UNIT 9: AMITAV GHOSH: "THE DIASPORA IN INDIAN CULTURE"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- discuss the essay "The Diaspora in Indian Culture" written by Amitav Ghosh
- discuss the context in which the essay is written
- identify the themes of the essay
- describe the narrative style of the writer

9.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is based on the essay "The Diaspora in Indian Culture" written by Amitav Ghosh who is one of the most important Indian authors currently writing in English. The essay you are supposed to read in this unit remains one of his most important contributions to his non-fictional prose writings. In this essay, Ghosh relates to his own experiences as a diasporic Indian writer, his predicaments as a writer in a foreign country and his understanding of his own sense of migrancy. However, in this unit, you will also find Amitav Ghosh reflecting on the notion of ***diaspora***, on the idea of India and on how a diasporic Indian writer like him are linked with India.

9.3 CONTEXT OF THE ESSAY



***Diaspora*:** it means the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland.

The Imam and the Indian, in which the essay "The Diaspora in Indian Culture" appears,is a collection of essays on a wide variety of themes and subjects. The piece after which the collection is named was published in 1986. The essays under this collection were published separately in various journals. This book provides an all inclusive impression on the literary preoccupations of Ghosh as a writer in the post colonial situations. But *The Imam and the Indian* is not a unified work as it consists of essays written over a period of years. As a writer, Amitav Ghosh, in his fiction as well as in his non-fiction is engaged in the political and cultural wars that shape a postcolonial and globalised world. Like in his fictional works, in this book too, Ghosh is concerned with exploring the connections between the past and the present, between historically important events and memories, between people, cultures and countries sharing a common past. It is in the context of his discussion cosmopolitanism, migration and ***diaspora*** holds tremendous significance. Written in 1900 as part of a lecture this essay "The Diaspora in Indian Culture" is a captivating and illuminating survey of the meaning of Indian diaspora and how they are innately connected with the idea of India irrespective of the country in which they are living now. This essay can also be easily contextualised in a recent discussion in Indian Writing in English of which Amitav Ghosh is also a part—that the best writing of Indian English literature is coming out of the diasporic Indian authors. Once you finish reading the essay you should find that diasporic writers from India (like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh himself) have helped in spreading the idea of India throughout the whole world.

9.4 EXPLANATION OF THE ESSAY

Amitav Ghosh begins the essay by acknowledging the fact that the modern Indian diaspora– which means the huge migration from the Indian subcontinent to other countries basically in the West in the mid nineteenth century—now represents a powerful force in world culture. But this culture

of diaspora is also a significant force within India. Because the literary cultures started by migrant writers like Naipaul, Rushdie, Ramanujan has also become an important socio-political and literary force within India. But it is also true that the Indian State and the Indian political class have not favoured books like *Area of Darkness* by Naipaul and *Satanic Verses* by Rushdie. But Ghosh warns that the Indian State cannot repress the richness of ideas inherent in these books. However, he admits that of late even the Indian State has shown some sensitivity towards the writings of the Indian diaspora.

Then Ghosh refers to the very phenomenon called 'colonial mentality' of the people in India. He argues that the political class in India is much more sensitive to the writing coming out of England and not to that coming out of New York. Ghosh perceives that there is an over flooding of indo-babbles in the form of travel writing, journalism, etc. on India. Along with this many University departments in the Western world are devoted to the study of India. Some of these writings are even critical of the Indian state. This indirectly has also helped in shunning the 'colonial mentality' of liking anything English. Ghosh asserts that the nature of India's cultural relationship with her 'diaspora' has helped in reconsidering the role played by the Indian State in reserving 'some' respect towards the diasporic Indian writing. Ghosh however argues that the relationship between modern India and its diasporic population is not an institutional relationship which is mainly because of the fact that both share a common history of subjection to the British empire. The institutional relationship between them, if they exist at all, are all mediated through Britain. But the important point is that India's relationship with its diaspora is a very direct relationship even though the whole history is based on different types of mediations.

He further states that the relationship between India and its diaspora is very peculiar. We take for granted that there is a close relationship between India and the 'Indians.' But Ghosh considers it to be a 'historical anomaly'. As we have to recognise that such links are not those of language, religion, politics or economics. In a sense, these are the links of culture and they live within the imagination. On the other hand, the 'metaphor of space'

is another way to understand this link. Anthropologists and Indologists have shown that a symbolic special structure of India is infinitely reproducible. It can be encapsulated in a microcosm, as in case of Banaras, and can be exported wholesale to be produced in other foreign countries.

Then Ghosh makes some observations on the notion of India. Unlike an Englishman who leaves England and feels separated from his 'homeland' in the new country, an Indian always carries his 'India' along with him. We can assume that Ghosh is only telling his readers about his own experiences of leaving India for United States. He writes that the place called India becomes an empty space, mapped purely by words. So the spaces of India travel with the migrant and India too has no such vocabulary for separating the migrant from India. It is therefore not a coincidence that many diasporic Indian writers often choose to write either about India or about Indian communities abroad. Then he argues that "it is impossible to be imperfectly India… Were it possible to be imperfectly Indian, everybody in India would be. This is not merely because India has failed to develop a national culture. It is not a lack; it is in itself the form of Indian culture." Ghosh then reflects on the nature of Indian culture by saying that it "seems to be constructed around the proliferation of differences." And to be "different in a world of differences is irrevocably to belong." Thus, Ghosh says, "any body any where who has even the most tenuous links with India is Indian; potentially a player within the culture." Another interesting feature of the cultural representation of the space called India is that it has been constituted both by the notion of periphery and center. And Ghosh ends the essay by opining that the notion of periphery has now expanded to include the diaspora too. This is why perhaps the opinions of the diaspora are very much important to India as it works as a mirror in which modern India seeks to know itself.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Say True or False

a. Ghosh in this essay refers to the very phenomenon called 'colonial mentality.' T/F

b. Ghosh does not make any observation on the notion of India in this essay. T/F

c. Ghosh states that the relationship between India and its diaspora is very normal. T/F

d. Many diasporic Indian writers often choose to write either about India or about Indian communities abroad. T/F

Q 2: Discuss briefly the role played by the modern Indian diaspora.

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9.5 MAJOR THEMES

The various themes which you should find interesting to read have been discussed below:

Indian Diaspora as an Important Literary Force

Published in 1990, Ghosh in this essay mainly writes that the modern Indian diaspora is emerging or has already emerged as an important force in world literature which is also increasingly becoming a factor within the culture of the Indian subcontinent. Modern Indian diasporic writers like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, and A. K. Ramanujan have not only given visibility to the body of writing called Indian English Literature but have also asserted the fact that the best writings in Indian English writing are being provided by the diasporic Indian writers only. This is one of the important implicit comments made by Amitav Ghosh in this essay you are reading.

Ghosh's Critique of the Indian State

Ghosh in this essay marvels at the Indian State's sensitivity to the writing of the diaspora and provocatively asserts that "the links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination". This also means that Ghosh is not very happy with the role of the migrant intellectual in imagining a nation. On the one hand, "the institutional relationships between modern India and its diasporic population are mediated through Britain, on the other hand the opinion of the diaspora are so significant to India that it has become the mirror in which modern India seeks to know itself". This helps us in understanding the fact that Ghosh is very much rooted in the idea of India both as a cultural concept and as a modern political state.

Idea of Travel

Himself being a world famous travel writer of the contemporary world, Ghosh in this essay, implicitly refers to his own understanding of travelling which, according to him, has been the cause of migrancy or vice versa. Travel as well as displacement are perhaps the most central issues addressed in both fictional and nonfictional writings by Ghosh. Thus, the departures and arrivals of the characters should necessarily influence the perceptions of the characters regarding their identity and history in most of Ghosh's fictions. Incidentally, the far-east like Cambodia and Burma, to which Ghosh refers in this essay, have always been an obsession with Ghosh because of some personal reference points.

Non Porous Nature of Borders

After reading the text of the essay, you must have realised that central to Ghosh's non-fictional works is the idea that the 'non porous nature of modern borders' which is brought to the forefront when contrasted with the inclusiveness of older communities where no concept of **nationality** with passports and visas existed. In this essay Ghosh writes that "the links between India and her diaspora are lived within their imagination… the specialists of the imagination— writer— play so important a part within it." They write about their own India from their unique perspective from the outside expressing most aptly the colonial experience. Ghosh feels that it is impossible to be imperfectly Indian and paradoxically defines that the 'perfect' Indian is one who expresses and reflects the living signs of having been colonised, that unique hybrid that is neither Indian nor British but a product of cultural clash one who is not purely Indian. So, the non porous nature of borders has resulted in ambivalence among the diasporic writers from India.

Nature of Indian Culture

The Bengali bhadralok family, of which Amitav Ghosh is a member, considered knowledge and culture as representing access to the larger world symbolised by a cosmopolitan attitude that was brought to life in

Calcutta. Himself being a part of that culture, Ghosh in this essay argues if there is any one pattern in Indian culture in the broadest sense it is simply that the culture seems to be constructed around the proliferation of difference. Thus, anybody anywhere who has even the most tenuous links with India is Indian; potentially a player within a culture. The mother country simply does not have the cultural means to cut them off. By saying so, Ghosh not only explores the various layers of Indian cultural forms but also posits a vehement critique of the processes of inclusion and exclusion into what we call Indian culture today.

Notion of Indianness

Reading an essay like this, you should find that a diasporic Indian writer writes about India from a unique perspective, expressing most aptly the colonial experience. When Ghosh articulates that it is impossible to be 'imperfectly Indian', paradoxically he also defines the 'perfect' Indian as one who expresses and reflects the experiences of colonialism, that unique 'hybrid' class of people that is neither Indian nor British but a product of cultural clash, one who is not purely Indian. Thus, locating Indianness in Ghosh's state of mind also puts light on two other concerns identifiable in his discussion of the interdisciplinary nature of any knowledge system and the present status of the colonised communities, as they position themselves in various parts of the world.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Is travel one of the central issues addressed in this essay by Ghosh?

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Q 4: Reflect on Ghosh's idea of Indianness.

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LET US KNOW

James Clifford's essay on "Diaspora" is an important text which explores the disputes arising out of the definition of 'diaspora' that he refers to as a 'travelling term, in changing global conditions'. His essay is one of the most important discussions on diaspora dealing with the origin of the concept of diaspora.

Some other writers associated with diasporic writing are Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, etc.

9.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

One common problem with Amitav Ghosh's narrative style is his scholasticism. Being a social anthropologist he started writing as a researcher always submitting reports on research conducted by him. This aspect of his career has never left him. So, it is quite natural for a common reader to find his scholastic writing quite difficult to understand. Moreover, the vastness of his knowledge often presents before us a problem of familiarity with the content he is providing. In this essay called "The Diaspora in Indian Culture" Ghosh's discussion on diaspora and Indian culture has been done in a quite informal manner as if he is having a face to face talk with his readers. However, one will have to agree that Ghosh also writes in a very lucid manner without any jargon so to say. The use of words and expression makes the context of the essay so lucid that readers like us are at once diverted towards the kind of information that he is trying to place His play with word India and Indian invites our response to his use of language. Moreover, expressions like "It is impossible to be imperfectly Indian" which also means "It is possible to be perfectly Indian" exemplifies this play and suggests his typical way of narrating certain state of affairs. This adds to the beauty of his narrative style.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Make a list of the important themes in the essay "The Diaspora in Indian Culture".

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Q 6: Comment on the narrative style of Amitav Ghosh.

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9.7 LET US SUM UP

While you have finished reading the essay "The Diaspora in Indian Culture" you have found that Amitav Ghosh is one of the most important Indian authors currently writing in English. You have realised that the essay you have just finished remains one of his most important non-fictional writings. While narrating about the diasporic Indian writers like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and others, Ghosh actually relates to his own experiences as a diasporic Indian writer and his predicaments as a writer in a foreign country to which he has migrated. However, in this unit, you have also found Amitav Ghosh reflecting on the notion of diaspora, on the idea of India and on how a diasporic Indian writer like him are linked with India. After going through the different themes you have realised how rooted Amitav Ghosh is in the idea of India and Indian Culture. Moreover, consistant travel has also helped him see the meaninglessness of national borders to be understood in terms of passports and visas. Finally, you find Ghosh writing in style which, although scholastic, also appeals to the common readers a lot.



9.8 FURTHER READING

1. Hawley, John C. (2005). *Amitav Ghosh: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Foundation Books.

2. Hind, Wassef Alif.(1998). "Beyond the Divide: History and National Boundaries in the Work of Amitav Ghosh" in *Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 18, Post-Colonial Discourse in South Asia pp. 75-95.
3. Khair, Tabish. (ed.) (2003). *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*. Delhi: Permanent Black.
4. Khair, Tabish. (2001).*Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
5. Kapadia Novy (Ed). (2001). *Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines.* New Delhi: Asia Book Club.
6. Mondal, Anshuman. (2007). *Amitav Ghosh.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
7. Rollason, Christopher. (2005) "In our translated world": Transcultural communication in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide"* in *The Atlantic Literary Review* [New Delhi], Vol. 6, No. 1-2. pp. 86-107.

Websites

http://www.indobase.com/indians-abroad/amitav-ghosh.html



9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: a. True
b. False
c. False
d. True

Ans to Q No 2: The modern Indian diaspora . . . represents a powerful force in world culture . . . the nature of India's cultural relationship with her 'diaspora' has helped in reconsidering the role played by the Indian State in reserving 'some' respect towards the diasporic Indian writing.

Ans to Q No 3: Ghosh in this essay, implicitly refers to his own understanding of travelling which, according to him, has been the cause of migrancy or vice versa. Travel as well as displacement are perhaps the most central issues addressed in both fictional and non-fictional writings

by Ghosh. Incidentally, the far-east like Cambodia and Burma, to which Ghosh refers in this essay, have always been an obsession with Ghosh because of some personal reference points.

Ans to Q No 4: When Ghosh articulates that it is impossible to be 'imperfectly Indian', paradoxically he also defines the 'perfect' Indian as one who expresses and reflects the experiences of colonialism, that unique 'hybrid' class of people that is neither Indian nor British but a product of cultural clash, one who is not purely Indian.

Ans to Q No 5: The important themes in the essay "The Diaspora in Indian Culture" are as follows: Indian Diaspora as an Important Literary Force, Ghosh's Critique of the Indian State, Idea of Travel, Non Porous Nature of Borders, Nature of Indian Culture and Notion of Indianness.

Ans to Q No 6: Being a social anthropologist he started writing as a researcher . . . So, it is quite natural for a common reader to find his scholastic writing quite difficult to understand . . . Ghosh also writes in a very lucid manner without any jargon so to say.



9.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: What ideas do you have of Indian diaspora from the reading of the essay "The Diaspora in Indian Culture"?

Q2: The modern Indian diaspora has emerged as an important force in world literature. Comment.

Q3: How do you think an expatriate Indian writer would take the idea of India?

Q4: What is the nature of the Indian culture? Explain with reference to the text.

Q5: What do you mean by the 'non-porous border'? Do you think that extensive travel has enabled Amitav Ghosh to consider borders as non porous?

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