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TREATMENT OF DIASPORA IN AMITAV GHOSH'S FICTION :  
A READING OF HIS SELECT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the research is to examine in detail about postmodern traits with specific reference to Indian diaspora in fictional works of Amitav Ghosh. The novels like *The Glass Palace*, *River of Smoke* and *Sea of Poppies* of Amitav Ghosh have been specifically considered for this review. These novels are the perfect evidence for the postmodern traits and the treatment of diaspora written by Amitav Ghosh. In these novels, Ghosh has engaged incessantly in the risk of putting otherised/marginalised individual back in the middle of the narrative, and saving from getting lost in the hegemonic portrayal of the nation. Especially concerned with the South Asian diaspora in the various regions of the world, the novels are endeavoured narrations of anti-Hegelian history of the world, including the hitherto left-out narratives of the familiar individual – the predicament against the historical backdrop, this endeavour is to resist the hegemony of the nation through the own experiences and story and search for the own identity.<sup>1</sup>

**Key words:** Postmodern traits, treatment of diaspora, fictional works, emigration and diaspora, *The Glass Palace*, *River of Smoke*, *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh

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INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh, a novelist with an exceptional sense of place and history, is one of the most popular novelists of the time. Ghosh has joined the famous novelists such as Monohar Malgonkar, Shashi Tharoor, Khushwant Singh, Salman Rushdie and Chaman Nahal and others with a sense of political and historical consciousness. One can identify the sense of historical reality, in Ghosh's novels. The idea of displacement, craving for strong identifications and race-relations, is the staple-stuff of Ghosh's novels.<sup>2</sup>

The term displacement is associated with diaspora and has got the poignancy in the hands of Ghosh. In the novel, "The Circle of Reason" (1986), Ghosh used the magic realism in the literary scenario. The other

<sup>1</sup>Paranjape, M. R. (2012). Beyond the subaltern syndrome: Amitav Ghosh and the crisis of the bhadrasmaj. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47(3), 357-374.

<sup>2</sup>KUNDU, T. AMITAV GHOSH: A STUDY IN DISPLACEMENT. NEW MAN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES, VOL. 1 ISSUE 10, pp. 75-82.

novels like 'The Glass Palace', 'The Hungry Tide', 'The Shadow Lines' and 'In an Antique Land' are the famous novels of Ghosh.

The novel 'Sea of Poppies' was shortlisted and got the Man Booker Prize, 2008 and it was awarded the India Plaza Golden Quill Award and the Crossword Prize.<sup>3</sup> John Meleodhas considered Amitav Ghosh as diasporic writer along with Caryl Phillips, Bharati Mukherjee, Hanif Kureishi and others. The theme of displacement will be found in all the novels of Ghosh and it fills both the structure and texture in the novels. The term 'Displacement' has got a vast connotation with respect to diasporic literature which involves the theme of a homeland, a place from where displacement took place and narratives of tough journeys undertaken because of the economic compulsions.<sup>456</sup> The word diaspora came from Greek words 'dia' and 'speirein', etymologically means 'dispersal' and which involves two cultures and two countries are embedded in the migrant's mind, side-by-side.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the postmodernists.<sup>789</sup> Postmodernism has developed and determined in the Indian novels by the novelists, especially Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh belongs to the International School of writing which deals successfully of the modern world with the post-colonial ethos without sacrificing the old histories of the lands. Ghosh blends fiction and fact perfectly with magical realism. Ghosh weaves the magical realistic plots with the themes of postmodernism.

#### **Aim**

Aim of the research is to investigate in detail about the treatment of diaspora in fictional works of Amitav Ghosh

#### **Objectives of the Research**

Objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To explore how post-colonialism and postmodern traits have been dealt in Amitav Ghosh's 'The Glass Palace'
2. To determine how Amitav Ghosh brought out the themes of postmodernism and diaspora related to the indentured labourers in his fiction, 'River of Smoke'
3. To determine how Amitav Ghosh brought out the themes of postmodernism and diaspora related to the indentured labourers in his fiction, 'Sea of Poppies'

#### **The Glass Palace (2000)**

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is given importance with the impact of colonial encounter on the cultural, social and political lives of independent countries such as Burma, Bangladesh and India.<sup>101112</sup> The novel's narrative is extended up to three generations. This book also explains about geographical entities – time, space and distance. Many stories are woven together. There are plenty of characters, with the family sagas, their connections and lives with each other. Ghosh in spite of his great humanist raises his voice against

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<sup>3</sup>Stankiewicz, D. (2012). ANTHROPOLOGY AND FICTION: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh. *Cultural Anthropology*, 27(3), 535-541.

<sup>4</sup>Bhalla, T. A. (2008). *Between History and Identity: Reading the Authentic in South Asian Diasporic Literature and Community*. ProQuest.

<sup>5</sup>Steckenbiller, C. B. (2013). Putting Place Back Into Displacement: Reevaluating Diaspora In the Contemporary Literature of Migration.

<sup>6</sup>Singh, D. G. (2010). Afghan Women in the Diaspora: Surviving Identity and Alienation. *NTS-Asia Research Paper*. Singapore: RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security.

<sup>7</sup>AbMajeed Dar, M. A. Postmodernism in Amitav Ghosh's Novels. Vol. 13, No. 7, pp. 178-186.

<sup>8</sup>Malathi, R. (2013). Postmodernism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. *Language in India*, 13(10).

<sup>9</sup>Chenniappan, R., & Suresh, R. S. POSTMODERN TRAITS IN THE NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH.

<sup>10</sup>Mohan, R. K. (2013). The self the family and the society in the novel of Amitav Ghosh.

<sup>11</sup>Kallur, N. H. (2014). Thematic Concerns and Narrative Strategies in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh.

<sup>12</sup>Mukherjee, S., & Vaishnav, B. Amitav Ghosh's Writings: Issues, Ideologies and Craftsmanship :A Dissertation Submitted ToSaurashtra University Rajkot.

tyranny and oppression through this novel. At levels he dominates man by man – military, economic and political.

*The Glass Palace* explains about imperialism done immense harm to capture nations. Indeed of the prodigious effort by Amitav Ghosh's in the novel is to provide an imaginative reconstruction of the most trouble period of the history. Ghosh sets things down accurately, thoughtfully with right meticulous research whether it's the description of the Royal Palace in Mandalay, laying of rubber plantations, coolies' lives, the complex activities involved in the timber trade, the military manoeuvres such as aircrafts, automobiles, cameras, food or clothing – all these detail is faultlessly period specific, this is what the novel impresses us. The Glass house Palace also challenges the literary and historical separation in a tradition of postmodern fiction. However the novel should be remembered that it is not a historical one as much reader tends to think the same. The novel attempts to change the opinions of historical received without evading the historical determination or of historicity. Both history and fiction and also subverts both but much of this historiography metafiction work within the same. It is not just another version of the non – fictional or the historical novel not it's not just metafiction. The novel is perhaps the best example of the postcolonial, postmodernist and historiography fiction.<sup>13</sup>

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh pointed out the process how Indian soldiers have been used by the British. The intelligence of the Indian soldiers has been tried to shape in accordance with their own path. Arjun's mind became unfairly prejudiced by the British way of watching the 'other'. That's why he comments:

Look at us –'they would say, ' - Punjabis, Marathas, Bengalis,  
Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims. Where else in India would you come  
across a group such as ours- where region and religion don't  
matter- where we can all drink together and beef and pork and  
think nothing of it?

The novel will reveal the "spirit that indicates the colonial rule, if one reads it critically". *The Glass Palace* brings fiction, memories, autobiographical and history records. Ghosh explains in his letter to the commonwealth foundation, where he withdrew the novel from getting an award, that the "issue of how the past will be remembered lies at the novel's heart". The author expresses his feeling that the spirit of the book if allowed will be incorporated within a particular memorialisation of the Empire that explains under the rubric of the commonwealth. Author's letter explains the direction in which history will be remembered. The memories and experience are loaded with a sense of suffering and pain of the large amount of people who were on those phases of history. This book is a case point, if the title of the novel is regarded as an indication of its central theme. An unwary glance might seem point to nothing other than The Glass Palace of the Burmese king which was mentioned only twice in the novel after the opening section in fleeting appearance.<sup>1415</sup>

The title might represent the depredation, destruction and exploitation by the British at the best. One will recollect the unmistakable allusion to the crystal palace in England during the reign of Queen Victoria to commemorate and reflect wealth, glory and power of the vast British Empire, as brittle and fragile as the glass that was used for its building even as it was mean to reflect the achievement of the British in the colonies and will hit upon the resonance going beyond the denotative reference.

It is a novel about various places, displacements, identity conflicts, wars, subjugations and exiles. In such scenario, it depicts the helplessness of the human beings. A human being could try to compromise, adjust, live and form new relationships. They can form new bonds, castes and mixing of races all together. This is a human life, after all. Ghosh is famous for the worthy writings and the work *The Glass Palace* is very

<sup>13</sup>Khuraijam, G., &Acharjee, S. (2013). Nation in Question in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*.

<sup>14</sup>Rollason, C. (2008). Empire, sense of place and cultures in contact–George Orwell's *Burmese Days* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. This text was given as a guest contribution to a postgraduate seminar at the University of Manchester, England, in July.

<sup>15</sup>Baishya, A. R. (2010). *Rewriting nation-state: borderland literatures of India and the question of state sovereignty* (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Iowa).

important because it opens the new trendy thematic doors and reopens the old ones so efficiently and effectively.<sup>16</sup>

In *The Glass Palace*, the reference to cultural essentialism could be identified when the natives of Mandalay felt the necessity of having a defense force for three reasons:

**...to uphold the religion, to uphold the national honour, to uphold the country's interest.**

Here, a separated interest and a unique mode of religion have been identified.

### ***River of Smoke (2011)***

The main reason why Amitav Ghosh is considered as a unique writer is that the narratives do not engage a "neutral" zone. Rather, they provide a multifaceted and sensitive view on the contemporary issues of the worlds Ghosh writes about. Amitav Ghosh's first preference is to the art. Ghosh's projected *Ibis* trilogy spreads out of the comprehensive research of history about the opium wars in mid-nineteenth century between China and Western rules led by Britain. In order to cloak the greed under the rubrics of the internationalization of commerce and free trade, the European powers attempted to start the Chinese markets to the opium trade.

In the opinion of Marx, Ideology is a 'false consciousness', but to Althusser, it is a 'self-misrecognition', because the dominated class of people are kept by the dominant class of group in such an 'illusory' situation which the human being feels its existence and looks its correct image in the 'mirror' of dominant discourse of ideology. Postmodernism challenges the authority of the dominant and defies Enlightenment's grand description which suppresses the diversified reality representations of the subjected people. Multiple realities can be showed by introducing diary writing, storytelling, filmy version, letter writing, advertisements, gossiping which are used as tools or parts for carrying the mode of counter-narrative in the fiction. Letter writing is a good narrative mode which tries to assert the existence by breaking down the dimension of the 'imaginary' part of human existence. In Amitav Ghosh's fiction *River of Smoke* the letter series act as the tool for the stance of postmodernism.

Ghosh abhors Karahasan's brand of aestheticism, and plumps for moral activism:

Writers don't join crowds—Naipaul and so many others teach us that. But what do you do when the constitutional authority fails to act? You join and in joining bear all the responsibilities and obligations and guilt that joining represents. My experience of the violence was overwhelmingly and memorably of the resistance to it.

A kaleidoscopic dimension in *River of Smoke* is linguistically virtualized by Amitav Ghosh. The narrative opens in Mauritius and a few pages in the beginning are peppered with the words from Bhojpuri dialect and Mauritian creole of the Indian settler girmityas: "bonoys", "salas", "bandobast", "palki", "pus-pus", "bowjis", "gardmanzes", etc. By filling the narrative with native unfamiliar expressions and words, Amitav Ghosh conveys a sense of place and time to the trilingual universe of the Indian ocean in the world where one is "always surrounded by the dialects and languages one cannot understand". In a world where women disguise as men by themselves, identities are endlessly reshaped, drug-peddlers become heroes and Indian, East Asian and European languages constantly interact with each other.<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup><sup>19</sup> There is a shift in focal point from the indentured labourers of India in Mauritius to the mercantile community of India huddled in the complex called "Achha Hong" in Canton. "Accha Hong" is itself a hybrid coinage. For Indians, "Accha" is a Cantonese term. The Chinese word "Hong" is for trading house. Robin celebrates the hybrid world of Accha Hong in the letters to Paulette is seized by the brutal public implementations of Punhyqua and Allow that predate the opium wars. French and British gunships followed the bombardment of Canton and the enraged mob destructed the thirteen foreign factories which changed the place after recognition. Robin's unpleasant experience of the destruction of this incredible area inspired him to paint it on the canvas in 1839. The only surviving documents

<sup>16</sup> Sonia (2013), *Fragmented Identities: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace*, LANGUAGE IN INDIA, Vol. 13. Pp.316-329.

<sup>17</sup> Roy, B. (2014). Exploring the Orient from Within: Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*. *Postcolonial Text*, 9(1).

<sup>18</sup> Huttunen, T. (2011). *The Ethics of Representation in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh*.

<sup>19</sup> Haddad-Null, E. K. (2013). *Family Stories: Narrating the Nation in Recent Postcolonial Novels*.

which testify to the existence of the multicultural world of Canton in 19<sup>th</sup> century are the Robin's paintings. *River of smoke* is a diachronic version in history that rewrites the imperial archives.<sup>2021</sup> It explores alternative ways of building the world based on connections which deconstruct empiricism of Western modernity and the rigid binaries. It questioned both the production and grounds of the historical knowledge of the imperial archives by reading between the lines and emerging as the discourses for intimating the subaltern past. The novel of Ghosh, transforms the discourses of the Western modernity, be they novelistic or scientific, by creating an ethically informed narrative which destabilizes the discursive knowledge creation strategies which originally produced the discourses.

River of Smoke shows Amitav's depiction of the past; travelling and the mobility resulting from commerce and trade as well as the various types of migration; and the language experimentation. In Amitav's *River of Smoke*, the Fanqui town becomes a gathering of the community in diaspora: migrant, interned, indentured.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Sea of Poppies(2008):**

"Sea of Poppies" written by Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the first wave of history of Indian diaspora. *Sea of Poppies* is a remarkable novel for its portrayal of imperialism and the migration of the indentured labourers of North India; specifically to Mauritius in Ghosh's "Sea of Poppies". The eradication of slavery in 1833, in the British Empire stopped the supply of the cheap labour for the plantations of the colonies. Moreover there was an upcoming threat to the opium trade because of the new trade regulations by the empire in China. In such historical improvements, the transportation and the recruitment of indentured workers from India became a commercial venture for the Britishers of imperialism. The workers had to sign an "agreement" called as *girmit* in the North Indian language; so they were called as *girmityas*. The novel "Sea of Poppies" is a saga of the *girmityas* those who were the first Indian diaspora. In the novel, "Sea of Poppies" Amitav Ghosh highlights the the different diasporic elements in the early Indian diaspora. The main aspect of the novel is the loss of the homeland, national and cultural identity because of the migration and how the labourers try to form a new identity in a foreign land, exemplified by the slave-schooner *Ibis*.

Amitav Ghosh's "Sea of Poppies", the novel in 'Ibis trilogy' is a historical saga set in the time when opium trade was establishing during the colonial British rule. The diaspora that resulted because of this is now called as the 'old indenture diaspora' in the cause of diaspora studies as against 20<sup>th</sup> century diaspora of the young educated Indians in different parts of the world. The two forms of diaspora could be seen as the two autonomous archives relatively designated as 'old' and 'new'.

In *Sea of Poppies* we come across some of these oppressive trading strategies of the British traders. This novel begins with Deeti's vision:

"The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream... .. it was the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala-Pani, 'the Black Water'."

The Greek word diaspora, meaning 'to disperse' is the forced or voluntary movement of people from the homelands into the new foreign nations. In the endeavour to stand with two cultures; the old one that is lost and the new one that is obtained, diasporic writing is distinguished by a "dislocation from" and "relocation to" a foreign region. It might be mentioned here as, *Midnight's Children*, a lot of global fiction Indian writers have wrestled with the subject of diaspora; particularly in the works of Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, and others. The diasporic writers, frequently mentioned to as the 'new diaspora writers', have inhabited in different parts of the U.S. and the U.K. for work and education during the late 20th century and

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<sup>20</sup> Kent, E. (2015). "Ship-Siblings": Globalisation, Neoliberal Aesthetics, and Neo-Victorian Form in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 8(1).

<sup>21</sup> Roy, B. (2014). Exploring the Orient from Within: Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*. *Postcolonial Text*, 9(1).

<sup>22</sup> Chaudhuri, S. (2010). Translating loss: place and language in Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie.

the writings reflect their adapting experiences in a new region and their culture; and the themes of dislocation, dispossession, and the emergence of an ambivalent hybrid existence. Ghosh is a prominent one among the new diasporic writers. Moreover, as far as the *Sea of Poppies* is concerned, Amitav takes a new stance in that writing not about the own experiences in a diasporic individual.

*Sea of Poppies* is a remarkable historical narrative that minutely captures the experience and journey of the North Indian labourers who were indentured within the early Indian diaspora. Ghosh's novel is well known for its intimate portrayal of the constant diasporic community who were willingly or forced to lose the caste and face many hardships under the British colonialism. Nevertheless, in the journey of the migration Ghosh manifests how the migrants closed down the caste system and became jahaz-behens and jahaz-bhais to come in terms with the new reality and how they maintained successfully the own cultural, individual and national identities even in the poor circumstances. The novel 'Sea of Poppies' is indeed a revision of the old Indian diaspora and a representation of their hopes, fears, and aspirations in the appearance of a historical saga.<sup>23,24</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Indian writing in English has stamped its eminence by mixing up modernity and tradition in the production of art. Furthermore, the oral transmission of literary Indian works gained ground slowly. It formed an indelible mark in the heart and mind of the lovers of art. The engrossment in literature lit the burning thirst of the Indian writers that turned their technique and energy to innovate new style and form of writing. Earlier novels predicted India's tradition, heritage, moral values and cultural past. A remarkable change could be seen in the novels issued after the First World War, which is known as, modernism. Amitav Ghosh is one of the postmodernists. Ghosh is immensely affected by the cultural and political milieu of post independent nation. Ghosh weaves the magical realistic plot along with postmodern background. Postcolonial migration to the foreign nation is yet another trait of postmodernism. Irony plays an important role in the postmodern fiction. Ghosh is very careful in using the vernacular transcriptions and English. Ghosh improves a rich and conscious tradition in Indian English fiction, a tradition which includes Shashi Deshpande and R.K. Narayan. In Amitav Ghosh novels, *The Glass Palace*, *River of Smoke* and *Sea of Poppies*, the post-colonialism, postmodern traits and the treatment of diaspora are obviously present. The novels of Amitav Ghosh centre around multiethnic and multiracial issues; as a wandering cosmopolitan travels around and weaves them with the narrative beauty.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Khuraijam, G. (2014). Modern Research Studies.

<sup>24</sup>Sreelatha, M., & Phil, M. (2013).Reconstructing Identities in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies: A Postmodernist Perspective. *Language in India*, 13(10).

<sup>25</sup>Chenniappan, R., & Suresh, R. S. POSTMODERN TRAITS IN THE NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH.