

East-West Encounters: A Quest for International Peace and Prosperity, Harmony and Integrity in Amitav Ghosh's Novel, Countdown

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Abstract: *Countdown*, a travelogue by Amitav Ghosh, deals with a panorama of things-the author's visit to Pokharan, Pakistan and Siachan, his conversation with so many people of India, their grief and sorrow, their horrendous and horrifying experience regarding the nuclear explosion; the compulsion behind south Asia nuclearisation and a mild satire on the arrogance and dominance of politics seldom cares for the peace and prosperity of the people. The real beauty of the book lies in its simplicity of language and the sobriety of thought which cannot help without giving jerks and jolts to the average reader. The book opens with the apocalyptic vision of the nuclear explosion tested at the Pokharan site on 11 May 1998 where the author, Amitav Ghosh, has travelled some three months later. It was a great irony that the dust from the test site was also sent around the country so that the whole nation could partake in the glow of the blasts. This paper focus on the international peace with reference to the novel *Countdown*.

Key words: blast, journey, peace, pilgrims, terrorism,

I. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh was born on July 11, 1956 in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Srilanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria and is the author of *The Circle Of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *Dancing In Cambodia*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hunger Tide And Sea Of Poppies*. *The Circle of Reason* was awarded France's Prix Medices in 1990 and *The Shadow Lines* won two prestigious Indian Prizes the same year, the Sahitya Academy Award and the Anandha Puraskar. Amitav Ghosh's work has been translated into more than twenty languages. His essays have been published in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic* and *The New York Times*. He is a world renowned Indian author and novelist known for his works in English language (categories- Fiction, Historical Fiction, Non-Fiction)

Countdown, a travelogue by Amitav Ghosh, deals with a panorama of things-the author's visit to Pokharan, Pakistan and Siachan, his conversation with so many people of India, their grief and sorrow, their horrendous and horrifying experience regarding the nuclear explosion; the compulsion behind south Asia nuclearisation and a mild satire on the arrogance and dominance of politics seldom cares for the peace and prosperity of the people. The real beauty of the book lies in its simplicity of language and the sobriety of thought which cannot help without giving jerks and jolts to the average reader. The book opens with the apocalyptic vision of the nuclear explosion tested at the Pokharan site on 11 May 1998 where the author, Amitav Ghosh, has travelled some three months later.

It was a great irony that the dust from the test site was also sent around the country so that the whole nation could partake in the glow of the blasts. Some great champions of the blasts are also said to be thinking of building a sacred monument at the site-a that could be visited by pilgrims. But on the other hand, the people living around the nuclear site weren't jolly and jocund, rather they were sad and gloomy. They had never heard of cancer in that area. But now, they are afraid, they will begin to get cancer after the test as they would have been after 1974 when the first nuclear blast was conducted on the same site. A more powerful jolt than that of 1974 was felt especially by the people of the village, Khetoloi, six kilometres from the test site.

The people of this village are mostly Bishnois, members of a small religious sect whose founder had forbidden the felling of trees and killing of animals. They thought of themselves as the world's first conservationists. But the fact is that the blasts created such a havoc that the felling of trees and killing of animals will be the order of the day. The people of the village, who were most threatened and terrorized by the blast, told of their pathetic plight to the author. The author observes:

On 11 May, they told me, at about noon a squad of soldiers had driven up and asked the villagers to move out of their houses to open ground. They guessed what was going to happen. They carried these out of doors and set them down in the sand, under the noon day sun. Then they sat under trees and waited. It was very

hot.... At about two thirty there was a tremendous shaking in the ground and a booming noise. They saw a great cloud of dust and black and white smoke shooting skywards in die distance. Cracks opened up in the walls of some of their houses. Some of them had built underground tanks to store water for their livestock. The blasts split the tanks emptying them of water. . . Later on officials came around and offered them small sums of money as compensation. The underground tanks were very expensive. The villagers refused to accept the money they were offered and demanded more. . . (*Countdown10*)

The theory of the splitting of the atom had been propounded by the eminent scientist. Einstein. But a practical demonstration of this revolutionary idea was witnessed only when the Americans dropped atom bombs on the two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in August 1945. Both towns were wiped off the face of the earth and the six- year-old world war came to an instantaneous halt. The use of the atom bomb was really an epoch-making event. It exercised an unprecedented stir all over the world. It sent a wave of horror and indignation on account of the inhuman mass slaughter caused in Japan. People all over the world denounced this heinous and atrocious droppings as the most immoral, savage and barbaric act and demanded that atomic software should be completely banned.

So far no effective defensive measure against this cruel bomb has been discovered. It produces a wave of radio-activity, which spreads from one continent to another and brings in its train all kinds of hitherto unknown diseases and ailments. The mind of man is so much fractured by the cares and anxieties, by the fret and fever of life that he gets very little time to stand and stare the beauty of natural gifts and resources. The production of atomic weapons is a colossal waste of human energy and national wealth. It is the greatest stumbling block in the way of international harmony and peace.

Amitav Ghosh, a great champion of the cause of peace and prosperity, harmony and integration, also met K. Subrahmanyam, a civilian defense affairs expert. He told the author that nuclear weapons weren't military weapons. According to his view, India wants to be a player and not an object of this global nuclear order. The author thinks that India's nuclear programme has nothing do with defending the country: It is a kind of ploy, a minting of false coin in the hope of purchasing world-wide influence. Chandan Mitra, a historian is also of the same opinion: "The bomb is the global currency of self esteem. And what two hundred years of colonialism did to us was that is robbed us of our self-esteem. We don't have any degree of national pride or national cohesion in the same way as the British have, the French have, the Germans have, the Americans have."(12). Thus, those nuclear test explosions had created a tremendous euphoria in India.

In August 1998, Amitav Ghosh paid a visit to New Delhi and had also a chat with several parliamentarians. He went to see Ram Vilas Paswan, a member of a caste group that was once treated as untouchable by high caste: The leader was not in favour of the nuclear tests. He said:

These nuclear tests were not in the Indian national interest. They were done in the interests of a party, to keep the present government from imploding from within . . . the people of Pakistan want friendship with India, But how did our government respond? And this is a country where ordinary citizens don't have food to eat, where villages are being washed away by floods, where prices are touching the skies . . . For the price of a single battle tank we could open one hundred primary schools. But what we do instead is that every year we spend thirty-five thousand crores of rupees on armaments. (20)

In the last world war, even the civilian population of every belligerent country suffered as much as the fighting soldiers. Destruction of buildings, property and means of communication took place on an immeasurable scale. The entire structure of economic, industrial and social life was shattered. In short, mankind and civilization are sure to be wiped off, if another war is waged with nuclear weapons. The book also describes the realistic picture of the soldiers deployed at the embattled state of Kasmir, its several places like Siachin glacier, Leh, Ladakh and Suronkot where the soldiers are more afraid of the natural calamities than of the bullets; where the basic equipment for every Indian soldier on the glacier costs Rs. 60,000 and where every Chappathi eaten by a Pakistani soldier on the Siachin glacier, bears a cost of about Rs. 450.

It is a matter of great surprise that the soldiers of both the countries are never hostile to each other particularly on those difficult places where the danger of nature is more powerful than that of the enemy. The author says, "I was interested to note that Indian soldiers always spoke of their Pakistani counterparts with detachment and respect. Usually they referred to the other side collectively as 'He'; sometimes they used the term 'dushman', enemy. I never once heard any soldier utter a denigratory epithet of any kind" (41).

Here the author means to say that soldiers from both sides are never curious to wage an unwanted war. They never want to fight for the sake of fight. In the phraseology of G.B. Shaw, they preferred chocolates more than bullets. After all they are also made of blood and flesh, intellect and emotion. There are so many misinformations and rumours raised by the fanatics of both India and Pakistan which give birth to so many breaches in our harmony and peace. During Amitav Ghosh's visit to Pakistan, he met Asma Jahangir, Pakistan's leading human rights lawyer, who is famous for her defence of the rights of religious minorities, her work on behalf of women; her dogged interrogation of Pakistan blasphemy laws; her refusal to cave in either to

governmental pressure or to fundamentalist death threats. She apprised the author of the threat of the religious fanaticism of her country. She rains hail and fire on the bigotry of her country. She said, "They actually believed that I was some kind of demon. They believed that by defending a case of blasphemy I was encouraging blasphemy against the Holy Prophet. They believed that I stood against all decent norms. That I was a kind of devil incarnate that would wreck the whole social fabric of Pakistan" (64).

According to her opinion, first of all the intrusion of religion and religious orthodoxy into the politics of Pakistan must be eradicated. Thus, this brief analysis very well deals with the author's realistic portrayal of the problems arising out of nuclearisation of Asia. She is of the opinion that the language, the cultural habits and the body language of both the countries are very much alike. She thinks that if the barriers of disinformation are broken down, our hostility will change into friendliness.

Some rulers feel that they cannot be called great rulers until they have fought some wars even though without any cause. Apart from many other causes, the religious differences between the Muslims and the Hindus play a notorious role in generating a sense of hatred, callousness, and isolation between these two countries. But if we dive deep into the depth of reality, we come to the conclusion that all religions, however different in forms and colours they may be, their ultimate goal is to make an acquaintance with the Eternal Truth. The interview of Amitav Ghosh with Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, in Pakistan aptly points out the possibility of nuclear war: When you have two nations between whom there is so much ill-will, so much enmity as there is between India and Pakistan, and when they both have nuclear weapons, then in the event of war, there is always the danger that they would be used, certainly. In situations of war people become mad. When a nation feels that it is likely to be defeated it can do anything to spare itself the same. (55)

The author's attitude seems to be dead against the nuclear warfare. He is of the opinion that nuclear matter is a grave matter for any country. So it should be well thought upon before taking it in force. But unfortunately, the nuclear test on 11 May 1998 was a hasty step and was conducted without consulting the army experts.

It is interesting to note that all these drawbacks of nuclear armaments do not mean that nuclear energy is absolutely negative and so avoidable. Atomic energy is obviously the most powerful energy man has so far discovered. It is estimated that a fraction of this energy is sufficient for running all the mills and factories of a big town like London, Mumbai and Calcutta. Thus, if atomic energy is available, it will replace all other forms of energy such as water power, wind power, steam and electricity. Besides, this will solve the problem of decreasing coal stock of the world. So, what is the need of the day is not to waste our powers but to turn them into right directions. Science is a blessing when it is judiciously used. But it becomes a curse when it is used for the annihilation of human race.

II. Conclusion

It is to be noted that *Countdown* is not simply a travelogue, of lines and statements but also a fine piece of artistic beauty. It is woven into the fabric of aestheticism. It has some fresh and vivid images and symbols, words and phrases which captivates a genuine reader's attention. The novel beautifully presents a horrendous and horrifying dismay or disgust generated by nuclear explosions. The fatal consequences of nuclearisation shows that if it is let loose, it would bring death and disaster and knock out the very bottom of our prosperity, power and civilization. *Countdown* points out several malpractices on the part of the political leaders in both India and Pakistan which must be eradicated for the swift and soft blossoms of international peace and integration. All religions, their creeds, practices and rituals differ immeasurably from one another yet, at their deepest levels they all uphold the universal truth that the supreme power is in the form of love. The monster of war can be killed not by indulging in warfare but through love, harmony and peace.

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