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## **Re-Examination of History in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines***

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### **Abstract**

History in the milieu of literature can no longer document only grand incidents and great characters of history. History in Amitav Ghosh's oeuvre is not only a narrative of historical events but also a means of creating an interconnection between the historical events and the ordinary people living during the times. The opening of the novel itself clouts history, as does the background of wars against which the narrator plots his own history and that of others. *The Shadow Lines* starts in colonial India, goes through the creation of East Pakistan and the following communal riots in the 1960s and concludes in London in 1979. It moves back and forth in time and space, going away and returning home both geographically and intellectually.

**Keywords**

History; Communal Riots; Freedom movement; Amitav Ghosh; *The Shadow Lines*.

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History in the milieu of literature can no longer document only grand incidents and great characters of history. History in Amitav Ghosh's oeuvre is not only a narrative of historical events but also a means of creating an interconnection between the historical events and the ordinary people living during the times. Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is set against the outburst of World War II and the post partition communal riots of 1964 in some parts of India and Bangladesh. The fictionalised accounts are fused with history and authorized by real incidents in the life of the chief characters. Seema Bhaduri in "Of Shadows, Lines and Freedom: A Historical Reading of *The Shadow Lines*" observes: "Lives of the characters in this novel are determined largely by their ideas of freedom and this idea is shaped by the history of the times . . . The major characters, here, move towards a global humanitarianism coming to grips with the realization that freedom can't be geo-politically defined or determined" (223). Borders to Tha'mma are complete material and concrete truths. Meenakshi Malhotra in "Nationalism and the Question of Freedom in *The Shadow Lines*: A Gender Perspective" says:

That Tha'mma's ideas are interrogated and undercut in the novel is quite obvious. What needs to be mentioned here is that her views on freedom and the nation, and her severe criticism of Ila's choices fit into the larger contemporary discourses of gender and nation. To more precise, they are indicative of the uneasy relationship between overarching nationalisms and individual freedom(s) of its citizens, especially its women. (147)

Moreover, the characters in the novel are portrayed to have a close relation with history: Tridib pursues a Ph.D. in Archeology, Tha'mma has lived through the partition, and the narrators visit to London is incited by the need to "collect

material from the India Office Library, where all the old colonial records were kept, for a Ph. D. thesis on the textile trade between India and England in the nineteenth century” (13). The opening of the novel itself clouds history, as does the background of wars against which the narrator plots his own history and that of others. In addition, the history becomes the history of imagination, which occurs at certain time, and in a certain context of other acts of thought, emotion, sensations and so forth. The novel sustains itself through a change of context and revives in a different mode, where the thoughts-regarding the past- are Tridib’s, while the narrator goes on a mnemonic journey, visiting the places and the people, that figured in Tridib’s past. In this regard, the narrator becomes a historian.

At the superficial, historical and domestic levels, the novel covers the period from 1939 to 1964, with a concise meaningful addition into grandmother’s forcefully revengeful reactions against the Muslims at the time of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965. In the novel, Tribib is born in 1931 and the narrator is born in 1952. But the real ‘events’ of the novel start in 1939, while the narration is made about 1979, when the narrator, a grown-up man of 27 years, recollects the memories of his childhood. The main attention is on the early 1960s when the narrator is about 10-12 years of age. In 1962, the war with China takes place. In 1963, Mayadebi’s husband is posted in Dhaka as the Consul General before the Hazratbal episode in Srinagar and the ensuing communal riots which continue periodically in Dhaka until early January of 1964, even after the retrieval of the Holy Hair of the Prophet. Tridib is killed in Dhaka in one such riot.

Ghosh discloses the sagacity of history and a firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical substances, when he grasps alive the pain of emotional shatter through the emotional baggage of the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India and the gloom of communal hatred breaking out as riots in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) following the Hazratbal episode in Srinagar. The violence banded in Calcutta on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1964 when the

narrator was a school boy, “the day the first cricket test match of the 1964 series against England” (168) was to start in Madras. A rumour spread that the Tala tank had been poisoned by the Muslims. The most touching expression of the communal divide was visible in human relationships. The narrator tells his loss of friendship with Muslim boy, Montu in the following words:

Not since we moved away, I lied. I haven't met Montu for months. I was looking out of the window when we got to Gole Park, watching the spot, right beside the tubewell, where Montu usually waited for the bus. He wasn't there. Stealing a quick glance down his lane I saw a gap in his curtain and I knew he was watching us. I was very glad he hadn't come. (200)

Totally frightened as the narrator was, he took off the top of the bottle along with other classmates to drain out the water as they might die due to drinking poisoned water. Later in Teen Murti House Library in Delhi the narrator is reading the newspaper article about the 1964 riots, as a research scholar, he recollects the incentives for riots in Calcutta:

In Calcutta rumours were in the air-especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot-that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses. A few Calcutta dailies printed pictures of weeping, stranded Hindu refugees, along with a few lurid accounts of the events in the East. On 8 and 9 January, with refugees still pouring in, rumours began to flow like floodwaters through the city and angry crowd began to gather at the stations.

And so, the events followed their own grotesque logic and on 10 January, the day the cricket Test began in Madras, Calcutta erupted. Mobs went rampaging through the city, killing Muslims, and burning and looting their shops and houses. (228-29)

All through the novel, the narrator maps out memories and joins a series of events to search and eventually untangle the connections between Tridib's death and the historical event of the communal clash that took place in Dhaka.

The newspaper proof at the Teen Murti House Library takes his memory back to the horrible bus ride as he was returning home from school and the activities that took place in Dhaka. The narrator begins to weave bits and pieces of recollections and remembrances of the shock of Tridib's death had on those close to him. These memories that help him ultimately emerge out of the silence that he has been living with. The use of memory as a narrative promptly helps to understand how Ghosh manages his narrative strands through memories of the past. The past and the present are elaborately woven with memory connecting the incidents - not the exact events but as memory and in some blurred manner. The narrator says: "...I cannot remember when it happened or 'I don't know, I cannot tell" (13). On referring to Tridib he says "he didn't know whether it had really happened or he had imagined it" (144).

The narrator recollects all these incidents from his own childhood memory, the memories of others, imagination, hearsay and guesswork. The cobweb of this memory novel is woven slowly by him, moving between events and characters, reality and imagination, terror and shock; all these conclude in the final stage of calm mind. The world of his memories and imagination is so well merged at the last part with the real world. After the trip to Pakistan, the narrator looks at Tridib's old atlas, measuring the distances between nations with compass, and replicates on the disjunction between memory, human experience and national boundaries. He recognizes that the Euclidean space of the atlas has nothing to do with cognitive and cultural space:

I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intention, had thought . . . that there was a special enchantment in lines . . . They had drawn their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that . . . there had never been a moment in the 4000-year-old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and

Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines. (233-4)

Other characters in the novel whose historical memory acts as the setting of recorded truthful history as codified in history books. Tha'mma, a refugee from Bangladesh, is a living memorial of the partition in 1947. The narrator himself is an eyewitness to the riots in Calcutta in 1964. In spite of that he tries to establish it to his colleagues using the traditional medium of recording history—the newspapers. There is no visible record of the narrator's mnemonic history. He says: "I nodded silently unnerved by the possibility that I had lived for all those years with a memory of imagined event" (222). Finally, he discovers that its mirror image had happened on the other side of the border, in Khulna, East Pakistan. He also discovers that the main historical incidents such as the trouble in East Pakistan and the restoration of the sacred relic in Kashmir find no mention in the local newspaper. He ironically comments: "It was after all, a Calcutta paper, run by people who believed in the power of distance no less than I did" (227).

Tha'mma is a woman like innumerable others who experienced displacement and dispossession, struggle, and fear and witnessed violence in those terrible days, following the independence and the partition of the motherland. Tha'mma always suffers under the agonizing burden of memory. The most terrible moment of pain arrives at a time when she cannot match her place of birth with the new settled place. Her Dhaka has changed severely and completely over the years that she cannot find any connection between her remembrance of the place and the reality that now prevails. It may not be wrong to state that the core of *The Shadow Lines* in itself is the revelation of the other side of history that Ghosh recreates through the surface of memory as a narrative technique.

The novel starts in colonial India, goes through the creation of East Pakistan and the communal riots in the 1960s and concludes in London in 1979. It moves back and forth in time and space, going away and returning home both

geographically and intellectually. All the characters in the novel are always on the move - travelling to different parts of the world. The journey motif is clearly portrayed through the two parts of the novel "Going Away" and "Coming Home". The novel begins when Mayadebi, her husband and Tridib goes to London in 1939. It ends in 1979 on the note of fulfilment of acquiring note on the death of Tridib in 1964. Indira Bhatt in "The Journey Motif: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*" observes that: "being free from guilt-consciousness for May, the nightmares about Tridib's murder for Robi and from ignorance about the mystery that surrounded Tridib's death for the narrator- fifteen years of suffering and agony for both Robi and May and a puzzled and confused state of mind for the Narrator who must have been a child of eight at the time of Tridib's death in Dhaka" (34).

Moving towards the back in time to the war time London of 1939-40, the narrator recollects Tridib's account of war time London. Tridib spend most of his time in India. His elder brother Jatin was an officer with UN, so he was always away from home travelling. Tha'mma travelled to Calcutta from Dhaka to get a better job. There are mentions of the travels of Mrs. Price's father to India. During the course of time the narrator travels to Delhi, then to London and at the end he comes back to Calcutta. May comes to India to meet Tridib in 1964. Tha'mma goes to Dhaka, the place of her birth with her sister and family. Nagesh Rao in his essay "Cosmopolitanism, Class, Gender in *The Shadow Lines*" observes "The travels of the narrator in the novel must be placed alongside the "colonial dislocations" of "indentured workers" who were shipped to other areas of England's far- flung empire to serve as landless labourers or cannon fodder in colonial wars" (96).

John Thieme in his essay on Amitav Ghosh says that the novel corrodes "culturally constructed borders in favour of a broader humanism, affinities which transcends such divisions" (258). The narrator notes that there are instances of cross-cultural relationships other than inter-cultural conflicts, violence and rioting mobs. In the novel it is said that in Dhaka, Muslims give

shelter to Hindus and Hindus give shelter to Muslims in India. Also the English family, the Prices befriend Dutta family and later they befriend the narrator too. Likewise, May comes to India and stays with Tha'mma and they together go to Dhaka, Tha'mma's ancestral house.

The novel traces the development and progress of its unnamed narrator's perception from his childhood conviction that national borders have 'a corporeal substance . . . that across the border there exists another reality'. The novel traces every single detail of the unreliable nature of national borders that are created to project an image of distinction across political divides. Like Jethamoshai said after drawing one border they will start to think where to draw the next one. All are creating the shadow lines. Through the characters of Tha'mma, Ila, and Robi, Ghosh shows that nationalism can be a source of terrible psychological violence, especially, when it is manifested in its most revolutionary form.

Ghosh's fiction challenges the artificial shadow lines that had been drawn to separate nations from their neighbours, fact from fiction, and academic disciplines from each other. His interrogation of boundaries accord with the preoccupation with hybridity, in-between spaces and diaspora in postcolonial debate. Although, Ghosh dislikes being categorized as a postcolonial writer, he focuses on the ways the partitioned South-Asian subject has been affected by colonialism yet resist the legacy of colonialism. Alka Kumar in "Nation as Identity in *The Shadow Lines*" says:

The narrative in *The Shadow Lines* takes us across international border, continents and cultures, child time and adult time; past and present with such ease that one is simply intrigued. Sometimes, it traverses some of these realms simultaneously so that the complexity of the text is further enhanced. In the novel, there are some epiphanic moments or 'highpoints' both at the personal and political level, which suddenly illuminate such chunks of virtual time and life, thereby enriching the reading experience. Many of the



important characters in the novel, the narrator, and his grandmother, instance are locked in specific historical moments so that to them the passage of time becomes irrelevant. For example, the old lady, her real home exists only in the memory and she is unable to recognise Dhaka when she finally sees it. ‘Where is Dhaka?’ is her constant refrain. (59)

The whole idea of a nation- state revolves around history. The novel insists on the imperatives that assure empathy and unimpeded flow of friendship, and mocks the conception of militant nationalism, exclusive national pride and identity.

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