

## **A Study of Amitav Ghosh's "*The Shadow Lines*"**

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### **Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* presents the major character as a global citizen existing in the liminality of national boundaries to show the concept of nationalism as simulation. The characters used in *The Shadow Lines* by Ghosh as Tridib, Grandmother, Mayadebi, the narrator, May Price, Ila, Nick, Mike, Robi, Khalil project nationalism, communal discord, and political freedom in two subtitles called 'Coming Home' and 'Going Away' in which geographical and cultural boundaries are dismantled through imagination. Besides, these subtitles are interchangeably used to describe the three specific territories as Dhaka, Calcutta, and London (England). So by blurring the geographical demarcation rather than limiting themselves into the single boundary, they go away at the same time as they come home.

**Key Words:** boundaries, childhood, freedom, geographical, memories, protagonist

### **Introduction**

Basically, the novel is about how boundaries are formed and identity is created, how notion of national and ethnic identities are perpetuated and accepted. The novel, in fact, resists the classification. The novel covers the period from 1939 to 1964, with a brief, meaningfully extension into grandmother's forcefully revengeful meaningful reaction against the Muslims at the time of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965. While Tridib, the protagonist of the novel is born in 1931, the narrator is born in 1952. But the actual events of the novel start in 1939, while their narration is made about 1979 when the narrator, now a grown up man of about 7 years, recalls the memories of earlier times encapsulated in his childhood. The prime focus is on the early 60s when the narrator is about 10-12 years of age in 1962 when the war with China takes place. In 1963, Mayadebi's husband is posted in Dhaka as consul general and the Hazratbal incident takes place in Srinagar-resulting in communal riots which continued in Dhaka till early January of 1964 even after the recovery of the Holyhair of the prophet. It is in one of such cases of violence that Tridib gets killed. The narrator recalls all these and earlier events through his childhood memories which include the memory of others, imagination, hearsay, guesswork, partly his own. He, moving between events and characters reality and imagination, plain light narration and reflection, suspense, terror and shock, weaves the novel slowly. The world of memories and imagination is so well fused at the end with the real world that the transition of memory and imagination to the reality of the present of consciousness to conscious is hardly noticed. In other words, the characters and narrator, are in effect, travelers who frequently cross the boundaries between one cultural space, and other cultural space, one geographical space and other geographical space and one linguistic space and the other linguistic space that was the major obsession of Ghosh. In the same context, O.P. Mathur opines:

Children make fun of Grandmother going (or coming?) to her ancestral house in Dhaka for the first time after the partition. Thamma, Thamma I cried. How could you have come home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going you see in our family we don't know whether we are coming or going. It's all my grandmother's fault. (qtd. in Kapadia 155)

The Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* opens with a note of recollection as the narrator pens down his relation to Tridib, the latter's leaving for England in 1939, with his parents and the muted love – hate relationship which his grandmother shares with Tridib, who she considers a good for nothing. The May Prices – close friends of Tridib's parents in England are introduced in Gole Park, especially May Price whom Tridib has known since childhood. The abiding intimacy between the Price family and Tridib's family transcends the shadow lines of nationality and cultural boundaries. The narrator meets

May when she visits Calcutta and then again when he goes to London to work on his Ph.D. thesis. The meeting reveals that Tridib, and May have been corresponding with each other since 1959. After Tridib and May, Ila is introduced. The narrator, anyway, is fascinated by Ila's exotic appeal. Her foreignness, western ways and easy informality attract him. However, Ila shared her admiration for Nick price.

*The Shadow Lines* basically tells the story of three generations of Dutta- Chaudhary family in Calcutta and May price family in London. However, the characters used in the novel belong to the same geographical and cultural space. They are brought together with a self-propelling love and empathy. It is a close-limit fictive world, written against the back drop of the civil-strife in Post-partition East Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta. The events revolve around Mayadebi's family, their friendship and sojourn with English friends and Prices and Thamma, the narrator's grandmother's link with her ancestral city Dhaka. So, the narrator remembers how on certain morning in early January 1964, the school bus which would normally be over crowded, came with only a dozen boys. No sooner, he got the other boys told him that 'they' had poisoned the water in the Tala Tank that catered to the entire city of Calcutta. On their way home the boy saw that the streets "were easily empty now except for squads of patrolling policeman" (202). An ordinary school day turns into a horrible nightmare for the narrator as he vicariously participates in the frenzy of a city gone mad. It was at the time the narrator suffered the worst of fears in Calcutta, which his grandmother had gone on a visit to her sister, Mayadebi who was in Dhaka. The reason for the grandmother to go to Dhaka was her mission of "rescuing her uncle from his enemies and bring him back where he belonged" (137).

As Jethamoshai arrives then the family sets out. They were two sisters Thamma and Mayadebi, Tridib, Robi, May price, the driver and a security guard. To a great surprise, Jethamoshi offers a new perspective on the question of being a Hindu in a Muslim-dominated area, by rejecting his sons' offer in the past, and his nieces' offer how to quit his "home". By befriending the Muslims in his area and even giving them a place to stay in his huge mansion, the old man seems secure and content. By this idea of inclusion rather than exclusion, the old man achieves a form of communal harmony and peace of mind that is denied to others of his generation like the grandmother. Finally, according to their plan, he is escorted in Khali's rickshaw, as he would only step out on the pre-text of going to the court. Khali, in his rickshaw, is to follow their car and deliver him to his relatives. The expectancy of trouble hovers over them and soon enough they run into trouble in the form of rowdy and the armed boys and strategically lit bonfires. A crowd of Muslim hooligans attacks the rickshaw, and all the others in diplomat's car. The frenzied mobs hacks to death Khali, the old man and Tridib. The horror of the act is branded forever in the memories of Robi and May Price who witness the whole catastrophe from close range.

The narrator, on the other side, in his memory, recalls Thamma's frenzied desire to donate her gold chain and her blood for the sake of her grandchild's identity and freedom. He also recalls his mother pacifying him and telling, "Child never been the same you know, since they killed Tridib" (237). Seventeen years later, Robi reveals the truth of Tridib's death to the narrator. He had been told earlier that Tridib had "an accident in Dhaka" (239). For the first time, he has an inkling that Tridib's death had been caused by reasons other hand an accident. The other half of the memory is supplied by May, who has been ridden with guilt, blaming herself for Tridib's death she realizes that Tridib's act of going after her into the mob was a sacrifice. The novel ends with a gratitude on the narrator's part to May for having given him the glimpse of "a final redemptive mystery" (252).

This research attempts to analyze Ghosh's interest in the blurring and subversion of the identities created by nations and ethnicity and need of "syncretic civilization and identity" to avoid the violence in the novel. Amitav Ghosh, a renowned Indian literary voice in English, an anthropologist was born in Calcutta on 11 July 1956 and grew up in the east Pakistan, Sri-Lanka, Iran and India. He, in fact, is accepted as a productive writer not because he produced book after book but because of his unique skill in mingling his personal experiences and the epochal events of human history. As a young person, he was influenced by stories of partition, independence and the Second World War. These

stories, events, and anecdotes of such epochal events related by his parents, family members and neighbours made an indelible impression on his mind.

Ghosh attended the Doon school in Dehradun and then graduated in History from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University in 1976 and an M.A. in sociology from the Institute Bourguiba deslangues Vivantes, in Tunis, Tunisia, in 1979 and then Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from Oxford University in 1982. He worked for a while as a journalist for *The Indian Express* newspaper in New Delhi. Later he joined Delhi school of Economics as a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology. Since then he has been a visiting fellow at the center for social sciences, at Trivanddurm, Kerala (1982-83) a visiting Professor of Anthropology at the University of Virginia (1988). The university of Pennsylvania (1989) the American University in Cairo (1994) and Columbia University (1994-97) and a distinguished professor of comparative literature at Queen college of the city university of New York (1999-2003). In the spring of 2004, he was visiting professor in the department of English at Harvard University. winner of the 1989 Sahitya Akademi Award and the Parix Medicis Etrangere, Amitav Ghosh, Spends part of each year in Calcutta, but lives in New York with his wife and their children Leela and Nayan.

Ghosh's career as a writer consists of four novels, a travelogue and a booklet. His first novel is *The Circle of Reason* (1986). It presents the history as a collective memory, that gathers in a symbiotic fashion all which existed in the past into all that happens in the present. His next book is *The Shadow Lines* (1988), has been considered by many critics as his best work of fiction till date. It is an acclaimed master piece that evokes postcolonial situations, cultural dislocations and anxieties in the period between 1962 and 1979. His third novel is *In an Antique Land* (1992). In this novel, Ghosh blends fiction, fact, and history so skillfully that the combination appears seamless. In his fourth novel entitled *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), Ghosh combines literature, science, psychology, and sociology. Besides, these four novels, he has written a gripping and meticulously researched travelogue *Dancing in Cambodia, At large in Burma* (1998). It reveals the writer's perception about the socio-political situations in both Cambodia and Burma, two countries, which practiced the politics of extreme isolation in the recent past.

Amitva Ghosh's complicated novel *The Shadow Lines* has been elicited by the host of criticism since its publication. A number of critics have tried to analyze the novel from different view points from the beginning to the end. Despite the fact-that Ghosh has remained at the center of critical interest and has received much critical appraisal since its publication in 1988. It is impossible to include almost all the responses to the novel in such a small project, so, the attempt is to project some representative responses selected from the huge pile of reviews. For this purpose, the varied and divergent responses to *The Shadow Lines* has been categorized as critical on technique and style and different views on the novel though the division is purely personal and arbitrary.

The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* is in two parts, 'going away' and 'coming home'. The narrative structure is fragmentary. There are sixteen sections in the first part and fifteen in the second part but the sections do not add up to an organic whole with a proper beginning, middle and ending. The narrative achievement of *The Shadow Lines* has been amply praised; its complex and fragmentary narrative structure has been taken as reflecting the sense of history's unfolding process'.

However, the author uses a non-linear, multi-layered narrative technique. Memory is one of the techniques used by Ghosh in this novel. In describing the narrative technique of the novel Seema Bhanduri writes:

Ghosh uses the stream of consciousness tradition, through sketchy, disjointed outlines of memory, association and fancies as they pool into the narrator's mind and consciousness by way of reminiscence fusing gradually into a coherent pattern of stories mutually interrelated yet disparate, the profile of a multi-lateral world through the random diversions of the narrator's memory, the socio-cultural ambience of Calcutta and partly of London are conveyed. (25)

Commenting on the multiple use of narratives by Ghosh, Nevedita Bagehi observes, "The Story or Chief narrative line evolves sporadically and is constantly interpreted and diverted by other narratives. The only fixed center is that of a chief narrative voice through whom the other narrative filtered" (188). Another critic, Suvir Kaul, in his scholarly essay, "Separation Anxiety." Growing up Inter National in *The Shadow Lines*" writes that narrative technique in this novel is based on the narrator's search for connection. Describing this technique, Kaul writes:

It shapes the narrator's search for connection, for the recovery of lost information or repressed experienced for the details of great trauma or joy that have receded into the achieves of public or private memory. As the repository and archivist of family stories, stories told by his grandmother Thamma, by Tridib, by Ila and finally by Robi and May, the unnamed narrator of the shadow lines is constantly engaged in the imaginative renewal of times, places, events and people pest. (268-69)

### Conclusion

It can be seen that in the novel, memory is restless, energetic end troublesome power. The shaping power of memory in the novel is "enormously productive and enabling but also traumatic and disabling; it liberates and stunts, both the individual and imagination and social possibilities, it confirms identities and enforces divides" (269). The novel can, therefore, be described as the narrator's journey backward in time in quest of a fuller meaning in life. It is an attempt to impose a pattern on experience. The novel doesn't tell events sequentially, nor is the experience of the hero-narrator limited to the events of his own life, for beneath the surface of everyday happenings he lives a truer life in his memory and imagination

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