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## Understanding The Values Of Existentialism In Amitav Ghosh's Theibis Trilogy

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### Abstract

The modern world has seen many revolutions and transitions in all fields. The human hope to surpass the struggle and to achieve betterment in their life is the reason behind this transition. But the freedom in thoughts and actions to achieve happiness also has its own limitations. The present study is an attempt to decipher the values of existentialism noticed in Amitav Ghosh's The Ibis Trilogy. The qualitative study aided with the ideas of philosophers like Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir analyses the human situation and their transcendence. The Phenomenological approach helps to understand the human condition and the decisions they make in crucial life conditions. At times the decision taken by human lead them to dilemma. This form of existential crisis leaves human in the verge of dissatisfaction, distress and suicide. Amitav Ghosh and his concern on human existence is revealed in his writings. The Ibis Trilogy exposes his point of view towards life, and shows his agreement with the ideas of existentialism. He insists on the human responsibility of understanding the limitation of freedom an important element of existentialism.

**KeyWords:** limitations of freedom, acceptance, authenticity, dilemma, dissatisfaction, distress

“Literature can illuminate and mirror our problems, and can affirm and reinforce social, political and ideological standpoints” (Carter 6), likewise, Ghosh's The Ibis Trilogy taken for study represents human suffering with immense clarity and also provides essential insights on life. As Amitav Ghosh's versatile writing always carries his concern towards the universe and mankind, his trilogy with the aid of his well-constructed plot, characters and effective narration tries to bring the writer's point of view to life. The characters and their realistic life situations become valuable lessons to the readers that can teach them proper approach towards life conditions.

With narration as his vehicle, Ghosh tries to imbibe and instill certain values in the minds of human who live in a world where suicides, violence and distress have conquered its own place. Ghosh's view to educate and enlighten mankind is exposed evidently by his writings. His canon of literary works helps in learning a lot of life skills, moral and

psychological insights, presented through it. Revealing suffering as an unavoidable experience in human life and as Sartre claims in his *Being and Nothingness* that we are aware to some extent of our freedom and the responsibility that comes with it, but we try to hide this from ourselves (Sartre 74), Ghosh's characters and their inner anguish build an intention to resist and transcend suffering. Their transcendence becomes crucial at circumstances for better existence and survival.

The present qualitative analysis that analyzes Ghosh's novel through close reading presents a clear picture of the implications of suffering in human life. Ghosh in his narration reveals the traumatic effect of suffering that presents its traces in decision making with the implications of their past and also the human mind that carries the pain of traumatic suffering throughout their life. Ghosh's novels represent the fact that everyone stands inescapable before this emotion, suffering, that not only haunts the subalterns, the marginalized, and the colonized but also the King, the Queen and the landlords.

The novels present the fact that as humans suffer, the sufferance imparts many changes in them. The matter of resistance towards hardships is presented in the novel *Sea of Poppies* through the central character Deeti Singh. She marries a man whose dependence on opium makes him an inadequate husband both physically and economically. She also fears her brother-in-law as she is impregnated on her wedding night by him. Ghosh gives evidence of Deeti's painful experiences in the house of her in-laws as a back story. He presents her odd grey eyes, the unfavorable condition of the family and the stars in her horoscope as the reason behind her endurance of this painful condition.

Deeti leads her life with a crippled man enduring the bitter condition in the surroundings but when she gains knowledge about the injustice done to her womanhood, she starts tackling the situation differently. She leaves back the dogmatic belief of the Indian society and gladly accepts Kalua, the low-caste ox-cart driver, who saved her and marries him with courage. Ghosh presents Deeti's will to power that exceeds the essence for existence. Her responsible, authentic decisions and empathetic attitude are glimpses of humanity.

The intimacy when one ponders through the sufferance of the other and finding unity and concern among themselves is revealed throughout Ghosh's novels. Deeti's relation with Kalua, Paulette's relationship with Jodu and his mother, Serang Ali's relationship with Zachery Reid, Neel's relationship with Ah Fatt, Bahram's relationship with Zadig Bey, Mr. Burnham's relationship with Zachary, Deeti's relationship with the women in the *Ibis*; the support extended by the Modi's to the Mistries and its reciprocation from the Mistries's by taking the boy as their son-in-law, Fitcher's support to Paulette, AhFatt and his help to Neel by suggesting a job to join as munshi under his father, are examples for this fact. In the novel *River of Smoke* Bahram's relation with the Mistries, Zadig and Chi Mei and in the novel *Flood of Fire* Kesari's relationship with Captain Mee and Gulabi the women in the *Lal Kotha* and Kalua's relationship with Kesari are all empathetical relationships born out of suffering. <sup>a</sup>Gopinath, R explained the relationships among emotional intelligence and self-actualization, <sup>b</sup>Gopinath, R investigated about the relationship between self-actualization and job satisfaction.

Ghosh by presenting the condition of Neel refrains the choice of acceptance in life. The distress which he faces in his life is answered by acceptance which presents him with

optimism to encounter life as it comes to him. Neel Rattan Halder the Bengali landowner, once a profiteer in the opium trade who is materialistic, decadent and promiscuous, has to pay the price for refusing to sell his estates to Mr. Burnham. When he is charged against forgery and dispossessed from his royal estate by a British jury, he is not only driven out of his palace but also separated from his son and wife. He is made to share a room with a stinking convict, Ah Fatt, and sentenced to be in exile as a slave in the Mauritius island for seven long years. His life changes abruptly and he is sent aboard in the Ibis to Mauritius island. He is ill-treated by the inhuman Subedar Bhyro Singh who is appointed to lead him to the island.

Neel Ratan the Rajah of Raskali, who is brought up with luxury, experiences pain when he faces unexpected loss. He worries a lot for his innocent wife, son and people who stand destructed through his incautious deeds. But he starts accepting life as it comes to him and tries to live as Albert Camus's Sisyphus tries to accept the situation in which he is positioned.

The violation of the limitation of freedom and unauthentic decision is presented by the character Mrs. Burnham with her absurd behavior. A woman who marries Mr. Burnham because of the compulsion of her parents diverts her mind indifferently with parties and enjoyment to cope up with her mental agony. She leads a life with existential attitude. Her life patterned by the luxury of richness, makes her probe on the issue of Paulette who has run away from their home. She joins Zachary to her service in the pretext of mending the Budgerow. She enquires him about Paulette by holding him on the pretext of the disease, Onatism. When Zachary reveals of her husband's behavior, she too thinks to break the chastity of marital relationship and gets physically connected to Zachary. When Mr. Burnham returns back from China and Mrs. Burnham asks Zachary to end their relationship; Zachary who has much cherished their relationship could not accept it. The words with which she consoles Zachary reveals her neurosis, "Look, Mr. Reid – it is as hard for me as it is for you. No – truth to tell, it is much harder for me. I have only my old life to go back to – leve'es, church, improving causes, and laudanum to put me to sleep at night. But you are young, you have your life ahead. You will go on to find happiness, with Paulette or someone else" (FF 244).

But Zachary who learns to tame life according to one's fulfillment from Mrs. Burnham, uses it on her when she hesitates to continue her relationship with him. She becomes prey to her own extravagance and she ends her life because of her own decision and she stands as the representative of women who fail to make optimistic decisions in life.

Ghosh's character Shireen is represented as a confident woman who moves with sensible understanding and makes authentic decisions during times of neurosis and angst. Her disappointment when she learns of her husband and his concealed relationship is reduced when she meets Zadig Bey. She hears about the concern of her husband on her and their family. Being bought up in a strict patriarchal background, she emerges to the requirement without holding the old dogma of the Parsi family. When she is persuaded by Zadig to travel to Canton for getting back the money she tactfully compromises her daughters, sons-in-law and brothers and with the companionship of Rosa, she travels towards Canton. Ghosh reveals that finding meaning even during adverse conditions is in the hands of the individual. Ghosh presents the new understanding which Shireen has

gained towards life. She goes beyond the restrictions of the society to do things according to her will. When Freddie dies, Shireen suggests to bury him in the 'happy valley' next to his father. When puzzled Zadig questions, "But what about Dinyar and the other Parsi Seths?" Her stern answer, "Let's not worry about the seths. What matters is what Bahram would have wanted. And in death at least I think he would have wanted to give Freddie the acceptance he could not give in life. It's only right that Freddie should be buried beside him" (FF 548).

Like Anita Desai who connects her thinking in literature, Ghosh throws light on his intention to decipher the value of authenticity in decision making. While his characters Deeti, Kalua, Shireen, Paulette, Kesari and Zachary live a life of satisfaction the other set of characters, Bahram Modi, Mr. and Mrs. Burnham suffer from existential dilemma in their life. Their existential sufferance lands them in dilemma when they start accounting for the value of their life and end up with futility. Kalua's authentic decisions get him regarded as a hero, by Deeti and others in their clan. Ghosh's character Paulette the small girl in the novel *Sea of Poppies* stays stubborn even at a tender age.

Among his characters, Zachary, Neel, Jodu and Kesari are existentialists, who accept things as they come to them for survival. Neel being a Raja, comes down from his standard to understand the life of a common man, Zachary, a brimming youth tries to elevate himself by clinging to the opportunities that come him as encouraged by his mother, Mrs. Burnham and Mr. Burnham.

His life takes another mode when he is exploited by Mrs. Burnham. He is shocked by experiencing the relationship that cannot be provided with any name in the society. His loneliness that longs for a relationship and his interest in Paulette is uprooted by the connection with Mrs. Burnham. Her frank acceptance of the fact that money and pride of the Memsahib is much essential to continue her life urges him to think wild and he decides to make money to bring up his dignity in the society. In Ghosh's portrayal, he is a typical model of the many such ambitious youths of the post-modern world who cannot be defined as good or bad and who learn to employ unfair measures to come up in life. A good human with a tender heart diverts from his ethics to build himself in this materialistic world. But he does not show any remorse for the decisions which he takes in his life.

Ghosh's back story denoting the tough times that Zachary endures as a small boy, who starts his life with the advice of his mother, grows with the encouragement of Serang Ali and diverts his approach to life when Mrs. Burnham insists him to accept every opportunity to grow in his life shows how human thoughts carries the support of the surroundings. His thought and its intention get differed and without any concern on good or bad ethics of life, he keeps moving with the singular thought of improving himself in the rat race of life for success. He gains assistance from people such as Mr. Doughty, Babu Nob Kisin and tries to build a life with the money and concern of Mrs. Burnham and the support of Mr. Burnham who wishes to have a dynamic person like Zachary in his service. Mr. Burnham also sees his reflection on Zachary and tries to deploy him in his service. His argument with Mrs. Burnham on her relationship with him which extends to the level of

threatening her, creates absurdity and leaves the readers with a question that whether he can be enlisted in the category of good or bad?

Kesari, who stays with honor in the battalion recognizes that the Sepoys have started ostracizing him as he has been declared as an outcaste after his sister Deeti's escape with an untouchable. He feels the impossibility of continuing his duties and also thinks of the difficulties to get transferred to the other units. He also thinks of the pension which he would be benefitted with if he continues for few more years. He rethinks over the persuasion of Captain Mee and wisely decides to move away from the Paltan. His intension to move with Captain Mee whom he had denied earlier is changed by the compulsion of his situation and Captain Mee gladly accepts him. Ghosh's characters and their decisions are carried with optimistic intonation where time becomes a great factor which alters their present from their past and their existential decision are driven by the factor of survival.

Ghosh gives glimpses of how humanity has changed into an impersonal view. In ancient epics, the heroes were tragic because they violated the cosmic order. But some characters in Ghosh's novel are tragic as they think that there is no such order. His characters give value to their instincts and try to live life to the fullest. The Universe which sustained with the thought of God and submitted itself in his feet endured the pains and panics of life with divinity. The scenario has changed and the human approach with the autonomy of thought, which gives priority to freedom to find their meaning in the absurd world, gives both positive and negative results.

Ghosh's story which concentrates on human suffering elevates the existential thought with which man tries to frame meaning in the discourse of life. The existential thought encourages humans to come out with a better outlook where the situation demands a change to derive new meaning from it. This thought in both the fields of science and moral is due to the freedom which the human mind recognizes leaving behind the traditional culture, religion and essence of the past. The values which the human mind creates are born of their consciousness and they are highly responsible for its consequences. Ghosh's novels register the misconception of this notion in the present modern world. His novels reveal how human freedom bound with autonomy and responsibility is replaced with selfishness and greed.

Existential thoughts are really good as these emotions "allows you to move beyond the narratives that have sustained you to a healthier, more authentic existence" (Panza 43) but, "living authentically requires that you have the right orientation towards the past and toward the future" (Panza191). Hence Ghosh levies stress on the essential matter of existentialism and instigates to find meaning to one's life through free will and choice, assisted by personal responsibility and authenticity that can result in leading a remorseless life.

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