
SHADOWS OF MEMORIES IN *THE SHADOW LINES* BY

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In the evolution of novels written in English as a literary genre in India, the first generation writers generally show a great concern about the national and social problems. The novels of 1960s had a private tone focusing on individual's life and are introspective in structure. The novels from 1980 onwards, however, have created a watershed in the history of Indian English Fiction as they have brought a significant change in the world view, expression and the form. Distinctly, Amitav Ghosh through his writings throws a challenge against the age-old way of thinking in which reason and logic hardly find place.

Amitav's writings bring forward his deep insight into historical events as well as human behavior. Anti-Colonial spirit for example is reflected in his *The Glass Palace* and *The Shadow Lines* is against artificial borders. Similarly out of conviction he has written *The Calcutta Chromosome* with a view to undoing the Western sense of superiority, vis-à-vis touching their monopoly over the scientific research. Hence he comes out as an extensive experimentalist for whom ideas are the vital driving force. Ghosh neither indulges in India bashing to gain sympathy from West nor does he glorify it by romanticizing its exotic aspect under the garb of 'the essence of India'.

The conventional Indian novel in English reinforces the classical notion of discrete cultures and a world full of distinctly marked divisions. But *The Shadow Lines* breaks the conventions in the very beginning.

"In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi went to England with her husband and her son Tridib" (*The Shadow Lines*)

The novel makes the natives of the colonized country, the travelers who go to England, the country of their colonizers whereas in the conventional colonial novel the westerners are made to travel to India, a country with an ancient fixed and self-contained literature. Ghosh's novels occupy a unique place in the arena of post-colonial literature- they critique both globalization and post-colonial nationalism, by depicting the experiences of those in transition, those in between nation states, those going back and forth as travelers in search of lost homes and better lives.

The Shadow Lines is a highly innovative, complex and celebrated novel of Amitav Ghosh published in 1988, it received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in the following year. Not only literary critics but also some noted litterateurs have acclaimed it for what it has been able to achieve as a work of art. Its focus is a fact of history, the post partition scenario of violence, but its overall form is a subtle interweaving of fact, fiction and reminiscence. Its multi-layered complex structure makes it a difficult text, which demands perspective reading for a richer experience. It is principally organized through the weaving of 'personal lives and public events'. The finished form ultimately excavates personal and social history vis-à-vis the racial riots in some parts of East Pakistan and mainly, Calcutta in India. Its wider appeal is to be found in its contemporaneity. But it is about any place and any time that has known violence, death, memory and pathos.

Memory is the cabinet of imagination,

The treasury of reason,

The registry of conscience

And the council chamber of thought

What is memory? We all understand it rightly to be a psychological process as much integral to our consciousness as thinking is. We are rational because we think, and also because we memorize. Both thinking and memory are the essence of our rationality; they contribute equally to our learning. But they are not identical. Memory is both emotive-pertaining to the cognitive and the affective parts of personality. Thinking on the other hand, even as

understanding and not as mere awareness is purely rational-completely devoid of feelings, emotions and sentiments, which are the components of our affective life. Memory, therefore, is perhaps more gratifying than purely objective, disinterested kind of thinking. Literary artists, poets and novelists alike have acknowledged the presence of emotive element in memory. No wonder, the famous poet Shelley eludes memory in these words:

We look before and after
And pine for what is not
Our sweetest songs
With some pain are fraught. (Shelley)

The word 'pain' here is indicative of the emotion accompanying memory. Similarly, Ghosh, the novelist makes the narrator of the novel recall his own experiences with a fondness-another emotive element. Take for instance, the narrator's following recollection of an incident, pertaining to Tridib:

When I was about nine Tridib one stayed away from his haunts for so long that regulars begin to wonder what happened to him [...]. Then one evening I heard that he had surfaced at Gole Park again. I[...]found him[...]and heard him say I have been to London[...]I have English relatives through marriage[...].It was then[...]that I cried: Tridibda [...]you made a mistake. You were in your room smoking[...].There was a haul of laughter and a chorus of exclamations: you fraud, you liar[...]you haven't been anywhere sharper voice broke in and said[...]the fact is that he is a nut and he has never been anywhere outside Calcutta.(*The Shadow Lines*)

The narrator was furious with himself for having exposed Tridib to their ridicule [...] shouting he told the truth as he knew it: that Tridib had been to London, with his parents, many years ago when he was a boy' (12-13). The point to be noted here is that in recalling his attempt to undo the damage to Tridib's reputation, the narrator feels relieved and happy. Now happiness is a state of emotion.

Memory of experience, unlike that of facts is either happy or sad but never indifferent; thinking on the other hand, is definitely non emotive as when we think about an abstract concept like 'space', or solving a mathematical problem. We do these by exercising our mind or by rationality alone; but memory is both rational and emotive. That is why; it is an apt instrument and sustainer of the creations of a work of literary art.

There is no doubt that the more sensitive people have a 'softer' more impressionable memory, but not all such people are artistic in temperament. Equally true is the fact that all artists, literary or performing, have a 'softer' memory as the material cause for their creative endeavor. They also store and retain their experiences for a longer periods, to be used purposively later-in fact, more purposively than a layman does. Impelled by their inherent tendency to use up every possible memory for the creation of some or other work of art, artists receive almost every impression more and this they can do only with the softer memory material. This softer memory material does not allow, in their case, impressions of all events are deliberately gathered up and then remain dormant in their memory till such time as the retainer finds the occasions for their actual use. Then they are recollected and transformed, at least, by literary artists like Ghosh into the materials of the narratives.

Such memories are, necessarily, invariably accompanied by the artist's awareness and understanding as to how he is going to use them effectively in the creation of work of art. This can be clearly seen in *The Shadow Lines*. Possessed of a highly refined sensitivity, main fictional characters, retain, may be unconsciously, their experiences, and relate them to the experiences, of the other characters in the novel, directly or indirectly, immediately or remotely. Ghosh, the literary artist, has woven them all into an organic unity, befitting a successful novel. He has done it through narrative devices with the help of which the raw material i.e. memories, have got organized and become a major component of the novel.

The relationship described in *The Shadow Lines* through child's involvement gets rebuilt and reconstructed in the adulthood. This sort of description involves a new perspective and makes the narration more sensitive in the way that these are threaded. The experiences gained in the innocent prank of narrator's childhood is analyzed in his adulthood and

developed into the real experience. Ila's infatuation with Nick Price and Tridib's love for May are experienced in the past, in the narrator-hero's childhood. But these past experiences are congregated with the incidents in the narrator-hero's adulthood. Hectic experiences on the New Year's Day night and the news of Ila's marriage with Nick devastates the narrator-hero's expectation of Ila. He feels himself quite rooted in this thought failing to compromise with it. His expectations of Ila from his childhood get churned when Ila breaks the news of her marriage to be solemnized with Nick. Again the reality of Tridib's death is revealed to him by May. She narrates that Tridib sacrificed his life for his love for May and confesses that it is at her insistence that he has embraced death. May's account of Tridib's death at Khulna in Dhaka riots brings out the reality and roots out the notion that he has preserved in him for the years as a legend. Hence, the technique Ghosh employs in building the theme and in depicting his characters through incident at the different span serves this purpose. G.R. Taneja's comment on Ghosh's narrative technique is quite appropriate:

Life in *The Shadow Lines* loses its chronological logic. The past invades the present and enriches and transforms it, in the process strengthening the narrator's ability to encounter and even reshape his own future when it invades his present at a later date. The very structure of the novel – coil within coil, opening up vistas of new worlds and new experiences – reflects this giddy whirl of life, memory and imagination.

This link between past and present takes us into the mnemonic fund of a young narrator-hero, who as a wide-eyed adolescent, worships his uncle Tridib who feeds him on his memories of his one visit to London during war and his grandmother, who shares with him her nostalgic memories of East Bengal, where she is born and has spent her childhood. It is through their memories that the narrator-hero draws the map of the world he visits in his adulthood.

All the major characters encounter the real world and get ruefully disenchanted with it as it creates a void within them. They emerge interesting from the perspective of dream which descends to them either in forms of expectations or in the form of retrospection of the past

that emanates as a stream of their consciousness. In either case, the novelist presents them as victims to their inner conflicts. Sometimes they appear compromising but even in their compromise, they look morbid and squalid. At times, it also belittles their stature when they admit their aspirations are their faults and have their source from misunderstanding and particularly when they fail to gratify their physical urges. Their suffering grows intense when they feel themselves crushed between real and surreal, between dream and the fractured world of dream.

Thus, almost all the characters of *The Shadow Lines* are patterned as the victims of the tormenting realities of life despite their dreams and their sincerity to realize them in their own ways. The most striking aspect of the suffering of Ghosh's individuals is that it helps them to invent a new avenue in their lives. The way the novelist has arranged his characters and their traits reveals his innovative approach to depict them. He allows them their own way justifying their living. Ila is an Indian girl and is chaste in her own way and proves it marrying Nick Price and accepting him despite his infidelity and against her parents' will. May embraces suffering the life of a spinster worshipping Tridib in her heart for the rest of her life and finds a sort of redemption expressing her feelings to the narrator-hero. She places him in Tridib's place and attains the final redemption of her guilt allowing him a sexual relationship on the eve of his departure. In this way, Ghosh has successfully maintained his perspective in bringing out the confrontations of his characters' dream and what actually life grants them

The narrator of the novel is endlessly fascinated by the relationship between memories as they exist in people's minds and memories that are transformed into stories and passed on through the spoken word. As the child, he lives for the stories his uncle Tridib tells him of living in England, as well as other stories about the Price family, which is the family that Tridib and his parents stayed with. As the narrator grows up and experiences others challenging these stories that Tridib told him, he becomes even more convinced of what Tridib always insisted: while stark reality has its place, one can live an even richer life when

a person allows stories and memories, both one's own and those of others, to inform and influence their reality.

Despite the fact that narrator relies so heavily on Tridib's stories and memories, the instances when the narrator either cannot gain understanding outside of his own memories or simply doesn't have Tridib's memories to color his experience are telling. This suggests that Ila's method of moving through the world has its place, given that she doesn't struggle with the issues the narrator does of whose stories take precedence: his own, or someone else's. This is the most apparent in the case of Tridib's death, something that Tridib himself cannot tell the narrator about the truth of which the narrator's family keeps from him. They originally tell him that Tridib died in an accident in Dhaka, and at eleven years old, the narrator doesn't find this particularly interesting-accidents, he insists, aren't that compelling for a child, unlike other means of death. However, as the narrator grows older, he begins to wonder about the truth of his parents' story. He finally consults both the newspapers from the day Tridib died and May, who witnessed firsthand what happened. The narrator discovers that though he also experienced the riots that gripped Calcutta and Dhaka. When the narrator learns from May that Tridib was murdered by a mob while attempting to save her, his great-uncle Jethamoshai, and his great-uncle's caregiver, Khalil, the narrator is finally able to make sense of Tridib's story, his own story, and the story of the riots as a whole.

With this understanding, which completes the understanding of his uncle's entire life, the narrator finally realizes the impact and the importance of telling stories and holding onto other people's memories. May's memories allow the narrator to, for the first time, grasp the reality and the scope of what happened. This echoes the way that Tridib's stories about World War II made that war feel real for the narrator. With this, the novel ends by asserting that though reality as Ila experiences it has its place, memories and stories offer unique insight into an event that simple experience doesn't allow.

There are various tropes and images which enrich the novel by their subtle shades of meanings and nuances. Rita Joshi has made an intensive study of the major images and then

related them to individual characters and the overall thematic structure of the novel. She gives an 'ironic' interpretation of the two major tropes, namely, 'maps' and 'mirrors'. Whereas maps, which are supposed to be representative of a corporeal reality are seen as 'illusory' the 'mirrors' are seen as reflective of the 'true self' and hence are to be regarded as 'substantial'. Since *The Shadow Lines* happens to be a memory novel photographs are very significant images as they reflect 'the past which influences the present through memory'. Then there are sets of images which signify individual and social identities. For instance, Tridib's spectacles and the cigarette smoke coming from his cloistered room signify his insights and dreams, and his 'Gastric' portends 'disorder'; and when Western clothes in the context of Ila signify a donned social identity. Joshi gives an extensive interpretation of Magda the doll. Magda acts as a metaphor for Ila's various experiences. 'It will be correct to say that Ila rewrites her own story when she makes Magda undergo experiences similar to hers but with a different ending'. Interestingly, Joshi has fresh interpretations to offer for apparently simple images as the lizard and the snake. The images are so powerful that they function as 'characters' in the novel. Collectively, these images give expression to the theme of illusion and reality, Joshi opines.

The Shadow Lines has been constructed on various characters most important being the narrator. The memories of narrator are related to Tridib, his family and acquaintances. The memories that have nothing to do with boundaries demarcated in the maps. These memories are spread across time and place: "*The Shadow Lines* is an archeology of silences, a slow brushing away of some of the cob webs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma."

Thus we can say that *The Shadow Lines* that exist in the memory of one and therefore in another's imagination. A narrative built out of an intricate, constantly crisscrossing web of memories of many people. It never pretends to tell a story; rather it invites the reader to invent one. Out of the memories that hold mirrors of different shades to the same experience.

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