
**Glimpses of Historio- Political Perceptions in Amitav Ghosh's
'The Shadow Lines'**

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Abstract

Admired and feared alike as a writer, Amitav Ghosh holds a formidable position in the literary world today. Admired, because he is acknowledged as an erudite scholar, an enthusiastic traveler, a keen historian and a conscientious writer whose writings bear a strong mark of the aforementioned facets of the man. But the myth of his works being incomprehensible place him as a writer, many readers fear and distance themselves from. Both, because of the world or the people he deals with and the way he presents his stories, his works are beyond the literary reach of the common man. And yet he is quite popular, not only in India, but across the globe, with a steadily growing fan-following.

Keywords: Historicism, Politicizing, Post-colonialism, Destabilization.

Amitav Ghosh, the most cosmopolitan of contemporary Indian English writers, holds a key position in the history of Indian English literature. All writers and all artists cherish a desire in their heart to create a place for themselves in their infinite universe. In the list of such writers the name of Amitav Ghosh comes first. He is a person who is completely involved in this quest for narrative significance, in trying to find a place for himself. This quest is constantly seen in almost all the works of Ghosh, even though they seem to cover a wide range of genres, his innovative attitude of narration is highlighted in almost all his works.

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The Second novel of Amitav Ghosh entitled *The Shadow Lines*, published in 1988, is a significant contribution to the post-colonial literature of Indian Writing in English. *The Shadow Lines* is a Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel in which Ghosh recalls the people and events that dominated his childhood in Calcutta in the 60's and later in Delhi and London. The 'lines', in the title of the novel, symbolically represent all such lines that divide nations and people in the name of nationalism, religion, language and caste but as the epithet preceding it states, these lines are illusionary or unreal. "What is new in 'The Shadow Lines' is that the novelist denies the very existence of these lines and hence calls them 'shadow' or 'illusionary'"¹. So the novel lends a new dimension to the old theme of partition.

In the domain of Indo-English fiction there are several novels which belong to the genre of Partition novels. For example B. Rajan in *The Dark Dancer* (1976), Manohar Malgaonkar in *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Raj Gill in *The Rape* (1974), Khushwant Singh in *A Train to Pakistan* (1956), Bapsi Sidhwa in *Ice- Candy Man* (1988), Chaman Nahal in *Azadi* (1975) and many others in their works of fiction have echoed their deep concern against partition, war and violence. What is prominent in these novels is the vulnerability of human understanding and life caused by the throes of partition which resulted in the division of friends, families, lovers and neighbors. But *The Shadow Lines* is a novel with a difference. This novel dealing with the partition and immigration focuses on man's desire for freedom. And this central theme is presented with the help of an unusual narrative technique.

The novel is quite typical in its thematic concern as it deals with present day sensitive issues like the partition, riots, war and national boundaries. Here Ghosh primarily "focusses on nationalism, the Shadow Line we draw between people and nations - which is both an absurd illusion and source of terrifying violence"². And this indeed is one of the great themes of our time. In his endeavor to examine multifarious concepts of freedom, Amitav Ghosh tries to disengage himself from the shackles of the conventional narrative technique. Being an immaculate artist, Ghosh divides the novel neatly into two parts- "Going Away" and "Coming Home." The narrative then oscillates beautifully from the past to the present and from the present to the past. This back and forth movement of the narrative and the disjointed manner in which the story is unfolded reflect not only the fragmented thought processes of the narrator's mind but also brings into focus an important theme of the novel – that the past and the present are not divided or separated; the line which seems to divide them is a shadow – the past shapes the present and so lives in it.

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The protagonist of the novel – the narrator, is a nameless person who can be anyone of us. The narration of *The Shadow Lines* filters through the consciousness of this unnamed adult male narrator. He looks back into his childhood and interweaves his personal experiences with the major historical events of colonial and postcolonial India. The author traces his development from childhood to maturity and in doing so he adopts the stream of consciousness technique interspersed with straight narratives, stories and newspaper reportage of public events. But the stream of consciousness used by Ghosh is different from that used by Joyce in *Ulysses*. Here the author also shows how the opposing forces influence his growing up and how as an adult he comes to term with them. Hence the novel impresses as a “‘once upon a time’ type of story narrated autobiographically yet with a multiple perspective, using memory as a means of recapturing fragments of the past.”³ And since the stream of consciousness technique is used by the author the novel does not follow a linear development. Rather “discarding a linear structure and the conventional narrative technique, Amitav Ghosh employs a circular, loop-like structure and a multiple narrative scheme in the novel.”⁴

As time and space are not restricted or controlled by barriers in the stream of consciousness technique, Ghosh’s novel too fuse the past and the present causing a misbalance or a sense of destabilization in our sense of time. In fact, “The cyclical movement of the narrative which the narrator manipulates with the help of the stream of consciousness narrative pattern facilitates the author to handle the movement across time from 1981 back to the 1960s to 1940s and beyond.”⁵ Similarly, a different arrangement of special differences adds a new dimension to the complexity of the narrative. Time has an important hold on the narrative for Ghosh uses it in an innovative manner (different from the traditional chronological depiction of time). The actual time span of the novel is from 1934 to the early 1980s, 1964 being a significant year for the characters. In fact “with a zig- zag in narration jumbling the past, present and future”⁶ the narrative contains in its fold multiple time frames, three of them quite distinct:

1. “The War years when Tridib and Ila are with the Price’s in London.
2. The early 1960s up to Tridib’s death, that is, the narrator’s childhood.
3. The 1980s when the narrator is a student in London.”⁷

Treatment of time in such novels, where events are temporally connected, is of great import for such narratives manoeuvre time to relate their story. “The care with which the historian narrator locates his story in time, only reinforces its

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timelessness....”⁸ In this novel, as in Ghosh’s other novels, time is handled with a fluidity by him, as frequent references are made to events in the past. It has been used in a relative sense. So the frequent shifts between the past and the present are related as ‘time lived’ and ‘time removed’. This mode is also continued in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Moreover, even when an event from the past is being narrated, there are numerous queries, explanations, reminders which act as digression but at the same time this mode shows how the viewpoint about the past and the present alters from one character to another. As such in *The Shadow Lines*, time “...turns away from linearity to include all experience, historiophoty transforming the audience/readers into participators in the past ...”⁹

The narrator, while in his childhood stage, faces two different views of using time. The first one is reflected by his strong matriarch Tha'mma and the second one by his uncle Tridib – the visionary. And the narrator grows up in between these two different worlds. For Tha'mma, his grandmother, the representative of the solid middle class “time was like a toothbrush; it went mouldy if it wasn't used.”¹⁰(p-04) And so we find that in the narrator's house there was not a single thing which would encourage him to waste his time – no chessboard, no pack of cards, not even music systems. Instead, he says “we all worked hard at whatever we did; my grandmother at her school mistressing; I at my homework; my mother at her housekeeping; my father at his job as a junior executive in a company.... Our time wasn't given the slightest opportunity to grow mouldy.” (p - 04)

Quite contrary to this, Tridib's world inspired the narrator to “waste” his time in a deliberate manner. Because “Tridib's time never ‘stinks’, it never dies, but is kept alive in the narrator's thought process.”¹¹ Tridib, who left an indelible impact on the narrator, was quite sensitive to the variations of time and space. Tridib who was “something of a recluse” (p - 20) guided this young boy in a very distinguished manner. He advised the narrator to learn to use his “imagination with precision” (p - 26). He gave him the “world to travel in and...eyes to see them with” (p - 22). Of course his theory of imagination was quite different from the imaginative theory towards which the narrator as a child was inclined. In fact, “Tridib's aspiration to think across the differences of time and space are interwoven with a powerful sense of materiality of location. He thinks across cultures rather than beyond them”.¹² Moreover, it was Tridib again who pushed him “to imagine the roofs of Colombo” (p - 32) and told him “one could never know anything except through desire, real desire....” (p - 32) Thus we find that the child identity of Tridib has been

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superimposed on the child narrator. We come to know that Tridib went to England when he was eight, and the narrator recalls "I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridib first talked to me about his journey.... I had decided that he looked like me." (p - 3) The focal point, however, remains constantly the narrator's eye – that of an eight-year-old boy, who lives with his parents and grandmother in the genteel suburb of Calcutta.

As stated earlier, with the passage of time or at a given point in time, an event or episode or incident can and does mean different things to different people in a story. Each person perceives and relates it from his or her own viewpoint and mindset. This creates space for multiple narrators. In fact, even the narrator has two voices – that of the child narrator and adult narrator. The comments of the child narrator are simple, naïve while those of the adult narrator are more mature and objective. The child narrator is not aware about the adult world, but the grown-up or adult narrator is in a vantage position being enriched by the past experiences and memories and can therefore objectively analyze the complexities of human relationships. This can be illustrated by recalling the chance meeting of the child narrator and May with the 'Cotton man'. His instrument seems like a harp to May. The child narrator forwards May's request to the cotton man concealing his ignorance. When the cotton man plays it, he is paid five rupees by May. Three voices can be discerned in this whole episode – the child and adult narrator and also Ila's. Each voice has his/her own account about the characters and incident concerned. This adds to the complexity of the narrative. These dual or triple voices – that of the child and the adult – and that of some other character, run throughout the novel and "the dual viewpoint gives us a sense of inhabiting both past and present simultaneously".¹¹

Some incidents which the narrator had failed to understand as a child become clear when he grows up. When the narrator visits the Victoria Memorial with May and Tridib, he sees May disturbed. She tells Tridib "It should not be here...it is an act of violence" (p - 188). The child can't understand Tridib's rejoinder to it "this is our ruin" (p - 188). Also some childhood memory recalled later help the narrator to understand some important truth. To cite an example, the narrator's crush for Ila is revealed by his mother when she tells Ila that he had been waiting for days. Ila's reaction is a tiny shrug of her shoulders. The narrator feels as if he had been stripped and hated his mother for giving away such feelings. He confesses "At that moment I hated my mother...she had given me away, she had made public, then and forever, the inequality of our needs" (p - 48). This episode flashes through the narrator's mind

when he approaches a towel – wrapped Ila in Mrs. Price's cellar. But she moves away from him and turns towards the stairs to go up and meet Nick. This movement of Ila brings to his mind that a similar incident of his childhood and some simple but important truths are made manifest.

Since there are frequent visits to the past, as each character fishes out events, incidents and anecdotes from his/her well of experiences, memory plays a dominant role in *The Shadow Lines*. So much so that it has been referred to as a “memory novel.”¹² The narrator lives most of his life pondering over his memories. And when these events from the past are narrated it “adds density to the narrative texture...”¹³ We are introduced with the other characters through his memories. To make the novel a little more complex, Ghosh sometimes employs a memory – within – memory kind of framework and sometimes projects before us many memories clinging together. The arrangement of the novel is such that all the important incidents are preceded by a prelude. These preludes work as a catalyst for the narrator's memories. For example, the narrator recalls the moment when he was a child, his grandmother had received Mayadevi's letter announcing May's proposed visit to India and that Tridib asked him whether he would come to receive May with Tridib. This is followed by the narrator's memory after many years. He says “The first time May and I talked about her visit to Calcutta was on the day after Ila's wedding...”(p - 170) but the narrator, before talking with May about her visit to India describes in detail many events like Ila's wedding, his getting drunk and accompanying May to her house, his imposing himself upon her sexually, his feeling of embarrassment after the remembrance of his act of seduction, his apologizing to May, the elaborate description of breakfast, his joining May in her collection of money for the African famine and then their conversation of the time when the narrator had gone with his elders to receive May at Howrah Station, giving an impression of “coil within coil of memories unfurl (ing) within it.”¹⁴ Here what is notable is the fact that the incidents do not come before us in chronological order rather they are laid before us as recollections of the past spontaneously as they come in the narrator's mind one by one. It makes him see minute things with telescopic eyes. In between the receiving of Mayadebi's letter about May's visit and the narrator and Tridib's plan to receive May, Ghosh introduces a wide range of incidents. Their function is expository as they throw light on May's loneliness, the narrator's sadness after Ila's wedding and the final union of May and the narrator. Paying attention to such minute details, makes Ghosh's technique different as well as distinguished. Moreover, he never reveals any truth as a shock to

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the readers. He alerts his readers for the forthcoming conflicts and cries and yet tactfully holds back the suspense. Here lies the real essence of his technique. The most apt example of this delineation of the rights of 1964 and Tridib's death. It starts with the narrator's statement when he asserts that it actually took him 15 years to discover that there was a connection between the nightmare bus - ride back from school and the events that befell Tridib and the others in Dhaka.

The nature or kind of memory used by Ghosh is both definite or exact and vague or blurred. Some of the events recalled by the narrator ring with an exactness so far as the time or place of its occurrence is concerned. Even the minutest details have been maintained with precision. The most telling example is the first opening sentence of the novel itself as it states "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Myaydebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib." (p – 03) Not only is the year of birth mentioned but the relative time between the birth and the event (13 years) to be exact has also been calculated. The narrator recalls all this in the year 1979. A similar trend is followed in describing places too. The place where the narrator lives is a flat in Gole Park, Tridib lived in his family house in Ballygunge, Prices live in 44 Limington road etc. "By using this device of describing exact times, places and things, Ghosh links the narratives and authenticates the nexus between the historical moment and the fictive world."¹⁵ In the second instance, the sense of vagueness is conveyed when the narrator, while trying to recall about exact time or incidents during the riots of 1964, the narrator has to count and calculate on his fingers.

Apart from Memory, History plays a crucial role in the novel. The history that has been used by the writer in the novel is "individual and private, so each effort becomes an attempt towards historicization and each individual becomes an amateur historian".¹⁶ When the narrator states that people like his grandmother who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection, the stress is on memory as a technique to build personal history with the help of recollection. The writers of the modern age in fact reveal this tendency of learning on history with a frequency. In the novels of Salman Rushdie historical facts are an indispensable part and form the vertebra of his narrative technique as he weaves facts and fiction to recreate his fictional world.

The novel, thus, has been made memorable by its unusual technique of narration. The use of memory in time shifts used as devices show Ghosh's consummate skill as a writer. The memory – within – memory instance adds to the

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complexity of the narrative technique and yet manages to hold our interest as Ghosh, slowly, lets the memory uncoiled. Since the narrator depends greatly on memory, both his own and that of others, the use of non – linear looping method of narration seems quite appropriate. This complex narrative technique is not just an embellishment or a contrived endeavor on the part of the author but it seems to get well with the mood of the characters and also help Ghosh in his attempt to fuse a family saga and political history and present it in the form of a novel. Other postmodernist writers too have taken recourse to multiple narrative scheme but the ease with which Ghosh used these devices to achieve a complexity in his technique is remarkable.

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