

**THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE FICTION OF AMITAV GHOSH**

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Identity is an umbrella term used throughout the social sciences and literature to describe an individual's comprehension of him or herself as a discrete, separate entity. This term can be further specified by the disciplines of psychology and sociology, including the two forms of social psychology. A psychological identity relates to self-image (a person's mental model of him or herself), self-esteem, and individuality. An important part of identity in literature is gender identity, as this dictates to a significant degree how an individual views him or herself both as a person and in relation to other people, ideas and nature. The notion of identity negotiation may arise from the learning of social roles through personal experience. Identity negotiation is a process in which a person negotiates with society at large regarding the meaning of his or her identity. Psychologists most commonly use the term "identity" to describe personal identity, or the idiosyncratic things that make a person unique, a term often used by sociologists to describe social identity, or the collection of group memberships that define the individual.

With the emergence of modern concerns with ethnicity and social movements in the 1970s, Identity became an interesting aspect to anthropologists. But they formed two opposing groups: the first favoured a primordialist approach which takes the sense of self and belongs to a collective group, defined by objective criteria such as common ancestry and common biological characteristics; and the second, rooted in social constructionist theory, viewed that identity was formed by a predominantly political choice of certain characteristics, and even though they have been criticized, they still exert an influence on approaches to the conceptualization of identity in the modern era.

Identity is made evident through the use of markers such as language, dress, behaviour and choice of space, whose effect depends on their recognition by other social beings. In a social context, misunderstandings or acceptations can arise due to a misinterpretation or understanding, respectively, of the significance of specific markers. The notion of social identity is defined as the way that individuals label themselves as members of particular groups (e.g., nation, social class, subculture, ethnicity, gender, etc.). Symbolic interactions attempts to show how identity can influence, and be influenced by, social reality at large, based largely on the work of the American pragmatists, such as Charles Sanders Peirce and William James.

Social identity can also be examined from the perspective of social and historical change. Postmodern views of identity understand it as a function of historical and cultural circumstances. Some prominent literary critics have attempted to place theories of identity formation in a historical context. They argue that changes in popular types of identity have run parallel to a change in broader culture: a sense of robust ego identity was present in the romantic period, followed by a sense of self as rational actor during the modernist period, and the sense of a relational self was typical of the postmodern period. In contrast, some critics accept that there is historical change in identity styles, but attributes it to aberrations in socio-economic conditions which are unique to the 'high modern' period.

On the individual level, alienation or identity crisis is said to occur when there is a clash between one's own self-definition and the identity assigned one by a larger society. Alienation thus becomes the

**An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal**

subjective manner in which various forms of oppression (racism, sexism, ageism, etc.) are experienced, and seen in violent, antihuman nature of "the mainstream," postmodern theories.

The transition from the colonial to the post-colonial is a subtle one. In India the British were the last of the major colonizers who appropriated native values and resources to their best advantage. What they left behind are elements that account for the hangover which had an upper hand of our post-colonial preoccupations.

A versatile genius in contemporary post-colonial fiction in the English-speaking world is Amitav Ghosh. The impermanence of cultural rootings and the cross-fertilization of art, society and politics in the modern world are judged by Ghosh to make national descriptions redundant.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Circle of Reason* proffers a stern exploration of the oppressions of migrancy and quest for identity where reason and capital become metonymic, circulating forces in the world. Focusing on a motley group of migrants drawn from various parts of India on an imaginary island al-Ghazira and then Algeria, the novel marks the search for meaningfulness of those whose lives are displaced by globalization, and whose very bodies bear the violent marks of this passage, this history. The chapter entitled "Becalmed" is the most revelatory and powerful in articulating Ghosh's vision of globalization and issues related to identity crisis. Here, we get a sense of the different lives, motives, and aspirations of the passengers of the rickety boat Mariamma which is taking them to al-Ghazira as migrant laborers. Incidentally, 'Mariam' is the South Indian name for Mary, and Mariamma means Mother Mary, which includes 'amma'. They are all headed for al-Ghazira, a prosperous sea-port of trade: the protagonist Alu who is evading an incompetent Indian police apparatus and an absurd charge over a ridiculously escalated petty conflict between his 'scientific' uncle Balaram and the traditional, corrupt, village landlord Bhudeb Roy; Zindi, a 'madam' who runs a house of prostitution in al-Ghazira after she was banished from her matrimonial home on account of her barrenness; Karthamma and Kulfi who have been picked up by Zindi to be prostitutes there; Rakesh, an ex-traveling salesman of Ayurvedic laxatives which he could never sell; Professor Samuel who propounds theories about queues; and others.

Karthamma is mysterious and unknowable, beyond the literal sense. If we take her desire for a house and a car and everything else for her child literally, we may interpret it as a generally desire for material comfort, and the forms as the instrumental means to go about attaining that. The form, then, is the emblematic source of material wealth in Karthamma's vision for her yet unborn child's life as a citizen. But taken figuratively, as indeed they must simultaneously be the forms are marked by a desire for 'home': home as a place of comfort, as a sense of rootedness and belonging, as a future-time of a secure life.

While Ghosh recognizes the subaltern's desiring and imagining and acknowledges the dissent in prevailing forms of social hegemony, he refuses to affirm such dissenting desire and imagining as subversive. To name Karthamma's articulation as subversive would be to misname it - it would turn the critic's gaze away from the effects of material institutional oppressions and the need for concrete, collective, organized political resistance

Karthamma's imaginative wish for those material goods which she has never used is not only disproportionate in relation to her means and lifestyle, but it is also disjunct from the horizon of expectation attached to her structural position in the global economy. In Karthamma's condition we witness the ruthless dislocation of "interests, motives desires, and power of knowledge".<sup>1</sup> Their [Karthamma's, as well as her fellow female travellers] very status as female sub proletarian workers in the international division of labor ensures their alienation from capitalist habits of consumption, even as new media and technology foster in them desires for, from images of the consumption of, the goodies made available by capitalism. In these complex ways, their personhood inhabits the commodity structure that organizes their everyday life. The narrativization of Karthamma's labour illustrates, global capitalism involves "the increasing subtraction of the working class in the Periphery from the realization of surplus value and thus from "humanistic" training in consumerism ... In their [females of the urban subproletariat]

**An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal**

case, the denial and withholding consumerism and the structure of exploitation is compounded by patriarchal social relations ... The woman is doubly in shadow".<sup>2</sup>

Thus in *The Circle of Reason*, circle becomes a metaphor for the historical circulation of capital first through colonialism and then through the neo-colonialism of globalization. The novel deals with the issues of identity and reveals and critiques the structural failure of the promises of both nationalism (and citizenship) and globalization for the sub-proletarian migrant woman - rendered minor by her gender, class and race.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is one of the most readable and least frivolous of the recent Indian novels in English. The novel tells the story of the three generations of the narrator's family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London and lines up characters from different nationalities, religions and cultures in a close-knit, palpable fictive world.

Amitav Ghosh explores the mysterious pull between Tridib and May and the abiding intimacy between the two families, when the countries were pitted against each other. This search for invisible links ranging across the realities of nationality, cultural segregation and racial discrimination is the central theme of *The Shadow Lines*. The author questions the validity of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of aliens pulled together by self-propelling empathy and attachment. Tresawsen and Mayadebi, Tridib and May, Jethamoshai and Khalil rise above the prevailing passion of war. Hatred and communal bad blood and vindicate the political logic of partition and border demarcation to define national and cultural particularities. The novel presents the protagonists' the different problems which were easily not about to be sorted out. They had much strived to get their identity in those cities but failed to do so. After that, they had to struggle for their image and existence.

*The Shadow lines* is a seminal piece of fiction, and it brings out the rare and remarkable talent of Ghosh who passionately searches for strategies for survival in a violent, hate-filled world of narrow divisions and finds in love the enabling and productive action to tide over separatist propensities of communities and nationality groups. The novel addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a new consciousness and firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical material. The experience of aliens and immigrants in postcolonial setting furnish us with the clue to the novel's larger project of cultural assimilation, friendship across borders and adjustment with the altered face of the world. The theme is first sounded when in a conversation with the narrator in London in 1978 May Price shares her growing intimacy with Tridib:

..., she told me how his card had reached her just when she was trying to get over an adolescent crush on a schoolboy trombonist, who had had no time for her at all and had not been overly delicate about making that clear. It was nice to feel that someone wanted to befriend her, She had written back, and after that they had written to each other regularly-- short, chattv letters, usually. Soon, pen-friendship, they had exchanged photographs.<sup>3</sup>

The novel insists on the imperatives that assure empathy and unimpeded flow of friendship, and mock the conception of militant nationalism, exclusive national pride and identity. The outbreak of communal strife in Dhaka following the disappearance of the prophet's hair in Srinagar exposes the fragile demarcation of political frontiers.

The author's postcolonial angst for the disrupted sub-continental commonality and snapped cultural bonds is evident in the instant communal reaction to the Hazratbal incident in Calcutta and Dhaka. Tha'mma's ideals of nationalism nurtured since the Swadeshi movement do not stand the test of time. Hers is a misplaced sense of pride reminiscent of the 'tardy late-bourgeois world.' Drawing national borders with blood is bound to be undone by the inherent logic of and propensity to separateness and divinations. Her senile old uncle has a grasp of ambiguous and tenuous geographical boundaries:

**An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal**

I understand everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere. What will you do then! Where will you move to! No one will ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here.<sup>4</sup>

The message of the novel underlines the need of friendly ambience for co-existence and humanitarian ties across cultures independent of political managers. The 'indivisible sanity' of people beyond borders has the potential to ensure wholesome international amity and exorcise divisive streaks and madness. Mayadebi and Tresawsen realize the palpable evidence of this desire among people both in, England and Germany even as the Second World War is looming ahead.

*In An Antique Land* is a leisurely blend of travelogue, history and cross-cultural analysis and the panic feeling of migrancy and self identity. In this novel Ghosh reconstructs a 12<sup>th</sup> century master-slave relationship that confounds modern concepts of slavery. Here Ghosh works with three narratives. One is a detective story albeit in the most scholarly of veins. The second narrative requires his novelistic gifts, as he attempts to reconstruct from mere shreds of evidence, the life of Abraham ben Yiju and his slave. The third narrative is one of Ghosh's lives in rural Egypt. His each narrative sheds on the other that motivates almost all of Ghosh's writing.

Ben Yiju is the prominent character in this novel. The story is centralized around him. The extent of his alienation is evident from his over-zealous response at the news of his long-lost family. The long separation had not dried up his feelings, but had in-fact increased his longing for his family in Egypt. The letter that he writes to his brothers immediately after returning from India illuminates the depth of his anguish at being separated from his family and homeland:

..., Ben Yiju wrote his brother a long letter from Aden. His return had stirred many long-settled memories, and he was now overcome with a desire to reclaim his family and the remembered landscapes of his childhood: 'I do not know what to write,' the letter begins, 'so strong is my longing and so ardent my yearning'.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Ghosh has been successful in bringing out the feeling of alienation and loneliness experienced by Ben Yiju in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Through this Ghosh has once again managed to prove the theory that migration does create the problem of alienation. This story of the 12<sup>th</sup> century is once again repeated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with minor changes in character and place. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is Nabeel who is at the centre of the story. He is a very contemporary character in *In An Antique Land*. He represents the youth of the third World developing countries who are hypnotized by the dream of success, and are eager to go to any extent to achieve this success.

Nabeel like many other young men of Nashawy had gone to work 'outside', for a short time, just to earn enough. But who will decide when it is enough. Gradually the material success assumes the form of bog, which makes these young men its captive and they find it difficult to relinquish its magic. Nashawy was slowly turning into another 17<sup>th</sup> century English countryside town, with all its youth and its power migrating to the countries rendering greater economic success. The narrator is able to make this connection, as soon as he visits Egypt after a gap of eight years:

I could not have begun to imagine a change on this scale when I left Nashawy in 1981; revisiting it now, a little less than eight years later, it looked as though the village had been drawn on to the fringes of a revolution - except that this one had happened in another country, far away.<sup>6</sup>

Nabeel loses his standing within the family as a living emotional human-being, and becomes a money producing machine. When Amitav inquires with Nabeel's family about his life in Iraq, they try to discourage his inquisitiveness:

**An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal**

"What are things like in Iraq?" I asked Fawzia. "Does Nabeel like it there?" She nodded cheerfully. He was very happy, she said; in his tapes he always said he was doing well and that everything was fine.<sup>7</sup>

Nabeel's alienation is never understood by his family. Nobody tries to penetrate through the mask of happiness those Nabeel fashions, whenever he tries to contact them. All they understood was the money that he sent. Nabeel had become ail 'outer' by going to work 'outside'.

When Amitav Ghosh was engrossed with doing his research work in Egypt and far away from his family, he himself felt the same inkling of alienation as Nabeel got too in Iraq. That's why when both did telephonic conversation, his painic feeling of loneliness accentuated:

When i had finished giving him my news, I told him about his own family in Nashawy, and about my visit to their new house. He was eager to hear about them, asking question after question, but in a voice that seemed to grow progressively more quiet.<sup>8</sup>

Nabeel's alienation and hardships increase manifold when the Gulf War breaks out. Nabeel is left all by himself to face his war-sticken and alien country because Isma'il and his other friends from Nashawy have already left for their homeland. Ismail tells Amitav that Nabeel wanted to return with him to Egypt but could not do so, as he had to earn some more in order to complete his unfinished house in Nashaway:

He wanted to come back. Infact he thought that he would. But then he decided to stay for a few more months, make a little more money, so that they could finish building this house. Prices have gone up this last year. Everything costs more.<sup>9</sup>

Nabeel is especially burdened by this sense of alienation because he is shown to be more sensitive and considerate than the other men of this age. He treasures familial bonding, and that is why he was able to understand the loneliness that the narrator experiences during his stay in Egypt. And it is this incident which immediately strikes the narrator, as soon as he is told about Nabeel's being alone to face the war in Iraq, as most of his friends and relatives have returned to Egypt:

My mind went back to that evening when I first met Nabeel and Isma'il : how Nabeel had said: 'It must make you think of all the people you left at home when you put that kettle on the stove with just enough water for yourself'. It was hard to think of Nabeel alone, in a city headed for destruction.<sup>10</sup>

Ghosh discovers that migration, alienation and identity crisis had always affected the lives of his protagonist. The Circle of Reason presents history as a collective memory which gathers, in a symbiotic fashion all that existed in the past into all that happens in the present. In *The Shadow Lines* the world of war-torn London is overlaid by the memories of Calcutta and Dhaka. In *An Antique Land* blends fiction, fact and history competently. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* the mystery of the novel accentuated by the use of magic realism dissolves the boundaries between the physical and spiritual truths and explores the possibilities of exitence of various levels of consciousness. In *The Glass Palace*, Rajkumar's journey to India in search of Dolly becomes a metaphor in his search for himself and his identity. The trauma of an uprooted protagonist has received an unusual treatment in his novels since he struggles hard to adjust himself to new surroundings. His creative impusle demonstrates a propensity for deconstructing, often overtruning the models and assumptions of Western civilizations, a typically post-colonial preoccupation.

**References**

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