

**CRITICAL RESPONSES TO DIASPORIC
LITERATURES IN ENGLISH**

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From time immemorial, humans have been leaving their homes and homelands seeking new places and settlements. These migrations undertaken for various reasons, especially looking for greener pastures, facilitated the spread of civilisation and also brought along the complex emotions of the rootless diaspora. Our scriptures and mythological traditions give a prominent place to travels, wanderings, exiles, expatriates, mass migrations and the diaspora. *The Bible* has many stories of the diaspora and expatriates starting from the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The banishment from the paradise on Earth plunges them into heartbreaking sorrow and longing for their first and only 'home' and the close relationship they shared with their Creator. Cain, their son kills his brother and runs away from home and wanders in the desolate wilderness haunted by guilt and homelessness till he finally finds his own settlement. The Bible has a considerable amount of stories explaining the diasporic predicament like the oppression of the Israelite slaves in Egypt, their exodus to their promised homeland, the exile of the Jews to Babylon during the time of King Nebuchadnezzar and more. The song of the Israelite exiles in the book of Psalms:

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion... our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said: "sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1-3), following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BCE can be considered as one of the earliest recordings of diasporic longing for home that is widely expressed today.

The term Diaspora is derived from the Greek verb *diaspeirō*, meaning "I scatter", "I spread about" and refers to the dispersion of a people from their homeland. The term diaspora comes to us from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The Bible stories of Joseph, Daniel and Esther could also be described as diaspora literature, because they reflect on what it means to be a Jew living outside the land—with all the accompanying dangers and opportunities. Indian, Greek and Roman mythologies too are permeated with stories of exiles, migrations and travels, for instance, the *Vanavasam* in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and the seafaring, travels and quests in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

With the development of technology and the world becoming a Global Village, people have been migrating to different parts of the world in an unprecedented scale and the resulting sense of homelessness, exile, loss of the sense of belonging have become more pronounced and prevalent now than ever. Literature being the mirror of life has been faithful in recording

these diasporic voices and Amitav Ghosh is one of the main writers of the 21st century in whose writings the metaphor of travel and aversion of boundaries have constantly found a place. Many of his protagonists are people stranded in alien lands, who are forced to adapt to the new culture. In his historical epic fiction, *The Ibis Trilogy* he presents a dazzling and varied array of expatriates through brilliant characterization, in-depth psychological analysis and helps reshape the idea of the diaspora.

In the first book of the trilogy, *The Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh focuses his attention on North Indian Indentured labourers, the *Girmitiyas* and chronicles their experiences of indenture. In these *Girmitiyas*, Ghosh presents the grounding notions of diaspora, of individuals bargaining with fate to create a new life, not only through contract signed for pledged labour but also the greater covenant that is created in the securing of an identity as it leaves the parchment of the old world behind and transfers itself onto the new sheets that would make the manuscript of the diaspora. The subaltern voice of the indentured labourers is most strongly represented in the character of Deeti, one of the central protagonists of the trilogy. Deeti, a young Rajput woman, undergoes untold miseries and humiliation in the hands of her in-laws who finally try to make her a victim of Sati after the death of her opium addicted husband. She is saved by Kaula, a low caste man with superhuman strength and a heart of gold. To escape from the wrath of the family and society they join a group of *girmitiyas* who are on their way to work in Mauritius. In 1833, slavery was officially abolished in the British Empire- an act that effectively wiped out the supply of cheap labour for their plantations. Hence, British officials engaged in the mass recruitment of Indian indentured labourers. Those indentured had to sign an indenture agreement, which in North Indian languages was called 'Girmit' and so were called the *Girmitiyas*. For the vast majority, this movement was a terminal departure characterised by an absolute break from the homeland and that made the experience exilic than transient. For North Indian peasants crossing the "black waters" (*Kalapani*) is more dreadful as it represents not only an awful unknown but also for many castes, crossing the ocean has associated superstitious and religious beliefs and can even make the traveller an outcaste to his community forever.

Deeti's arrival into the indenture is paralleled by Ghosh to the arrival of a new bride: *They moved up to make room for her; she lowered herself to her haunches, taking care to keep her face covered, there followed a sizing-up that was as awkward and inconclusive as the examination of a new bride by her husband's neighbours (SOP 215)*. The metaphor is significant for it neatly underscores the notion of exile that is at the core of the diasporic condition. In nuptial alliances in most of the Indian communities, the bride leaves her natal place and shifts to her

husband's place of residence. On reaching the boundaries of the Ganges and venturing out into the ocean, the women *girmitiyas* break into a lament sung to a bride as she is torn from her parents' embrace to face an unfamiliar world and spend the rest of the life there. Thus, in seeking to capture the indentured labourers' sense of banishment, Ghosh consciously employs a feminine metaphor in evoking the trope of a bride's exile.

Their common fate evokes a bond and sisterhood among the fellow travellers and the women spend their free time talking about their past. For the *girmitiyas*, this reminiscence functions as an emotional reprieve from their sad condition, helplessness and uncertain future they face.

Among the women, the talk was of the past, and the little things they would never see, nor hear, nor smell again: the colour of poppies spilling across the fields like *abir* on a rain-drenched Holi; the haunting smell of cooking fires drifting across the river...No matter how hard the times at home may have been, in the ashes of every past there were a few cinders of memory that glowed with warmth.. (SOP 365)

As the story unfolds Ghosh tells us how the indentured labourers maintain a sense of self even in the most debilitating conditions proving right the words of Nietzsche, *He who has a 'why' to live for can bear almost any 'how'*. Deeti retains her sanity and puts up with the basest of conditions because she wants to stay alive to meet her daughter Kabutri sometime later in life. Deeti rises above the shackles of her past and the constrictions imposed by caste and she, with the new found comradeship of other ship-siblings, discovers her self-esteem and potential and grows to become the founding matriarch of a prestigious family in Mauritius. Deeti serves as a representative of a truly subaltern class: the indentured labourers who did not have a choice but to migrate as they couldn't cope with the economic crisis that was the result of colonial greed and also to escape the clutches of caste and oppression. The case of Deeti also proves the theory that immigrants to undeveloped countries like Mauritius adapt well to their new surroundings and get better incorporated into the local community than the diaspora immigrating to developed countries.

Exile is the condition of being forced to live away from one's native country for political or punitive reasons. The psychology of the exiles is typically characterised as loneliness, homelessness and shock resulting from being severed from everything familiar. With Amitav Ghosh's excellent characterisation and the touch of an anthropologist, *The Ibis Trilogy* presents a gallery of impressive characters but no one moves us as much as the Neel Rattan Halder, the Rajah of Rashkali who

perfectly portrays the condition of the exile. His fall is so great and piteous that it gives him the appeal of Greek tragic hero. The Halders were among the oldest and most noted landed families of Bengal. Born of a high caste with religious sensitivities, Neel is a paragon of purity and cleanliness. Rich and deeply respected he spends his time in pursuit of pleasure and knowledge. Neel soon finds himself unable to retain the wealth of the ancestors of his family, which has been siphoning away for years, without his really knowing it. And eventually Neel finds himself in prison because of his inability to pay his debts, and because it suits the British colonizers who want to make use of the Raja's land holdings. After an unjust trial he is exiled to Mauritius as an indentured labourer for seven years. The verdict comes as a death blow to the Rajah, his family and subjects.

In prison and on the *Ibis*, Neel has no choice but to occupy a filthy cell that is an affront to every pattern, every rule he has tried to live his life by. But the greatest affront to Neel's status and identity, the greatest challenge to his cleanness is his cellmate: a stinking, shrivelled, convulsing, nameless soul who is an opium addict, who lies huddled in a corner of the cell, "so thickly mired in dirt and mud that it was impossible to tell whether the man was naked or clothed." "For a man of Neel's fastidiousness," Ghosh writes, "it was to cohabit with the incarnate embodiment of his loathings." Psychological scientists have found that to sooth the pain of extreme loneliness the exiles 'invent' people to keep them company.

They even resort to anthropomorphism- giving human traits to non-human things. In a way Neel also comes to such a mindset regarding his cellmate who is baser than even a beast. The Raja of Rashkali scrubs the filth off the man, cuts his loose clothing off of him, finds someone to shave his head and his beard, both of which are teeming with lice, cleans and de-louses his bedding and washes that last corner of the cell, to which he returns the bedding and the still silent figure of his cellmate. This is the first giant step in the transformation that comes over the exiled aristocrat and with time and many more unprecedented agonies Neel gets filled with 'tragic optimism'- a chief trait of the exiles. According to psychologist and the Holocaust survivor, Viktor E. Frankl tragic optimism is optimism in the face of tragedy and human potential to turn suffering into achievement, deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better and deriving from life's transitoriness an incentive to take up responsible action. Neel serves as an exemplary of this theory. He survives a shipwreck and escapes to China and starts a newer fuller life under the name Anil Kumar using his knowledge and skills. He is, at rare instances, flooded by nostalgia as

when he comes across a book *The Butterfly's Ball and the Grasshopper's Feast* which he used to read to his son. He says:

To brood uselessly serves no purpose- that is why I do not dwell in the past; that is why I try not to think too much of Raju or Malati. But *The Butterfly's Ball and the Grasshopper's Feast* took me unawares and pierced my defences. It was as if an embankment had been swept away and I were floundering in a flood, trying not to drown in my grief. (Flood of Fire, pg 335)

The exile's deeply ambiguous feeling towards the homeland, nostalgia, search for meaning and identity and tragic optimism is perfectly brought out in the character of Neel Rattan Halder.

The metaphor of travel and wandering has always been an obsession with Ghosh and in *The Ibis Trilogy* too one comes across a motley crew of globetrotters, who extensively travel around the world trying to make a living and constantly looking for greener pastures. Zachary Reid, one of the main characters of the trilogy is a globetrotting opportunist and the chief representative of this class. An American mulatto with a white father and a slave mother, he joins the crew of *Ibis* as its second mate. With a Faustian ambition to become successful in life and become a 'Sahib' he climbs the social ladder with eyes only on the goal, not worrying about the means. The footloose youngster tries his luck as a sailor, boat repairer, opium trader and doesn't shy away from being a spy or being a lover of a rich Mehsahib if it would bring him money. He hides his identity of a mulatto and presents himself as a white to the British in India.

Another character, Paulette Lambert, a French girl brought up in India feels more kinship towards India and Indians more than for her own homeland. Paulette is a voiceless subaltern living in the fringes of the colonial British society, constantly harassed by her English master and mistress. She escapes with her Indian childhood playmate Jodu to Mauritius on *Ibis*. She survives the shipwreck and travels on to China in the ship *Redruth* with botanist Robin Chinnery in his search for the rare Golden camellias. The quest motif operating in the restless psyche that has imbibed and inherited a cultural displacement as the outcome of colonial regime is clearly brought out by Ghosh in the character of Paulette Lambert.

The trauma of the Indian soldiers who were used as mercenaries in British's opium war against China in the 19th century is portrayed through the character of Kesari Singh, a havildar in the Bengal Native Infantry's 25th Regiment. Having to cross the

accursed 'Black Waters', undergo long distressing sea voyages, face countless adversities both in the army and outside, the demoralised, underpaid and utterly voiceless soldiers present another aspect of dislocation of culture and the disastrous effects of colonialism, resulting in alienation of vision and crisis of self image.

Bahram Bhai, a Parsi overseas merchant with two families, one in India and one in China represents the traders who spend more time in other countries than in their own because of their business requirements. Through the character of Bahram, Ghosh presents the kind of people for whom boundaries make no difference. They are people who are able to adapt to more than one culture, language, lifestyle and sometimes even more than one family.

There is an array of British settlers too in the trilogy. These colonial Britishers enjoy high social status, elaborate balls and festivities and lead a life of luxury and pleasure. Through their clever portrayal Ghosh raises the intriguing question, why there is no such thing as 'British Diaspora' and if migration woes are reserved only for people coming from underdeveloped countries.

The three books of the Ibis Trilogy- *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* have God's plenty in the diaspora, expatriates, exiles, indentured labourers, casual nomadic travellers, explorers, mercenary soldiers, lascars, rich business traders who defy boundaries of any kind and the settlers. Even the language Ghosh uses is a lexicon he has made his own, a rich brew of English, Bangla, Hindi, Parsi, Malay, Cantonese, and Pidgin when imperialism and migrations were recombining Asian culture and tongues. Thus, *The Ibis* trilogy is indeed a formidable saga of expatriates presented in an epic proportion by Ghosh.

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