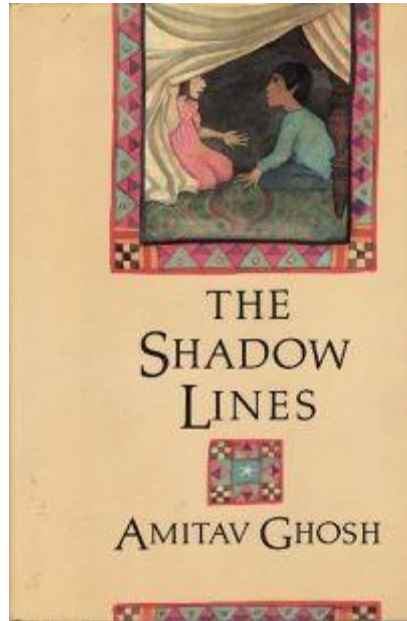


Theme, Technique and Historicism in Amitav Ghosh's
The Shadow Lines: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh has won many accolades for his fiction that is keenly intertwined with history. His fiction is characterized by strong themes that may be sometimes identified as historical novels. His themes involve emigration, exile, cultural displacement and uprooting. He illuminates the basic ironies, deep seated ambiguities and existential dilemmas of human condition. He, in one of the interviews, has observed, "Nobody has the choice of stepping away from history" and "For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life-history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality".

Amitav Ghosh's success as historical novelist owes much to the distinctiveness of his well-researched narratives. He remarkably manifests a bygone era and vanished experiences to life through vividly realized detail. The better reference in this context is his celebrated second

novel, “The Shadow Lines” (1988) which was published four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This constitutes a logical background in the novel, and it makes readers probe various hammering facets of violence. Also, his treatment of violence in Calcutta and Dhaka in this novel is valid even today.

The novel deals with the concerns of our period, the search for identity, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture. It magnificently interweaves fact, fiction and reminiscence. It is a continuous narrative which replicates the pattern of violence not only of 1964 but also of 21st century. The fragmentary narratives unfold the narrator’s experiences in the form of memories which move backwards and forwards.

While focusing upon the text of “The Shadow Lines” I aim to examine and elaborate elements of historicity in the novel and their implications. I also aim to investigate the theme as well as technique employed in the novel.

Key words: Post Colonial, Communalism, Historicism, Cosmopolitanism, Nostalgia, Self identity, multi culture and post modern.

Introduction: Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh, one of the most celebrated authors in Indian English, has won many national and international awards for his fiction that is keenly intertwined with history. He is one of most significant literary voices to emerge from India in recent decades, and has contributed to the development of ideas on the postcolonial in particular, in particular its relation to post modernism. His fiction is characterized by strong themes of humanism, cosmopolitanism, communalism, colonial power and history. His themes involve emigration, exile, cultural displacement and uprooting. He illuminates the human ironies, deep-seated ambiguities and existential dilemmas of human condition. He, in one of the interviews, has observed, "Nobody has the choice of stepping away from history" and "For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life-history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality".

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Amitav Ghosh skillfully places facts in his narratives, historical events written in the fictional language and fictional matter treated as history, thus giving the effect of presence and absence of history at the same time. The public chronicles of nations are interrogated through the means of graphic details of individual memories that do not necessarily tally with the official version of history. For instance, the narrator himself is a witness to the riots in Calcutta in 1964, but when he tries to prove it to his colleagues using the traditional medium of recording history – i.e. the newspaper – he initially meets disappointment. He has woven fact and fiction in a complex and absorbing narratives.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's success as historical novelist owes much to his power of documentation and his distinctiveness of well-researched socio-political narratives. He goes beyond historical representation. The better reference in this context is his celebrated second novel, "The Shadow Lines" (1988) which was published four years after 84 anti-sikh communal riot that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the assassination of Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This constitutes a logical background in the novel, and it compels readers probe various hammering facets of violence. Also, his pathological treatment of violence in Calcutta and Dhaka in this novel is valid even today.

The novel reconstructs and recapitulates major historical and far-reaching events such as the Swadeshi movement, the Second World War, the partition of India, the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta, the Maoist Movement, the India-China War, the India-Pakistan War and the fall of Dhaka from East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The events revolve around Mayadeby's family, their friendship and sojourn with their English friends the Prices and Thamma, the narrator's grandmother's links with her ancestral city, Dhaka. It is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator which has its roots in broader national and international experience. In the novel the past, present and future coalesce and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcations. . The text deals with the concerns of contemporary period such as the search for identity, political freedom, communal frenzy, nationalism, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture. It magnificently interweaves

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fact, fiction and reminiscence. The text intersects personal memory, family lore and public history. It is a continuous narrative which replicates the pattern of violence not only of 1964 but also of 21st century. The fragmentary narratives unfurl the narrator's experiences in the form of memories which move backwards and forwards.

The Shadow Lines

The Shadow Lines is Ghosh's second novel, who has overtime secured his place as one of the India's most celebrated and finest of post-Rushdie generation of authors in Indian writing in English. Ghosh's work is known to be imbued with minute details of the given time, space and situation, which he writes about and his words are impregnated with a wealth of meaning. Having penned novels of different genres, Ghosh seems to reinvent himself with his every work but *The Shadow Lines* undoubtedly remains one his best. His text straddles the border between history and fiction.

Amitav Ghosh's historical world is one of restless narrative motions. His central figures are travellers and diasporic exiles. He treats national borders and conceptual boundaries as shadow lines and mere illusions. The shadow lines of the novel are experiential and political, and challenges political, social and cultural borders. Reason becomes passion; going away is also coming home and the differences between us and them, now and then, here and there are disrupted by the itinerant maps of a roaming imagination.

Historical Touches and Their Narratives

While tracing historical aspects and their narratives interlinked with social perspectives in the novel it is herewith worth-noting that each of his major works direct their narrative force towards historical facts. In this particular context, it will be proper to discuss the following points.

1. The New Historicist Approach

New historicist approach concerns itself not only with the big and paramount national problems like partition and communal frenzy but also with political matters and international events of the past. The inscrutable and transcendental issues like the indivisible sanity, religion and alienation, themes of detachment and isolation become very much part of it. The search for

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syncretic culture and communal harmony, and deep concern for the individual liberty in an increasingly collectivized and militancy-ridden society are very well represented in such works. *The Shadow Lines* is a story told by a nameless child narrator using mnemonic process. It's a non linear narrative, fragmentary, episodic and incomplete. This style of writing is both unique and captivating; unfolding ideas together as time and space combine and help the narrator understand his past better and look for a new meaning. Revolving around the theme of nationalism in an increasingly globalized world, Ghosh questions the real meaning of political freedom and the borders. In fact, it reflects the fictional analysis of nation state as obstructive and divisive. The novel traverses through almost seventy years through the memories of people, which the narrator recollects and narrates with a dual point of view as an adult and as a child. Though the novel primarily focuses on Calcutta, Dhaka and London, it seems to echo the sentiments of whole South-east Asia, with lucid overtones of Independence and the pangs of Partition.

2. Impact of Nostalgia and the Question of Self-Identity

The novel also highlights nostalgia and chronicle communal chaos which are an intrinsic part of history. The characters suffer a sense of loss and belonging. They are always longing for the past, for those days and for those places that are no longer traceable. For example, reminiscences of her childhood in Dhaka keep haunting Tha'mma, who has been living in Calcutta for about two decades. For her, Calcutta can never be Dhaka which used to be her home, 'no home but in memory'. It is a story of a middle class Indian family based in Calcutta. The boy narrator presents the views of the members of his immediate and extended family, thus, giving each a well-defined character. However, Tha'mma, narrator's grandmother is the memorable character in the novel, giving a distinct idea of militant nationalism and the enthusiasm with which the people worked towards nation building just after independence. It is chiefly through her character that Ghosh delivers the most significant message of the novel; the vainness of creating nation states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided. All the characters are meticulously sketched. In Tridib, the narrator's uncle, Ghosh draws one of the most fascinating characters of our times. Narrator's fascination with him is understandable. It is Tridib who gives him "worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with" (S.L. 20). Ghosh subtly tries to undo the myth that boundaries demarcate as there are no barriers in imagination. Ila is central to the narrator's coming of age. Her portrayal is

crucial to showcase the pragmatic cosmopolitanism of the people who live aloof from their native place.

3. Omniscient Narrator as Historian

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's personality merges with that of the historian. For him the past exists only in memory and has no visible traces left in the present to go by. Here memory is more adequate than history, and works as a channel into past. The only resources, which the narrator-historian possesses to graft history, are memories, photographs, and Tridib's stories which are difficult to dismiss because they are factually correct yet set in other time and space. The events are reconstructed, often as accurately and as carefully by any historian, putting real people in imaginary situations, and fancy conditions in documentary archives, augmenting the significance of historical events by plausible and internally consistent depictions of events. Ghosh invokes the archives as a key organizing principle in his novels making it coherent historical narratives.

4. Retrospection of Past Events

The Changeability of time and place blur as the process of recollection transforms the past events into a throbbing sense of what has been lost. The historical events documented by the novel includes the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the Partition of India in 1947, and the spontaneous communal combustion in the form of riots in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and India following the '64 Hazratbal incident in Srinagar.³ The novel is not a bare and bland recapitulation of those tense historical moments; it captures the trauma of emotional rupture and estrangement as also the damaging potential of the psychological siege within people sundered by bigoted politics. Ghosh's novel as re-appropriated history moves through the narratives and melds the historical moments into a compelling tale. The reconstruction of the past through houses, photographs, maps, road names, newspapers, advertisements and other concretisations allows us to collate the text with concurrent co-texts and validate the author's perception of the time and milieu covered by the novel. The principal episodes viewed in a simultaneous focus seem to be part of a historical continuum and the narrator's insight into the characters falling into insane frenzy or wallowing in stolid indifference to transcultural currents can be palpably located.

5. Concerns about Cross Border Humanity and Cosmopolitanism

While *The Shadow Lines* explores the author's major concern about wider, cross-border humanity with striking insights into the issues of ethnic nationalism, multiculturalism and communalism, it also reveals new levels of his technical prowess. Ghosh has departed from Rushdie's mode of "imaginative serio-comic storytelling" (Hawley 3) or "the disjointed magic realism" (Mukherjee) evident in his apprentice novel (*The Circle of Reason*). What he now offers is a supple and sophisticated mnemonic narrative. He weaves together different strands of history by mnemonic process or "wistful evocations of memory" (Mukherjee, "Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma") to reflect on communal carnage and sectarian tension in the Indian subcontinent. The novel derives its material from Ghosh's experience of the fracture following the Partition and the resultant rupture in the affiliative bonds of the communities across the border. What makes his experience worthy of investigation is the technique by which his experience is moulded into a fascinating and coherent narrative.

6. Geographical Fluidity and Cultural Dislocations

Ghosh engages with the limits of essentialist nationalism and barriers to empathy across geographical borders. The novel eventuates into a search for the strategies for survival in a violent, hate-filled world of narrow divisions and finds in cross border interaction an effective antidote to the miasma of ethnic tension. Thus the novel also addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a salutary insight into history. For this purpose he uses the metaphor of 'family'. The cross-border movement of aliens and immigrants under the increasingly globalised scenario endorses, or rather validates, the novel's larger project of cultural accommodation, of making sense of ontological confusion in intricate spatiality and seeking adjustment to the emerging demands of multicultural world. As Brinda Bose rightly notes, it is no doubt fitting that in the age of an extravagantly embracing of globalization, we may claim to have closed the gap between the other and straddling it; certainly, the legacy of postcolonial angst today appears to have settled into a potentially numbing acceptance of bi- or multi-cultural euphoria. In such a circumstance, the diasporic imagination of Amitav Ghosh – that wrestles with an understanding of bi-culturalism as it 'yokes by violence together' discrete

and distant identities – is essential to our understanding of our history even as it is being created. (Bose 15-16)

In my view, Ghosh appeals to creative multicultural impulses and communal harmony. He perceptively shows how different cultures and communities are becoming antagonistic to the point of no return. He makes a plea for cross-border ties and intercivilisational alliance which amounts to making a new world order. To quote Edward Said, “the new economic and socio-political dislocations and configurations of our time [begin] with the startling realities of human interdependence on a world scale” (Said, *Culture and Materialism* 401). Such re-appropriations of history or “desirable constructions of the past” also do away with the partitioning of the past to open out common doors from the corridors between cultures through “creative improvisations” (Prasad 58).

7. Demarcations as Arbitrary and Invented Divisions

Ghosh does not totally accede to the claims of historicism. His preoccupation with shadow lines or demarcations as “arbitrary and invented divisions between people and nations” has also been closely questioned by A.N. Kaul. In his opinion, *The Shadow Lines* “ends up attributing value and a higher reality to a sort of amorphous romantic subjectivity” (Kaul 299). Kaul argues that unlike Henry James and E.M. Forster, who recognise the barriers to cultural crossings due to a variety of political and cultural complexities, Ghosh privileges the world of private refuge over historical and political realities and thus regards these harsh realities or historical formations as immaterial; at any rate, he blithely disregards them. As Kaul notes, the novel insists on a sentimental resolution and as such it lacks an authentic resonance. He also underlines some signifying and profound statements about life in the novel as “postmodern banalities” or mere “conundrums.” Kaul perhaps sidesteps the implications of Tridib’s advice to the narrator that he uses his “imagination with precision” (S.L. 24). Kaul further quotes Ernest Gellener’s unequivocal statement that nationalism “invents nations where they do not exist”. Tridib’s insistence on the material moorings of imagination – its temporal and spatial co-ordinates – is plainly missing from Kaul’s explication of “imagination” as romantic retreat from historical realities in *The Shadow Lines*.

8. A World Torn Asunder by History and Religion

The Shadow Lines embarks upon a journey of discovery of roots and reasons. It also portrays a world torn asunder by history, and depicts forms of violence that extreme of nationalism sometimes manifests. Through an intricate web of memories, relationships and images Amitav Ghosh builds a vivid and moving narrative. It is unlike the novel of previous era, firstly because it is not linear in narration. The interaction of Indians with English people, their journey to other continents, their issues of political freedom, self-identity and the forces of nationalism have all been very vividly described. The first impression one gets in reading this novel is that the people delineated belong to many different nationalities, cultures and backgrounds that make the scope of novel formidable. The very opening of the novel describes the writer's aunt Maya Debi going to England with her husband and son. This was in 1939 and since then the interaction with them and separation from them has been projected through memories. Through the cinematic technique of flashback, the action moves to and fro from London to Calcutta and to Khulna and Dhaka. Here narrative time coincides with the consciousness of narrator. In a globalized world, it is no longer possible for any writer to write the novel in Jane Austen fashion from the centre of her place.

9. Reevaluation of Historical Reality

Although, chronologically, the story begins with a passage of time in colonial India when the narrator was not even born, it embraces a good deal of postcolonial moments, and all the episodes are held in simultaneous focus to illuminate the narrative resolution. The novel begins thus: "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt Maya Debi went to England with her husband and her son Tridib" (*The Shadow Lines*, p.3). The year 1939 is historically significant for the outbreak of the Second World War and the phenomenal upheavals on the Indian subcontinent coming in its wake. Mayadebi's visit to London around this time, her intimate contact with the Price family and the Tridib-May component of the story are recounted by Tridib twenty-one years later to the narrator, an eight-year-old inquisitive child. May was a little baby when Tridib saw her in London. A romantic relationship between them has developed through correspondence, transcending the shadow lines of nationality and cultural boundaries. Amitav Ghosh explores the mysterious pull between Tridib and May and the abiding bond

between the two families defying distance and physical frontiers even as the countries they belong to are pitted against each other, and this superbly provides thematic framework of novel.

The narrator's voice appears to be the author's voice and suggests that the issues of boundaries and national culture are illusory and non-existent. There cannot be any divisions of universal humanity. The concept of time in the story can be taken as a metaphor for the national borders. It seems to suggest that divisions between nations are illusion and that frontiers between nations should not exist, and it tends to justify the title of the novel itself. In this way, Ghosh reveals a firm grasp of socio- cultural and historical material that underlies his narrative.

Conclusion

Thus a historicist approach to text is nothing but an evaluation of a segment of historical reality as projected by the novelist whose techniques of writing fiction enable him or her to describe his or her world-vision. In all his writing, Amitav Ghosh's engagement with history is not the same kind as that of a regular historian, but this does not, in any way, lessen its significance as historical fiction. The fictional framework renders history more readable and lively and he is able to involve the reader more than what actual history does. Ghosh's fiction reveals that the novelist's involvement with history is his prime obsession. Indeed, he interjects a new dimension into his encounter with history. His fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. While offering memory as a better or more valid means of assessing past, Ghosh is thus a novelist who virtually bends his novels to the needs of history; they largely derive their purpose and shape from it. the novel narrates the events taking place in 1939-40, 1960-63 and 1978-79 in a jumbled way but the adult narrator focalises on these recollections in the 1980s and manipulates these blurred temporal and spatial fragments into a coherent stretch to stage postcolonial situations as well as cultural dislocations and anxieties, and presents the issue of fractured nationalities in close and telling encounters for good measure. All the narration comes to us filtered through authorial voice.

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