



***The Shadow Lines:*  
Representation of Diasporic Literary tradition in South Asia**

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**Abstract**

The *Shadow Lines* is among the best novels in Indian English fiction. It is a novel based on the Hindu-Muslim riots (in the background, past) and the characters are engaged in a quest of their own. The environment of the diaspora has a bearing on the novel. The novelist, Amitav Ghosh depicts the gruesome experiences of characters in Bengal and abroad. Here one also gets the experience of multiculturalism. It shows a movement towards new values and an urge for the erasure of geographical boundaries in *The Shadow Lines*.

*Key words: diaspora, culture, realistic, communal, multiculturalism*

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Amitav Ghosh is a post-colonial writer who is capable of seeing the fissiparous society in which divisions are common, and vision is dimmed. Ghosh is aware of the fact that a writer is an artist and imagination in his forte. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh has presented a panoramic view of life through the realistic mode. He has selected a few families and woven their tales into the fabric of the novel. The relationship between Tridib and the narrator is a wonderful one. Tridib had taught the narrator how to use his imagination. On many occasions, the narrator observes a situation or a character from a distance.

According to Shubha Tiwari, the most important ideas drawn from this novel are the shallowness of international borders, lines of control. Through the description of partition, riots and communal hatred, Ghosh drives home the idea of unreal borders.

Literature in general reflects the aspirations and yearnings of people caught in a vortex of traditions and beliefs. They hope for change and

continuity with their 'usable past'. In the postcolonial period, writers have taken up the problems of identity, alienation, diaspora, feminism and multiculturalism at the overt and covert levels with underspinnings of ironic satire and subtle visions. Women writers have also created a feminist space for them. Postcolonial writings make use of such tools.

*The Shadow Lines* provides an opportunity for Amitav Ghosh to give a lyrical expression to his diasporic imagination. Diaspora literally means the dispersion of Jews to areas outside Palestine since the 6th century BC. It also connotes a dispersion, scattering or decentralization of national or religious groups living outside their homeland but maintaining their cultural identity. Ghosh in his narratives tries to be historically accurate in his delineation of life in Bengal during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Ghosh himself asserts that *The Shadow Lines* is an international novel with cross-breeding of ideas and cultures. In this novel, one finds the diasporic

imagination wrestling with his understanding of bi-culturalism. Brinda Bose observes:

Ghosh's imagination is as necessarily diasporic as it is postcolonial, being a product of specific histories of the subcontinent in the twentieth century. He explores the identity of the so-called world traveller in his fiction: that entity who is certainly everything that Ila in *The Shadow Lines* is not - a woman who recalls the exotic places she has been to.' (Brinda Bose 16)

Amitav Ghosh himself is interested in history, sociology and anthropology that take the Indian diaspora in an embrace. "Diasporic identity in its inherent fracture clearly intrigues him; he analyses this 'space' with reference to his histories," observes Brinda Bose (Bose 17).

In Ghosh's fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by time and space—history and geography—and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past. As the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* embarks upon a journey of discovery of roots and reasons, the more of the one he unearths leaves him with less of the other... The meta-journey that this novel undertakes follows the narrator — as he weaves and winds his way through a succession of once—imaginary homelands... (Bose 19)

The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* is out to find and know the meaning of violence that took place in 1964 in Dhaka through memories of migration. Tridib's death remains the centre of curiosity in the narrative. The writer makes use of the metaphor of the looking-glass which is evocative for the tenability of Ghosh's diasporic imagination. The partition of Bengal has been a great shock to the people and many refuse to believe in the existence of the imaginary, dividing 'shadow lines' between diasporic identity of his family in Dhaka. Amitav Ghosh comments on the relationship between India and her diaspora as:

The links are not those of language, religion, politics or economics. In a sense the links are those of culture... the links are lived within the

imagination. It is therefore an epic relationship: an epic without a text... It is because this relationship is so much a relationship of the imagination that the specialists of the imagination -writers-play so important a part within it. (Amitav Ghosh, *The Diaspora in Indian Culture. The Iman and the Indian* 247)

The child-narrator in the *The Shadow Lines* views the external world like the child—narrator. Lenny in *Ice-Candy-Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa. These child-narrators look at the mysteries of life with wonder and imagine about life's problems. Though *The Shadow Lines* is a novel about a series of guests of the unnamed narrator, Tridib, Ila, Grandmother and May Price, it also fits into the paradigm of the bildungsroman's novel. In the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*, we are introduced to two generations of migrant women—the grandmother and Ila. The unnamed narrator's family has its roots in Dhaka but now they live in Calcutta. They have a friendly relationship with the Prices, an English family from London. This relationship begins in the 1930's and covers the span upto 1980's. Ila is narrator's grandmother's sister's son's daughter. Ila's father is a diplomat and Ila journeys through different parts of the world. The journey motif is dominant in her life.

She is cosmopolitan in spirit and she wants to get rid of her traditional role of Indian woman. She wants to be free from all bonds and taboos of culture. She is against the patriarchal system. Amitav Ghosh also presents the grandmother of the narrator with her concern for her roots in Dhaka where she visits her old house in 1964. The Partition compels her to move to Calcutta and the experience of displacement becomes a part of her diaspora. Her "vision of freedom from colonial rule included a vision of a national identity—citizenship that articulated a homeliness and sense of belonging." (Kavita Daiya 51)

"The Shadow Lines reveals the fragility of Partition's borders between nations as etched out in maps, and of the frontiers policed by nation states that separate people, communities and families... In Ghosh's narrative, the borderline cannot destroy the

fundamental identity of people on both sides of the boundary."<sup>1</sup> The works of Amitav Ghosh have won him a place in the postcolonial literature which deals with "hybridity of postcolonial nationality and migration." (Daiya 53)

Another critic Vinita Chandra finds a leitmotif of the novel in the narrator's oft quoted phrase "Do you remember?" In fact, the narrator instigates his friends and relatives "to probe their memories, to search through their personal archives for material that conforms to his recollections." (Chandra 67). The narrative moves among shifting temporal and spatial planes. Here one finds "childhood fancy is collapsed into a supposedly real adult experience" (Chandra 261). Maps and Mirrors play a very important role in the quest of the narrator. Meenakshi Mukherjee opines: "In *The Shadow Lines* there is a repeated insistence on the freedom for each individual to be able to create his own stories in order to prevent getting trapped into some one else's construction of reality" (Maps and Mirrors 263). The quest of each character in the narrative is a search for meaning and diasporic identity. Rather the novel is "an archeology of silences, a slow brushing away of the cobwebs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma." (Suvir Kaul 269)

Another significant theme in the narrative of *The Shadow Lines* is that of 'bildungsroman' alongwith theme of nationalism. With the progression of the narrative, one also sees the narrator growing into an adult. His contact with other characters like Tridib, Ila, May Price and Grandmother helps him to gain maturity in life. He is told by Tridib to use his imagination in the right manner and he becomes a traveller to many lands without any boundaries. The geographical boundaries seem to him mere shadow lines or the invisible lines.

Suvir Kaul discovers the crowning irony of the novel in Thamma's realization that "the legacy of her birth place is not separable from her sense of herself as a citizen of India, her nephew Tridib's death at the hands of a Dhaka mob confirms in her a

pathological hatred of 'them'." (Kaul, Separation Anxiety 283). The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* concentrates on the themes of diaspora, nationality, internationality, cultural and historical self-determination.

The novel also offers a radical critique of political boundaries, vapouring their rigidities into shadow-lines—the male narrator's growing imagination, empathy and intellectuality which allow for the exploration and understanding of complex themes. As his horizons expand and international inter-national in scope, his questions, memories and experiences provide the structure of the narrative. (Kaul 285)

A. N. Kaul says that 'shadow lines' is a metaphor for evading rather than exploring political realities. The novel has a fractured and irregular chronology and there are many shifts and flashbacks in action. It is an ambitious novel showing the narrator's road to maturity and self-hood.

*The Shadow Lines* is not a novel about the meaning of political freedom in the modern world but rather a novel about the compensations and the escape routes which that world still makes available to a certain privileged class of sensitive and talented people. (Kaul 309)

The title of the novel *The Shadow Lines* is suggestive and symbolic. The division the India has been shocking to many and suddenly the changed nationality shocked the sensibility of people on both sides. The geographical divisions of the country could not cut people from their roots and these lines of division, appear to be mere 'shadow lines' for characters in the novel. The novelist also portrays Indian women in traditional as well as in modern colours. The Grandmother of the narrator dislikes Ila for her new ideals and urge for freedom from old culture that restricts her movement. She is a cosmopolitan young woman who does not want to carry the burden of traditional Indian womanhood like Mayadebi and the Grandmother. The narrator also becomes a traveler into the kingdom of imagination and sees the reality around him in new shades. The perception of reality by the narrator as a child shows a marked change when he grows up

into a young man. The novel also portrays the narrator as a growing artist who has learnt to use his imaginative faculty from Tridib. The novelist has integrated a number of themes with the structure of the novel with this novel, Amitav Ghosh has joined the band of great modern writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, V. S. Naipaul, Farrukh Dhondy, Sumiti Namjoshi, Leela Dhingra, Meera Syal, Hanif Kureishi, Alifquar Ghosh, B. Rajan, Uma Parameswaram, Himani Banerji, Rahul Verma, Rana Bose, Michael Ondaatje, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, A. K. Ramanujan, Meena Alexander, Shashi Tharoor, Chitra Banerjee, Geeta Mehta, Ved Mehta, Bapsi Sidhwa, Mena Abdullah and Ben le Humte.

These writers have contributed a lot to the fast growing South Asian diasporic writing. Expatriation has been an important phenomenon in modern times that has exerted a great impact on literature. People from South Asia have settled all over the world and yet they are not far from their roots. according to R. K. Dhawan "The diasporic literature of the Indian subcontinent shares a common diasporic consciousness" (Dhawan 180). Diasporic writing indulges in nostalgia alongwith a bold acceptance of a new homeland. In the beginning, the agonising experience of partition and a sense of homelessness was manifested but now it has led to the creation of a new kind of literature, i.e., diasporic literature. So diaspora is not a painful experience.

Now people in different lands "regret the loss of land they left behind mythologizing it through memory, nostalgia and imagination... In this respect, diaspora achieves the unintended purpose of celebrating marginality and embracing multiculturalism and diversity," observes R. K. Dhawan. (180)

The interplay of reality and illusion is another theme in the novel. It also presents coalescence of time and space only to reveal that despite divisions and man-made barriers, there is an undercurrent of emotions which unites mankind. Ghosh observes that people who cannot look into the past and peep into the womb of future, remain

myopic in vision. Their narrow vision makes them rigid and communal and they fail to become true nationalists. The unnamed narrator traverses into the past, into the corridors of time and narrates the past events. The narrator of places through stream of consciousness, uses past to give answer the present queries. Suvir Kaul has called the novel an archeology of silence and articulation. Amitav Ghosh admits, "Every word I write about the event of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. It is a struggle I am destined to lose... when we try to speak of events of which we do not know the meaning, we must lose ourselves in the silence that lies in the gap between words and the world." The unnamed narrator, struggles to decipher the mystique of silence. The incidents of Mu-i-Mubarak and riots in Calcutta in 1964 have been depicted to trace to root cause of violence and the death of Tridib. So time and space seem to be conspiring to hide the truth under the cover of silence.

The occupation of an archeologist is interesting as well as intriguing. Tridib was an archeologist and past always fascinated him. It fired his imagination and he also taught the narrator to use his intuitive and imaginative faculty. The narrator comments, "I began on my strangest journey : a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances, a land of looking-glass events." Here the relationship between time and space is a new phenomenon. In excavation (in symbolic terms), facts are dug up. The distance between time and space provided a better view of reality. The narrator searches through the archives to get a clear picture of events of 1964.

In the treatment of characters, space and time are shown as shaping and molding them. The personality of the narrator is shaped in Calcutta. Tridib transforms the narrator into an imaginative traveler and Ila, the feminine principle retains him in the real world. Through the relationships between the narrator—Ila and Tridib—May, the novelist shown that the distance of space makes Ila and May look exotic to the narrator and Tridib. Ghosh shows that time and space coalesce of test of strength of people.

Thus, a number of themes have been woven in the fabric of the narrative of *The Shadow Lines* in an artistic manner. *The Shadow Lines* is a continuation of that diasporic literary tradition in South Asia which is a reflection of real history.

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