A Critical Study of the New Face of the Old Colonialism in Ghosh's the Circle of Reason and In an Antique Land

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the contextual elements used in Amitav Ghosh's In an Antique Land and The Circle of Reasont to reflect the new garb of the old colonialism. This contextuality is narratively traced through discussing specific political and economic issues in the two selected works. The main objective of this paper is to shed light on the expansion of Western power, which has acquired the wealth of Eastern societies throughout history. This phenomenon started with the arrival of the Portuguese in India and continued in time through the activities of the East India Company till the Gulf War of the 1990s. Therefore, this study takes a step out of Ghosh's novelistic texts to present how a work of fiction gives Ghosh, as a postcolonial commentator, enough space to address his contextual issues. The paper tries to answer one main research question: To what extent does Ghosh manage to contextualize a new framework to the concept of colonization in the two selected works? The conclusion drawn from this paper reveals that Ghosh blends the past with the present in a non-chrono logical order to emphasize that Western colonization has come to the East or near East countries under different garbs throughout history. Still, the real target is to seize the wealth in this region.

Keywords: borders, cosmopolitan, multicultural, multi-religious, the spice trade, oil industry, maritime trade, colonialism, terrorism,

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh uses a double narrative technique to travel backwards and forward in space and time. This trait enables him to mix past incidents with contemporary issues to interpret such events and grant the current situations a historical depth. Thus Ghosh deploys the motif of travel to achieve this aim. The journey is used as a symbol of discovery; it involves exploration and stepping into the mysterious worlds to understand the self and the new arena around. In Edward Said's words, "To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it" (32). This paper sheds light on the expansion of Western power, which has acquired the wealth of Eastern societies throughout history. This phenomenon started with the arrival of the Portuguese in India and continued in time through the activities of the East India Company till the Gulf War of the 1990s. Therefore, this study takes a step out of Ghosh's novelistic texts to present how a work of fiction gives Ghosh, as a postcolonial commentator, enough space to address his contextual issues.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the contemporary writers who reject the political boundaries in his writing. Obviously, most of his fictional and non-fictional works mostly concentrate on transcending the boundaries that might restrict people of the world from mingling and interacting with each other.
Thus his imaginary characters navigate the boundaries of the world, paying no attention to spatial or temporal barriers that might restrain their travels. Throughout his life, Ghosh used to travel to many places during his childhood, while growing up and in his academic qualification. In an interview with World Literature Today, he clarifies, "my parents moved around a lot. I mean our home was in Calcutta in some way, but we also moved around a lot" (Aldama 85). All through his life, he crosses many countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, the U.K., Egypt, Tunis, Burma, Thailand, Malay, and the U.S.A. Such journeys have broadened his knowledge about the whole world and enabled him to comprehend the entire situations in the globe. Early experience in his life has moulded his thoughts and stimulated his curiosity to know the other hidden parts of the world after that. So, Ghosh distances himself from India and views it from a far distance. In his essay, "The March of the Novel through History", Ghosh argues, "to even perceive one's immediate environment one must somehow distance oneself from it", and that "to locate oneself through prose, one must begin with an act of dislocation" (303). Therefore, his characters do not stay in the same place, but they indulge in travel worldwide. In this regard, Robert Dixon remarks that Ghosh's characters "do not occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across borders" (10).

Ghosh acquires international recognition because the fictional characters he creates are individuals who are associated with India and many places around the globe. In other words, new characters are deregionalised individuals living in a broader world. The writer owes this trend to the recent globalization phenomenon, in which the internet enormously narrows down the distances between people. It is this new world where all multicultural, multilingual, and multi-religious people meet. What distinguishes Ghosh's literary career is how he portrays the anthropological, social, and cultural setting through characterization. Utilizing his powers as a writer, Ghosh subjects the territories drawn by such contexts to his critical analysis. A global citizen, Ghosh vouches for the equal mobilization of codes across borders. This perspective accords him of a liberationist who, like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Homi K. Bhabha, believes in the mutual coexistence of differences with none privileged over the other(s).

Ghosh's style of narration is mixing up and the current event with past incidents. This continuous moving in space and time deprives his chronological order novels, which is an essential part of the novel. P. S. Ravi views this technique as a "radically different perception of history", contending that "So artistically is the new and old synthesized that events of the past come alive, making it a living experience" (39). Juxtaposing different historical period with one another is one of Ghosh's literary techniques to violate the conventional temporal divisions; moreover, he tries to find the relationships between the past, the present, and the future. This feature shows the continuous connection in history between events in the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. In his novels In an Antique Land and The Circle of Reason, Ghosh deploys such juxtapositions to dramatize his postcolonial comments on the present status quo.

1.1 Objectives of the Research

This paper attempts to achieve the following objectives:

1- To shed light on the expansion of Western power, which has acquired the wealth of Eastern societies throughout history.

2- To show how colonialism adopts different forms and shapes throughout history.

3- To demonstrate the extent to which new colonialism is shaped and reshaped by certain political and economic circumstances.

1.2 Research Questions

The paper tries to answer the main research questions:

1- To what extent does Ghosh manage to contextualize a new framework to the concept of colonization in the two selected works?

2- How does Ghosh show the new garb of the old colonialism in the selected works?

2. Literature Review

Many writers deal with Amitav Ghosh's novels from a Postcolonial perspective and tackle the two aspects of power and colonialism in his works.

S. Moorthy (2015) shows that Amitav Ghosh is a postcolonial writer who talks about colonized India in his novels and deals with hybridist of Indians due to colonization era. He also points out that postcolonial literature is repositioning the reification of the Britushness and new writers such as Amitav Ghosh speak about transnational literature. In other words, postcolonial Indian writers deviate from the western style of writing to involve new issues relevant to their situations. Moorthy points out that Amitav Ghosh "attempts to present the colonial, pre-colonial, and postcolonial worlds through the mouthpiece of the protagonist or any other character." (12)

Fatima Kalpakli (2016) argues in her paper that Amitav Ghosh, in his novel, In an Antique Land inquires the world's borders that separate the nations of the world as they are artificial borders. She goes on by saying that
politicians artificially draw boundaries to separate the countries of the world. According to Kalpakli, Ghosh believes in the globalized world, and all people of the world live in this global village apart from their differences.

Claire Chambers (2006), in his paper "Representation of the Oil Encounter in Amitav Ghosh The Circle of Reason", as the writer indicates that Ghosh makes an analogy between spice trades in medieval times with oil industry in the modern period. He says that the oil industry in the Middle East attracts many people from all over the world to the Arabian Peninsula seeking their livelihood after discovering petrol in the Middle East.

Venkateswarlu Yesapogu (2016) points out in his paper that Amitav Ghosh’s fictions are true representative of postcolonial novels. His writings come in the framework of Indo-English literature, and he deals with national and international themes such as migration, multiculturalism, Diasporas, exile and dualism. Such situations bring Indian migrants to live side-by-side with other migrants from different countries in the global village arena.

3. Methodology

This research scrutinizes the contents of Amitav Ghosh's selected novels from the perspective of postcolonial theory; the writer writes back and attempts to reinterpret the history of the colonial period by using a double narrative technique to travel backwards and forward in space and time. Thus, methodologically, the paper examines this notion in the selected works using critical discourse analysis and postcolonial theory. In critical discourse analysis, the study also emphasizes Edward Said’s Orientalism and Bill Ashcroft’s Postcolonial Studies Reader dealing with the relationship between colonizer-colonized. Furthermore, the research focuses on Claire Chambers, who attempts to find an analogy between spice trades in medieval times with the modern period’s oil industry. The paper also focuses on other critics worldwide and shows their opinions about the selected works from a postcolonial perspective.

4. Discussion

Amitav Ghosh has been affected by Arab literature due to his study in Egypt and Tunisia. He spent a year and a half in Tunisia and Egypt in academic pursuits. While in Tunisia, Ghosh earned a Diploma in Arabic from an Institute in 1979. His anthropological study took him to Alexandria University to pursue his academic research, by doing fieldwork in an Egyptian village, as a part of his doctoral research in 1980. In 1981, he was awarded D. Phil in Social Anthropology for his fieldwork in Egypt from Oxford. His experiences in Tunisia and Egypt and his encounters with ordinary people are reflected in his literary works. In his novel, In an Antique Land, Amitav Ghosh attempts to link India with the Arab world, as both nations are interconnected historically and commercially throughout history. In this regard, Binita Vijay Gheewala points out,

An Antique Land is concerned with postcolonial theory as well as subaltern studies. Egypt and India are two countries that share a common history of colonial violence and need modernization. He very meticulously expresses the tense relationship between these two countries. He flashes out the networks of exchange viz. money, people and goods, which were transported and traded between India and Egypt in the middle ages as in the twentieth century. (227)

An Antique Land has a double narrative technique, and at the same time, it keeps moving between two periods of the present and the past. It contains two stories- life in medieval times as well as in the twentieth century. It also intermixes the events of the past with the incidents of the present. In S. Moothri’s words, "The writer presents his own experiences that he spends his time in the villages and towns in the Nile Delta and his rebuilding of the lives of a Jewish trader and his Indian Slave in the eleventh century from documents from the Cairo Geniza lie at the core of this novel in the shape of a traveller's book" (12). Furthermore, the novel In an Antique land shows how Eastern cosmopolitan people live side by side peacefully apart from Western influence. In Carlotta Beretta words, "A cosmopolitan perspective informs Ghosh’s novel. This happens in ‘In an Antique Land’, where the 12th-century figure of the slave Bomma represents an untimely link between India and Egypt” (251). The book also talks about the writer’s travels between India and Egypt. He dives deep into some facts in the past and comes up resurfacing with multidimensional discoveries. Due to the sudden discovery of the documents that refer to the Indian slave in the archives of Oxford University, the writer hybridizes different genres to achieve this seamless work of the imagination. This thematic hybridity, a prominent postcolonial feature, problematize the generic categorization of the book. A hybrid to prevent it from yielding to any Western-based classification signifies Ghosh’s narrative strategy to dispense with such hierarchies. In this way, Ghosh dramatizes the arbitrariness and limitations of Eurocentric narrative conventions by showing his characters as "global citizens and enjoying the sense of belonging to the whole world regardless of religious, racial/ethnic or political borders" (Kalpakli, 82)

An Antique Land reflects economic and political issues related to the Middle East, such as the oil industry, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the second Gulf war leading to the "Desert Storm" headed by the U.S.A. army to free Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation. Ghosh links the oil industry of modern times with the spice trade of medieval times. In this regard, Claire Chambers points out that Ghosh makes a comparison between spice trade and oil industry as he says, “The comparison is exploited with sophistication in ‘In an Antique Land’, in which medieval spice traders are
depicted alongside present-day oil migrants” (35). Furthermore, Shirley Chew sums up the commercial aspect of the two periods as “the spice trade of the Middle Ages with its principal centres at Fustat-Cairo... and the modern oil industry in the decade leading up to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (July 31, 1990) and the Gulf war (January-February, 1991)” (104).

“Petro fiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel" is an essay written by Amitav Ghosh in which he likens the ‘Oil industry' of the modern time with 'Spice Trade' of the ancient times. He comes to conclude that both commodities held responsibility for bringing colonizers to the East. He says, “Oil is the only commodity that can serve as an analogy for pepper” (75). Ghosh points out that the competition for the spice trade brought the Portuguese forces to the Indian ocean in ancient times; in Ghosh's words, “As far as the Portuguese were concerned, they had declared a proprietor right over the Indian Ocean: since none of the peoples, who lived around it had thought to claim ownership of it before their arrival” (AL, 288). Likewise, the oil attracted the attention of western forces to come to the Arab world. Therefore, both products motivate Western troops to invade the Eastern countries. Peter Hitchcock discusses this issue of modern capitalism in his paper ‘Oil in American Imaginary'. He says: “It is common to view oil as symbolic of all that is dynamic and disastrous in advanced capitalism. Just as oil dominates commodity trade and circulation globally, so it's symbolic order critically organizes competing discourses about its human worth" (81).

An Antique Land depicts the tremendous commercial maritime trade extended from Malabar Coast through the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean ports. Therefore, the text links India with the Middle East through trade interactions. It is also considered a recollection of the maritime trade, which was prosperous during that period, as Mangalore connected with Aden and some other Middle Eastern ports. In this regard, Shirley Chew comments, “Ghosh’s remaking of the lost world of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trade conjures up a Mangalore long since vanished but which was once the hub of a global trading community as well as the crossroads of the cultural and spiritual life of the Malabar” (110). Travels between the territories of Eastern citizens in the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial eras have been clearly shown in ‘In an Antique Land’. Mangalore, for example, was a cosmopolitan city where traders came from various countries to do trade activities there. Foreign ships from China, Sumatra, Yemen and Persia were routinely welcomed in Indian ports. Duarte Barbosa observes, “The city’s merchants included ‘Arabs, Persians, Guzarates, Khorasanys, and Decanyes’, who were known collectively as pardesi, or foreigners” (243). Despite cultural, religious, and linguistic differences between Mangalore traders, there was reciprocal trust and mutual understanding. In an Antique Land, this ancient vision of cosmopolitan society compares it with the modern conception of globalization. In this juxtaposition, Ghosh critiques the current globalizing process, an accumulation of imperialism and colonialism.

In the meantime, maritime trade flourished in India and played a very influential role in enhancing trade relations with the outside world. The existence of ports on the Eastern and the Western coast of India facilitated domestic and international trade activities. Indian merchants entered into mutual trade relations with other merchants from Central Asia, China and Arabia. Brajadal Chattopadhyaya, in his essay, "Trade and Commerce in Ancient India", observes: "The lucrative commerce and economic gains further encouraged them [Indian merchants] to sail across the Indian Ocean and to go to distant lands. They entered into Commercial intercourse with different Asian and European Countries" (245). The Yemeni ports of Aden and Al-Mukha were used as a transit for Indian merchandise shipped to Egypt. Egyptian merchants seemed to consider Yemeni ports their supply-centre of Indian goods. Aden had a significant location on the trade route; Fischel points out, "the city of Aden, which was a great commercial centre and transit port of considerable significance. From Aden, the articles were brought over by ships through the Red Sea to the West side of the Egyptian-Sudanese coast" (162).

Such communal understanding that had existed for a long time between people coming from diverse backgrounds becomes a means for the postcolonial novelist to target and juxtaposes it with colonial oppression. Medieval traders had many things in common, as they intermarried among themselves; for example, In an Antique Land, Ben Yiju himself married an Indian woman, Aish. After her conversion to Judaism, he had many children with her. However, this mutual understanding came to an end with the coming of the Portuguese, that is, with the arrival of Vasco da Gama to India. The Portuguese played a vital role in destroying that history of tolerance, cooperation and mutual understanding that had emerged among merchants in Mangalore. The multicultural society of Mangalore negatively affected by the cruelty of Europeans, especially when the Portuguese expelled all Muslim traders from the city: "Within a few years of that day [when Vasco da Gama arrived in India] the knell had been struck for the world that had brought Bomma, Ben Yiju and Aish together, and another age had begun" (286). Ghosh seems to suggest that the Westerners' presence in the East brought violence to the whole region to monopolize the wealth of Eastern societies. Himadeep Muppidi scrutinizes the issue of modern violence that has been brought by western people saying: "a West that was more than, other than, the possessor of the technologies of modern violence" (59).

One of the essential themes of The Circle of Reason in which Ghosh turns his hand to critique colonization of the East by the West, is the monopolization of oil in the Middle East. This issue accentuates the significance of the place setting of the second part of the novel, al-Ghazira, which is a land of dreams for the migrating labour force. Al-Ghazira becomes a romantic place for many migrants to be enriched there; John J. Su argues that “Similar visions of
beauty as the embodiment of a highly organized community underline the utopian thinking of characters for the majority of the novel" (73). More than a mere fictional element, al-Ghazira stands for the Middle Eastern countries which have been colonized due to their oilfields. The second section of the novel, "Rajis", is set in al-Ghazira. This fictional country has many similarities with actual countries like Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. Hajji Fahmy, in chapter twelve, makes this point clear in his narrative about the history of al-Ghazira before the discovery of oil. It was ruled by its own king, the Malik, who had a certain amount of autonomy. However, after discovering oil, the British sent their envoy to al-Ghazira to convince the Malik to sign a treaty that gave them an extensive privilege for digging rights. The Malik angrily rejected the idea of relying on the greatness of the history of the Arab civilization. He was an ethnic Arab leader harrowing back to the excellence of the glorious "histories of the great Baghdad and Cairene dynasties" and also singing the panegyric lives of the Arab "caliphs and the kings" (249).

The British oilmen used all means to threaten the Malik to sign the treaty, exhibiting their warships on the seashore; finally, the Malik is forced to sign the document. It is told that the oilmen imprison Malik and put him under custody as a consequence of his initial refusal to sign the treaty in their favor. Moreover, they install his half-brother, the Amir, in his place. What is of consequence about the Amir is that he has been educated in America on their expenses; hence he proves a proper channel through which the colonizers can control the oilfields and the city. They appoint him first as the oil minister and then the minister of public work. The British oil-people try to humiliate the former authority by offering to "pension the old Malik off in their own country" (262) because of his resistance to their greedy enterprise to control the oilfields. Therefore, the oilmen acquire all extensive rights to dig, work, and have employment rights in al-Ghazira. Thus they offer no job opportunities for the Ghaziri people; "Instead they brought their own men" (261) to occupy all jobs in the oil fields. In this way, the oilmen change their mission entirely from acquiring the rights for digging to possess the oil in the region. This fact reminds us of Bill Ashcroft's clarification that "European societies . . . have combined the urge to travel with the urge to possess" (229).

Although Ghosh wrote The Circle of Reason at the end of the 1980s, it can be read in the light of the political-economic context of the present time, especially after the year 2000, since the novel attends to such contemporary issues as "War on Terror" and international competition for the oil industry. Recently, terrorism had become synonymous with the Middle Easterners, just as darkness has been associated with Africans. In the second part of the novel, Alu is repeatedly referred to as a terrorist: "the Suspect was believed to be somewhere in this area. There are several extremist groups around here . . . he'd probably try to contact them" (153). When Alu runs away from the Indian police to the Middle East, he is mistakenly accused of being in contact with the extremist group there; the Suspect has joined up with some Middle Eastern terrorist groups. . . . Has connections there and that 'he's bound to get involved with them' (165). The Circle of Reason novelizes the stereotypical view that terror is connected with the Middle East; this concept emerges as an international phenomenon nowadays because of the immense influence of the Western mass media on people around the world that happened after the 11th September attack U.S.A. Therefore, the Westerners brought their forces to the Middle East under the pretext of fighting terrorism, but their hidden aim is to put their hands on the oilfields.

Despite its publication for nearly four decades back, The Circle of Reason still holds some links with the political situation in the Middle East. Such problems as the episode of deposing the Malik and imposing the Amir are quite similar to the tragic scene of imposing and disposing of many Arabian Peninsula rulers. During the Malik reign that lasted for about thirty years, he succeeded to cherish some political autonomy and independence in decision-making. Although he can be critiqued as a native, his people witnessed all-pervasive progress in the country. Western forces came to the Gulf State under the pretext of "War on Terror", "Democracy", and "Human Rights", but their hidden aim was to put their hands on the oil wells. Vineet Mehta argues about this issue by saying: "The neo-colonist machinery operates and flourishes in the Arab region on the pretext of modernizing this region and often conflicts, like the infamous U.S.-Iraq war, have been imposed on the pretext of replacing despotism, barbaric autocrats" (2). Furthermore, Vineet Mehta also talks about the tragic scene of disposing the Malik and imposing the Amir by saying, "replacing of the old Malik by a puppet Amir, Ghosh presents an allegory of the new-imperialist conquest of the Middle East by Western oil giants" (10). In Douglas Little's words, "the region's most recognizable symbol has probably been the oil well" (43). In their attempts to colonize the Arab mineral sources, they assembled their air forces, troops and warships in the Gulf and got ready for the war. The U.S.A president escalated the tension in the region while addressing the Alghazera's leader and his sons to depart their country within forty-eight hours. The U.S.A president pronouncement gave a hint to begin the war to control the oil fields in the region. Since then, the whole globe still suffers from the increase in fuel prices that led to recession and economic crises.

The war resulted in the deposition of the Malik and installing a new leader who is obedient to the colonizing forces and hence no longer a threat to Western profits. The Americans opened massive prisons for rebels and resistance militias who showed disapproval for Western domination. They incarcerated all their enemies and used all kinds of tortures to force the prisoners to name the other secret members of their movement. The most compelling scene that caused exasperation worldwide, and at the same time, brought international sympathy for prisoners was
showing their naked bodies in mass media. That was a very hostile behaviour that was intended to emasculate the prisoners. This hostility has aroused the reaction of many intellectuals, including Amitav Ghosh. In his article, “The Theatre of Cruelty: Reflection on the Anniversary of Abu Ghaib”, Ghosh juxtaposes the agonies of prisoners in the so-called Abu Ghaib jail with those Indians during the British colonization period, observing that the jailers “were also careful to target what they thought were deep-rooted fears and taboos” (32).

Moreover, the former Malik, who was considered the incarnation of an ideal leader, was hung during the wholly festival occasion. This cruel treatment has only one interpretation: to silence the others in the region and warn them not to show any resistance to the Western masters. This aggressiveness was intended to manoeuvre their ability to impose dictates on the whole world. In this sense, Ghosh also indicates in the same article that “The war in the Middle East has often been described in the language of the classroom: It is said to be intended to provide lessons in democracy and to teach the ways of freedomand so on” (32).

5. Conclusion

Throughout history, Western colonization came to the East or near East countries under different garbs, but the real interest was to occupy the wealth in this region. In the middle ages, for example, the Portuguese came to the East for the sake of discovery; in time, they changed their aims. Similarly, the East India Company represented their successors, which transformed its mission from trade activity to occupation. Gisele Cardoso de Lemos argues about the mission of East India Company in the 19th century, as he says; “In this period, the East India Company consolidated their territorial control, focusing on despotic profit as well as systematic and efficient exploitation. Thus, the concepts of knowledge and authority also changed.” (1-2). The same incident was reiterated in the late twentieth century when the Westerners came to the Middle East under the pretext of civilizing mission but afterwards changed their plans entirely and got involved in the colonizing activity. In both of his literary works, In an Antique Land and The Circle of Reason, Ghosh blends the past events with the present situation in a non-chronological order. In other words, he gives the current situation a historical depth, displaying history as a process of continuous circulation.

Therefore, everything turned upside-down with the arrival of the Westerners in Eastern societies because they politicized their residence in this region. Thus the peaceful nature of the Indian Ocean dramatically changed into violence, and the first episode started with the dismissal of the Arab merchants by the Portuguese from the coastal cities of India. The Western forces monopolized the Indian trade as well as the oil industry by using unlimited power. In Medieval times, they took control of the maritime route in the Indian Ocean. They are recently inciting the pirates to attack trade’s ships in the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Gulf and the Red sea to take over the trade's route. It goes without saying that violence has been brought to the Orient societies by the Western forces because they use power to control the wealth of the Eastern countries. Ultimately, Ghosh suggests that there must be a global rejection of violence and its ideology which is a legacy of the West’s colonization of the East. Ghosh votes for the peaceful coexistence of multinational and multicultural people all over the world without taking into account the differences among them.

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