

3

Categories of International Migration in Select Works of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

This paper posits that migration stories that appear as the central theme in some of Amitav Ghosh's key migration-oriented novels can be categorized according to some theory of migration, namely Hein De Haas's Theoretical Migration Categories based on positive and negative liberty types. In this vein, the paper explores select migration narratives through textual analysis from the novels that make up the Ibis Trilogy as well as standalone novels: *The Glass Palace*, and *Gun Island*. It appears that all the narratives discussed here can be explained through the four migration categories defined by de Haas: Precarious Migration, Distress Migration, Improvement Migration, and Free Migration. By fitting the migration narratives from the large cannon of Ghosh into broad categories the paper fills the gap of an under-researched area- migration theories vis a vis migration narrative in literature, and looks beyond the academic tendency of looking at migration from only native points of view.

Keywords: Theoretical Migration Categories, Hein De Haas, Ibis Trilogy, The Global South, Amitav Ghosh

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is one of the best-known contemporary ethnic Indian authors writing in English today and is also celebrated for his significant contribution to Postcolonial Literature (Dave 17). Ghosh is considered a literary cosmopolitan, and his best-known works benefit from his background as a peripatetic author who travelled around the globe in his quest to examine deeply, through research, the subjects and issues that populate his novels (Dave 19). Not a stranger himself, firsthand, to the complex issues that surround international migration, Ghosh's most famous works feature international migration and displacement as central themes of these works. The

Ibis Trilogy, constituting three novels by Amitav Ghosh, is considered his magnum opus, and in these novels, we encounter international migration in different forms and scales. *The Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh's first novel of the trilogy, features the Indian Ocean as a site of transnational connectivity and commerce, under the auspices of the British, where migration is a key factor that brings about this connectivity (Arora 33). In the second novel of the trilogy *River of Smoke*, Ghosh deals with cultural exchanges, and a clash of socio-cultural practices when migrants from one country are forced to integrate into another country (Vidhya and Venkatraman 201). In the last instalment of the trilogy – *Flood of Fire*– Ghosh reimagines the era of the Opium War, and plausibly evokes a world of merchant ships sailing between China and India where thousands of Indian and East Asian individuals are in the process of de-facto migration as these ships traffic to China not only opium, but also coolies, indentured labourers, servants, local officials, and even Indian merchants (of Persian extraction mainly) to another land (“History Meets Fiction in the Indian Ocean” 1521). In *Flood of Fire*, all key protagonists undertake physical journeys across the sea that take them from 19th century India's Opium producing hubs- Assam, Bombay, and Calcutta to the product's consumption nerve centre- China's Canton. In this novel each protagonist, regardless of their socioeconomic position, finds himself or herself emigrating for a cause (Lalami). Set in the historical backdrop of the deposition of King Thibaw, the Burmese King, at the hands of the British, and the subsequent complete establishment of British rule in Burma, Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, utilized Migration and Displacement as major themes (Das 177). The patterns of international migration that we observe in his Ibis Trilogy are outnumbered in *The Glass Palace*. In this novel of Burmese setting we experience the plight of the Indian protagonists who are forced to shuttle back and forth between India and Burma as migrants, to the United States as freedom-loving political migrants, and to the Malayan jungles as colonial army officers. The forces of history, economy and the global power order dictate their fates. *The Glass Palace* is a novel which is predominantly about migration, and the hybrid identity that attaches itself to those who are subject to it (Sukanya and Sobana 123). If we fast forward to more recent works produced by Ghosh, we find amongst them his fictional work- *The*

Gun Island -which deals specifically with the issue of Climate Migration. He also poignantly evokes the perils that are braved by the illegal South Asian migrants who risk drowning in their bid to emigrate to Europe. In its denouement, the novel brings into focus how the illegal migrants from Asia, Africa, and nations like war-ravaged Syria, and Afghanistan, trying to enter the European Union (EU) via its sea frontier, are viewed in terms of political power-play only. Their universal human rights are undermined by the European Union (EU) which, quite ironically given the context, claims that it is founded on that very discourse (Som). In the works that have been discussed so far, we find Ghosh engaging with the idea of migration in a variety of patterns, each of which encapsulates certain degrees of complexity. By the timeline of the publication of stand-alone novels, we find *The Glass Palace* to be the earliest (published in the year 2000), and *The Gun Island* to be the latest (published in the year 2000) (McGaw). The Ibis trilogy was published over seven years: *Sea of Poppies* in 2008, *River of Smoke* in 2011, and the last novel of the series, *Flood of Fire* came out in 2015 (McGaw).

In this paper, the specified standalone novels were chosen to examine the widely differing patterns of migration that Ghosh depicts in the two novels which are separated by a gap of 19 years in terms of their publication period. The Ibis Trilogy was chosen not only for its critical significance in the literary canon of Amitav Ghosh but also owing to the differing patterns of migration that we come to read about through the lives of the novels' protagonists as all the instalments of the trilogy get published over 7 years. Extant academic papers on Amitav Ghosh's novels discuss the causes of migration that are featured in his work, especially their historical context of colonial rules. Papers discuss the conditions of oppression and exploitation in which many of the colonized characters of Ghosh's novels lived: conditions which caused them to emigrate. While such literature enumerates and describes the causes of migration in the Amitav Ghosh canon, they scarcely look for "patterns" or categories of migration through any 'theory of migration' lens. This paper attempts to reduce this gap through a two-step process: First, textual analyses of select texts are made, chosen from the works described above, which deal with international migration. Secondly, the analysed output is then utilized to compare against the migration theory

developed by Hein de Haas known as The Aspirations- Capabilities framework (de Haas 17). In this manner, the paper seeks to identify specific categories or patterns of migration that are found in Amitav Ghosh's novels against the backdrop of a theory.

Theoretical Migration Categories of Hein de Haas

There is a dearth of theory-making in Migration Studies as an area of social-scientific enquiry (de Haas 2). Many scholars in the field contend that thinking concerning migration has remained attached to nineteenth-century concepts, assumptions, and models of migration, and little has changed (Massey 7). In recent years there has been a huge increase in the number of empirical studies on migration, starkly contrasting the theoretical development on migration (de Haas 18). One of the detrimental outcomes of lack of systematic theorizing is the inability to meaningfully interpret empirical facts, understand how macro-structural factors shape migration processes, and explain the huge diversity in migration experiences across different ethnic, skills, gender and class groups (de Haas 18). That migration research, particularly recent works by anthropologists and sociologists, has focused on studying and conceptualizing the lives, identities and experiences of migrants from an internal or native point of view, and does not lend itself to broad pictures, and theorizing is also unhelpful in developing broad categories of migration (de Haas 20).

In his bid to proffer the Aspirations- Capabilities framework, Hein de Haas offers a final criticism of the present state of theorizing by stating that "Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have failed to adequately capture the vital role of difficult-to-quantify structural factors such as inequality, power and states in shaping migration processes, or to develop meaningful idea of human agency beyond the voluntaristic assumptions of neo-classical models or the portrayals of migrants as more or less passive victims of capitalist forces, as is common in historical structure theories" (22). Hein de Haas arrives at four different categories of migration by informing his Aspirations- Capabilities framework with Noble Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen's concept of Human Capability (19), and Russo-British philosopher Isaiah Berlin's concepts of Positive Freedom and Negative Freedom (24). According to Amartya Sen,

Human Capability is defined as the ability of human beings to lead lives they value, and that enhance the substantive freedoms that human beings may enjoy. In his view development constitutes not only income growth but also the expansion of the capabilities of people to control their own lives (Sen 201). In this sense, migration is undertaken to improve one's life, and one possesses the capability to migrate. Isaiah Berlin's Positive Liberty entails the ability to take control of one's own life, and thereby realize one's fundamental purposes and aspirations. His Negative Liberty refers to the absence of barriers such as oppression, regulation, war or violence that constrain people's freedom and their lives (de Haas 25). Negative Liberty and Positive Liberty are structural in the sense that in a nation these are structurally determined, and thus affect the mobility and migration decisions of that nation's people (de Haas 26). For example, in a nation where oppression and political violence exist, its people will aspire to migrate elsewhere to gain freedom from such oppression. Yet that aspiration may well be stunted owing to their lack of capability to move or migrate as the government may have active exit restrictions in place, and the people may also choose to remain to protect family members, and their community (de Haas 27).

In the presence of Positive Liberty access to social, economic, and cultural resources increases, and that also means that the individual's capacity to aspire increases: making him or her aware of alternative lifestyles, and places which fit individual aspirations, and making one feel that migration may be within one's reach (and prompt one to acquire the capability to migrate) (de Haas 27). Based on the above de Haas has come up with four migration categories (see table 1):

Table 1. Theoretical Migration Categories Based on Positive and Negative Liberty Types

Categories of Migration	Short Description
Precarious Migration	Generally short-distance, often internal, by relatively poor people vulnerable to exploitation, i.e., poor rural-to-urban migrants, undocumented labour migrants, 'failed' asylum-seekers, internal displace) (relevant theories: historical structural; dual labour-market)

Distress Migration	Deprivation of mobility freedom through the absence of a reasonable option to stay; applies to refugees fleeing potentially life-threatening conditions but possessing the resources to move abroad and obtain legal status (relevant theories: historical structural; network; new economics of labour migration)
Improvement Migration	Internal and international, often through networks, recruitment and pooling of family resources (relevant theories: new economics of labour migration; network and internal dynamics; cumulative causation; dual labour-market; mobility transition)
Free Migration	Relatively unconstrained mobility in and between wealthy countries or by wealthy people, skilled workers, 'lifestyle' migrants (relevant theories: neo-classical; human capital; mobility transition)

Source: De Haas, Hein. "A theory of migration: The aspirations-capabilities framework." *Comparative Migration Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4>.

Upon textual analysis of some of the excerpts taken from Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy as well as his stand-alone novels *The Glass Palace*, and *Gun Island*, we will be exploring what different categories of migration from Ghosh's narratives match the categories delineated in de Haas's theoretical migration categories (as depicted in table 1).

Migration Categories in Ibis Trilogy

In *The Sea of Poppies*, the first book of the Ibis Trilogy by Amitav Ghosh, we meet one of his most powerful female protagonists: Deeti. She is one of the subaltern migrants who feature in *Sea of Poppies* as a woman not only doomed in a marriage to an opium addict impotent husband but also the social oppression and lack of agency that dictated the life of women in 19th century rural India: communities which were in the thrall of a strict caste system with some of its most onerous attendants such as the *Sati Dah* or widow sacrifice practices. Indeed, Deeti is introduced in the novel as one who has been a victim of the worst possible outrages that can be perpetrated against

women. Before joining the Ibis- the migrant ship on a voyage across the sea, after a series of trials and tribulations, she is united in her escapade with another scheduled caste social outcaste- Kalua- who protects her and befriends her during her journey. Upon escaping from the funeral pyre of her husband Deeti finds herself, with the help of Kalua, on a large boat making its way on a river to deposit its cargo of migrant labourers. Ghosh describes Deeti's experience inside the hold of the migrant boat with remarkable poignancy:

The hold ran the length of the vessel, and had no compartments or internal division: it was like a floating storage shed, with a ceiling so low that a grown man could not stand upright in it for fear of hurting his head. The hold's windows, of which there were several, were usually kept shut, for fear of thieves, thugs, and river dacoits; after the rains came down they were almost permanently sealed, so that very little light penetrated inside, even when the clouds cleared.

The first time Deeti looked into the hold, she had felt as though she were about to tumble into the well: all she could see, through the veil of her hung, were the whites of a great many eyes, shining in the darkness as they looked up and blinked into the light. She went down the ladder with great deliberation, being careful to keep her face veiled. When her eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom, she saw that she had descended into the middle of a packed assembly: several dozen men were gathered around her, some squatting on their haunches, some lying curled on mats and some sitting with their backs against the hull. A gangsta seemed like a paltry shield against the assault of so many curious eyes, and she was quick to seek shelter behind Kalua (Ghosh 231-232).

From the above narrative, we can discern that a mass of indigent and helpless labourers were subject to local, and international migration during the 1830s when the British colonial rulers were consolidating their grip in India as its principal administrators. Their conditions of transit in the cargo hold of a large boat are telling and confirm the abject and inhumane conditions in which they were treated. Deeti's plight as a newcomer from a village having to encounter the unsettling scenes of the boat as she makes her escape from the horrors of her life in her native village is also quite unsettling. The description fits de Haas's category of 'Precarious

migration' in which he defines such migration as rural to urban, usually made by impoverished people vulnerable to exploitation, and often undertaken by undocumented labour migrants (see Table 1).

Deeti and Kalua ultimately proceed to be shoved aboard the Ibis—the migrant labourer ship bound for China. Ghosh depicts the moment when Deeti teeters aboard the erstwhile slave ship Ibis:

Through the veils of her sari, Deeti looked up at the masts, towering above. The sight made her a little giddy, so she kept her head bent and her eyes lowered. Several maistries and silahdars were positioned along the deck, ushering the migrants along with their lathis, shoving them in the direction of the booby-hatch. *Chal! Chal!* Despite their shouts, progress was slow because of all the clutter on deck; everywhere you looked there were ropes, casks, pipas, bimbis, and even the runaway chicken and bleating goat.

Deeti was almost abreast of the foremast when she became aware of a voice that sounded strangely familiar: it was shouting obscenities in Bhojpuri: *Tore mai ke bur chodo* (Ghosh 366-367)!

In the description above we see that the migrants were almost treated like cattle as they boarded the Ibis. Their subaltern status and lack of power made them subject to extreme brutality, abuse and maltreatment. Once again the scene above places the migrants belonging to the category of 'Precarious migration' (see table 1).

Seth Behram Modi, the Indian entrepreneur of Parsi descent is one of the central characters in *River of Smoke*, the second novel of the Ibis trilogy. This novel is mainly based on the critical events that took place in China's Canton (or Guangzhou of the present day) that led to the first Opium War of the 19th century. Here we find Modi as the only Indian opium merchant who has eked out a position for himself as a trader amongst the many Occidental merchants who have settled themselves in their respective factories of Canton to get a slice of the very attractive opium trade that was taking place between East India Company controlled India and China (at the behest of the British). Seth Modi, although an Indian, does not share the plight of the rural masses who are oppressed, exploited, and are mere minions for the production of opium that finances the growth of rich lifestyle of the British, Europeans and Americans who control the trade. Here we

find Modi a wealthy Indian merchant who has an opulent lifestyle that is equally privileged in India and China. Settled in Canton in his factory to look after the opium trade as a direct result of his imports to China, Modi owns his merchant vessel that carries him, and his cargo of precious opium along the sea routes of the South China Sea, and Indian Ocean:

Until then the voyage had been uneventful and *Anahita* had sailed through the few squalls that had crossed her path with a full suit of sails aloft. A sleek and elegant three-master, she was one of the few Bombay-built vessels that regularly outran the swiftest British- and American-made opium carriers, even such legendary ships as *Red Rover* and *Seawitch*. On this voyage too she had posted very good times and seemed to be heading to another record run. But the weather in the Bay of Bengal was notoriously unpredictable in September, so when the skies began to darken, the Captain, a taciturn New Zealander, wasted no time in snugging the ship down. When the wind reached gale force he sent down a note to his employer, Seth Behramji, recommending that he retire to the Owners' Suite and remain there for the duration (Ghosh 27).

In the description, we find a well-heeled Seth Modi ensconced in the well-appointed cabin of his merchant ship in the wake of a tropical storm on the high seas of the Bay of Bengal. He has an international crew to man a very elegant ship and is the only person who is calling the shots. His trade interests in Canton have made him a resident in that city- a sort of wealthy migrant from India who travels back and forth in his conveyance. What we find here is not de Haas's 'Precarious migration', but what he categorized as 'Free migration': free unconstrained mobility of wealthy people between countries (see table 1). Wealth and privilege certainly enabled Modi to enjoy a lot of Positive Liberty (as defined by Isaiah Berlin) (de Haas 24), and this eventually amounts to the kind of Free Migration that the likes of Modi come to enjoy in colonized India.

Flood of Fire, the last instalment of the Ibis Trilogy is mainly about the second and last Opium War, which contains as a denouement the decisive and tragic defeat of the Chinese navy at the hands of the British. The war was waged with the help of thousands of Indian mercenary soldiers who were led by their British commanders to kill

and deliver a devastating blow to the Imperial Chinese war machinery which wanted to end the lucrative opium trade that was killing their nation. Havildar Kesri Singh was one of the Indian mercenaries- a central character in the novel- who was transported by sea to China to fight on the side of the British, and wage war against the Chinese. Finding life in his native village too limited, Kesri Singh had run away and joined the army as a havildar for an improved and adventure-filled life. Initially, the experience of being transported as part of his company of troops did provide a sense of novelty and strange experiences that were welcome:

But the next day when they arrived at Barrackpore, the novelty of seeing the sahib-log paled before the utter strangeness of everything else. Even before the boat docked they spotted a building that was nothing like they had seen before- a palace overlooking the river, with peacocks on the roof, and a vast garden in front, filled with strange colorful flowers.

Hukum Singh sneered at the awed expressions on their faces. The Barrackpore bungalow was only a weekend retreat for the Burra Laa- the English Governor-General: it was a mere hut, compared to the Laa Sahib's palace in Calcutta (Ghosh 108)

In the above, we see a distinct example of 'Improvement Migration' as suggested by the theoretical migration categories of de Haas (see table 1). Here, as in the theory, international migration is enacted by the use of networks and family resources. Hukum Singh who allowed Kesri Singh to become part of the British military expedition in China, was known to Kesri Singh from his village. The sole reason for joining the army had been centred around the desire to gain new experiences and enjoy a different life that the staid village could not provide. In this initial portrait of the recruits staring agape at the lifestyle of the colonial rulers, we find a picture of that hunger for novelty being satiated.

Migration Categories in The Glass Palace and Gun Island

The Glass Palace is a large canvas, on which is painted the stories of Indian migrant family members from British India who had settled in the newly colonized Burma at the end of the 19th century after King Thibaw, the Burmese king was deposed by the British. This is an

intricate novel about migration to Burma, and then re-migration to India and the USA by the many protagonists that people in the novel. They are subject to different categories of migration, and fit some of the categories suggested by de Haas (de Haas 27). Rajkumar, the main protagonist of the novel, came to Burma, first as an impoverished child labourer aboard a small boat (or *Sampan*), and his story of migration is a clear case of the 'Distress migration' (see Table 1). Fleeing from abject poverty in East Bengal, Rajkumar is orphaned when his mother dies of cholera in transit to Burma, and he is left with nothing but the small gold ring that his mother passed on to him during her death. It was by sheer chance that Rajkumar found himself as a boatman on the day of the British attack in Mandalay in 1886 that launched his migrant life in alien Burma (Ghosh 102). But this novel is not only about distress migration. Rajkumar, through the vagaries of fortune, eventually emerges as a very wealthy businessman leading the Indian community in Rangoon, Burma's capital, and one of his relatives Uma, eventually migrates to the USA of her own volition with financial help from Rajkumar. Uma, the widow of a colonial civil servant, exercises almost unconstrained mobility when she decides to buy a ticket on an ocean liner bound for the USA, and this is a fascinating example of 'Free Migration' (see Table 1) during the early part of 20th century in this Amitav Ghosh novel.

Gun Island is one of the recent Ghosh novels which portrays the issue of climate migration within the backdrop of narrative fiction (Kaur 114). The protagonist Tipu, one of the central characters, is not only adversely affected by the ecological changes that take away livelihood opportunities in his native Sundarbans, the mangrove forest region in the Southeast corner of India (and Bangladesh), but also his same-sex amorous inclination toward his Muslim friend-Rafi. His decision to use illegal migration channels to move to Italy (in the EU) is also no less influenced by the access to technology and internet via smartphones which can feed images of a free and affluent life in the Global North, and induce individuals to aspire for lifestyle migration. Ghosh implicates the pervasive hand-held devices for inspiring individuals to migrate from the Global South:

This in turn raises the question: what is the nature of the migrant's agency in these circumstances? Take the case of the boy in

the Bengal village: Is his decision to migrate wholly his own, or is it, to some degree, the product of his interactions with the “cognitive assemblage” that manifests itself in his handheld device? If that is the case, then to what degree are young migrants responsible for their decision to move?

Today there is a widespread awareness of the ethical and philosophical dilemmas that arise when humans interact with self-guided machines—for example autonomous weapons, like killer drones. If we are unwilling to accept that the same dilemmas may arise also at the other end of the human and technological spectrum—that is, about poor people in the global South—it is perhaps because we are unable to acknowledge the true scale of the disruptions that have been set in motion by the technologies of our time (Ghosh 716)

From the above, we can discern that Rafi’s migration to Italy, and later in the novel Tipu’s migration as an illegal migrant, was a curious category which straddled two different categories of migration as suggested by de Haas: simultaneously a ‘Distress Migration’, and also an ‘Improvement Migration.’

Conclusion

This paper makes an important contribution by looking at the stories of migration in some of the select Amitav Ghosh novels which eminently deal with migration, and trying to find patterns in these migration stories. In our vein to find patterns we utilize a migration categorization offered by influential migration researcher Hein de Haas, and look at the migration narratives through the lens of four migration categories offered by de Haas. It is evident from the textual analysis that Ghosh’s various narratives of migration can be accommodated within the four broad categories of migration that have been discussed here (see table 1). The discussion deepens our understanding of the complexity of migration, yet at the same time helps us look at the holistic picture, and frame the migrations undertaken in different eras, and different circumstances within a theory of migration.

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