A Postcolonial Study of Amitav Ghosh’s

*The Shadow Lines*

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ABSTRACT

*The Shadow Lines* (1988) is a highly innovative, complex, and celebrated novel of Amitav Ghosh. It received the Sahitya Academy Award in the following year. Not only literary critics but also some notable critical works have acclaimed it for what it has been able to achieve as a work of art. It focuses on historical facts, the post partition scenario of violence. Its overall form is a subtle interweaving of facts, fiction and reminiscence. *The Shadow Lines* is a significant work in South Asian literature in the last decade. It sums up and fictionalizes all the major issues of postcolonial literature, the search for identity, the need for independence and the difficult relationship with the colonial culture, the rewriting colonial past and attempt at creating a new language and a new narrative form and to understand the communal past.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Ghosh, identity, culture, language, communal, literature.

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonialism would seem to label literature written by writers living in countries formerly colonized by other nations. Broadly, it refers to the traditions in which contest, civilization background, and individual uniqueness are characterized in post-independence period of many colonized countries. Till the end of the twentieth century, the countries like India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Canada and Australia won autonomy from their European colonizers. In these countries, the art and literature shaped after their freedom has labeled as ‘postcolonial’ and hence a new term, ‘postcolonial literature’ is coined to suggest “de-centering of colonial literature.” (Habib 737).

Indian English Fiction, today, is dominated by postcolonial writers, who were born in Indian soil and write in English. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistory, Jhumpa Lahri, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh boast unconventional Indian English Literature from the regal repression.

FULL PAPER

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most contemporary Indian English writers whose extra ordinary artwork of fiction has been a source of magical fascination and exerts a bewitching influence on the mind and the lovers of literature. Ghosh, being a postcolonial writer focuses on the exposition of the cultures of the land which has so far been relegated to the periphery.

*The Shadow Lines* which is set in postcolonial India, is one of the finest novels of Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh has tried to suffuse his sense of belonging, national identity, landscape, rituals, national culture and tradition which form the core of postcolonial fiction in the texture of *The Shadow Lines*. In this context, it would be apt to quote Silvia Albertazzi’s words that:

Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Shadow Lines* is probably the most important fictional work to have appeared in South Asian literature in the last decade. It sums up and fictionalizes all the major issues of postcolonial literature-- the search for identity, the need for independence and the difficult relationship with colonial culture, the rewriting of colonial past, and attempt at creating a new language and a new narrative form and the use of personal memory to understand communal past. (Chowdhary 169).
The very title of *The Shadow Lines* relates to a key concern of postcolonialism that is of borders and boundary lines and their illusory nature. The title emphasizes on obscenity of existing borders. Postcolonial criticism examines man made borders as efforts to identify a particular group as against another group. This is predominantly true of India as an independent nation with the partition of 1947 which drew imaginary lines of across India and also causing much fatality from the consequential riots. Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* seems to move effortlessly across national boundaries as Shobha Tiwari puts it, “a culture rooted in a single place but a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generations in time” (Tiwari 67). The remark refers to obscure lines of the title *The Shadow Lines* which are distant other than currently the margins created by politicians. It suggests that they are also the lines of segregation that separate the colonized and the colonizer.

*The Shadow Lines* has a lot of postcolonial features such as an element of the incredible and bewilderment of time and space, dislodgement, a sense of loss and reminiscence and disintegration of individuality which is the common ground of postcolonial discourse. The vast scope of the novel in terms of time and space straddling three generations and stretching over three countries seems to invite carrying out tests with the postcolonial narrative technique.

In *The Shadow Lines* the action takes place in different continents – Europe, Asia, and Africa – and in different countries – India, Bangladesh, and England. The novel is divided into two parts: “Going Away” and “coming Home.” There is a shift of time from the past to the present and from the present to the past. “Going Away” can be interpreted as “going away from the self” and “coming Home” can be interpreted as “coming back into the self.”

The narrative begins in 1939 with the outburst of the Second World War when Tridib went to England. While in Calcutta, Tridib used to tell the narrator about his experiences. Tridib was his mentor and alter ego. He taught the narrator to use his imagination precisely and accurately. The narrator met Ila, his cousin in Delhi and they became good friends. Here the narrator shows the psycho-sexual growth of Ila and the narrator In the second part of the novel, the narrator along with other family members is shown visiting Dhaka to visit their ancestral house. The narrator’s grandmother and her sister were excited to visit their house. Their old uncle still lived there with a Muslim mechanic, but he had become senile and insane. The old ladies wanted to see the borderline but they could not. It only existed in maps and atlas. On their journey, communal clashes broke out and Tridib was killed by the mob. The narrator through Tridib realized the illusionary and uncertain nature of man- made borders as invented corollaries of the idea of nationhood. In his writings, Amitav Ghosh, instead of securing borders through violence, expresses a strong desire to transcend nationalism and global humanitarianism.

The novel is a postcolonial text which deals with post-partition problems like communal and cultural divide, quest for self, gender bias, nationalistic antagonism and so on and so forth. In the postcolonial period, writers have taken the problem of identity, diaspora, alienation, feminism and multiculturalism at the overt and covert levels. *The Shadow Lines* provides an opportunity for Amitav Ghosh to give a lyrical expression to his diasporic imagination. Diaspora achieves the unintended purpose of celebrating marginality and multi culturalism and diversity.

The novel sketches few historical events like the sovereign society in Bengal, the Second World War, and India’s partition in 1947 and the natural public ignition in uprising type in Bangladesh, India and so on. The old and new houses, map and mirrors, borders and boundaries are full of emblematic indication. In one way or the other, all these symbols deal with the subject of man’s search for identity, roots, war, borders and so on. But the work of fiction is not an exposed and unexciting summation of those nervous past instants; instead, it captures the distress of moving tear and the negative prospective of the barrier within people surrendered by partition political views.

The novel is woven around two families; the family of Dutta Chaudhari of Bengal and the family of Price of London and the anonymous narrator’s associations with them. The storyteller from his early days comes in to close contact with them and thus is able to knit jointly the different strands of their associations. The narrator shows the alter ego of Tridib as “Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and had given me eyes to see them with” (20). Hence, though the novel has a first person narration, it is not the narrator’s life that is narrated but to a large extent. It is his uncle Tridib’s life and experience that is narrated as “In 1939, thirteen years before I was born. My father’s aunt, Mayadebi went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib”(2).

The narrative initiates with cuddles a high-quality pact with moments of postcolonial and a channel of occasion in noble India when the speaker was not even born. Mayadebi’s close contact with the family of Price and her visit to London, the relationship between Tridib-May transcending the shadow lines with people and civilizing margins that form the major concern of the novelist. Amitav Ghosh stares the strange heave connecting Tridib and May and the unshakable tie.
The simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-years old history of that map. When the place we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free-our looking-glass border. (233).

_The Shadow Lines_ shows two types of postcolonial understanding. One is that of higher social elites like Mayadebi and Shaheb, and, second is that of characters like Ila who still live in close contact with the West. They do not have roots in the home country and want to be a part of the colonizer’s world. Such characters have no desire even to think of the colonized world, they are happy imitating the west. Ila’s mother’ for instance, sits like ‘Queen Victoria’. The grandmother, on the other hand, shows the other side of postcolonial understanding. She is enlightened and self-sufficient and ardently proud of being an Indian. She wants India to forgo her own identity.

In the words of Murali Prasad, "Evoking the postcolonial trauma is the aftermath of India's separation from Pakistan. Ghosh visualizes the recuperative exercise of transnational imagination to overcome communitarian strain" (79). Ghosh as a postcolonial author cleverly exploits all the postcolonial narrator’s actions and behavior in this novel.

**CONCLUSION**

It can be said that the postcolonial 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 colonized people written by them in the language of the colonizer as a reply to the colonizer. Thereby he enabled the study and understanding of history and heritage of the post-colonial nation from the point of the view of the colonized people rather than the colonizer. The point of view of the colonized people reflecting the contemporary trend of postcolonialism displaying resentment against the colonial regime is very much explicit in Ghosh’s _The shadow Lines._

**WORKS CITED**