

## The New Historical Dimensions of Discursive Historicism- In the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh –A Critical Perspective

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**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh sets history as a background for his novel. He gives importance to the individuals but not to the background. History rumbles discreetly at the background throughout his novels. Take for instance, The Glass Palace which is an ambitious work of fiction which covers more than a century of history and four generations of characters spread across India and South East Asia. All the novels of Ghosh demonstrate the author's voice in balancing the sweep of history with the depth and complexity of the individual. Ghosh spins his tale with harrowing precision and insight, leaving the reader with a lingering disquiet about how the forces of history can irrevocably alter the lives of ordinary men and women. Human historian in Ghosh novels travels between cultures/lands and negotiates what has now come to be called the 'third space' in the way of anthropological studies.

The extant criticism on Ghosh's work has exposed significant socio cultural representations. One of the concerns is the representation of history which interfaces fiction which has become the subject of much critical debate on new historicism. The themes of all Ghosh's oeuvre are perceived for the individual characters at the expense of active historical characters. This article in all its satirical representation critiques on new historicism in a discursive manner. It reveals the complicit formulation of post national future within the framework of history interface fiction. Ghosh associates undesirable nationalism with historical background. However, for my article presentation I have chosen the title called "**The New historical Dimensions of the Discursive Historicism in the fiction of Amitav Ghosh –A Critical Perspective**" which makes an exploration of the aspects of history which interface fiction in the novels of Ghosh. However I tried to interpret the nature of this article by observing it from the various cultural aspects of contemporary Indian society.

**Keywords:** Discursive, New Historicism, Anthropology, Cultural Aspects, Dimension, Oeuvre.

### INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary Indian Literary scenario, Amitav Ghosh is the only writer who reflects the truth of Indian reality. He bears numerous responsibilities in the world of literature. He executes with admirable aplomb as an anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer, teacher and slips into global responsibility for establishing peace as an ambassador. He has excelled the global literary standards set by the post colonial and post modern writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Sashi Tharoor, Arundhati Roy etc. He has become the colossal central socio literary figure with a substantial body of work drawing the global attention. He has become the only negotiator to mediate the core social and cultural problems of India and other colonized nations. All his major works have enjoyed immense academic attention across the globe and it has invited and produced a great amount of literary criticism. He has created a wide readership and a strong critical endorsement that reflects the attention of serious academicians and scholars. All the post colonial and post modern predicaments are wrestled to demonstrate a high level of self consciousness which continues interrogate the social, philosophical, cultural issues of the world in all its relevance and freshness. His works have initiated the emergence of critique of nationalism and universalism. His intellectual insights, conceptual,

theoretical and textual experiments have engaged and interpreted the complex colonial and post colonial situations. They have established a peculiar paradox of reading and appreciation eloquently responding to the post colonial and post modern issues of evolution and transformation of the world. Making his debut with *The Circle of Reason* in 1986, he has produced the ground breaking novels till today with *River of Smoke* (2011) that interrogate the history of humanity with discursive discourses. His non fictional writings are equally challenging and stimulating offering philosophical and cultural elucidation on different themes such as fundamentalism, history of the novel, Egyptian culture and literature. Despite this vast amount of creative and critical output surprisingly there is a small amount of critical reception. But his works have become the most favoured areas of scholarly exploration for many of the young scholars and academicians. These explorations have become part of unpublished research that focused exclusively on the relevance of Amitav Ghosh to the contemporary times.

The critical reception on Amitav Ghosh marks a notable divergence of interests between the criticism of Indian subcontinent and the western academy. Criticism from Indian academics mostly concentrated on the novels *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* that dealt with the questions of national identity and communalism in the sub continent. There is a note of dissent from the Indian academics as they positioned themselves on the base of traditional Marxist criticism. However, these novels had enormous impact on the much debated post colonial issues of nationalism, identity and the fabricated cultural myths that inflate pseudo nationalism. These texts have become part of university curriculum paving the way for the instant critical response of the students. Besides, there emerged some volume of essays reflecting the overwhelming critical negotiations and interventions breeding other novels *The Glass Palace* and *The Circle of Reason*. The Western critical response is firmly based on exploring the experimental and post modern aspects of culture registered in divergence and its is almost unanimously enthusiastic.

The extant criticism on Ghosh's work has exposed significant socio cultural representations. One of the concerns is the representation of gender which has become the subject of much critical debate. The theme of *Shadow Lines* is perceived for the inversion of passive male characters at the expense of active female characters. The novel in all its satirical representation critiques nationalism from the perspective of Gender. It reveals the complicit formulation of post national future within the framework of benign masculinity. Ghosh associates undesirable nationalism with femininity. He repeats some of the national gestures of portraying women as emblematic figures signifying 'culture', 'tradition', 'nation' and authenticity. This is precisely a counter argument for the novel's gender politics. In all his other novels there is relatively little debate about the representation of gender and other issues of sexuality. But as a matter of academic speculation, women have become very significant presences in all his other works. Examining this aspect, James Clifford in the article 'The transit lounge of culture' says that we hear little from women in other novels, but it is only in *The Calcutta Chromosome* the women figures emerge as central organizing principle ( *Times Literary Supplement* 3 May, 1991). Mangala as the subaltern leader attempts to subvert the discourse of science articulating an alternate mode of knowledge. *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* presented detailed and individualized women characters than Ila and grandmother of *The Shadow Lines*.

Political implications in Ghosh's works are another issue of serious concern. His works are perceived as the study of material conditions of post colonial experience. They espouse post modern idealism and elucidate the political realities. A. N. Kaul's essay 'A Reading of *Shadow Lines*' in *The Shadow Lines* (1995) aptly justified this perspective. He has argued that the novels of Ghosh explored the categories of human experience as metaphors of contemporary political realities. John Mee in his article 'The Burthen of the Mystery' praises the anthropological imagination of Ghosh, which has espoused the idea of space and time. Thoroughly examining the divisiveness of nationalism, the works of Ghosh scrupulously examine the enactment of divisive forces of racism, imperialism and class exploitation from the perspective of Indian nationalism. Another critic Robert Dixon in the essay 'Travelling in the West' has argued that In *An Antique Land* and *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh has

presented an Untheorized and utopian belief of humanity. He characterizes Ghosh's writing as an ambivalent tension between liberal humanism and post modernism. Apart from the post modern response to the works of Ghosh, his works are also projected as an abdication of political responsibility or refusal to confront harsh political realities. This perspective is based on the premise that politics requires an active intervention into the affairs of the world. But what is at stake for Ghosh is viable political praxis. In the context of globalization, Ghosh works have accelerated multiple contradictions inherent in post modernity projecting his politics as ambivalent. His politics of ambivalence stand in odd with an activist vision of politics. The significance of Ghosh's politics of ambivalence is in the way it offers us a means of revising what politics might mean in a globalised, post colonial world.

To a greater extent all, the major works of Ghosh resonate with the preoccupations of contemporary society and culture marshalled under the framework of post modernism. Ghosh exhibits an interest in the nature and philosophy of language, textuality and the discourses in which human perception and experience is invariably shaped. For Ghosh the question of 'identity' is implicated in the representations of 'Self'. To him identity does not stand alone but it is derived from inborn 'essence'. Moreover, it is 'fashioned' by language and representation. From this perception, 'identity' has acquired the status of fiction interrogating the material consequences that influence the actions of humans. The texts of Ghosh interrogating the equivalence of fiction to unreality represent the correlative view that 'identity' is unstable and fluid. The very notion that fiction is untrue is part of the system of knowledge initiated by the intellectual revolution of early modern Europe. As this is deeply implicated in colonial culture, elucidating the intellectual legacy constitutes the central concern of Amitav Ghosh. Negating with the 'meta' or 'grand' narratives of progress of civilization, Ghosh has focused on the fragments of human experience that are excluded from the grand designs of civilization. The generic multiplicity and indeterminacy of his works, splices the contrapuntal formation, which are associated with popular culture.

It is wrong to characterize the works of Ghosh as unproblematically postmodern. His works have showed certain affiliations, but there are other affiliations to the context of his works. So, there is a dire necessity on the part of the reader to execute a peculiar paradox of reading to perceive the novels of Ghosh. They convey a 'sense of place' and 'sense of dislocation' as fictional representations. Our contemporary contexts of our lives are justifiably conditioned by the reactions to dislocations. Ghosh's extraordinary oeuvre portrays a balanced portrayal of warm location and terrifying dislocation. This is predicated on the consciousness of one losing the precious lived sense of place as a catalyst for the emergence of novel. Ghosh had evinced a great faith in the evolution of the novel. To him, the novel bears the writer's perception and responsibility in a most appropriate manner. The novel according to Ghosh has been universal from its evolution. It creates a space for cross cultural reading and experimental ideas and styles. It is one form of literature founded upon 'a myth of parochialism. It is from this vantage point, Ghosh takes upon the responsibility of using history as a tool for fictional representation.

The imagination of Ghosh is a product of specific histories of the subcontinent and necessarily diasporic and post colonial. He unveils himself as a world traveller and reveals the identity of every place with subtle presentations. Cutting across autobiographical resonances, Ghosh permeates academic antecedents-history, sociology and anthropology. With all his historical research pursuits, He is concerned with Indian/South Asian Diaspora in different regions of the world. He is intrigued by the inherent fracturedness of diasporic identity. Analysing the space with reference to history, he travels between cultures and lands with the power of imagination. He retrieves the history of India, Bangladesh, England, Egypt, Burma, Malaya in his novels. Reiterating the journey of imagination of the West Indian novelists such as Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, Ghosh reinvents the ways of subverting the colonial injustices. He interrogates the burden of colonial past that weighs heavily on migrant post colonial generation. In all honesty, he churns out a glimpse of 'final redemptive mystery'. The retrieval of imagination with the objective of subverting the grand colonial history is employed meticulously by Ghosh in his works.

### **THE APPLICATION OF NEW HISTORICISM UNDER THE DISCURSIVE REFRACTION**

The application of New Historicism brings in new insights of thematic interpretations of these novels. New historicism dismisses eschatological or theological connotations of conventional historians. The accessibility

to the facts of past and the interpretation from our points of view creates a new history. The motto of New Historicism is based on Michael Warner's phrase: "the text is historical and history textual" ("Literary studies and the History of the Book", Book 12, 1987, P.5.). The emphasis of Frederic Jameson in the Political Unconscious: "Always Historicize" is also the crux of New Historicism. Stephen Greenblatt who has coined the term "New Historicism" in Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (1980) is usually regarded as its beginning. However, similar tendencies can be identified in work by various critics published during the 1970s; a good example being J.W. Lever's The Tragedy of State: A study of Jacobean Drama. A simple definition of the new Historicism is that it is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period. That is to say, new historicism refuses to 'privilege' the literary text: instead of a literary 'foreground' and a historical 'background' it envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. This 'equal weighting' is suggested in the definition of new historicism offered by the American critic Louis Montrose: He defines it as a combined interest in 'the textuality of history, the historicity of texts'. It involves 'an intensified willingness to read all the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts'. Stephen Greenblatt's brilliant studies of the renaissance have established him as the major figure commonly associated with New Historicism. Projected the aspect of making or promoting one's 'self' is the crucial aspect of human history.

Drawing the example from the period of Renaissance, he revealed how people trained, managed and fashioned their 'self' with very example from the life of Queen Elizabeth, who ruled awakened England into renaissance against the wished of papal authority, unravelled the ways adopted by Elizabeth to promote and consolidate her 'self'. Queen Elizabeth identified and consolidated her image with the image of England by declaring that she has wedded England. She has sacrificed her personal and domestic life to watch the progress of England in all aspects of the promotion and making of 'self' is one of the crucial aspects of New Historicism. However, comparatively, Queen Supayalath who ruled Burma did not rule peacefully. However, she also did not identify her image with the image of Burma. She did not sacrifice her personal and domestic life to the progress of Burma like Queen Elizabeth. Moreover, it makes us to perceive history from a new dimension as is aptly represented in the themes of Ghosh's novels taken for study.

Many Indian English novelists have turned to the past as much to trace the deepening mood of nationalism as to cherish the memories of the bygone days. A close study of the contemporary novel reveals writers preoccupation with our historic past and the unabated interest of the readers. In the novels that depict the past are those treat some event of national importance that has had wide repercussions.

Ghosh concept of history colours all his writing. The Glass Palace presents history as a collective memory, which gathers in a symbiotic fashion all that existed in past into all that happens in the present. His narrative method combined with his treatment of history weaves delicate connections between different phenomena, so that no event becomes absolutely autonomous. This generates the mobility with which history traverses past and present, creating an acceptable fluid pattern of history of time. There is no attempt on the part of the writer to squeeze history into a preconceived shape. Certainly, Ghosh's sense of history retains its historicity, a happy outcome that has eluded many great writers. In his hands, history becomes a process, which hinges on characters who without losing their 'realistic' eccentricities are still representatives of important historical tendencies.

History can be fashioned by the way of individuals look at their culture. Each aspect of history, each character and event is gathered into a process of constant change, which after all, is the real meaning of history. Viney Kirpal's comment is illuminating: "The sudden realization of the reality of history in which the individual has an important part to play is reflected in the Indian novel of the 1980s" (1990: xxi)

Describing history as an unending dialogue between the present and past, the historian E.H.Carr observes that its dual function is to enable man to understand the society of the past and to increase his mastery over the society of the present (1973:55). It is in this sense that Amitav Ghosh's writing is part of "the multiple search for a new dimension of reality which could combine past and present..." (56).

In Mukul Kesavan's words, Ghosh "buffs his imagination against the grit of recorded lives" (2002: 1). Ghosh thus explores historical moments and constructions in order to give form, and thus content, to his own narrative impulses and gives us complex pictures of interpenetrating lives of individuals, the interaction between their individual narratives. The Glass Palace according to Ghosh was: "The Glass Palace was like an Odyssey...at some point that my book was about much more than just individual characters. It was also about the history Diaspora in Southeast Asia, which is an epic history, a very extraordinary history..." (World Literature Today 2002:88-89).

Ghosh is constantly looking for ways in which he can render history interface fiction; in a certain sense, he is also seeking to pit fiction against history, to challenge the letter's implacability with the former's potentiality more of human qualities. In an interview, Ghosh defended his choice of fiction over history:

*I think fiction has always played that part. If you look at Tolstoy's War and Peace...I think difference between the history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about the human history. It's about finding what happens to individuals, characters. I mean that's what fiction is...exploring both dimensions, where as history, the kind of history exploring causes, causality, is of no interest to me (2000:30).*

Ghosh inherent fascination with the cyclical patterns of history and its dissemination in society and culture is conducive to the acceptance of such a notion about migrancy, hybridity and diaspora in which the tension between the states of de – and re – territorialisation never quite dissipates, but is held in a constant delicate balance between the memory of a past and for a future. In *The Glass Palace*, he returns to his own now distinctive brand of historical fiction that he had first introduced with *The Shadow Lines* but this time the sweep is larger, the canvas more epic, and the stories personal still and yet somehow grander. And there are recognizable historical and political figures the last of the Burmese royalty and of course the chimeral hope of a nascent Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi—to etch the realistic borders of the fictional lives of Rajkumar and Dolly, Saya John, Ma Cho, Uma, Dinu, Neel and Manju, Arjun and Kishan Singh. And Jaya Rajkumar's art- historian granddaughter, who makes almost an – expected cameo appearance toward the end of *The Glass Palace*, and ties its loose ends together as best as she can perhaps only a historian can. The novel is, in some senses, an elegy for the diasporic condition that is a product of history that leaves behind kingdoms and palaces and moves, in the exilic mode, toward a near hopeless regeneration. But it is not the story of kings and queens; they merely provide the backdrop for Ghosh's incisive historical sense—and sensibility.

The story spans more than a century in the history of the Sub Continent, people get involved in unexpected relationships across countries and cultures, wars are fought, rebellion quelled, political and ethical issues are debated, fortunes are made and lost. Ghosh reports everything accurately, thoughtfully—his precision backed up by meticulous research. Ghosh gives detail description about military manoeuvres, models of automobile and aircraft, drilling of oil, timber trade, food, clothing, and every detail is historically specified. He gives vivid details about timber trade so accurately and he mentions about this; a small wooden structures even.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and in *Sea of Poppies* the protagonists like Piya and Deeti try to fashion them 'self' with the contemporary culture. Through Piya's 'self' is trained by the people in sundarabhans. She imbibes it into her 'inner self' and becomes responsible for her destructive actions. In her fascination to train and churn a new 'self' from the incomprehensible cultural situation of America, she destroys her 'inner self'.

In Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* Jaya as the narrator of the story trains her 'self' and explores into the history of Aung San Suu Kye's 'self'. She studies the history of the making of her uncle Dinu. The history of her grandparents



and her uncle is set against the history of partition and Independence of India. The self-exploration of Jaya, the granddaughter of Rajkumar into the 'self' of Aung San Suu Kyi the greatest freedom fighter of Burma proves to be a genuine critique about the social positions of women in the pre-Independent times.

Ghosh's *dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* is the third essay in the book, and "At Large in Burma is another study of the 'self' of Aung San Suu Kyi She is reflected on the author's three meetings. The way Suu Kyi has constructed her 'self', fashioning herself to the circumstances of Kings of Burma and the British is similar to the life of Queen Elizabeth who made her 'self' as the ultimate image of England. Suu Kyi learns the required intrigues to rule her nation almost undaunted by the destruction of her family life. Imbibing the Machiavellian spirit, she disallows the dominance of British, as well as her father's opponents, by conquering the barrier of gender. Suu Kyi's personal history becomes the history of her nation.

However, Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* also demands a serious elucidation from this perspective. The way Deeti tries to establish her 'self' against her husband's brother and uncle and her husband's brother Chandan Singh's influence as well as Bhyro Singh her husband's uncle reflect the contemporary conditions in which women exploit and lead their lives. Deeti tries to make her own history of life by violating the rules of the society to make love and marry to an untouchable Kalua. She creates her 'self' in her own world of absolute love. Creating her own 'self', she becomes a victim of the treacherous society and its domination. Similarly, all the women characters in *Sea of Poppies* are after creating and promoting of their 'self' for example miss Paulette Lambert who created her own 'self'. She also acquires her 'self' by resisting the male domination and exploitation.

So, the attempts of all these women protagonists in finding, making and promoting their 'self' against the discriminating and unfavourable conditions of life is a new versions of history that subscribes to the propositions of *New Historicism*. The 'self' of all these protagonists demands New Historicists propositions of 'negotiation' and 'circulation'. The themes of Amitav Ghosh's novels undoubtedly mark the positions of 'Return to History or the Recovery of the Referent'. The untraced genuine history of the World is traced from the thematic representation of all these women protagonists of Amitav Ghosh.

## CONCLUSION

Thus Amitav Ghosh makes an intellectual exploration into the history of marginalized and the contexts of nationalism, internationalism, migrancy, violence and communalism. He constantly looks for the ways to render history into fiction and often posits fiction against history. Exploring the human predicament, he finds the individuals and characters asserting and liberating themselves from the burden of history. His sensibility of unveiling the nuances of history, sociology and culture makes him distinctive apart from the bunch of Indian novelists. The Diaspora and displacement are the keys to understand the thematic concerns of Ghosh. They direct us to explore the contemporary perplexities in hyphenated identities. The dilemmas of diaspora engendered in the margins of history are fore grounded in Ghosh's fiction. The historical research and exploration becomes secondary to some extent. Arun P. Mukherjee in *Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space* is concerned with reading the novels of Ghosh as oppositional to the dominant literary and cultural ideologies of Euro America. But Ghosh's intellectual exploration of the major and marginalized cultures is seen as representation of aesthetics. However, if one accepts the moot point that fiction is a representative of human history, one can trace the genesis of humane historian. Ghosh as a humane historian travels between cultures and negotiates for a 'third space' in social studies. In the contemporary clash of binaries of nationalism, globalization ushers in the erasure of culture and articulates the absence of culture emphatically. So, when the cultural interaction is confined to exchanges between national cultures, the inhabitants of the third space oscillate between the dominant cultures. Nikos Papastergiadis in *The Turbulence of Migration* (2000) says that Ghosh's fiction negotiates between two lands divided by space and time and attempts to redefine the nuanced understanding of the past.

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