
Navigating Native Roots and Transnational Experiences of Bahram and Neel's Exploration of Identity in Amitav Ghosh's Flood of Fire

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* (2015), explores the complexities, sinuosity's and contortions of native and transnational experiences. The novel is layered, stratified and laminated of diametrically opposed identities within the milieu of colonialism, migration and trade in the 19th century which tells the status quo of the First Opium War. The novel revolves around two of its characters named Bahram Modi, a Parsi opium trader from Bombay and Neel Rattan Halder, a dispossessed Bengali aristocrat. Both the characters represent divergent and creased but at the same time intertwined narratives of identity formation and transformation as they face displacement of their roles in a transnational world which is hewed by empire and commerce. This study will scrutinize and inquire into how Bahram and Neel's journeys bespeak the tension between native roots and transnational experiences, and it will also catechize and anatomize that how the forces of colonialism and displacement shape their sense of self. Bahram's story is moral and having the tinge of cultural conflict with his native Parsi values which is strained under the weight of his involvement in the opium trade and ties him to the British Empire and Chinese commerce. Bahram's conflict with transnationalism distances

him from his community because of his own actions. Neel, on the other hand, is a fallen aristocrat whose identity is jiggered and disoriented by his conviction and exile. However, through his experiences as a convict and interpreter, Neel embraces the fluidity of identity and becomes a more cosmopolitan figure. His journey reflects a different response to displacement and exile where identity is reimagined rather than clung to its native root. This paper confers that *Flood of Fire* spots identity as a dynamic and fluid construction that has been reorganized by historical forces such as colonialism, commerce, and migration. Ghosh presents identity as a site of conflict, where characters like Bahram struggle to reconcile their native roots with their roles in the imperial economy, while characters like Neel alter their identities in response to their transnational experiences. This paper highlights the intricate interplay between the local and the global through which it will examine that how Ghosh uses the characters of Bahram and Neel to explore the flexibility of identity in response to displacement, exile, and imperial forces.

Keywords: Identity formation, Colonialism, Transnationalism, Migration, Cultural Displacement.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* (2015), offers a sweeping exploration of identity in a world where everyone is being dominated by empire, commerce, and migration. This novel is set against the backdrop of the First Opium War and the British Empire, who has taken further expansion to the world explicitly into Asia. This particular novel of Ghosh's follows the lives of individuals whose personal trajectories reflect the larger historical forces which play the vital role in it. Specially,

the characters of Bahram Modi who is a Parsi opium trader, and Neel Rattan Halder who represents a Bengali aristocrat, have turned a convict of his own inconclusive knowledge of this world and embodied the tension between native roots and transnational experiences. These stories of theirs raise critical questions about the fluidity of identity in a world that is shaped by colonialism, migration, and the global economy.

This paper tries to find out how Ghosh navigates the interplay between native identity and transnational experiences through the characters of Bahram and Neel. In doing so, it explores how these characters have responded to the purpose of this paper to find out how displacement and their identities have been transformed by their engagement with imperial forces and global commerce. Like Bahram's involvement in the opium business has positioned him at the intersection of traditional Parsi values and the demands of British colonial trade, has created a moral and cultural conflict for him that ultimately leads to his downfall. Whereas, Neel's exile and subsequent role as an interpreter during the Opium War has marked a transformation in his identity and therefore the displacement becomes an opportunity for reinvention for him rather than loss.

This paper argues about Ghosh's efforts, how identity has been presented as a fluid and dynamic concept which is constantly reshaped by external forces such as colonialism, commerce, and migration. Through Bahram and Neel's journey, it has been criticized the notion of a fixed and static identity that suggests the artifact of ongoing negotiation between native roots and transnational realities. This theme is particularly relevant in the context of the 19th century, which was the time of colonialism and global trade that not only reshaped the political and economic landscape but also personal and cultural identities.

Bahram Modi's Moral Decay and Economic Imperialism

Bahram Modi's narrative can also be seen as a reflection of the

broader ethical dilemmas that emerge from transnational economic systems, which have been driven by imperialism. Ghosh, through Bahram's participation in the opium trade, critiques the exploitative nature of colonial capitalism, where moral considerations are often subordinated to the imperatives of profit. Bahram's gradual awareness of the human cost of his business ventures which reveal the dehumanizing effects of such systems who destroy his morality. In his reflective moments, Bahram's conscience is haunted by the suffering of Chinese opium addicts, whom he refers to as "the unseen ghosts of his fortune" (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire*, 402). This metaphor of ghosts underscores the idea of colonial commerce that is built on the exploitation and destruction of lives, which is the reality of Bahram that can no longer be ignored.

The moral decay of Bahram is associated with his success that serves to critique imperialist economic ventures, particularly in the 19th century, which have commodified not only goods but also human lives. This process of commodification, as described by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*, entails the reduction of human relationships and labour to mere economic transactions (Marx, *Das Kapital*, 243). Bahram's role in the opium trade which is like a mirror to this commodification that has made him increasingly disconnected from the human suffering caused by his business dealings. His initial attempts to rationalize his involvement in the opium trade as "just business" gradually give him a way to a deeper sense of guilt and self-loathing that reveals the moral bankruptcy of the colonial economy in which he is enmeshed.

Bahram's personal downfall is therefore the symbolic of the broader collapse of moral order under the burden of imperialism and global capitalism. His narrative arch reflects Ghosh's broader assessment of the destructive consequences of empire, particularly for those who are like Bahram, who has been caught between their native cultural identities and the anxieties of colonial power. The corrosive impact of Bahram's

transnational dealings highlights Spivak's "subaltern's complicity" in imperialism, where colonized subjects have their participation in the colonial economy that inadvertently contribute to their own marginalization and the dissemination of imperial power structures (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 78). This is how Bahram's tragic end illustrates the impossibility of escaping the moral and existential dilemmas posed by such complicity, as he is ultimately consumed by the very system that he sought to yield.

Neel Rattan Halder's Survival Skills Through Adaptation and Hybridity

In discrepancy to Bahram's moral and empirical downfall, Neel's story represents a narrative of survival through adaption of hybridity, and transformation. Neel's capability to resuscitate himself in response to his changing circumstances exemplifies what Homi Bhabha describes as the "third space," a liminal point where individuals are not fixed but it rather constantly negotiated in response to the social power dynamics (Bhabha, *The position of Culture*, 54). To show that how Neel's transformation from a disgraced gentle person to a smart practitioner signifies the fluidity of identity in a social world, where relegation and exile force them to embrace to a new artistic and political realities.

Neel's experience as a practitioner between British and Chinese forces during the Opium War allows him to navigate the complex, overlapping spheres of imperial and native interests. This part as an artistic conciliator positions him in a space of hybridity, where he constantly negotiates between different artistic canons and power structures. Unlike Bahram, who remains trapped by his attachment to his Parsi heritage and his role in the British social frugality. But, on the other hand, Neel embraces the possibility of fluidity and change. His relations with other characters like Ah Fatt, who himself is a product of multiple cultures, which gives farther emphasis on the novel's hybridity of identity

in a transnational world. Neel's willingness to inhabit multiple individualities allows him to repel the rigid social scales of the social order that allows him to transfigure not simply a matter of existence but also an assertion of agency within a system that seeks to impose fixed places on a colonised matters. Bhabha's notion of "hybridity" as a form of subversion in Neel's capability to move between different culture which allows him to challenge the binary oppositions of colonial and colonised (Bhabha, *The position of Culture*, 112). Through Neel's character, Ghosh suggests that identity is far from being an essential, and stable construct, which is inherently fluid and capable of adapting to the conditions of a world marked by colonialism, migration, and global trade.

Transnationalism and the Reconfiguration of Self

Deep down in the novel of Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* unravels the concept of transnationalism, which reshapes the identities of characters like Bahram and Neel profoundly. Transnationalism, as defined by Arjun Appadurai, which encompasses the flow of people, goods, ideas, and capital across national borders to create a new form of belonging and identity that transcends traditional notions of the nation-state (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 4). Both Bahram and Neel are profoundly affected by this transnational flow, but they respond to it in different ways. For Bahram, transnationalism aggravates his internal conflict between his native Parsi identity and his role in the British colonial economy. His involvement in global trade, predominantly the opium trade, distances him from his cultural roots and leads to a sense of alienation and disillusionment. In his journey to China, Bahram has developed an involvement with the British imperial project, which symbolizes his alienation from his native roots. As he sails across the foreign landscape of Canton, Bahram reflects on his growing sense of disconnection from his own identity as Ghosh mentions in his work that "He was neither fully Parsi nor fully British, but something in between—a man without a

home” (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire*, 321). This shows the sense of displacement while having a broader experience of transnationalism, who often find themselves caught between multiple identities and cultural contexts.

Neel, on the other hand, embraces the possibilities that are being offered by transnationalism. Because his interactions with British, Chinese, and Indian characters have allowed him to transcend the narrow confinements of his former aristocratic identity and adopt a more cosmopolitan outlook. This enables him to navigate these different cultural spheres, which are a testament to his adaptability and resilience. And these qualities have enabled him to thrive in a world that is shaped by colonialism and migration. On this basis, this character serves as a model of transnational identity, where individuals are not bounding by any fixed notions of belonging but are instead capable of building a new form of identity in response to changing historical and social conditions.

Colonialism and the Ethics of Identity Formation

The differing peregrinations of Bahram and Neel also raise an important ethical questions about the conformation of identity in a social perspective. Bahram’s moral decomposition reflects the corrupting influence of colonialism, which not only exploits colonized matters but it also erodes their sense of tone. His involvement in the opium trade forces him to defy the moral contradictions of his conduct, as he grapples with the consummation that his wealth has been erected on the suffering of others. This moral reckoning, still, comes too late, as Bahram’s ultimate downfall illustrates the destructive consequences of conspiracy in the social frugality.

Through Neel’s perspective, on the other hand, offers a more hopeful vision of identity conformation. His capability to acclimatize and resuscitate himself in response to the challenges of exile and relegation suggests that identity is far from being a static construct, which is commodity that can be laboriously shaped and reshaped in response to

external forces. This ethical inflexibility allows Neel to navigate the complications of the social world by standing in the stark distinction to Bahram's rigid attachment to his Parsi identity which has paralyzed his morality in the face of social power. Eventually, Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* presents identity as a fluid and a dynamic construct that has been shaped by the literal, profitable, and social forces of colonialism and transnationalism. Through the differing gestures of Bahram and Neel, Ghosh criticizes the fixed sundries of identity and emphasizes the significance of rigidity and adaptability in a world that's being defined by relegation, migration, and imperial power

Conclusion

In *Flood of Fire*, Amitav Ghosh presents a nuanced exploration of identity in a world shaped by colonialism, commerce, and migration. Through the characters of Bahram Modi and Neel Rattan Halder, Ghosh interrogates the tension between native roots and transnational experiences that offers a rich observation on the fluidity and complexity of identity in the colonial world. Bahram's story is of moral and cultural conflict. And his involvement in the opium trade distances him from his Parsi heritage and leads to his downfall. His inability to reconcile his native identity with the burdens of colonial commerce that illustrates the destructive potential of transnational forces when they come into conflict with traditional values. Bahram's tragedy serves as a cautionary tale about the costs of participating in the imperial economy, particularly for those who are caught between the cultural conflict and moral imperatives.

Whereas, Neel's story offers a more hopeful vision of identity in a transnational world. His transformation from a disgraced aristocrat to a cosmopolitan interpreter who demonstrates the potential for reinvention and adaptation in the face of displacement and exile. Neel's ability to navigate multiple cultural contexts which embraces the fluidity of identity that offers a counterpoint to Bahram's tragic fate which suggests that

identity is not something fixed but it can be reshaped by one's experiences. Ultimately, *Flood of Fire* presents identity as a dynamic and fluid construction of constantly reshaped by historical forces such as colonialism, commerce, and migration. Ghosh's portrayal of Bahram and Neel's journeys reflects the broader themes of the novel, highlighting the intricate interplay between the local and the global, the native and the transnational. In doing so, Ghosh invites readers to consider the malleability of identity in a world where displacement, exile, and empire are ever-present realities.

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