



Research Paper

Role of language in understanding the culture present in Amitav Ghosh's novel Sea of Poppies

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ABSTRACT: Language plays a prominent role in the culture of a country and the same prominence could be seen in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. The culture of a country cannot be separated from the history of its language; since Ghosh's most of the novels are historical he has given distinct role for language. The novel Sea of Poppies includes characters from different countries and they talk too many languages like Hindi, French, English and two important languages which are Pidgin and Lascari language. As mentioned earlier language has a specific role in the history of culture, so culture cannot be analysed or understood without knowing the culture of a country. This paper attempts to identify the different language used by different group of people and how it helps to trace the culture followed by those people.

Key Words: Language, Culture, lascari language, English, Pidgin, China, French and Indian culture.

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I. AMITAV GHOSH AS A NOVELIST:

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and this novel Sea of Poppies might be close to his heart because the major characters like Deeti, Raja Neel Rattan Halder, Kalua are from Bengal. Amitav Ghosh was a well-known novelist and his Ibis Trilogy can be considered as the excellent work produced by him. Ibis Trilogy includes three novels namely, Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke and Flood of Fire. He has received lot of awards and recently he received Jnanpith award in the year 2018 which is highest honour award for literature in India. Apart from Ibis Trilogy he has also published The Circle of Reason, The Shadow lines, In an Antique Land, Dancing in Cambodia, The Glass Palace and The Hungry Tide. Amitav Ghosh's most recent novel is Gun Island, published in 2019.

Ghosh said, "Novel is not reflecting reality but creating reality, where language is used constitutively like clay". From this one can understand the priority of languages given by Amitav Ghosh in his novels. Most of the novels of Amitav Ghosh are historical, so his usages of languages are beyond capture.

II. ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN CULTURE:

Our description of our experience comes to compose a network of relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally parts of our social organization... Since our way of seeing is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community (p- 19)

Culture and language are intertwined because it is not possible to know the culture of a particular people without knowing their language. Learning a new language does not mean by learning alphabets alone but learning their culture. Everyone knows that a word in any language does not mean that particular meaning alone, it denotes some other meanings also; that connotative meaning can be understood only by knowing the culture

of a country because language is not just sounds and tones, in a deeper way it includes the feeling and emotions of people and that can be understood only by knowing people's culture. That is why all the language teaching has a little reference towards the culture.

Many critics especially A.L. Krober says, Culture begins in a society when the people in that group begin to speak in a language; a child learns its first language from its parents and relatives. The child not only learns language it also learns culture along with it unconsciously.

According to Raymond Williams communication creates community. Culture is the way of understanding the meaning of the society through politics and economics; hence to study meanings is to study culture. However the meanings are not fixed, they arrived at the process of exchange. Apart from meaning, Williams talks about 'Representation'. Meaning is the process of knowing words whereas representation is the process of knowing words and it gives image and concept of that particular word; that is representation is alphabet of culture.

Word+ concept behind the word = meaning

Word, concept, meaning, context = representation (p- 20)

For cultural studies everything in the society is language, the society can be understood only by knowing its language.

III. LANGUAGE AS CULTURE:

Language becomes the key point of the novel *Sea of Poppies*. Amitav Ghosh uses his complete craftsmanship in the usage of various languages. People in Ibis ship are from various countries like England, Baltimore, China, France, India, Africa and from many other regions; even in India one could find people from Calcutta, Tamilnadu, Kerala and from many other parts of the country. They all travelled in the same ship called Ibis and they did not have any common language to communicate.

Though some people who gathered there are educated and are capable of communicating in English for example: Neel, the zamindar communicated in English with Ah-fatt, a half- Chinese man, Paulette, a French orphan communicated in English with Zachary Reid, a Black African whom people mistaken as White; all the others were communicating in a language they knew and made the others to understand what they want to convey. Especially the language of Serang Ali, the head of lascars talks in a language which is filled with lot of words from many different languages.

Amitav Ghosh has made a special note about this lascar language in an interview. He said that he visited many countries before writing this novel and in one of the libraries he found Lascari Language Dictionary which contains words from languages like Hindi, Urdu, English, Portuguese, Bengali, Arabic, Malay and some other languages. He felt that English was not narrow in those days.

The territories and border lines are divided mainly on the basis of language especially country like India where multiple languages are spoken. As mentioned earlier this novel contains characters from various states of India, various countries and various continents. Through the representation of characters with different languages author back voices the culture. No characters in this novel has common language to speak, everyone speaks in their native tongue.

Deeti, the protagonist of this novel is a common village girl who speaks in her native language Hindustani. She does not know any other language except native language and the author also used the native language of the people in many places which acts as mouthpiece for characters. Deeti says "Beti – I saw a jahaj" (p-8), which means that she saw a big ship, "Jai Ganga Mayya ki" (p- 7) which she uttered while praying river Ganga. However, these kind of words and sentences do not confuse the readers because Ghosh himself given the translation of those sentences. Not only Deeti, one could find many characters speaking in their native language and the author also used colloquial language.

Zachary Reid is a sailor who works in Ibis and he comes to export slaves from many parts of the country especially Africa and India to America and Britain. After reaching India he changed a lot in his food habits, dressings and mannerism. Along with this he was made to change his language also.

"...he had to learn to say 'resum' instead of 'rations', and he has to wrap his tongue around words like 'dal', 'masala' and 'achar'. He had to get used to 'malum' instead of 'mate'...." (p-15)

Ghosh himself has mentioned about this in an interview. He says that he uses lot of languages in his novel to make the reader to feel the milieu and the languages used by him are not imagination especially Pidgin language and lascari language he gathered through his travel to various places. He also makes a note about the language of Britain people. When those people talk with the other country people who are not familiar with English, they do not use standard language. However there is no proof for that because when they write, they use Standard English. This is the condition of Zachary Reid, he cannot talk in a standard English with his fellow men in the ship because they do not understand it. So he needs to change his language.

Serang Ali, one of the lascars who was close to Zachary Reid acts as representative for all the lascars. In order to make Zachary understand he speaks in a language which seems like English but it mixes lot of languages as mentioned in lascari language dictionary. "Lascari- buggar savvi too muchi sail ship, you look see" (p- 17). The lascari language of Serang Ali could be seen throughout this novel and this shows how much work Ghosh has done to work on the language of lascars.

Mr. Burnham, the owner of Ibis is a well- educated man and can fluently communicate in English. But for emotional situation even his tongue uses only mother tongue. When Mr. Burnham was talking with Zachary Reid in English he had some emotional moment and while appreciating Zachary he talked in his mother tongue. This shows that second language can never be equal to the mother tongue of a person it comes out of the people unconsciously.

Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the zamindar of Rakshali when talking with Mr. Zachary Reid and Mr. Doughty he feels that in Bengali it is very easy to know the religion, caste and village of a person just by his name but it is not possible with foreigners. This shows how language represents the culture of a society. Raymond Williams also talks about it. He says that if a person belongs to our culture, it is very easy to find the gender of a person that is by knowing one's name one can identify the gender but when the person is from other country one cannot identify the gender by knowing name. This shows the link between language and culture.

After the imprisonment of Neel he was made to stay with Ah- fatt, a half- Chinese. In the jail they did not talk to each other for some days. Later they started to talk with each other in English. The best way to develop relationship among people is language that is when people are able to communicate and share their feeling they can have good relationship. Until they have a common language to talk it is very hard to build relationship as well as people lack trust. When one analyse this matter psychologically, one could find that people who speak same language get closer to each other than with the person who speak different language. Raja Neel Rattan Halder knew Bengali, English, Persian, Urdu.

...Is it true that you know how to read and write?

Yes.

In Bengali?

In English too. And also Persian and Urdu. (p- 323, 324)

Neel and Ah- fatt becomes too close in the jail since they did not have any body with them. They communicated in English, a common language for both of them. "She found to her astonishment, that she could not only hear what was being said, but understood it too- for, amazingly, the two convicts were conversing in English" (p- 363). It is a great surprise for Paulette because one prisoner is from India and other prisoner is from China and she wants to know the common language between them, she thought definitely a prisoner must be illiterate. So she wonders at Neel speaking English.

Paulette was a French orphan who grown in Bengal. The language which Paulette learns first was Bengali since she was born in Bengal. She gets used with both Northern and Western culture which is commonly known as biculturalism that is a person feels home at two cultures. Paulette could communicate in Bengali, French and English. When she was young she was brought up in a Muslim family where she had her childhood friend Jodu who is very close to Paulette. After that she was brought up by Mr. Burnham family but she always maintains a distance in that family and wants to leave Mr. Burnham home. Since her father worked as Botanist in Mauritius she wanted to visit the place.

Language is not only for communication but it has a strong emotional attachment in the hearts of the people. When Neel was travelling in Ibis he heard Bhojpuri language which makes him to think about Parimal, Neel's wife. Bhojpuri is Parimal's rustic language in which she was forbidden to talk. Parimal was married to an

aristocratic family where she was not allowed to use Bhojpuri but she often used the language and gets scolded. This incident and reference shows language denotes the status of a family.

The most important part of this novel which shows the greatness of the language is the conversation between Paulette and Neel in Ibis. Paulette did not reveal her identity in the ship; she says that she is from Brahmin family and named herself as Putleshwari. When she was talking in the ship with other people the way she spoke and the matter she delivers to others makes Neel to guess her identity. This part shows the language can reveal the culture and identity of a person.

During sixteenth century the people who were educated were limited that too women who were educated were only handful and all those educated women belong to well- to -do family. Since Neel is from aristocratic family all the educated women are related to him in some ways. When Paulette talks something which delivers some information from English books a great doubt arise in the mind of Neel. "...that this female was educated- then it seemed to Neel that he would almost certainly know her parents or families who encouraged their daughters to read" "...the educated women of the city were almost all from well- to- do families; it was inconceivable that any of them would allow a daughter of theirs to sail off with a boatload of indentured labourers and convicts" (p- 391).

The paragraph which includes Neel's doubt on Paulette, shows the complete details about the culture, style of living and mannerism followed in India. The dialogue delivers the education system in India during that period. The people who learnt secondary language is limited and that too women's education is very mere; only people from rich family can have education and it was a forbidden fruit for the poor people. There was another cardinal point in this paragraph which is, though the women were educated and know to speak in English they never admit that publicly. Neel also added that the women from high class society were not allowed to move in a cordial relation with any people from lower class.

The language spoken by Paulette reveals much information like her family, education, culture, etc. so Neel wanted to clear all his doubts and questioned her. Paulette decided to be alert in using language because her colloquial language may reveal her identity because she was brought up by Jodu's family who lived their life by fishing and boating, so the language she acquired from river front edge was something different from her convicts. She changed her slang and carefully communicates with Neel. Though most of her convicts speak Bengali, the accent may reveal her identity. "The accent was neutral enough to deny Neel any further clues to the speaker's origins" (p-391). Already while communicating with Zachary Reid, Neel said that the name of a person discloses his caste, area and religion. Here one could find even the accent of a language helps in identifying caste and locality of a person.

Neel interrogates Paulette in many ways and tried to find her identity but Paulette escaped from everything. Finally she made a comment "we're all in the same boat" (p- 393) for which Neel laughed and replied those words are English sayings which is translated in Bengali. After that Paulette was not ready to talk any other words, she remained silent. Finally she admitted to Neel that she did not belong to their kind. From this Neel concluded that Paulette might be a prostitute because in those days prostitutes learn English from White clients.

All these dialogues and incidents evidences that a language denotes the culture of a people and from the language and speaking style of a person that is slang, one can find the identity of the person. It is not possible to understand the culture of a person until we know their culture; even to understand the feeling and emotions of a person one should know his language. Paralanguage and kinesics can help a person to some extent but man cannot lead his life with that alone.

IV. CONCLUSION:

This paper tried to explore the indications of culture in Amitav Ghosh's novel Sea of Poppies. In the beginning Ghosh wanted to give importance to the sea travel since he is fond of travelling; but the novel took another form and gave importance to culture. Through this paper one can understand the importance of language given by Amitav Ghosh in his novels and how far language is important to understand the culture of people.

There are many characters in this novel and all those characters speak different languages and an exceptional note is most of the characters know more than one language; Paulette could speak French, Bengali and English, Neel could communicate in Bengali, English, Persian and Urdu. Serang Ali, one of the lascars uses

a language which is totally different because his language includes words from languages like English, Hindi, Malay, French, Urdu, Portuguese, Arabic and many other languages.
Thus just by knowing the language and slang of a person one can know their place and their culture.

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