

# The political consciousness in contemporary fiction with reference to Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *The Sea of Poppies*

\*Dr. Jaya Kapoor

Dept. of English & MEL, University of Allahabad

## Abstract


*In the following paper I propose to explore the increasing presence of political consciousness as a part of the narrative in Amitav Ghosh and how it is an extension of the urgent need he feels for such a buildup. By implication then the political consciousness is present not only in the authorial voice but in the way the plot resolves and the characters evolve. I will use the two referred novels to see how far they reflect is increasingly politicized world in every aspect of life. There are voices that are standing up to be heard that have always been overridden or ignored. These voices emerge out from every sphere of life, challenging the defined order. The subaltern emerges out of the shadows and starts demanding its share of the limelight. The voices of the women, the colonized, the caste and the outcaste, the aborigines and the migrants, the capitalist and communist, the autocrat and the suppressed, the displaced and the devastated are all to be heard. There is a dialogue and debate across the political platform demanding a place on the agenda for themselves. There are voices rising for the empowerment of the underdogs and the under-privileged.*

**Keywords:** *political consciousness, limelight, migrants, capitalist, communist*


## Article Publication


 Published Online: 23-Mar-2022

## \*Author's Correspondence

 Dr. Jaya Kapoor

 Dept. of English & MEL,  
University of Allahabad

 jayakapoor@allduniv.ac.in

 [10.31305/rrjm.2022.v07.i03.005](https://doi.org/10.31305/rrjm.2022.v07.i03.005)

© 2022 The Authors. Published by  
RESEARCH REVIEW International  
Journal of Multidisciplinary. This is an  
open access article under the CC BY-

NC-ND license



(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

## Introduction

The world today is increasingly politicized in every aspect of life. There are voices that are standing up to be heard that have always been overridden or ignored. These voices emerge out from every sphere of life, challenging the defined order. The subaltern emerges out of the shadows and starts demanding its share of the limelight. The voices of the women, the colonized, the caste and the outcaste, the aborigines and the migrants, the capitalist and communist, the autocrat and the suppressed, the displaced and the devastated are all to be heard. There is a dialogue and debate across the political platform demanding a place on the agenda for themselves. There are voices rising for the empowerment of the underdogs and the under-privileged.

In the following paper I propose to explore the increasing presence of political consciousness as a part of the narrative in Amitav Ghosh and how it is an extension of the urgent need he feels for such a buildup. By implication then the political consciousness is present not only in the authorial voice but in the way the plot resolves and the characters evolve.

## Analysis

The colonial period had seen literature emerge as a strong cultural tool. It had been very effectively used to create an aura and a glamour for the colonizer cultures in the mind of the colonized. In the post-colonial era, it is being used by the marginalized for participating in the debate as also for repositioning the debate for posterity to investigate. When so many voices emerge and it becomes important that all of them be given a fair share of hearing, the process of story-telling becomes a complex job. This has leads to a need for an increasing complexity of narrative voices in fiction. As a result, the narrative patterns seem to have become more and more innovative.

The novel gives the writer the freedom to use multiplicity of voices and experiment with narrative techniques. What is happening hereby is not limited to the arena of the political novel. Politics is not an isolated activity and fiction has an almost umbilical relationship with politics in the contemporary world. When we look at the novel from this perspective, the political novel does not remain a limited form, in fact every novel becomes political novel. It becomes a part of the debate and dialogue as well as a medium for it. The flexibility of the form comes to a great advantage in these conditions. The writer might not be able to give a platform to all the voices might actually not be writing a political novel but still the politics involved in almost every aspect of life makes it inevitable that a lot of ground is covered. What I discuss in the following pages will not be political novels but the political consciousness in fiction with special reference to the two novels by Ghosh.

The political concerns have never been a major engagement with the majority of Indian writing in English. This is quite surprising because their language always gave them a position of proximity with the political mainstream of the country. There were always social concerns reflected in some novelists but for the most part they chose not to interfere in the prevailing socio-political hierarchies. Mulk Raj Anand was an exception to this till the time he was associated with the highly politically conscious Progressive Writers Association. His later works are more on the autobiographical lines. Makrand Paranjape talks about this phase of Indian writing in English "...the IE novel remained bourgeois, albeit liberal. After Independence, the removal of the British and the disillusionment of Partition resulted, as I perceive it, in a withdrawal and alienation of the artist from the masses. During the mass-movement for independence, the bourgeois IE novelist had identified themselves with the aspirations of the proletariat, but after independence, they retreated back to their traditional class positions of elitisms and aloofness." (Paranjape, 2000)

The writers showed a lack of not just political but even social concerns in their works in the post-independence period. The stories revolve round characters belonging to the privileged class with concerns and problems that belong more to the western society than the contemporary India which was going through tests of fire for its democratic system and the dreams with which the nation was conceived during the nationalist movement. Major events like the Emergency, the J.P. movement, militancy in Punjab and Kashmir, the '84 riots, the militant movements of the North East and the growing naxalite movement, the wars with Pakistan and China were watersheds in the destiny of the nation. But the more or less ivory tower bound Indian Fiction in English failed to even register them let alone trace their impact on the changing milieu. As Paranjape further sums it up: "...the post-independence IE novel remains pretty bourgeois in both form and content, liberal in outlook but implicitly accepting the social and political status-quo. In all cases, the form- placid, more or less in the realistic mode, with round or flat middle class characters, and written in a proper, non-deviant, pretty English- is the best proof of the conservatism of IE fiction, which is quite untouched by mass movements or mass aspirations." (Paranjape, 2000)

But the turn of the Century saw an expression of the political concern of the writers in English. Ghosh rejected the Commonwealth Prize as he objected to the idea of imperialism implied in the roots of Commonwealth. He also voiced a strong protest against what he sees as attempts at neo-colonialism by the recent U.S. interventionist stance. He realizes that the way to avoid it is through a heightened political consciousness and assertion of independence (Sankaran, 2012). There is an increasing engagement of the writers with the political issues and undercurrents of the country. Ghosh along with Arundhati Roy were some of the earliest to assert the mindset of protest. The shift in the position is most obvious in the location of the protagonists. While earlier the protagonists almost never identified with the national socio-political milieu and always had the option of moving out of a difficult situation physically usually by moving out of the city or the country itself. But with the growing demands of the situation that is intricately related to the geographical spaces, their protagonists now do not have the option to escape from the country to find solutions. "The Inheritance of Loss" and "The God of Small Things" are examples I would like to mention here. When the problems are psychological or emotional, the physical distance from the situation can usually provide a better capacity to handle the problem but when the complications arise out of a social or socio-political order, an escape is not the best way to find a solution.

This is an important phase for Indian Fiction in English as it tries to locate itself on the world map not as a shadowy Anglo-Indian writing but rather fighting to prove its Indian identity. There is also a simultaneous movement trying to make the language more receptive to the expression of the Indian situations and contexts. Experimentation with language was one of the many ways that this difference was emphasized. They did write for a more international readership but the expression was more focused on consciously projecting an Indian identity since there was a growing Indian readership in the country as well as abroad. The experimentation with language was the first step towards a closer understanding and expression of the complexity that India provided. It spoke the language its people really spoke. The realism involved in the genre took a reality check of expression and succeeded.

I take up Amitav Ghosh's two novels "The Hungry Tide" and "The Sea of Poppies" as points of reference to study the engagement of the writers of today with the world around them and the evolution of this process since the last century. The two books that I have chosen to discuss here have been critically and popularly well received and mark an important shift in the career of the writer. What is happening in both these novels is that the characters including the protagonist now do not take up the option of moving out of a complex situation and then objectively coming to a solution that would seem logical. Now they shed their objective and logical self that had been trained to find solution to every problematic situation and in the process they not only discover themselves but also resolve the complexity of the situation..

In the novels up to "The Hungry Tide" Amitav Ghosh makes liberal use of magic realism although there is a strong political consciousness at work in most of his works. His protagonists are Indians urban and cosmopolitan or migrated to the west. They try to relate to the country where they feel rooted. They also discover their identity in course of their discovery of the country since their history is inextricably mixed with the story of the country. But there is usually a sense of aloofness, a distance from the land in these works. Earlier it was easy for his protagonist to move out of the country both physically and mentally. Even when they were in the country, they carried parts of their cosmopolitan identity with them. Whenever India becomes too complicated to handle, they could turn to the alternate identity open to them, sort things out logically and start afresh. We saw it happening in case of Piya and Kanai when they start understanding and relating to the land and the people beyond their educated urban elite mindset and relate to the people at the human level.

The "The Hungry Tide" reveals the comfort that Ghosh seems to be reaching in dealing with the mindset of the country where the present is only a part of a large cosmic cycle linked to both the time past and the time future. Like history, the social and political are inextricably linked. The struggle of the subaltern is usually a result of the troubled political consciousness of the powerful. The sharp sense of history that marks the West is more expansive in case of India where the lines between myth, history and folk are blurred. The story of Bon Bibi is an example of such blurred perceptions. In some ways even the barriers of place collapse in the story of Bon Bibi transiting from the deserts of Arabia to the marshy forests of the Sunderbans. The myth gets mingled with the lives of the people. It reflects how easily the land assimilates cultures and makes it their own. The same ease is present in the minds of the people regarding politics. The politics of the country is also similarly about a coexistence of a spectrum of contrasting ideologies which would find it hard to operate in the same system otherwise. The basic principle of coexistence that marks the cultural structure is seen operating in the political consciousness in his novels. The relationship of man with land is an important motif here and it is explored at various levels. Nirmal's experiences with the Communist Party are one very visible form of political threads running through the novel but there is another less visible but more important link which is that of the opening up of the delicately balanced ecology of the region to the onslaughts of development and settlement. Ghosh wants to point out the damage such easy acceptance could cause. The terrible violence of the Morichjhapi and the ecological balance point to the problem such assimilative mindsets could cause. Ghosh talked in an interview about the damage such moves for development activities even a thoughtless promotion of tourism could do to the region. The absolute powers of the communist regime led to a lack of answerability in case of the migrants. Nirmal had been dedicated to the ideology of communism and tried to fight for what he thought was the right side since the

control over resources is one of the basic principles of Communism. But in the Morichjhapi incident, the ideology is at loggerheads with the people. The system seems to be going wrong with the refugee agitation and the subsequent bloodshed. With “The Hungry Tide” Ghosh feels confident to take up the issue of the Left party rule in Bengal, and the welfare of the settlers of Morichjhapi and the marginalized dwellers of the Sunderban region. Nirmal who had failed as an active Communist Party worker sees the agitation of the migrants as a chance to redeem his lost self-esteem and dreams of an ideal land where the marginalized find their rightful claims to the land. The disillusionment of Nirmal and moving to the island as teacher is in a way an attempt to escape from the crisis. Ghosh goes beyond the immediate situation and explores the consequences of the conflict. It might have looked like a socio-political conflict but in reality, there were also questions of development and environment. Not that the political system was sensitive to these issues, if at all, it comes across as blatantly insensitive to the ground realities. Nilima earns the faith of the people of the region with great effort. She thinks that helping the settlers might hurt the work that she is trying to do in the region and turns down their appeal for help. And like her Moyna also knows that education and development are more important than personal relationships and issues. The resolution of the tragedy is not in resettlement but creating a balance between nature and development so that one does not grow at the cost of the other. He had once written an article opposing the development of tourist facilities in the region citing the delicate balance of environment as the reason. But then when we look at the other characters whose journey is traced by Ghosh, we see the distance he has travelled. The way Nilima reacts to the Morichjhapi incident and Moyna reacts to Piya’s decision to stay back show us that sustainable development and not opening up and growth are the solutions to the problems of the region. But it will mean fighting back and taking some not very popular decisions. Piya with all her advanced geo-positioning gadgets is out of sync and seems to be at a distance from the environment she is using them to understand. It is only when she loses her gadgets that she could come to comprehend the land and understand its responses better. She understands that the issue is not about the survival of a species but about the existence of a social and natural structure integrated into an entire environmental system.

The relationship between the land and the man is more complex in “The Sea of Poppies” having many layers to it from the farmer to the landlord to the scientist to the sailor to the colonizer. And the undercurrent amidst all these layers is of the relationship of the migrant to his land. It is for migrants like these that Rushdie had said that their best thing is their hopefulness and their worst is the emptiness of their luggage...they seem to have floated upwards from history, from memory, from time. Like the bundle of Sarju they carried with them a culture and a language that would relate them to the land of their ancestors when all memories of the migration had been blurred by time. The songs of longing that mark the character of their homeland would become expression of their sense of loss. It is only when they begin to lose the weights of their past identities that they are able to communicate with each other and forge a bond that is symbolized by the escape of the people in the boat.

He realizes that literature can be used as a tool expressing resistance. He resists through the evolution of the political consciousness of his characters.

In “The Sea of Poppies” Deeti, Neel, Baboo Nob Kissen, Kalua, Zachary, Paulette, Jodu have all to shed the baggage of the past identities before they become the repository of the culture and carry its legacy to a new land. And then the ship that had started off as their prison transforms into their freedom and the land where they were to migrate as slaves becomes the land of hope where they could live a life of dignity and peace. Their physical bondage is a continuum of their psychological state which lasts only till their political consciousness is denied. The moment they realize their right to individuality they can fight a battle of independence that transcends its immediate circumstances and leads to freedom. The state of art marine engineering of the ship in Sea of Poppies and the all-pervasive advanced gps gadgets the Hungry Tide could be seen similar technically advanced extension of the neocolonial omniscient powers that have to be neutralized to achieve self-realization. But in none of the novels do the moments of comprehension come out of logical reasoning. They have to struggle and engage in fierce and at times fatal battles with their circumstances before they could move towards a resolution of the crisis. Their weapons in this struggle are their instincts and faith and the result is a self-realization with strong politico-cultural

tones. Piya's coming back is an act of faith more than a logical decision. And Kanai's responses are decided by his bonding with Nilima, Kusum and Nirmal. Kalua fights because his past has given him the strength to survive and struggle and Deeti and Paulette have survived ruthless social pressures giving them an inner strength and the capacity to decide what is the path for happiness without giving in to adversities. That they choose to stay back fight and not escape or give in is a mark of Ghosh's maturity as a writer.

The other aspect that Ghosh has grown as a writer is in dealing with the political undercurrents in his recent works. Even in "The Shadow Lines" which was based on the Partition of India, the globalized perspective works more than a comprehension of and concern with the local forces that were tearing the land apart and cast their shadows across the decades.

The aura and glamour of imposing powers are played upon the mind through the opium Factory with its imposing and forbidding air and the complicated workings that Deeti finds very difficult to comprehend and the ship with its even more cutting-edge technology and complex working combined together in *Sea of Poppies* while in *The Hungry Tide* it is the entire state of the art gadgets of Piya.

In "The Sea of Poppies" there are references to the dirty games that the West once played in the name of free trade and turned into colonizers. The circle of loans for development and further loans to settle these loans that the developed world grips the underdeveloped world with is seen being played by the colonizers with the local land owners. There are phrases that would seem to come not from the mouth of some British colonizer two hundred years back but from any representative of the free-market system keen on tapping the potential of the third world markets. A dialogue comes up in the story when the important policy decisions are being considered and the doctrine of free markets is being advocated to promote the trade from England "...is it not true that our representative in Canton, Mr. Elliott, has had some success in persuading the mandarins to legalize opium? I've heard it said that the mandarins have begun to consider the benefits of free trade" (*Sea of Poppies*, 259). The arguments will sound more like a discussion at a trade forum in our own times than at a meeting in the early days of colonialism in India.

As the plot of the novel unfolds the ruthless and greedy face of the colonizer is revealed tightening its vicious tentacles on the unsuspecting people sparing neither the poor farmer nor the affluent landlord. The business of opium and the slave trade that form the mainstay of the British Empire in India wrought havoc upon the land they were conducted from and broke down the social structures of the region providing easy victims for the slave trade by uprooting the farmers. Central India became a land of migrants *Girmitiya* and till now people from the land have to leave their homes to find livelihood. Their language and their literature epitomize grief of separation. The "Bidesiya" have grown into a folk form because they tell the tale not of one woman but of thousands who are left behind when their husbands leave home to earn a living and sometimes never come back. The once rich land became constant home of draughts and famine, poverty and deprivation. "*Sea of Poppies*" shows us the beginning of some such ill-fated tales of displacement and migration. They don't know where the future will take them but the past has closed doors on them and they are left with no option but to move on. The snatches of the folk-songs that intersperse the narrative bring the story closer to the soil and the people it talks about. But also highlight the painful realization that all that these people are left with are memories of their land that they will probably never return to. We are never very sure whether it is the natural warmth of the people and the culture that brings the narrative so close to the reader or the sheer dexterity of the novelist in his art but at the end of the day we have a novel that gives us a close glimpse of the beauty of culture and the history of pain of a region that the urban India usually associates with backwardness and poverty. The beauty of the novel is that the long-standing concern of Ghosh regarding the subaltern studies becomes an interesting aspect of his creative output without sounding loud or overpowering. It is there to be heard by those wanting to hear it running alongside the stories.

## Conclusion

"*Sea of Poppies*" being just one part of the trilogy Ghosh plans to write. With "*River of Smoke*" has a sharper focus on the workings of the colonizing machinery. But the analysis might need more space as the parallels one

can read of between the lines with the contemporary world are too real to be ignored as fiction. It will be interesting to see how much further he will take his journey of maturity as a writer. The direction that Indian Fiction is taking with its increasing attempts to come close to the reality of the country and reflect the mood of the people will go a long way in releasing it from the ivory towers of being the literature of the elite and privileged few.

## References

Ghosh, Amitav, *The Hungry Tide*, New Delhi, Ravi Dayal, 2004.

- *Sea of Poppies*, New Delhi, Penguin Viking, 2008.

Paranjape, Makarand, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*, Simla, I.I.A.S., 2000.

Sankaran, Chitra ed., *History Narrative and Testimony in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh, Diasporic Predicaments: Interview with Ghosh*, Chitra Sankaran, New York, SUNY Press, 2012, the interview is also found at [www.sunypress.edu/pdf/62322](http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/62322)