

Cross-Cultural Communication of Hybrid Identities: Displaying Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

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Abstract

The paper explores several aspects of cross-cultural communication and the hybrid identities of characters. The title explains multi-racial dissimilarities and identities as built in communication through race, class, religion, culture, or ethnic identity these are based on their particular structural hybrid identities. They focus on the basic differences between values determining cultural changes and identities. This perspective of hybrid culture with instability and transformation creates a hybrid cultural identity that differs with time and is dependent on contingency. Hybrid cultures identities are negotiated and they are able to hold a variety of cultural effects. The process of cross-cultural communication adapts and creates a hybridized identity that helps them in their negotiation between different cultural practices with their group or with different strata of the society. This study attempts to display how race plays an important role in dividing people into superior and inferior groups and among this, it shows how the power structure shifts from the former structure to a fragmented structure and how the characters adapt to the changing situations. This paper shapes the above points regarding cross-cultural communication of hybrid identities.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Communication, Races, Classes, Hybrid, and Identity.

Communication is always important in human existence since it allows people to exchange ideas and engage with one another. It can be considered a means of connecting individuals, locations, races, and social classes. Many characters in the narrative identify with one another to connect with friends, family, co-workers, and relatives. In *River of Smoke*, Amitav Ghosh describes Zadig's conversation with Bahram. Zadig was an interpreter, he communicates with Bahram to describe the personality of Bonaparte (General, military man). They were his two visitors, he had completed their introduction. They communicate:

Are You 'Zadig' hein? He said, with a smile. Is it taken from Monsieur Voltaire's book of the same name? Are you too a Babylonian philosopher? No, Majesty; I am Armenian by origin, and the name is an ancient one among my people. While the two men were conversing with each other, Bahram took the opportunity to observe the General closely. His build reminded him of one of his mother's Gujarati sayings: tukki gerden valo haramjada ni nisani – 'a short neck is a sure sign of a haram-zada'. But he noted also his piercing gaze, his incisive manner of speaking, his sparing but emphatic use of his hands, and the half-smile that played on his lips. Zadig had told him that Napoleon was capable of exerting, when he chose, an extraordinary charm, almost a kind of magic: even the barriers of language, Bahram saw now, could not diminish the power of his hypnotic appeal (p-06).

Bahram quickly recognises that he was the source of the conversation which is based on the General's quick look; he knew that he was looking for a long questioning. It was weird speaking, lacking of understanding what did he wish to say in his message, when Zadig turned to him and started interpreting the General's remarks into Hindusthani, Bahram feels pleased to listen the message into his native language. He decodes:

The foreigners often treat them as such they are not recognized to be so by the Chinese. From time to time Britain does indeed appoint representatives in Canton, but the Chinese do not countenance them and they are allowed to communicate only with the provincial authorities: this too is no easy thing, for the mandarins will not receive any letters that are not written in the style of a petition or supplication, with the appropriate Chinese characters – since the British are reluctant to do this, their communications are often not accepted (p 06).

Despite the fact that the Chinese do not acknowledge Indians, foreigners usually treat them as such. The British do occasionally nominate immigrant representatives in Canton but the Chinese do not accept them and they are only acknowledged to interact with the regional government. Due to it their messages are frequently turned down.

Culture is a difficult phrase to describe, and it is challenging to apply it in everyday situations. Culture can be defined as the continuing negotiation of learnt and patterned beliefs, practices, values, attitudes, and behaviour to address the communication components of culture. It is a dynamic process that evolves through time in various circumstances, leading to identification with one or more cultures and a variety of groups. Culture can be viewed as an individual's identity, influencing how they perceive themselves and the group with which they identify. A person's sense of their own culture develops from birth, and additional identities are shaped by the values and attitudes prevalent at the time.

As a civilization, we have a complicated concept of identity, with people's identities becoming increasingly complex throughout time as they interact with various groups. Many variables influence identity, including cross-cultural contact, hybridity, and popular culture, as well as new technologically enabled chances for social engagement. Individuals are increasingly identifying with numerous cultures and ancestries as a result of these reasons, as

well as globalization, migration, and intermarriage between people of different cultural backgrounds. Hall describes culture in *Cultural identity and diaspora*. He says that “cultural identity is one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (Hall, P-394).

Gergen also writes about cultural identity in *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*. He describes that “this constructionists and discursive view, an individual is a socio-historical and socio-cultural product and identity is not biologically pre-given to a person, instead, he or she occupies it, and more importantly, this occupation may include different and multiple identities at different points of time and settings” (Gergen 2000).

The story of the novel *Sea of Poppies* is continued in *River of Smoke* in the second instalment of the Ibis trilogy. ‘Islands,’ ‘Canton,’ and ‘Commissioner Lin’ are the three portions of the novel. There are six unidentified chapters make up each segment. Amitav Ghosh has once again concentrated on cross-cultural communication and characters hybrid identities through the continuity of their occurrences. War has been used as a metaphor to represent the conflict between the two countries. The racial conflict has also been touched through the characters Zachary Reid, the son of a slave, of a white master, which is fine evidence of a black man’s lost identity in a white culture. For the gain of power and politics, the humanistic values are kept aside and the two nations meet at a crucial point in their relations. Besides the theme of cultural identity and multiplicity of culture in a globalized world are explored again.

The story is followed all the way to Canton, China, where the opium is traded. The Chinese government is attempting to prohibit illegal drug imports, which have afflicted the Chinese population with a plague of addiction while creating empire-sized fortunes for the irrepressibly shameless traders, primarily British. The investigation did come across the

intricacies of opium intoxication, which appears to be practiced by people of all ethnicities and social backgrounds, whether secretly or openly. People at all levels of the industry appear to be enslaved by the drug. Opium has evolved its own society, rituals, elegant pipes, opium types, and ingesting procedures. The story moves around characters they represent the cross cultural communication and contact. It also focuses on how capitalism's invasion of the colonies impacted members of colonized cultures in different ways with pre-contact hierarchies and traditional cultural conventions of inequality because of it reshaped into the capitalist model of wealth and income which everyone knows today.

In his novel, Amitav Ghosh depicts various shades of cultural diversity and their ways of speaking via the sources of anguish rather than the society's controlling and tormenting forces. The mental impact of the opium conflict on people's minds is mostly reflected through prominent characters such as 'Bahram Modi,' 'Neel,' 'Zadig Bay,' 'Robert Chinnery,' and others. Through the novel's characters, the author explores the implications of culture and identity on people's lives. He depicts the offended lives of people like 'Bahram,' 'Ah Fatt,' 'Deeti,' and 'Neel,' as well as the difficulties Chinnery faces during the opium trade and war in China.

K. Woodward notifies with reference to identity in *Identity and Difference*. He comments that "Identities are usually produced within the play of power representation and difference which can be either constructed negatively as the exclusion and marginalization or celebrated as a source of diversity, heterogeneity, and hybridity" (K. Woodward, p-299-343). This is implying that they are combining to other identities. This entails the practice of using speech as a symbol and representation of meaning tool to identify ones identity from others which leads to identity formation. Gender, class, culture, sexuality, and ethnicity are all instances of identities.

Robertson describes this identity in *Japan and the USA: The Interpretation of National Identities and the Debate about Orientalism*. He says that “Occidentalism also demonstrates the very same idea. The identity of ‘Oriental’ culture is understood as a subaltern culture that is established by its separation from Western culture; thus, the West is the one who has given the Orient its identity” (Robertson 2015). Morley and Robins state it in *Spaces of identity: Global media, electronic landscapes and cultural boundaries*. They think that “if the West did not exist, the Orient would not exist either” (Morley and Robins 1995).

This novel focuses on the nature of different cultures and identities colliding. Ghosh creates characters from all over the world they cross the geographical division for a variety of reasons. *River of Smoke* examines the political and socioeconomic factors that led to the large migration of Indian peasants to the Mauritius islands as ‘Girmitiyas’, or ‘Indentured Labourers’. Characters from all histories, geographical locations, and social backgrounds come together onboard the ship Ibis, designed to transport them to an unknown area beyond the ‘black waters’, where they rebuild new ideologies.

In *River of Smoke*, Canton was a popular business hub known as Fanqui town or foreigners’ town. British used to grow opium at a huge rate in India. Then they shipped it to Canton. Within a short period, the Chinese have become a drug addict nation. The Chinese government started to assume that it is a lethal poison destroying the minds and morals of the country. So, they banned the products. But, again opium was infiltrated as a smuggled good. Then there was a massive crackdown upon the smuggled opium which led the British to go on to war with the Chinese.

The journey continues in the novel to Canton, China, where the processed opium is marketed as drugs. But there is an outbreak of opium addiction among the Chinese population which harms the economy of China as well as the physical and moral condition of the entire Chinese population. On the other hand, the opium traders mostly the British are

made empire-sized fortunes by selling the drugs and forcing the Chinese to inhale them. Faced with such a horrible outcome, Chinese officials are attempting to place restrictions on the drug's illicit effects. The Canton opium traffickers were not allowed to unload their consignment because of the deadlock between the Chinese authorities and enforcement of open market in the work. During the 'First Opium War', British gunboats enforced a deal that allowed international trade to flow through China's five ports. The war occurs shortly after the novel's conclusion.

River of Smoke is rich in language detail and spoken using Bengali, Hindi, and pidgin conversation to make it more Indianized and homely so that everyone in the Ibis had the same story to tell, and they had to spend years and months without knowing what the future held for them. Culture spills over national borders in the story, challenging the modern notion of a homogeneous society. Ghosh describes that the character of Deeeti expresses her native language of Bhojpuri and Kreol that represents the blending of her intercultural negotiation (p-4). Thus it shows that the country existed by heterogeneity and be the part of cultural site of hybridity and flexibility which creates a global imaginary of this hybrid culture.

Bahram used to undertake the journey between Bombay and Canton allows the story to explore the regions in between. He belongs to Parsi Zoroastrian community that shows his racial and religious identity. This defines his national and transnational identities. Ghosh emphasises on Bahram's character who displays ethnicity and essentialization of identity that leads to fetishization. He says that the mobility of his hybrid Parsi identity himself applying his surrounding of his being and belongingness. This sort of identity notifies by the author in this way. He says that it is the matter of concerned belief of Paris who have grasp it faithfully to the old ways but in other respects, they borrows them freely from the customs and usages of their neighbours (p-170).

In this context, Ghosh emphasizes different ways of cross-cultural existence that exhibit critical self circular relationship in terms of trade networks. His methods of identities consist of global relation and identity which can be noticed in nature notably in medicinal, aesthetic, art, creativity and to some extent, the hybridity of lineages and lives. It shall be noted in the fictitious universe of this Ibis trilogy that is a potential of this global world. This shows the optimism of Ghosh which are creative abilities, fills with the author's confidence in the potentials of a multicultural life for his characters.

In the novel, Ghosh is more uncertain regarding the scope of interpersonal interactions formed by persons from various ethnic or cultural groupings. He gives the example of pre-Victorian age which suggests the flexible attitude in Britain and her colonies. This flexible attitude can be expressed in different character they are from hybrid communities by mentioning love and sexual experiences between Chi-mei and Bahram Mody, Zadig Bey and his Ceylonese wife, and George Chinnery and his Indian mistress. The dynamics of such kind of relationships frequently shape a clear hierarchy between upper-class males of dominant societies and lower-class submissive women of colonial nations. On the other hand, Only Zadig Bey openly admits the seriousness of his love in the end; he chooses to live with his Ceylonese family despite public condemnation. Furthermore, the progeny of such clandestine amalgamations remained marginalized individuals in both civilizations, passing themselves off as a nephew in the instance of Robin Chinnery or being denied the paternal name and acknowledgment in the case of Ah Fatt. As a result, this hybridity cannot be heralded as a complete victory ended established societal biases or countrywide-cultural constraints, and it would take several years to achieve it.

There are only pointers to the potential of another multicultural practice in the story because characters have been sensitized to diverse cultures and accepted the nuances of both. In this regard, Ghosh takes the characters like Zadig Bey, Paulette, Neel, Baburao, and Asha

who have worked to achieve a plural manner of being outside of attributed cultural codes or geographical ties which suggest a restorative option. The French father of Paulette is shown as a dedicated botanist who is unconcerned about racial discrimination and allows his daughter to grow up free of prejudice. Indeed, Paulette forms a great bond with her nanny's son named Jodu and the two grow up to be as close as siblings. As a result, she is able to transcend her appearance of the colonial gentle woman who is at ease in both a sari and a gown, as well as in both French and Bengali. Similarly, ethnic Chinese are also content with their Bengali connections. Here Baburao and Asha provide an interesting model of heterogeneity. Finally, Neel reveals his continuing cultural and ontological maturation which occurs in tandem with his economic and social degradation. Seth Bahram recalls on his prior life as a modest munshi of his country as a wealthy Seth who realizes his earlier innocence, arrogance, and detachment from reality. Neel plays an important role in rescuing Bahram from detention as well as his keen knowledge of colonialism's involvement in the devastation of nations and economies but also the corruption of these nations and people. It shows the shift of this colonial cultural identity. His endeavour to construct a Chrestomathy of pidgin near the end of the story brings him deeper into an understanding of the Chinese value system and points to an optimistic future tendency.

Ghosh focuses on communication through various people, such as Zadig, an Armenian by birth who had lived in Egypt with his family. He was fluent in numerous languages, including Hindustani, as he was a frequent traveller. Ghosh writes that "they were both in their mid-thirties and they discovered to their great amazement that they had more in common than would seem reasonable for two guys who had grown up on opposite sides of the globe" (p-66). Bahram mentioned his Chinese wife and son to Zadig. He explains that "my wife is a Ceylonese burgher and while the family I've had with her isn't mine by law, it's as precious to me as the one that carries my name" (p-66). Chi-mei was her name. She

was a washerwoman and a widow when he met her. She and her mother and daughter were living on a yacht. They made a living by collecting laundry from the foreign commune's occupants. Bahram had never told anyone about this.

Ghosh's stories continually address the ethical need of keeping the lines of cross cultural communication between the self and others so that one can hear that which does not already grasp (p-11). This explains the difficulty and chaos of literature and how, rather than simply embodying timeless truths. It develops and engages an ethical sensibility and notably through the growth of empathy.

Finally, it is imperative to state that no human is culture-free. Everyone is a product of the many distinct cultures that exist on the outskirts of the borders. The beliefs, worldviews, and experiences that people have are shaped by the society and culture that they live in every day. It is therefore critical to have a strong cultural identity before becoming a multicultural individual. Culture and identity are considered as universal changes in people's lives, whether for the better or for the worse. These have advantages and limitations, therefore it's important to consider their benefits and drawbacks. Culture is the unique setting in which an ethnic group of a natural community can distinguish itself from others. Culture must have a face and an identity; in terms of expression and distribution, it is self-contained. It cannot express itself and spread to the point of obliterating and eradicating other cultures. As a result, without self-annihilation, western culture cannot develop at the expense of other cultural forms and identities.

Bauman writes on culture identity in *From Pilgrim to Tourist or A Short History of Identity*. He states that "if the modern problem of identity was how to establish an identity and keep it firm and stable, the postmodern problem of identity is principally how to prevent fixation and keep the choices open. The catchword of modernity in the realm of identity, as in other cases, was creation; the catchword of postmodernity is recycling" (p-18).

In the postcolonial and postmodern ages, the concept of identity has grown to be a very broad and influential one, requiring individuals to seek out new ways of representing themselves in order to confront global conditions and ever-increasing cultural heterogeneity. Identity has proven to be highly flexible and changing in terms of acquiring meaning, goals, and objectives. Individuals' old concepts for defining themselves and their place in society have been blown away. To put it another way, the postmodern era calls into question long-held assumptions and norms about persons and families. Individual identities in old civilizations were permanent and stable, whereas today's identities are multi-faceted and constantly reconstructed by choice.

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