
**Migration and Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*
and *Sea of Poppies***

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's novels cover a wide arena of subjects, including authoritarianism, imperialism, the rise of nationalism, the partition of India, globalization, environmental issues, and the Opium Wars. Despite this diversity in themes, a unifying thread of migration and displacement runs through all his fictional works. This recurring motif underscores the importance of studying his novels through the lens of Migration Studies. Analyzing Ghosh's works from this perspective offers a comprehensive understanding of his narratives, revealing a cohesive vision that the journeys of humanity are inherently tied to migration and displacement. His novels, *The Circle of Reason* and *Sea of Poppies*, while depicting the elements of migration and displacement, reveal diverse reasons for these, ranging from socio-political and cultural to national and individual factors. The present research aims to study Ghosh's novels *The Circle of Reason* and *Sea of Poppies* through the lens of Migration Studies, with a special focus on the elements of migration and displacement.

Keywords: History, Migration, Displacement, Migration Studies, and Humanity.

Human history is the history of migrations. Right from the earliest days of human society, people have been migrating for one or the other reason. Natural calamities, political conflicts, economic necessities, and socio-cultural pressures have been and are the reasons behind these forced migrations. Along with these, there are willing migrations as well, in which people move out of their own will. Amitav Ghosh's stories reflect complex histories and personal stories shaped by the experiences of migration and displacement. His narratives dig into the cultural, political, and emotional landscapes of individuals and communities uprooted from their

homelands. The discussion below sheds light on the aspects of migration and displacement in his novels *The Circle of Reason* and *Sea of Poppies*.

1.The Circle of Reason (1986)

In Ghosh's debut novel, the protagonist Alu's journey symbolizes the theme of displacement. After a violent feud in his village, he becomes a fugitive and flees to different locations, including a fictional Gulf state and Algeria. Alu's experiences highlight the challenges faced by immigrants seeking better opportunities while grappling with the loss of home and identity.

Amitav Ghosh does not necessarily associate the concept of 'Displacement' with colonialism. People move out, away from their own native places and locations, to elsewhere owing to various reasons. He aptly clarifies it: "I don't think migration signifies one thing. There are so many reasons why migration takes place- it could be economic, social, or even related to education... That's the kind of reality people are living with now," (Ghosh, "Migration is the Reality of my Times").

In the novel *The Circle of Reason*, the protagonist Alu, after having escaped from the explosion in Lalpukur, boards a boat called *Mariamamma* in an effort to fly away from the chasing authorities. The boat carried the emigrants from Malabar to al-Ghazira, a fictional oil country in the Persian Gulf. In his books, Michael Walonen says that al-Ghazira represents Dubai. The author has presented it in disguise (115). There are many other passengers on *Mariamamma* apart from Alu. Along with men there are some women as well. Karthamma, Kulfi, and Chunni are the names of these women. They are deserted women, the unmarried mothers, and widows lured by the al-Ghazirian dream. Such women were helped by the agents like Zindi, who worked as brokers that supplied needy, hard-working and good-looking women to the people in al-Ghazira to work at their homes.

While on board, Karthamma experiences labor pains but holds off on delivering the baby. She is convinced that if she signs a particular form, her baby will be guaranteed a house, car, and other benefits. Without signing, she fears her child won't be safe and could be sent back to India. In such a situation, she feels that not having the baby at all might be better than giving birth. Unfortunately, this was the reality for many bonded laborers. They were promised unrealistic dreams and taken to foreign countries only to work in slave-like conditions. The situation for laborers in the Gulf during the 1980s was similar. Many bonded laborers from India were marginalized and lacked recognized identities. At the cost of displacement, they

yearned for a respected life and acknowledgment. "The diverse stories of these individuals indirectly comment on the unequal social conditions in India. The displacement faced by the characters mentioned above is definitely not a choice of a free mind. They are exploited, harassed, driven, and even chased by hegemonic social groups." (Kshirsagar 56)

The question remains whether these migrants found any better future in the Gulf. Claire Chambers, in one of her essays on Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*, writes that around 1980, during the oil boom in the Gulf, many poor and needy from across Asia flew to the Gulf in order to find their future. However, they could not find the desired future because they were exploited by the capitalists sitting in the Gulf. Ghosh depicts the pathetic picture in his *The Circle of Reason* and *In an Antique Land*. Chambers also makes an observation: "Ghosh provides a pessimistic depiction of the experiences of a migrant underclass of undocumented workers in the dominant culture of al-Ghazira" (chambers 7).

In the novel, at one of the points, Professor Samuel bursts out in anger and points his figure at some of the reasons responsible for the migration of people: "Criminals, Villains...Bringing helpless men and women out to die like animals on the sea. Why is the government not doing something?" (Ghosh, TCOR 187). Professor Samuel is here to speak for all the passengers. Everybody is running away from his/her homeland either because of a strictly hierarchical social structure, discrimination, or hard-hearted government. Ghosh here attempts to make a point that society is not mature enough to rise to a level where differences are accommodated, justice is equally distributed, and discrimination is done away with forever by society. Alu, after being saved from under the rubble of a fallen building, Star emerges as a learned prophet. He preaches over the poverty and dirt of *Ras*, the area where he lived in al-Ghazira. His miraculous survival assigns him status as a messenger of God. He starts a sociological movement for the people of *Ras*. Listening to Alu, they raise a common fund through which their daily needs are fulfilled. These starts show the results. As they buy things in bulk, it saves their money. The mini-Marxist model does miracles, and people feel happy.

For some days, everything goes on quite happily until the day the people of *Ras* decide to go on a shopping trip. On the way, they plan to visit the fallen site of Star; they want to have a look at the site where Alu had been trapped under the rubble between the two sewing machines. If possible, they want to gift those machines to him by taking them out of the rubble. Local politics gives it the color of a movement

with some serious purpose. Police suspect that perhaps some extremists were going to attack the site. The police use tear gas to disperse the mob. The consequent stampede brings an end to the entire mini-socialist movement. Alu flees from al-Ghazira and migrates to Algeria.

Ghosh through this episode demonstrates that system is always afraid of sociological movements. Moreover an authoritarian government system always suspects social gatherings. It suspects danger to its own existence. Under such scenarios the system gets ready to sacrifice even the innocents like Alu and the people of *Ras*.

2. *Sea of Poppies* (2008)

Sea of Poppies, the first novel of the Ibis Trilogy, begins in 1838, just before the start of the First Opium War. The story opens in a village near Ghazipur in Bihar, where one of the central characters, Deeti, lives. Her husband, Hukam Singh, is a disabled ex-army man who works at the Ghazipur Opium Factory. Unfortunately, he becomes addicted to opium and eventually dies from it. After her husband's death, Deeti faces the expectation of performing 'sati,' a traditional practice where a widow sacrifices herself on her husband's funeral pyre. However, at the last moment, Kalua, a Chamar from the village, rescues her from the pyre. Kalua, who belongs to an untouchable caste, has secretly been in love with Deeti. Deeti, a high-caste Rajput, defies the patriarchal norms of her society by eloping with him. Together, they escape and board the ship *Ib* is.

Onboard, the *Ibis*, Deeti, and Kalua find themselves among a diverse group of people, including indentured laborers, crew members, lascars (sailors), and prisoners. Two notable prisoners are Raja Neel Rattan Halder and Ah-Fatt. Raja Neel, once a zamindar (landlord) of Raskhali Rajbari in West Bengal, has fallen into debt to Mr. Benjamin Burnham after investing heavily in the opium trade. Due to a ban on opium in China, his investments fail, and Mr. Burnham seizes his property. As a result, Raja Neel is sentenced to seven years of transportation to Mauritius as a prisoner-laborer. The other prisoner, Ah-Fatt, is a half-Chinese, half-Parsi opium addict from Canton. He is the son of a Bombay opium merchant, and his story is further explored in the sequel, *River of Smoke*.

Among the ship's officers is Zachary Reid, an American mulatto. Due to his modest background, Zachary often feels isolated among the British officers on the schooner. During the journey, he befriends Serang Ali, the leader of the lascars, who sees Zachary as one of their own and offers guidance on various matters. Another

passenger on the ship is Paulette, a French girl who has secretly boarded to escape Mr. Burnham, her caretaker, after her father's death. Disguised as a boy, she hopes to reach Mauritius, her mother's birthplace. Paulette is accompanied by her foster brother, Jodu, whose mother cared for Paulette after her own mother passed away. Lastly, Baboo Nob Kissin, a Bengali agent of Mr. Burnham, also travels on the Ibis. He is a mystic who believes he has received a divine call from his godly beloved, Ma Taramony, to make this journey.

Historical migrations are characterized by the significant movement of people, often leading to experiences of dislocation and alienation, along with a desire to connect with cultural traditions from the past. Homi K. Bhabha insightfully remarks that a deeper understanding of what it means to be human is embodied in the figure of the migrant, described as "the 'borderline' figure of a massive historical displacement." Such migrants often find themselves in a state of uprootedness, exhibiting nomadic, transnational, and transcultural fluidity (The Location of Culture, 320).

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* serves as a testament to Bhabha's ideas. In the book, most of the characters are engaged in acts of migration for various reasons, often as a response to their past. Niall Ferguson, in his book *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, presents data illustrating this mass movement: "Between the 1820s and the 1920s, close to 1.6 million Indians left India to work in a variety of Caribbean, African, Indian Ocean, and Pacific colonies, ranging from the rubber plantations of Malaya to the sugar mills of Fiji" (217).

In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh depicts a wide range of characters who are migrating, either temporarily or permanently, aboard the schooner Ibis. Originally, the ship was used for transporting slaves from Africa to America, but after the abolition of slavery, it was repurposed for other uses. A merchant from Calcutta, Mr. Burnham, purchases the Ibis in Baltimore, and it eventually sails to Calcutta to pick up indentured laborers bound for Mauritius. These passengers embark on a transformative journey aboard the ship.

One of the passengers, Deeti, lived in a village near Ghazipur in Bihar before the journey. She was a simple, devout woman married to Hukam Singh, a disabled ex-army man who worked at the Ghazipur Opium Factory. Tragically, he became addicted to opium and died as a result. After her husband's death, Deeti faced the pressure to perform 'sati,' a traditional practice where a widow would immolate

herself on her husband's funeral pyre. However, she was saved by Kalua, a Chamar from the village, who intervened at a critical moment. The two of them fled together and boarded the Ibis.

Kalua, who used to transport Hukam Singh to the opium factory in his bullock cart, and Deeti belonged to different castes and initially avoided contact. Deeti was a high-caste Rajput, while Kalua was a cobbler. Although Deeti's husband was impotent, Kalua was a vigorous young man. This underlying attraction likely existed between them, which led them to seize the opportunity to escape and live as husband and wife. Given their society's rigid caste restrictions, they found refuge aboard the Ibis.

Their journey on the Ibis introduces them to many other travelers. Among them are two prisoners: Raja Neel Rattan Halder and Ah-Fatt. Raja Neel was a zamindar of Raskhali Rajbari in West Bengal, who fell into debt to Mr. Benjamin Burnham, an English opium trader. The Chinese government's ban on opium severely impacted Neel's investments, preventing him from repaying his debts. When Neel refused to surrender the zamindari of Raskhali to Burnham, Burnham retaliated by falsely accusing him of forgery. As a result, Neel was sentenced to seven years as an indentured laborer on Mauritius, known as Mareech Island.

The other prisoner, Ah-Fatt, is a half-Chinese, half-Parsi opium addict from Canton. His story is further explored in Ghosh's sequel, *River of Smoke*.

Another key character is Zachary Reid, an American mulatto who joined the Ibis crew in Baltimore as a carpenter. Due to a shortage of officers, he rises to the position of Second Mate, or Assistant Captain, of the Ibis. Although Zachary's migration is temporary, the extended journey offers him rich experiences of diverse cultures and people.

Paulette, a French girl, also finds herself aboard the Ibis. After her father's death, she lived with Mr. Burnham but eventually fled due to personal reasons. Disguised as a boy, she boards the Ibis, hoping to reach Mauritius, where one of her father's friends resides. Her foster brother, Jodu, is also on the ship, and they eventually reunite.

Another significant figure on the ship is Babu Nob Kissan, a Bengali agent for Mr. Burnham. He is portrayed as a mystic who believes he has been called by his divine beloved, Ma Taramony, to undertake the voyage aboard the Ibis.

In addition to these characters, the Ibis hosts a variety of others, including lascars (a group of freelance sailors), Indian and English officers, and numerous indentured laborers. The indentured laborers and prisoners aboard the Ibis are grappling with challenging circumstances, each trying to navigate their paths out of hardship.

The novel's expansive narrative and exploration of unfamiliar territories make it a compelling work. As Mr. Rajendraprasad and Gupta aptly summarize, Ghosh "loves to dwell in those little-explored spaces where cultures intersect and identities emerge, classes collide, and languages melt into each other. Equipped with his gift for lucid prose and the power to relate in a way that is at once modest and deep, he comes away as being extremely convincing for his pains" (123).

Indentured Laborers: When slavery was officially abolished around 1833, European powers sought new ways to exploit unorganized and disadvantaged people in their colonies. The creation of the category of 'indentured laborers' was a cunning strategy to effectively enslave people indirectly. Although the label changed, the treatment of these individuals remained akin to that of slaves. In Ghosh's novel, characters like Kalua, Deeti, Munia, and others sign up as indentured laborers to be transported to Mauritius, highlighting this historical exploitation.

Conclusion:

Amitav Ghosh's novels, *The Circle of Reason* and *Sea of Poppies*, poignantly address the themes of displacement and migration, offering a nuanced understanding of the historical and contemporary forces that drive people from their homelands. Through his richly drawn characters and intricate narratives, Ghosh sheds light on the resilience and adaptability of individuals and communities in the face of displacement while also critiquing the socio-political systems that perpetuate these movements. The exploration of these elements not only enriches the interpretation of Ghosh's work but also positions him as a writer committed to depicting the historical and ongoing journeys of humanity. Through his richly woven tales, Ghosh presents migration and displacement as central to the human condition, urging readers to consider these themes as pivotal in understanding the complexities of our shared history and present-day realities.

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