



Presentation of Journey through History in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract:

Among contemporary Indian writers, Ghosh is the most cosmopolitan. His significance as a writer lies in his cosmopolitan approach. He is a writer who travels and re-maps the world drawing connections across the boundaries of modern nation states. In his creative pursuit of political and historical realities and facts and his redrawing of cultural and political lines that divide and unite that Amitav Ghosh finds his goal as a writer.

Keywords: *Amitav Ghosh, History, Journey*

Amitav Ghosh has several dimensions as a writer. As a post-colonial writer, sense of nationality, identity and cultural heritage are important parts of his personality and writings. He is passionately involved with history crossing of national and international frontiers are an old theme, to which Ghosh gives a new dimension. His works, *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace* and travelogues – *Countdown* and *Dancing in Cambodia At Large* in Burma brought him International fame and recognition. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra, Khushwant Singh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh have all employed novel as a means of cultural representation, Jasbir Jain wrote about the aim of these writers of the 1980's.

“aimed at enhancing an Indian cultural identity, and projecting Indian cultural and historical heritage to enable an assertion of the Indian self.”¹

Journeys are very important part of Ghosh's fictional landscape. The journey as a motif runs throughout the novels and is a unifying factor too. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator journeys from Calcutta to Bangladesh and from there to England. These journeys are not mere quests; they also provide Ghosh with the means to explore consequences of history and impact of violence on human behavior. Travelling across borders is a theme that he is preoccupied with. In his novels, Ghosh makes it clear that borders set up by men are mental constructs, that the lines on the maps are only shadow lines. Homi Shroff wrote that Ghosh in his journeys explores, “a colourful and warmly human picture of people and places, both medieval and modern.”² Ghosh believes that travel is man's basic quest to expand his awareness into realization.

In the *Shadow Lines* there is a lot of movement to and from places. Someone or the other keeps going or coming back either literally as in Tridip's case or because of him, the narrator who travels a lot without actually travelling. Amitav Ghosh wrote,

“You see in our family, we don't know whether ‘we are coming or going’ – it's all my grandmother's fault. But of course, the fault wasn't hers at all : it lay in language. 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 journey which was not a coming or going at all—a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits that proper use of verbs of movement.”³

Journey is the central motif of *The Shadow Lines*. It is not only the characters who keep moving from place to place. The movement of the narrative which the narrator handles with the help of the stream of consciousness technique, helps the author to handle the movement across time from 1981 back to the 1960's and 1940's and beyond. The 'journey motif' runs through the entire story the grandmother's journey to Dhaka in the second part of the novel and the narrator's journey backwards in time. Journey is also symbolic of life's journey where the individual is continuously moving from search of one thing to the other.

The novel is a family story where the family goes through many ups and downs due to certain historical events taking place at that time. The story covers a long period of time when Ghosh was not even born. He wrote that it was in 1939, thirteen years before he was born that his father's aunt, Mayadebi went to England with her husband and her son Tridib. *The Shadow Lines* is divided into two parts – “Going away” and Coming home are images of journey. Tridib goes away from India to England with his family and the child relives the experience indirectly through Tridib's vivid descriptions so that when he himself grows up and goes to London, it is an effortless transition, a “coming” rather than a “going”. It is Tridib who expands the frontiers of his boyhood world. Tridib explains to him how one could be carried beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places. Thus the boy learns the value of imagination – something that reveals a world as concrete and real and infinitely more exciting than the world experienced through the physical senses.

Amitav Ghosh brings out the uselessness of drawing lines across a nation to form two nations, one having an East wing, which is separated from its West wing by over a thousand miles. Alpana Neogy in her article, “The Partition of Bengal : A Comparative Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Purba Paschim*” points out that the novels focus on the Partition of India and the consequent trauma of the East Bengali psyche. The writer's focus is on India and Dhaka where he tries to find the meaning of political freedom. The meaning of nationalism or Indian nationalism changed after the Partition and excluded the people on the other side of the border but could not include everybody on this side of paradise.⁴ Partition of the Indian subcontinent was the most traumatic experience in our recent history. Nationalism in the twentieth century degenerated into political animosity. The historic event of Partition shocked the Indian's sense of nationalism.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh inquires into the issues of religion and nationality, of belonging and displacement and of the necessity of suppressing memories that threaten to disrupt the tidy narrative of history and national identity. The “minor riots” that take place in India are crucial informing the psyche of the people of the subcontinent. In this novel, the writer has given a new treatment to an old theme of partition. The “line” symbolizes all such lines that divide nations and people in the name of nationalism, religion, language and caste. Manohar Malgaonkar in *A Bend in the Ganges*, Attia Hossain in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Khushwant Singh in *A Train to Pakistan*, Bapsi Sidhwa in *Ice Candy Man* have all reflected their concern over partition, war and violence. A.N. Kaul wrote,

“...rather a novel about the compensations and the escape routes which that world, such as it is, still makes available to a certain privileged class of sensitive and talented persons.”⁵

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh emphasizes the absurdity of the two nation theory which resulted in the partition of India on the eve of India's Independence. This Partition was the most painful experience for

the people who crossed the border as well as for those who stayed back. The real tragedy of the partition was that it brought to an end a long communally shared history and cultural heritage. The novel is the result of a historical moment which is a crucial point in the evolution and growth of the nation. Through the experiences of a single family, the writer is hinting at a broader national and international experience. The lives of the narrator's family have changed drastically as a result of Bengal's Partition between India and Pakistan at the time of Independence and the subsequent experience of the East Pakistan Civil war of 1971 which led to the creation of Bangladesh. The "shadow lines" are the borders that divide people.

The Shadow lines brings into focus the changing middle class ethos in India before and after Independence. The lives of the characters in this novel are determined by their idea of freedom and this idea is shaped by the contemporary history. It is basically a "memory novel" that weaves together past and present, childhood and adulthood, India and Bangladesh, and Britain, Hindu and Muslim story and happening through the "coil within coil of memories that unfurl within it"⁶. It establishes its social and historical situation through its careful observation of social reality. The novel also traces the growth and development of the narrator from childhood to adulthood. In the novel, memory functions as a legacy, inheritance and prized possession. The narrator says, "people like my grandmother who have no home, but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection."⁷ Fred Weinstein observes the growing interest of the writers towards fact and fiction :

"Unlike earlier generations of novelists who did not like history and historians, for whom history was a nightmare from which they were trying to awake and who would have escaped from history into a world of art, not only are there novelists currently who have come to appreciate the use of history... but a number of them want to claim history for their own."⁸

The use of history and politics in a work of art is common to Amitav Ghosh. He has beautifully blended history and politics not only in *The Shadow Lines* but also in *In An Antique Land*. In *The Shadow Lines* the event recorded as history merge with the private lives of the individuals. History creates a different reality experienced by individuals in their daily lives. The Grandmother is obsessed with the idea of nation, freedom and boundaries and is surprised when she does not find a clear, visible border between India and Bangladesh. Tha'mma is unable to understand the basic idea of partition and nationalism. She says,

"But if there aren't any trenches or anything how are people to know? I mean where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both the sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it for all then—the partition and the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between?"⁹

History is an inseparable aspect of Ghosh's writings. The feelings of Alienation and Isolation are compounded by migration. Ghosh has the ability to combine the personal and the historical in an aesthetic manner.

Even after so many decades since India's Independence, the Bengali diaspora has been dispersed to distant lands where some have been successful in new associations and developments. Yet the sense of lose of one's identity, the connection with one's 'baari' remains. 'Baari' is where one's ancestors have lived for generations. 'Baasha' is a temporary residence no matter how long one has stayed there.¹⁰

N. Bagchi analysed *The Shadow Lines*,

“Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* is a manifestation of the desire to validate the post-colonial experience and to attempt a reconstruction of “public history” through a reconstruction of the “private” or personal history.”¹¹

In his other novel *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh is involved with the idea of the border, and the crossing of the border. The novel presents a journey from “Satwa” through “Rajas” to “Tamas”. Like V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, Ghosh perceives experiences of the part to explore the lives of men and women in his novels. His *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land* and *The Calcutta chromosome* redeem a gap between worlds of the rulers and the ruled. These novels have immediate as well as historic relevance because they deal with history and politics. Ghosh approaches human affairs from the points of view like anthropology, medical science, psychology, history and sociology.¹² He chooses to represent the past from bits of memory and this ‘memory’ is a complex cultural and historical and increases human experiences.

The Journey in this novel is through historical events that shook the sensibility of the people of India and Bangladesh and changed their lives forever. They became alien in their country of birth. After Partition, they had to migrate—cross the border, leaving behind not only their home and their land of ancestors but also history and culture. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh deals with the issues not only of dislocation but with identity and nationhood. Coming and Going, Arriving and Departing are frequently mentioned in his fiction. This is not physical or geographical movement but movement from ignorance to knowledge and awareness and understanding. Journey is perhaps that journey which is eternal and endless.

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