings into focus a diasporic community which is varied and complex. His novels centre on familiar and the human minds homeward bound. They are well aware of the culture rooted in a single place at the same time oscillating to a space that has transcended political and national boundaries. His characters experience the absence of being and belonging which always have a longing for identity and space. At the same time, without enacting a radical strategy, they express a sense of reconciliation and passivity.

Amitav Ghosh's fictional world has a unique narrative motion. His central figures are travellers and diasporic exiles. Migration occupies an important aspect in his novels. By tracing the problems of displaced migrants, the author points out the emotional trauma which focusses settlement to a place with varied perceptions. The concept of diaspora stands steadfast in its claims towards the inevitability of nostalgia. Amitav Ghosh stands supreme in that he handles the poetics of expatriate status as something which every man would like to

experience at first and then reject. His concept of exile has similarities with that of Said's idea of an exile. He writes, “The person who finds his homeland sweet it still a tender beginner, he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong, but he is perfect to whom entire world is a foreign place”. (407)

As the works and their authors are not often separate, a study of the background of the author becomes essential to analyse the major issues and themes handled by the writers. As Rene Welleck observes: “The most obvious cause of a work of art is its creator, the author and hence the explanation in terms of the personality and life of the writer has been one of the oldest and established methods of literary study” (qtd. in Hutcheon 75).

Amitav Ghosh born in 1956 in Calcutta is known for his work in the English language. He was educated at the Don School, and graduated at St. Stephen's College, Delhi. He was awarded Ph.D. in Social Anthropology at the Oxford University. Ghosh lives in New York, with his wife Deborah Baker, author of *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Ridding* (1993) and a senior editor at Little Brown and Co., and his children Lila and Nayan.

Amitav Ghosh, other than being a popular novelist and an eminent writer, is an excellent anthropologist. He observes the feelings of the individual and studies their problems in an efficient manner. His interest mainly centers on the problems of the displaced migrants and their attachment to the settlement. Being an anthropologist, the writer well traces this common phenomenon that human beings experience in day-to-day happenings. Amitav Ghosh is recognized as a celebrated writer. He fulfils the reflections of thoughts of the writer and the merging impact of the readers' heart in an excellent manner.

This paper attempts to perceive diaspora in all its variegated patterns. Hence, an analysis of the displaced individual (Alu) found in the novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986), Amitav Ghosh's first novel which won the Prix Media Estranger, one of the Frances top literary awards has been taken to be fitting before one establishes the main characters as displaced individuals. Also, it attempts to categorize the displaced individuals as ones who have acculturated themselves and the ones who feel that they are trapped pathetically in a hostile ambience.

This paper makes a different approach in which the very gait of characters achieves a metaphorical signification of a wretched displacement. The basic idea of approach in this paper is to point out Ghosh's knowledge of reality as occasioned by a metaphorical perception of language. The metaphorical perception of language demands a going beyond the literary information. It also expresses an increasing concern with Ghosh's presentation of characters as handicapped by language and communication. The language barrier presupposes, metaphorically a diasporic displacement. This is a linguistic mechanism employed by Ghosh to develop the identity crisis as pivotal in the lived experiences of the displaced diasporans. Consequently, lack of security, freedom and fixation drives the character into endless misery which motivates alienation and despondency. This lack of stability is an exhibit of a diasporic individual which necessitates the historical representation of reality. Though, this sense of

insecurity could be deemed universal in fiction, a diasporic insecurity is different in that, it makes the characters move about looking for an endpoint.

The immigrant's sense of displacement constitutes his socio-cultural dilemma and disillusion in a term attributed to the psychological fiasco. It also attempts to establish that a diasporan cannot escape the psycho-cultural dilemma. *The Circle of Reason*, Amitav Ghosh's first novel, proclaims a radical break from the older themes of the Indo-Anglian fiction in that, the very structure and the thematic content are new to the genre. The novel is tightly intertwined in variegated structures.

According to Damodar Rao,

In *The Circle of Reason*, the attempts of the novelist are obviously oriented to floating the events and characters through a medley of metaphors and select ideas. The all-embracing structural principles of magic and irony eloquently 'weave' the total pattern of the novel and ideas, characters and metaphors are explicated through attendant motifs. In fact, the characters themselves are converted into possible metaphors. Their quest is for a specific structuring of their entity in the totality of experience however trivial and absurd it is. (279-80)

The story centres on Alu, the eight year old orphan and his life with his uncle Balaram Bose in Lalpukur. Alu's physical appearance is succinctly brought out. It was generally reckoned that the boy's arrival was the real beginning. Some said they knew the moment they set eyes on that head. That was a little difficult to believe. But still, it was an extraordinary head – huge, several times too large for an eight-year-old, and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps. (TCR 3)

The variegated structures of the novel unfold through Alu's life with his uncle, with Bhudeb Roy his teacher and in the mixed company of Prof. Samuel and Calcutta whores. As Prasad observes,

Almost all the major characters in *The Circle of Reason* try to understand and constitute the world and hence motivate their actions through pattering of some kind. In fact the principal quest in the novel seems to be one for the right metaphor. (101) Alu's stay with his uncle takes a rationalist pattern in that, it has been put in association with intellectually many scientists.

Alu arrived in Lalpukur, when Balaram took his share of their inheritance and moved to the village – without so much, as his brother shouted after him, as a thought for the floundering family business. Later, with that vicious prescience peculiar to close relatives, he had even left instructions in his will that Balaram was not to be told of his death, nor asked to attend the funeral. (TCR 4)

His life in Lalpukur turns out to be a devilish one. He takes the assignment of cleaning out the refugee shanties with carbolic acid which ultimately destroys Balaram. Like a picaresque fictional hero, Alu is on the run. . . . he passed down a chain of Raja's chalia kinsmen, scattered over every factory . . . Then it was time to leave the railways behind, time to step into the forests of the Nilgris . . . then . . . He spent the nights secreted away in the Chalia quarters of scattered villages . . . so faster still westwards, down through the mountains, faster and faster. (TCR 157)

Later Alu, in the process of construction work is buried in the collapse of a building. He is saved after four days and now he is a new man with a new finding in his life. Alu's experience still unfolds as he is found in the company of Zindi, Kulfi and Boss in El-Qued, a little town on the north eastern edge of the Algerian Sahara. And here he meets Mrs. Verma, a wonderful personality, who is able to reason out life with an almost perfect rationalist endeavour. This is how Ghosh makes of Mrs. Verma's philosophy of life: Rules, rules . . . All you ever talk about is rules. That's how you and your kind have destroyed everything – science, religion, socialism – with your rules and your orthodoxies. That's the difference between us: you worry about rules and I worry about being human. (TCR 409)

After having experiences as a displaced Indian, Alu is back home. Like a picaresque novel, Ghosh indulges in ironic humour now and then as the following paragraph shows:

. . . when Virat Singh, the famous wrestler, the great marble-biceped pehlwan of Bareilly, . . . one attempted to press his suit a little forcefully with her [and] since he was not greatly to her taste, she overpowered him, merely by baring an armpit and blowing gently upon it. (279)

While Alu traverses boundaries, he is exposed to the evil effects of money planning on politics. When Alu keeps only the sewing machine as providing successor, ironically, it also saves him. As he gets buried in the avalanche of the immense building, but the two sewing machines holding up as a steel girder above him, save him. “. . . on the other side, were two sewing machines, of the old kind, of black and solid steel. That must be the only whores of their kind in Al-Ghazira now, real antiques, probably kept for display . . . if it weren't for them our friend Alu would have been flattened days ago” (TCR 240).

Ghosh's main intention in the novel is the point out how the displaced Indian becomes the victim of money. He concretizes the craze for power and money at Al-Ghazira in the building of the star. Star epitomizes late capitalism and the rotten politics linked to it. The contractors who built it didn't care whether it stood or fell – they had made their money anyway . . . Jabal and his friends . . . [will] be happier with the insurance money. Did even the Amir want it? His money's far away in some safe country and nothing in al-Ghazira matters to him much. (245)

Star falls and Alu is trapped in the debris. His stay inside for four days brings out revelations upon him and he reaches the conclusions that money is the root cause for all evils. For *Star* is built not only with money, power and politics ut also with, “. . . too much sand in the cement” (244). Star is the result of a dirty system powered by money and activated by politics. This is what Abu Fahl makes of money in the novel . . . “with you it's money, money, money all the time: take money, hand out money, take back money . . . It's a dirty system: it spreads germs like a squid spreads ink” (311).

Ghosh proclaims the contention that the modern technological man is poised towards money and as drifting away from values. Instead of cleaning up the world, he has in fact dirtied it, “Dirt doesn't be in underwear. It is the world, the world of people which makes dirt possible” (104). Sengupta is not far off the mark when he says, “The fact of Reason (Sattva) which manifests itself as a crusade for

cleanliness and fight against dirt has its sway over Alu at al-Ghazira, for some time, especially in his attempts to experiment with socialism” (42). Ghosh, in order to make his thematic content intensive in its reach towards the readers, sets out to create a community undergoing a period of experiencing the full impact of materialism and consumerism during the late 1960s, set against this picture of growth and prosperity. He puts to experiment his characters. The novel, eventually projects displaced individuals who live in a community with closed boundaries in which one may seek ironically, security in the company of people who too have shared the same worldly experience of negligible opportunity, poverty and a limited knowledge of the social environment. It is a society into which people may withdraw having felt misplaced or displaced in the secular world.

Looking at the novel, Pradip Dutta observes:

The vision of life as a process transforms the restless world of this novel. Restlessness loses its meaning as displacement or instability. It becomes, in Ghosh's hands, a dynamic urge to find a complete relationship with the rich diversity of our world, which is achieved in the organization of the novel. (77)

Alu, in the novel creates a new system of symbolic status in which he alone could participate and which denies the validity and legitimacy of the symbolic arenas from which he regards himself as excluded. In fact, Alu's ventures are an attempt to escape from the competitive status-seeking of the materialistic culture in which he is isolated and frustrated by the poverty. The secular and the secluded status are rhetorically denigrated within the community. His status, rather is ascribed on the basis of his own picaresque quest for identity, for example in his miraculous escape from the collapsed building.

Ghosh emphasizes that the native Indians are victims of colonial and monarchical carriage vomited out into their native country. *The Circle of Reason* illustrates this as the narrator and the other characters are forced to look back at such horrified historical events. Alu is the protagonist who has an amorphous head looking like a potato. The mangled shapelessness of his head is the metaphorical signification of an individual having been specifically and irrevocably fixed in the traumatic, colonial and monarchical history. He manipulates the theme of exile in such a way that many of his characters find a transformation of personality through this.

While diasporic literature might not have the structure or direction which one associates with radical or social movements, it may nevertheless, serve a similar need. Diasporic content is largely a mental construct whose subjective manifestation in displaced arenas gives it credibility. It is highly symbolized, with the eventual option

that its members could invest it with their selves quite often fragmented. Sometimes, the characters are sufficiently malleable that they could accommodate themselves into a new culture compartment without feeling their individuality to be overtly compromising.

The attempts of the novelist are obviously oriented to floating the events and characters through a medley of metaphors and select ideas. The all-embracing structural principles of magic and irony eloquently 'weave' the total pattern of the novel and ideas, characters and metaphors are explicated through attendant motifs. In fact, the characters themselves are converted into possible metaphors. Their quest is for a specific structuring of their entity in the totality of experience however trivial and absurd it is.

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