

TRACING ETHNIC DISTINCTIVENESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IBIS TRILOGY

Dr. Khan Sheehan Shahab

Asst. Prof., Department of English, Alankar Post Graduate Girls College, Jaipur

Abstract

The paper focuses on the many Ethnicities portrayed by Amitav Ghosh in the Ibis Trilogy. It sheds light on the concept of ethnicity, the polysemy and synonymy associated with the term. The study also explores how ethnicity differs from race while discussing traits of the respective concepts. The research also discusses the significance of ethnicity in one's identity as the habits, experiences, food and language are reflected in the identity of a person. The paper deliberates on how the cosmopolitan colonial world paved the way for mixed ethnicities to come into existence resulting in "cultural cosmopolitanism" and "global culture" with regards to nineteenth-century British India depicted in Ghosh's Trilogy (Nagla 193). Language, ethnocentrism, multiculturalism and religion through caste are some of the features of the subject in discussion. The aforementioned characteristics have been explored through characters belonging to different strata, caste, religion and ethnicity, in other words from all walks of life of the colonial society prevalent in the nineteenth century due to which their paths cross at different stages of the narrative in the Trilogy.

Keywords: *Ethnicity, Cultural Cosmopolitanism, Global Culture, Ethnocentrism, and Multiculturalism.*

The concept of 'ethnicity' is often misconstrued with that of 'race' and 'nation,' probably because of the common core elements shared between the three concepts. The core elements of ethnicity are "common descent, common history, and common homeland" (Green 1). Defining ethnicity is difficult as many social scientists have acknowledged and have attempted to define ethnicity as per their perception of the concept which has resulted in the concept suffering from polysemy i.e., having multiple definitions. The relativity of the core elements of the concept with that of the other concepts results in the synonymy of ethnicity.

The term ethnicity finds its roots in the Greek language, *ethnos* and *ethnikos* generally used to address the pagans. But with time, the term was used to refer to the 'Other' section of the populace. The other section in reference kept on changing to represent the people differing from those possessing the agency of discourse. The subjects of discourse being fragmented from the society in the name of ethnicity were subject to change, for example, the aforementioned Greek terms were used for non – Hellenic, also known as pagans, the non-Jewish and non-Catholic.

'Ethnicity' forms a crucial part of one's identity, as the habits, experiences, food and language are reflected in the identity of a person. It is a term that describes the beliefs and practices of a particular group, as the members of an ethnic group may share a religion, customs and language and members bond

on the basis of shared culture. It is a phenomenon that has changed since the inception of the term and the consequent concept, i.e. the subject referred to as 'ethnic' has been fluctuating over the years. On one hand, where ethnicity becomes the base of affinity and association for members hailing from the same ethnicity, on the other hand, it also forms the base of distinction among the various ethnicities prevalent in society. Nevertheless, the answer to some societies employing 'ethnicity' as a dividing factor, are pluralistic multicultural societies that respect, acknowledge and accept the differences among the different ethnicities.

'Ethnicity' is a socially constructed phenomenon, as it is based on social parameters whereas 'race' is based on the shared biological traits. One of the sociologists' varied comprehensions about 'ethnicity' relates it to the cultural values of a group. The microcosm of the cosmopolitan world presented by Ghosh in the Trilogy through the colonial world consists of multiple ethnicities viz., English: Mr. Benjamin Burnham, Mrs. Catherine Burnham, Captain Mee, Justice Kendalbushe; French: Paulette Lambert; Chinese: Ah Fatt (also known as Framjee Pestonjee Moddie); and Indian: Deeti, Kalua, Neel, Kesri Singh are the characters representing these ethnicities.

The colonial world paved way for these ethnicities to be mixed which resulted in the overlapping of these ethnicities, for example, the hybrid form of Indian and French ethnicities was Indo – French ethnicity in the character of Paulette Lambert. Indo – Chinese ethnicity is another example of the hybrid blend of Indian and Chinese ethnicities is evident in the character of Ah Fatt (Framjee Pestonjee Moddie).

The cosmopolitan colonial world also resulted in "cultural cosmopolitanism" and "global culture" (Nagla 193). This cultural cosmopolitanism came about through various reasons one of which was the Imperialist Colonial reign of the East India Company, which enabled the interaction between people of varied nationalities, races and ethnicities and abetted Global culture. It was also aided by the process of "acculturation," the assimilation of various cultures, which was a part of colonization wherein the colonizing nations endeavoured to make the colonized nation a replica of its own society (Atal 168). The widespread use of literature in its varied forms and genres also resulted in the people sharing their experiences with those across the globe through fictional or factual accounts leads to the creation of a further hybrid form of culture and identities by association. Hybrid forms of cultures and identities are formed when diasporic beings ingest certain parts of the host culture and endeavour at embracing them. This attempt results in changes that take place, in many aspects of a culture such as a language, cuisine, attire, biology and ethnicity are all "rework(ed), reform(ed) and reconfigure(ed)" (Kalra, et al., 71).

The adaptation of various cultures also occurs due to diasporic displacement, which as suggested by Homi K. Bhabha, takes place either due to "middle passage' of slavery and indenture," or because of "the 'voyage out' of the civilizing mission" ("The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency" 191). The realm of Diasporic Studies witnessed the rise of another notable figure apart from Homi. K. Bhabha, Vijay Mishra, nonetheless, both celebrate the varied hybrid formations in their critical works respectively. For example, Bhabha in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1994) states that the Third Space is also known as the "interstitial passage" between the fixed markers of identity contests the dominant hierarchy and paves way for possibilities like inversion and hybridity (217). Mishra, rather than focusing on the friction in the creation of various forms of hybridity, emphasizes

“vibrant kinds of interaction” taking place amidst the diasporic communities in “New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Border” (67). Diasporic studies and encounters developed into a new postcolonial subject, as it frames the premise of contemporary postcolonial thought which reverberates with the diasporic clashes and wistfulness braved by the individuals from the diasporic networks (communities) in the present times, as the extension of diasporic networks is a “social transformation of global significance” (Leon 272).

Ethnicity through its various features has been a notable part of Amitav Ghosh’s literary works; the same can be stated for the Ibis Trilogy. Ethnic characteristics such as language, ethnocentrism, multiculturalism and religion through caste can be traced through the course of the Trilogy. The Trilogy is composed of characters who belong to different strata, caste, religion and ethnicity, in other words from all walks of life and it was due to the colonial society prevalent in the nineteenth century that their paths cross at different stages of the narrative. Despite the differences in their the varying aspects of life they were able to interact and understand the plight others came across and it was because they too had suffered the ordeals of inequity at the hands of colonialism and restrictive norms of society, that is, these characters transcend the cultural boundaries and bond over shared experiences of marginalization. Britain’s forced cultivation of poppy to procure opium in northern parts of India rendered the peasants helpless as they were threatened and coerced to lease their lands to the East India Company. They were paid with minimal compensation for the loss of fertility of their productive agricultural lands along with what they might have earned from their usual agricultural produce. But a large sum of this amount would return to the Company in the form of exorbitant taxes paid by peasants for lands they owned. To fulfil the conditions of the agreement they signed under duress peasants like Deeti would take their agricultural produce of poppy to the famous Opium factory of Ghazipur (Uttar Pradesh, India).

The agent directing Deeti through the factory would lower his voice to a mere whisper of reverence like “a pilgrim who is about to step into the innermost sanctum of a temple” on entering the assembly room where rows of dhoti clad-men were busy in carefully packing the dried balls of opium (*Sea of Poppies* 96). Ghosh’s depiction of the Opium factory as a “cavernous shrine in the high Himalayas” introduces the two-fold intention of the West behind setting up the factory first of which was that it earned the East India Company revenue requisite to maintain its hold over most of the South Asian continent in addition to strengthening the armed forces of the Empire (*Sea of Poppies* 96). And second was to enslave the senses of avaricious natives of its colonies like India by greed and ensnare and cater to those addicted to opium throughout the world with its production of the factory, “Maha-Chin” (China) in this case as Britain wanted to gain the loss of revenue that importing tea from China had cost the nation in the discussion (*Sea of Poppies* 97). The trade of opium was looked after with utmost care, the packaging of the opium suggestive of the significance it held for Britain as the balls containing sticky opium were prepared following the “measure for every ingredient ... laid down by the Company’s directors in faraway London: each package of opium was to consist of exactly one seer and seven-and-a-half chittacks (thirteen hundred grams approximately) of the drug” (*Sea of Poppies* 97). The factory was protected like a fortress to guard one of the most lucrative artefacts produced by the Empire; the poppies were processed under the watchful eyes of English “cane-wielding overseers” who did not hesitate in employing the prop of authority over an offender. That is a person who failed to catch a sphere of opium while balancing with one hand over a ladder to place the object on shelves

above over sixty-two metres (two hundred feet) from the ground. Severe punishment was inflicted over people like one of the handling boys mentioned in the previous statement, who on falling from such a height was certain to have lost his life. Yet the English men kept in line with the Empire's thought valued opium more than human life and were harshly beaten for their transgression, so much so that Deeti on witnessing such an incident could not bear to hear the shrieks and howls of pain that echoed through the lofty ceilinged chamber of the factory.

At the core of the actions of the East India Company the perception of the West about the East, India in this case, was indirectly revealed as they had chosen to mask to hide their objectives with diplomatic benevolence. The West, in reality, perceived the East as an unexplored land replete with opportunities occupied by people who lacked the sophistication of the European society with reference to the administration, trade, education system and cultural etiquettes. This ideology of the West was another form of ethnocentrism based on which Mr. and Mrs. Burnham looked down upon the orphaned young Paulette. Though the young lady was of French origin, a part of the European sovereign, yet she was ostracized by those hailing from English ethnicity for being different. The young lady of eighteen (Paulette) had been brought up by an Indian Bengali lady of Muslim faith along with that of her botanist father who was known for his rationale which did not necessarily conform with norms of the society. The nurture Paulette was raised with was rather secular and humanitarian, influenced by the French and Indian cultures she was taught and was surrounded with resulted in Paulette becoming a young lady of distinct tastes and choices. The overlapping of ethnicities created a hybrid form of ethnicity namely Indo – French, embodied by Paulette, who in the opinion of members and friends of the Burnham household lacked the education and etiquettes of a white lady of their standing. Attempts of moulding and training the young lady in accordance to the behaviour deemed to be appropriate by people like Mr. and Mrs. Burnham, Captain Chillingworth and Mr. Kendalbushe – the upstanding members and representatives of the English society in colonial India. Their efforts were reflective of ethnocentrism as well as acculturation wherein they not only tried to transform Paulette into a *memsahib* (a proper English lady) but also began training her in the teachings of the Scripture. Through the course of Paulette's stay under the Burnham's roof, she was made to wear dresses discarded by Mrs. Burnham as they had become old fashioned; these dresses even after being tailored were loose and short on Paulette's slim and tall physique, as Mrs. Burnham was a healthy lady of short stature. Dressed in gowns originally tailored for her patron made Paulette awkward as she was liked wearing a *sari* rather than a gown customed to cater to the social expectations of English society. Apart from her wardrobe, Paulette was also ostracized and alienated, at the hands of the staff members of Bethel and the Burnham household, on account of her preferred language of communication. It was a fact that Paulette learnt during her stay at Bethel, before being undertaken by the Burnhams, that Paulette realized that the staff serving in the European households and institutions were equally staunch in their beliefs than their European master. As "the bearers and khidmutgars sneered when her clothing was not quite pukka and they would often ignore her if she spoke to them in Bengali because they had their own preconceived notions on what was appropriate for the Europeans especially *memsahibs* (lady) (*Sea of Poppies* 123). Their opinions were so firmly rooted that perceptions that they only responded to anything instructed in "kitchen-Hindusthani," for, it had become a language of command in European dwellings (*Sea of Poppies* 123).

Apart from Paulette, Ghosh explores linguistic ethnicity through Neel, even though Neel was a native Indian but he was part of the upper echelon of the society with higher education and mastery over the

colonial language at his disposal. Neel is seen interacting with people of varied backgrounds, such as the less educated or even illiterate crowds of his estate in Bengali and Hindi and with the administrators of the British East India Company in fluent English. He switches from languages in such a fluid manner that it never occurred to the observer as though Neel transited between languages at all. It was Britain's colonial presence in India wherein the cosmopolitan environment of the society encouraged people to educate themselves in accordance with the British education system. Neel's ability to speak in English came through his father's inability of mastering the art of the colonial language, which strengthened the Old King's wish to educate his son (Neel) in matters beyond his capabilities. Neel's education was a result of the cosmopolitan environment that brought people of varied nationalities, races, ethnicities and faith together under the roof of colonized India and enabled interactions between them. But these interactions were only possible if they had a common language to communicate in, this need resulted in the identification of common grounds and common aspects among the different ethnicities and the gradual overlapping in pure ethnicities, the consequence of which was the creation of hybrid ethnicities.

The pidgin used by Indian traders to converse with people in foreign lands is another example of the hybrid form of language explored by Ghosh in the Trilogy. Bahram Moddie's encounter with Chei-Mei, her nephew Allow are all evidence of the Sino-English languages founded by men of trade to be able to exchange information with foreigners who spoke a different language. Neel's attempts at hiding his real identity and surviving as an educated Indian in the Fanqui town of Canton (China) is another instance of the same, where over time and multiple exchanges with the Cantonese people he was able to converse with Compton. Neel's help in comprehending and translating one of *Chinese Repository's* articles created a reputation due to which Compton's teacher offered a job to Neel, the ensuing exchange is an example of a hybrid and pidgin language and thereby ethnicity explored by Ghosh:

'So, Ah Neel! I hear you've been learning to speak Cantonese? Haih Lou-si!' ... 'Yat dihg, yat-dihng, said I, at which Zhong Lou-si said that rumours had reached Canton that the English were planning to send an armed fleet to China. Did I have any knowledge of this? ... Haih me? Really? Where had I heard this? From whom? ... Then he looked up at me and said: So the Indians fight for less pay, knowing that they will never advance to positions of influence? Is this right? None of this could be denied. Jauh haih lo, I said: what you are saying is right (Flood of Fire 45 – 46).

Hybrid ethnicity was the outcome of not only the biological intermingling between people of varied ethnicities but it was also the result of social, cultural and economic influences and can be traced through the characters of Baboo Nobb Kissin Pander, Neel, Paulette, the Colver Fami (family), Ah Fatt, the Burnhams, the Moddies and the lascars. Hybrid ethnicities also result in the adaptation of cultures through diasporic displacement along with those who voluntarily chose to adapt and absorb ethnic aspects from foreign and new ethnicities. In Bhabha's opinion, diasporic displacement is an outcome of the "middle passage' of slavery and indenture," or because of "the 'voyage out' of the civilizing mission" ("The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency" 191). Deeti's journey and the subsequent life as a part of the Fami is an apt example of an adaptation of culture through diasporic displacement where not only does Deeti but her siblings and the following future generations, too, retain qualities from their own ethnic cultures but also add to their ethnic qualities by absorbing the virtues of the new ethnicities around them. The Creole language employed among

the Fami to communicate developed from the encounter of their native languages with the different speeches used on the plantations sites they worked on as *girmityas* (indentured labourers). Deeti narrating the incidents that revolved around the four years of the *Ibis* embarking from India to Mauritius and the events that ensued, prove the creation of hybrid ethnicity resulting from the confluence of pure ethnicities. The Fami along with the ship-siblings, though, were suggestive of Vijay Mishra's perception about the creation of various forms of hybrid where the author celebrates the new creation rather than focusing on the friction entailed in the creation of the hybrid, where Mishra emphasizes "vibrant kinds of interaction" taking place amidst the diasporic communities ("New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Border" 67). The Fami was evidence of the multicultural society where the siblings of the wooden womb hailed from varied ethnicities, nations, faiths and walks of life. The members of the Fami had all retained aspects from their own identities and culture by extension, such as Deeti's faith, intuition and her Madhubani art; Paulette had her love for nature and her distinct cultural identity and Neel's identity reflected his passion for words and was evident in years following their escape in Jodu's *sampan* (small boat) when he along with Paulette would narrate anecdotes and tales of their survival before the *Ibis* and thereafter.

Another manner through which Ghosh explores ethnicity is by portraying how marginalized people of varied societies, too, connected and contributed to the creation of hybrid ethnicity. Bahram Moddie, a downtrodden Parsi, was marginalized and subjected to subaltern treatment for materialistic reasons because he could not speak fluent English and inheriting a lack of financial stability from his ancestors. He was a young man who had just stepped into the realm of jobs and gaining employment and was soon married into a rich and well-established family of Seth Rustomjee Mistris and was looked down upon by his brothers-in-law for being favoured by his father-in-law. Apart from being suspected by the heirs of the Mistris family, he shared a marriage of obligation with his wife, Shireenbai Moddie, all these added to Bahram's wish to belong in a world of affection. Bahram found the affection he sought with a widowed Chinese washerwoman, Chi-Mei, who was ostracized for being a boatwoman, which was a polite manner of addressing a mistress or a common woman. Given their status in life and societies, respectively it was evident that their offspring too would be completely accepted in neither Bahram's nor Chi-Mei's world and were referred to as the *achha* people in the Chinese. The word *achha* in Chinese meant a bad man whereas in the Hindustani language it connotes alright and good. "*Jaahp-jung-jai* – 'mixed-kind-boy'... 'West-ocean-child'... 'salt-prawn-food'... 'half Cheeni (Chinese) and half *Achha*'" were the expressions used to address people like Ah Fatt, the natural son of Bahram and Chi-Mei who was half Chinese and half *Achha* (Indian) (*River of Smoke* 93). The manner of address to the hybrid offsprings revealed the outlook of the Cantonese towards the members of hybrid origin, who were referred to as such because it rendered their efforts at maintaining a monoculture in the Qing Dynasty of China in the nineteenth century useless.

Ethnicity is a crucial part of society with reference to aspects like ethnocentrism, multiculturalism, language and religion considering the circumstances of the present times. With the emergence of modern times, the issues raised by Ghosh resound with the problems braved by people in the present century as they were similar to the discrimination faced by the marginalized characters of the Trilogy. Ghosh explores Ethnicity and portrays a society where discrimination based on features of ethnicity was contrasted with a society that was accepting of plural ethnicities prevalent in nineteenth century colonial India. The subaltern section of the society bonded over the experience of oppression and being

ostracized made them tolerant, appreciative and respected the others who had likes and inclinations different from their own. The ship siblings and the Fami embodied the multicultural harmony where the pluralistic and hybrid nature of the new world was embraced by them and the kinship shared among the members of the Fami laid the framework for their descendants. As the radical steps taken by the siblings like blurring the boundaries of castes through marriage and even getting married on ships carrying human cargo became new ethnic customs that are followed by generations even after over a hundred and fifty years.

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