



Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* and Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*: A Comparison

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2023-11026101

Volume: 11

Issue: 2

Month: March

Year: 2023

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 01.01.2023

Accepted: 18.02.2023

Published: 01.03.2023

Citation:

Keerthi Rajalakshmi, V., and K. Sankar. "Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* and Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*: A Comparison." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2023, pp. 29–33.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v11i2.6101>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

V. Keerthi Rajalakshmi

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Dr. N.G.P. Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

K. Sankar

Associate Professor of English

Dr. N.G.P. Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

The paper aims to form a comprehensive and in-depth study of the theme of multiculturalism as portrayed within the selected novels of Orhan Pamuk and Amitav Ghosh. The reputed Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh has carved a distinct segment for himself within the world of fiction even as Orhan Pamuk who writes exquisite novels won the Nobel award. Pamuk's work often touches on the deep rooted tensions of spiritual conflict between East and West, tradition and modernism or secularism. Loss of identity occurs in an alien land within the novel owing to the colonial impact within the postcolonial context. These are the ideas that involve relationship between individuals belonging to the identical or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders. Depicting meticulously the lives of Indian diaspora in Burma, this novel has taken a lot of time for Ghosh, travelling between the boundaries of south Asian countries as to incorporate the events of this novel. Ghosh tells the story of colonizer-colonized relationship through the temporal and spatial journeys of his characters. Pamuk and Ghosh talk about the national identity, oppression, diaspora, exile and a host of such factors which influence the construction of a nation. Both as novelists deals with culture, nationality, tradition, the conflict between the east and the west, communication, defending individual's rights of expression and belief and arguing against religious and nationalism.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Modernism, Multiculturalism, Relationship, Secularism, Tradition

Cultural Studies aims to be both an intellectual and a practice enterprise. Its objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyse the social and political contexts within which it manifests itself. Cultural Studies adapts methods of analysis from various disciplines such as media studies, cultural anthropology, discourse analysis, popular culture and audience studies. The term 'multiculturalism' generally refers to a state of racial, cultural and ethnic diversity within the demographics of a specified place. Multiculturalism advocates a society that extends equitable status to distinct cultural and religious groups, with no culture predominating. Multiculturalism points to the visible and universally accessible products of cultural diversity food, clothes, music, theatre, etc. Multiculturalism is a never-ending process of coming to terms with the major question of life and humanity.

Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name is Red* develops invoking two distinct traditions of painting, the Eastern art of miniature and the Western art of portraiture. Pamuk explores the representation of identity using an aesthetic framework. Through the different approaches of the two forms of visual representation Pamuk portrays the impossibility of representing a pure and

authentic 'self'. Without restricting his inquiry to the diegetic level of the narrative Pamuk also incorporates stylistic details from the art of miniature, which result in a reconsideration of the binary definitions of the Eastern art of miniature and the Western novel. *My Name is Red* incorporates the same method with the individual chapters where each narrator tells his 'miniature' story. Each chapter where a different narrator tells his story repeats the overall structure of the narrative which results in further possibilities of meaning. Both miniature painting and *My Name is Red* are more than the sum of their parts as each 'miniature' part re-invents the whole.

The first time the colour red appears in *My Name is Red* is in a miniature painting by the great master Bihzad that depicts a scene from Nizami's *Husrev and Shirin*. The painting shows the jealous son of Husrev murdering his father while he is asleep next to his beautiful wife. The representation of the colour red on the rug far from assuring an essential and predetermined meaning of the colour indicates how its identity is defined through the various forms in which it appears. While in this scene the colour red represents the loneliness of the dying man; later it appears in *My Name is Red* as red ink, connoting creativity and production.

Black presents Enishte Effendi an inkpot that is reserved for the use of red ink only. Although designed for creative purposes the inkpot turns into an instrument of murder in the hands of the murderer. When the murderer hits Enishte Effendi with it, the red ink inside the inkpot mixes in Enishte's blood, making the two inseparable. The inability to distinguish between ink and blood underlines the significant role of form in the production of meaning. Depending on the different forms in which it appears the colour red gains a distinct signification. The meaning of the colour red remains ambiguous and fluid, possible only as perpetual displacement.

There are other colours used throughout the narrative, which not only hint at the parallel between the novel and the miniature painting but also underline the production of meaning with the different forms in which they appear. For example, the colour pink is particularly significant as it gives away a social code that is specific to the era where the novel is set. During the Ottoman era non-Muslim minorities

were forced to wear clothes of a certain colour that would allow them to be easily distinguished in public. This practice is made explicit in the narrative through Esther the Jewish clothier who also works as a matchmaker.

Black can recognize Esther's Jewish identity owing to the colour pink she has to wear. Another instance of the colour pink occurs when it enables Black to spot Esther among the crowds thanks to her pink dress. Esther's pink outfit demonstrates how the art of miniature, regardless of the ban on representational painting, uses distinct formal strategies in order to generate certain conclusions. If Esther were represented in a miniature painting, she would not have any distinctive facial features but her pink coat would allow the viewer to identify her as Jewish. Pamuk too in *My Name is Red*, refrains from providing any distinctive facial features and instead, he differentiates Esther by drawing attention to the significance of the colour pink that she wears.

Red, green, blue and white are all among the colours that Shekure puts on. Her final choice, however, is significant as the colour red, apart from its resonance within the narrative, is also the colour of wedding gowns at the time. Later on in the narrative she is also seen wearing the red wedding gown when marrying Black. The different forms in which the colour red appears indicate the impossibility of an ideal and essential meaning to which the art of miniature lays claim. The identity of the colours, their meanings, can only be represented through the forms in which they appear.

The painting that Black makes to declare his love to Shekure depicts them as Husrev and Shirin, the protagonists of the well-known epic. The specific use of colours allows Black to produce specific meanings as through the colour red that he uses for himself, he establishes a parallel between himself and Husrev whose face is also depicted in red. Thus, just like Shirin who can recognize Husrev through the red spot, Shekure too can recognize Black in this painting where they are represented through the colours blue and red respectively and without any distinctive facial features. The painting offers a definition of their identity not through an accurate depiction of their facial features but through colours that represent them. In addition to their

representation through the colours, another level of representation enables the significance of Black's painting: the painting of Shirin and Husrev. Black's painting is an imitation of the painting that depicts Shirin and Husrev. He uses the colour blue and red.

In *My Name is Red* the miniature tradition's reluctance towards the inscription of singular identity is juxtaposed with the secret book of Enishte Effendi, contain Sultan's portrait painted in the Venetian style, which makes the western tradition of painting alluring, more than the use of perspective and the lack of a background story, the realistic portraits. During his visit to Venice, the portraits that he sees inspire Enishte Effendi for a similar project. According to Enishte what makes the western style portrait so alluring is its capacity to represent the singular identity of the individual. The resemblance between the subject and the portrait is for Enishte Effendi the proof of the inscription of the singular identity.

Both the story teller of *My Name is Red* and the novelist represents their identities through their representations as 'and-other'. It is neither their names nor their facial features that define their identities but the stories alone they tell by giving voice to various other characters. The personal style of the novelist does not emerge from his desire to reach an originary and predetermined definition of his singular identity but is created through the perpetual re-invention of his self as 'an-other' in his work, which defines him as displacement. The figure of Orhan the story teller that emerges in the final chapter of *My Name is Red* offers an insight into the definition of Pamuk's identity as a novelist.

My Name is Red explores the possible ways of defining identity through the distinct formal conventions of artistic production. Using the self/other binary as a starting point, Pamuk displays the impossibility of a singular and originary definition of the self as all attempts to capture meaning contain the possibility of fiction. Through miniature painting and western portrait, Pamuk addresses the anxiety that is inherent in the Turkish experience of modernity.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* reveals how understanding of human values can be traced from the rejection of the authority of the imperial powers. Branding the colonised as the inferior and the barbaric, the imperialists very often imposed

their culture in the name of civilisation. Ghosh, through *The Glass Palace* exposes the essentially hollow nature of the pseudo-humanistic concerns of the colonialists embodied in the protection of rights of women and their education. Uma in *The Glass Palace* brings out Ghosh's perspective regarding the deceptive nature of this type of humanism presented by the colonialists. It is disturbing when Uma says about the reality:

“How was it possible to imagine that one could grant freedom by imposing subjugation? That one could open a cage by pushing it inside a bigger cage? How could any section of a people hope to achieve freedom where the entirety of a population was held in subjugation?” (The Glass Palace 80)

In order to reject the stable and fixed concept of identity, Ghosh presents his characters that do not carry essential identities. Instead of being Indians, Burmese or Malay, these characters are remembered as Dolly, Uma, Rajkumar, Saya John, Alison, Dinu or Neel. The two different names of Rajkumar's sons Neel and Dinu one Burmese and other Indian, destabilise nation-based identities. Here Ghosh's perspective comes closer to an understanding of multiple possibilities of human existence that tends to make his humanistic concerns multidimensional, informing plurality of views and defining human values. The concept of equality of all human beings irrespective of their nationality, religion and culture gains significance in Ghosh's humanistic conviction.

In Ghosh's understanding, one major element threatening humanistic values today is power politics. The intrusion of politics into different fields of life tends to marginalise humanistic concerns. The working power politics does not allow the social and cultural institutions to work for human dignity. Alison is a Burmese-American and Dinu is Burmese Indian. While Alison is Christian, Dinu is Hindu Buddhist. Dinu and Alison fall in love with each other but could not get married because Alison shoots herself instead of fall into the hands of the marauding Japanese. Similarly, Rajkumar's elder son Neel falls in love with Manju, Uma's niece. He is half-Burmese from Dolly's maternal side and Manju is a Bengali. Rajkumar's another son Dinu marries a Burmese lady, Ma Thin Aye, who is a writer and a university professor.

All these relationships demonstrate how the differences between Burmese, Indians and Americans become insignificant in the face of the universal compulsions of love and companionship. Such blended hyphenated relationships assert the idea of inescapable multiculturalism and universal humanism. They also underline the overpowering nature of man-woman relationship. Here race, religion, class and creed are overridden by the drives of mutual love and understanding.

Ghosh's characters stay outside the purview of national identity and accommodate one another within the diaspora community. This erasure of national identities builds new homes. Ghosh's vision and perception of the modern world viewed from *The Glass Palace* presents the possibility of a human world without narrow national barriers irrespective of class, colour and creed. The English family plays an essential role in Ghosh's attempt to subvert the previously dominant view. Instead of portraying them as off-spring of the aggressive imperialist power, Ghosh takes a compassionate and humane view towards them and incorporates them into his own and his nation's history. Through this, Ghosh affirms that real existence is the maturity of coming to terms with the amalgam that has come to constitute multiculturalism. Ghosh conveys the idea that multiculturalism is a fair system that allows people to truly express who they are within the cultural framework of the society which is more tolerant. He argues that culture is not a definable thing based on one race or religion, but it is the result of multiple factors that change as the world changes.

Conclusion

Attempts have been made to emphasize the relatively similar situations in which Amitav Ghosh and Pamuk came to write. Pamuk as a writer, who draws his identity from tradition as well as from modernity; from the ruins and memories of a fallen empire and also from a young republic, from his Western education as well as his Eastern roots; his admiration both for West and to East and his critical eye on both cultures. He himself is a living example of the past, the present and the East-West clashes, and therefore he stands for the problem of cultural identity crisis. Amitav Ghosh, who is a sociologist, announces publicly through the novel

the melancholic effect of violence on human beings, especially on the unprivileged and underprivileged stratum of society that is the Middle Class. He extends it as an act of admonition, Amitav Ghosh compels the reader to shun such fundamentalist and anti-social elements which are deeply rooted in a society. Orhan Pamuk and Amitav Ghosh highlight the awareness of the growing internationalisation of the world. They show the coming together of different societies and cultures, which has also emphasised their distinctions. To build a society on the basis of multiculturalism, one should divest oneself of the narrow-mindedness of selfishness.

References

- Agger, Ben. *Cultural Studies as Critical Theory*. The Falmer Press, 1992.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1991.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. Routledge, 1998.
- Berten, Hans. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. Routledge, 2001.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *Nation and Narration*. Routledge, 1990.
- Bhatt, Indira, and Indira Nityanandam. *The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh*. Creative Books, 2001.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Dixon, Robert. "Travelling in the West: The Writings of Amitav Ghosh." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1996.
- Dollimore, Jonathan, and Alan Sinfield. *Political Shakespeare: New essays in Cultural Materialism*. Manchester University Press, 1985.
- Ettinghausen, Richard. *Turkish Miniatures: From the 13th to the 18th Century*. Collins, 1965.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*. Penguin, 2000.
- Hayward, Helen. "Once a Golden Land: Review of The Glass Palace." *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2000.
- James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Good Press, 2019.

- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Monga, Padmini. *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Routledge, 1996.
- Pamuk, Orhan. *My Name is Red*, translated by Goknar, Erdag M., Faber and Faber, 2001.
- Roy, Anjali. "Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's 'Little Stories' in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *The Journal of Common Wealth Literature*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2000.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.
- Saint, Tarun K. *Bruised Memories: Communal Violence and the Writer*. Seagull Books, 2002.
- Sen, Biswarup. "Interview with Amitav Ghosh." *Persimmon: Asian Literature, Arts and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2001, pp. 62-65.
- Sengupta, Jayita. "Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* through Post-colonial Lens." *The Quest*, 2002.
- Seyhan, Azade. *Tales of Crossed Destinies: The Modern Turkish Novel in a Comparative Context*. Modern Language Association, 2008.
- Tiwari, Shubha. *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study*. Atlantic Publishers, 2003.
- Wassef, Hind. "Beyond the Divide: History and National Boundaries in the Work of Amitav Ghosh." *Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 18, 1998, pp. 75-95.

Author Details

V. Keerthi Rajalakshmi, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dr. N.G.P. Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, **Email ID:** keerthirajalakshmi@gmail.com

Dr. K. Sankar, Associate Professor of English, Dr. N.G.P. Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, **Email ID:** sankark@drngpasc.ac.in, meetsancks@gmail.com