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Implicit Elements of Existentialism in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *River of Smoke*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novel *River of Smoke* reflects the human life condition and the crisis which becomes a part of it. His implicit narration denotes that human survival requires some knowledge to withstand and overcome the crisis. Being a citizen of the modern era, he writes of the world where human beings are subjective in their thought to face tough conditions of life. The aim of the study is to decipher the novel *River of smoke* with the aid of the existential thoughts shared by the philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir etc. In this novel, Amitav Ghosh with his well-designed plot insists the implications of the past on the present. He registers the dilemmatic situations developed by one's own decisions. Ghosh's plot brings this matter of grave importance to life and insists and educates the value of responsibility and authenticity that builds the meaningful life of an individual.

Keywords: situations, freedom, existential dilemma, existentialism.

1. Introduction

The novel *River of Smoke* written in 2012 by Amitav Ghosh is a realistic portrayal of life in the first half of the eighteenth century, a crucial period before the opium war. His characters stay affected by both the external and internal factors and they try to resolve their problems by adopting freedom of thought. His writing which carries the effect of his anthropological research not only brings the history before the eyes of the readers, but also portrays human life and its changing standards. Mary Klages in her *Literary theory: A guide for the perplexed* recommends, "human investigation and thought" (Klages10-11) to frame sensible analysis. Likewise, Ghosh's realistic portrayal presents a sensible

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analysis of the hardship of the human life amidst the norms of the family and society, physical and psychological sufferance caused by natural and artificial forces. His plot unfurls how the endured hardships unknowingly impart many changes in individual. By writing this novel Amitav Ghosh reveals the hardships of human existence that precedes essence.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *River of Smoke* brings before our eyes the life in Canton and Mauritius in the first half of the nineteenth century. The historical background in which Ghosh's characters live, are imbued with their life which makes the novel more realistic. The novel reveals the cultivation of opium by the British in their various colonies and how it was traded by the East India Company for making profits.

The novel starts with the life of the grimeyas taken to Mauritius and incidentally, let free because of the anti-slavery act. This novel being the second part of the *Ibis* trilogy continues with the life of Deeti and her Clan in a distant land. The novel presents characters from various categories of life such as Bahram who hails from a poor background and tries to find his own identity in the society, Neel the Raja who joins as munshi under Bahram, the pitiful condition of Bahram's illegal son AhFatt, who stays unrecognized by Bahram, Paulette who escapes from the clutches of Mr. Burnham from Bethel and joins herself with Fitcher, the life of Fitcher the botanist, Robin Chinnery the painter, other merchants from various parts of the world who accumulate in Canton for trade, the Chinese merchants, lascars and many others who struggle for life in this critical period of history. It elaborates the quest of Seth Barham Modi and his intension to make handsome profit by selling opium in China during the restricted period and to buy the export division from his brothers-in-law by the profits gained from it.

The human struggle for existence has changed the approach towards life and Ghosh makes it evident through his characters. His characters start adopting freedom in their attitude which is the important characteristic of an existentialist. Existentialism as a theory according to Thomas Flynn not only talks about the free will, the choices, the neurosis or angst as an underlying reason behind transcendence, but also lays concern over the personal responsibility of an individual. But the despair and the ambiguity of the individuals in this post-modern world have compelled some among them to think as an existentialist, without providing emphasis on authenticity and responsibility to their decisions. Many philosophers such as Kierkegaard, a religious philosopher, Nietzsche, an anti-Christian, Sartre and Camus an atheist, are credited for their works and writings about existentialism. Among them Sartre is much acknowledged for bringing out the ideas of existentialism and integrating it by finding its traces in various fields in the 20th century.

Ghosh symbolically reveals the fallen condition of the world in the novel *River of Smoke* by statistically revealing the three vessels that are sailing in the sea during the storm. Among them, the Redruth, a two masted brig, was the only ship that was sailing with the intention of plant hunting without carrying any destruction to the cosmos. But the other two, the *Ibis* loaded with sorrowful slaves and convicts and the *Anahita*, with a great deal of harmful opium were taken to be traded in China. With this Ghosh keenly symbolizes the rising human greed and intension to gain living by harming others. The character Deeti, is set as a perfect example of detribalization. According to Walsh,

Detribalization is the process by which we escape from some of the distorting, constricted, erroneous beliefs of our cultural world view (Levinson, 1978). Through detribalization we are able to step back from these beliefs so that we no longer look through and identify with them; but rather begin to look at them, and in looking at them, disidentify from them, and in disidentifying from them, are able to work to transform both them and ourselves

The novel starts with Deeti, a pious house wife from Bihar, and her transformation into an old matriarch leader of the La Fami Clan. Her annual intentional plan to visit the shrine, the place in which she and her son Girin stopped for a night during the storm long ago when she was gathering bananas for her son, is undertaken insistently to record the pain that life exhibits in the young minds of the Clan. She enlightens the young members of the Clan by treading over the path in which she has walked previously.

She repeats and elaborates the traumatic incidents that happened in *Ibis* and about the violent storm to the young members of the clan showing the figures drawn in the shrine. The figures that represent the characteristics of the members who travelled along with her, stresses how people from different parts of the world are connected in their path of life.

Christopher Panza in his book *Existentialism for Dummies* defines:
For the existentialists, life is about creation, about creating the ground for your own meaning, creating value and making your world, and making yourself into something... If God is dead, the existentialist proclaims, life is not meaningless. It has the meaning you choose to give it. (Panza 45)

Ghosh's characters reveal the fact that life takes its form which an individual tries to give it. In his plot, Ghosh uses the technique of duality in characterization and provides a better understanding towards this essential concept. With his well-planned narrative and by presenting the characters Seth Bahram Modi and Fitcher, he denotes the consequences of individualistic decision. His characters make it evident that the economic struggle in a young age registers as a trauma in the heart. The intension of never to come across such experience creates anxiety in both Bahram and Fitcher to gain wealth for a better survival.

A comparison between these two characters and their way of survival in the world presents how human choices differ from person to person. Bahram who marries Shireen could not connect himself with the house of his father-in-law and his quest for identity lands him to choose a life by selling opium in a distant land, China. But Frederick 'Fitcher' Penrose, becomes a noted nurseryman, who makes a great deal of money by marketing seeds and saplings. His great enterprise Penrose & Sons was based in Falmouth in Cornwall and has gained enormous popularity in the British Isles especially for its Chinese importations. The alterity in the decision of these two characters, Fitcher and Bahram, who have risen in their life from a poor family background changes their approach to life. The choice of Fitcher to earn money by sharing and collecting species of plants and the greed of Bahram to earn money by selling the restricted opium reveals how their bitter past culminate with the individualistic instincts and reigns the human mind.

The economic condition of Bahram Modi demands him to marry Shireen the daughter of the Mistries. The flashback intentionally reveals how in Navsari, in coastal Gujarat, Bahram's own family was reduced from prosperity to enormous burden of debt. Ghosh's realistic narration presents the hardship of the family that mounts due to the rash investment of his grandfather, the father's consumptive habit and after the sale of their beautiful haveli by the grandfather. Their reduced condition occupying a room at the edge of the town and survival by his mother's skilled needlework becomes an unforgettable trauma in Bahram's heart. His aim to reach heights is supplemented by their old connection with the Mistries that emerged when the Parsi businesses man Seth Rustamjee, ordered wedding shawl for his daughter's wedding, mainly because of his lineage with the Moddie's family.

In spite of his father-in-law's advice against starting an opium trading unit Bahram's ambition of earning money was intense. Even his establishment as a great Seth in Canton did not appease him. After his father-in-law's death, when his brothers -in -law insist on stopping the trade denoting the tensions that were mounting on opium trade in Canton; he sticks to his own decision and insists that "he had given the rumors and gossip much more attention than they had. The conclusion he had reached was exactly the opposite of theirs; it seemed to him that the present conditions offered an unmatched commercial opportunity, the like of which came only once or twice in a life time" (RS 55).

"Existentialism which could be summarized as 'freedom', 'responsibility' and 'authenticity' (Tidd 14)" differs in the perception of Ghosh's characters. Their freedom and rejection of responsibility and failure to provide authenticity to their decisions brings out dilemma in life. Bahram at a point of time suffers due to existential crisis. His journey towards Canton starts with the external storm that uproots and damages many chests of opium and ends with the storm of his inner mind that costs his life. A man who carries great privilege on becoming a Seth is struck with sorrow when he notices the growing

strictness towards the trade of opium. His childhood traumatic experience due to economical suffering and his anxiety never appeases his yearning for money and he fears of the history getting repeated back in his life as it has happened previously in the case of his grandfather.

The author presents many instances in his narrative to prove how the childhood suffering conditions has left its traces in Bahram's mind and how he relates it with his present condition. One such occasion is when Bahram is privileged and gets a letter from the committee to join as a member in Canton and Vico praises him saying, "ArrePatro! See what you have become now? You are a Seth of Seths" he replies to Vico with pride, "BahramjiNauroji Modi, whose mother had made ends by embroidering shawls, has become a leader amongst a group that inclined some of the world's richest men" (RS 198).

Basically, a man who is loved by his servants for his kindness suffers with dilemma when Zadig questions him on continuing with the trade and asks, "Is it right to carry on trading opium when Chinese are against it?" (RS 211) Ghosh systematically reveals how people carry differed views over the same concept. More crisis awaits in Bahram's life when he agrees to sell a small portion of opium to Allow to whom he was personally related because of Chi-Mei. But when his consignments are seized and when Allow is caught and assassinated for it by the mandarins, he feels guilty for the death of Allow. He also feels hard as he was the person who has sown the habit of opium in Allow when he was a small boy who helped him as a messenger for his meeting with Chi Mei.

Ghosh presents how freedom in thought creates the difference in opinion among the merchants in the matter of Free Trade. When merchants like Charlie King, Wetmore and Eliot were against trading opium, merchants like Mr. Burnham, Bahram, Dent and Innes were persistent in continuing opium trade with China. When Bahram was nominated in the committee to decide on behalf of all the Indians about the opium trade, he did not think of the Chinese people who were suffering due to addiction. Instead, he thinks very subjectively and decides to be persistent with the decisions taken by the British merchants and Mr. Burnham. He justifies it saying, "Because it is not my hand that passes sentence upon those who choose the indulgence of opium. It is the work of another, invisible, omnipotent: it is the hand of freedom, of the market, of the spirit of liberty itself, which is none other than the breath of God" (RS 463).

When the strictness towards Free Trade mounts and Captain Eliot assures him that "we will get back everything we give up and more. Our investors stand to make handsome profits. It is just a matter of waiting," (RS 518) he remembers the angry letters that were accumulating in his office. When he hears from Eliot that the investors have to wait for two or three years to get back their investment; the situation throws him into extreme grief. His guilt keeps growing and when Zadig consoles him saying, "It is only money, Bahram-bhai. Soon you will recover your loses," (RS 520) he reveals his extreme dilemma painfully regretting, "I gave my soul to Ahriman.... And it was all for nothing. Nothing" (RS 520).

The dilemma of Bahram on his own decisions is revealed by Ghosh by the sleepless nights and his bothersome condition when he stays annoyed by the shadows thrown back by the Maidan and he could not digest the voices of the soldiers who trooped past the Fungtai Hong. Even laudnam does not work to bring peace to his mind but it made the sounds louder and dreams more vivid. "The thought of food made Bahram nauseous" (RS 525) and with days and nights moving hard, he refuses to move outside with Zadig. His existential dilemma pushes him to the verge to end his life by climbing down the sea, using a rope ladder through the window. A man who does not wish to acknowledge Chi Mei in his life and who says to Zadig that there is no intense bondage with her, dies imagining of getting united with her. Bahram's mechanical relationship with Shireen which made Chi Mei enter his life has pinned an unacknowledged relationship in his heart which is revealed at the time of his death.

Ghosh through his well-constructed plot of Bahram and utilizing the technique of back story reveals how existential dilemma can be caused due to thoughtless, unauthentic decisions. He precisely presents how the once approved factor, creates a dilemma in Bahram's future life. Bahram's story is a parody of many incidents all around the world where people suffer and encounter tragedy because of their own decisions.

On the other hand, Fitcher a man of unusual accomplishment and considerable wealth has raised himself by marketing seeds, saplings, cuttings and horticulture implements- and his patented materials were of great demand in England. By narrating about *the Redruth*, and by the character of Fitcher, Ghosh denotes the ethical way of livelihood, where one can make his living and lead a passionate life by adoring nature and finding fulfilment by tracing the hidden treasures which has been stacked in different parts of the world.

When Burnham approves to make money by selling opium, Fitcher frames his life by transporting and preserving sampling. When Burnham tries to embrace prosperity by selling the evil drug opium, Fitcher decides to make his fate by finding the golden Chamelion which can create magic in human health. This alterity in decision creates a big difference in their life. When Fitcher leads a prestigious life until his death, Bahram dies of remorse on his own choice.

2. Conclusion

Although existential crisis creates sufferings, it also provides way for new possibilities that open up when one faces the situation honestly. It is also assisted by the anxiety and determination which one carries due to the intensity and traumatic fear towards the situation. The question ‘What’s next?’ that occupies human mind makes them to think of the Other and new truths are framed by transcending the old beliefs as bad faith. The failure to provide authenticity to the new truths, at circumstances results in dilemma from where their return to the previous stage becomes impossible. Thus, Ghosh clearly specifies that existentialism demands to find meaning through free will and choice, where personal responsibility and authenticity will help to lead a remorseless life.

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