

The Quest Theme and Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

Quest has always been a popular theme in fiction writing. In the modern era it has been interlinked with dwelling and displacement, diaspora, dislocation, alienation and rootlessness. Much of quest is found in travel writing. Together with being quest narratives, an exemplar of post-colonial imagining; Amitav Ghosh's novels are simultaneously sites facilitating questions of nation and identity.

INTRODUCTION

Quest theme is not a new theme in fiction writing. "A central topic in literature of every culture, past and present is the heroic quest, during which someone accustomed to a comfortable, mostly passive life is 'called' to adventure and chooses to strive towards some important goal."¹ Examples of classic quest heroes include Oedipus, Sir Gawain, and assorted pilgrims in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In the fifteenth century we have Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d' Arthur* and the modern day example best suited to this genre is J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. Modern writers, particularly American writers have also shown their interest in the quest theme. Prominent among them are William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and John Barth.

Definition:

A quest serves as a plot device in mythology or fiction and aims at a certain goal, often of symbolical or allegorical in nature. Tales of quests figure prominently in the folklore of every nation and ethnic culture.² In literature, the object of a quest requires great exertion on the part of the hero, who must overcome many obstacles, typically including much travel. The aspect of travel allows the storyteller to showcase exotic locations and cultures (an objective of the narrative, not of the character).³ The object of a quest may also have supernatural properties, often leading the protagonist into other worlds and dimensions. The moral of a quest tale often centers on the changed character of the hero.

Quest Theme in the Modern Era:

In the current era of globalization the theme of quest is interlinked with dwelling and displacement, diaspora, dislocation, alienation and rootlessness. Much of quest is found in travel writing. The postcolonial societies in general, had to go through different culture consequent to the exploitative politics of the colonizers, which created a sense of loss among its people. This sense of losing their culture and identity becomes apparent in the form of their quest of domination on the colonized people which is, ingeniously manipulated for continued exploitation by the colonizer.

Diaspora is linked with quest in the sense that it is a journey towards self-realization, self-recognition, self-knowledge and self-definition. Ghosh looks at Diasporic literature in a new perspective. Ghosh is one of the Trinity after V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie who

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popularized the Diaspora in Indian writing in English. He is an anthropologist, sociologist, journalist, novelist, essayist, travel-writer and teacher. Both his fictional and non-fictional narratives, move restlessly across countries, continents and oceans. But initially, creative writing in English by Indian writers was ridiculed mainly because they wrote in a foreign tongue, which according to critics did not “compare favourably” with the English novelists’ works.⁴ Nevertheless, the emergence of writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan on the literary scenario brought new hopes in fiction writing and by the 1930s the Anglo-Indian writers had started contributing substantially.⁵

By the 1950s, Indian novelists began to delineate more of the individual’s quest for the self along with exploring newer themes. Most of them, in their eagerness to find new themes, “renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man” and engaged themselves in “a search for the essence of human living”.⁷ R. S. Pathak mentions that in the growth and development of Indian novel in English, 1980s occupy the most significant position. (Pathak, 1999: 12)⁸ Apart from Salman Rushdie, the most talented novelists of the time are Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Allan Sealy, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Farrukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry and Firdaus Kanga. According to Pathak, these novelists are making conscious efforts to redefine English prose “with myths, humour or themes as vast as the subcontinent”.⁹

Donald Oken suggests that the loss of identity often results in alienation.¹⁰ Hence, alienation is related to the quest theme. Meenakshi Mukherjee feels that alienation is “a very common theme in Indo-English novels. (Mukherjee, 1971: 83)¹¹ Pritish Nandy finds that it is a “rootless literature, totally alienated from the people, unconcerned with Indian realities”.¹²

Alienation ultimately leads the novelist to a quest, not only for his roots, but also to establish his identity. In this process, the novelist is in “in a perpetual quest for reality”. (Trilling, 1953: 205)¹³ This quest restores his sense of stability, of security, and of belongingness. Man must have his roots somewhere in some home, in love and affection of parents, in friends and relatives. The whole issue of identity, its quest, crisis and assertion as treated in Indian English novel deserve a detailed study. Another theme related to quest is the sense of history and place which has found ample attention by the Indian fiction writers. The term displacement is intimately associated with diaspora and it has got its poignancy in the hands of Amitav Ghosh. The theme of displacement, race-relations, and a strong craving for re-identifications, is the staple-stuff of most of Amitav Ghosh’s novels. Amitav Ghosh, a social anthropologist came to the literary scenario with disjointed magic realism. His writings have often been seen as exercises that extend beyond the genres which apparently frame them. Together with being quest narratives, an exemplar of post-colonial imagining; his novels are simultaneously sites facilitating questions of nation and identity. His writings offer readers several points of entry, which “being culturally and critically located, do not pretend to be neutral and are therefore designed to invite counter-positions as well as provoke readers to read Ghosh’s texts in different ways.”¹⁴

Quest in Amitav Ghosh’s Novels:

Ghosh as a literary personality exemplifies the fact that the novel should be aimed at finding out solution for the common routine problems of people which includes middle class men and women in the society of different culture and faith and he projects the historical events in comparing with post-colonial situation and put forth the life of men and women struggling for existence for work, for wages, for money, for home, ultimately for better life. Ghosh projects the ‘concern’ for all these workers and professionals in quests for better life. Ghosh presents the situation of middle class families entangled in the circumstances facing violence and striving to ease the situation and how their lives are shattered to pieces and they

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have to migrate. The theme of migration out of violence based on political, cultural and differences – rising so intense as to erupt the violence like volcano are explored by Ghosh. It seems Ghosh is so much ‘concerned’ over the issue that even through the art of novel he cautions not only the readers but also the society as a whole. Impact of the novel is such that the reader is driven to think about those innocent people, living moderate lives, are becoming victims of violence and who are forced to migrate from their home. Displacements of families as a result of violence and communal riots intensify the feeling of anger and violence increases.

The theme of migration and alienation has been discussed in the novel *In An Antique Land*. Ben Yiju’s problems and his accepting India as his home, must have been the cause of his agony and anguish as to remain as fugitive in India. To remain away from one’s home or family for whatever reasons creates the sense and feeling alienation. The elements of story of Ben Yiju’s life are dated before more than seven or eight centuries. It is evolved subversion of history. Against such drawbacks of migration Ghosh puts forth the life of Nabeel in modern time, which is based on Ghosh’s own experience in Egypt during his stay for research work. Nabeel and Ismail are fascinated over the prospects of lucrative jobs in Iraq and goes there for better prospects for better standard of life, and to earn more money. Ghosh writes:

“I wanted him to talk about Iraq, but of course he would not have been able to say much within earshot of his boss.”¹⁵

The Calcutta Chromosome (1996) by Amitav Ghosh gives stirring picture of scientific invention, quest and glaringly about reason verses superstition and Indian philosophical blind notion of man’s rebirth. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a novel of modern times and it presents the amalgamation of many themes such as science, religious faith, logical solutions and function of reason in association with prevailing belief of Indian superstition conflict of ideological differences and various assertion interlinked in the story of quest and mystery. The interaction of the characters with the time past – present and future creates the mysterious and thrilling narration of a story, about Antar who is working on super computer named Ava, about Murugan, who investigates the background of Ronald Ross’s research and award of noble prize. There are other characters such as Pulbony, Urmila, and Mrs. Aratovian – a principal and Sonali—an actress and Mangla. Through all these characters, the theme of quest and education, scientific research, immortality and Indian ideology about reincarnation and man’s rebirth are explored and developed. Murugan’s crusade to find out truth on malaria chromosome is linked in the story of other middle class family. The theme of quest and supernatural belief in some form of transcendental philosophy is evoked in the disturbed flow of a story moving from one event to another mixed with historical details. Mr. K. K. Parekh comments:

“The idea of this search becomes the haunting object for Murugan. He is obsessed by the desire to unravel the mystery of Luchman and his followers. The conversation now goes on to internet between Antar and Murugan....Both are trying to perform a quest in the field of science and counter-science.”¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh has emerged as a prolific writer since his arrival in the literary world. His writing matures gradually in its unique style with the increasing number of his works. He continues to be a strong voice among contemporary literary artists and eminent thinkers of his period as far as his fictional and non-fictional works are concerned. It is difficult to categorize him within the limits of any typical style or genre. He has emerged as a prominent writer of

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his age with the power of his versatility. Beside this, a vast range of the characters in his works provide a quality of multiplicity, multidimensionality and cosmopolitanism to his works. His literary masterpieces are marked with the characteristics of post modernity and interdisciplinary values. Innovation and variety in the subject matter are the undistinguished part of his works. The issues that he raises in his works are local and global at the same time. This definitely adds to the quality of universalism to the themes that he handles.

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