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Displacement and Identity: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's Select Novels

Ours is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced persons, mass migration.

Edward Said

(The Mind of Winter 440)

My father was from Chittagong and he ended up in Arakan; I ended up in Rangoon; you went from Mandalay to Ratnagiri and now you're here too. There are people who have the luck to end their lives where they began them. But this is not something that is owed to us.

Amitav Ghosh *(The Glass Palace 10)*

The essence of identity which, is sometimes understood in terms of something fixed and unvariable, is questioned in the contemporary world of transnational, transcultural communication. The sense of rootedness associated with identity is replaced by multiplicity of affiliations one enjoys on account of inhabiting diverse geographical and cultural space. In his fictional as well as non-fictional works, Amitav Ghosh presents numerous characters who straddle cultures, cross borders—national and/or cultural, and inhabit diverse spaces. In fact Ghosh's fictions delineate the unique predicaments of individuals whose lives are changed by historical forces beyond their control. No wonder migration, displacement, dislocation have occupied centre stage in Ghosh's creative output and this concern with the loss of rootedness experienced by his characters problematizes the notion of singular identity. It may be mentioned that Ghosh's peripatetic life itself contributes to the sustained treatment of the notion of identity in his fictional works. In a number of occasions Ghosh has focused on the centrality of migration and displacement in his works. It is interesting to see that Ghosh's characters, ranging from ordinary people to kings and rulers, from colonized people to the postcolonial individuals, from pre-modern slaves and traders to the modern, contemporary workers, experience displacement and dislocation in their lives and this geographical and cultural dislocation impact considerably

on the notion of their selves. The dispersal of characters from their land of origin to alien places because of various historical factors like colonialism, trade and commerce etc., problematize the rootedness of self. But it will be argued that Ghosh does not offer any one-dimensional treatment of the issue of displacement, because he is fully alert to the multiple possibilities it can engender and one's social location is intimately linked with the possible change in one's attitude to life in displacement. In his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) Ghosh shows how a number of lower middle class people ferry across the Indian Ocean towards Al-Ghazira in order to earn livelihood. One of the major tropes in Ghosh's fictional oeuvre revolves round the displacement, dislocation that affect their sense of identity. This present chapter seeks to make a critical investigation of how migration, displacement, dislocation and diasporic experience impact individual identity in a globalized world.

Ghosh's characters which comprise motley of people hailing from diverse socio-cultural background are dislocated from their homeland to a different place sometimes by historical forces and voluntary exercise. People who are forcibly dispersed from their familiar geo-cultural surrounding suffer cultural fragmentation and the people who migrate for better economic opportunity try to relocate themselves in the new environment. Not surprisingly Ghosh's characters embody varied cultural manifestation leading to a number of interactions with unfamiliar socio-cultural setting. The most visible consequence of such displacement is the evolution of a mobile, hybrid community who straddle various cultures and participate in imaginative and cultural artefacts. The dispersal of people across the continent in the wake of European colonialism, transportation of Africans across the Atlantic, Asians for working in colonial outposts as indentured labourers as well as voluntary migration of people because of economic opportunity offered by globalization show the insufficiency of traditional ways of identifying ourselves. In other words worldwide migration has led us to rethink traditional affiliations in the construction of identity. Interestingly the migrants who experience displacement and dislocation due to historical factors formulate their older affiliations differently. In fact Ghosh shows the vast range of response and reaction of the migrants to their older identities defined by national, religious or regional affiliations.

Amitav Ghosh's novels depict the displacement of people as the direct fallout of a number of historical factors like European colonialism, Partition of the subcontinent, World War II, British invasion of Burma etc. The migration of individuals is generally explained in terms of certain imperative like 'push' and 'pull' factors. The push factor is generally understood negatively as the socio-economic compulsion that leads people to take to flight. This kind of push factor refers primarily to war, ethnic cleansing, riot, violence, poverty etc. that forces people

abandon their home in order to settle in another, alien place. This kind of displacement creates traumatic sense of dislocation and migrants fail to integrate themselves in the alien land. However the pull factors are variables that attract people from other locations because they offer positive opportunities or amenities. The economic globalization and technological advancement have created opportunities to the guest workers. The migration in contemporary age is facilitated by worldwide connectivity that makes movement easier, comfortable, and less hazardous. Algerian guest workers in France may be considered as the glaring examples of this kind of migration. The gulf region attracts a large number of people from the Indian subcontinent and other places. The US and other advanced capitalist countries have attracted large number of IT professionals who migrate to these places for better economic opportunities or higher lifestyle. Understandably migration to a different locale not only impacts in the material condition of the migrants but affects their mode of negotiation and interaction with the cultural condition of the land. Since the migrants bring their own cultural baggage to the new land, they confront different socio-cultural set-up leading to a number of possible repercussions. This cultural interaction shapes up the sense of who they are. In Ghosh's fictions which are peopled with migrants uprooted from their place of origin, question of identity assumes different dimension regarding its constitution, sustenance and possible re-formulation.

There are two important aspects of any migratory experience—material condition and cultural interaction. The migrants may not always find their new place of habitat materially advantageous, for the dislocated people often are forced to lead life in abject poverty. The migrants may be in danger in foreign countries because of the various laws and restrictions imposed upon the entry of people. Ghosh depicts the painful life of the migrants, particularly dislocated women in his first novel *The Circle of Reason*. The conflict-torn life at home, exploitation of all sorts, economic depravity forces women like Zindi, Karthamma, Kulfi, to migrate to Al-Ghazira. These women suffer from lack of economic resources resulting in their exploitation. The plight of these migrants problematizes the discourse of globalization that looks upon migration as an innovative way of being in the world. While the world witnesses gradual dispersal of people in this globalized age, Ghosh seeks to focus his attention on this traumatic aspect of migratory life for the dispossessed, deprived and minority people. However Ghosh also shows the possibility of change and prospect of better future for some diasporic people and migrants who exploit the prevalent socio-cultural condition in their favour. The point I wish to make here is that Ghosh presents multi-dimensionality of migratory experience as lived by dislocated people in different points of time. In *The Glass Palace*, for example, Ghosh shows how Rajkumar, who travels to Burma in his teenage, makes use of the colonial machinery in

order to consolidate his entrepreneurial enterprise. Rajkumar's success in Burma attests to his personal acumen, shrewd intelligence. The migrants may experience hostility in the land of their relocation. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh illustrates this sense of being unwanted, unwelcomed through the pathetic plight of the refugees from East Pakistan who try to relocate themselves in Sunderbans in Bengal. The migrants are considered as trespassers, and are not enfolded within the borders of nation-state. Therefore in Ghosh's novels migration is presented in multiple ways evoking pluralistic approach to the issue of migration and the possible impact it entails upon identity formation.

The identity of people who are displaced from ancestral residence is determined on the basis of their relationship to the notion of 'home'. No wonder sense of rootedness suggested by home offers the most important coordinate of an individual's identity. In diasporic existence this static notion of home comes to be challenged and replaced by a mobile, variable idea of home that cannot be pinned down to a mere geographical space. Not surprisingly, therefore, we witness this concern with home and the emotional impact it exerts upon the migrants in diasporic and post-colonial literature. A cursory glance at the titles of some postcolonial literatures will immediately tell us about their concern with spatial location—*An Area of Darkness* and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (Naipaul), *Brick Lane* (Monica Ali), *Bombay Duck* (Farrukh Dhondy), *In an Antique Land*, *The Glass Palace* (Ghosh). These works are ostensibly concerned with changing notion of home. The diaspora literature seeks to investigate how people in migration look upon their older identities associated with a geopolitical entity as they migrate to a different socio-cultural locale. The word 'diaspora'¹ which is derived from Greek term '*diasperien*' (from *dia* meaning 'across' and '*sperien*' meaning 'to sow or scatter seeds') suggests the dispersal of people from one geographical location and subsequent relocation in different place². Diaspora thus involves travel and journey, but it is different from travel in the sense that unlike travel which presupposes return to the place from where one has started at the end of the tour, diaspora suggests re-location, settling down to a new place. As Clifford says: 'It (diaspora) involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home (and in this it is different from exile, with its frequently individualistic focus)' (308). Diaspora discourse maintains close relation with the host country and one's nation, interaction between one's 'roots' and 'routes'.

The displacement, dislocation that is accompanied by sense of loss and a longing for a return back to the home country destabilizes the rooted sense of identity. Since the diasporic movement involves settling down to a new place, striking roots elsewhere, one notices complex, multi-dimensional negotiation in one's affiliation to the cultures of one's original and host

country. It must however be mentioned that the notion of one's country of origin does not tally with the actuality. An obsession with the homeland that is considered to be central to diasporic discourse and imagination is replaced by newer notion of homeland. Avtar Brah, for example, suggests that what characterizes diasporic imagination is not a longing for a return to homeland, but a 'homing desire': "Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations" (180). Salman Rushdie argues that homelands in the diasporic imagination are transmuted into 'imaginary homelands' and the writers who are pulled by the strings of the past and try to reclaim sense of the self as understood in their homeland create not actual villages or cities but merely 'imaginary homelands'. Rushdie suggests that the migratory experience and diasporic reality of the world have now supplanted the notion of singular and stable identity. He suggests that we need to recognize the reality of our partial and plural nature of identity. Rushdie suggests that displacement and migration have helped in the emergence of new formulations of identity. Homi Bhabha similarly considers displacement and disjunction as productive condition and rejects the notion of a fixed, rooted identity. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha notes that we need to rethink the notion of identity as understood in nationalist discourse. He suggests that borders need to be seen not as rigid demarcations separating spaces completely but as thresholds, in-between spaces that create scope for re-formulation of identity. In other words these are hybrid spaces. Bhabha says: '...The need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (2). Bhabha thus looks upon identity as incomplete, plural and diasporic experience attests to the multi-dimensional nature of identity.

Amitav Ghosh problematizes the issue of identity by offering a migrant perspective through which the characters who suffer geographical and cultural displacement negotiate their affiliation. No wonder the vision that emerges from Ghosh's works is diverse, multi-dimensional. In *The Shadow Lines* which critiques the monolithic concept of nationalism Ghosh shows how spatially and culturally displaced people perceive their identity. Two important characters—Ila and Thamma—look upon their identity from the perspectives of migrants/diaspora. Ila, daughter

of an Indian diplomat consciously chooses to settle in England precisely because her spatial movement from her homeland, India to the metropolitan England will, she believes, ensure her freedom. During an altercation with the narrator and his uncle Tridib at a nightclub in Calcutta where she is debarred from dancing with a stranger, Ila explains the reason for her migration to England: ‘Do you know why I chose to settle in England. It’s because of you to enjoy freedom’ (88-89). Understandably the claustrophobic patriarchal culture that imposes the burden of sexual purity on women drives Ila to England. Since her migration is impelled by conservative ambience at home, she tries to relocate her home in a new metropolitan space. She tries to acquire English identity by joining with her classmates in different programmes and by taking part in different movements. But Ila fails to strike her root in the alien place because the rhetoric of exclusive nationalism operative in England ‘otherizes’ her for her racial status. Ghosh suggests that the formation of identity is not just determined on the basis of one’s subjective perception of one’s location in the world. It is on the other hand equally the notion others hold about one. In other words the perception of the world has a strong hold upon the sense of identity one holds. Ila’s desire to assimilate with the English is not fulfilled because her racial identity as an Asian immigrant prevents her from being accepted by her English classmates. She thus becomes a victim of racist attack and her dashing boyfriend Nick Price whom she subsequently marries avoids her company in the public for fear of being seen with an Asian. What we see in Ila is that Ila’s immigrant status stands in the way of attaining the identity she covets so much. Ila’s case illustrates the pangs of the first generation immigrant who can neither completely abandon her older identity nor embrace new identity. Despite her radical desire to get rid of Indian patriarchal morality, she does not altogether reject it. She confides to the narrator her sexual purity—something she inherits from her cultural upbringing and something for which she cannot accept Nick wholeheartedly after the latter’s sexual promiscuity is revealed. Consequently Ila has to lead a life of compromise with her husband who leads a parasitic life upon the wealth of Ila’s father. Ila hovers between two cultures—the culture of her ancestral homeland she rejects and the culture of the land of her relocation that rejects her. She remains incarcerated within the confused state and cannot resolve the crisis in her identity. Ghosh’s presentation of Ila critiques the discourse of globalization and cosmopolitanism that sometimes seeks to elide the pangs of life as lived in diasporic space.

Thamma on the other hand fails to construct a stable sense of her identity. This is because of the geographical and cultural displacement she has suffered as a result of the Partition. After the death of her husband she comes to Calcutta in search of job and remains confined within her nation that is ‘messily at odd with her birthplace’ (152) following the partition. No wonder people

like Thamma who experience displacement because of the partition of the subcontinent, cannot construct an unproblematic identity for themselves. This is because their sense of identity is severely fractured by the displacement imposed upon them by history. Ghosh critiques the nationalist discourse that emphasizes upon the rigidity of territorial borders by problematizing the notion of home as perceived by Thamma. Home as the fixed coordinate of one's identity is disrupted in the conceptual framework of the displaced people like Thamma. Her rigorous emphasis on the discreteness of national borders may have been inspired by the nationalist rhetoric that seeks to construct separate spaces along the border. But even though she tries to construct her identity in consonance with the nationalist discourse, she cannot align herself completely with her national identity. In fact Ghosh critiques the exclusivist nationalist discourse by posing characters like Thamma who perceives deep fissure in her sense of belonging to the land. Her censorship of Ila and the latter's migration to a place she does not belong to stands counter-productive as she herself becomes a foreigner in the land of her birth. No wonder her visit to Dhaka is marked by a strange feelings of unfamiliarity and she constantly searches for all those traces of her earlier Dhaka. Tridib punctures the nationalist discourse by pointing out the deep contradiction as a result of which one becomes a foreigner in one's place of birth. Thamma cannot unproblematically subscribe to the dominant notion of nationalist identity since she is the victim of history that does not grant her the middle class dream of having a neat symmetry between home and nationality. James Clifford offers a perceptive comment on the problematic of identity for people like Thamma by suggesting that people whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be cured by merging into a new national community' (307). No wonder, people like Thamma cannot have any sense of homeliness. In other words she is never at home in her new home in Calcutta. For people like Thamma therefore there is 'no home but in memory'.

It is commonplace that people who are displaced from their familiar socio-cultural moorings generally suffer from sense of loss and try to relocate themselves in new place. Home thus becomes a marker of identity and the notion of home itself undergoes change in the discourse of diaspora and displacement. Ghosh questions the place-based notion of identity that is enshrined in the nationalist rhetoric. The displacement of people problematizes the nationalist discourse. In *The Glass Palace*, for example, Ghosh shows the displacement of 'home'. One may suggest that Ghosh's evocation of diasporic experience disturbs the stabilizing discourse of nationalism. Ghosh seeks to foreground movement as 'a mode of being in the world'. In fact Ghosh critiques the discourses of race, nationality, gender that seek to ground our identity to certain fixed markers. His celebration of movement thus serves to interrogate this fixity of

identity and makes us rethink the static notion of identity. No wonder in Ghosh's scheme of things home comes to be displaced for a number of times. His characters understand the mobile and provisional nature of home and thus seek to challenge the unitary notion of identity. Rajkumar comes to Burma as a teenager and later on climbs the ladder of success. Rajkumar's orphanage bespeaks of the need to create an identity for himself—an identity that is not determined by the traditional markers like race, lineage, creed. He has to fashion a place in the world. Thus Burma becomes a home to him, for he makes his fortune there. Rajkumar's later success as timber merchant may be interpreted as his entrepreneurial skill in making use of the colonial machinery in Burma. But the sense of rootedness as he begins to experience in Burma is disturbed when the invasion of Burma by the British forces Indians like him move toward India. Ghosh critiques the nationalist discourse for its emphasis on the bounded territory and that is why home becomes a highly charged term in the discourse. The displacement, dislocation of people interrogates this fixity of identity as suggested by one's ties with a particular geographical locale. In *The Glass Palace* we see how various characters negotiate home in a mobile world that witnessed huge displacement, dislocation due to colonial enterprise. Dolly, for example, seems to imbibe the most flexible notion of 'home' as she has to shift her home from one geographical locale to another at regular intervals. She is brought from her native village to the court of Mandalay which she considers to be her home. Again after nearly twenty years in exile she feels that Outram house is 'home to me now' (112) and that 'if I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner' (113). When she returns to Rangoon, Kemendine House becomes her home. But she does not feel at home after her stay in Burma. When she is forced to leave Burma and resides in Calcutta temporarily, she is never at home. During her stay in Calcutta, she visits Buddhist monastery and follows the Buddhist notion of renunciation of home and identity altogether by becoming a nun. In this epic historical novel Ghosh shows the impact of displacement and dislocation brought about by historical forces upon the perception of oneself. The movement of people from one geographical location to another suggests the insufficiency of constructing any monolithic discourse that may fix one's identity in certain categories. In other words the traditional markers of identity like nationality; caste, etc. get dissolved in a moveable world. Ghosh brings home the point that historical dislocation is at the centre of human experience by showing the reversal of attachment of the Burmese princesses after the death of the king: 'of the four princesses, the two who'd been born in Burma both chose to live on in India. Their younger sisters, on the other hand, both born in India, chose to settle in Burma' (213).

Even though diaspora figures as a key term in Ghosh's displacement of the nationalist identity by foregrounding movement, Ghosh is however not blind to its paradoxical contribution

to the strengthening of national identity. In recent times a number of anti-colonial movements was financed by diaporic community. Therefore we must not surmise that diaspora stands as an alternative to the hegemonic discourse of nationalism. In *The Glass Palace*, for example, the indentured labourers who service the colonial economy in Malay joined the Indian National Army that resisted the colonial government and fought for India's independence. These soldiers have almost fanatical loyalty to the notion of Indian nation about which they have little idea: 'they are fighting for a country they had never seen...what was India to them?...India was the shining mountain beyond the horizon, a sacrament of redemption—a metaphor for freedom in the same way that slavery was a metaphor for the plantation' (521-522). It must be remembered that this diaspora was subject to tremendous suffering since they worked in the colonial outposts. Ghosh evokes the terrifying experience of the labourers during their journey from India to Burma and other places and this tortuous experience is reminiscent of the 'middle passage' endured by the black Atlantic slaves who also helped in the emergence of European modernity'³.

Ghosh foregrounds the constructive role of displacement and dislocation in making one aware of one's position in the society. In Ghosh's novels the characters consolidate the notion of their identity only at a place away from their residence. Since dislocation places one in unfamiliar surrounding, the traditional markers of identity are negotiated more critically. In his generically indeterminate work *In an Antique Land*, which is based on his field work in Egypt, Ghosh himself suffers temporary displacement. As a young researcher pursuing D Phil in social anthropology, Ghosh arrives at small villages in Egypt and starts living among the villagers. During his field work, Ghosh confronts many disturbing questions and comments from the villagers regarding various rituals and practices of his home country. Understandably Ghosh's dislocation from a predominantly Hindu nation to a marginal place in Egypt subjects him to the penetrating scrutiny of the villagers. They interrogate his cultural and religious practices like cremation, cow-worship, circumcision etc. Ghosh's stable identity is suddenly disrupted by these uncomfortable questions and he sometimes engages in altercation with them, particularly with the local Imam who has a poor opinion of India. Displacement and dislocation can help one in developing reasoned understanding of one's position in the world by adopting a perspective from the other. Ghosh who is subjected to a host of questions regarding the 'bizarre' customs of his country, takes a more objective assessment of his position. He develops objective, critical thinking about the various rituals and practices of his religion and culture. He understands that unfamiliarity or difference often is interpreted as 'lack' and thus is considered to be 'other'. In the eyes of the Egyptian villagers Ghosh dwindles into an uncultured, strange individual whose peculiar customs need to be replaced by higher culture. Ghosh recounts the central role of

difference in creating borders among people. He remembers the communal violence in India that was perpetrated in order to exterminate 'other'. Ghosh however is able to improve his standing in the eyes of the villagers when he is asked to inspect a water-pump brought from India. Ghosh understands that the social identity is dependent on the internalization of European notion of modernity. In his heated exchange of words with the Imam, Ghosh suggests that they both 'were travelling in the west'. This travel is marked by their pride in possessing western machines, tanks, bombs etc. The displacement therefore empowers Ghosh in formulating more critical notion of one's place in the world. In other words the Egyptians provide him an opportunity in assessing his location intellectually. In the essay "The March of the Novel through History" Ghosh emphasizes the contributory role of dislocation in understanding one's position in the world: "...to even perceive one's immediate environment one must somehow distance oneself from it." (Ghosh *Imam* 303)

In *The Hungry Tide* Piya's displacement from her metropolitan residence to Sunderbans, a marginalized place in Bengal provides her with newer perspective on border, science, universal discourses like ecology etc. The setting itself provides the volatile nature of human relation and identity. Though widely travelled because of her research undertaken in various parts of the world, Piya gets an opportunity in verifying the validity of various meta-narratives like that of ecology and environmentalism. During her field work, she comes in contact with the pathetic plight of the subalterns who are trying to eke out their living in the most difficult circumstance. During her interaction with Fokir and confrontation over the killing of a tiger by the infuriated mob, Piya understand that the so-called universal discourse of ecology cannot unproblematically be applied to places like Sunderbans. Kanai, a Delhi-based businessman running a translation agency tries to alert Piya about the human cost involved in the implementation of various ecological programmes financed by the global bodies. The subaltern perspective offered by the life and action of the marginalized characters make Piya understand the inauthenticity and invalidity of global projects that do not take into account the local specificity. It is her displacement; dislocation from the familiar surrounding that generally grounds her identity to certain socio-cultural markers like race, gender, profession etc. On the other hand she develops some sort of commonality with the islanders and looks upon the island as her 'home'.

Ghosh shows the debilitating impact of displacement upon the refugees who remain at the margin of the society. In *The Hungry Tide*, for example, the dispersal of poor, disenfranchised people belonging to the lowest rung of the society in East Pakistan engenders existential difficulty for them. These people suffer terribly from the sense of loss of their 'home' and the Indian nation-state, backed by global discourse of environmentalism, looks upon these people as

squatters, trespassers. The refugees come to understand that the value of their social identity is belittled because of their migration to a different locale. Since the refugees are politically and culturally disempowered, their displacement does not lead them to the adoption of any hybrid identity. On the other hand they experience the nullification of their social identity that is determined on the basis of various socio-cultural affiliations. No wonder the logic of nation-state dubs these people as unwanted and trespassers who are to be evicted in order to preserve the biological balance of the Sunderban. Ghosh suggests that the politics of power plays significant role in the formation of identity for the dislocated and displaced people. In *The Circle of Reason*, we have seen how the poor immigrants—illegal workers have to struggle in an alien land because of their social and political status.

However Amitav Ghosh is fully alert to the dynamics of displacement in offering new mode of interacting with the world for those people who are socially marginalized. In the first two parts of the Ibis trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*, Ghosh explores the possibility of formation of identity on the basis of new affiliations and relationship during the journey of people away from home. In the first part of the trilogy, Ghosh dwells on how displacement from the familiar space can help people adopt new identity. It is interesting to see that ‘routes’ which suggests sailing away from ‘roots’ can offer new way of constructing an identity. The Ibis, former ship-slaver ferries motley of indentured labourers, convicts, a deposed Zaminder accused of forgery, to the colonial outposts in Mauritius. The passengers on the ship hail from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and they come up with their own cultural ethos. These people have their own distinctive identity based on their social affiliations like caste, creed, social status etc. Thus Deeti is an upper caste woman (a Rajput), though a victim of abject poverty brought about by the colonial injunction on producing rice and cereals. Since the British had a monopoly of the production and marketing of opium, the poor, disenfranchised peasants were compelled to produce poppies instead of rice, dal, and vegetables. This kind of farming played havoc with the indigenous cultivation leading to the destitution of the people. Deeti has been a victim of malicious design perpetrated by her mother-in-law who forces Deeti to have been raped by her brother-in-law since Deeti’s husband is an invalid and an opium-addict. The mother-in-law appropriates the epic narrative and calls Deeti, ‘Draupadi’, wife to five husbands. Evidently Deeti has been a victim of colonial and patriarchal mode of living and cannot share her fate with her lover, Kalua, a man of *Chamar* caste (generally deemed to be a lower caste in Bengal and Bihar). Even though both Kalua and Deeti are condemned to be poor, their social identity does not allow them to form any alliance. The social identity in a caste-ridden society thus stands in the way of finding common ground with other human beings who experience similar social opprobrium.

Ghosh suggests that the journey across the Indian Ocean offers the scope for re-negotiation with their identities. In other words people unmoored from their socio-cultural affiliations try to negotiate their identities in new circumstances. Dislocation thus helps people invent their identities that are based on shared experience, commonness of fate. While the passengers are on the Ibis, they try to become interested in each others' lives. The slackening of cultural moorings occasioned by displacement helps them form new identity on the basis of the commonality of the passengers on the Ibis. In this novel Ghosh suggests that personal identity should not be understood merely in terms of an off-shot of a bigger cultural system or the discursive formulation. Ghosh presents identity as personal project engineered by the subject's desire to fashion a position in the mobile world. It is no coincidence that Ghosh's emphasis on the creative aspect of identity formation is well matched by the setting of the novel. Ghosh seeks to foreground the notion of instability and lack of rootedness by setting his novel on river and seas. The novel may well be interpreted as a saga of journey from a sense of fixity to flux, root to route.

Ghosh unsettles any fixed and stable ground by allowing difference, amalgamation of various things—ethnicity, caste, language. It is no coincidence that the ordinarily perceived determinants of identity like language, caste, creed, ethnicity etc. are missing, for there is mixing of these socio-cultural categories. Thus even though there is an official hierarchy, it is the 'unofficial' subcultures that shape life on board in the Ibis. Thus we see a colourful group, the lascars who make up most of the ship's crew. These lascars do not share a common ethnic heritage: 'They came from places that were far part, and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East African. Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese' (13). By projecting the lascars as globe-trotters communicating in a polyglot world, Ghosh critiques the contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism that is generally linked with class position. On the other hand Ghosh suggests that these lascars may be considered as the forerunners of today's migrant populations empowered by globalization.

Displacement offers an opportunity for the downtrodden people to forgo their traditional social identities in order to fashion a new identity based on their common experience of suffering and difficulty in the journey to uncertain future. The displacement therefore acts as a kind of liberating force for the marginalized people like Deeti who have been suffering under an oppressive identity imposed on her by the society. The strict social and patriarchal system debars her from forging any relation with her lover Kalua even though she is subjected to suffering and neglect. The Ibis carried people from all walks of life and from a variety of social, ethnic, linguistic background. The moment people are on board, they snipe off their age-old ties so that

new ties could be established. They delink themselves from the identity mostly dictated by others and heavily influenced by social and cultural norms. What replaces the traditional mode of affiliation is the commonality of suffering and the mutual history of deprivation, poverty, oppression both by the colonial forces as well as by the indigenous social structure. In the face of new condition created by their displacement because of the prospect of job, freedom from constraining social system, the passengers on board invent new names and histories for themselves. Thus Aditi becomes Deeti, her lover Kalua transforms into Maddow Colver, a French woman becomes simultaneously Paulette as well as Putli (to her Bengali aunt who rears her up). They try to form a common bonding among themselves by sharing each others' stories. In fact their departure from their land of origin to far-off places like Mauritius is marked by the traditional song of bereavement as women do during the marriage of their daughters. This cultural legacy is reformulated in a new setting that demands its appropriation in new context. Nevertheless they take part in each others' stories of suffering. No wonder all the stories they share with each other centre round suffering, atrocity and depravity of all sorts. These stories provide them the ground for establishing common bonding and thus they cope with the hardship of life by inventing new identity for themselves—*jahaz bhais* or ship brothers. Their movement towards an unknown land where they will have to work as indentured labourers suggests possible transformation of their identity in different circumstances. Ghosh suggests that for the indentured labourers, displacement, though accompanied by usual suffering and uncertainty, can offer them the chance to look at life in a new way that is not determined by oppressive social structure. One may however wonder whether the formation of identity based on common experience as it is in the case of journey by a ship, is a lasting one. But it is nonetheless an alternative way to negotiate with the possibility of forming an alternative identity. Ghosh seems to suggest that identity formation may not be taken as the result of any discursive formulation, for human can have agency, however limited, in handling one's identity. Interestingly Ghosh does not paint the pathetic, traumatic aspect of migration and dislocation. He rather shows how migration and displacement may sometimes lead to new affiliation, though outside the social structure and framework. Ghosh thus gives greater primacy in presenting the possibility of camaraderie, bonding and mutual affection of the present rather than on the uncertain future: "When you step on that ship, to go across the Black Waters (Indian Ocean), you and your fellow transportees will become a brotherhood of your own: 'you will be your own village, your own family, your own caste'" (314). The hardship of life in displacement make the migrants ignore the traditional markers of identity and try to form a common identity based on their shared life. As Rai and Pinky argues, "The conditions on board ship made it difficult to sustain many of the taboos

associated with religious ritual life, ruled by observations of relative purity and pollution of food, the boundaries of caste, marriage and relation” (74). Therefore displacement creates opportunity for the negotiation of identity, though it may not help the dislocated people to always appreciate the multifariousness of affiliations. However, in this narrative of displacement and migration, Ghosh suggests that identity is subject to re-negotiation, re-formulation rather than a closed, fixed thing. This flexibility of identity is realized more fully by the migrants who hover between their traditional identity category and adopting a new one.

Amitav Ghosh dwells on how displacement leads to negotiation with new condition that sometimes leads to the formation of identity. In *The River of Smoke* Ghosh shows how the convicts and the indentured labourers who have to work in far-off places try to participate in the cultural matrix of the land. Even though they do not snipe off their ties with the land and the people of their origin, they try to make adjustment with the new situation. One of the most important determinants of identity in their country of origin is the social caste. But the transportation to a new land makes them ignore their caste identity in order to interact with people of other caste and religion. The displacement actually helps them to perceive commonality with people whom they have never cared to communicate in their land of origin. Therefore despite huge difference in terms of religion, caste, social location, the displaced people form a community of their own. Ghosh shows how new community is built on the basis of the existential crisis faced by displaced people. Interestingly a sense of bonding and pride is shared by the members of the displaced community and this kind of communitarian thinking helps them formulate their identity in a new way:

“What was more, all its residents, from the lowliest of broom-wielding kussabs to the most fastidious of coin-sifting shroffs, took a certain pride in their house, not unlike that of a family. This surprised Neel at first, for on the face of it, the idea that the Achhas might form a family of some kind was not just improbable but absurd: they were a motley gathering of men from distant parts of the Indian subcontinent and they spoke between them more than a dozen different languages;...Has they not left the subcontinent their paths would never have crossed and few of them would never have met or spoken with each other--far less thought of eating a meal together. At home, it would never have occurred to them to imagine that they might have much in common--but here, whether they like it or not, there was no escaping those commonalities...” (192)

Thus the displacement offers new ways of negotiating with one's identity. One can no longer stick to the identity one possesses, because the new condition may modify the way one is looked at by others. This is most clearly evident in the case of the socially disempowered people who are not

well accepted in their country of adoption or migration. Amitav Ghosh explores this multidimensionality in his works which fictionalize the myriad ways people negotiate their identities. Amitav Ghosh, however, distances himself from offering any definite model of identity formation because he represents the possible changes in the way one can make a sense of one's self in a different ambience. While displacement sometimes helps people to become aware of their multiple affiliations, it may also force them to stick to their particular identity in the face of dominant discourse. Thus they get involved in identity politics and do not appreciate the inadequacy of the markers of social identity.

Notes

1. For an overview of diaspora at the global level see Robin Cohen's excellent elaboration of the issue. He looks at diaspora from diverse angles ranging from victim diaspora (Africans and Armenians), Labour diaspora, Imperial diaspora or Trade diaspora. See Cohen.
2. For an understanding of different kinds of migration see William Petersen's article — A General Typology of Migration, *American Sociological review*, Vol 23, No. 3 (June, 1958), pp. 256-266.
3. For an analysis of European Modernity, see Gilroy. 240

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