
**REFLECTION OF TIME IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL:
THE SHADOW LINES**

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Abstract

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 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.

Keywords: Rationalism, Nationalism, Narratology, Illusion

Amitav Ghosh's second novel 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 in 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.

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 fuses 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 maneuvers time to relate their story. “The care with which the historian narrator locates his story in time, only reinforces its timelessness....”⁸In 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*. 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.”¹¹Tridib, 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”.¹²Moreover, 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)

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. This same episode is related by the narrator as an adult to Ila whose comment is in tuned with her nature. Now that the narrator is mature, he disagrees with Ila’s view and gives his own opinion about the incident resulting from his mature understanding telling her that to him it seemed...secluded from the world.

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”.¹³

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.”¹⁴ 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...”¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ 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.

Not only this, "Memory also functions as the graph on which history – individual, private and experienced – is plotted".¹⁷ However, it is an individual memory and not a collective one. Each individual's memory is measured against the intensity which he or she shares with the other. For example – the narrator's memories of Tridib far exceeds those of Ila, because of the intense relationship he shares with Tridib. As the narrator remembers these incidents or moments spent with Tridib, we see shades of joy, grief, nostalgia flitting through them. Though the nature of memory is restless yet it is forceful enough to generate the whole form of the novel.

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. In a similar manner the narrator gives exact information regarding beginning of correspondence between Tridib and May – when Tridib was twenty-seven and she was nineteen in 1959.

Then, the events of 1964 are linked together with clarity – Mayadebi's letter was received on 2nd January 1964, a day after the narrator's grandma had left for Dhaka. It was on 11th January that the news about the riots in Calcutta appeared in the newspaper as the riots had occurred on the previous day. 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.”¹⁸ 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.

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