



ESSENCE OF HUMAN EMOTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN "THE SHADOW LINES"

B.SANTA KUMARI

Lecturer in English

S.V.D College, Parvathipuram



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ABSTRACT

In his novels, Amitav Ghosh investigates the ideas of nationhood and diaspora, ideas that include relationships between people having a place with the equivalent or to various networks that occasionally transgress and rise above the shadow lines of political outskirts. The Shadow Lines likely speaks to Ghosh's most head on showdown with patriotism and national identity and it is at the same time about each character's close to home personality. In *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Ghosh juxtaposes the lives of two different yet intertwined families—one Indian and one English—to question the boundaries between their cultural and geographical settings. The title alludes to the blurring of the lines between nations and families, as well as the blurred lines within one's own self-identity. Ghosh depicts the characters of the novel as caught between two worlds, and the struggle to come to terms with both their present lives as well as their past forms the core of the narrative. This paper is an endeavor to demonstrate how the storyteller's grandma, Tha'mma, is depicted as an encapsulation of the patriot dream.

Ghosh was born on July 11, 1956, in Calcutta, India, to Shailendra Chandra, a diplomat, and Ansali Ghosh, a homemaker. He traveled frequently in his youth, living in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, Iran, and India. Ghosh attended Delhi University and received his B.A. with honors in history in 1976 and his M.A. in sociology in 1978. In 1978, he began studies at Oxford University in social anthropology. While at Oxford, Ghosh studied archives of documents from twelfth-century Egypt and was granted a scholarship that allowed him to travel to a small Egyptian village in 1980 to further his research. The village was located in the delta of the Nile River and Ghosh lived among the fellaheen, or Egyptian peasants. He graduated from Oxford earning a Ph.D. in social anthropology in 1982. From 1983 to 1987, Ghosh worked in the Department of Sociology at Delhi University. In 1986, Ghosh's first English-language novel, *The Circle of Reason*, was published and was awarded France's

Prix Medici Etrangère. In 1988 and 1990, Ghosh returned to the Egyptian village he visited previously to continue his research. His third book, *In an Antique Land* (1992)—which is both a travel-memoir and a historical study—resulted from Ghosh's continuing interest in twelfth-century Egyptian culture. Ghosh has won numerous awards, including the Annual Prize from the Indian Academy of Letters in 1990. In 2001, Ghosh declined a nomination for a regional Commonwealth Writers Prize. Ghosh has served as a visiting professor at several universities, including the University of Virginia, Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, and American University in Cairo. Ghosh has also held the title of distinguished professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at Queens College, City University of New York, and has worked as a contributing writer to *Indian Express*, *Granta*, and *New Republic*.

Halfway through Amitav Ghosh's new novel, *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator says, "I no longer existed, but as a chronicle." That is a striking statement, a testament of personal extinction before one's story, the tacit confession of every omniscient narrator. In this novel, it implies the ability to repose on language as if it were a hammock, to trust the way its weave keeps one's haunches off the ground. It implies certitude, competence, judgment, meaning—all the trappings of what the narrator calls his "tidy, late-bourgeois world," whose genteel borders are rigorously defended against India's seething masses. To reduce (or enlarge) oneself to a chronicle demands the balance needed for the kind of storytelling that aspires to the composure of omniscience. The smaller your world and the tighter your borders, the easier omniscience comes.

In *The Shadow Lines* two families, one Indian, one English, engage each other in friendship, romance, and tragedy over a period that stretches from 1939 to the present in England and India. On the surface, this makes

The Shadow Lines sound like a dying Raj epic in which Events are rolled out on wooden wheels and Character is displayed in front of a painted backdrop. Nothing could be further from the truth. The plot wanders at will in a thoroughly modern fashion, weaving from one place and year to another, following currents of association, disowning chronology. Though *The Shadow Lines* is only Ghosh's second novel, this whirling, dipping narrative manner—so familiar from his celebrated first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, and so difficult to summarize—is virtually a signature of his work. All the while, the plot leads the reader to conclusions that undermine the idea of Event itself, not to mention the comfort of Language and the conceit of Omniscience. Among the characters in *The Shadow Lines*, the most important is Tridib, the narrator's idol and elder kinsman, who believes that "we could not see without inventing what we saw." A scholar with a mysteriously disengaged grace, Tridib filled the narrator's childhood with stories because "everyone lives in a story ... because stories are all there are to live in." Tridib's niece is Ila, a spoiled Marxist student for whom the narrator feels painfully unrequited love. He nourishes a more confused affection—lust, softness, and awe

together—for Tridib's former lover, May Price, a London musician who girds herself for Earth's crowded future by fasting on Saturdays and sleeping on a pallet. The narrator's grandmother is a woman of fierce middle-class belligerence. Her determination to revisit her childhood home in Dhaka, from which she and her family fled just before that city became part of East Pakistan, triggers the incidents that spiral upward to tragedy: Tridib's death in Dhaka during one of the subcontinent's epidemic riots. And then there is the narrator. He never names himself (others call him "silly boy"), but he is very much an actor in his story. With delicate irony, the narrator portrays himself as a young Indian boy crouching on the edge of every conversation, breathlessly gathering stray words and broken stories into what he calls "my own secret map of the world." He hoards the tales Tridib and Ila tell him of England and refines them until, as a doctoral candidate doing research in London, he visits May Price's family in "boring suburban old West Hampstead," where both Ila and Tridib have lived. In an embarrassing tour de force that demonstrates what he calls "the inequality of ... needs," he astonishes the Prices with his encyclopedic knowledge of their house, their neighborhood, their lives—in short, with his carefully fabricated omniscience, a form of homage to May Price and her family, as well as to Ila and Tridib. Such enthusiasm—such obsession—emerges from the narrator's faith in the structure of his small, puritanical world" and from his inexperience of anything else. Though the narrator was well-tutored by Tridib in "inventing" countries—imagining what he calls the "ordinariness of their difference," how some, for instance, have flat roofs and some have sloped roofs—he also inherits the hardheaded nationalism of his grandmother, who remarks that the English have "drawn their borders with blood. ... That's what it takes to make a country." "I believed in the reality of space," the narrator writes. "I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality." Though they sound more sophisticated, these beliefs closely resemble his grandmother's assumption that at the border of India and East Pakistan there must be

"trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other."

The Shadow Lines is a political novel because it questions the most basic structures of political life: peoples, borders, states, space, distance. But *The Shadow Lines* goes deeper than that; its central theme is how one extrapolates from the self to knowledge of others, in time or in space. If one repudiates the reality of space, the reality of nations and borders, the fact that distance separates, how does one proceed? And what if knowledge of the past were only, as Tridib believed, "the seductive clarity of ignorance: an illusion of knowledge created by a deceptive weight of remembered detail"? How could one attach meaning to the past?

All these matters come to bear on Tridib's death, a tiny effect contained within a much larger cause. Tridib dies in January 1964 during rioting that sweeps India and East Pakistan with typical results: Hindus murdering Muslims, Muslims murdering Hindus. (Tridib's death is complicated, if not caused, by the presence of May Price, who intervenes in good conscience in matters beyond her understanding. Price is Ghosh's Mrs. Moore.) What makes the riots momentous for the narrator, aside from the loss of his admired kinsman, is that as a boy his school bus had been caught in them too, but in Calcutta, not Dhaka—across the border and, presumably, far away. He did not connect the two events—that special frightening day and Tridib's death—until he was grown. The discovery leaves him shaken; it violates (and ultimately destroys) his conventional faith that borders demarcate changes in reality across which emotion cannot flow. "The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. There was no room in it for this other thing [the wave of rioting]. And things which did not fit my vocabulary were merely pushed over the edge into the chasm of that silence." Under the pressure of this discovery, the narrator ceases to be the omniscient showoff of his younger days—the tidy, late-bourgeois master of maps and chronicles—and finds instead that his sense of the world and, more important, of language has been utterly discomfited. To Tridib's belief that "there are moments in time that are not *knowable*," Ila is the counterpoise. Events the narrator has savored for years and that

Tridib would probably deem unknowable, she understands in terms of her own life. She breezily assumes that a household of young people on the verge of destruction in World War II resembles the household she inhabits: they must have been happy because she is happy. "I began to marvel," the narrator writes, "at the easy arrogance with which she believed that her experience could encompass other moments simply because it had come later." That is the true mark of someone living entirely in the present. "Ila," says the narrator, "would not have believed that there really were people like Tridib, who could experience the world as concretely in their imaginations as she did through her senses." She is an absolute moralist for whom context is irrelevant because she can imagine none but her own.

Both Ila (the narrator's exact contemporary) and Tridib educate the narrator, one through blind and rather chary affection, the other through subtle meditations couched in anecdote. They pull in opposite directions. And yet, ironically, Ila provides the most satisfactory commentary on Tridib's death, the exact cause of which was quickly suppressed by his father, an important Indian diplomat stationed in Dhaka. Ila remarks offhandedly that famines and riots and disasters are "local things, after all—not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's really remembered." As political borders give reality to a nation, so wars give reality to conflict that has no reality unless it takes a politically recognized form. When he first hears Ila say this, the narrator begins to shout in protest, but it is very close to the conclusions he finally draws from Tridib's death. "The theater of war, where generals meet," he writes, "is the stage on which states disport themselves: they have no use for memories of riots." Tridib's death and Ila's commentary teach the narrator that below the level of his orderly analogies—his secret maps, his genteel syntax—there lies another level of human relationships that cannot be boxed or bordered. The narrator acknowledges the lesson. "The madness of a riot," he writes, "is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of

government, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples.” The riot that kills Tridib exposes the fear afflicting all who live in the sub-continent, “a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent.” If normalcy is utterly contingent, then so is morality (*pace* Ila), and so is language.

After such terrifying lessons, one can say of the narrator what he says about his grandmother:

Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement.

The narrator was once sure of such a point—and of all its implications—just as his grandmother was once sure of Dhaka. Her long-desired return to that point killed Tridib (who said, after all, that knowledge comes through desire), a fact that leaves the narrator marooned in the present, “skilled in the art of recollection.”

The Shadow Lines is a stunning novel, a rare work that balances formal ingenuity, heart, and mind. Throughout the novel Ghosh brings essentially philosophical issues into the reader's ken with a gentleness, a sweetness, that reflects the translucency of the narrator's character. Even as it readies itself for tragedy, the novel blushes with humor and the deftness of Ghosh's tongue. Though on a lesser scale than *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines* is peopled with wonderful minor characters like Queen Victoria, which is what the narrator's family calls Ila's mother, a small, fat Indian woman. When Queen Victoria discovers a monitor lizard in her garden she bursts out in her best sergeant-major manner, “Damn and blast, there it was—a heck of a huge great big lizard, all gray and black, nasty great-big creature, with a little pointed head and a tongue like a bootlace, wandering about in my garden like a governor at a gymkhana.” Such pearls disorient the narration and its fundamental seriousness not in the least: they merely deepen the impression of humanity that, in *The Shadow Lines* as

well as in *The Circle of Reason*, has made Amitav Ghosh a novelist to reckon with at the age of 32.

In the narrative that follows, we go back with Rajkumar and Dolly to Rangoon, where he, though scarcely literate, sets up a booming business in timber, and we see one of their sons, Neel, become a film producer and the other, Dinu, a photographer. At the same time, we follow Dolly's best friend Uma, who, when her civil servant husband dies, takes off for Europe and then, in flight from its “ruthless hypocrisies,” to New York, where she joins a group of Indians who agitate for independence under the tutelage of Irish activists (another obscure corner of history that Ghosh vividly illuminates). The book has many widows, virtual and actual, but Uma, independent-minded to the end, is the strongest of them all. While Rajkumar tries to turn even war into an occasion for profit, she returns to India to spread the word of Burma's suffering and to join Gandhi in his nonviolent fight for freedom.

In an author's note at the end of the book, Ghosh refers to a “near-obsessive urge to render the backgrounds of my characters' lives as closely as I could,” and it is this urge that is often most evident throughout the book. He has consulted “hundreds of books, memoirs, travelogues, gazetteers, articles and notebooks” and we get, for example, fascinatingly detailed accounts of how teak camps worked in the Burmese jungle or how rubber plantation tappers began their day in Malaya. At times the research almost swallows up the story; we are treated to a brief excursus on the delights of Nyonya food (and then another 126 pages later), and we learn (twice) that the current way of wearing a sari, with blouse and petticoat, was in fact the invention of an Indian official during the Raj. At one point Ghosh suddenly begins classifying cars (“There goes a brand-new 1908 Hutton,” “It's an Oldsmobile Defender ..., mint new, this year's model, a genuine 1914,” “a new 1938 Delage D8 Drophead,”), and we realize, perhaps with alarm, that this is a device comparable to the flapping of calendar pages in old movies, to show where we are in time.

The real heart of the book, though, and its dramatic centerpiece, lies in the classic imperial setting of World War II, in Burma and Malaya; here everything that is powerful in Ghosh's somewhat aerial perspective, and everything that is shaky,

comes to the fore. He takes us into the Southeast Asian theater of war by cutting back and forth between a shy romance on a rubber plantation in Malaya's highlands—a microcosm of empire—and another involving the Indian soldiers who are fighting for the British as the Japanese approach. In the love scenes, the widescreen approach leads to some curious effects. As Dinu, the photographer, lies with his beloved, he watches “the horizontal planes of her forehead, her eyebrows and her mouth perfectly balanced by the verticals of her black, straight hair and the translucent filaments that hung suspended from her lips.” The man sees life through camera angles, to be sure, but still it seems odd that the closer the bodies get, the more abstract the language becomes.

Yet even as he seems somewhat ill at ease here with intimacy, and so squanders the emotional force of the scene, Ghosh conveys the larger picture with particular vividness. We see Christmas trees in the department stores of Rangoon whose branches are “whitened with a frosting of Cuticura talcum powder,” and as the Japanese move through Malaya, we follow great crowds of people running for evacuation trains only to find that all the cars are reserved for Europeans. “The road's embankment was dotted with parked vehicles. Families could be seen to be sleeping in their cars, snatching a little rest before daylight. At intervals one-and-a-half-ton military trucks came barreling down the highway, heading south.” Filmmakers must be relishing the prospect of working with such scenes.

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