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A Parallel Study on Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Chethan Bagath's *The Three Mistakes of My Life*

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Abstract

An attempt has been done in this article to compare the two eminent contemporary novelists, Amitav Ghosh and Chetan Bhagath, who have taken India to the global scene through their narrative skills. The study is made to read their perceptions of reality, myth, history, politics, characters and related themes. The novels taken for comparison are Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Chethan's *The Three Mistakes of My Life*. The religious riots of recent decades that broke the peace of the nation India are focused upon. This study focuses on how these riots were dealt with by Ghosh and Bhagat in their respective novels.

Parallel Study

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Parallel study paves the way to examine the similarities and the dissimilarities of a work of art by two different authors of the same country. M. M. Enani defines “Parallel Study” as follows in the book *Theories of Comparative Literature*: “Any study of parallelism claims that there are affinities between the literatures of different peoples whose social evolution is similar, regardless of whether or not there is any mutual influence or direct relation between them.” (42) Spasmodically the two works of art may contain the same theme but the narration or the tone of characterization may differ.

Amitav Ghosh and Chethan Bhagat

The two authors taken for the parallel study are Indian English writers Amitav Ghosh, novelist, columnist, environmentalist, essayist and travelogue writer and the recent bestselling author Chethan Bhagat. Chetan’s six novels have won critical praise and prestigious literary awards.



Chetan’s novel *The Five Point Someone* has also been adapted into film and brought more fame and glory to the writer.

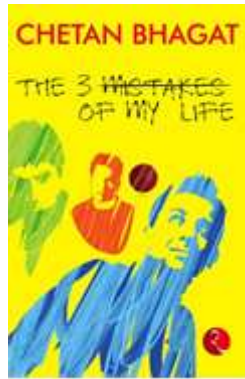
The Three Mistakes of My Life

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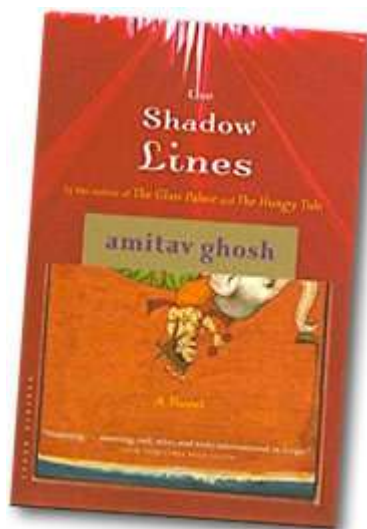
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is his fifth novel that was written in 2008 and it found a place in bestselling lists across the world. Amitav Ghosh, in an interview, says, “I also liked Chetan Bhagat's first book - - I think he has a lot of talent and I hope that the urge to write bestsellers doesn't interfere with it” (n.p).

Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* is a novel written in the year 1990. There are many similarities between the authors. Both authors contribute a lot to the literature and both of them write about Indians and for Indians. Both of their novels are written out of their own experiences and there is a blend of historical incidents that happened in our country in their novels.



The Focus: *The Shadow Lines* and *The Three Mistakes of My Life*

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The novels taken for comparison are Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Chethan's *The Three Mistakes of My Life*. Both the novels give importance to friendship and deal with the religious riot that took place in the recent decades in India. These two novels are real stories of mission, obsession and sacrifice.

The Shadow Lines and The Three Mistakes of My Life

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is narrated by a nameless narrator and is also a memory novel. He brings the political events and the religious riot which took place during the war of 1962 and 1964. The story is about the families of Mr. Justice Chandrashekhara Datta Chaudhary and Lionel Tresawson. Though they belong to different religions, races and regions they are tied with the band of friendship. Tridib is the friend of the narrator, and also his philosopher and guide. Thamma, the grandmother of the narrator, is a widowed school teacher who hates the moderns and the youngsters and she considers Tridib as a "loafer and a wastrel, lives off his father's money" (TSL 04).

Social problems like Hindu-Muslim riots or political issues like the politicization of religion are the burning themes discussed in both the novels. These problems are seen through the eyes of Govind, Ishan and Omi in the novel *The Three Mistakes of My Life* and through the eyes of Tridib, the narrator and Thamma in the novel *The Shadow Lines*.

The Three Mistakes of My Life

Chethan's *The Three Mistakes of My Life* is based on the real events of the sectarian riot that took place in Gujarat in 2002. It is set on the backdrop of communal disharmony of Gujarat. It tells the story of three friends, namely, Ishan, Omi and Govind, who grow up in the same boarding school and are drawn into a romantic triangle. Their destinies are predetermined and yet the three of them are unable to get past the traps of

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love and betrayal life. They yearn and dream for an identical future for them but they develop revulsion for each other in later years. This not only sets the perspective for the intimate and ultimately tragic relationship they build with each other, but also provides an insight into the human mind and society.

Ishan and Tridip

Moreover, this novel is also about the three friends and their part in rescuing the life of an innocent Muslim boy Ali. Ishan, one among the three friends, aims to become a cricketer. Like Thamma in the novel *The Shadow Lines* considering Tridib as a loafer, here Ishan is considered as a loafer by his father. His dad sarcastically comments “cut a cake today to celebrate one year of your uselessness” (TML 03). Ishan’s father identifies him as a loafer to his neighbors. He says, “He and his loafer friends hanging around the house all day along” (5).

Here both the novelists point out the mistaken sense of the elders about the youngsters. Tridib is doing Ph.D. in Archeology and is considered as a loafer. Ishan’s interest in cricket makes him a loafer in the eyes of his father. Later he drifts into the life of an ordinary cricket coach. He sees a great potential in the Muslim boy Ali and he decides to support him because as a lover of cricket he did not like Ali’s talent to go waste. He did not like a repetition of misfortune. So he is magnanimous in helping the boy. Somewhere in his psyche, the boy becomes a prop, a substitute for his lost self and he again hopes to re-live his own unfulfilled childhood dream.

Through Ishan, Chethan allows the readers to understand the struggle and obstacle faced by a sports person and enables the reader to see the real person behind the mask of a superstar.

Govind and Tridip

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Govind in *The Three Mistakes of My Life* is very much attached to his own city Ahmedabad. He says, “Ahmedabad is my city. It is strange, but if you have had happy times in a city for a long time, you consider it the best city in the world. I feel the same about Ahmedabad” (TML 06). Like Govind, Tridib is very much attached to his native city. Though his parents live abroad, he lives in his grandmother’s house in Calcutta. He roams around the Gol Park with his wandering friends.

Ila and Vidya

Young people of this generation choose to be free from the tangles of their parents and are obsessed with adopting the ways of western culture. Elders who are rooted in old values develop this perception of youngsters. In *The Shadow Lines*, Thamma condemns Ila who wants to be free in her own way. She is obsessed with foreign culture and wishes to dance with the strangers in the pub. Ila declares, “I’ve chosen to live in London . . . because I want to be free of your bloody culture and free all of you” (TSL 98). Ghosh shows the change in the attitude of youngsters living abroad.

Like Ila, there is a character in Chethan’s *The Three Mistakes of My Life* that is Vidya. She is the epitome of modernism. She aspires to be a PR and wants to be free and live her life king size. Her room itself portrays her passion for western culture. “Her [Vidya] room was filled with postures of west life, Backstreet boy.” (TML 49). She takes everything light and easy in life. She says “life’s best gifts are free” (TML 182).

Both have no attachment towards their native town. Vidya says, “I want to get out of Ahmedabad” (TML 47). She is crazy about the foreign land. When Govind brings sand from the Australian beach, she gleefully says, “Wow, an Australian beach in my hands” (TML 182).

These two women, Ila and Vidya, are modern individuals and are free of commitments of relationship, of duties and everything else. Their motto is to live for one's own self. They do not bother about anything or care for others. They both have a growing interest in metropolitan culture in which there is no place for emotions and feelings.

Communal Prejudice

Both Ghosh and Chethan have brought out the harm caused by communal prejudice in their novels. Valuable lives are lost because of this prejudice. Novy Kapadia in his article "Imagination and Politics in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*" rightly points out "Amitav Ghosh's greatest triumph is that the depiction of communal strife in Calcutta and erstwhile East Pakistan, and its continuation in contemporary India, is very controlled and taut" (208).

Religious Riot in *The Shadow Lines*

In *The Shadow Lines*, the religious riot is caused due to the theft of the Mubarrak relic. The disappearance of the sacred relic known as the Mui-i-Mubarak- a hair of the Prophet Mohammad, from the Hazratbal Mosque is the root cause for the communal riot which was sparked off in Kashmir and spread to Pakistan, Bangladesh and Calcutta. In East Pakistan many Hindus were killed and many Hindu refugees crossed over to India by train and on foot. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims demonstrated throughout the Kashmir Valley in protest. There were innumerable black flag demonstrations, "every shop and building flew a black flag, and every person on the streets wore a black arm band" (TSL 225). In Calcutta, in the early morning of January 1964 an unruly mob threw stones on the school bus. They were informed that the Tala Tank is poisoned which catered to the entire City of Calcutta. The whole city was drowned in fear:

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It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood . . . it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (TSL 204)

The Hindu-Muslim separatism is not pre-ordained, but it results from the conscious manipulation of selected symbols of both the religions by involved parties.

Religious Riot in *The Three Mistakes of My Life*

In the novel *The Three Mistakes of My Life*, the author focuses on the communal riot that happened in Gujarat. The Sabarmati train was attacked by a large Muslim mob. The attack prompted retaliatory attacks against Muslims and resulted in communal riots on a large scale, in which Muslims and Hindus were killed. The relationship between the two communities became inimical and the two were trying to harm and eliminate each other. It is the chicanery of the politicians that permanently divide the land purely on the basis of religion. People are marginalized on the basis of ability, economic status and of religion.

Omi's Tragedy

Omi's roots are in Hindu culture and religion. Yet, later he is considered an atheist and rebel. Here the religious politician Bitto Mama is responsible for the tragedy. He is a staunch follower and practitioner of Hindu religion and regards the other religious believers as his foes. He rages against the Muslims whoever he sees in the street. He teaches the devotees "keep bearing pain...Our scriptures tell not to harm others. They teach us patience" (TML 42). But he is the first person who does not follow the words.

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Ghosh conveys the possibility of equality through the words of Thamma in the novel *The Shadow Lines* “Once that happens people forget that they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don’t you see?” (TSL 77-78).

The Climax

The sacrifice of Omi is the climax of the novel *The Three Mistakes of My Life* and the sacrifice of Tridib in rescuing Jethamoshai in the riot is the climax of the novel *The Shadow Lines*. Both Omi and Tridib understand the value of human life and the value of religious disharmony. Amidst the world of violence, through these two peaceful figures, the authors remind the need for leading a harmonious life. Ghosh and Chethan pay their tributes and condolences to the martyrs who lost their lives in the riots.

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