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CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AND SHIFTING COMMUNITIES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S
THE CIRCLE OF REASON & SEA OF POPPIES

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the advent of the civilization, the movement of people around international boundaries germinated new notions that vigour new movements and standards into the researches of social sciences and humanities. The historical events like war, colonialism or globalization are now deemed as the major ideological forces that is reshaping international relationships, community relations and the individuals place in them, a plethora of new key words have emerged. As people integrate into new host societies and re-define their identities in alien environments, cultural relativism and acculturation have re-emerged as analytical way of understanding contemporary processes of flows of people across international boundaries. While trans-national movements of people are creating ever more complex relationships, they continue to regroup and converge towards others who share alike terrestrial, physical and spiritual characteristics, reconstructing the circumscribed cultures in which conformist structural-functional investigates placed them. In this sense, it calls for more research and for newer conceptualizations on how migrant groups reform, integrate and renegotiate their communities in new host environments.

Displacement has a unique place in the writings of Amitav Ghosh as he himself is no stranger to travel and displacement. Though Ghosh's characters are generally nomadic, wandering from one place to another yet at the core of heart some of them do form diaspora as they are abided by their roots. They as diasporic embodiment develop communities and collective homes at alien place. These communities are ever shifting and mutable with time and place.

Key Words: cultural, displacement, shifting community, Amitav Ghosh, nomadic.

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Displacement is not a recent phenomenon and is not restricted to a matter of concern of today's life only. It transcends time and place and affects the life of individual as well as mass. From time immemorial, displacement has been an undeniable fact that is inevitable due to the contiguous situations of society or

family. "There has, since the beginning of human existence always been movement, migration and settlement in new areas; for as long as is known and in most parts of the world" (Massey and Jess, 2).

Diaspora has been witnessed by the people of past century in the form of large-scale displacement and dispersal across the world for several, be it natural calamities or major political upheavals. Avtah Brah, stated the several reasons that cause diaspora, "...it is necessary to analyse what makes one diasporic formation similar to or different from another; whether for instance, the diaspora in question was constituted through conquest and colonization or it might have resulted from capture or removal of a group through slavery or systems of indentured labour.... Alternatively people may have had to desert their homes as a result of expulsion and persecution....or they may have been forced to flee in the wake of political strike" (443).

The cultural displacement refers to the state in which the person or mass in their diaspora adopt the culture of the migrated place cerebrally or obliviously. The cerebral shift from own culture to the culture of migrated place can be attributed to self. The cerebral displacement from own culture can be the outcome of the various situations, some among them are: the frustration with the cultural rigidity, the attractive norms of other culture, or sometimes the feel for change or discovering the self. The other aspect of cultural shift is the oblivious adoption of the cultural values and norms of other society or the place where the person or the mass move. The oblivious shift from own culture to other culture is the outcome of the long stay of the individual or mass at other place, hence the culture of the other place by default come in the behaviour of the diasporic people. Both the forms of cerebral and oblivious displacement from own culture dominantly occur in the characters of the selected novels of Amitav Ghosh.

Ghosh has employed the concept of cultural intermingling within the societies which reflects the notion that culture is not a discrete entity and even cultural rootlessness and cultural diversity is a basic condition of diasporic human life.

Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre given cultural 'contents and customs, held in a time frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity. Cultural diversity is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations. (Bhabha 206)

As a novelist, Ghosh evolves a unique sense of self and place. His conviction is that once an individual is displaced physically as well as culturally, he becomes culturally and emotionally alien. "The American anthropologist James Clifford has attempted to frame Ghosh's work in the context of recent development in the discipline of anthropology. Such diaspora cultures are not oriented towards lost origins or homelands, but are produced by ongoing histories of migration and transnational cultural flows" (Dixon 11). Nevertheless, he has been aware of this conflict of today's life in which man has to exist in a structure. Also, he is very much clear with the notion that once borders are erased, multi-culturalism sets in, and man has to adapt and acculturate himself to this cultural phenomenon. Avoiding and distancing of self from the new and alien place creates despair and identity crisis. And to establish them they have to form community to survive in the new setting. Ghosh also penetrated the characters in diaspora with the ability to form, reform the continuously shifting communities according to the place and context. James Clifford rightly notes: "Diaspora is different from travel in that it is not temporary. It involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes (and in this it is different from exile, with its frequently individualist focus). Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots and routes" (308).

Ghosh's fiction, no doubt, illustrates the predicament of his characters who were diasporic and trying to find out their way in the current situation. Diasporic person is facing the inclusive of ever changing cultural setting and an extreme social movement. Ghosh himself is the embodiment who had many an encounter with cultures emerging from his own understandings of wide travelling. Thus, consequently, his novels are records of those individuals who are involved in conciliation of a diasporic adjustment.

The characters of his novels show an extra-ordinary ability of coping with the situation and the new place. They are highly adoptive as well as adaptive and adjust very well with the new place and role. Their strength lies in the ability to form the communities and get adjusted with that community. And the most

specific characteristic of the characters towards these communities is that they keep on forming, dissolving and reforming the communities according to their need of survival. "It is this ability to relocate to new spaces and adapt to these spaces that gives an edge to Ghosh's characters. They belong to a new group of people unfettered by the burden of 'otherness', and wonderfully blessed with the diasporic hope equipping them with a rare strength to fight with anxiety" (Bhattacharya 133)

The Circle of Reason assimilates in itself the stories of diasporic characters, the communities that they form, and their story of survival and struggle. In Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, the diasporic characters constantly negotiate between both time and space i.e. history and geography. The novel set off the characters through a succession of homelands-into that third space where boundaries are distorted and cultures collided, disabling perplexities and complexities in their circumstances. The novel presents the nomadism of the characters, sequence of inexorable changes in the form of the communities that they develop at different times and different places.

The diaspora of the people of Lalpukur is the outcome of the partition. This forced movement developed in them the problem of alienation and identity crisis. They engross all their vigor in discerning what they have lost, how they have become almost disadvantaged. They recalled the memory of the rich and lavish life of past in the other part of the border. The emptiness and anomalies of their new life made them melancholic. "People of Lalpukur were too melancholy, vomited out of their native soil years ago in another carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away, they had no anger left. Their only passion was memory; a longing for a land where the green was greener, the rice whiter the fish bigger than boats" (Ghosh 59). But the people of Lalpukur also embodies the fighting spirit in the form of their efforts for the survival. They all belonged to different places but still at Lalpukur they resided as a community. Their collaborative efforts for adjustment as a community are commendable. The people of Lalpukur migrated from their abode, community and culture, yet they gradually learn to survive and establish their own community based on need of persistence.

The migrated working people of *The Circle of Reason* are also the embodiments of the forced displacement. There are several challenges and confrontations in front of them in their stay abroad. But to survive and to live they developed their own community at Ras and left behind their former association of any community. And time and again they stand by their peer members to help at foreign place. The people at Ras help Alu, as he belongs to their community, when he is buried in Star. They help Mast Ram also, but his own behaviour leads him into crisis. To establish themselves and to be free from the society based on hierarchy and discernment, they, as a community helped each other to come out from the anarchic clutches of money. The people at Ras follow Alu when he propounded the idea of germ free society, and try to get rid of the web of money oriented society and develop rules of their own community to survive in an alien land. As Alu said, "We shall war on money, where it all begins" (260). He again said while addressing the crowd, when he returned to Ras, "No money, no dirt will ever again flow freely in the Ras" (302). And all the community agree with this notion of Alu and acted as suggested. This gesture of the people of Ras denotes that they all being diasporic, undergo the difficulties and that is why they want to get rid of the problems. The problem of survival, the problem of facing difficulty because of working for others and many more as Alu assured them, "without it (money) we shall be happier, richer, more prosperous than ever before" (303). And again when they all drifted apart they forgot their bonding with the community at Ras and moved on. This spirit of their go on tendency denotes about the tendency of shifting communities in them.

Mrs. Verma and Dr. Mishra truly represents the feelings of diasporic and migrated people residing at Al-Ghazira. They migrated in a land of dessert from their country because of their jobs. The land which is all along different from their own yet they learnt to survive by developing their own community and adopting their own rules, as an embodiment of diaspora. Their displacement taught them to survive by adopting and adapting with the confronting situations. "Not all diaspora sustain an ideology of return. Displacement has taught them to re-orientate, to modify social customs. They learn to negotiate with new economic and cultural realities." (Naikar, 170)

Sea of Poppies also entails the story of cultural displacement and shifting communities against the backdrop of the migration of indentured labour from their land to black waters. The 'Ibis' shelters the people from wide cultural background. The bankrupt king, convicts, low caste chamar, Englishmen, a French woman, a gomusta to the lascars. All gathers on the 'Ibis' with different cultural background and fate, "gathering of people in diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned"(Bhabha 200), with amidst fear and apprehension ready to be transported to a land of the unknown. "All kinds of men are eager to sign up- Brahmin, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis" (SOP, 205). The characters who never saw any other place are uprooted from their culture, "She had never seen the sea, never left the district, never spoken any language but her native Bhojpuri" (8). In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh creates a unique lexis of the early 19th-century cultural references where its multicultural dimension is in the limelight.

Firdoos Ahmad Bhat and Suheela Nazir in their research paper *Sea of Poppies: Peeping into Histories and Cross Cultural Tiestalks* about 'Ibis' as a place:

Where we find English sailors like Mr Cowle, Mr Doughty and the American Zachary Reid and Indian lascars like Serang Ali and Subedar Bhyro Singh. From pawn brokers like Baboo Nob Kissin to the indentured laborers it becomes a gathering of people of different professions and classes, common village people, English merchants, Indian and Bengali lascars, zaminders prisoner, opium cultivators prisoners, policemen, American sailors, coolies, sahibs. (155)

Even though the new environment of 'Ibis' was not easy, even difficult for them still they adopted the alien culture of the ship either by assimilation or biculturalism. Out of struggles and hardships, the migrants developed bonds and tried to cope up with new surroundings in an effort to settle in the unfamiliar environment. Their cultural displacement can be referred as the cerebral cultural displacement. Uprooted from their cultures and homes they created their own society and "develop their own distinctive culture(s) which both preserve(s) and often extend(s) and develop their original cultures" (Ashcroft et al 57). They in the process of adjustment with the new environment and difficulties formed and developed the community to make their life easy. "On the Ibis in *Sea of Poppies*, the subaltern group forms a community that does not allow the demarcation of race, caste or gender to further fragment world of the dispossessed" (Richa154). They denied the previously existing rigid distinctions and differences towards the formation of a human society in which diversity becomes the most important and defining factor. They left their earlier bondages with their communities and culture to fit themselves in the current scenario. They all developed a new society with new culture away from their orthodox and categorized culture.

The novel, *Sea of Poppies*, also exemplifies the possibility of a multicultural existence. Once again, it has been shown among the subalterns on the Ibis during the time of crisis. Before the multicultural journey begins, many doubts in terms of religion, caste and superstition occur to these 'girmityas'..... irrespective of caste, race or gender, these people decide to take up journey on the Ibis with some hope. (Richa156)

They have been told "When you step on that ship, to go across the Black Waters (Indian Ocean), you and your fellow transportees will become a brotherhood of your own: will be your own village, your own family, your own caste" (Poppies 314). No social distinctions and religious discriminations on the basis of the caste has any place on the ship. Literally the migrants become one, as Deeti said, "From now on, and forever afterwards, we will be ship-siblings – jahaj-bhais and jahaj-behens – to each other. There will be no difference" (Poppies 356). This coming out of their narrow thinking to broad views denotes the shift in their life style which was different from the previous one.

In his novels, Amitav Ghosh attempts to portray the coming together of diverse cultures and the elimination of all boundaries "shallow and unjustifiable" (Tiwari 48) between people. Culture is either staged or imagined but not lived (A culture is lived only when it has relevance to the space and context). And that is why the characters of Ghosh's novels seek displacement from those which is either cerebral or oblivious cultural displacement. For them, culture is neither staged nor imagined but lived in true sense. The other approach of Ghosh regarding the cultural displacement of the character is that they had the attitude of a

traveller. They did not restrict themselves to any place, and have the tendency to belong nowhere. They are generally 'disposed to routes' rather than rooted in roots. And hence with their movement they could easily move forward leaving behind their legacies in the form of culture and relations and develop the community that is based on necessity and requirement.

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