

Reconstructing Identities in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*: A Postmodernist Perspective

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to present individuals' quest for new methods of representation to challenge the global conditions and ever-increasing cultural multiplicity. In Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* this condition is delineated through a panorama of characters who migrate to an alien place in a ship called the *Ibis*. In a colonial backdrop, Ghosh draws attention to the historical consequences of imperialism leading to migration and displacement of people. By using the tools of deconstruction, this paper will focus on how the characters try to escape their names, caste, race, bodies, and places of origin while reconstructing identity. Cut off from the older personal, familial and national ties these migrants forge new identity and adopt the *Ibis* as new cultural community.

Introduction

The question of identity has become a very broad and influential concept in the postmodern era wherein an individual must search for new methods of representation to challenge the global conditions and ever-increasing cultural multiplicity. The concept of identity has proven to be remarkably fluid and changeable, acquiring its own meaning in various disciplines in ways that best suit their intentions and priorities. The traditional and highly valued frames of reference in terms of which individuals can define themselves and their place in society have been blown out. In other words, the postmodern era challenges long established ideologies and values related to individual and family. Identity is now multi-faceted and constantly reconstructed by choice whereas individuals' identities in traditional societies were fixed and stable.

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The current era of globalization and the postmodern age has rendered the assumption of fixed identity as obsolete and has recognized that identity is a multi-layered and changeable notion. The inevitable influence of the media, especially the internet, social networking and mobile phone opened new channels to allow for the flows of information and people to transcend borders resulting in greater exchange. In this respect, the spaces they inhabit are not fixed and homogenous but heterogeneous and malleable. Consequently, individuals are assigned to reconstruct their image and adopt multiple identities while altering existing ones.

Amitav Ghosh as a Postmodern Writer



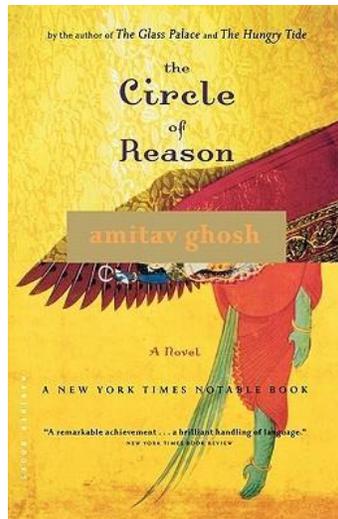
Amitav Ghosh has emerged as one of the prominent writers of Indian postmodern literature. Ghosh's novels centre around various issues of postmodern age. The important traits of postmodern fiction such as fluid identity, migration, plurality, hybridity, multiculturalism, blending of fact and fiction, human insecurities and questioning nature appear as major themes and narrative strategies in his works. As a history graduate and trained anthropologist, Ghosh finds connection between past and present by reinterpreting the historical events with a creative insight that allows weaving a magical plot. Ghosh's fictional world consists of magically realistic plots organized with postmodern narrational techniques injecting a sense of dejection that deals with human predicament, disasters, dislocation and displacement.

Postmodern Elements in His Works

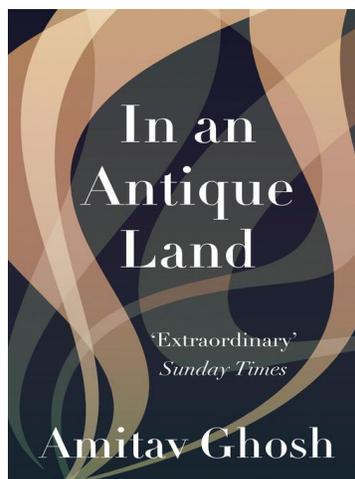
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Amitav's very first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) explores the theme of migration and a continuing tradition of cultural exchange for India. Through this novel Ghosh tries to show that western reason proves to be inadequate and he celebrates the triumph of human goodness. It is a search for a transforming vision-more than a simple quest for identity- as the protagonist moves from Lalpukur in India to al-Ghazira in Egypt to the little town of El-Qued in the north-eastern edge of Algerian Sahara. One of the major concerns of the novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is search for self-knowledge and self-identity. The protagonist of this novel "is an individual, rooted and well-defined but as the novel progresses he seems to transcend himself and becomes identified with a depersonalized contemporary consciousness"(Sircar, 49). It also deals with the concerns of our period, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture and the legacies of partition in the subcontinent.

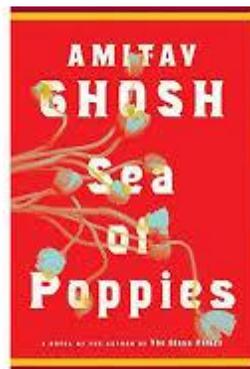


In An Antique Land (1992) is a novel in which Amitav Ghosh explores African-Asian connections preceding British colonialism and points out at the tragic turn of events in history of Asia and Middle East and particularly India. And *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) is an attempt to deconstruct and dismantle Western sense of superiority by Indian irrationality. Ghosh questions the colonial narrative of discovery and the myth of progress in his corpus by disputing the colonial “truth” of Ronald Ross’ account of ‘Plasmodium B.’ *The Glass Palace* (2000) is once again a book about the issues of civilization, families, their lives and their connection with each other, wars and their futility, the concept of boundaries, colonization, and hybridism. The massacre at Morichjhāpi of Bangladeshi refugees and their agonies, the harsh realities of the life of the Sundarbans islanders, the debate on eco-environmental and cultural issues through the intrusion of the West into the East find voice in *The Hungry Tide* (2004). The latest novels in the *Ibis* Trilogy- *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* trace the lives of the main characters who reconstruct their identities to cope with the colonial and socio-cultural situations. As a postmodern writer, Ghosh celebrates in his writings the fluid condition of entity along with other elements of postmodern fiction such as migration, plurality, multiculturalism, skepticism and the disappearance of boundaries.

Objective of the Study

The present study examines not only the individuals’ quest for representing themselves in various means but also how the characters in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of poppies* attempt to reconstruct their identity by hiding their names, bodies, caste and racial origins and ultimately restart their lives to fill new essence.

The Play of Colonial and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in *Sea of Poppies*



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Sea of poppies (2008), the first volume in Amitav Ghosh's proposed 'Ibis Trilogy' narrates a period namely earlier nineteenth-century colonial history in Asia where he has delineated the individual self quagmired in the kaleidoscope spatio-temporal reality of the society. The characters in Ghosh's novel have chosen to travel across the Indian Ocean to an unfamiliar island where they must reconstruct new identities. Belonging to different strata of society, these characters rebel against the callous and constrictive colonial setup and chart out their own course of action to carve out a unique identity out of the straining circumstances. But it is an identity in flux since all of them are ever on the go towards self formation and reconstruction. According to Weinreich "A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future." Weinreich's definition assists in relating an individual's past identity with future one elucidating component aspects of one's total identity, such as one's gender identity, social identity, ethnic identity and national identity and so on. In the present novel each of the characters tries to connect one's past with the present, memory with desire, old ties with new associations and moves to reach their destination with a strong degree of ambivalence.

While travelling in the *Ibis*, the characters try to reconstruct their identities, influenced by power hierarchies and the world that surrounds them as well as their own feelings, beliefs, memories, or imaginations. A person's identity is recreated through a combined effect of names, familial ties, social class, racial affiliation, role image, the imagination, memories, relationships, environmental forces, and historical background. All of these elements act upon continuously to shape identity of an individual. The identity transformation of the main characters in the novel takes place on the ship *Ibis*. Deeti becomes Aditi, Kalua becomes Maddow Colver to hide their real identity or perhaps they want to live a new life with a true and respectful identity. Mr Zachary Reid, runs away from the American racial discrimination. is transformed into Malum Zikri, Jodu turns to be Azad Naskar, Paulette, impersonating into the gumasta Baboo Nob Kissin's niece Putleshwari or Pugly, is running away from a rigidly defined and divided European community in India. Raja Neel Rattan Haldar becomes Neel and transported as a convict for the offence he has not made. All these individuals forge a new identity for themselves, and the colonial setup acts as a catalyst for their transformations.

In the fictional world of poppies, Amitav Ghosh constructs the notion of subject in representation through discursive connections with people, places and situations. The identity that comes through Ghosh's text is not a solid and stable entity as in the modernist manner. Neither is it its own origin. It is closer to the fluid and changing discursive construction in the post modern sense.

Deeti's Identity as Metafictional Reconstruction

Identity construction is a prominent element in this novel but appears to be influenced by the ethico-political and socio-economic dynamics that constantly change characters' roles and trajectories to reconstruct new identities in new milieu. Colonial upheaval interrupts the contours of the roles assumed by the persons in the social context. A superficial reading of the novel might give the impression that it is a historical novel set in the colonial period as it records the dramatic turn of events and destinies befalling the main protagonist and her interaction with a hodgepodge of other characters with whom she moves from land to river and climactically travel through sea. But the creation has a deeper level that Ghosh has effortlessly gone to sea depths by carefully peeling its social, economic and political layers and at a still deeper level, the metaphysical. The episodes which follow the main character, Deeti stress at one level, the struggle between capitalism and socialism; at another level, the narrative appears to be a clash for the hierarchical power. Deeti can also be seen to transform herself into a new identity allowing for meta-fictional reflection and an acceptance of destinies as indicated in her decision to marry Kalua who rescued her from sati.

Even then she did not feel herself to be living in the same sense as before: a curious feeling, of joy mixed with resignation, crept into her heart, for it was as if she really had died and been delivered betimes in rebirth, to her next life: she had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose... (178)

A Two-dimensional Process

It seems that Ghosh's manner of constructing Deeti's identity in his narrative is a two dimensional process. On the one hand, he combines and imaginatively interprets and interweaves the textual traces from the pages of Sir Gierson's diary. Gierson mentions in this historical record about his encounter with the father of a female coolie in a village along the Ganges noting that the man "denied having any such relative, and probably she had gone wrong and been disowned by him" (Bahadur). This diary provides only a little mention of this woman with a processing number, while Ghosh attempts to recreate and fill the blanks left by the archives with his imagination as a novelist and with impulses as an anthropologist.

Deeti Becoming Aditi, an Inspirational Leader

On the other hand, in the process of narration, Deeti's character is developed as a product of its origins and circumstances; is also a process of self-invention. Moreover, the two aspects are integrally related with regard to the recognition and construction of identity. According to Singh "Though Deeti assumes another name and caste thus erases her caste identity, she is distinctly recognizable for hereditary caste characteristics." The meaning of her new name 'Aditi' suggests to a mythical Hindu goddess who releases from sin and to a person having a deep inner desire to use her abilities in leadership and to have personal independence. The leadership traits that Deeti possess can be associated to Bass' transformational leader who creates significant change in the life of people. The followers of such a leader feel trust, admiration, loyalty and respect for the leader who offers an inspiring vision and give them an identity. Towards her fellow people on the ship, Deeti's conduct is typical of a considerate and trustworthy leader. Soon she comes to be known as bhauji and for many she is a friend, protector and confidant. It happens naturally, as she takes responsibility and speaks for truth and justice. Even Deeti shoulders the responsibility of guarding the single women like Munia, Sarju and Heeru throughout their journey to Mauritius.

The Question of Identity

The central theme that runs through the novel is identity. Throughout it we learn how a person's identity can be defined by different aspects, including appearance, family, relationships, men, oppression and liberation, motherhood, and age. The novel explores the devastating effects of colonialism on individual's lives, and how it has consequences on the rest of their lives.

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Caught up in the pang of imperialism the people have to try to rediscover their identities by themselves, and we see the struggle they go through to achieve this. The theme of motherhood is shown to effect identity as it makes women love their children so strongly they will go through anything to help them. Deeti's maternal instincts are comparable to Toni Morrison's central character Sethe in *Beloved*. Sethe's maternal instincts lead her to kill her own child, and almost lead to her own self destruction. But contrary to Sethe, the misfortunate woman Deeti finds safety of her child before deciding to her self-immolation. "When the boat sailed away, with Kabutri in it, it was as if Deeti's last connection with had been severed. From that moment she knew no further hesitation; with her habitual care, she set about making plans for own end" (159).

Identity Reconstruction - A Choice

Identity is about constructing an image by choice, it follows that identity is not fixed; since they are free to change their minds. To select a new image and to adopt a new identity does not represent a 'fundamental me; I can have more than one identity, depending on situations.' Middleton claims, "We are inundated by a multiplicity of clamoring voices proffering alternative identities. This inevitably results in us making different choices" (50). It is apt that Paulette Lambert—an orphaned French girl hides and runs away from her benefactor, Mr. Burnham who takes her into his household and then exploits to fulfill his sexual desires.

Aspiring to lead a new life, Paulette joins the *Ibis* under the guise of a Brahmin's daughter. She recreates her identity under the strong influence of her upbringing by an Indian ayah who becomes her 'Tantima'-'aunt mother'. She feels more at home with Indian clothes, food, language, and people than her ancestral European culture. Ghosh constructs this European woman's identity as a two-fold constructive. On the one hand, her realities, the Bengali culture in which she lives, the language she speaks and the strong influence of books related to nature compose one unit. So we find her attempting from the very beginning of the novel to enliven her realities as if she listens, "out her father's voice. How wrong he was! How mistaken he had always been in his understanding of her, making her into that which he himself wished to be, rather than seeing her for the ordinary creature that she was" (137). On the other hand, her unquenchable desires, cherished dreams, enduring goals and strong sense of determination lead

her to make an adventurous voyage to cross black waters. Moreover, she has a passion to sail all around the world like his grand aunt Madame Commerson who joined a great expedition organized by Monsieur de Bougainville to know the riches of the earth.

The dilemma of Paulette comes almost to an end after a shocking turn of events in the story. When her father dies, she resorts to her own resource to pick up the thread that has been repeatedly broken between herself and her desire. She develops her mind sufficiently to fulfill her desire but unlike her grand aunt she passes for a typical Indian woman with ghungta as a means of concealment.

...she had also disguised her appearance in a number of other ways: her feet were lacquered with bright vermilion *alta*; her hands and arms were covered with intricate, henna designs that left very little of skin visible; and under the cover of her veil, the line of her jaw was obscured by large, tasseled earrings... (359)

Paulette Emerging as a Bold and Courageous Woman

However, Paulette represents the women of today who do not believe that women are inferior beings and must remain passive and submissive. Instead she gives a tough fight against the established order and comes up with new concepts of gender identity. She invests with her the conventionally considered unfeminine qualities like courage, independence, intellectual energy, rationality and ambition along with feminine qualities. She is an autonomous and self-determining woman who struggles to obtain selfhood by overcoming hardships, inculcating the strength to survive with dignity and analyzing her problems rationally. She refuses to surrender before anxieties, indoctrination, social conditioning and resultant oppression. Amitav Ghosh through the character of Paulette presents the picture of an extremely courageous woman who faces the problems of her life boldly and also manages to come out of them. Her courage and confidence is evident in a conversation with Zachary whom she requests to allow herself to join the crew. "Paulette repeated, 'that is my request to you: to be allowed to join your crew, I will be one of them: my hair will be confined, my clothing will be as theirs... I am strong... I can work...'" (307)

Role Image as Motivational Force

The individuals relate themselves in terms of attitudes, behaviour and lifestyle to the potential 'role images' and to make decisions and judgments about their own way of living. This is that potentiality which becomes a constant source of energy and motivating force for an individual with inspiration to move further. It is for this reason Paulette's grand aunt remains to be an important image for Paulette to steer her personal route through life, and it is Ma Taramony that becomes a powerful and inspirational source behind the existence of Nob Kissin who waits for his spiritual transformation. It is precisely this paragon that made Zachary to become the protégé of the lascar group.

Adopting Alien Cultures

Even though the characters are placed in new environment which is difficult for adjustment, they settle down in the alien culture and attempt to adopt new culture either by assimilation or biculturalism. Out of struggles and hardships, the people cope up with new surroundings in an effort to settle in the unfamiliar environment. The alien integrate with natives as a result of which the existing differences are reduced and gaps are successfully filled to extract lasting benefits for both. In this novel, Zachary's character is redesigned to suit to the new conditions in association with new relationships.

The lascar Serang ali's influence on Zachary Reid is immense and deep. The reason for Serang's enthusiasm to transform Zachary into a gentleman, a pukka sahib is not only out of paternal feeling but also the lascar's feeling to perceive him as one among their group of seamen. Zachary finds himself not just adapting to their speech with ease: "as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own tongue" (16) but also begins to relish their flavor and changes his food habits "to a Laskari fare of karibat and kedgerree- spicy skillygales of rice, lentils and pickles, mixed on occasion with little bits of fish, fresh or dry....he soon grew to like the unfamiliar flavours"(23). Zachary's reconstruction of identity in integration with laskari group is as similar as Paulette's assimilation to Indian culture.

Ghosh's Postmodern Art of Blending - Creole Cultures

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A postmodern strand of creativity seems to appear in Ghosh's manner of narrating the plot with colonial background as he blends history with fantasy, juxtaposes native with naïve, unites a high caste with an out caste, pastiches genres and mingles languages to create a vivid picture that included a motley mix of characters. His pen is not out of ink to bring to pass the same trend in revealing the origins of characters like Zachary and Ah Fatt as creoles. Moreover, individual identities are portrayed as being shaped by the great historical events. At the point in time when the industrial revolution and abolition of slavery were being celebrated, another system of servitude was underway: indentureship. Indenture labour resulted in the migration of millions of people from place to place and country to country especially-- into British and French colonies. A great Majority of them, either helpless or compelled by the situations, stayed back in the countries and participated in the creation of new, Creole cultures.

Re-identification through Books and Myths

Books, myths, tales and narrations act to influence profoundly on certain characters and help to re-identity themselves. It is the book *Journey to the West* gifted to Ah Fatt in his thirteenth year becomes responsible for a growing interest in him to visit the west none other than India or *Jambudvipa*--- his father's very own homeland. Despite his father's insistence that India is no good place for him, Ah Fatt performs his voyage to the mighty land to find his origins only to put himself in further troubles. In that way he ends up in Alipore Jail where he finds Raja Neel Rattan Halder as a cellmate. Both of them as convicts are placed on the *Ibis* along with other girmitiyas to be transported to the Mauritius across the black water.

Conclusion



The friendship and relationship between the migrants promote sense openness to “difference” and erasure of rigid or categorical distinctions – a common theme of postmodern novel. These ties between the individuals, unrelated by blood or kinship or race, suggest a world of possibility imagined outside of categorical boundaries of race, class, and nationality. Their caste, class or origin is washed away by the very black water that they have dared to cross. While the Indian Ocean erases their past, the *Ibis* fills new essence in their life, to be enlivened on Mareech deep. In the light of Anupama Arora’s observation the *Ibis* “gets invested with new symbolic meanings by the migrants and is remade into a vehicle of transformation from which new selves and identities emerge. Different characters feel the “birth of a new existence” on the ship” (38).

The schooner brings new spirits for the migrants. The ship takes image of a new home as the demented figures “create communities of choice” as they creatively reclaim new familial relations that give them strength to survive and tie them to each other. And the migrants obtain a new identity called ‘Jahaz-bhai’ and ‘jahaz-bahens’. The black sea is very symbolic as expressed in following lines: To Deeti “all the old ties were immaterial now that sea had washed away their past” (431). As the relationships among the boarders on the ship are getting revived and aligned, they are allowed to restart their lives with a fresh breathe and new identities. This is how old alliances become frail and past ties are broken to construct their fragmented identities into new. In conclusion, Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* is surely a gripping and engaging novel if assessed from post modernist’s point of view. The way the identities of the characters constructed and reconstructed can yield interestingly new insights into the meaning and understanding of postmodern identities in the present era. According to Stuart Hall, “Identity becomes a ‘moveable feast’; formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in postmodern societies.”

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