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Romantic Quest in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Ms. Priyanka Pandey

Researcher, Department of English, Patna University, Patna, Bihar, India.

Abstract

The quest for freedom is one of the important elements of romanticism. When seen as a diaspora novel *The Shadow Lines* seems to be a saga of this romantic quest that defines its characters. *The Shadow Lines* deals with the diaspora that emerged after the independence. It was different in that it was the voluntary diaspora of the rich and the elite. One of the important features of this Diaspora is that they romanticized homeland and their past. They are characterized by a nostalgia that always haunted them. The desire for freedom that haunted Ila and Tha'mma (Ila's grandmother) is analysed extensively in the paper.

Keywords

Romantic Quest; Amitav Ghosh; *The Shadow Lines*; Cultural Orthodoxy; Freedom.



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romantic quest that defines its characters. *The Shadow Lines* deals with the diaspora that emerged after the independence. It was different in that it was the voluntary diaspora of the rich and the elite. So we find that Ila's father Jatin-kaku was an economist with U.N. He was "always away too, somewhere in Africa, or South-East Asia, with his wife and daughter." Tridib's father too "was a diplomat, an officer in the Foreign Service. He and Mayadevi were always away, abroad or in Delhi; after intervals of two or three years they would sometimes spend a couple of months in Calcutta, but that was all." (Ghosh 5-6)

One of the important features of this Diaspora is that they romanticized homeland and their past. They are characterized by a nostalgia that always haunted them. This nostalgia for the past and especially the immediate past was visible even in the people who lived in India. M.K. Naik has pointed out,

The post-independence Indian scene with its curious criss-cross of rapid socio-political changes in a country where tradition still remains a strong force has presented a stimulating spectacle, which has naturally evoked a variety of reactions from its writers, including nostalgic idealization of the immediate past of the days of freedom struggle, a strong desire to rediscover one's roots in the ancient Indian ethos as also to examine this ethos afresh in the light of westernization, and satirical comment both on the darker side of the freedom movement and its aftermath and the decline of values in all spheres of life. (Naik 191)

Tha'mma, the grandmother of the narrator, has her own share of romanticism in her nostalgia for the past and her willingness to be free. She regrets that she could not take part in the freedom struggle. She was born in Dhaka and was "separated from her birth place by a history of bloodshed and lines on a map." However, more than an immigrant from Dhaka, she can be called an immigrant from the past, which "is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is a part of our common humanity." (Rushdie 12). For though she loses her "grammatical co-ordinates as she thinks of 'home' and "her

neat and orderly mind seems momentarily unable to understand “how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality”, she had in her conscious mind that she belonged to India. She even persuades her senile old uncle to leave the decrepit surroundings he lives in (Dhaka) to move to India, “where she thinks he belongs.” Her home was actually in the past which she remembers with fondness, specially the era of the freedom struggle. We find her smiling and laughing while narrating one incident of the past in which she had seen that young member of the terrorist movement.

And do you know? she said laughing. Maya would be frightened every time, and she would hold on to my hand and hurry me past the gali. What about you said Tridib. What did you think? I used to dream about him, she said softly. For years afterwards I would lie in bed and conjure up his face, complete with that absurd, stingy little beard of his. (Ghosh 38)

Thus, it was that era of past where she really felt at home. “She would have been content to run errands for them, to cook their food, wash their clothes, anything.” And, “It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free.” She loved the past and wanted to live in the past. She says, “Oh we’re not interested in anything as current as that ... The past is what we talk about.” (Ghosh 127)

Ila too wanted to be free and so she lived in London. “Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London? Do you see? It’s only because I want to be free” (Ghosh 88). But, Tha’mma would have felt nothing but contempt for a freedom that could be bought for “the price of an air ticket.” Ila’s idea of freedom is based on shadow lines. For Tha’mma, the freedom from one’s culture could not be bought just by an air ticket. The crossing of borders cannot make a person free. That kind of freedom would only be an illusion. The borders that Ila wanted to cross were mere shadow lines. As it is evident in the argument of Jethamoshai, “once you start moving you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I do not believe in this India- Shindia. It’s all very well

now, but suppose when you get there, they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here." The borders and frontiers that they believed in and needed to cross in order to belong to a country where just shadow lines etched out on maps. It was this border which Ila had crossed but she was not able to cross the real frontiers.

The desire for freedom that haunted Ila and Tha'mma, makes the narrator wonder, "whether it was I that was mad because I was happy to be bound: whether I was alone in knowing that I could not live without the clamour of voices within me." (Ghosh 89)

Perhaps Ila could also not live without the clamour of voices within her, neither Tha'mma nor Tridib. The only difference was that they all knew it but Ila did not. The burden of culture, it has been found, was intensely born by the women who move from India to other places. In the book *Diaspora and Hybridity*, Virindra Sparla, Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk say,

We need to ask whether Diaspora and hybridity helps constitute a subject beyond the traditional device of gender, or whether these terms can contribute to the emancipation of women (and indeed men) from cultural orthodoxy? Women more often than not become the carriers of cultural symbolism that marks out the boundaries of diasporic group. (51)

Ila thought she would be free if she wore western clothes and lived in London. It was just a mirage that she was following. Tha'mma points out, "It's not freedom, she wants.... She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases... but that is not what it means to be free." The anguish of Ila was that she was not able to recognize the shadow line between freedom and rootlessness. She wanted to be free of the "bloody culture". But, that was not easy for her as she lived

abroad. Her attachment to her culture was even more intense. Salman Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands* observes,

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants or expatriates, are hunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But, if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties- that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities and villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind...the writer who is out of country and even out of language may experience this loss in an intensified form. (Rushdie 12)

Though Rushdie has said these words in the context of writers, this can be applied to every man and woman who lives abroad. When distanced in time and space, culture acquires a romantic dimension to which one sticks more for emotional satisfaction than from any real bondage. That bondage becomes a voluntary action so that the 'clamour of voices' should not die leaving one alone in an alien land. This explains the urgency with which Robi tries to stop Ila from dancing with the businessmen, "you shouldn't have done what you did. You ought to know that girls don't behave like that here." The narrator who has always lived in Calcutta does not feel the need to react as Robi. Robi lived abroad and he was anxious to conform to the Indian values when he was in India. Ila too was never really able to shake off the Indian values, as she knew them, completely. She tells the narrator,

You see, you've never understood, you've always been taken in by the way I used to talk, when we were in college. I only talked like that to shock you, and because you seemed to expect it of me somehow. I never did any of those things: I'm about as chaste in my own way, as any woman you'll ever meet. (Ghosh 188)

Savi Kaur observes, “Thus, *The Shadow Lines*, represents Ila as bearing most heavily the burden of other people’s expectations, and her unhappiness as the product of deep cultural contradictions.” This reinforcement and demarcation of gender roles is also found in the behaviour of Shaheb, Tha’mma’s brother in law, Mayadevi’s husband. There was a marked difference between his talk with women and those with men. He had an established notion about the spaces of men and women in the society. While he live abroad and he belonged to the elite class, he preserved his adherence to the cultural roles assigned to men and women in the Indian society. Narrator’s mother found this fact highly impressive,

My mother was touched that so important and distinguished a man should take so keen an interest in such trivial and unlikely matters, but she was a little puzzled too, for though the questions had been asked with every semblance of interest, they seemed almost practiced and yet she could not imagine any circumstance in which a man like him could have practiced them, since she could not bring herself to think that the ministers with whom she believed him to spend his time, were much interested in small-talk about the price of eggs and the availability of kerosene (Ghosh 41). Leaving apart the fact that a binary opposition has been created between domestic talk and the political talk privileging the latter upon the former, we wonder what makes Shaheb talk about domestic matters to women. It is nothing but his desire to conform that makes him reinforce the gender roles.

Tridib points out that Ila did not travel at all. In the shifting landscapes of her childhood, the only fixed points were the departure lounges. “The inventions she lived in moved with her.” And she was never really able to see the places to which she moved. Thus we find that people actually tend to create their own imaginary fixed points of shelter when alienated from their homelands.

The parallelism between the division of the countries and the division of Tha’mma’s family house is so obvious that Tha’mma’s house becomes the metaphor for the country. The division of a country creates certain imaginary

barriers among people. Tha'mma represents this mental phenomenon which divides people on reasons that are more often than not just fancied. Her character is contrasted with that of the narrator's mother. Narrator's mother believed that "relatives and family were the central points which gave the world its shape and meaning: the foundations of moral order." But Tha'mma never pretended to have much family feeling. And she was always anxious to protect her pride. She severed her connections with most of her relatives,

The price she had to paid for that pride was that it had come to be transformed in her imagination into a barrage of slights and snubs; an imaginary barrier that she believed her gloating relatives had erected to compound her humiliation. (Ghosh 129)

But as she turns older and is alienated from her homeland she longs for her relations. She was adamant to meet her distant cousins who, she comes to know, were living in India. This is one of the important aspects of diaspora. When away from the native place, they long to belong and so they try to be with people who share the same heritage and experience the same loss that they are experiencing. Also, distance seems to bring a romantic touch in relationships. When Mayadevi was married with the assistance of her aunt, her mother tells her not to forget to send her aunt half a dozen sarees from Calcutta. "But there, at home in Dhaka, they never so much as exchanged a single word across that wall" (Ghosh 124).

When we assume that the house in Dhaka is India then India become the metaphor for foreign country. Then it follows that whatever be the condition home, when one migrates to another country, the differences which seem unbreakable barriers at home dissolve and the individual becomes a symbol of home. It is often seen that the people who migrate have a great desire for seeking affinities and maintaining their relation to their roots. As it has already been said that they long to conform. This longing is found in every kind of Diaspora. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* V. S. Naipaul records the experiences of the people who settled in Trinidad. This Diaspora belonged to the older Diaspora which was the

result forced migration of people from India to countries like Africa, Caribbean islands etc. and people who are represented in the book (*A House for Mr. Biswas*) are people who belong to the Brahmin caste of India. Naipaul says that even after several generations they have a feeling that they would return 'home' to India. And to prove their loyalty to their culture and tradition, they married in the caste only. They did not think of the financial position of the person to whom they arranged the marriages. The only important thing to be considered was that the person was a Brahmin. This may be because in a foreign country it must have been difficult to find someone of the same caste. Thus we find that it is important for the diasporas to have a point of fixity. That they find in their memory of the past and also in the people and things that reaffirm their connection to their homeland. Thus it was not surprising that Tha'mma was excited at the prospect of meeting old relations. However it does surprise narrator's mother as she had known Tha'mma as a person who did not have much family feeling.

This division of countries and houses has a romantic aspect too. When Tha'mma's home in Dhaka is divided, she invents strange stories about other side of the house to entertain her sister and to sustain the hatred. She gets so much involved in her own imagined stories that she comes to believe that they were true. The same happens in the case of countries too. When political speculators divide a country into two they spread imagined facts that are meant to assert the differences that never existed. Tha'mma loved her inventions so much that she actually wanted them to be there. "But do you know? she said, looking out across the Lake, half-smiling. In all that time there that was the only thing I ever really regretted about Dhaka. What? I asked. She smiled: That I never got to see that upside-down house." (Ghosh 125)

This 'upside down' house was the invented other part of the house which she conjured up to hide the fact that both the halves were actually mirror image of one another. As this paper seeks to investigate the romantic quest that haunted the characters in *The Shadow Lines* it would not be out of place if we discussed that even the narrator's father and mother longed for romance in their

own way. Keeping in mind Tha'mma's strict adherence to the rules and her commitment towards work, it can be inferred that his son's childhood would have hardly gone through any romantic phase. It was only when the things were out of joint that he had had his moments of romance,

On one of those evenings my father came home exhausted after a series of long meetings at his office. It was not often that he came back as tired as that, and every time it happened a pleasurable sense of crisis would invade our house. It often seemed to me later that those were the moments in their lives that my parents most looked forward to: my father because it was at those times, tired, fussed over and cared for, that he tasted most fully and richly the subtle rewards of a life that had never strayed from convention by so much as a displaced hair; my mother because it was then that she could best display her effortless mastery of the household arts—for instance, her ability to modulate the volumes and harmonies of our house down to a whisper, while making sure that its rhythm kept ticking over, in perfect time, in much the way that great conductor can sometimes produce, within a vast tumult of music, one perfect semibreve of silence. (Ghosh 127)

Thus we find that *The Shadow Lines* records the romantic quest of the individuals. The other fact that comes to notice while the perusal of *The Shadow Lines* is that there is no border in reality. If any border exists anywhere that is only in the minds of the people.

Thus it follows from this that if there is no border, there is no Diaspora in reality. If immigration is being talked about then everyone is an immigrant as “all of us have migrated from the past.”

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