

## **THE SHADOW LINES: THE CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM**

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Amitav Ghosh's second novel *The Shadow Lines* is an extraordinary experience for the readers. It received the Sahitya Academy Award in 1989 and ensured the author international renown. A profound historical sense, a strong humanitarian drift that defies geo-cultural boundaries and moves towards cosmopolitanism, a witty but compassionate insight into man and his society, an attempt at interlacing the past and the present in the crucible of memory - these are the essentials of Amitav Ghosh's fiction. These, together with his brilliant art of construction that weaves together private lives and public events, and balances complex sets of issues with a rare deftness, his ingeniously structural web of history and mythology, politics and philosophy and above all, his evocative use of an indefectible prose that stands out for its lyrical grace and transparent clarity, have established him as a significant, was voice among the recent Indian authors crafting fiction in English.

The story begins with the narrator's grandmother sister Mayadevi leaving for England with her husband and son Tridib in the year 1939, thirteen years before the narrator is born. Tridib, the central character of the story was just a seven-year old boy at that time. The narrator's grandmother is a widow, struggling as a school teacher in Calcutta to give economic hold up to her family consisting of one son, his wife and the narrator. She hails from Dhaka, and her bag of living experience is full of varied exposures. As a girl groomed in a joint family she has witnessed fierce legal battles for lands, an experience that makes her quality a special meaning to the euphemism called brotherly relationship. As a student in Dhaka she used to feel romantically attached to or rather sympathized with the cause of patriots who took to the path of violence against the British colonial rulers, yet as a girl she had no way to give vent to such feeling.

On the other hand, like any other girl of her time, she was fond of jewelries. She is shown to be extremely strict with her grandson in study matters, a stickler of discipline. With her husband dead, she grows even stricter cultivating a fiercely self-respecting image, a person who has spurned the offer of anybody among her relatives to come to her rescue at her times of need. Mainly she is strict in this matter with her own sister Mayadevi, a rich and famous woman, foreclosing any option of help from her. Sibling rivalry is the basis of such distrust, or may be she has taken her affairs to be her exclusive domain, enjoying every inch of her struggle for respectful way of life. Tridib, Mayadevi's son, related to the narrator as uncle, is a fellow of bohemian temperament, one that does not have any inhibition to go to street corner at Gole Park and start lecturing on random topics to people who are willing to listen to just anything. Otherwise, he is into some archeological research for his Ph. D. when his parents move about foreign lands in pursuance of a career in Foreign Service.

In addition, as a person eminently accessible to the narrator in his childhood, Tridib is the latter's primary source of knowledge about England. Earlier. Tridib had accompanied his parents to England in 1939 when his father went there for his treatment, stayed there for a year, at a time when England was going through a very crucial period of her history. And as such his account is unassailably authentic in the eyes of the narrator. As Tridib shares his experience, the narrator's

imagination is whetted to an extent that he begins to carry mental picture of the places. Mayadevi's husband Mr Himangshusekhar Dattachaudhury alias Saheb has a close family friendship with one Mrs Price of West Hampstead, London. The friendship dates back to the British days when Mrs Price's father Tresawsen actually lived in India cultivating an intimate friendship with Mayadevi's father-in-law who was a judge of the Calcutta High Court.

Tresawsen's daughter, after her marriage with one Mr Price, became Mrs Price. That is how Trdib as a seven-year old boy goes to London with his parents and stays in the house of Mr Price. There he has the chance to see May, the baby daughter of Mrs and Mr Price. Back in Calcutta, he keeps contact with Mrs Price through a Christmas card every year and after nineteen years of such formal friendship suddenly starts to include May into its fold. The pen friendship continues for at least two years and then there is an exchange of photographs. Then after two years that is in December 1963, May pays a visit to Calcutta on the request of Tridib, when the narrator is only an eleven-year old boy. There develops a peculiar kind of love between them, a kind of feeling that blends curiosity with condescension.

There is another important character in the novel. She is Ila, the granddaughter of Mayadevi. Since Ila's father Jatin has a globe-trotting career, Ila has the multi-cultural exposure. She is a votary of western way of life, quite mercurial in her temperament. The narrator and Ila are the two cousins, for Ila's grandmother and that of the narrator are the sisters hailing from a family of advocates in Dhaka.

She is an exquisitely beautiful woman; lenient in her attitude to sex etc but her most important role in the novel is that she is responsible for whetting sexual fantasy in the narrator's mind. There are occasions the cousins go very close to the acts of sex thanks to the seduction of Ila, say for example once when they are under a huge table of British provenance in the cellar of Jatin's Rajabazar mansion and on another occasion when they stay overnight in the cellar of Mrs Price's house in London, but on both the occasions the matter does not advance owing to the indecisiveness and timidity of the narrator. May be Amitav Ghosh has stopped short of incest as he is conscious that what he is writing has abundant correlation with actual happenings in his life.

However, the narrator's upbringing as an imaginative boy owes in a substantial measure to Ila who shares her foreign way of living through the photographs and yearbooks and by narrating the many interesting episodes. Whether it is through her description of her encounter with the monitor lizard in her bungalow of Colombo or her intimate childhood games with Nick, she exercises an intense stimulating experience. She gets some smalltime job, loves Nick, the son of Mrs Price, and finally enters the wedlock. The narrator is left in the midst of a peculiar feeling of loss, losing something that he is not prepared to own.

Then there is one May, the daughter of Mrs Elizabeth Price and Mr S. N. Price. She is a musician, but at her heart, she is an altruist, helping Amnesty and Oxfam as a Good Worker in their philanthropic effort in the famine-stricken areas of Africa. The love between Trdib, the narrator's uncle and May Price has a peculiar tinge. It is neither a love at first sight, nor a feeling of fondness born out of longstanding association, nor a result of mutual dependence. This has nothing to do with mutual appreciation, nor with gratefulness.

It is rather a love born out of careless fantasy, the maiden overtures of which are made by Tridib. Amitav Ghosh makes May narrate her own love in the following words: 'I don't know whether any of it was real, whether I was in love with him, or merely fascinated by the sense of defeat that surrounded him (Tridib). An eight-year old boy happens to meet one-year old baby girl and thereafter a long nineteen year elapses with neither contact nor remembrance. Suddenly

the contact is revived through pen-friendship followed by a series of one-sided smutty letters and then she visits India to meet her friend.

The invitation to visit India is extended by Tridib, though. Here in Calcutta she searches for the ruins where the smutty letters of Tridib have pen-pictured their sexual encounters and the Victoria Memorial where Tridib takes her for sightseeing does not match her mental picture. May is shown to be honest, kind and affectionate. It is not the way she snaps the vein of a severely injured dog on the road to save him from pain alone that shows her compassion. Rather she maintains her magnanimity even against the gravest of provocations. The day Ila and May's brother Nick get married, a mood of frustration comes over the narrator who goes dead drunk. May takes pity on him and takes him to her house at Islington to stay overnight and get sober before he can go to his house at Fulham. But the narrator does not stop himself from molesting May. Despite that May maintains her notional relationship, 'I'm old enough to be your spinster aunt' and excuses him the next day when he wakes up to a feeling of remorse.

We have another character in the novel with serious role in shaping the story. He is Robi, the younger brother of Tridib. He is physically stout to an extent that he likens the toughness of those extremists among the freedom fighters of Dhaka in the eyes of the narrator's grandmother. He is sanctimonious as seen from the way he prevents his niece Ila from dancing in a cabaret organized in Grand Hotel, Calcutta. He is successful in clicking a premium job in the Indian Administrative Service. He has the experience of staying abroad with his parents, of a hostel life in early childhood. Finally, he is the eyewitness of the tragic death of his elder brother Tridib in Dhaka.

The story ends in January 1964. Earlier in 1962, the grandmother of the narrator retires from her job of a Principal of the school in Deshapriya Park in Calcutta. Initially she suffers from her ennui but soon she gets something important to accomplish. Her father's elder brother, Jethamoshai, is now left in Jindabhar Lane, Dhaka and living a life of helplessness, almost at the mercy of a refugee family that has squatted in his house. Therefore, she wants to rescue him and afford him a life of comfort for the rest of his life. By January 1964, she was ready to embark upon that job. It is exactly at that time that May Price comes to Calcutta to meet Tridib. Moreover, a further coincidence is that Mr Himangshusekhar alias Saheb, the husband of Mayadevi comes to Dhaka on promotion as the Counsellor in the deputy high commission. Likewise, all three of them, May, Tridib and the narrator's grandmother, set out for Dhaka on 3rd January 1964. The law and order situation in Dhaka is not calm at all, yet they accompanied by Robi who is already in Dhaka, go to Jindabhar Lane in Shador-bajar leaving their safe diplomatic enclave of Dhanmundi.

The hooligans spot the CD-plated diplomatic car and they wait in the middle with a view to intercepting the car in its return trip and to harm the passengers. While they return, the car drives slowly so that Jethamoshai, the rescued old man riding a rickshaw can follow them. Besides, in the middle, the hooligans attack the car but the driver tries his best to steer clear. Then the hooligans attack the rickshaw fellow and the old man and around that time May, in an act of foolhardy, goes to save the old man. Tridib follows him just to be hacked to death.

The novel is in the form of a first-person narrative. If we take into consideration the birth of Amitav Ghosh in 1956 and of the narrator in 1952, almost around the same time, his scholarship trip to Oxford similar to that of the narrator in the novel, we will find in the novel much that seems to have been taken from the author's life, mutatis mutandis. There is an adage, widely prevalent in literary circle: everybody can pen at least one novel in his or her life. Well, autobiographical stuff ever appears immensely authentic-its tone says it all.

Sometimes, this novel of Amitav Ghosh is taken to be his voice against the folly of creating several nation states based on religion. Well, there is much in the text that points to such a conclusion, but then, in my reading it is more a fiction based on human relationship than a voice against the folly of separation in the subcontinent. When we compare this novel of Ghosh with Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* this point gets even clearer. The author has relied on the riots in the erstwhile East Pakistan to help him reach a readable denouement, and that is all about that. Much before that, the predominant human-relation tone of the novel has been set and nowhere in its initial chapters we get such a hint that the novel is going to assume a political overtone.

Overall, the element of incompatible love is the mainstay of the theme in the novel. The narrator and Ila cannot go any deeper in their relationship because they are cousins. There are some touch-and-go scenes though. The relationship between the narrator and May has no support of the former as she thinks herself to be the unmarried woman aunt of the latter. There is an invasion of modesty yet nothing far-reaching emerges out of that. Tridib's love is only a fantasy: it however creates curiosity in the mind of May but Tridib is too timid to carry it forward.

The love between Ila and Nick Price goes to some extent; they enter into holy matrimony but Nick is too fickle and by the time the novel runs short of words Ila is poised to assert her freedom. There seems to be a sort of exchange matrimony between Nick and May, the brother-sister duo on the one hand and the narrator and Ila, the cousins on the other. Nick Price marries the sister of the narrator and the narrator harbours a romantic felling for May Price, the sister of Nick. Passion is given voice through this incompatibility of souls and situations . . . and for this reason alone, it turns out to be an immensely evocative reading at that and everything is for an experienced reader alone.

*The Shadow Lines* is an intricately woven tale based on both fictional and non-fictional events that shaped the author's life. Amitav Ghosh sends the reader on a journey that defies all familiar perceptions of time and space. *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh paints a landscape of symbolism and realism that spans both time and space. The notions of distance and time are exclusively depicted in both the corporeal boundaries that divide countries and the fantasy borders that divide human beings. From the image-conscious character of the grandmother to the riots that explode in the streets, Ghosh takes the reader on a fascinating journey of exploration, dissecting the characters of the story while simultaneously dissecting the human race.

Ghosh manages to speak excessively of shadows, darkness and light, weaving them subtly into the context of what he is trying to convey. He uses the terms both realistically and metaphorically to show that the shadow we cast, the one other people can see, is not always an accurate reflection of which we really are. Nick was not the hero he seemed to be and when May reveals this to the boy, they are in the process of moving from light to dark, both in physical environment and knowledge of the truth. In a way, a shadow is like a "fair weather friend" in that it appears to us only when the sun is directly overhead. While every human being casts a unique shadow, a common theme can be seen in them all, namely that they are just as much a part of us as they are detached from us. This is another realm in which Ghosh metaphorically uses the elements of shadow lines to tell his story.

The skillfully manipulating the narrator's developing social consciousness and his interactions with multicultural representatives in a fictional construct, Ghosh makes this novel the subtle medium of sophisticated comment a current realities. Describing Amitav Ghosh's story telling technique, P.K. Dutta, in his learned essay, says that the impact is "of one passage rather than of montage" (69). Dutta elaborates that the idea of a passage allows Ghosh to constitute his

novelistic experience as "oppositions founded on co-existing paradoxes rather than on antagonism. In *Shadow Lines*, the world of war-torn London is overlaid by memories of Calcutta and Dhaka. In this way Ghosh is able to remove realism as the procedure of organizing social experience" (67). Instead, according to Dutta, he relocates it to provide the method of describing society for the purposes of narrative meditation. By using such a narrative technique, Dutta feels that Amitav Ghosh extends his thematic concerns to explore human relationships. Characters are not seen as autonomous entities but instead Ghosh examines the logic of human relationships.

By letting his stories interplay with time, Ghosh achieves an unusual synthesis of time. In *The shadow lines*, the movement is from the present to the past to the present again and this enables the novel to achieve a symbiotic narrative texture. A significant difficulty in *The shadow lines* is the identification of the narrator as the authoritative voice. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, in her essay "The Division of Experience in *The shadow lines*" says, "We are strongly pressurized by the narrative tone and stance at once judicious, reflective, intelligent and sensitive to accept the narrator's account and his interpretation of men, women and events as the definitive versions of reality. This novel comes to us entirely filtered through a single consciousness . . . however resonant it may be of an entire civilizational ethos (296-97). Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan feels that there is an suggestion of irony or resistant points of view or any other forms of checks to the overall reach of this central vision. She feels there is a powerful control of meaning by the central voice.

Therefore, in *The Shadow Lines*, it is ultimately the male narrator's growing imagination, empathy and intellectuality, which leads to exploration and understanding complex themes. Explaining this technique, Survir kaul says, "As his horizons expand and become international in scope, his questions, memories and experiences provide the structure of the narrative. But as his consciousness mediates and frames other voices, stories and experiences, we become aware that some of these voices counterpoint his narrative, and even interrogate his telling of the story".

To conclude, there are many stories in this novel, which tend to overlap at points and even become contentious at times with this method. *The Shadow Lines* becomes not simply a male bildungsroman, an authorized autobiography, with its obvious agendas and priorities, but also a dialogic, more open-ended of the difficult interdependencies and inequalities that compose any biography of nation.

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