



Human Sufferings And Their Existential Strife: A Study Of Amitav Ghosh's Select Novels

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Abstract

Human life and their strife for fruitful existence are the result of the curiosity and will which they carry for better existence. The freedom that human cultivates in thought and action is the support that helps in transcending miserable life conditions. At times unconditional freedom lands human life in existential crisis, and one needs to suffer for the decisions of his own. As Amitav Ghosh's writings always instigate for betterment in human survival, his skilled narration with many additional techniques makes conscious efforts to add knowledge to human consciousness. The present qualitative study is an attempt to enhance human understanding on fruitful existence deciphering the narrative techniques employed by Ghosh in his fictional works. His narration in the novels *The Glass Palace* and *The Ibis Trilogy* attempts to enhance the human mind in the battle of existence. Ghosh's novels with its realistic portrayal of the characters and their crucial life situations, presents a distinct opportunity of research in the trilogy. The analysis of this concept also helps to reaffirm the limitations of freedom. It presents the value of authenticity in decision making, and acceptance to the situation, as the smarter ways to continue the human life without distress and suicide.

Keywords: situations, tragedy, phenomenological, back story, parallel narrative, alterity, dilemma

A narrative (Fr. récit; Ger. Erzählung) is a representation of a possible world in linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure).

This introduction given by Monika Fludernik in her book *An Introduction to Narratology* shows her deep affinity of narrative with literature. Narration is a powerful

weapon in the hands of the writers that helps them to execute their plan and deliver their thoughts in an appropriate, deliberate manner. A writer's intentional narration carries its effect on the readers' understanding and tries to produce their desired effect. The writer and his experience in writing give him an insight to present his point of view in a distinct way. His narration helps to register the thoughts appropriately and to achieve success in the envisioned matter which he conceives in his imagination. As literature is a medium which makes the readers think and analyze the narrative from various points of view, Ghosh's omniscient third person narration in *The Ibis Trilogy* discourses about life and its hardships in a defined period of time in a detailed manner presenting a possibility to be analyzed in varied dimensions.

With the plot of *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh deciphers the changing human conception towards life. A fabula which causes the narrative to be recognizable as narrative is factual as the novel of Ghosh keenly represents the consequences of suffering in it. Ghosh's narration connects fragments and presents a whole in which the fragments lay dispersed stating a unity. He presents unity in his narration by knitting them by the yarn of suffering that brings the sufferers together. In the novels the situations which human faces are governed by their past and they stand either benefited or affected by it. His characters endure suffering and the implicit traces of their traumatized past has its implications in their future decisions. Suffering becomes the driving force behind his characters and their anxiety makes them overcome their essence for their being. Ghosh's narration concentrates on remarking the limitation of human freedom and is conscious in bringing out its consequences.

Klages explains anxiety as "the psychological state that arises in infancy from the experience of separation from one's caregiver, which in classical Freudian psychoanalysis is always one's mother" (Klages 5). Ghosh's narration presents his protagonist Rajkumar in an alienated condition to make a clear depiction of his interest towards improvement in his life.

His name meant Prince, but he was anything but princely in appearance, with his oil-splashed vest, his untidily knotted longyi and his bare feet with their thick slippers of allused skin.....smooth as the palms of his hands, innocent of all but the faintest trace of fuzz (GP 4).

Ghosh's phenomenological style of back story presents Rajkumar's alienated condition as the driving force behind his decisions and determinations in his present life. His loneliness and economical struggle become the driving forces that determine his life and actions. Ghosh's parallel narrative brings out the life of many characters belonging to different castes, categories, region and religion and their encounter with the changing atmosphere parallelly in the novels. The psychic change in his characters and the existential, midlife and spiritual crisis that the characters encounter during the course of life clearly reveals the crucial situations and the decisions that are taken by them for survival.

Ghosh's detailed descriptions in his novels display a documentary of human greed and its consequences in Burma. His work presents an existential vision of the damage caused to nature and its habitat due to the extravagant greed of man. He describes the psychological and physical sufferance of both the inmates and the people who migrate there for survival in the teak camps from other places. Saya John talks of the hardships in human survival by denoting to Rajkumar about the British officers of the teak camps who come there from different places for survival and their infections with Malaria and dengue that cause them great discomfort. He tends to denote the hardship of survival as he says that their life is wasted before they return back to London in few years.

In his novel *River of Smoke* Ghosh's narration presents the alterity in human decision using his characters Burnham and Fitcher. Both of them suffer from economic hardships and are left in a bitter condition of life. When Burnham approves to make money by selling opium; Fitcher frames his life by transporting and preserving saplings. When Burnham tries to embrace prosperity by selling the evil drug opium, Fitcher decides to make his fate by finding the golden Chamelion which can create magic in human health. This alterity in decision creates a big difference in their life. When Fitcher leads a prestigious life in the surrounding until his death; Bahram dies of remorse on his own choice and is unable to digest the failure of his life.

Ghosh in his tragic story carries over the responsibility of deciphering the existential futility, sufferance, dilemma and despair caused by the British and their colonial attitude by his descriptive narration. Ghosh presents it as his setting in the novel *Sea of Poppies* where he flashes the grave truth of how the Indian farmers were pressurized to cultivate opium in place of the edible crops in India.

When Nietzsche talks of his interest in tragedy he states as, "it offers the supreme example of an art form that provides insights into the strength and weakness of a culture" (Spinks 14). Ghosh in the novel *River of Smoke* writes of the tragic life of Bahram and his obsession for wealth which is his weakness and obviously the reason behind his tragic death. He accepts to frame his identity by marrying a woman from a rich background but senses his meaningless survival in the household of his father-in-law. In spite of various opportunities presented by his father-in-law he could not connect himself with any of them and thinks of framing his identity by starting his own export division. His inferiority in the house of Mistries is compensated with fulfillment which he achieves when he is away from home. He enjoys life in a distant land where his past is hidden. His 'will' to secure the export division for himself leaves him in a state of destruction. His obsession to find more success by securing the firm for himself by carrying over the trade at the time of emerging opium ban in China is assisted by his neurosis that makes him hesitant to hear the requests of his wife and brother-in-law and he leaves to Canton with a great consignment which becomes the last journey in his life.

Ghosh presents the last voyage of Bahram Modi as an eyeopener that reveals to him a different perception towards life. Time, one of the factors which creates a great difference in man and his way of being, presents Bahram to view his life in a different sense. His

departure towards Canton gives him his first realization as he understands his wife's care and concern towards him which he thinks has changed from the previous mechanical inclinations. His next realization happens during the storm which uproots the chests of opium and when he goes for its rescue. A man who refuses to give any type of approval to his relationship with Chi Mei gets her image in his mind when he is drenched with opium. He stays distressed on his inability to give recognition to his son amidst the society. He remembers his son pleading to take him to Bombay and feels bad for the grave sorrow which he has cast on the life of the boy. He curses himself and always thinks about the boy and his failure to provide recognition to him in the society.

Ghosh presents in detail how the once approved factor of the mind stands as a great grievance in the life of the individual. As Rajkumar in the novel *The Glass Palace* grieves on his decision Bahram who has never faced any remorse in trading opium, develops an ill-feeling in his inner mind when the stress on opium trade and its consequences were debated on much detail in the Committee. When the situation becomes crucial and when the merchants were asked to surrender their chests to the government, he could not bear the loss which is about to follow it. And after the execution of Ho Lao Kin, he accuses himself for his thoughtless deed of destroying his life by giving him opium in compensation of helping him by delivering message for his secret meeting with Chi Mei.

He experiences more pain when Zadig asks to him, "Is it right to carry on trading opium when Chinese are against it" (RS 211)? Ghosh brings off how different people hold different opinions on the matter of Free trade. He talks of merchants like Mr. Burnham, Mr. Dent, Charlie King who carry different notions on their behalf on the matter of Free Trade.

As Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* refers to the concepts of Apolline and the Dionysiac in which the Apollonian stands as a "well fashioned character who stands apart from the multitude" and "the Dionysiac cult that celebrates sexuality, unconscious desires and the amorality of natural forces" (Spinks 17), Ghosh presents characters from all multitude and their struggle in the battle of life. Ghosh echoes similarity with Nietzsche's interest in tragedy because it offers the supreme example of an art form that provides insight into the strength and weakness of a culture. "The experiences of tragedy, he argues, force a culture to reconsider or revalue its values; and Nietzsche notes later that 'Birth of tragedy was my first revaluation of all values' (1990b:121). Tragic art compels such a revaluation because it yields a profound insight into the depth and terror of human experience. It does so by teaching us that humanity's potential to develop a vital and expansive existence is fundamentally linked to its capacity to endure suffering and terror" (Spinks 14).

He remarks of the economic crisis of businessmen like Gopinath, R^a,Gopinath, R^b,Gopinath, R^c,Mr. Burnham, Bahram Modi, Zadig Bey, Penrose Fitcher, Charles King and many others who frame their business for their survival. The author remarks the difference in perseverance towards life through these characters. His narration with the flash backs of their childhood and their efforts to emerge as businessmen in their lives shows the characters and their intension to come up in life. When Mr. Burnham marries a Brigadier's

daughter to put him forward with connections to grow in his trade; Bahram Modi marries Shrieen the daughter of the Mistrie family who were masters in Ship Building. Zadig Bey, a tradesman who has travelled all around the world has his own concept towards life and he stands ideal with his own policies and laws of life framed by him. He earns his life by selling watches and doing fair business according to the demands of the environment. He is stern in his decisions and moves his life logically with good self-determination.

Fitcher, the botanist leads his life with passion of transporting species to various parts of the world and by sharing the nature's bounteous gifts. He leads a life of satisfaction even when he loses his daughter in one of his travels. Charles King, a tradesman from Britain has his own ideology towards trade. Ghosh presents both the positive and negative impact due to freedom of thought. His characters are both beneficiaries and losers of it.

Ghosh brings anagnorisis in his narration when Kesari recognizes Kalua, as the one who has eloped with his sister to save her life. He also presents twist when a genuine soldier like Kesari moves off with the price money of Captain Mee without sticking to the rules and regulations of the army and losing the money to people who are deceivers and nothing more.

The author symbolically uses the storm to escape the 'storm' which his characters are holding within. Kalua and the other convicts are spared with freedom due to the storm and Mrs. Burnham who suffers internally because of her thoughtless decisions also takes the assistance of the storm to end her life. As Swinburne announces in his *Triumph of Time* "I will go back to the great sweet mother, / Mother and lover of men, the sea," but it is to lose himself and forget his grief: "Save me and hide me with all thy waves, / Find me one grave of thy thousand graves" (Ferber 180), Ghosh's characters too admit themselves to the sea. In his novels *The Glass Palace* the collector Bipin dey, and in *The Ibis Trilogy* Bahram, who leads a life of great distress because of his failure in life and business and Mrs. Burnham end their life by admitting themselves to the sea.

When every story makes its move towards its end, Ghosh does not conclude his plot but his end denotes a new beginning. Ghosh presents this symbolically and represents the continuing dilemma in the field of human existence and tries to caution on the ethics of fruitful existence. According to Ghosh, the limitations of existentialism when understood and followed will prevent suicides and confusion that in turn will create responsible individuals.

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