

Amitabh Ghosh's Art of Characterisation: Transcending the Borders of Nations and Time

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Abstract

The manipulation of characters in fiction is mainly called characterization. Character is the most vital aspect in a work of fiction. Amitabh Ghosh, one of the most popular Indian English writer of fiction in contemporary times has created some memorable characters. Although Ghosh's novels are mostly theme based, he has created some unforgettable characters also. In fact, his experience as social anthropologist shows in his brilliant handling of characters and the context in which they exist. His works reveal a deep sense of history and a firm grasp of the socio-cultural milieu that underlie his narratives. Ghosh's fiction is manifested as a major critique of the psychological make up of contemporary man. He displays an intellectual caliber of minute and shrewd observation of human nature. He presents a pageant of character delineating their lives, manners, dialects, social and religious customs- all from the view point of a social anthropologist. Tapan Kumar Ghosh points out that an author's success "lies in the invaluable insight he provides for his readers into some abiding aspects of life and characters which cannot be wiped off by the flowing currents of history and civilization. This is Ghosh's remarkable achievement.."

Keywords: socio-cultural milieu, social anthropologist, history.

Introduction

There are many ways of revealing a character in the novel. The character may be presented either through description or report in which a particular character is described by a narrator or other characters and his actions and habits are reported so as to acquaint the readers with him. A character may be revealed by action, in which case we learn the habits and behaviour of a character by observing the actions. Finally a character may be revealed by his mental impressions and attitudes. This is an excellent and widely practiced method of characterization. This method is the most realistic. A person's life and character cannot be understood properly without listening to him and observing his interactions with other people. A novelist must create agreeable characters, that appear humane and not supernatural or infallible beings. The character's ability to attract the reader's sympathy contributes largely to the success of the novel. In a good novel the reader's identification with the character is such that he laughs when the character laughs and weeps when the character weeps. Therefore, the character should be natural with whom a reader can identify himself. When a character is allowed to grow and develop freely he

becomes natural, convincingly life-like, constantly surprising and refreshingly original. A good character is not the product of an arbitrary design but is a happy discovery.

Aims of the Study

Ghosh's narratives are generally based on history and the characters and events are viewed from the point of historical research. Ghosh makes a sincere effort to unveil the multiple layers of inter-relationships between Indian, Egyptian, British, Jewish, and Islamic cultures and their histories. But what is impressive is that no false note is struck in Ghosh's delineation of his characters whether Indian, British, Egyptian or Arabic - because their emotions and passions are related to the universal humanity rather than to their racial identity. Ghosh portrays them in a broader and more human context which transcends the boundaries of nationality. Ghosh's mastery of the narrative art becomes evident in his lively characters. This paper will discuss Ghosh's art of characterization by analyzing some of the major characters created by him.

Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* has many characters and loosely connected episodes. The only link which holds these characters and episodes is the

protagonist Alu. The novel rotates round the adventures that befall Alu. The protagonist was named Alu because of his potato - shaped head. His original name was Nachiketa Bose. We are reminded of the little boy Nachiketa of the *Kathopanishad*, who, obeying his father, waits at Yama's (God of death) door until he grants him a boon. Nachiketa desires to know the secrets of life and death. In the second part of the novel, we are reminded of Nachiketa when the multi-storied building Star collapses and Alu gets buried under the debris. He was taken for dead. Actually he was alive, lying under the debris, without food and water for four days as if waiting at death's door. Unlike Nachiketa, Alu's quest was to learn the cause of the ills of society and the present life. When Alu was rescued from under the debris, he was a changed person - as if he had come to some deep realization during his vigil at the threshold of death. Sharing his knowledge with the people he says that money or wealth is the greatest enemy of mankind. It "travels on every man and woman, silently preparing them for their defeat, turning one against the other."²

In *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh uses a medley of metaphors and select ideas to introduce his characters. His characters are in quest of a specific structuring of their entity in the totality of experience. As the novel progresses from 'Satwa' to 'Rajas' and then 'Tamas', we find that the governing metaphor Alu, comes alive in the company of other and associative metaphor. Alu's story and character acquires prominence only when associated with the story of his uncle Balaram, his idealism and tragic end, as well as the story of Zindi, her pragmatic outlook and her irrepressible instinct for survival. Ghosh seems to convey through these characters that in the unending monotony of life there is a saving grace only in our creative capabilities. In fact even Alu's survival indicates the victory of the creative mind over ruthless mechanism. Alu's initiation into the world of weaving indicates his rejection of Balaram's idealism and values and also his admiration for the pristine simplicity of the weaver Shombhu Debnath and his daughter Maya. Alu nurtures deep affection for Maya and the loom is a symbol of his longing. His search for a new technique on the loom reflects his quest for fresh moorings. We observe that while the creative abilities of the character form one side of their being, the other is

formed by their strange obsession, thus completing the circle. Balaram is obsessed with phrenology; his wife is obsessed with her sewing machine and stitching; Alu with his weaving; Zindi with Durban Tailoring House; Professor Samuel with the theory of queues; Jyoti Das, the policeman who followed Alu throughout his journey, has an obsession for bird watching. Ghosh's bewildering array of characters and their irate behaviour adds to the fantasy which actually underlies life's reality.

In Ghosh's delineation of his characters we find that he relates their emotions and passions to universal humanity rather than to their racial identity. For instance, Zindi is a prominent character in *The Circle of Reason*. But we learn of her Egyptian origin only in the latter part of the novel. Her origin is of little importance because we know her closely as Ghosh has defined her in a broader, more human context, that transcends the boundaries between Indian and foreign. Characters like Alu, Balaram, Zindi, Shombhu Debnath become memorable because they rise above the mundane.

"*The Shadow Lines* takes the reader to the consciousness of several characters; each character is caught between shadow lines in the wasteland of prejudice, dogma and narrow nationalism."³ The characters are brought alive with great psychological depth; locales and environs are painted accurately. The characters in the novel are not expatriate Indians, but they travel frequently from nation to nation interacting with men and women of different cultures and religions, developing a tremendous eclecticism of outlook.

Ghosh's second work *The Shadow Lines* is a complex novel which converges on the traumatic life of a middle class Bengali family in Calcutta and Dhaka in 1964 when a member of the family is killed in a communal riot

The most colourful character in the novel is undoubtedly the Grandmother, "Thamma", as the unnamed narrator addresses her. She is the retired headmistress of a school. Domineering, dogmatic and determined, she is both feared and respected. She is the central character and in fact it is her story."The Shadow Lines is the first novel that presents an in-depth study of a grandmother's relationship with her grandchild.⁴ Grandmother or Thamma had great affection for her grandson,

The Shadow Lines is written in the first person, but till the end, the narrator remains unnamed. The narrator belongs to a middle class Bengali family, which had risen from the lower edges of the spectrum to the highest in one generation. Movement from a flat in Gole Park to a bungalow in Southern Avenue, changes in the life style and condition, association with relatives and friends, both below and above their status, have been minutely recorded. Ghosh clearly depicts the relentless educational compulsion and the friction of conflicting values facing this class of people. The narrator-hero is a deeply-rooted and well-defined individual. He acquaints us with his parents, grandmother, relatives and friends and the many events and places that find a place in his memory and consciousness. "The nameless protagonist accepts the cultural predicament into which he is born, the agony of the educated Bengali individual who looks with longing at certain western values and yet cannot shake himself free from his native roots. The more deeply he looks within himself the more clearly he senses the chasm of his divided self."⁵ The unnamed narrator is in fact Ghosh's alter ego who believes that reality lies not in the obvious but is evoked and understood by memory and imagination over changing lapse of time and space.

In *an Antique land*, the characters and events are viewed from the perspective of historical research. Carefully and minutely, Ghosh unveils the multiple strata of the interrelationship between the Indian, Egyptian, Jewish and Islamic cultures. Ghosh, the social anthropologist, travelled to Egypt in 1980 for his research work. By tracing the story of the Jewish merchant Ben Yiju and his Indian slave Bomma, Ghosh attempts to retrieve the remnants of the antique civilization of the 12th century. He presents a strange and colourful world, at once medieval and modern in the garb of a traveller's tale. During the course of his research, he visited the two villages of Nashawy and Lataifa. The villagers and his neighbours in the two villages with whom he was associated have been skillfully portrayed. We have Abu Ali and Shaik Musa in Lataifa; Ustad Sabri and the Imam in Nashawy who in turn introduce a number of unforgettable characters. It is almost a pageant of characters carefully observed and faithfully presented.

In his novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh takes us back and forth in time from the 21st century to the 1890s, with locations shifting from New York to Calcutta to Secunderabad. As the narrative shuttles between three space times, in each of these time slices we meet different set of characters: in the 21st century New York we meet Antar with his super computer Ava, Tara, Maria and Lucky; in 1995 Calcutta we meet Murugan, Sonali Das, Urmila Mrs Aratounian, Roman Haldar and Phulboni; travelling back in time to the 1890s Mangala, Laakhan or Lutchman, D.D.Cunningham and some other scientists who were working on Malaria research in Calcutta and Secunderabad.

Amitav Ghosh's enigmatic scholar detective, L.Murugan, the hero of the *Calcutta Chromosome*, is pursuing a scientific puzzle-Ronald Ross's work on the malaria parasite and the object of Murugan's picaresque quest is the Calcutta Chromosome. In the course of his research, Murugan however developed the notion that Ronald Ross was actually handed out the information regarding the malaria parasite by some "other mind". Murugan was aware of the conspiracy and wanted to know the truth. Murugan's role as the prime seeker of truth is highlighted. Dr. Subhash writes: "Murugan's efforts ...Allegorise the sceptical, questioning mental attitude which needs to be adopted by the self-satisfied, smug, but manipulated masses who consume unconsciously all that has the aura of truth about it."⁶

Conclusion

What makes Ghosh's skill of characterization commendable is that most of the characters, situations, and passions that Ghosh delineates belong to no age or society but he is aware of their relevance in his world. Ghosh deserves to be admired for his ability to create characters who seem so real that the reader feels he has personal acquaintance with them and this feat he manages to achieve in all his novels.

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