

A Postcolonial Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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The term “post colonial” is applied to the cultures affected by the imperial process or the agenda of western imperialists for cultural domination. It is only after the beginning of colonialism but not necessarily after decolonization. The Post Colonialism is a complex cultural process that represents the general mood of a particular period of history as shown by ideas, beliefs or the spirit of the time. The post-colonial discourse offers different perspectives of colonialism. The rupture between colonialism and post-colonialism has become a myth. The post colonial identity of marginal groups, their exploitation and oppression, displacement, nostalgia, and the loss of language and culture are the predominant issues related to post-colonialism.

The term post colonialism refers to the body of working known as ‘commonwealth’ in which the colonial experience is the central link that defines and contains the life of post-colonial subject. It also refers to the period after colonial rule and control. The focus of post colonialism is on the people who were once under the rule of colonialism and on “the product of human experience, but human experience of the kind that has not typically been registered or represented at any institutional level” (Young 13)’. Colonialism, as we understood it, is an imposition of colonial forms on pre-colonial societies and post-colonialism is an ongoing process. It is a continuation of colonialism. The colonial encounter has been a seminal event in the history of both the west and the non-western world, shaping culture, literature, politics and history. The colonial ambivalence is comprised of materialism and spirituality that are otherwise considered as the economical and the cultural identity.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Post-Independence Era in Calcutta on 11th July, 1956. He grew up in East Pakistan (Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, Iran and India. In his childhood days he was brought up on the stories of partition, the struggle for independence and the Second World War. History has thus become Amitav Ghosh’s prime obsession. His fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. He has used these memories to construct the

concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world, which is the dominant theme of *The Shadow Lines*, by interweaving memory, history and contemporary life.

Amitav Ghosh, one of the foremost and the prominent voices of Indian Writing in English, has no faith and belief in national borders and geographical boundaries that divide and separate both the country and its people from their own people as well as from other neighbouring countries and their people under the pretext of religion and community. His reputation rests on *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and the non-fiction, *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) and *The Travelogues Countdown* (1998) and *Dancing in Cambodia* and *At Large in Burma* (1998). As a post-colonial writer, he uses English as an Englishman, stays in America and frequently visits his hometown Kolkata in India. He is the New York-based serious novelist and anthropologist who writes with a post-colonial consciousness. He is certain of his human and historical insight.

Ghosh sees history as the trajectory of events that causes dislocations, disjunctions, movements and migrations and eventually replacing solid markers with shadow lines, destabilizing our notions of the past in the reverberations of the present. Hence, his narratives offer a sensitive and multifaceted view on the contemporary problems of the worlds he writes about. When asked to what extent his background as a historian, journalist and an anthropologist has affected his works and whether his novels are entirely the works of fiction, he answered as follows:

For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life-history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality. As I see it, the novel is a metal-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist, etc (Ghosh in Caswell 2004).

This highlights the generic heterogeneity, one of the most important characteristic features of his writing. It further enables him to retain sensitivity to the various kinds of discourses, voices and agents while narrating into existence the unforeseen connections

between them. In his *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh deals with the issues of identity vs. nationhood, the representation of history and ultimately concludes that all borders are imaginary constraints. He dismantles history, the frontiers of nationality, culture and language. The novel is a manifestation of the desire to validate the post-colonial experience and to attempt a reconstruction of public history.

There is no such thing as objective or factual truth. All truth in our world is created by the context within which it is experienced or observed. The novel endeavours to reconstruct history on its own logic of individual memory and interpretation. *The Shadow Lines* depict the suffering, the death and the devastation caused by a shadow line of division that could not undo the shadow line of connection. In the novel, the past merges fluidly with the present as it reflects the restlessness and turmoil of the times and its meaning in the present context. The novel deals with the history of World War II, the freedom movements, the partition and the subsequent communal outbreak. Amitav Ghosh explores the historical variables, the meaning of contemporary India, the cross cultural friendship and feelings.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh weaves the temporal and the spatial dimensions into a personal texture on which the anonymous narrator builds his identity. “The narrator” or the “I” the central voice powerfully controls the meaning and the understanding of the novel. The novel is divided into two parts: “Going away” and “Coming Home” that preoccupy the entire part of the novel. The novel narrates the history of an Indian family that lives in Calcutta but has its roots in Dhaka on the border of Pakistan. The assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the violence and the unrest that followed have contributed the background of the novel.

The storyline juxtaposes the lives of two different families, one an Indian family and the other, an English family. This sort of story-structure questions the boundaries between the people and the geographical setting that they inhabit. The story that shifts from London to Calcutta to Dhaka is told through the point of view of a contemporary Indian male, although the real luminaries of the plot are the young man’s grandmother and his cousin, Tridib. The stories interweave life in Dhaka before Partition, life in London during the war and the life the narrator leads in Calcutta during the 1960s and his life in London of the 1970s. The anonymous narrator recounts in flashback the people and places Tridib had described to him twenty years before and the heady life of modern London that signified the centre of the Universe. It is an

undeniable fact that the narrator considers his imaginary reconstructions of the past as more real than that of the present. It is because he lives through the stories of other people. He strongly believes that the actual present alone can serve as an impulse for the narrative construction of memories. His outlook of life is quite contrary to that of his cousin, Ila who treats the actual present alone as the real one. Unlike the narrator, she does not take refuge in the past.

The novel refers to the blurred lines between nations, land, and families as well as within one's own self-identity. Ghosh depicts the characters of the novel as caught between two worlds. Hence, they struggle to the core to come to terms with both their present as well as their past. Like Gandhi, Ghosh is opposed to the political discourse as well as the haphazard division of land and human communities that are required to form a nation. Ghosh's tale dramatizes the inner conflicts of the juxtaposition of dissimilar yet related cultures as well as the outward conflicts between friends and families that have been inflicted by geopolitical discord.

The Shadow Lines spans three generations of the narrator's family spread over Calcutta, Dhaka and London, and his English family friends, the Prices. Written against the backdrop of the civil strife in the post-partition East-Pakistan and riot-hit Calcutta, the narration of the incidents begins in 1939 (the year World War II broke out) and ends in 1964. The novel depicts riots at three levels. There are riots between religious communities within one nation or State, riots between religious communities in two States and there are riots between different communities and the government. Robi, one of the narrator's cousins, describes his experiences at the time of acting as a government official:

I'd have to go out and make speeches to my policemen saying: You have to be firm, you have to do your duty. You have to kill whole villagers if necessary – we have nothing against the people, it's the terrorists we want to get, but we have to be willing to pay a price for our own unity and freedom. And I went back home, I would find an anonymous note waiting for me saying: We're going to get you for our freedom. It would be like reading my own speech transcribed on a mirror (*The Shadow Lines* 246-247).

Ironically, both the terrorists and the government troops are acting to secure their freedom, which, as a construction of nationalist ideology, is only an illusion. Thus, with the eruption of a cycle of violence both in India and East- Pakistan, his boyhood experiences during wartime London and his violent death twenty five years later in Dhaka constitute the end point of the novel's essential narrative.

The events revolve around Mayadebies' family, their friendship and sojourn with the English friends and Tha'maa, the narrator's grandmother's links with Dhaka, her ancestral city. The novel takes us into mnemonic fund of a young narrator who as a wide-eyed adolescent, hero-worshipped his uncle, Tridib, who fed him on the memories of his one visit to London during the war and Tha'mma his grandmother, who shared with him her nostalgia of East Bengal where she was born and spent her childhood. And then there is Ila, the daughter of Tridib's elder brother, who travels all over the world with her diplomat globe-trotting parents and occasionally comes home to tell the wonderstruck boy the account of her peregrinations abroad. While the narrator's experience is travelling in the mind through imagination, Ila's experience of travelling is based on the actual travelling in person through reality. The narrator acknowledges that he has created his own secret map of the world. Their memories, says the narrator, "Form a part of my secret map of the world, a map of which only I know the keys and co-ordinates, but which was not for that reason any more imaginary than the code of a safe to a banker" (*The Shadow Lines* 196).

The story of *The Shadow Lines*, told in first person, is of a growing boy who lives in the shadow of the man he idolises; and of an individual's drawn into history as well as social and political turbulence. Tridib gives the young boy "worlds to travel in and... eyes to see them with" (20). Ila also contributes to the narrator's voyage of self discovery. The narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma, is the third pivotal character to the structure of this novel. It is through the vivid and almost an animate imagination of the world of an eight year old child, the shadow lines takes shape. As an eight year old boy, the narrator sees England through the eyes of Ila and Tridib. Thus, there exists a subtle medium of sophisticated comment on current realities. It is ultimately the narrator's growing imagination, empathy and intellectuality that lead to exploration and understanding of complex themes in the novel.

The post colonial approach of Ghosh propels him to portray the widespread prevalence of sadness in *The Shadow Lines*. There is the sadness of inaction, failure of materialism,

disappointment, constant search for truth and identity, unrequited love, etc. Similarly, the theme of borders and maps occupies the prominent place in the postcolonial context of Ghosh because he believes that his people have suffered due to the divisions created by geographical boundaries. As the novelist has no faith in national borders and geographical cartography that divide and separate people, he considers them all as mere artificial lines created by the superficial politicians who have no genuine interest in the welfare of the people. The novel also provides an insight into the history of colonization legacies. The death of the main characters at the border is the realistic portrayal of the suffering of the people who have to endure the pangs of separation and the aftermath effect of it as they move between the borders of homeland. Said echoes Ghosh's opinion in *Culture and Imperialism* by describing imperialism as "an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control(Said 4). Another critic Mondal observes (2007, 164), the publication of *The Shadow Lines* coincided with academic interest in the interrogation of nationalism and national identity, which were fast developing into a major concern within post colonial criticism and post colonial approach. Ghosh emerged as a unique literary genius "whose innovative textual experiments offered new insights and openings into the cluster of conceptual and theoretical concepts that had been developed to describe, analyse and interpret the complex of colonial and post colonial relations" (164).

Thus, the post colonial history that is depicted in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* reads history not from the centre but from the margin's discarded perimeter. It presents the history of the colonised people written by them in the language of the coloniser as a reply to the coloniser. Thereby he enabled the study and understanding of history and heritage of the post colonial nation from the point of the view of the colonised people rather than the coloniser. The point of the view of the colonised people reflecting the contemporary trend of post colonialism displaying resentment against the colonial regime is very much explicit in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*.

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