

CULTURAL CONTINUITY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *DANCING IN CAMBODIA AND AT LARGE IN BURMA*

Research Scholar

Kirti Choudhary

Dept. of English, Maharshi Dayanand
University, Rohtak, Haryana

Research Guide

Dr. Rashmi Malik

Department of English and Foreign Languages

Abstract-

The present paper focuses on Amitav Ghosh's journey to Cambodia and Burma in his collection of essays Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma. Ghosh explores the multifaceted history of the two countries to create a better cultural understanding. The writer narrates three stories namely, "Dancing in Cambodia", "Stories in Stone" and "At large in Burma". In the former two, Ghosh focuses on the history of Cambodia and emphasis in Cambodia during the post-UNTAC election years. It follows the cultural period of before, during and after the impact of Khmer Rouge. In the latter, the writer focuses on an Asian country that has been notably isolated from the outer world in recent years, through the instrument of individual stories. The essay brings forth the varying couplings of history over time to analyse the cultural continuity of the people of Cambodia and Myanmar from a larger cultural perspective. The writer provides a window to the world's closed societies which characterises the national and cultural issues through the personal accounts of the characters. The paper examines sacred traditions and conventions in a society, highlighting how the cultural identities are discursively formed.



Global Online Electronic International Interdisciplinary Research Journal's licensed Based on a work at <http://www.goeirj.com>

Keywords- Amitav Ghosh, cultural continuity, identity, travel, art, Cambodia, Burma

Introduction

To travel is to embark on a journey, it is a movement through time and space. Travelling maps an individual's ability to move from experience to experience in terms of geography, time and space in the process blurring the lines between the known and the unknown. Travel writing, in recent years, has become an instrument to explore new dimensions of different cultures. The accounts of travel constitute a significant description of culture, where writers present travel experiences imaginatively and interpret reality from their vision. The traveller seeks to capture

the glimpses of cultures around him. The traveller questions the practices and conventions that are considered to be sacrosanct in a society or culture and he points to how the identities of individuals and their places of origin are discursively constructed.

In his work *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, theorist Stuart Hall defines cultural identity as “a sort of collective ‘one true self’ ... which many people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.” (Hall 223). Hence, cultural identity offers a “stable, unchanging and continuous frame of reference and meaning”. (223) The theory of cultural continuity parallels with the same notion of cultural connectedness, emphasising the significance of intergenerational cultural connectivity, maintained by a shared set of values and traditions of a community. Cultural continuity was described by Kirmayer et al. as “something that is potentially enduring or continuously linked through processes of historical transformation with an identifiable past of tradition”. (Kirmayer et al. 78)

In his collection of essays *Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma* (1998) Amitav Ghosh travels throughout Cambodia and Burma to understand the multifaceted history of the two countries. He travels significantly, to gain varying perspectives through personal connections. The physical travel to varied locations allows him a variety of imaginative temporal and spatial adventures. As Michel de Certeau describes, “every story is a travel story – a spatial practice” (Certeau 62). The travelogue narrated by Ghosh is of profound significance since it addresses pertinent and challenging problems involving the lives of people who live in difficult times and their struggle to persevere.

Amitav Ghosh in his work explores the intertwining cultural boundaries of Cambodia and Burma. The various experiences of the author, the lives, destinies and histories of people he meets with and hears about, are depicted in these travelogues. In his work, the writer attempts to establish a connection that oscillates between the world before and after colonisation in Cambodia and the constant struggle faced by the people of Burma. The present paper attempts to study how the author’s narrative maps the varying experiences of individuals operating in the cultural paradigm and explores the emphasis of cultural continuity on intergenerational cultural linkage through shared values and customs throughout a community.

Dancing in Cambodia

Dancing in Cambodia is the first piece in the collection, it delves into the art of dancing in two distinct time-frames almost a century apart. Ghosh travelled to Cambodia in January 1993, when the nation was gradually beginning to open its door to Western observers, allowing him a glimpse into the lives of people who had suffered during the Pol Pot regime. The essay

corresponds with the demise of the tyrant Pol Pot, the leader of Cambodia's communist revolution. The writer's work explores the role of dancing in the political and cultural backdrop, covering the destruction caused by Pol Pot and its resurrection.

In the essay, Ghosh focuses on two aspects of Cambodia, the glorious history of Khmer culture and the bitter present. The juxtaposing events from two different time-frames illustrate that the dancers draw inspiration and strength from the past to confront the present and the future. The work showcases the ability of the art of dancing to transcend generational boundaries and create connections in seemingly distinct events. Ghosh draws parallels in the journey of Cambodian King Sisowath in 1906 along with the retinue of traditional dancers of Cambodia and the nation's contemporary historical events, which have been desecrated by the Khmer Rouge Revolution.

Ghosh's account focuses on the three elements that helped shape the fate of Cambodia: the former King Sisowath, the Khmer Rouge, and the aftermath. The historical connections of these three elements resemble the dancing shadows that influence Cambodia's fate. Judith Hamera in her work *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City*, describes, every day, urban communities are danced into being. This is more than a metaphor. It is a testament to the power of performance as a social force, as cultural poiesis, and as a communication infrastructure that makes identity, solidarity and memory shareable (Hamera 1).

During King Sisowath

The essay begins with a description of Cambodia in the year 1906 from the perspective of the French when Cambodia's King Sisowath embarked on Marseille on the journey with his retinue for the exhibition, Exposition Coloniale on the French liner Amiral-Kersaint. Ghosh draws upon the European opinion of the Orient by expressing that "no pasha or prince or bey had aroused nearly as much enthusiasm as the King of Cambodia" (Ghosh 2).

The emphasis on the dancers of Cambodia is supplemented with Le Figaro's stories of the Western view. Ghosh's travelogue is enhanced with materials from varied resources instead of personal ventures. It's intriguing to read Ghosh's source, *Rodin et les danseuses cambodgiennes: Sa dernière passion*, where one of the contributors, Dominique Viéville, refers to Rodin's sketches as an effort to resurrect antiquity, uncovering the unknown past, and discovering Cambodian dance postures that are comparable by those of Ancient Greece:

while the performance was in progress a correspondent spotted the most celebrated Parisian of all in the audience, the bearded mosaic figure of the 'great Rodin ... going into ecstasies

over the little virgins of Phnom Penh, whose immaterial silhouettes he drew with infinite love ...' these Cambodians have shown us everything that antiquity could have contained... it is impossible to think of anyone wearing human nature to such perfection; except them and the Greeks. (32)

In Rodin's one hundred and fifty sketches, the traditional appeal of Cambodian classical dance on paper can be visualised with diverse movements that tell the stories that originated in the temples of Angkor, spanning subsequently to a period when royal dances at the court portrayed and referred to the bond between the earth and the heaven. The essay highlights Rodin's modernism as well as traditional Khmer art.

During Khmer rouge

During the Khmer Rouge regime, “private property, personal possessions, money, leisure, socialising, marriage (except in cadre-approved cases), religion, and all personal liberties” (Widyono 26) were abolished. The erstwhile palace dancers concealed their identities for the risk of being executed because their involvement with customs like dancing was seen negatively in the aftermath of the agrarian revolution.

An entire generation of dance instructors were massacred by the Khmer Rouge administration, Ghosh demonstrates the challenges of reconstructing the traditional form. During the Pol Pot regime, dance became a symbol of the immortality of a civilization on the verge of extinction. Ghosh centres on the idea of a dancer who fantasises in her dreams. The traditional art form can evolve into an imaginative dance that can resurrect buried memories from the depths of one's mind. Dance also evokes images of stoic endurance, persistence, and decades of practice to master motions and postures. Reviving Khmer art involves further efforts in, reconfiguration and recreation.

Post Khmer Rouge

Cambodia was invaded by Vietnamese in January 1979 which propelled the Khmer Rouge into hiding, which allowed surviving artists to organise troupes in the hopes of reviving their valuable art. Ghosh during his journey locates Chea Samy, a dance instructor Chea Samy, a dance teacher, met Princess Soumphady, who was a part of the 1906 French expedition. The writer evokes memories of Soumphady, whom she met as a child; she reacts with “a smile in an indulgent, misty way in which people recall a favourite aunt.” (Ghosh 5) Chea Samy was married to the man whose youngest brother was Pol Pot, whose soldiers are also responsible for the death of Princess Soumphady, the royal troupe's dancing instructor. The writer is intrigued by the coincidences of existing conflicting duality.

Ghosh observes Chea Samy's aim of passing the Cambodian dance art to children as a way of constructively placing herself into history. Her efforts consist of the continuous transmission of the art to the current generation, despite the numerous difficulties encountered in the past. It's mentioned how ninety per cent of the artists suffered executions under the Khmer Rouge, and how those who survived attempted to revive the ancient art form. The writer mentions the value held by the art of dance as by the dance instructor as

I was like a smoker who gives up smoking, a well-known dancer said to me once, describing those years. 'I would dream of dance when I was alone or at night. You could get through the day because of hard work. It was the nights that were difficult; we would lie awake wondering who was going to be called out next. That was when I would dance in my head. (17)

Continuity can also be defined as the preservation of customs and social institutions that provide stability to a community. Chea and her dance teachers utilise classical dance to respond to horrific events with grace and dedication. Their dance performance is an attempt to recapture the joy of freedom. Ghosh's travelogue demonstrates how dance provides survivors of the Khmer Rouge unity and cultural continuity, and how dancers use the social and artistic power of performance to reconstruct their lives and establish new, and varied communities. By sharing the form of dancing with the coming generation and redefining the potential of Khmer culture, the dancers construct transformative spaces of hybrid identities and politics.

The writer ends his account of his journey by referring to the festival in 1988 “when classical Cambodian music and dance were performed for the first time since the Revolution” (51). This dance festival signals the victory of the spirit of the people of Cambodia. Dance becomes a kind of travelling metaphor, a symbol of Cambodian culture. This represents cultural continuity where the dance signifies the preservation of traditional customs, rites or festivals within a social structure. These celebrations contain social significance and are passed down from generation to generation, operating as an instrument for preserving and celebrating cultural identity.

The people of Cambodia reacted to the dance performance with tears flowing down their eyes, to which Ghosh suggests that: "It was a kind of rebirth: a movement when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living." (52) Dance becomes a symbol of resistance against violence, celebrating the victory of the human spirit.

Theorist Raymond Williams proposed the notion of ‘structure of feeling’, in this he combines the vague idea of ‘structure’ and ‘feeling’ together and attempts to define the historical understanding of the past culture with the living culture of a given time and place. He asserts that

society continuously changes in terms of values and meanings that might hold distinct connotations when used in different periods. Williams proposes that with every new generation, people respond to society in a certain way and by doing so they create their values and cultural identities. Hence, the cultural continuity is depicted through the art of dancing in distinct time-frames almost a century apart.

Stories in Stone

In his second essay, *Stories in Stone*, Ghosh details the architectural magnificence of the temple Angkor Wat. Ghosh's journey explores the history, myth, and personal accounts behind the portrayal and allocation of Angkor to comprehend its multifaceted intricacy. The temple of Angkor Wat was devoted to Lord Vishnu, constructed by King Suryavarman II. Ghosh highlights that the ancient temple has endured the ravages of time and recounts the narrative etched on stone.

Sculpture was the primary art form used by the Khmer monarchs to assert their sovereignty, representing the symbolic connections between the monarch and deity. The writer emphasises that Cambodian dancing is inscribed in Khmer sculpture reaching as early as the ninth century. In the essay, Ghosh describes “Angkor Wat is a monument to the power of the story” (54). He mentions

From the minute I first entered Angkor Wat I found myself awash in stories ... This is true in a perfectly literal sense: with every step a visitor takes in this immense twelfth-century Cambodian temple he finds himself moving counters in a gigantic abacus of story-telling ... But no story, no matter how loftily cosmic, is ever entirely free of its origins: as with all the best stories, this one too is partly an autobiography, an allegory about its authorship. (54-55)

The essay explores the historical symbolism of Angkor Wat, as one of the world's significant religious structures, to be a representation of Cambodian identity. The significance of the essay is represented in the symbolic monument that pervades all aspects of the nation's existence. The writer's representation of the images of Angkor Wat in a variety of commercial settings serves as a testament to the extent to which ancient and contemporary cultures combine.

In the time I'd spent in Cambodia, I had discovered Angkor Wat: I had discovered that its place in the world rests upon a kind of paradox. For many people, around the world, Angkor Wat is a uniquely powerful symbol of the romance of lost civilizations; of ancient glory, devoured by time. But for Cambodia, it serves as no less a vivid symbol of modernity. Images of Angkor Wat are so common in Cambodia, so inescapable that after a while they become an assault upon the visitor's senses; the visual equivalent of radio music played on public loudspeakers. There are so many of

them, everywhere, that at first, the images appear to be omnipresent, ubiquitous. But the impression is misleading; the images are not ubiquitous – they are never where one expects. (55-56) Cambodia's ancient heritage overtakes the Ghosh's sensations since images of the Angkor Wat's symbol appear on a multitude of things ranging from civil and military clothing, manufacturing goods, beer bottles, national and political flags, business logos, and even the wing of the former Kampuchea Airlines.

Ghosh's expedition led him to an inquisition of the land's silent history. Ghosh overlays narratives in the essay to show the interconnected and palimpsest nature of society as he perceives it. He discovers a material representation of the passage of time and the interplay of cultural facts of the epic histories engraved on the stone walls of Angkor, and the ancient tales it contains. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* written by theorist Edward Soja describes Thirdspace as

a space of radical openness, a site of resistance and struggle, a space of multiplicitous representations ...where there are always 'other' spaces... It is a meeting ground, a site of hybridity...a margin or edge where ties can be severed and also new ties can be forged. It can be mapped but never captured in conventional cartographies; it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practised and fully lived. (Soja 69) Thirdspace exemplifies people who have been robbed of their education and identity,

now in search of the small strands and clues connecting them back to the origins of their culture, these are the 'other' things that interest the writer. In the same way, dance became a symbol of Cambodian perseverance, Angkor Wat exists as a symbol of refuge and consolation, it is represented as "a break with the past- a token of the country's belonging, not within the mediaeval, but rather the contemporary world" (Ghosh 60).

At Large In Burma

At Large in Burma, chronicles Ghosh's expedition in the southeast Asian country of Burma, which is primarily inaccessible from the rest of the world due to its political concerns rather than geography. The writer travelled to Burma twice between late 1995 and July 1996. Ghosh calls Burma "the dark house of the neighbourhood, huddled behind an impenetrable, overgrown fence" (65). Ghosh engages in interviews and actual visits to remote spaces of the nation to understand the ongoing upheavals.

Ghosh's travelogue allows its audience to engage in the process of multi-cultural understanding and development. The author describes not only the physical characteristics of places he visited but also the struggle that the characters confronted when faced with difficult

situations. The writer recalls his experiences of Burma's hermetic society, which has been detached from global politics by its tyrant, General Ne Win, who has led the military regime since 1962. The work highlights Aung San Suu Kyi's signifying position, and the necessity to continue fighting for democracy in Burma, which has been transformed from its previous condition of a golden land of abundance to one of scarcity in all spheres.

Ghosh visited Suu Kyi two-times during her house arrest in 1995 and 1996, he recounts his initial discussion with her at Oxford in 1980, when things were relatively more peaceful. The essay highlights the rise from anonymity to enormity, and Ghosh enables the audience to visualise the battle for democracy using nonviolence as the sole instrument. The writer affirms that he was brought up the same way as Suu Kyi to “believe in the appropriateness of a strict separation between the public and the private, the political and the domestic” (83). He says that it is inappropriate to classify political movements based on the philosophy of a single leader, but offers an exemption for Suu Kyi, whom he characterised as “the personification of Burma’s democratic resistance” (74). The exemption of the movement of these principles in Suu Kyi's predicament is ironic. In the postmodern era, political ideology is all about symbolism, and Suu Kyi is the embodiment of the most significant political asset.

It is only because Burma’s 1988 democracy movement had a symbol, personified in Suu Kyi, that the world remembers it and continues to exert pressure on the current regime. Otherwise, the world would almost certainly have forgotten Burma’s slain and dispersed democrats just as quickly as it has forgotten many others like them in the past. (83) Ghosh also describes the struggle of the Karenni-refugee camps across the boundaries of Thailand and Burma. He discusses the historical guerrilla battle being fought for the last five decades between the Karenni ethnic minority and Burma's military. He informs readers that the Karennis have begun touring their tribal hill to hiking visitors since they were driven to destitution. The writer observes:

In effect tourism has transformed these camps, with their tragic histories of oppression, displacement and misery into counterfeits of timeless rural simplicity waxwork versions of the very past their inhabitants have irretrievably lost. (94)

It’s fascinating to study the process through which Karenni groups are being converted into places of interest. Jonathan Culler's work, *Framing the Sign*, demonstrates the semiotics of tourism, how tourist attractions are dependent on symbols

empty sights become sights through the attachment of markers. An unremarkable piece of ground becomes a tourist attraction when equipped with a plaque [...] and the markers

themselves quite explicitly become the attraction, the sight itself (Culler 165-166). In the essay, Ghosh studies the traveller's code that emphasises the interconnection of the signifier and signified: the Karenni camp, which was initially an indicator and a marker of political upheaval and homelessness has now transformed into a destination to attract tourists to hike up the mountains to witness the unfortunate condition of the lost civilization.

Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* comments that “any space implies, contains and dissimulates social relationships – and this despite the fact that a space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things” (Lefebvre 83). He adds that

spaces are *produced*. The ‘raw material’ from which they are produced is nature. They are the products of an activity which involves the economic and technical realms but which extends well beyond them, for these are political products and strategic spaces. The term ‘strategy’ connotes a great variety of products and actions: it combines peace and war, the arms trade with deterrence in the event of a crisis, and the use of resources from *peripheral* spaces with the use of riches from industrial, urban and state-dominated centres. (Lefebvre 84)

Ghosh does not consider Burma to be a foreign nation because he has numerous familial ties there. Ghosh goes on to emphasise the intrinsic fictionality of all national boundaries and identities. He claims that there's nothing known as a natural nation and proceeds to explain that in a very diverse region like Southeast Asia, the boundaries tend to be arbitrary. According to him “Burma’s best hopes for peace lie in maintaining intact the larger and more inclusive entity that history, albeit absent-mindedly, bequeathed to its population.” (Ghosh 100) **Conclusion**

Amitav Ghosh’s *Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma* provides an insightful look into Cambodia and Burma's political, economic, and social conditions. Cultural continuity specifies culture as dynamic through the preservation of collective memory, which may transform over time. Ghosh asserts that a nation lives in its culture and not in government. The characters who appear in Ghosh's works are travellers in their own rectitude, therefore their voyage is not just limited to the metaphorical aspect in the novels. Ghosh emphasises individuals'

attempts to discover themselves from unfamiliar circumstances and build a larger perspective of themselves and the world surrounding them. They all go through their cultural journey. Whether they reach a destination or not is, however, a matter of interpretation. Ghosh's work offers a willingness to address the political challenges and as a result, dancing and sculpting became significant metaphors for describing and textualizing the journey. By using this form of narrative, the writer maintains a keen awareness of the inextricable link between historical, geographical and

cultural facts and the power structures that imbue them throughout the work.

Works Cited

1. Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
2. Barker, Chris. *Cultural Studies : Theory and Practice*. London, Sage, 2012. Bhattacharji, Shobhana. "Amitav Ghosh's Travel Writing: 'In an Antique Land, Dancing in Cambodia' and 'The Imam and the Indian.'" *Indian Literature*, vol. 47, no. 6 (218), 2003, pp. 197–213. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23341083>.
3. Clifford, James. "Diasporas". *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 3, *Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future*, 1994, pp. 302-338. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23341083>.
4. links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0886-7356%28199408%299%3A3%3C302%3AD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O.
5. Culler, Jonathan. *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
6. De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of Minnesota Press, 1998. Ghosh, Amitav. *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1998. Hamera, J. *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City*. United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2006.
7. Hall, Stuart. "CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DIASPORA." *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, edited by Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 131–38. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrwt2.26>.
8. Hulme, Peter, and Tim Youngs, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
9. Kirmayer, Laurence J, and Aboriginal Healing Foundation Canada. *Suicide among Aboriginal People in Canada*. Ottawa, Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2007.
10. Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith Blackwell, 1991. Mikkonen, Kai. "The 'Narrative Is Travel' Metaphor: Between Spatial Sequence and Open Consequence." *Narrative*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2007, pp. 286–305. *Project MUSE*, doi.org/10.1353/nar.2007.0017.
11. Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994.
12. Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1996.
13. Vincent, Suhasini. "Metaphors of Fine Arts in Amitav Ghosh's *Dancing in Cambodia*, at

Large in Burma.” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1 Sept. 2009, pp. 77–86, journals.openedition.org/ces/8730, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8730>.

14. Widyono, Benny. *Dancing in Shadows: Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge, and the United Nations in Cambodia*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

