



EXPLORING POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH HISTORY IN FICTION: A STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

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ABSTRACT

In the mid twentieth century, colonial rule started declining with the rise of tendencies like nationalism and search for self in the third world. For the arousal of such feelings literary and cultural theories played a very decisive role by providing the alternatives for the so called fixed and central political notions. Most of the postcolonial writers started exploring new knowledge about the identity, history and political life of their nation state through their fictional and non-fictional writings. Amitav Ghosh is one such novelist whose well-known text *The Shadow Lines* provides a new dimension to look at the politics of different discourses in the construction of personal and group subjectivity and its documentation through histories. The novel belongs to the genre of partition literature with the non-linear plot construction. It shows how violence, communalism and nationalism become the cause of conflict between otherwise even species of human beings. The study intends to show how subaltern people, ignored in official histories are given voice through the medium of literary texts. The impact of important historical events on the life of common people is also taken into consideration by Ghosh. In this paper a critical analysis of this process of re-evaluation of history and the realisation of one's subjectivity in the literary work is worked upon.

Keywords: Histories, realities, subjectivity, subaltern

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The Padma Shri awardee, writer and anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh has widely written in English language and has taught in various Indian as well as American universities. His writing corpus includes novels, travel essays and other forms of literary and historical writings. Among his ten major publications six are novels: *The circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Bengali by birth, Ghosh depicts Bengali way of life, history, behaviour and social consciousness

alongwith concerns of humanity in general as Murari Prasad opines:

Amitav Ghosh stands out among his peers for the admirable directness and lucidity of his prose as well as for his brilliant perception of the complexities of human relations in the multicultural world. (70)

He won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award (1989) and the Anand Puraskar for his novel *The Shadow Lines*. It is easy to read Ghosh as a postcolonial writer due to his experiments with the

question of language, history, representation and identity. It is rightly said by Dixon,

Ghosh's training in historical and anthropological research, his eschewing of grand theoreticist gestures and his links with the Subaltern Studies project make his work an interesting site around which current arguments in post-colonial theory can be conducted. (10)

He does not feel happy with the term postcolonial to be applied to his novels yet is in good terms with the postcolonial critics. Regarding the themes and concerns in his fictional and non-fictional works only the shadow lines of demarcation exist. Mondal opines that Ghosh's works deal with,

[T]he troubled legacy of colonial knowledge and discourse on formerly colonized societies . . . formation and reformation of identities . . . the recovery of lost or suppressed histories; an engagement with cultural multiplicities . . . critique of Eurocentrism in general. (2)

These themes find reflection in the novel taken up for present study but the main focus is on the construction of postcolonial subjectivity in the face of partition history and its after effects.

Plot Synopsis

The first part of the novel, "Going Away" deals with going away from India and signifies its association with diaspora. Mayadebi with her husband goes on visiting different countries of the world. Similarly her sons also go on crossing the borders of nation state. Her another son Jatin-Kaku who "[i]s always away too, somewhere in Africa or South-East Asia, with his wife and his daughter Ila." (6)

The second part entitled "Coming Home" deals with coming back to India. For Tha'mma, India after partition has become her home so she wants her uncle Jethamoshai to come home for the rest of his life. The novel goes on shifting from individual to the public and from public to the individual. The episode of dividing the house between two brothers who were united in the earlier times portrays the division of the large country into two parts.

Ghosh has very technically structured the novel to move between past, present and future.

The author has tried to show that our understanding of the present is based on our earlier perceptions that is why the narrator tries to link every present movement with its past. The novel *The Shadow Lines* portrays history of Partition of India (1947), riots in Calcutta and Dhaka (1963-64), world war (1939), economic crisis and other events from history. It is a commentary on how British policy of 'divide and rule' exploited the uneducated and superstitious people as well as the discourse of communalism and violence overtook the feeling of humanity. Prasad avers,

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. (70)

The two families the Datta Chaudharies from Calcutta and the Prices in London are on familiar terms due to the friendship of their elders Justice Datta Chaudhari and Alan Tresawsen. The narrator's grandmother (Tha'mma) and Tridib's mother Mayadebi are two sisters and they migrate to India after the partition. But their uncle Jethamoshai is left behind in the country of his birth. He is not willing to come back but the two sisters want him to be.

Mayadebi is married to the elite class man addressed as Shaheb by Tha'mma. She has three sons Jatin-kaku, (father of Ila), Tridib who is the best friend of the narrator, Robi, the youngest son studies with the narrator in Delhi. This family is well settled in comparison with the narrator's middle class family who "did not have a car, and money was too tight to pay for holidays . . . never went anywhere."(36)

Ila and her mother stay for some time in London with Price family. The members of the family are Mrs. Price, her daughter May Price and her son Nick Price. Tridib falls in love with May Price but they are unable to get married because Tridib dies during the riots in Dhaka. May's brother Nick Price is in love with Ila and both of them get married. It ends in an unhappy relation but Ila does not express it outwardly.

Tha'mma has the experience of a dreadful past and she feels a kind of nostalgia about it which

leads her to go to Dhaka to bring back her uncle Jethamoshai. A poor Muslim rickshaw puller named Khalil looks after Jethamoshai who also dies in the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka while saving Jethamoshai. Similarly Tridib loses his life at the same time and place in order to save his beloved May Price. Through the love and concern of these victims of riots, the novel tries to show how boundaries are visible to some and for others they are just shadow lines. This difference in perception of boundaries constructs their subjectivity.

Critical Analysis

The treatment of time is very crucial in the absence of a single story line. It goes on jumping between past and present. Instead of chronological order time is depicted in an experimental manner as the very opening of the novel "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born" (3) begins with his knowledge based on the memory of others. Dealing with the life of its narrator cum protagonist the fictional piece is a Bildungsroman kind. The story starts before his birth and mentions his childhood in Calcutta and later on his education at Delhi and then in London.

The unnamed narrator creates a world of his own on the basis of others' experiences. His uncle Tridib tells him the stories of his experience in London during the war, his grandmother tells him the tales of her experience during partition of India and Bangladesh, the then east Pakistan. Ila tells the narrator her experience around the world because she goes on visiting distant lands with her parents, her father being an economist with the U.N.

The relation between culture and imperial rule is evident whereas postcolonialism as a historical marker in this text shows how subjectivity becomes multi-faceted when countries are divided and subjectivity formation turns out to be ever changing process. It embodies the associated idea of subjectivity as a dynamic process "because what is made can be unmade, and often is- over time or in different contexts" (Mondal 20-21).

The narrative is structured to support the theme of imagined self in imagined communities. Thamma does not recognise where her real home is: the country where she took birth or the country where she lives. The question does not end with the

novel. It remains alive with the people who migrate from one geographical location to another and are termed as Diaspora. The idea of nation or home has been shattered by Ghosh by presenting a cosmopolitan view of the world where people are citizens of the whole world like Ila: "although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all" (23). The depiction of historical events inside a literary text relates it to society at large. As Uday Shankar Ojha opines:

[T]he novelist perceives in depth the events of the world and enables his characters to envision the multilayered, complex patterns of time and space in which past, present and future coalesce into one. (137)

The novel deals with the question of history and brings about the idea that history is partial. There is difference between personal history and national history. It is the colonial legacy that history written in India always follows the lines of British historical documents because "we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of "us," eminently useful in understanding our societies" (Chakrabarty 3). However, the narrator is of the view that one has to invent stories and construct a reality of his own to enjoy freedom because everyone lives in a story. History is treated as fiction as Tridib asserts, "everyone lives in a story . . . all lived in stories, because stories are all there to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose"(201).

The problems of group subjectivity on the basis of difference between personal experience and public history are dealt with. The experience of partition is depicted through the lines dividing different realities, nationalities and subjectivities. Thamma's idea of freedom is limited to national freedom. She has the conviction that nation is defined by blood because "everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood . . . they know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood" (85). She attaches a sense of security to one's own country. She questions Ila's living away from her home and justifies it as a source of her unhappiness. The same assumption leads her to summon her uncle Jethamoshai back from Dhaka to Calcutta as it is safe to live in India. But Mondal opines that Ghosh has satirised this

sense of security through Jethamoshai's becoming a victim of "trouble" in Dhaka, his home (10). Jethamoshai outwardly rejects the idea of leaving Dhaka, by proclaiming:

I don't believe in this India –Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? . . . I was born here, and I'll die here. (237)

The grandmother is disillusioned about her subjectivity in Dhaka when Tridib makes her realize that she is "a foreigner now . . . more than May, for look at her, she does not even need a visa to come here" (215). For her, there exists "no home of her own but in memory" (214). She remembers every nook and corner of the city of Dhaka when she left it during partition and tries to relocate it as such. She is not ready to accept change. She feels herself very much attached to Dhaka without really knowing its existence. She repeatedly asks, "where is Dhaka?"(215). The belief in physical demarcation between nations as a result of political movements is a subjective issue. About the nature of shadow lines between the countries in the modernised world narrator points out: "the border isn't on the frontier: it's right inside the airport" (167).

Like this subjective approach towards understanding geographies, histories too are followed differently by different people. Most of the subcontinent's subjects, born as free citizens of their nation do not find something tragic about what happened in the year 1947. Those who have experienced it call it partition and those who find it just in history books call it the moment of independence. The event has different connotations for different people. The idea of partition has been overcome by the romantic idea of freedom. No doubt it is something to celebrate liberty from the clutches of British colonialism but its basis is the partition of a nation geographically as well as ideologically.

The trauma of partition convoluted the people like Tha'mma in realizing their own subject position in the context of time and space. For her the real India is the India before partition. She presumes that there are physical lines demarcating

two countries but gets disillusioned to know that there are no such lines, "Where is difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same . . . What was it all for then-partition and all the killing and everything" (167).

Ila's narration of childhood experience to the narrator during playing the game "houses" hints towards the history of racial discrimination in western world. The binaries of white- black and east-west concretised by colonial era find space in fiction implicitly. The conduct of the teacher shows authoritative side of racism. The physical description of the girl in derogatory terms demonstrates the prevalence of in England:

Denise was very ugly . . . dirty red hair . . . mother has left her and run away to Australia . . . skin was like dirty ice-cream-pale and grainy and peppered with blackheads. (81)

Religion becomes an important discourse in the construction of one's subjectivity in nations like India and Pakistan where religion has been the basis of partition of one nation into two. The incident of the riot starts with the rumour that the whole water of Calcutta has been made poisonous by the Muslims. Even the small children, the narrator being one among them, think that their Muslim friend must know everything. Later on religion becomes the cause of Tridib's death whereas the Christian girl, May Price is not hurt by anybody in spite of her presence among two rival groups. The incident of the sacred relic's theft of Prophet Mohammad's hair which was regarded by the Muslims as the prophet incarnate from a mosque in Hazratbal, Kashmir in December 1963 lead to communal riots in India as well as in East Pakistan. This historical incident is depicted by the author through his memory of his childhood days. Prasad writes about such treatment of historical events:

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 siege within people sundered by bigoted politics. (73)

It is experienced by the narrator that when there is a trouble, people become more united regardless of knowing each other. Like the schoolboys in the bus treat him in a friendly manner during riots and “they seemed relieved” to see him although they were not his “friends” (219). The grandmother is also of the view that when there is war in any country, it unites people like religion does. So war fosters the feelings of nationalism. She says:

[P]eople forget they are 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 . . . (86)

English language as a colonial legacy plays pivotal role in postcolonial subject formation. It is this idea of language which makes Ila’s mother be ironically called queen Victoria as she speaks English language in a very silly manner while talking to their maid and cook in Colombo. She uses repetitive words like “Lizzie, at it-garden looking-looking...Lizzie, what it-thing being-being” (28). There is mixed use of vernacular with the English language which is particularly spoken by the local man, the cook named Ram Dayal who shouts “Mugger-muchh...Save me, burra mem, bachao me from this crocodile” (27). This marks his subjectivity as a homogenous mixture of the east and the west. It shows how people from different socio-political backgrounds make use of their own language willingly or unwillingly to assert their group subjectivity. The question of language becomes important as a medium of cultural change in human history as Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o opines:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world . . . (Qtd. in McLeod 18)

Freedom is also a relative and subjective sentiment which has different meanings for different people. For Ila, who is the only grandchild of an affluent family of Datta Chaudharies, the high class people called *Bhadralok*, to live in England is freedom. Ila

gives reason for choosing to live in London because she wants “to be free” and free of Indian “bloody culture” (98). She is unable to get such freedom in India as Robi tells her, “You can do what you like in England . . . here there are certain things you cannot do. That’s our culture; that is how we live” (97).

The characters in the novel are in continuous search for their self. Tha’mma is suffering from her memories of the pain of colonial experience whereas Ila is a subject of neo-colonial discourse who “has no memory of any home” (Spyra 14). It is this difference of perspectives about national identity that does not let grandmother accept the term refugee for herself and she says, “We’re not refugees . . . we came long before partition” (145). Later on while filling in the form her place of birth and nationality she “had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be messily at odds with her nationality” (168).

The discourse of national history gives space to different subjects according to their position on the social hierarchies. In case of Tha’mma gender subjectivity becomes the basis whereas in case of Khalil it is class which does not let them have a say in national history. It is suggested by Robert J.C. Young that such discrimination was even done by Gandhi while advising Sarojini Naidu not to go with him on Dandi-march: “why did he refuse to allow any women to go with him” (93). Similar is the case of Tha’mma who wishes that she could have saved the person who fought for national freedom and could equally participate in the nationalist movement “with a pistol in her hands, waiting for that English magistrate” (43). But she is unable to do so “because she was a girl, a woman” (43).

The death of the rickshaw puller, Khalil during the riots shows how subaltern in spite of playing an important role does not find any place in national histories. Ghosh’s this trait of giving mention to subaltern in history is recognized by John. C. Hawley,

[Ghosh] is fond of occasionally suggesting “alternative” histories . . . re-emphasizing of things that actually did take place but were not deemed significant enough for

posterity's notice. Sometimes this means viewing history "from below" . . . (59)

Tridib's death also does not find any mention in the newspapers which makes the unnamed narrator realise that every event does not become part of national history despite its huge importance for the individual. The newspaper of today becomes tomorrow's historical document and the event or person which could not find any room in them cannot become a part of history. The novel shows how ordinary people are ignored in history,

[T]here were innumerable cases of muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims. But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten-not for them any Martyr's Memorial or eternal Flames. (253)

The way a story is told to us changes our perception and history being itself a story is prone to such problems. The presentation of a fact becomes more important than the fact itself. The narrator could not find any mention in the newspaper report of the riots which took place in Calcutta when he was in school. The story was neglected by the historian. Here the difference between personal and public history becomes obvious. The fact is that Tridib died but "how he died" is narrated in three different ways by three main characters in the novel Robi, May Price and narrator's father to him.

Conclusion

Silence is considered as the symbol of submissiveness but to speak or give voice to someone through one medium or the other marks the presence of that passive subject. Amitav Ghosh through the diversity of perspectives, place of a postcolonial subject in metanarrative of grand history, provision of alternative histories by marginalized people, has started a move from the margins to the centre. This resistance towards the normative knowledge pattern is the aim of postcolonial theory and literature.

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