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UNDERSTANDING DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY: A STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL GUN ISLAND

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Abstract : The word “Diaspora” has acquired an evolving meaning in the twenty first century. Diaspora is often related to the experience of displaced people, who maintain varied levels of connection with their homeland. Amitav Ghosh, a Padma Shri awardee, in the novel *Gun Island* manoeuvres through such varied experiences of displaced people and their relation to their homeland. The diaspora underscored by Ghosh is a candid reflection of the present day diaspora community which often are in search of their ambiguous identity. The novel touches the lives of not only the protagonist who is a diaspora but many individuals who have migrated and settled in other countries illegally and illegally. The sentiments undergone by the diasporic community is often to be sympathised with for there is so much uncertainty and precariousness in terms of their future. The central character of the novel *The Gun Island* is Deen Dutta, the narrator of the story who takes us through the experiences of the diaspora of many displaced people who migrate for varied reasons from their homeland. Better opportunity, environmental degradation and poverty are some of the intentions for migration. He also establishes how the connections and the interactions of the community of diaspora shape their identities, beliefs and sense of belongingness. This study will journey through the days of Deen Dutta, the protagonist and traverse through the disturbing experiences and the challenges faced by displaced people and the interconnection between the community of diaspora and the role of social networking to access resources and opportunities.

Key words: Diaspora, Displaced, Homeland, Identities, Migrate, Opportunities.

The word “Diaspora” has often been in the limelight in the past and the present for various reasons. The word has evolved from referring to the Jews, who dispersed or were displaced from their homeland forcefully and on those who migrate voluntarily for varied reasons. Edward Said rightly pointed out that “the difference between the earlier and those of our times is, it bears stressing, scale: our age with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological of totalitarian rulers- is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration.”(180) Between the 16th and 19th centuries, with the forced movement of people during colonialism and war. A pertinent example is the mass migration during the holocaust.

By September 1939, approximately 282,000 Jews had left Germany and 117,000 from annexed Austria. Of these, some 95,000 emigrated to the United States, 60,000 to Palestine, 40,000 to Great Britain, and about 75,000 to Central and South America, with the large numbers entering Argentina, Brazil, Chile,

and Bolivia. More than 18,000 Jews from the German Reich found refuge in [Shanghai](#), in Japanese-occupied China. (“German Jewish Refugees, 1933–1939 | Holocaust Encyclopaedia”) In the 20th century, the displacement was due to the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Cold War, and the India-Pakistan War.

In the 21st century one of the foremost reasons for people to flee from their homeland is either on account of political instability or war. According to BBC News, “More than half of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million has fled their homes. Some 6.9 million are internally displaced, with more than two million living in tented camps with limited access to basic services. Another 6.8 million are refugees or asylum-seekers abroad. Neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, which host 84% of the refugees, have struggled to cope with one of the largest refugee exodus in recent history (“Why has the Syrian war lasted 12 years?”).

The war initiated by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022 has resulted in the largest refugee migration in Europe since World War II, estimated by UNHCR (2022) at 6.3 million persons. In the first two months, almost 3.5 million war refugees crossed the Polish border, of which over 95% were Ukrainian citizens. (Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk) The ongoing Ukraine-Russia conflict is another example of millions of displaced people take refuge in other countries.

The sudden exodus of migrants from their native land is an agonizing experience. The anxiety and the fear they live through while settling in a new land is excruciating. Their potential to adapt is tested from time to time. The extent to which they adapt determines the future of the migrants. When it is voluntary the migrants have no choice except to assimilate the new culture they are in.

Climate change is another reason for migration in the contemporary world. The BBC headlines highlighted: “Is the world ready for mass migration due to climate change?” It was reported by the International Organization of Migration, which is part of the United Nations, in November 2022 that “an estimated 15 million people are severely affected by the drought in Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia – approximately 3, 5 and 7 million people in each country respectively and has recorded an increase in drought-induced movements from Somalia into Ethiopia. (“Greater Horn of Africa (Food Insecurity and Drought)”)

A recent report published by the South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) in October 2020 says that “the unprecedented exodus witnessed in recent years has been triggered by poverty, rural distress or natural disasters”. Poverty has driven people away from their homes. People even risk their lives to cross borders from Mexico to America for better opportunities. Many illegal agencies in India lure middle-class youth into having a better life in the West with a starting price of 60 lakhs. The human smuggling networks operated by travel agents took advantage of youth who wished to escape poverty in India.

Many flee their homeland to escape persecution based on race, ethnicity, religion, or political beliefs. One of the most recent displaced communities has been the Rohingya Muslims from Bangladesh. Edward Said aptly puts it as “People bundled out of their homes and prodded, bussed or walked to enclaves in the other regions; what do these experiences and up to?” (182)

The word Diaspora denotes a complex phenomenon today wherein there is a combination of reasons for migration, such as economic prospects, political instability, and environmental issues. It includes the historical context and focuses on people migrating for myriad reasons. It also refers to people who connect with their homeland: memory, experiences, and perspectives.

The notion of diaspora encompasses different areas of study: history, geography, anthropology, and literature are among the many. Diaspora has been a recurring theme in literature. The Bible has many stories about wandering people. Joseph is a slave in a strange land (Genesis 37-46). Moses flees to Egypt and finds shelter in the house of a Priest (Exodus 2:15-22).

During the colonial and post-colonial periods, writers expressed their views about the complexities of this period. Some of the post-colonial diasporic writers like Chinua Achebe, Buchie Emecheta, and V.S. Naipaul challenged the narratives given by the colonizer. Many contemporary diasporic writing writers have drawn from their experiences and challenges as migrants.

Some of the most renowned contemporary Diaspora writers are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Salman Rushdie, whose works survey the experience of immigrants in the Western world. The works touch upon contrasting pictures of the homeland and the new land. The themes of identity and displacement are the main themes in these works.

Amitav Ghosh, a contemporary Indian writer, received the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Jhanpith award in 2018. He won India's highest literary honour for his writings of exemplary narratives of the identity of the Asian people. He was born in Calcutta in 1956. He grew up in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He studied in India, the UK, and Egypt and travelled far and wide. He has settled in the US. His life filled with diaspora experiences, he managed to skilfully weave into his work. He has often brought to light the experiences of the migrant and the cultural conflicts he experienced when he moved away from his homeland. He has written 19 works, including fiction and nonfiction.

Gun Island is a novel written in the year 2019. The novel *Gun Island* is a well-woven collage of myth and migration. It is more or less a travelogue of Dinnath Dutta, called Deen, who moves from Brooklyn to Kolkata and lands in Italy to study. Being overwhelmed by the mystery of a Gun Merchant, he goes to Kolkata, where he visits the Sundarban. There, he is in search of a shrine. He observes the changes in the landscape and people migrating due to natural calamities. His visit to Venice further explores the theme of the displacement of people.

The central character is Deena, a rare dealer in books, is raised in Kolkata and settled in Brooklyn. Deen, a diaspora, returns to Kolkata not only to escape from the bitter cold of Brooklyn winter but also "from the solitude of a personal life that had become increasingly desolate over time, even as my professional fortunes prospered" (*Gun Island* 3). He later reveals to his friend Cinta that he left his homeland as he lost his loved woman.

The evidence of Deen not leading a socially active life in Brooklyn also brings to light his lonely life. Despite being away from Brooklyn for several weeks, no one gets in touch with him. It is evident when he says, "I discovered that absolutely no one, or at least no sentient being (rather than the bots) had attempted to call or text me in all the time I had been away." (23)

Piya Roy, another significant character in the novel, is an Indian American Professor in Marine Biology. She spends every vacation, whether it be summer or winter, in her aunt's house in India and visits the Sundarban to research. The return to one's land with a feeling of nostalgia is one of the elements of diaspora writing in literature.

Going back in time and relating to the people and history of the homeland adds to the diaspora phenomenon. Deen's thoughts about Durga, his first "long ago love" (22), and the recollection of memories with his parents and grandparents migrating from Bangladesh to India during the partition are forces that connect him to India. He recalls his days spent in Kolkata some twenty-five years ago with an old friend called Professor Giacinta Sciavon. He calls her Cinta. It is another instance of Deen recalling memories of time spent in their homeland. Cinta is a native of Venice and has migrated to the Midwest of the United States for research. Her topic is the role of Venice in medieval space.

The experience of diaspora separating from homeland and understanding the cultural differences results in what Homi Bhabha terms in his seminal work "The Location of Culture" as 'hybridity is camouflage' (Bhabha 1994:193). According to him, "It is how newness enters the world" (Bhabha 1994:227). Deen, brings out such cultural hybridity when he says, "I pride myself on being a rational, secular, scientifically minded person. I am sorry it does not conform to stereotypes of Indians but I am not religious and don't believe in the supernatural. I will not on any account go along with a whole lot of superstitious mumbo jumbo" (35). Deen has a new cultural identity at this juncture.

The challenges that a diaspora goes through to settle in a foreign land can be related to social capital theory. When Deen is unhappy working in the library, he takes advantage of the connection with Cinta. Cinta recommended Deen. He took up the job which he needed. It is evident when Deen says, "I did well enough that within fifteen years, I was able to set up on my own in Brooklyn. Later, Deen says, "If not for her I might well have remained forever entombed in that sepulchral library in the Midwest" (45). Deen, having voluntarily migrated to America, does achieve the economic stability. The scenario is similar for a significant Diaspora communities in the twenty-first century.

Whereas other people are forced to migrate to escape the poverty of their homeland. Moyna, a single mother tells Deen about forced migration. She talks about climate refugees, who moved out of Sundarban because of cyclone Aila, which hit the Sundarban in 2009. The once fertile land which was invaded by salt water has left the land uncultivable for generations and so the young people migrated from impoverished backgrounds crossed borders by illegal means. The men would slip over the border of Bangladesh and head for the gulf to help their families.

Tipu seems to be a classic case of hybrid culture. Tipu, the son of Moyna, with the help of Piya, a cytologist is moved to the United States from the deprived terrains of Sundarbans. Piya lived in a small apartment, eats food in boxes, and frequently travel takes Tipu to the United States He probably has a culture

shock and is a misfit in an alien society. He even changes his name from Tutul to Tipu. He is brought back to Kolkata and put in a boarding school where he is not accepted by his classmates as he is a Dalit. He is described as a “morose young fellow” by Deen. And his appearance was like a lad from Brooklyn. Wearing “a Nets T-shirt and baggy jeans that kept slipping down to expose his bright red boxers” (52) Tipu is an example of risk-taking confused youth, who struggles with the experience of cultural hybridity.

Rafi who is willing to help people migrate meets Deen. The arduous journey that the migrants take to escape poverty is a revelation to Deen. The tales about human trafficking are very prevalent today. Rafi seems to be part of the industry and even tells Deen that “My clients are people who need help finding a better life”. According to Rafi, the Internet is the magic carpet in the twenty-first century. When people see everything rosy in the pictures posted on social media by neighbors illegally migrating and settling abroad, they too want to migrate for a better life. They seek asylum in developed countries by covering up stories of their miserable life.

Displacement is familiar happening in the past too. Amitav refers to the Istanbul fire in 1660 due to drought which killed nearly 40,000 people and led to the migration of people to nearby countries. Gisa, a journalist, who covers the recent waves of people crossing into Italy across mountains from the far side of the Mediterranean and the Adriatic from Libya and Egypt, is another instance of fleeing the country in search of a better world. As Deen listens to Gisa he also comes to know about the Bangladeshis settling in Venice to escape the poverty of their homeland.

When Deen lands in Venice it appeared to him like the lagoon of Sundarban. “It was possible to mistake the Venetian lagoon for the Sundarbans.”(147) Deen’s visit to Venice reminds him of Varanasi which he particularly loved to be in. Several migrant workers who Deen comes across speak in Bangladeshi-accented Bangla. The more Deen explores Venice the more he thinks about home.

Displacement often gives rise to identity crises. Rafi migrates illegally from India to Venice. He feels awkward even to reveal his true nationality for he might not be accepted. Rafi says, “The others don’t, know that I grew up in India.” Everyone here thinks that I’m Bangladeshi. It is best to leave it like that.”(156) the fear that he might not be fully accepted by their host society and therefore feels alienated.

Lubna is another example of a Diaspora community. She was born in India and her family is originally from Bangladesh who left during the partition. Having settled in Venice, she spoke in the Mudaripur dialect, which has a close connection with Deen. Deeb grew up listening to the same dialect. As a child, he heard his grandmother speak in the same dialect. Language seems to be a uniting factor between Lubna and Deen. Arialkhan River connects them all the more. The two individuals living in different parts of the world come in contact and develop an instant connection. Collective nostalgia is a chief feature of the Diaspora. Lubna represents the Diaspora community, which moved away from Dhaka for a better life in the West. She is even proud of the other Bengalis who have migrated like her.

The stories of Cinta’s ancestors who were brought in as slaves from the far eastern Venetian empire are another instance of migration in the past. They settled and lived for generations in Cannaregio, Venice. Cinta moves from Venice and lives in the US. Cinta, who belongs to the Diaspora community has been constantly moving for better prospects in life.

The aftermath of syrian war is poverty and migration by sea. It has resulted in many refugee families settling in neighbouring countries. Tipu and Rafi are representatives of such illegal migrants in search of a better life by escaping poverty in their country in the twenty-first century. They like many today cross borders by risking their lives. Rafi and Tipu in *Gun Island* travel without papers through Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. The journey takes several months and they are even separated in their journey. Rafi gets lucky but Tipu as a refugee travels in a blue boat..When Tipu reaches the shore every other country in the Mediterranean has sent coast guard vessel to make sure that they can’t land anywhere”(188)The blue boat exemplifies the struggles that a migrant goes through while being displaced.

Rafi’s and Tipu’s journey across the continent as refugees remind Deen of the workers who were transported from the Indian sub-continent to distant corners of the globe to work in plantations. It also reminds him of the European Imperialists, who transported people between continents on an unimaginable scale.

Throughout the novel *The Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh reminds the readers of the predicament of the diaspora community. Though some leave their homeland voluntarily, and some migrate illegally but the plight more or less seems to be the same, the struggle to establish, alienation, the quest for identity, fear of acceptance, and longing for one’s homeland are the common thread connecting their lives.

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