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Voice of Protest in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Abstract

The condition of postcolonial writer begins the rewriting of history in the perspective of colonized people. When Indian writing is analyzed through the post colonial perspectives, most of them say that disclose of global literary scene and rewrite the tale of history. The destination and self-assured voice of Amitav Ghosh reflects through the literature of Indian culture and tradition. Amitav Ghosh considers fictional works like human insight and history.

Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines* deals with issues of partition, identity, freedom and cross-cultural interactions in the backdrop of communal violence. The attitudes and motives of both Indian and British characters in the novel as they emerge in the context of different situations are the other significant issues.

The post colonial historians have built the records to proceeding in the sensibilities of European people as to over the complete authority of colonized people. Post colonial writers endeavor to say that the other side of story contains cultural context through the events of elucidated and recorded. Historiography is full of problematic, it is claimed that incomplete the history of events. The political sovereignty of strength is decided to postcolonial writers.

The condition of postcolonial writer begins the rewriting of history in the perspective of colonized people. When Indian writing is analyzed through the post colonial perspectives, most of them say that disclose of global literary scene and rewrite the tale of history. The

destination and self-assured voice of Amitav Ghosh reflects through the literature of Indian culture and tradition. Amitav Ghosh considers fictional works like human insight and history.

Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines* deals with issues of partition, identity, freedom and cross-cultural interactions in the backdrop of communal violence. The attitudes and motives of both Indian and British characters in the novel as they emerge in the context of different situations are the other significant issues. The novel portrays the friendship between an upper class Bengali family and an English family, over three generations. The narrator's family is spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London. The family consists of his grandmother, Mayadebi's elder sister, and his parents, and their three sons, Jatin, an economist with the U.N, Tridib and Robi. Ila Jatin's daughter is always away with her parents.

The narrator's family is settled in Calcutta where his grandmother is a headmistress in a school. On the other hand, the family of Mayadebi, with the exception of Tridib, goes around the world. Tridib lives in his ancestral house in Ballygunge place. The friendship between the Indian families and the English family began when Lionel Tresawson was in India. Later on, in India he developed an interest on spiritualism and began to attend the meetings of the Theosophical society in Calcutta, where he met and earned the trust and friendship of a number of leading nationalists.

Under subaltern theory the word 'subaltern' is used in broad perspective as synonym for minorities, dalits, tribals, refugees, colonial subjects, the illiterate, helpless women and children whose voices and actions have been muted. Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the private histories of the victims of public history and gives voice to these helpless and voiceless subalterns. In *The Shadow Lines* the characters like Tha'mma shall be treated as subaltern because, she is a native of Bangladesh, who migrated to Calcutta during Indian Partition. Tha'mma as a widow struggled a lot in the alien land to settle and brought up her family.

Tridib is a subaltern because he was a victim of the communal riots. He was killed in the streets of Dhaka while helping his grandfather.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a vivid and moving story, mainly of two middle-class families—the Datta-Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Prices of London. The first family consists of Mayadebi, her husband, an officer in the Foreign Service, their sons Jatin, Tridib and Robi, and Jatin's daughter Ila. Because of the nature of her husband's job Mayadebi and her youngest son Robi live with him either abroad or in Delhi, and they rarely visit their ancestral house in Calcutta (Kolkata) where Tridib lives with his grandmother. The second family consists of a widow named Mrs. Price, her son Nick and her daughter May. The intimacy between the two families began during the British rule when Lionel Tresawsen, Mrs. Price's father, while living in Calcutta became friendly with Tridib's grandfather, a judge in the Calcutta High Court. It is also the story of the narrator's grandmother called Tha'nmia—Mayadebi's unnamed elder sister and a migrant from Dhaka who after her husband's death settles in Calcutta and lives with her son, daughter-in-law and her grandson the narrator.

The unnamed narrator, his grandmother and his uncle Tridib provide the main framework of the novel. Set in the metropolitan cities of Calcutta, London, Dhaka and Delhi, the narrative consists of two parts: "Going Away" and "Coming Home." The first part covers the time span of about twenty-three years from 1939 to 1962, and the second of about seventeen years from 1962 to 1979. Tridib's boyhood experiences during the Second World War and his getting killed in a communal riot are the central points of the text's main narrative. Unlike conventional institutional history which employs linear narrative technique, it is a non-linear, polycentric, first person narrative that consists of a series of stories and moves back and forth between the past and the present and between spaces through imagination and memory.

The novel critiques the drastic but unrecorded consequences of historical events on the innocent human beings and questions simultaneously the concepts of history, freedom and nationalism. It points out the absurdity of the national border that we draw between peoples and nations—which is a source of enmity as well as terrifying violence. It also deals with other themes such as migration, binary antagonism, syncretism and hybridity, expressing various subaltern truths and perspectives; it also coalesces imagination and reality, the past and the present, events and memories, and childhood naivety and adult maturity. The novel, like Ghosh's other novels, gives voice to many subaltern voices. The focus is not on the historical events forming the backdrop of the novel but on their consequences on the individuals. The events merge with the private lives to such an extent that the former lose their separate entities.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a story of a middle class Indian family based in Calcutta. The boy narrator presents the views of the members of his immediate and extended family, giving each a well defined character.

Tha'mma, narrator's grandmother represents the idea of the idealism and the enthusiasm with which the people worked towards nation building just after independence. It is chiefly through her character that Ghosh delivers the most powerful message of the novel - the futility of creating nation states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided. Ghosh gives adequate space to the British Price family and unlike most authors, he does not stereotype them.

All the three main women characters – Tha'mma, Ila and May - have played very important roles in *The Shadow Lines*. Even the male characters also have been influenced by these female characters in this novel.

In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh writes about the effect of Indian partition of 1947 on the common people like Tha'mma and the effect of communal riots of 1964 on the lives of

helpless people like Tridib. In this novel he reconstructs the private histories of Tha'mma, to show how the Indian partition affected the ordinary people and in the same novel he reconstructs the private history of Tridib to show the plight of the victims in the communal riots. Ghosh reconstructs the private histories of the individuals, who became helpless or voiceless subalterns due to the horrifying effect of the historical incidents. In the art of fictionalising the history Ghosh uses history against imagination or reality against fiction. He employs his imagination and creativity; his research abilities and enquiring mind in historicising the fiction. This fictionalised fact is an alternative reality which brings the private histories of subalterns into limelight, which was shadowed by the public histories. It can be analyzed that the novels of Amitav Ghosh help the readers in better understanding the history.

Like Tha'mma, Ila is another important character in the novel. As a woman of modern civilization, she wants to be free of commitments, of relationships, of duties and of everything. She is stubborn and lives in her own world. She is very positive, firm and determined to preserve her marital relations.

Ila is very strongly concerned with the welfare of the people. It makes her to affiliate with the Anti-Nazi League group. The members of that group are also very fond of her and will talk of her as their own upper class Asian Marxist. They see her as a link with the Fabians. Ila works in an organization called Save the Children Fund and is fighting for Indian Immigrants in London. She lives in London in a frugal manner in a tiny room in a house which she has to share with five other students. She has to cook and clean and do all kind of things though she has a dozen of servants at house to do all the things for her and works for Indians in England.

Like Ila and Tha'mma, May is another revolutionary in the novel. She is bold and practical in her statements. She is actually conscious of her duties and faults. She is outright

in expressing her emotions. As a British woman, her interpretation of people, places and events of India is different. She does not understand that the statue of Queen Victoria belongs to Indian history and its people. But when she is confronted by a beggar, she gives money to her. She also has the thought; “it was an act of helplessness. She wasn’t used to being helpless” (SL 166). This poverty and illness in India shocks her. Her idealism will not permit such injustice to exist, but she understands that she can do little for the poor.

May has a heart full of love for all living beings. She cannot see anybody writhing in pain. For example, while going on a drive with Tridib, she sees that a dog is writhing in pain. She asks Tridib to stop the car and asks him to relieve the dog of its pain. When Tridib says that they will not be able to do anything, she scolds him. “Can’t you help a bit? She said. All you’re good for is words. Can’t you ever do anything?” (SL 173) She takes out her pen-knife and stabbed the dog. So the dog gets free from its pain. Tridib accepts that she does the right thing and that she need not be apologetic about the inconvenience she causes. She also becomes a part of an Orchestra about which the narrator read in the Guardian. She admits that she is working with the Orchestra because she has to make a living somehow. Then she is however actively engaged in the work of relief agencies. She is also working on a project for providing houses for the survivors of an earthquake in Central America.

May Price went along with Tridib to bring Jethamoshai from Dhaka when there had been a communal riots going on. While they were returning in a car, Jethamoshai was brought in an auto rickshaw. When the rickshaw was attacked by frenzied rioters, May cries in horror that they are acting selfishly and saving themselves while endangering Jethamoshai. Tridib gets down from the car to save Jethamoshai and he is cut ear to ear by Muslim rioters. The riotous mob kills Tridib when he follows May to save the old man. His end is brutal. In an act to save others, he dies.

May is on a penance ever since Tridib's death. For a long time she held herself responsible for the death of Tridib. She asks the narrator, "Do you think I killed him?" (SL 251). She sleeps on floor. She fasts. She works for earthquake relief. She collects money from streets with all her banners and posters for social welfare. She suffers his death like hell. She is literally on a self-torturing spree. At the end of the novel she realises the meaning of Tridib's sacrifice. She frees herself from the burden of guilt. "He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery" (SL 251-252).

May is a virtuous, innocent and pure woman. She is friend to all and has malice for none. It makes her a revolutionary in the novel. She helps others wherever she gets chance and has a positive attitude towards her life. "May embodies the qualities of a savior, nurturer and a protector – she is politically active in a positive way... one of the few characters who takes responsibility for her action" (Multani 165).

Ghosh through Tha'mma's reminiscence narrates the subaltern history of militant nationalists, stressing their great contribution and sacrifice towards the freedom of the nation. Freedom movement in Bengal against the British was started by them in the early twentieth century, and to strengthen it these nationalists had established secret terrorist organisations like *Anushilan*, *Jugantar* and their affiliated groups to spread their activities and act out their strategies. However, their efforts to assassinate British officials and policemen were mostly retaliated by the British authorities with arrests, deportations and executions. During this period the grandmother studied in Dhaka College from where these terrorist organisations recruited their members, and due to such types of activities her college as well as Dhaka University often witnessed police raids. The grandmother, having been fascinated by the heroic stories of Khudiram Bose and Bagha Jatin, also wanted to work for freedom as one of these militants, but she could not do so because of their secret networking and her gender

constraint: "Ever since she heard those stories, she had wanted to do something for the terrorists, work for them in a small way, steal a little bit of their glory for herself (39).

The grandmother tells the narrator a story of one such less known militant who was both her classmate and neighbour. A shy and reticent student, always sitting unnoticeably in the back of the class, the grandmother could never think of him as a militant whom she had earlier visualised as a "huge man with burning eyes and a lion's mane of a beard" (39). Before his arrest a police party led by an English officer surrounded their class, and silenced and sent away their protesting class teacher. The officer drew his pistol observing each face to match with that on a piece of paper he possessed.

The novel, on the one hand, exhibits through the Second World War greed, vain glory, power, barbarity and destruction represented by colonialism, and on the other, it brings to light some humanitarian acts of sacrifice, helpfulness and companionship performed by the common people, which is rarely revealed in elitist history: Mike, Alan and Francesca succeed through demonstration in turning Savoy Hotel's cellars into an air raid shelter for East Enders. They feel exhilarated at their triumph for performing an altruistic deed. As mentioned earlier, during the bombardment Alan Tresawson saves Mike and Francesca at the cost of his own life; earlier he had injured himself in retrieving Francesca from Germany. The war also brings out the spirit of universal friendliness and cordiality transcending racial and national borders. This is evident from Mayadebi's romantic conversation with Alan during her stay with Mrs. Price. Mayadebi observes that the looming shadow of the war has brought about a dramatic change in the people of London, who in their shops or on the streets become nicer and friendlier towards her and her family, enquiring about her husband and the time of his operation. Similarly, Alan points out that he witnessed the same spirit of exhilaration during his recent visit in Germany: "People don't believe me . . . but it's the same over there—in

Germany—though of course in a much more grotesque way. It was odd coming back here—like stepping through a looking glass" (66).

Tridib emphasises the role of creative imagination to retain freedom as the former serves as the key to the latter for providing perception and creating experience and meaning. He describes war-stricken London mixed with fiction since he believes that we cannot invent without imagination and without this creation, we will fall prey to the prejudices and power of others and lose our individuality or consciousness which is necessary for a metanarrative version of a story: "we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly. And . . . if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions" (31). He knows the significance of inventing the regional, the national and the global to strike a proper relationship with human beings and powers. He knows how through the suppression or marginalisation of India's national and regional entity, misrepresented or replaced by the glorification of Western capital and modernity, the British were able to turn India into a colonised country.

After Tridib's death, his search for the ideal world is continued by the narrator who regards him as his mentor and guide. Tridib teaches him how to use his imagination with precision which "means to be able to recognize the contemporaneity of the past, to be able to see historical memory as vital to any understanding of the present, and to be able to see different times and places as inextricably intertwined with one's own" (S. Kaul 277). The narrator as a child regards his stories as true and gains knowledge of the world by listening, reading and imagining about it. Through maps, charts and photographs he becomes familiar with places like England, Cairo, Madrid and Colombo. As a boy he can exhaustively narrate Tridib's London memories. Tridib whom he likes most shapes his perception of life as he himself asserts: "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with . . ." (20).

To achieve the concept of freedom by Tha'mma is individually to leading a caution life. Ghosh also develops a concept of inseparable freedom through character of Ila who does not wish to remain the cultural compulsions and barriers of traditional to wish the adopt of freedom in the single actions as conquering in the western countries. Hence her attitude of freedom is limited.

Ghosh who is leading the life into a simple and looking for deep into the process of yearning into the regular mode of the thought for the betterment of the future. Ghosh has rendered many ideals for the perceptions of the freedom towards the novel of *The Shadow Lines*. In this novel the writer wants to describe about the portrayal of the freedom and then bring out the concept of violence and leads to the political control of the individual.

Work Cited

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