

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

Paper Submission: 16/08/2020, Date of Acceptance: 26/08/2020, Date of Publication: 27/08/2020

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's concept of history colours all his writing. With his narrative strategies he has introduced a peculiar flavour into the Indian novel in English. He has been able to move freely in his writing between anthropology, history and fiction.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Journey, History.

Introduction

The place of Amitav Ghosh in the realm of Indian fiction in English is firmly established. He adopts the technique of magic realism, history, anthropology, thriller, science, fiction, medical science, memory, Indian and European myths and legends, to write his novels.

The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* skims or pauses over a crowded tapestry of the past spanning of years from 1939 to 1979. The novel begins when the first person narrator, who is never named, is about eight years old, living in Calcutta, admiring Tridib, his intellectual uncle, who is about twenty nine. Certainly it records with vividness the inner life of the growing child, but Tridib, who shapes the narrator's youthful personality and Ila, his beautiful cousin who almost defeats it, could really be called the most important people in the novel.

The theme of journey in *The Shadow Lines* is implicit in its title-derived, significantly, from Conrad- and in the titles of its two parts, "Going Away" and "Coming Home". The metaphor of journey pervades the books and enables it to extend and to expand spatially and temporally (a journey, after all, takes place sequentially and in time). This is of course a traditional method for the novel that sets out to discover the relationship between imagination and reality (Barat, p. 15).

The journey in *The Shadow Lines* is of two types: real and imagined. In the latter, we take the examples of Tridib and the narrator. Tridib pointed out places in the Bartholomew's Atlas while telling him stories – "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with" (SL, p.20) – so that long before he actually moved out of Calcutta, his world has expanded to include many parts of the globe through learning and hearing and reading about these places. Cairo, Madrid, Cuzco or Colombo, names that his globe-trotting cousin Ila mentioned casually, were for the narrator "a set of magical talismans" (SL, p. 20) to be invested with reality through precise imagination in the way Tridib had taught him, though he knew he could never replicate the same feat: "And still, I knew that the sights Tridib saw in his imagination were infinity more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see" (SL, P.29) Ila lived in the present, in the external world of journeys. Tridib lived in the internal of journey.

For Ila, maps and memory are quite irrelevant. All the cities she had lived in "went past her in an illusory whirl of movement, like those studio screens in old films which flash past the windows of speeding cars" (SL, P.23).

A paradigmatic fictional figure, Tridib very easily fits into this inclusive narrative tradition that privileges the traveller/ imaginist, reminding the Bengali reader occasionally of the Ghana-da stories by Premendra Mitra, and slightly more peripherally of the Phelu-da stories by Satyajit ray in both of which a boy is held spellbound a somewhat older person's encyclopedic knowledge of other lands and other civilizations (Mukherjee, pp. 257-58). Once again we talk of "Going Away" and Coming Home."



Sangita Kumari

Secondary teacher
Dept. of English,
Yadav vidyapith+2 school
Maulabagh Ara, Bihar India

Tridib goes away from India to England with his family and the child relives the experience vicariously through Tridib's imaginatively vivid descriptions, so that when he himself grows up and goes to London, it is an effortless transition, a "coming" rather than a "going". Long before the narrator left home he knew the A to Z map of London so well that the first time he came to London he could lead Nick and Ila confidently along the roads of West Hampstead as if he had lived there himself.

As mentioned earlier, the imagined world of Tridib helps the narrator to make a mental journey of different parts of this world. "Tridib was an archaeologist, he was not interested in fairylands: the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision" (SL, p. 24) The viewer's exercise of memory and imagination enables him to 'see' in the mind's eye, more vividly than in actuality" (Rajan, p. 288).

The actual physical journey of the grandmother is the theme of "Coming Home". The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* has a history: the pattern of dwelling in travel. Ghosh subverts what Sara Suleri has called "The Rhetoric of English India" (Suleri, p.26). The opening sentence of the novel immediately unsettles the rhetoric: "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib" (SL, p.3). Robert Dixon says:

Unlike the usual colonial novel, in which Westerners travel to India to observe an ancient and self-contained culture, *The Shadow Lines* begins with an Indian passage to England: the natives are the travelers. The central fact of travel in this family's experience immediately demands that we modify our expectations about Indian culture and the way it is depicted in English novels about the Raj. Furthermore, these Indians are going abroad in 1939, the year Britain declared war on Germany. Classical ethnography assumes that the culture of the western observer is a stable and coherent point from which to observe native society. Ghosh undermines this notion by depicting Britain at war with Germany, so that partition takes place against the background of an equally unstable England. The parallels between England and Germany, and India and Pakistan effectively undermines any distinction between East and West, colony and metropolis, and point to similarities and continuities that cut across these differences (Dixon, p.10).

Thus, the journey of Mayadebi to England in 1939, When India was a colonial part of England, the two families, like the "indivisible sanity" of people beyond borders, believe in amity, friendship, love and warmth.

The journey of grandmother to Tresawseen London in 1939 was a memorable event, etched in the mind of Tridib, and, subsequently it helps the narrator to say: "Nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin." It results, at least, in the first friendship of Miss Price.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator shuttles not only from Calcutta to London to collect material for

his Ph.D. thesis, but across the loom of time from 1981 to the sixties onto the forties and earlier.

In the second part of the novel, the grandmother's journey to Dhaka, becomes a symbolic search for a point of fixity. Born in Dhaka, separated from her birthplace by a history of bloodshed and lines on a map, Tha'mma loses her grammatical coordinates as she thinks of 'home'. "Tha'lhma, Tha'mma. I cried. How could you have 'come' home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going" (SL, P.152).

The narrator says:

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 world for 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 (SL, p.153).

One important reason for the grandmother to journey to Dhaka was her desire to see her old house and bring her uncle, Jethamoshai, to India. No sooner had she spent a few days in her sister's house than the grandmother accompanied by Mayadebi, Tridib, May Price and Robi set out in the Mercedes with a driver and a security guard of the High Commission. The car had to stop at a particular point in the by-lanes of Dhaka, and they had to walk to the old house. They discovered to their dismay an automobile workshop in what was a garden in their house. Their house was crumbling and a large number of families were living there. Their uncle Jethamosai now called Ukibabu, was decrepit and bedridden, looked after by Khalil, a cycle-rickshaw puller, and his family. The old man failed to recognize them, and spoke ill of his relatives when they were mentioned. As for going to India, he had not believed in that. In fact, he had told his India-bound sons:

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? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here (SL, p.215).

The "Climax" occurs as the grandmother and her sister are returning in their Mercedes from their ancestral home and their uncle is following them in the rickshaw (Robi's narrative 243-47, May Price's recollection 250-51). When they come to the bazar area, they find that the shops are closed and the street is deserted, but for stray people it was as if they were waiting for the car. In no time a lot of men surround the car, break the windscreen and the driver suffers a cut across his face. The car lurches and comes to a halt with its front wheel in a gutter. Then the security guard jumps out and fires a shot from his revolver and the crowd begins to withdraw from the car. At the same time the eerie silence is broken by a check, and the attention of the crowd turns to the sound of a rickshaw-Khalil's rickshaw-with their uncle in it, and the people surrounded the rickshaw. Though the sisters could have driven away, May Price and Tridib leave the car to save the old man and they get

lost in the whirligig of the crowd. The mischief takes less than a moment and the crowd begins to melt away. The dead bodies of Khalil, the old man and Tridib lie on the road. This death of Khalil, Tridib, and the Jethamoshai at the hands of Dhaka mob confirms in her a pathological hatred of 'them'.

Anjali roy's analysis of Tha'mma's journey to Dacca is worth quoting:

The immigrant family's visit to their ancestral home in their native place becomes the site for Ghosh's examination of the meaning of presumed national communities. The narrative reiterates Tha'mma's estrangement from her home and kin to turn filial duty and nationalist sentiments upside down before they culminate in the horror of the climactic scene of Tridib's death (Roy, p.40).

The delayed account of Tridib's death serves the purpose of providing a detailed account into the meaning of essential nationalism and underlines the need for "transcending the ways in which meanings get fixed, locked in moments of history which time nor social change, nor personal affiliation can alter (Bisia, p.13). Ghosh argues that only an awareness of the "invented" nature of communities can release individuals from the manipulations of political imaginings. Tha'mma remains imprisoned in the myth of nation until the end. Her response to Tridib's death donating her last few pieces of jewellery to the war fund, shows steeped she is in nationalist rhetoric.

Aim of the Study

Through this article I want to reveal Amitav Ghosh's Keen sense of history and a firm grasp of social cultural and historical material. the sidelines explorers ghost is a concern about wider cross-border humanity with striking insights into the issue of ethnic nationalism and communalism.

Conculsion

Amitav Ghosh reveals a keen sense of history and a firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical material. The Shadow Lines explores Ghosh's major concern about wider, cross- border humanity with

striking insights into the issues of ethnic nationalism and communalism. In this novel he has departed from Rushdie's mode of " imaginative serio-comic story telling" (Hawley, p.3) or " mimetic realism" (Mukherjee, p.287) evident in his apprentice novel. What he now offers is a supple and sophisticated mnemonic triggers to reflect on the communal carnage and sectarian tension in the Indian subcontinent. The novel derives its material from Ghosh's experience of the fracture following the partition of India and the resultant rupture in the affiliative bonds of the communities across the border. The materiality of Ghosh's novel as re - appropriated history threads through the narratives and molds the historical moments into a compelling tale.

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