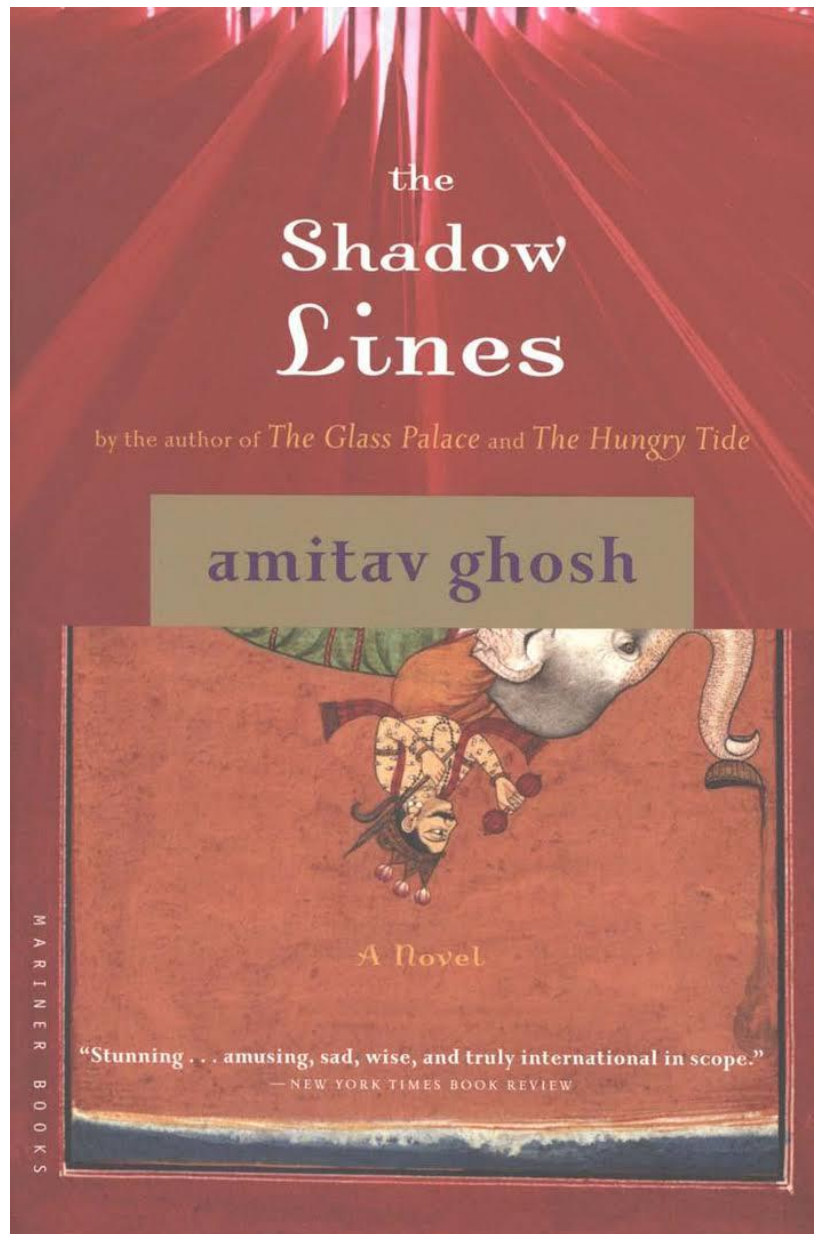


Women - 'the Regenerators' of Life in *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

Women are the most dynamic and powerful creation of God. William Golding states, I think women are foolish to pretend they are equal to men, they are far superior and always have been... Whatever you give a woman, she will make greater. She multiplies and enlarges what is given to her...

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Ghosh's women characters fit into Golding's definition, by becoming the very essence of male characters. They are like phoenix which sprouts wings from stereotype notion of dependability to an independent life. They fight against the miseries of the world like subjugation, widowhood, loneliness and injustice. They play a vital role in deciding the move of other characters. This paper aims at portraying the role of women in the life of the protagonist. Ghosh's women characters not only influence men but also design their destiny. They are not just revolutionaries but also regenerators of life.

Keywords: Freedom, subjugation, revolutionaries, regenerators, chastity

The Shadow Lines

Amitav Ghosh in this novel views women from a different perspective and fit them into a definite framework of liberty and freedom which the modern society has denied them. *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is a unique attempt to exemplify the importance of women who occupy central position in the lives of every male character in the novel. He being an anthropologist has analysed the importance and role of women in every culture and country. Through his women characters he raises a voice against the mute suppression imposed by their family and male counterparts of the society. The discourse of feminism is subtly implied in the novel as his protagonist is influenced by women at one particular point his life. The story is rendered in a first person narrative through the protagonist – the unnamed narrator. Though he is the protagonist his life is centred mainly on his grandmother, Ila, and May. His grandmother occupies a dominant position throughout his life; Ila was his first love and May his future. Ghosh women characters are an embodiment of courage and compassion who help to emancipate the society for its betterment.

Meaninglessness of Borders, Partition and Independence

The Shadow Lines (1988) portrays the meaninglessness of borders, partition and independence. Ghosh interrogates the necessity of borders that divides humanity and instils the feeling of hatred and enmity among brethren in the name of nation and country. The novel deals with themes of love, widowhood and death that is viewed from a different perspective. The story of two families to three generations is built upon the impact and effects of social trauma – partition – that has torn and shattered the lives of every character, their

memory and their conscience. The novel's first part 'Going Away' subtly points to the moving of every character from their family, home, nation and Past. The second part 'Coming Home' denotes the union of all the characters to a place where no borders or separations could alter or define their memory.

Time Is Like a Toothbrush

Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother, was a strict disciplinarian and a brave woman. She is resolved to venture into the recess of life as a widow at the young age of thirty two for the sake of her ten year old son. She was one of the victims of partition who was forced to leave Dhaka, her place of birth, to Calcutta which later became her home. Usha Hemmadi in *Amitav Ghosh: A Most Distinctive Voices* states, "Ghosh's fictional people traverse borders with an almost biological urge" (289).

Tha'mma heads and leads her family – her son, daughter-in-law and grandson – under her strict disciplinary rules. She is of the view that "time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn't used" (TSL 4). Being very young the narrator was not able to comprehend Tha'mma's concept of time, when he inquired about the wasted time, she said, "It begins to stink" (TSL 4). It was the grandmother who led the house as she wanted to.

...she had been careful to rid our little flat of everything that might encourage us to let our time stink. No chessboard nor any pack of cards ever came through our door; there was a battered Ludo set somewhere but I was only allowed to play with it when I was ill. She didn't even approve of my mother listening to afternoon radio play more than once a week. (TSL 4)

According to Tha'mma "Time is not for wasting, time is for work" (TSL 15).

The narrator who grew up in such a systematic and confined limit that his grandmother permitted was very tired of this monotonous life he says, "Our time wasn't given the slightest opportunity to grow mouldy" (TSL 4). She wanted her grandson to understand the importance of time but her strictness has made him drift into the axis of Tridib, whom she had never approved of. In grandmothers view "He (Tridib) is a loafer and a wastrel" (TSL 4) because "he doesn't do any proper work, lives off his father's money" (TSL 4) and all the more she was of the view that "Tridib wastes his time" (TSL 4). Tha'mma is the representation of the ideal woman which King Solomon in his book of Proverbs, chapter 31 describes 'the wife of noble character' in verse 27 thus, "She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness" (NIV, Prov. 31:27).

Tha'mma was crisp and shrewd in her judgement of the narrator who could understand his pulse even when miles apart. Though the narrator was brought up under the strict guidance of Tha'mma he was misled by his love for Ila, she says, "Why have you let that whore trap you?... I know it's she who's sent you into the arms of those whores you go to in Delhi. Do you think I don't know? Did you think I would allow it? (TSL 100). On hearing this, the narrator was shocked, "I could not believe that this withered, wasted, powerless woman was the same person that I had so much loved and feared" (TSL 101). Tha'mma in her little puritanical world was not willing to let her dear grandson go unpunished for this act of shame; so she had written to the Principal of his college requesting he be expelled from college for his shameful act. Thus Tha'mma was a very virtuous woman.

Tha'mma and Her World

Tha'mma's life enters into a new dimension after her retirement. She who had been careful in not letting her time stink is now totally at loss in the vast space of time where she finds nothing worthy to be engaged with. She is an embodiment of a devoted teacher who pays careful attention to her students. She even after her retirement never stayed away from her school but visited her school for couple of hours every day, until the new headmistress requested her son to keep her at home. She is the exact portrayal of hard work who never seem to have any intention to rest. She views her retirement as a curse because her time began to stink, the narrator says, "Time – great livid gout of it; I could smell it stinking" (TSL 131). She in order to escape this deadly disease of boredom and wastage of time and to prevent her time from stinking takes up a new mission of rescuing her aged uncle, Jethamoshi, from Dhaka.

Tha'mma in Her Old Age

The character of Tha'mma is a representation of the practical feelings of old age. Though she evolves and matures with time she is no exception entering to her second childhood. She desires that her dreams come true by involving in the mission of rescuing her aged uncle Jethamoshai who is living under the care of refugees in her ancestral house in Dhaka. She decides to go home to Dhaka, she says, "There's only one worthwhile thing left for me to do in my life now, she said. And that is to bring the old man home..." (TSL 151). She mumbles the address to herself, "1/31 Jindabahr Lane – it's still the same" (TSL 150).

It was only then she understood how alien she had become to her place of birth; when she had to fill in the form to the question of her nativity, she says,

It was not till many years later that I realised it had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form, and at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality". (TSL 168)

With this feeling of insecurity she also becomes the victim of guilt that robs all her happiness for the rest of her years. Her persistent desire to bring back her uncle had paved way for the tragic death of Tridib, Jethamoshi and Khalil in the riot of 1864.

Irony of Reality

Tha'mma falls prey to the irony of reality. To Tha'mma Dhaka was no more her place or home though she was born and brought up there. Her time and memory of her ancestral house has faded away and she believes that Calcutta in India is her home where she had spent almost more than three decades. She finds her heart deeply rooted in Calcutta as she had spent so much time there. Tha'mma enjoyed living in her conceived notion of thoughts which she feels is correct. She never entertains change. She finds it difficult to accept any new alterations for she is contented and happy in her own small world. She slowly started to drift away from the present. She was little interested of the new apartment which they occupied in 1962 when her son became General Manager of a firm. The narrator noticed the change in his grandmother and he says, "In our old flat my grandmother had always been careful to maintain a titular control of the running of our household; now she didn't seem to care anymore" (TSL 132). She slowly drifts away from reality and falls a prey to her obsession.

Tha'mma's conception of life and principles has lost its grip on her in her old age. She who never allowed room for nostalgia is now thinking of her past, the narrator recollects, "She hates nostalgia... she has spent years telling me that nostalgia is a weakness, a waste of time, that it is everyone's duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future". (TSL 230) Soon after her retirement she loves to spend her time with people of her age whom she meets during her walk near the Lake. When her son inquires the subject of their talk she says, "The past is what we talk about". (TSL 140) The people whom she has met also crossed the borders from the east just like her before partition. Her heart searches and even longs to reverse the time and to be a part of her birth place Dhaka.

Homecoming?

Tha'mma's homecoming was not really her homecoming but her going home. For the very first time she is experiencing the feeling of going home as a widow, she says, "You've got it wrong – I'm going home as a widow for the first time" (TSL 226). She nurtured her nationalistic feelings to the end even by giving away her chain which was her first gift from her husband and never parted with even after her husband's death. She says, "I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake, for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out" (TSL 261). But all her nationalistic feelings vanished when she witnessed the death of her blood relatives in the streets of Dhaka by the men of the same place – friends turned foes. Her journey to her home filled her with remorse and bitterness and had caught her captive to her feelings of guilt. Tha'mma's son requests the narrator not to ask anything about Tridib's death, "...you mustn't ask your Tha'mma any questions about what happened. She's already very upset, and it would only get worse if you made her talk about it" (TSL 264). Thus Tha'mma is a representation of those silent victims who suffered passive violence of war, partition and independence.

Ila, a Modern Woman

Ila is the representation of modern women who are obsessed with western ideas. She is willing to lose herself into the uncertainty of western influence in the disguise of modernity. She falls into the category of people who fail to live their lives; instead she lives to please others. She lives in delusion and also wants the narrator to believe and think big of her as she introduces him to her friends from her yearbooks when actually the truth is different. She would show the pictures in the book where the dresses they wore reminded him of "the costumes at a circus" (TSL 24). She would also pretend that the rich guy in her class was her boy friend and tells him the names of big cars like BMW. Ila by doing so triggers his possessiveness and makes him grow jealous for her. She could even sense the narrator's feeling and understand his love for her as a girl, but fails to acknowledge it. She even guides him to play houses with her under the huge table where she plays the role of a mother, the narrator, the father and her doll Magda, as their baby which is the replica of her emotional fulfilment.

Ila is a victim of inferior complex or of fear of racist feeling that was dominant in western world. She fails to understand her true self rather she forces herself to accept the illusionary world that she had created for herself. She willingly deceives herself in the name

of freedom by going against her culture and tradition. She who has been gifted with the opportunity to travel around the world would have exhibited the rich cultural heritage of our nation; instead she had the heart to bury it alive by imitating the western habits like smoking, drinking and flirting in the name of freedom but not any of their morals. As Tha'mma says, "It's not freedom she wants... She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases: that's all that any whore would want" (TSL 98). She is a woman who lacks the gravity of her roots.

Unpractical

Ila is an unpractical woman who lives in her own imaginary world. Tridib and Robi were wrong in their judgement of Ila's imagining capability. She does have the capability of imagination but just restricted to her fancies and she imagines only what she wants to. She is so much absorbed in her self-delusion that she is bound by it and could never come out of it.

Ila's westernization makes her life miserable. She deliberately uses coarse words to show off her western influence to the narrator. Her very attitude makes Tha'mma to call her a "whore" (TSL 98). She exhibits her fallacy of westernization when Robi stopped her when she tried to dance with a stranger in the Grand hotel, when she gave a party for Robi. She says, "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free. Free of you!...Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you". (TSL 98). Tha'mma never approves of Ila living in England; she says,

Ila has no right to live there...She doesn't belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood.
(TSL 85)

She wears a mask in order to avoid being exposed to the reality that she hates to accept.

Ruinous Imitation

Ila's attempt to imitate western culture proves to be ruinous. Her real nature and character is revealed when she understands that her husband is unfaithful to her when she is faithful to him. The narrator questions her, "What happened? Did you creep back home in the still of the day and find him in bed with another woman?" (TSL 206). Ila is shocked and retorts, "Yes, you're right more or less – you've seen it all already, on T.V. That's more or

less exactly what happened” (TSL 206). Ila who ceaselessly chased western culture is in heart of hearts more Indian. She then confesses to the narrator who sarcastically comments, “Your sins have finally come home to roost”. (TSL 207) Ila replies,

I wish I could say to myself – why, I used to do that kind of thing too, it doesn’t mean anything. But I never did, you know. 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. (TSL 207)

Though Ila has pretended to be a carefree woman she has never crossed her limits of a woman and has been very faithful to her lover in her heart of hearts – unlike the narrator. Ila’s love for Nick was so strong that she couldn’t leave him when the narrator insists that she leave him, “...he knows I love him so much I could never leave him”. (TSL 208) She was sincere in her own ways and decides to remain with him with compromises.

A Replica of the Reality of Modern Women

Ila is a replica of the reality of modern women. Many who are obsessed with western ideologies are torn between ‘who they are’ and ‘who they think they are’ just like Ila. Such women constantly battle against their identity crises. Ila, though had travelled to different places failed to proclaim and exhibit the richness of her culture. If only she had done so then she would have been the most striking character. Her character teaches the reality of life –one who misunderstands western ideologies and leads a ruinous and unsatisfactory life. She represents the typical western style woman in a post-colonial female perspective. Ghosh through the character Ila brings out the insatiable desire of Indians to ape western culture that began during postcolonial times and is continued till today.

A Unique Representation of Women

May, Tridib’s love-across-seas is a unique representation of women. May is a complete contrast to Ila. May lives in London and earns her living by playing oboe in orchestra and spends much of her time working for relief agencies like Amnesty and Oxfam providing shelter for the survivors of an earthquake in Central America because she finds great satisfaction in this work. She lives a very disciplined and a humble life. She was born in 1939 when Tridib had gone to England when he was eight years old. In 1959, when May was

seventeen and Tridib twenty seven they had started to correspond with each other. The narrator met May when he was eleven years old in 1964 when she had been to India on her visit to Dhaka.

May is a complete contrast to Ila. Tridib is madly in love with May for her character is more unique than her appearance. She is simple, sober and humble. The trace of her character is revealed when she awakes her brother Nick Price from the illusion he has created about his business in Kuwait. She is a very understanding and a compassionate person, she insists Nick to be truthful and responsible for his every deeds, she says, “You ought to be able to stand up and tell the truth; you were brought up to tell the truth, just as I was”(TSL 120). May for the act of her goodness had to suffer insults from her own brother. Though offended she goes on with life as a spinster because of the death of her lover Tridib. Her deep compassion is revealed when she daringly kills the dog that was hurt by their car and was suffering pain.

Fugitive Turned Free

The year 1964 turns out to be ruinous for May becomes fugitive to guilt. She has come to India as a response to Tridib’s constant summons, but little did she know of the tragedy she would have to suffer. Her visit to Dhaka makes her experience the fear and trauma of riots that claimed the life of Tridib because of her. She comments, “I used to think perhaps he wouldn’t have got out of that car if I hadn’t made him, if I’d understood what I was doing” (TSL 277). Tridib’s death has made her to live a life of guilt from then on. May’s firsthand experience of loss of life made her work for relief agencies from which she derives satisfaction. All the more she throws her lot with the majority of the people in the world to lead an unsophisticated and a contented life. She denies the sophistication of sleeping on her bed and using a pillow, when the narrator who questions her for sleeping on a mat, she says “After all, this is how most people in the world sleep. I merely thought I’d throw in my lot with the majority” (TSL175). She denies herself all sophistication and even the privilege of being married.

May is sensitive and conscious of her actions. All the more she is morally committed to Tridib. Her solitude had taught her the essence of life – Love – and also her feeling of guilt had restricted her to contented living. May looks into the narrator’s heart, understands and identifies Tridib’s characteristic in the Narrator and finds solace in his arms. Thus May is relieved from her guilt that had constantly been pricking her until the revelation dawned on her

that Tridib's death is a sacrifice, she says, "He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery" (TSL 277). Thus May though born in London is naive at heart and is trying to be true to her cultural heritage, which Ila misuses and deceives herself in the name of modernity and freedom.

Women as Integral Part of Ghosh's Fiction

Ghosh's women play an inevitable and integral part of the novel. In the patriarchal society, Thamma proves to be a victorious woman of leading an independent life. Ila though seeks refuge in the western culture to be free proves to be chaste and May is more righteous. In a society where women are dependent on men for protection, these women characters daringly decides to be independent and emerge victorious in deciding their future.

In the current scenario, where women are fighting for equal rights at par with men, against subjugation and harassment, Ghosh's Women are given the required liberty and freedom; they in fact are given dominant position in his novels. They indeed form a society where maternal domination becomes the cause of the story's progression. His women characters prove his statement that, "...the male, as a species, to be naturally frail and wayward..." (TSL 6), as that of the narrator and Tridib. Ghosh indefinitely glorifies women and portrays the hardships that every woman undergoes and surpasses and become more virtuous when compared with men.

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