INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (IJLLL)
(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)
ISSN Online: 3049-3242 ISSN Print:

Cartographies of Exile: The Theme of Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's Works

Claris Annie John[1], Ritu Shepherd[2]

[1] Research Scholar, Nehru Arts and Science College Coimbatore, India.
[2] Associate Professor, Nehru Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, India.

Article information

Received:15th September 2025
Received in revised form:18th October 2025
Accepted:19th November 2025
Available online:7th January 2026

Volume:2
Issue:1
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18181609

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's literary oeuvre constitutes a sustained meditation on displacement as both a historical condition and an existential reality. This paper examines how Ghosh transforms displacement from a simple geographical movement into a multivalent literary device that interrogates colonialism, nationalism, environmental catastrophe, and identity formation. Through close textual analysis of major works including The Shadow Lines, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide, Sea of Poppies, and Gun Island, this study argues that Ghosh deploys displacement not merely as a thematic concern but as a narrative structure that challenges linear historiography and monolithic national narratives. By examining various forms of displacement colonial, voluntary, environmental, and climate-induced this paper demonstrates how Ghosh's fiction functions as a counter-archive to official histories, recovering the voices of the displaced while simultaneously exposing the ongoing legacies of imperialism and ecological violence.

Keywords:- Displacement, Migration, Partition, Colonialism, Climate Change, Diaspora

Introduction

In the opening pages of The Shadow Lines, the unnamed narrator recalls his grandmother's violent displacement during the Partition of India, a trauma that reverberates across generations and continents. This scene encapsulates what would become a defining preoccupation in Amitav Ghosh's literary project: the condition of displacement as both a historical rupture and an ongoing state of being. Ghosh, widely recognized as one of the most significant postcolonial writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, has consistently foregrounded displacement as a central thematic and structural principle across his diverse body of work. From the colonial displacements of The Glass Palace to the climate-induced migrations of Gun Island, Ghosh's fiction maps a cartography of exile that spans centuries and continents, connecting the historical violence of empire to contemporary ecological catastrophe.

The critical significance of displacement in Ghosh's work extends beyond its function as mere setting or plot device. Rather, displacement operates as what Claire Chambers calls "a narrative epistemology" that structures how knowledge, memory, and identity are constituted in the postcolonial world (Chambers 58). Ghosh's displaced characters exist in what Homi Bhabha terms "interstitial spaces," locations that resist the binary logic of colonizer/colonized, East/West, home/exile (Bhabha 13). These liminal positions enable Ghosh to interrogate the fixed boundaries geographical, temporal, and conceptual that underpin nationalist and imperialist ideologies. By foregrounding the experiences of those who inhabit these borderlands, Ghosh challenges dominant historical narratives and reveals the constructed nature of the categories through which we organize experience.

This paper argues that Ghosh's treatment of displacement operates on three interconnected levels: the historical, the epistemological, and the ecological. First, Ghosh excavates histories of colonial and postcolonial displacement that have been marginalized in official historiography, from the indentured laborers of Sea of Poppies to the refugees of Partition in The Shadow Lines. Second, he employs displacement as a narrative strategy that disrupts linear temporality and stable subject positions, forcing readers to confront the constructed nature of boundaries and categories. Third, and increasingly prominently in his recent work, Ghosh links historical forms of displacement to contemporary climate crisis, suggesting continuities between colonial violence and ecological catastrophe. Through this tripartite framework, this study examines how Ghosh's fiction transforms displacement from a condition of loss into a position of critical insight, one that exposes the violences encoded in seemingly natural categories like nation, home, and belonging.

Theoretical Framework: Displacement in Postcolonial and Diaspora Studies

To theorize displacement in Ghosh's work requires engaging with multiple critical frameworks that illuminate different dimensions of the phenomenon. Postcolonial theory provides essential tools for understanding displacement as a consequence of colonial violence and partition. Edward Said's concept of "contrapuntal reading" proves particularly relevant, as it describes a mode of interpretation that holds together metropolitan and colonial histories, refusing the temporal lag that relegates colonialism to the past (Said 51). Ghosh's fiction exemplifies this contrapuntal approach, weaving together narratives of displacement across different historical periods to demonstrate their interconnection.

Diaspora studies offers another crucial lens, particularly James Clifford's formulation of diaspora as involving "dwelling-in-displacement" rather than simple exile from an originary homeland (Clifford 308). This conception moves beyond nostalgic models of diaspora to acknowledge how displaced communities create new forms of belonging and cultural production. Avtar Brah's notion of "diaspora space" further nuances this framework by suggesting that the condition of diaspora affects both those who migrate and those who stay, transforming the very concept of home (Brah 16). Ghosh's characters inhabit precisely such diaspora spaces, where identity is continuously negotiated rather than inherited.

Recent scholarship on climate displacement and the Anthropocene adds a third theoretical dimension essential for understanding Ghosh's later works. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" describes environmental destruction that occurs gradually and invisibly, disproportionately affecting the poor and marginalized (Nixon 2). This framework illuminates how Ghosh connects historical colonial displacement to contemporary climate migration, suggesting a continuity of violence that operates across different temporal scales. Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on the Anthropocene challenges the separation between natural and human history, a division Ghosh systematically dismantles in his fiction (Chakrabarty 201).

Borders, Memory, and the Violence of Partition in The Shadow Lines

The Shadow Lines represents Ghosh's most sustained exploration of how arbitrary national borders produce violent displacements that reverberate across generations (Ghosh 1988). The novel's nonlinear narrative structure mirrors its thematic concern with the impossibility of containing displacement within temporal or spatial boundaries. The narrator's fragmented memories weave together events in Calcutta, Dhaka, and London across several decades, refusing the linear progression of conventional historical narrative. This formal innovation enables Ghosh to demonstrate how displacement is not a discrete event but an ongoing condition that shapes identity, memory, and relationships across time and space.

The novel's central meditation on borders emerges most powerfully in the narrator's realization that the partition line dividing India and East Pakistan exists only on maps, invisible in the lived geography of the land itself. When the narrator asks his uncle Robi where exactly the border lies, Robi responds with bitter irony, revealing how colonial cartography has inscribed violence into the landscape: "It's not as though you can see it... But that doesn't mean it isn't there" (Ghosh, Shadow Lines 151). This passage crystallizes Ghosh's critique of how arbitrary imperial boundaries, drawn with "a ruler and red ink," as the text elsewhere notes, generate very real human suffering (Ghosh, Shadow Lines 228). The invisibility of the border underscores its fictive quality while simultaneously revealing how fictions can produce material violence when backed by state power.

The grandmother's character embodies the traumatic dimensions of Partition displacement. Her insistence on traveling to Dhaka to retrieve her uncle despite the danger reflects what the novel presents as an ironic reversal: she has become displaced from her ancestral home by a border that should, according to nationalist logic, represent liberation. Her violent death during communal riots exposes the deadly consequences of partition, while the family's attempt to suppress this history demonstrates how official narratives erase the violence that founds the nation-state. The narrator's painstaking reconstruction of these events functions as what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "history from below," recovering subaltern experiences excluded from triumphalist nationalist historiography (Chakrabarty 97).

Colonial Displacement and the Machinery of Empire in The Glass Palace

The Glass Palace extends Ghosh's examination of displacement backward in time to the colonial period, tracing how British imperial expansion generated massive population movements across Asia (Ghosh 2000). The novel's sweeping historical canvas, spanning from the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885 to the aftermath of World War II, enables Ghosh to demonstrate displacement as a systematic feature of colonial governance rather than an aberration. The forced exile of Burma's royal family following the British conquest initiates a chain of displacements that ripples across generations and continents, connecting the fates of characters in Burma, India, and Malaya.

The protagonist Rajkumar's trajectory exemplifies how colonial capitalism both produces and profits from displacement. An orphaned Indian boy in Mandalay, Rajkumar witnesses the British invasion and subsequent royal exile before himself becoming a migrant laborer and eventually a wealthy teak merchant. His success depends on the very systems of displacement and exploitation that initially victimized him, illustrating what Ghosh presents as the moral ambiguity inherent in colonial modernity. The novel refuses simple binaries of oppressor and oppressed, showing instead how colonialism creates complex chains of complicity that implicate even its victims in structures of violence.

The indentured laborers who work in Rajkumar's teak camps represent another dimension of colonial displacement, one driven by economic necessity rather than political violence. Ghosh's detailed depiction of their working conditions exposes what historian Gaiutra

Bahadur calls the "coolie trade," a form of bound labor that replaced slavery after abolition (Bahadur 7). These workers exist in what the novel describes as a state of "permanent transience," neither belonging to their places of origin nor their sites of labor (Ghosh, Glass Palace 189). Their displacement is economic rather than political, yet Ghosh insists on the continuity between different forms of colonial violence, suggesting that all participate in what Sven Lindqvist terms the "exterminate all the brutes" logic of empire (Lindqvist 160).

Coolie Ships and Forced Migration in Sea of Poppies

Sea of Poppies, the first novel in Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, focuses specifically on indentured labor as a form of displacement that bridges slavery and free labor in the colonial economy (Ghosh 2008). Set in 1838, the novel follows a diverse group of characters who board the Ibis, a former slave ship now carrying indentured workers from India to Mauritius. The ship becomes what Ghosh terms a "jahaj-bhāi" or "ship-brotherhood," a floating community where caste hierarchies dissolve and new identities form (Ghosh, Sea of Poppies 356). This transformation suggests displacement's potential to enable new forms of solidarity that transcend traditional social boundaries.

The novel's central metaphor of the "black water" or "kala pani" that indentured laborers must cross represents displacement as a form of social death. According to upper-caste Hindu belief, crossing the ocean meant losing caste and becoming ritually polluted, effectively rendering one an outcast. For characters like Deeti, a widowed opium farmer fleeing an abusive situation, crossing the black water represents both tremendous loss and radical possibility. She leaves behind her identity as a respectable Hindu widow to become, in the novel's language, a "jāt-gavā" one who has lost caste but gains in exchange a form of freedom unavailable within the rigid hierarchies of her former life (Ghosh, Sea of Poppies 227).

Ghosh's extensive research into the language of indentured labor reveals another dimension of displacement: linguistic hybridity. The novel incorporates numerous Hindi Bhojpuri, and nautical terms, creating what critics have identified as a multilingual aesthetic that reflects the cultural mixing produced by colonial displacement. The Ibis becomes a laboratory for creolization, where diverse languages and cultures encounter each other under conditions of extreme duress, generating new linguistic and social forms. This linguistic displacement parallels the physical dislocation of the characters, suggesting that identity itself becomes hybrid and unstable in conditions of migration.

Environmental Displacement and the Sundarbans in The Hungry Tide

The Hungry Tide marks a crucial shift in Ghosh's treatment of displacement, linking it explicitly to environmental violence and the conflict between conservation and human rights (Ghosh 2004). Set in the Sundarbans delta region of West Bengal, the novel depicts the 1979 forcible eviction of refugees from Morichjhãpi Island, an event that Ghosh presents as exemplifying how postcolonial states reproduce colonial patterns of displacement in the name of environmental protection. The novel's interweaving of human and ecological narratives challenges anthropocentric frameworks, suggesting that displacement operates across species boundaries.

The refugees who settle Morichjhãpi are themselves victims of earlier displacements: Partition refugees from East Pakistan who were initially resettled in Dandakaranya but fled its harsh conditions to return to Bengal. Their story illustrates what Ghosh presents as a cycle of displacement, where each attempt to establish belonging generates new forms of exile. When the government forcibly evicts them to protect the tiger reserve, the novel exposes the violence inherent in environmental conservation that prioritizes charismatic megafauna over impoverished humans. As the character Nirmal writes in his journal, "Who are we to say that their survival is less important than the tigers'?" (Ghosh, Hungry Tide 261). This question

challenges Western environmental discourse that too often ignores the human costs of conservation.

The Sundarbans setting itself embodies displacement at a geological level, as the constantly shifting delta resists permanent settlement. The tide country, as it is known locally, exists in what the novel describes as perpetual transformation, with islands appearing and disappearing, rivers changing course, and boundaries constantly redrawn by natural forces. This unstable landscape becomes a metaphor for the precarity of all attempts to fix identity and belonging. Piya, the American-born cetologist of Indian descent who studies dolphins in the region, represents a different kind of displacement the second-generation immigrant's estrangement from ancestral homelands. Her inability to speak Bengali despite her Indian heritage literalizes the cultural displacement produced by migration.

Climate Migration and Planetary Displacement in Gun Island

Gun Island represents Ghosh's most explicit engagement with climate change as a driver of displacement, connecting contemporary climate migration to the historical forms of displacement examined in his earlier works (Ghosh 2019). The novel follows Deen, a rare book dealer, as he investigates a Bengali legend that leads him from the Sundarbans to Venice, two cities threatened by rising sea levels. Along the way, he encounters Tipu, a young Bangladeshi migrant attempting to reach Europe via the treacherous Mediterranean route. The parallel journeys of Deen and Tipu suggest that contemporary climate migration continues the colonial-era displacements that have structured Ghosh's entire body of work.

The novel's depiction of climate refugees challenges liberal humanitarian narratives that present migration as merely a crisis requiring management. Instead, Ghosh insists on historical causation, linking contemporary climate displacement to the carbon emissions of wealthy nations. When Deen meets climate migrants from Bangladesh and Africa attempting to cross into Europe, the novel asks readers to recognize these journeys as consequences of a planetary crisis caused primarily by Western industrialization. As the character Cinta argues, "They're climate refugees... people who've been driven out of their homes by droughts and storms and desperation" (Ghosh, Gun Island 234). This framing refuses to separate climate migration from questions of historical responsibility and ongoing inequality.

The novel's conclusion, which depicts animal species migrating en masse in response to changing ocean temperatures, literalizes the planetary scope of climate displacement. When dolphins enter the Venice lagoon and spiders swarm Los Angeles, Ghosh suggests that displacement has become a condition affecting all species, not just humans. This move toward what scholars call "multispecies ethnography" expands displacement beyond its traditional anthropocentric frame (Kirksey and Helmreich 545). The ancient Bengali legend that structures the plot about a merchant who travels seeking the "gun island" of wealth becomes an allegory for climate migration, suggesting deep historical continuities between earlier forms of displacement and contemporary climate crisis.

Displacement as Narrative Strategy: Form and Content

Beyond its thematic significance, displacement functions in Ghosh's fiction as a formal principle that structures narrative itself. His novels consistently employ non-linear chronology, multiple narrators, and geographical dispersion to mirror the fragmented experience of displacement. This formal innovation challenges what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "historicism," the notion that historical development follows a single, linear trajectory modeled on European experience (Chakrabarty 6). By refusing linear progression, Ghosh's narratives enact the temporal dislocation experienced by displaced populations for whom past, present, and future collapse into one another.

The narrative structure of The Shadow Lines exemplifies this approach most clearly. The unnamed narrator pieces together family history from fragments and multiple sources, creating what Michael Rothberg terms "multidirectional memory" that connects disparate historical events (Rothberg 11). The novel moves fluidly between 1940s Dhaka, 1960s Calcutta, and 1980s London, suggesting that these temporal and spatial locations exist simultaneously in the narrator's consciousness. This narrative technique reproduces the experience of displacement, where geographical distance and temporal passage fail to produce closure or resolution.

Similarly, the polyphonic structure of Sea of Poppies reflects the heterogeneity of the indentured labor force. The novel shifts between multiple perspectives and linguistic registers, refusing the unified narrative voice of conventional historical fiction. This formal choice prevents any single perspective from dominating, instead creating what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia," the coexistence of multiple voices and worldviews within a single text (Bakhtin 263). The diversity of voices mirrors the diversity of the ship's passengers, all displaced from their original contexts and forced into proximity on the Ibis.

Implications: Displacement and the Politics of Belonging

Ghosh's sustained engagement with displacement carries profound implications for how we conceptualize belonging, identity, and political community in the postcolonial world. By demonstrating the centrality of displacement to modern history, his fiction challenges nationalist narratives that present the nation-state as a natural or inevitable form of political organization. Instead, Ghosh reveals how nations depend on violent acts of inclusion and exclusion, producing internal others who must be displaced to maintain the fiction of national homogeneity.

This critique extends to current debates about migration and border security. In an era of rising nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment, Ghosh's fiction insists on the deep historical roots of migration and the ways contemporary borders continue colonial patterns of racialized exclusion. When European nations attempt to prevent African and Asian migrants from crossing the Mediterranean, Ghosh suggests, they reenact the same logic that justified colonial extraction and displacement. His work thus provides a historical framework for understanding contemporary migration crises as consequences of long-term structural inequalities rather than temporary emergencies.

Moreover, Ghosh's linking of climate displacement to historical colonialism offers crucial insights for climate justice movements. By demonstrating how the same extractive logic that drove colonial displacement now manifests in carbon emissions and environmental destruction, his fiction makes visible the continuities between different forms of violence. This framework challenges Northern environmental movements to acknowledge their complicity in displacement, both historical and ongoing. As Gun Island suggests, addressing climate displacement requires not merely humanitarian response but fundamental transformations in global political economy that acknowledge historical responsibility for the crisis.

Conclusion

This study has examined how displacement operates as a central thematic, structural, and political concern across Amitav Ghosh's major fiction. From the Partition violence of The Shadow Lines to the climate migrations of Gun Island, Ghosh has consistently foregrounded the experiences of those rendered homeless by colonial violence, partition, indentured labor, environmental conservation, and climate change. In doing so, he challenges dominant historical narratives that marginalize or erase these experiences, offering instead a counter-archive that centers displacement as constitutive of modernity itself.

The power of Ghosh's treatment of displacement lies in his refusal to sentimentalize or romanticize the displaced. His characters are neither noble victims nor cosmopolitan heroes but complex individuals navigating structures of violence largely beyond their control. This ethical nuance prevents displacement from becoming merely a theme and instead maintains its status as a lived reality with material consequences. At the same time, Ghosh refuses the pessimism that would present displacement as only loss, showing instead how displaced communities create new forms of belonging, solidarity, and cultural production.

Looking forward, Ghosh's increasingly explicit focus on climate displacement in his recent work suggests the urgency of connecting environmental crisis to colonial history. As climate change generates unprecedented levels of migration, his fiction offers crucial frameworks for understanding these movements not as natural disasters but as consequences of specific political and economic choices. The displaced populations in his novels from colonial-era indentured laborers to contemporary climate refugees share exposure to what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," forms of harm that accumulate gradually and disproportionately affect the already marginalized.

Ultimately, Ghosh's fiction suggests that displacement is not an aberration but a foundational feature of modernity, one that connects colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and climate change in a single historical trajectory. By mapping these connections across his diverse body of work, Ghosh creates what might be called a "planetary consciousness" that recognizes how local displacements participate in global systems of violence and exploitation. In an era of mass migration and climate crisis, this planetary perspective proves increasingly urgent, offering resources for imagining more just and sustainable forms of political community. Ghosh's cartographies of exile thus function not merely as literary representations but as interventions in ongoing struggles over borders, belonging, and the meaning of home in an increasingly displaced world.

Works Cited

Bahadur, Gaiutra. *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 259–422.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197–222.

---. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2000.

Chambers, Claire. "Postcolonial Science Fiction: Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2003, pp. 57–72.

Clifford, James. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1994, pp. 302–338.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*. Random House, 2000.

---. *Gun Island*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

---. *The Hungry Tide*. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

---. *Sea of Poppies*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

---. *The Shadow Lines*. Viking, 1988.

Kirksey, S. Eben, and Stefan Helmreich. "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2010, pp. 545–576.

Lindqvist, Sven. *Exterminate All the Brutes*. Translated by Joan Tate, New Press, 1996.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Knopf, 1993.