

REDEFINED POLITICAL BORDERS AND ESTRANGING MASS MIGRATIONS IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

Ghosh' novels propagate one of the central themes of the post-colonial era—the displaced persons. His fictional world is full of restless people in motion. People move from place to place as the politicians redraw the borders of their country as the symbol of their authority. People living in both sides of the borders are compelled to move from their birth place for various reasons like religion, nationalism etc resulting in mass migration. Mass migration refers to the movement of large numbers of people from one geographical area to another. Ghosh' main focus is the Indian diaspora resulting in the migration of people in the borders of India, Burma and Bangladesh. After the political freedom from the British, the nationalism in the Indian context changed its meanings as it excluded people on the other side of its borders of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and at the same time did not include everyone on this side of the paradise. Many of the people on both the sides of the borders were uprooted due to various political reasons and had to face the hectic task of rebuilding their lives from the ruins of history. These people lost their moorings on the other side of the border; however, they failed to strike root in India also. Although they are materially well off, they could not easily come out of their emotional wounds. This further leads to a sense of estrangement as the migrants are in persistent search of their identity. In Ghosh's novels, borders drawn out of some political interest affects the harmonious environment of the people living inside as well as outside it. Ghosh questions the necessity of border lines and benefits they have brought to people living on both sides of borders. This paper on "Redefined Political Borders and Estranging Mass Migrations in the selected novels of Amitav Ghosh" shares some views on mass migration as depicted in Ghosh' novels, *The Circle of Reason*, *The Glass Palace*, and *In an Antique Land*.

KEYWORDS: Mass Migration, Borders, Diaspora, Identity

INTRODUCTION

Ghosh' novels propagate one of the central themes of the post-colonial era—the displaced persons. His fictional world is full of restless people in motion. Almost all characters keep moving from one locality to the other, or sometimes from one country to the other with diasporic consciousness. Many a time people in Ghosh' novels move in groups and they do act with emotional bondage neither to the place nor to the people around them as they are pulled away or pushed into the political borders with no willingness of their own. People move from place to place as the politicians redraw the borders of their country as the symbol of their authority. Borders are the legacy of history of the country. They are drawn to prove the dominance of the military forces and they shift according to the politico- military contingencies. In Ghosh's novels, borders drawn out of some political interest affects the harmonious environment of the people living inside as well as outside it. This kind of division brings out nothing but wars, massacres, riots and unhappiness among the people. The border lines, like war, have brought tragedy to humanity. These lines have brought in dichotomy in the lives of the

dispersed people resulting in frustration and chaos even after partition and migration have become part of their history. Ghosh questions the necessity of border lines and benefits they have brought to people living on both sides of borders.

Mass migration refers to the movement of a large number of people from one place to another due to various reasons. In most circumstances, such migrations take place due to unavoidable circumstances. *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*, defines mass migration in the following way:

“The most basic definition of mass migration is the movement of large numbers of people from one geographical area to another. It differs from individual migration in the sheer numbers of people involved in a “mass migration.” It is further distinguished from large-scale *seasonal* migration in that the latter is characterized by its periodicity and repetition, whereas mass migration usually refers to an event or series of events that may take place over the course of several years or even decades but is nevertheless bounded by time and usually results in permanent settlement.”

[Http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470670590.wbeog370/abstract](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470670590.wbeog370/abstract)

Mass-dispersions of people with common roots, particularly movements of an involuntary nature imposed on them, lead to irretrievable frantic changes in the life of the people.

Ghosh’ main focus is the Indian diaspora resulting in the migration of people in the borders of India, Burma and Bangladesh. After the political freedom from the British, the nationalism in the Indian context changed its meanings as it excluded people on the other side of its borders of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and at the same time did not include everyone on this side of the paradise. Many of the people on both the sides of the borders were uprooted due to various political reasons and had to face the hectic task of rebuilding their lives from the ruins of history. These people lost their moorings on the other side of the border; however, they failed to strike root in India also. To the immigrants, “refugee” was a term of abuse. They were not economically downtrodden. They were able to get rid of the economic barriers. Although they are materially well off, they could not easily come out of their emotional wounds. This further leads to a sense of estrangement as the migrants are in persistent search of their identity. What they are and where they belong are demands that hassle their thoughts. They are not able to let go off their old identity nor are they contented with their new-fang led independence. This paper on “Redefined Political Borders and Estranging Mass Migrations in the selected novels of Amitav Ghosh” shares some views on mass migration as depicted in Ghosh’ novels, [The Circle of Reason](#), [The Glass Palace](#), and [In an Antique Land](#).

The novel, [The Circle of Reason](#) is portrayed with the background of the Bangladeshi war of Independence in 1971. Ghosh speaks of the history of partition that compelled thousands of refugees from Bengal to hunt for roots and roofs over head in different parts of India and dividing lines drawn between India and Pakistan. Ghosh points out that migration of the people across the borders is the result of the scattering of people due to wars, riots, and political turmoil. A small village like Lalpukur is occupied by refugees of Burma and its remote district of Noakhali: “They had emigrated to India in a slow steady trickle in the years after East Bengal become East Pakistan” (TCR, P.26-27) Even Balaram who plays a foremost role in the first part of the novel is originally from Dhaka, “then the capital of East Bengal, now Bangladesh.” Balaram’s father is from the village of MediniMandol in Bikrompur and had settled down in Dhaka.

In the opening chapters of his first novel, **The Circle of Reason**, Ghosh describes the mass immigration of the People to Lalpukur. Indians were the victims of the war that were fought on the borders of India and Bangladesh.

“Wars keep people busy. As a rule, the spectators are the busiest of all. Some keep busy helping armies with their

business of murder and massacre, loot and rapine. Others are left with blood tricking their way and no choice but to join the flow or mop it up.”(TCR.P.63)

The Hindus who lived in the borders of Bangladesh were driven away from their native place with no will of their own. Ghosh says that none of the immigrants in Lalpukur had the energy to join the war willingly because they were damned to a hell of longing. They were “vomited out of their native soil years ago.” (TCR.63). They lived with the musing of their native soil. “Their only passion was memory; a longing for a land where the green was greener, the rice whiter, the fish bigger than boat.”(TCR. 63)

Along with the villagers of Lalpukur, the immigrants also longed for a land that was greener. The humanitarian concern of the Lalpukurians dissolved the borders between the immigrants and themselves as they extended a helping hand to everyone who entered the town. Both the guest and the host mourn over their pitiable condition. Ghosh says,

“The vocation of melancholy is not anger but mourning. When in need they charge by hour and sell a bitter sort of consolation. And all that Lalpukur had to offer was consolation of a sort-refuge. It could never be a battle field; nothing but a dumping-ground for the refugee from tyrants’ frenzies.”(TCR. 64)

The novel, presents a series of inevitable changes that leads to chaos. The people who lost their original “home” are not satisfied with their current status in Lalpukur as they have to undergo pain and despair to get even their basic needs fulfilled. The situation of the immigrants is portrayed by Ghosh poignantly. Man cannot live without a home. Only in a home, he can think of security, job, family and benefits. In “foreign places all are alike in that there are not home nothing binds you there.” (TCR.266). Almost all the characters of The Circle try to find their roots in that settlement and often fail in the enablement of mooring to the place. In The Circle Ghosh hoists questions about home, freedom, borders, nationalism that are illusions to him.

The Glass Palace is an extensive work, which entwines public and private events to register the undulation of the British Empire in South-East Asia. The novel throws light on two major and parallel upheavals: the conquest of Mandalay by the British in 1886, that led to the expatriate of the Burmese Royal family and the termination of British rule after the invasion of Burma and Malaya by the Japanese in 1942, which stemmed to a mass exodus of unprotected Indian migrants. The novel expose show an exceptional land of fertility and abundance where neediness and illiteracy were unknown became a place of impoverishment and dogmatic regression. Attributable to the transience of political power, it engenders a lot of migration pivoting sense of the insecurity and deracinated longings.

In The Glass Palace, Ghosh talks about the mass migration. Both the countries- India and Burma are ruled together in colonial subjugation after it conquered Mandalay in 1885. So, Indians were transported from their ‘home’ country- India to Burma in the first thirty years of the twentieth century because the British government ruled India and Burma together as one country. The kings and queens are made to surrender their territory and are hustled to a foreign land under exile. The British do away with King the baw in 1885 when they colonized Burma shifting authority from the king to their imperial regime. “The Royal Family was being sent into exile . . . They were to go to India, to a location that is yet to be decided” (Palace 41). In the novel, the king of Mandalay looks at the people who move away from the palace out of compulsion and out of fear. Viewing through his binocular, the king can witness many people evacuating their residence and moving away from Burma. The king wonders at the mighty imperial power that makes the people migrate. He wonders,

“What vast, what incomprehensible power, to move people in such huge numbers from one place to another: Emperors, Kings, Farmers, Dockworkers, Soldiers, Coolies, Police man –Why? Why this furious movement – People taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaw, to sit blind in exile?” (TGP. 50)

The capitalism made everyone “the tool” in the hands of the British Empire and the new industrialists.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, there was mass migration of innocent people from India to Burma. They were driven by poverty and a promised hope offered by the agents who exported them. Many Indians were moved from their place of birth to Burma to work as laborers and to do the menial jobs at low payment. People who were the immigrants from India are involved in the process of making wood in the woodland- a dark and harsh world that involved the felling and collecting mighty teak trees. These Indians suffered from sickness and hardship of the work and from loneliness as they are far away from the motherland. These people were imported to Burma as their hectic economic crisis dragged them to the stage of labor migrants suffocating with Diaspora.

How the Burmese began to feel the image of ‘self’ and the ‘other’ as Indians is expressed by Ghosh in the novel, The Glass Palace. India and Burma were ruled together and considered a single country during the British colonial period. Yet, people of these countries could never come together. The Indians were accused for their greed, exploitation of the raw materials. When Japan conquered Burma in 1942, and almost thousands of Indians who migrated to Burma were evacuated to India. The Burma’s nationalist movement turned the Indians into the hated ‘outsider’. The existence of an Indian community in Burma was almost entirely erased by nationalism of the Burmese. So, there is mass-migration of people to India in 1942. These Indians who were born and brought up in Burma are uprooted and thrown out of the country in a moment.

The historical evacuations of the people from settlements in their colonized country to the native place also result in diaspora as they are driven away with no assurance of good future. **Pico Iyer** says about Ghosh’s description of the refugees-the Indians who were moving towards the native place in his review of **The Road from Mandalay**,

“The very people who thrived in Burma suddenly turn into displaced disposed refugees themselves, struggling across rivers and mountains wheeling the elderly the elderly in carts and often dying along the way.”(**The New York Review, March 8, 2001**)

Refugee evacuation committee is formed by the Indians in Burma. In The Glass Palace, The Indians have to face two enemies – the Burmese public and the Japanese. So, the evacuation committee’s aim is to get Indians out of Burma. Returning to home country seems to be safer for the people. As the Japanese conquered Burma, Malaya and some other South Asian countries, it has become the common sight that the people run for evacuation trains only to find that the compartments are reserved for Europeans staying in Burma. Ghosh says that the road’s embankment was dotted with parked vehicles. Families could be seen to be sleeping in their cars, snatching a little rest before day light. Ghosh says,

“They had their possessions bundled on their heads; they were carrying their children on their back; wheeling elderly people in carts and burrows. Their feet had stripped up a long, snaking cloud of dust that hung above the road like a ribbon, pointing the way to the northern horizon. They were almost all Indians.” (TGP.467)

The people suffered a lot on the way to India.

The mental agitation of the migrants is described extremely well by Ghosh. The evacuation of Europeans from

Malaya in The Glass Palace proves that the people of all the countries have the sense of territory, nationalism, and continentalism in the world. Alison's mother is an American. Alison fears that the Japanese would move towards her and attack her as she is a European. Her fears become true because the Japanese secret police Kempeitai have received information about Saya John, a Burmese Merchant and Alison. They decide to find a place in the evacuation train, but not able to get accommodation. Dinu urges Alison to seek permission from the guard to travel as Alison is "half white". The guards who checked Alison and Saya John are Indians and they are loyal the money they earn from British Government.

Dinu, understanding the situation, yells at the station master as, "You bastard (...) it's you who is the enemy. People like you-just doing their jobs (...). You're the enemy" (TGP.425). Finally they decide to travel by Daytona (car). But Saya John and Alison die. Dinu could not "distinguish the identities of faces as "Malay or Chinese or Indian" (TGP.425). It is madness remarks Dinu "to differentiate between whites and colored" (TGP.425). He longs for a world without geographical and racial borders. The fight to secure the life of the individual becomes fruitless in the commotions. Countless helpless people lose their valuable life in their journey.

Ira Pande appreciates Ghosh's description of migration of people from Burma to India saying,

"The most moving account is the Long March from Burma to India. Refugees displaced by war and hatred stumble along the sticky mud of the Irrawaddy that clings and sucks. Ghosh prose mimics photography in describing individual horror pictures." (http://www.amitavghosh.com/glasspalace_r.html#gpm1_7) 7.01.12

People suffer a lot to reach India – a new place to many as they were born and brought up in Burma. The people who reached Calcutta which was a thousand miles away also could get nothing to eat as it had already become impoverished city. The country witnessed one of the worst famines in its history. Ghosh says in the novel that people were stripping the grass and leaves, sifting through sewers for grains of rice.

Santosh Gupta says in his essay, "**Looking into History: Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace**",

"The "Long March" back to India once again raises important questions about the nature of national identity, the reality of border lines between countries and the justification of mass migrations. Exiles and migrants who moved from one country to another are displaced and become outcasts within their own country and in the new land."(248).

The fortune of the migrants who move from the colonized to their own country is unauthentic as well as uncertain and results in the sense of alienation of people. Diaspora is to be grasped in the disapproval of the masses to the historical changes. The deterritorialized communities, regardless of their dispersal, share collective past and common promises of fortune in the new place of settlement.

Ghosh's concerns for the evacuated people from its colonized soil find expression in the novel, In an Antique Land that ends with the portrayal of the eve of the Gulf war. The last part of In an Antique Land ends with Ghosh's last visit to Egypt in 1990, three weeks after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. At that time, he is able to meet the Egyptians who had returned from Iraq. The war between the Iraq and Kuwait has come to an end and the people of Iraq are ready to return to the jobs in their own country and so they started sending the foreigners out of their country. Ghosh meets Ismail who has reached Nash away in Egypt. Ismail has come back from Iraq as he is unable to bear the harassment of the local populace which considers the immigrant workers as enemies because Iraqis think that the immigrants have "taken our jobs and our money and grown rich while we're fighting and dying."(IAAL. 354)

As the war between Iraq and Kuwait came to an end, many Egyptians who worked in Iraq started returning to their homeland. The novel ends with the news broadcasting that the

“footage of the epic exodus: thousands and thousands of men, some in trousers, some in jallabeyyas, some carrying their TV sets on their backs, some crying out for a drinking water, stretching all the way from the horizon to the Red Sea, standing on the beach as though waiting for the water to part.” (IAAL.353)

Thus the mass migration leads to restlessness in the society. The description of the sufferings of the people is heart-rendering.

The people who are evacuated from the foreign land in the post war period can rarely get a tenable life in their mother country. Nabeel went to Iraq to work as a labourer. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the foreign laborers like Nabeel who worked in Iraq were sent out as exiles. The acute reality is that their return is not looked for in their native place. In the novel, *In an Antique Land*, Nabeel's return is not very eagerly awaited by the family members. Nabeel's sister in law remarks, “What would Nabeel do back here? Look at Ismail- just sitting at home, No job, nothing to do” (IAAL.294). The tragedy is that nobody has heard any word from Nabeel after the war. “Nabeel had vanished into anonymity of History” (IAAL.353). The turmoil of war, colonization and the cruelty of racial differences are portrayed in a heart rendering manner.

Padmini Mongiasaysin “**Medieval Travel in Post-Colonial Times, Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land***”,

“His capitalized History-the master narrative – spared little time and attention on these thousands of workers who walked out of Iraq searching for some safety. Many died on their journey towards refuge; their homes in Egypt (and elsewhere) were arrested in mid- development. Ghosh offers no better symbol or effects of Gulf war on foreign workers than Nabeel's new house unfinished, as the money dried up”. (87).

Nobody, including the politicians, is sure that such displaced population comprising of war refugees will get a secured life in their former homelands.

Ghosh who analyses the political and socio economic factors of mass migration throws light on the impact of displacement on individuals also. In the novels, the story of the individuals reflects the eternal sufferings of man who is tossed between two countries. The novels highlight man's search for identity and roots in the ramshackle of history.

Christine Kavazanjian says:

““Home” is the starting point for almost all diasporic communities - it is Armenia for Armenians, China for the Chinese, Greece for the Greeks, Italy for Italians, etc.” “Away” is the place in which both the physical and mental process of the diasporic experience occurs through the processes of displacement from the old and emplacement in the new.” (<http://www.diasporastudies.org>)

CONCLUSIONS

People are often forced to move away from their “Home” shaking off their affinity to the places and persons living around as the politicians redraw the frontiers of their country. Most of the individuals are not prepared to admit the change and cope up with the displaced situation. The emotional wounds created by migration took a long time to get healed and had left a deep scar in their heart. Ghosh ends his novels with the affirmative note that people have to act out their problems, acquire a clear understanding of the situation and accept the realities presented by the border lines. In their life,

the border lines are to be blurred and life must be made comfortable.

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