



Original Article

Histories of Displacement: Migration, Diasporic Consciousness, and the Quest for Sustainable Communities in Amitav Ghosh's The Circle of Reason and The Glass Palace

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is one of the pioneering authors in post-colonial Indian writing in English. His powerful narrative techniques enable the reader to travel not just through geographical space, but also through history and culture. This paper examines how Amitav Ghosh's The Circle of Reason and The Glass Palace explore themes of migration, marginality, and diasporic consciousness within the broader context of cultural sustainability. Both novels are marked by displacement, either voluntary or forced, across geographies, reflecting how movements of people are entangled with political upheavals, economic survival, and cultural negotiation. His narratives portray exile and dislocation as vital in these fictions, suggesting that migration is not merely physical but deeply psychological and cultural. The displaced individuals strive to build meaningful community life in unfamiliar territories by navigating their fractured identities, negotiating between memory and adaptation. He shapes individual and collective identities, keeping focus on marginalised segments, and interrogates the systems of exploitation that perpetuate exclusion while also highlighting their acts of resilience. This paper focuses on two key areas: representation of migration, marginality, and diasporic consciousness in The Circle of Reason and The Glass Palace, and how they model sustainable, culturally rooted communities through narrative structure and shared historical memory.

Keywords: Migration, Diaspora, Marginality, Sustainable Communities, Cultural hybridity, Displacement, and Identity formation

Introduction

Amitabh Ghosh is a much-celebrated and highly acclaimed Indian diasporic author. Ghosh's fictions- *The Circle of Reason* (1986), and *The Glass Palace* (2000) are historical and portray themes of migration and displacement. He won one of France's top literary awards, Prix Médicis Étranger, for his first novel, 'The Circle of Reason'. He is also bestowed with the Padma Shri (2007) and the Jnanpith award (2018). *The Circle of Reason* interrogates science, belief, and identity, while the *Glass Palace* reveals ecological and imperial dislocation. Ghosh's characters are migrants, both geographically and socially displaced. Yet they form a resilient microsystem that is capable of mutual sustenance.

Ghosh's narratives span geographies and histories, from Lalpukur in Bengal to al-Ghazira and Africa in *The Circle of Reason*, and from colonial Burma and Malay to contemporary India in *The Glass Palace*. His work reveals displacement caused by colonial capitalism, war, or socioeconomic pressures. Social, economic, and ecological perspectives are well explored, along with envisioning sustainable and inclusive features. By comparing the trajectory and the communities that the protagonists inhabit, Ghosh portrays pathways towards cultural resilience and ethical coexistence.

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Discussion

The protagonist in *The Circle of Reason* is an orphan named Nachiketa and nicknamed Alu (potato). He has an extraordinarily huge head for an eight-year-old, and curiously uneven. *'bulging all over with knots and bumps.... like a huge, freshly dug, lumpy potato.'* He was raised by his uncle Balaram, the village school teacher. Balaram, a passionate believer in Western ideas and Louis Pasteur, established the Pasteur school of Reason. For him, there was a kind of *'historical legitimacy about carbolic acid,'* and he believed all evils could be fought with carbolic acid. So, he nearly destroys the village by sterilizing it with carbolic acid. Alu was apprenticed as a weaver by his uncle. On being wrongly accused of terrorism, Alu was forced to leave his home and travel to Northern Africa and the Middle East. The police officer handling the case follows him from Bengal to Bombay and on through the Persian Gulf to North Africa. Along the way, Alu meets a cast of characters- varied and unusual. A series of interesting incidents take place, including Alu's miraculous escape from the basement of a multi-storeyed building that collapses. The characters - Zindi, Maya, Toru-Debi, Parboti-Debi, Shombhu Debnath- in the book represent bigger ideas. Alu symbolises tradition, resilience, adaptability, and the human spirit in the face of injustice, while Balaram is a symbol of the modern influx of Western culture.

Weaving is an important metaphor in the novel, and Alu is fascinated by the loom. *"The machine is man's curse and his salvation.... It has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world."* (Page-55)

"It is a gory history in parts; a story of greed and destruction.... and history is hope as well as despair. And so weaving is a living belief that having once made the world one and blessed it with its diversity, it must do it again. Weaving is hope because it has no country, no continent." (Page -61-62)

"Weaving is Reason, which makes the world mad and makes it human." (Page -62)

The village Lalpukur is considered a symbol of traditional India. It is the product of a diaspora, settled by refugees from East Pakistan after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971.

'Vomited out of their native soil years ago in another carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away.... Their only passion was memory, a longing for a land where the grass was greener,... Lalpukur was damned to a hell of longing.' (Pg- 63)

Part two of the book talks of al-Ghazira and of bringing together the community of Indians in the Middle East. Alu gets buried alive accidentally when a new building, the Star, where he is working as a labourer, collapses. His friends- Abu Fahl, Rakesh, and Isma'il, search for him inside the ruins through rubble that was over ten feet high, had broken glass and bits of torn steel, lying precariously like razor blades. Treading carefully, leaving a trail of their own blood through cuts, the three friends continued their search till Ismail shouted out Alu's name and got a response in return. (Pages- 247-253,258-259). *"He was under a heap of rubble, broken machinery... We couldn't believe that anyone could be alive under all that. He said he wasn't hurt at all."* They find him *"lying flat on his back, with that huge slab of concrete so close to his nose he could have touched it with his eyelashes."* (page 259)

The traditional marketplace, the Souq, *'an old Bazar honeycomb of passageways, that obscured every trace of the world outside.'* Souq does not represent a discrete cultural root of one nation; rather, it is a part of a network of trades, confirming Balaram's argument that weaving produces not one world, but many.

On being saved, Alu purposefully *'wages a war on money.'* (page 260) He begins weaving again on the loom of his Egyptian neighbour, Hajj Fahmy who has moved to a more profitable construction business after abandoning his traditional craft. Alu needs to learn Arabic as he earlier learnt English. This is part of his revival and survival. Zindi, an Egyptian brothel owner, Alu's landlady, plans to make him manager for the Durban tailoring house, which she intends to buy from Jeevan Bhai Patel, a Gujarati Hindu from Durban, South Africa. His parents disapproved of his marriage, so the couple moved to Mozambique, Dar es Salaam, Zanzibar, Djibouti, Perum, and Aden, and finally reached Durban (pg 237). Ironically, he found fame as the *'most successful marriage broker in the Indian Ocean.'* (page-239) Zindi's boarding house is full of migrant labourers. It becomes a **third space** of culinary hybridity, polyglot chatter, shared hopes. Zindi wants to bring al Ghazira to its former glory as a merchants' paradise by diverting the labourers from the construction industry to the declining cloth trade. *'It'll give work to everyone, if it goes well, and we'll be safe.'* (page- 236)

Since the beginning of time, al-Ghazira has been home to anyone who chooses to call it such. Many, many years ago, when Al Gazira was just a speck of sand, a cross-eyed man, Nury, came from northern Egypt to al Ghazira, started egg trading, going from home to home for his business. He had a quiet eye on every activity in al Ghazira. When the oil deposits were discovered by the British, they used military force to persuade the elderly Malik to sign a treaty. The boundaries are saturated with inequality, power, and domination.

In part three, Alu finds a new exotic emigrant community with Zindi, Verma, and Mishra couples and other characters. He seeks a new rootedness in a foreign land in Algeria. Alu and Kulfi call themselves Mr. and Mrs. Bose under the pretence of marriage. As a migrant, Alu uses Reason to reshape his marginality; not to belong, but to **reconstruct a mode of survival and identity**. Mrs. Verma rejects traditional thinking and tries to create an Indian

model of community life in the desert, but Alu, Zindi, and Jyoti Das leave Mrs. Verma and her experiments in the desert. They search for new horizons, unfound hopes, and ideas.

"Nothing is worth anything anymore. If you wait for everything to be right again, we will wait forever while the world falls apart. The only hope is to make do with what we've got." (Page 412.)

The novel depicts a power struggle based on heartless reason on one hand and a plea for humanistic camaraderie by nurturing the power of human qualities, bringing a healing touch to all mankind on the other. It ends with the timeless message of hope being the beginning.

Through Alu's peripatetic life, Ghosh exposes the precariousness of **postcolonial migrant labor**, trapped within the 'circle' of policing, disease, and chance.

In *the Glass Palace* (2000), Ghosh's characters include the royal family (Thebaw, Queen Supalayay, Burmese princesses) and commoners (Dolly, Raj Kumar, Saya John, Uma), but what ties them all together is the crucial story of colonial displacement. Accompanied by historical episodes, these protagonists are propelled from Burma to India, Malaysia, Singapore, and back again, each time repeating a pattern of action that Ghosh presents in the earlier pages. *"The Royal Family was being sent into exile.... The British Government wished to provide them with an escort of attendants and advisors."* (Pg- 41)

The novel opens in Mandalay in 1885, with the introduction of the eleven-year-old Indian boy protagonist, Rajkumar, running through the city in search of a lady called Ma Cho. He is an orphaned boy who faces penury at a young age. He was an Indian *kalaa* from across the sea, a foreigner in an alien country. Due to a shipwreck, Rajkumar landed in Burma. He is the final surviving member of his family and comes to Burma from India with a hunger for victory. He was one among the uprooted ones from its roots. His father moved his family to Akyab, a vital harbour in Burma. They said their family name is *Raha* and claimed to be Hindus from Chittagong (Page-13). However, both of Rajkumar's parents die en route, and the mother's dying words to him are: *"Stay alive,"* she whispered. *'Beche thako, Rajkumar. Live, my prince; hold on to your life.'* (Pg-14) .

The characters in the fiction include both kings and commoners united by the inevitable narrative of colonial dislodgement. Amitav Ghosh explores the family, business, and cultural relations that link the scattered Indian communities in Burma and Malaya with their ancestral homeland in the novel. Ghosh reflects the migrants' lives and articulates his diasporic consciousness in his writings. The novel's primary concern is the dislocation and exile to and from India, Burma, and Malaya. The lower Burma and the Malaya Peninsula were regarded as lands of gold among the seafaring people of the eastern coast of India. The Indian expulsion in Burma was primarily the product of the dislocation of people from India in two ways: those who went to Burma as indentured workers and those who went to Burma as traders, including a timber dealer. It is believed that the British transported more Indians than there were Burmese in Rangoon. At that time, the Indian community was very strong in Burma and they developed a unity among themselves. Even the indentured workers of the diasporic Indian communities played a significant part in the activities of the communities in Burma. For the Bengalis, Burma was the promised land of opportunity. Thousands of Indians were also brought to Malaysia under British colonial rule. There are Indian diasporic groups like the scattered Indian communities in Burma, Malaya's cultures. They were carried from India by the British under the indenture scheme on the basis of a contract. The book deals with the tensions between the Burmese, the Indian and the British. The attendants of the Burmese family married a wealthy timber man. Rajkumar was a merchant who was once a poor Bangali orphan in Bengal. The *Glass Palace* is mainly a story of an orphan with herculean tenacity and stamina, he heals the pain of the past by means of which he forsake the past, dislocation and transnational adaptation to separate homes. He switches from nostalgia to shifting identities and creation of new relationships,

It begins with the British invasion of Burma in 1885 and takes the reader on a journey through history until the Second World War, when democracy, peace and order were restored. Ghosh recalls and examines them during the colonial turbulence in Burma, India, and Malaysia in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. *The Glass Palace* focuses on the historical facts like World War II, diasporic beginning during major events of exile by the Royal Family of Burma and resettling in Ratnagiri, India, and the wonderful 'Morningstar,' created by Mathew. Eventually, there's the plantation in faraway Malaysia, and there are a number of crisscrossing coincidences all through the novel to counterbalance between the present and the past. As their innate culture is missing, the immigrants feel lonely and alienated and it results in an imbalance mental state. Lack of adaptability, socialisation, and the inability to connect with the unfamiliar environment are the main causes of alienation.

Both novels explore migration as a means of survival and identity formation. Alu's labour migration parallels the first departure in *the Glass Palace*, revealing how capitalism and empire create poor borders and insecure livelihoods. Characters respond by engaging in hybridity, such as Alu's chemistry-based experiments and Rajkumar's hybrid cultural memory. These creative strategies are aligned with Bhabha's concept of hybridity as a site of resistance.

Ghosh offers an imaginative pathway to sustainability. He immerses his characters in the exercise of memory, Rajkumar's insistence on storytelling, Dolly's singing of mandala folk songs, and Uma's preservation of Burmese recipes. These acts resonate with Singh and Sinha's notion that diasporic articulation cultivates identity and sustains cultural resilience. Ghosh envisions belonging, not as geographical, but as relational.

The Souq emerges as a space of cultural coexistence, Muslim weavers, Hindu barbers and street vendors unite as shared labour, a living act of social innovation. Amidst these, sustainable social bonds are forged.

The Souq in *the Circle of Reason* and the practice of memory in *the Glass Palace* function as textual agents of sustainable community logic. They are micro narratives for ethical coexistence, a concept stressed by Narnolia and Mausam as central to a new diasporic consciousness. A sustainable future is not geographical, but cultural and relational.

Conclusion

Adopting a literary-critical method enriched by postcolonial theory (Bhabha, Said), diaspora scholarship (Narnolia & Mousam; Singh & Sinha), and sustainability frameworks (von Braun; Nel & Pelc), this comparative study demonstrates that Ghosh's fiction serves as a meaningful intervention in global dialogues.

Ghosh's fiction not only records diaspora - an archetype of human resilience - but imagines communities that resist marginalization by anchoring themselves in cultural hybridity, community, and memory. These fictions align with von Braun and Garzweiler's call for multi-sectoral action on marginality and with Nel and Pelc's advocacy for social innovation in even the poorest contexts. Literary-critical scrutiny reveals, too, that sustaining ethical, multicultural futures requires both historical awareness and creative practice—whether in Alu's scientific curiosity or Rajkumar's storytelling.

This comparative study reveals that Ghosh's narratives do more than tell stories of displacement - they model futures grounded in cultural hybridity, ethical co-existence, and ecological consciousness. *The Circle of Reason* and *The Glass Palace* explicate how marginalized actors, through ingenuity and cultural expression, foster sustainable communities.

By framing migration not merely as trauma, but as a site of creative resilience, Ghosh positions literature as vital to dialogues across arts, commerce, and science. Diasporic consciousness - those lived experiences of fragmented belonging - emerges not as a deficit, but as a productive platform for intercultural dialogue. This study contributes to current interdisciplinary debates by demonstrating that fiction can articulate sustainable models for global society, making literary narratives indispensable to interdisciplinary debates on migration, inclusion, and global futures.

The cross-disciplinary relevance of Ghosh's work reflects broader concerns in sustainable development. Angela Naimoli, in *Diaspora and Literary Studies*, emphasizes diaspora as a site of identity negotiation and cultural transformation. Meanwhile, Joachim von Braun and Franz W. Garzweiler assert that tackling poverty and ecological fragility demand inclusive, interdisciplinary remedies (pg 45- 48). Ghosh's narratives reflect precisely such integration: his migrant protagonists withstand economic precarity and cultural erasure, yet forge enduring communities grounded in memory, ethical exchange, and mutual resilience.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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