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**Exploring History And Lands Of Cambodia And Burma Through Travel Writing Of
Amitav Ghosh**

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Abstract:

Travel Narrative as a genre is a factual representation or rather re-creation of personal and individual anecdotes of travel experiences, after all the literary representation of a real travel with all its enthralling experiences. It can also be an introspection of the journey which had been completed by the author and also an objective documentation of his travel experiences. Amitav Ghosh is also one such writer. *He frequently uses history in his novels and essays inculcated in travel writings.* He is whole heartedly involved with history crossing of national and international frontiers area old theme, to which Ghosh gives a new directions. *Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze how Amitav Ghosh has reconstructed history of time and history of Cambodia and Myanmar.* The narration of Ghosh's travel experiences in these countries brings to the front the complex temporal dimensions of history of both the nations in the collection of essays *Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma.*

Keywords: Travel narrative, History, Travel Experiences, Cambodia, Myanmar

1. Introduction:

Travel has forever been a basic human urge. Men have travelled with various motives- out of curiosity, adventure, on personal and political errands, on diplomatic missions, for pilgrimage and spiritual satisfaction, on voyages, for business and trade and currently as part of multi- cultural immigration and displacement due to jobs. Travel Writing has thus become a genre of Literature which deals with nature writing, adventure writing, exploration writing, guide books etc. Some travellers with alert and methodological minds recorded their observations and experiences and facts of history, as perceived to them in a very kaleidoscopic view of the world that is now known as travel writing. In this modern era, Interesting Travelogues are written by such literary personalities such as William Dalrymple, Aldous Huxley, Henry Graham Greene, V.S Naipaul, Rushdie, Pankaj Mishra, Paul Theroux, Ved Mehta etc. They enriched the genre in various ways. By travel, one gets to check and perceive history, cultures, traditions, customs, and religions. The aim of this genre of writing is a diary and a receptacle of accurate records of

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particular peoples, places, customs, and ceremonies etc. They furnish us an account of the prevailing social settings and a deep insight into their culture and habitation.

2. Travel Narrative:

A travelogue may be a truthful account of an individual's experiences traveling, usually told within the past time and as I narration. The word travelogue comes from a jumble of the 2 words 'travel' and 'monologue'. In turn, the word monologue comes from the Greek words monos (alone) and logos (speech, word). A travelogue is then, in its most elementary form, a spoken or record of an individual's traveling experiences, which usually appears within the time, within the person, and with some verisimilitude. As a travelogue aims to be a real account of an individual's traveling experiences, it's a description of what the traveler sees, hears, tastes, smells, and feels within the external world while traveling are essential components. The travelogue – meaning literary exposition of travel experience – may conveniently be classified as (a) fantasy described as exposition of fact, (b) literature of recorded fact and (c) literary art of presentation of recorded impressions and feeling during travel.

Literary historians do not incorporate travel writing as a genre or kind of literature, both in our country and within the West. It is, however, not very easy to draw a sharp line of distinction between literary travel writing and non-literary writing. But some travelogues easily stand out as remarkable literary achievement. Travel as a metaphor widely employed in all literatures. It's used as a literary device in scriptures, epics and widely read literary artifacts. Travel is employed in satire as in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver Travels* or a method of conveying information in a remarkable manner or Joseph Addison's creation of a *Citizen of the world*, are cases in point. There's a full genre in English Fiction well accepted as the Picaresque Novel. The examples that readily come up to our minds are R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* of the 19th century of foreign travelers to India like Megasthenes's *Indica* (of ancient times) and (c) *Scinde* or the *Unhappy Valley* of Richard Burton of the 18th century.

The aim of writing may different from writer to writer and from time to time. A historical study of assorted travel texts help us to grasp our history yet because the personality of the individual travel writers, their attitude towards the lifetime of the people they traveled among various other things, the ways of governance in those periods. Whatever they saw, felt and experienced and therefore the degree of their subjectivity or objectivity in their writing will be studied. Of course, thoughts, feelings, and reflections are important parts of our experience of travel. Likewise, notes and observations on history, society, and culture also are common features of travelogues, as we certainly study the world while we travel. So, narrations of a traveler's inner world are not out-of-place within the travelogue. Thus, we can generally agree that travel narrative contains a high degree of literary merit in conveying personally and informally the data related to the journey, travel or emigration involving spatial displacement.

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One such travel writer, Amitav Ghosh, is passionately involved with history crossing of national and international frontiers area old theme, to which Ghosh gives a new dimension. His works, *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace* and travelogues –*Countdown and Dancing in Cambodia At Large in Burma* brought him International fame and recognition. He is also having the technique of rethinking and reframing the historical event with imagination blended with nationhood and reality. Ghosh attempts in re-reading of history from broad dimension, blending different fictional characters with the historical events that are described under these essays which focus on the assorted aspects of humanity. History is an inseparable aspect of Ghosh’s writings is a combination of the emotions of Alienation and Isolation that are compounded by migration. Ghosh has the power to mix the individual along with the historical in an aesthetic manner. The utilization of history and politics in an exceedingly work of art is common to Amitav Ghosh. He has beautifully blended history and politics in *Dancing in Cambodia* and *At Large in Burma*, the event recorded as history merge with the private lives of the individuals. The Journey, here, is through historical events that shook the sensibility of the people of Cambodia and Myanmar and altered their lives forever. They became alien in their birth country.

3. *Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma (1998):*

This essay collection is made up of three sections: the 2 longish travel-essays of the book's title and a shorter Cambodian piece, "Stories in Stones". Ghosh's ability to seek out patterns in seemingly unconnected events is at its best in "Dancing in Cambodia", which connects the 1906 visit of Cambodia's King Sisowath, his entourage, and a troupe of Cambodian classical dancers, to France, with the current record of the country decimated by the Khmer Rouge Revolution.

3.1 *Dancing in Cambodia: History of Khmer Rouge Regime*

The essays “Dancing in Cambodia” and “Stories in Stone” present the upsetting part of Cambodian history following the systematic trials to destroy it by the xenophobic Khmer Rouge regime (1975-79) and the succeeding endeavors of the Cambodian people after the 1993 well known elections to revive their lost and forgotten cultural heritage. One can notice a significant variation upon the way traditional travelogues are conceived and written as Ghosh inculcates the personal testimonies of the survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide in these essays. His visit isn’t just to certain places (Cambodia) but also to know the history of those places. The act of remembering the old time is what Ghosh shares with various people whom he meets on his way thus taking part in a collective memories of the injured past of present Cambodia.

As Hariom Singh mentions in his research paper that Ghosh by including individuals’ memories, personal testimonies in documenting his travels explores the truth of the Cambodian past instead of just its truthfulness. Those who aid him or those whom he meets within the course of his travels aren’t exhausted beings hopelessly struggling to return to terms with their past. The

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centrality of Phnom Penh (the capital city of Cambodia) within the travel essays of Ghosh is of great significance as it is intimately linked to the collective memories of its people.

In “Dancing in Cambodia” Ghosh retells the story of Cambodian king Sisowath’s visit to the French city of Marseilles in 1906 to take part in Exposition Coloniale “an immense fairy land of an exhibition centered on the theme of France’s colonial possessions” (Ghosh, 2002, p. 37). The entourage of the king had a royal troupe of dancers “dressed in colourful sampots” under the guardianship of king’s eldest daughter princess Soumphady (Ghosh, 2002, p.66). These artists were much famous in France and other European countries for their art and the onlookers at Marseilles port were completely taken aback by their tremendous appearance whose manners and ways surpassed their expectations. Ghosh’s discussion with Chea Samy, an educator at the varsity of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, serves to reveal the twofold purpose of King Sisowath’s story in the essay. Firstly, it exposes the insincere nature of European imperial powers towards the subjects of their colonies/protectorates and secondly, how fatal proved to be the lessons which King Sisowath affirmed to have drawn from his trip to France. After his return, King Sisowath issued a letter to the effect that “emulation is that the only means of turning resolutely to the trail of progress” (Ghosh, 2002, p. 594). Integration of his perception into the imitation of French in state policies caused irrecoverable damage to the glorious and ancient heritage of Cambodia. His fascination with French customs and manners led him to determine a faculty named College du Protectorate on the French model of education and through Khmer Rouge years, many of the closest allies of Pol Pot were a graduate of this school. This institution played an important role in familiarizing and institutionalizing the socialist ideology in Cambodia.

3.2 A Cambodian Ancient Temple-Angkor Wat in *Stories in Stone*:

The second chapter of is dedicated to the narration of varied aspects of the twelfth century Cambodian temple Angkor Wat. This temple is really far more than a temple within the conventional sense to Cambodians. Many stories are crafted on these elegant structures. Cambodians call Angkor Wat, ‘A Monument to the facility of the Story’. This sculpture is sort of a gigantic abacus of storytelling. It is said to be the most important single religious architecture in the world. It seems to be self-sufficient and absolute in its setting and dimensions where each part is supplementing the opposite. The setting is Mountain Meru. It is a mountain in Indian mythology. This mythological hill provides the blue print for Angkor Wat, the entire sacred place of gods, deities, sages and prophets is cast.

Surprisingly Ghosh offers one among his own discoveries regarding the temple. Ghosh noticed the paradoxical nature of the reputation this temple has among Cambodians. People round the globe view Angkor Wat as a singular powerful symbol of the romance and glory of a lost civilization. But for Cambodians, it’s a logo of modernity. Although Angkor Wat is undisputedly a temple, yet it does not figure in anything that has to do with religion or anything old-fashioned. Many commodities producers put it as a logo and also stamped on uniforms. ‘[...] It figures on the logos of huge corporations, like bank, indeed, the erstwhile Kampuchea Airlines

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even succeeded in transforming this most earth bound of structures into a logo of flight, by lending it a pair of wings' (56). Ghosh remarks that though Angkor Wat may be a temple "but it never figures in anything to try to do with religion or indeed in any context which could be called traditional or old fashioned" (Ghosh, 2002, p. 789).

As interested in folklore, he involves the legend of accidental finding of this temple by French explorer Henri Mohout. The contradictory nature of this temple further gets a lift when Ghosh involves skills this temple was restored with all latest available scientific and technical methods. He also came to know that Indian archaeologists were also called for help. Thus this central cultural symbol of Cambodia is additionally a logo of change and modernity. Ghosh writes, 'For a whole generation of Cambodians, including politicians as different in ideology as Prince Sihanouk, Son Sann and Pol Pot, Angkor Wat became a logo of modernizing nation-state. It became the other of itself: an icon that represented an opportunity with the past-a token of the country's belongings, not within the medieval, but rather the times.

Thus, these two essays are united by a quest of the Cambodian people to recover from their upsetting past of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-79). Through the testimony of various survivors of the Pol Pot regime, Amitav Ghosh takes into account the emotional outcome of the event. In fact, in its narrative, it outskirts twin strands of realistic/journalistic and psychological study of the victims of these who survived the Pol Pot years.

3.3 *At Large in Burma: Historical Story of Quest for Democracy*

The last part of the book *At Large in Burma* is mostly a direct narrative. Expectedly, its topic is struggle for democracy in Burma. But Ghosh features a personal link to Burma also. He says that writing about Burma is an effort on his part to urge to his roots. He intends to travel over places his parents and relatives had lived in or visited before the birth of the Indian Republic in 1947. He writes;

To me, the foremost intriguing of those stories were people who my family administered of Burma. I suspect that this was partly because Burma had become a sort of lost world within the early 60's, once I was sufficiently old to concentrate to my relatives' stories. It was in 1962 that General Ne win, the person who would be Burma's while dictator, seized power in coup. Almost immediately, he slammed the shutters and transitioned the lights: Burma became the dark house of the neighborhood, huddled behind an impenetrable, overgrown fence. It was to stay shuttered for nearly three decades (Ghosh 65).

This last essay of the collection is an attempt to understand the social and political situation of Burma which prevailed through much of the 1990s. Ghosh's concern in this essay appears to have moved beyond the exploration of just upsetting and painful memories of people's concern for democracy and its future in strife-torn Burma. Ghosh peeps deep into the political history of Burma, an Indian province under British colonial rule until 1947 through the

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personal memories, discussion, and testimonies of his familiarity, co-travelers and political opposites. He, within the words of Gabriel, is checking out “a disorder within the relationship between memory and past experience [which] is, at a minimum, a crucial component of trauma’s etiology” (Gabriel, 2009, p. 1). A sizeable part of the essay is dedicated to the precarious political existence of Suu Kyi, a renowned political leader and face of the democratic forces in military ruled Burma. Suu Kyi’s father Aung San was Burma’s recognized leader during the liberty struggle. On 19th July 1947 he was murdered when Suu Kyi was just two years old. She rose to be an eminent human rights activist and spearheaded a peaceful non-resistance mass movement to revive democracy and civil liberties in her country. Ghosh examines the political condition of today’s world. He correctly writes, ‘In the post-modern world, politics is everywhere a matter of symbol and therefore the truth is that Suu Kyi is her own greatest political asset. It is only because Burma’s 1988 democracy movement had a logo, personified in Suu Kyi, that the world remembers it and continues to exert pressure on the present regime.

After the death of General Aung San, the country dived into national struggles and following a military coup “when Gen Ne Win, the chief of the army abruptly took control of the army and suspended the government” (Ghosh, 2002, p. 1011) in 1962, it is continually under the military dictatorship. The common people of multi-ethnic Myanmar have lived in a state of everlasting trauma since the coup. In the words of Kong Sarith “since 1962, we have lived through the dark ages... torture, murder, poverty” (Ghosh, 2002, p. 1077). Every decade has seen its own generation of activists and democracy supporters. However, Ghosh’s travel essay is more concerned with the pro-democracy movements which emerged in 1988 and have continued since then. Ghosh comes across bringing out the complex nature of Burmese society by his personal narratives, alongside the fragmented nature of most of the contemporary history of Burma as against the relatively stable history of Cambodia.

4. Conclusion:

Travel Narrative is the careful account of selected unities with a greater sense of authenticity and observing power. The selection means the selection of unknown lands, new routes of travel and the new cultures which have been the objects of travelogue writing. In this collection of essays, Ghosh reveals history as it is yet they make a difference they are imagined through readers and Literariness. The paper brings out imagination as consequences to the past reality and the present ignorance. The imagination of life and global understanding would reflect people to become one yet practice their own philosophies to bring out the realities in common people. This is not physical or geographical movement but movement from ignorance to knowledge and awareness and understanding.

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