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# Identity Crisis in Amitav Ghosh's Novels

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Amitav Ghosh. Identity crisis is “a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person’s sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society”, says Dictionary. ‘Identity crisis’, the term was coined by Erik Erikson. In his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, he says that identity crisis can be varied to person-to-person. Sometimes it can be the crisis between the national identity and personal identity.

The unnamed narrator, his family and friends are the fictional characters used by Amitav Ghosh to portray the ‘identity crisis’ that was predominant in his time. *Tridib*, *Thaama*, and *Ila* are the three main characters that confronts ‘identity crisis’ in the due course of the novel. The nationalism and national identity presented in the novel is a representation of the individual’s personal identity. The question of national identity becomes the question of the personal identity.

Identity crisis is a subject that many authors, from time to time, have raised in their books. It becomes very interesting for the readers because this is an issue which is mostly a byproduct of social changes, psychological issues, philosophical enquiries and various other connotations in various terms. How many authors are there in your view when you talk about identity crisis? To me, the authors who have written about such themes are the ones who talk about alienation, sense of rootlessness, family crisis, marital issues and longing for the community support in their novels. And, with this rope, I can certainly reach to the names like Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and also, to an extent, Shobha De. From the galaxy of writers who are from the countries other than India and not having any origins in India, we might name Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Thomas Hardy to an extent and also the likes of Graham Greene and D. H. Lawrence. You can name many others as well, depending on your subtle interpretations. You might find a few names which might not trigger the same feelings in your that are triggered in me. However, there will certainly be something in common and we have to find that. I will discuss the books that I would like you all to read if you are thinking to read the best books on the subject of an identity crisis.

A paper that discusses the way postcolonial transformations of space may be relevant to revisionist postcommunist cartographies. It particularly considers the language of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and also looks at Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and *In An Antique Land* in the context of colonial and postcolonial cartographical and linguistic practices.

Amitav Ghosh is widely acclaimed for his major novels in which he has expressed his concerns for the downtrodden people of Indian society. In his major novels Amitav Ghosh’s sympathetic attitude towards the subaltern can be perceived. The problems of alienation, migration and existential crisis in life of unprivileged class of the society are explored through his fiction. The voice of the subalterns, their struggle and sacrifices which went unnoticed in the annals of the history began to get a prominent voice in the fiction of Amitav Ghosh in a different way. Through his writings he provided subalterns center stage by making them as the pivotal character of his fiction so that they can raise voice against the oppressive forces of their society. My aim in this paper is to analyze Amitav Ghosh’s selected

The term ‘Post-Colonial’ has gained attention in recent times. In the writings of Amitav Ghosh there is post colonial consciousness. In the novel *An Antique Land* the novelist Amitav Ghosh talks about the history of Egypt. Countries like India, Pakistan, Egypt, Myanmar and Bangladesh have been mentioned in the novel. In *The Glass Palace* the novelist talks about colonial expansion and its consequences in Burma, Malaya and India. In the present novel *The Hungry Tide* the problems of subalterns of Sunderbans in West Bengal have been highlighted. Amitav Ghosh is pre occupied with Indian concerns in almost all of his novels. *The Hungry Tide* was published in 2005. This novel has been divided in two sections. First is ‘*The Ebb: Bhata*’ and the second is ‘*The Flood: Jowar*’. The setting of the novel is in Sunderbans which is the easternmost coast of India. There are two narratives in the novel. The narrative



explored through Nirmal's diary unfolds the Morichjhapi incident which happened twenty eight years ago and the second narrative is the research of Piya which reveals the contemporary life experiences of people and environment of Sunderbans. The central concern of the novel is interwoven in these two narratives which creates the problems and issues of wilderness conservation of Sunderbans.

Amitav Ghosh has projected his characters who are searching for their identity. Their concern for identity is allied to diasporic identity, cultural identity, national identity and subaltern identity, referred as thematic considerations. They are not totally independent but the interrelated terms and must be seen in reference to each other. These thematic considerations have been dealt in the form of quest for identity, identity crisis/ transformation and colonial or postcolonial identity in the form of 'self and other'. Alienation, struggle for existence, dilemma of dual identity, sense of belonging and nostalgia are several constraints that have been exemplified through the well-defined characters of his novels.

The main theme of Amitav Ghosh's novels are concerned with the displacement, be it diaspora, migration or exile. The different issues and problems associated with the displacement also occupy the center stage. Among the several issues, identity is the most prominent one. While being displaced and disillusioned an individual encounter identity crisis, or quest for identity that reveals conflict of values and identifies the emotional perspectives involved in it. Alienation, ambivalence, nostalgia, and belonging nowhere, predicament of dual identity and identity regain are some of the issues that are associated with diasporic identity. In his novels, he has narrated the story of the persons who are displaced and forming the diasporic identity.

Ghosh's characters which comprise motley of people hailing from diverse socio-cultural background are dislocated from their homeland to a different place sometimes by historical forces and voluntary exercise. People who are forcibly dispersed from their familiar geo-cultural surrounding suffer cultural fragmentation and the people who migrate for better economic opportunity try to relocate themselves in the new environment. Not surprisingly Ghosh's characters embody varied cultural manifestation leading to a number of interactions with unfamiliar socio-cultural setting. The most visible consequence of such displacement is the evolution of a mobile, hybrid community who straddle various cultures and participate in imaginative and cultural artefacts. The dispersal of people across the continent in the wake of European colonialism, transportation of Africans across the Atlantic, Asians for working in colonial outposts as indentured labourers as well as voluntary migration of people because of economic opportunity offered by globalization show the insufficiency of traditional ways of identifying ourselves. In other words worldwide migration has led us to rethink traditional affiliations in the construction of identity. Interestingly the migrants who experience displacement and dislocation due to historical factors formulate their older affiliations differently.

Amitav Ghosh problematizes the issue of identity by offering a migrant perspective through which the characters who suffer geographical and cultural displacement negotiate their affiliation. No wonder the vision that emerges from Ghosh's works is diverse, multi-dimensional. In *The Shadow Lines* which critiques the monolithic concept of nationalism Ghosh shows how spatially and culturally displaced people perceive their identity. Two important characters—Ila and Thamma—look upon their identity from the perspectives of migrants/diaspora. Ila, daughter of an Indian diplomat consciously chooses to settle in England precisely because her spatial movement from her homeland, India to the metropolitan England will, she believes, ensure her freedom.

He uses the trauma induced by partition and riots as a theme, and even has an important character of the novel, the narrator's second cousin once removed Tridib, killed in the Dhaka riots (1963-64). He implies the partition however not in a linear manner as Ghosh's novel is written in the non-linear or disjointed narrative mode— an aspect which implies its title also, with the shadowiness of the border line. But this border line, as an abstract construction, only adds problems for a large number of people across it. He exposes the concept of a nation borders as a mirage, as a nation exists as a concept beyond physical boundaries. (Mirages can be seen as an important motif in the text as the character Robi finds even the word "free" a mirage.) A nation is created with the emotions and memories of people belonging to a community, and Ghosh brings this out through the journey of the narrator from childhood to adulthood. Ghosh noticed thoroughly that what is impossible at present was possible at once. People believe that the terms like humanism and secularism are products of modernity which in fact is wrong notion according to Ghosh. In this novel Ghosh



presents a medieval society which celebrated the concepts like secularism and human values the ideal in practice. These philosophical concepts are grandeur in philosophy in the present scenario. They are found more in theory rather than in practice. The novelist in this novel clearly sees the changes. When he met his Egyptian friend, Zaghoul, the novelists observes the ignorance of the people. Zaghoul asked the novelist whether he could reach India on donkey. The other notable differences are found with the image of visas which is a big obstacle for the people to move. The image of the war between Iraq and Iran made the author more worried about insecurity this kind of symptoms were not found in the twelfth century. The novelist Ghosh clearly depicts the freedom for people in those days.

The current era of globalization and the post colonial era has rendered the assumption of fixed identity as absolute and recognized that identity is a multilayered and changeable notion. The spaces in which the human beings inhabit are not fixed and homogeneous but heterogeneous and malleable. Consequently, individuals' are assigned to reconstruct their image and adopt multiple identities which altering existing ones. The themes that overlay throughout the novel are migration, diasporic feeling, and rootlessness. Even though migration existed since the beginning of human race, the reasons behind it are different. Previously the Aryans left Central Asia and spread across Asia and Europe and it was not a solitary act but it was a huge movement of mass. When this migration is narrowed down to an individual, there arises loneliness, a sense of vacuum and despair. Thus a question of belongingness becomes a universal one. This question remains unanswered till the very end of the novel. Because there is nothing to hold on with attachment or to be called a home. There exist only movement from one place to another in search for security and love.

In the above illustrated ways, Ghosh is able to, in his novel *The Shadow Lines*, portray the notions of identity and nation. He questions and reveals as arbitrary physical borders; shows scenes of violence across the border on one hand and juxtaposes this image with feelings of oneness and unity on the other; and illustrates the idea of the nation as a whole. He captures perspective of time and events, of lines that bring people together and hold them apart, that are clearly visible from one perspective and nonexistent from another, that exist in the memory of one in another's imagination, using a narrative built out of an intricate, constantly crisscrossing web of memories of many people.

- 1- Post colonial elements in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*-Nivedhaa Nivi.
- 2- Identity-An Inquisitive concern in Amitav Ghosh's Novels- Pooja Narain
- 3- Displacement & Identity: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's Select Novels- Sukanta Das Prasannadeb.
- 4- Identity Politics in Amitav Ghosh's Writing : A Postcolonial Study of *The Shadow Lines* and *Sea of Poppies*.- Rajkumar Bera.
- 5- Ghosh & Identity Formation- Sandhita Chandra.
- 6- The Nostalgic Pull: The Immigrant Scenario In The Select Novels Of Amitav Ghosh Dr. Anney Alice Sharene





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