



Research Paper

Every (Hi) story has an End: *The Shadow Lines* Transposed History

Dr. Satyajit T Patil

Associate Professor
Department of English
Pemraj Sarda College,
Ahmednagar (MS)

Abstract

Everything in this universe has specific lifespan. All human products – natural and artificial – turn pale or poisonous when they cross the barriers of time. To avoid infection or injury, they are wisely disposed of. History is man-made. History takes its outline from human acts and in turn it shapes human lives. In its course, history escorts many lessons for the posterity. History inspires us. It also ignites an array of feelings in the society. But as time passes by, it takes a perverted form. It is customised to convenience. Seeds of hatred are sown in uncultivated minds. Mal-educated multitude pours oil into the fiery feelings. Memories on the brink of extinction are rigorously recharged. Revenge game begins; and continues for centuries. Every section gets its turn to punish and pay back. If we do not want to let it go as it is, we should retire a piece of history at regular intervals. No doubt, it is painful and problematic. It will create certain challenges – What should be the shelf life of a historical movement or document? Will the deleted text erase from the public remembrance? Is it sane to burn or bury something which is begotten with tireless troubles and selfless sacrifice? We should not be carried away with such concerns if we really want our race to survive on this planet. History needs expiry. The present article proposes to study Amitav Ghosh's Sahitya Award winning masterpiece *The Shadow Lines* (1988) on the foothold of these postulations.

Keywords: history, diaspora, partition, migration

Received 12 Sep., 2022; Revised 25 Sep., 2022; Accepted 28 Sep., 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

Everything in this universe has specific lifespan. All human products – natural and artificial – turn pale or poisonous when they cross the barriers of time. To avoid infection or injury, they are wisely disposed of. History is man-made. History takes its outline from human acts and in turn it shapes human lives. In its course, history escorts many lessons for the posterity. History inspires us. It also ignites an array of feelings in the society. But as time passes by, it takes a perverted form. It is customised to convenience. Seeds of hatred are sown in uncultivated minds. Mal-educated multitude pours oil into the fiery feelings. Memories on the brink of extinction are rigorously recharged. Revenge game begins; and continues for centuries. Every section gets its turn to punish and pay back. If we do not want to let it go as it is, we should retire a piece of history at regular intervals. No doubt, it is painful and problematic. It will create certain challenges – What should be the shelf life of a historical movement or document? Will the deleted text erase from the public remembrance? Is it sane to burn or bury something which is begotten with tireless troubles and selfless sacrifice? We should not be carried away with such concerns if we really want our race to survive on this planet. History needs expiry.

These thorny thoughts tormented me while I shuffled through Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988). This Sahitya Award winner masterpiece is woven around historical events like the World War II, Partition of India, communal riots in Calcutta and Dhaka, leading to the conception of Bangladesh. All the characters in *The Shadow Lines* seem to have a close relation with history. This novel comments on the fantasy lines that bring people closer and at once tear them apart. These lines are clearly visible from one perspective and non-existent from another. They are touching and at times become torturous. Moreover, their existence is quite illogical. The narrator underlines this fact thus:

...I tried to learn the meaning of distance. (The) atlas showed me, for example, that within the tidy ordering of Euclidean space, Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. Yet I had never heard of those places until I drew my circle, and I cannot remember a time when I was so young that I had not heard of Delhi or Srinagar. (169)

The plot of the novel is a collection of memories triggered by different incidents in the life of the narrator, a youngster grown up in Calcutta, graduated to Delhi and then migrated to England. As he remarks, "People like my grandfather who have no home but in memory, learn to be skilled in the art of recollection" (142). The plot is split into two phases in his life - 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home'. Tridib, his uncle is a wasted talent. The narrator's grandmother hates Tridib. To her, "He's a loafer and a wastrel... he doesn't do any proper work, lives off his father's money." (4) Tridib did not really do 'nothing'. In fact, he was working on a PhD in archaeology. But this did not make any difference to her. On the contrary, the narrator has a high esteem for his uncle. He always "loved to listen to Tridib: he never seemed to use his time, but his time didn't stink." (5) The unfortunate demise of Tridib is, therefore, quite disturbing for him as well as May Price, an English girl, who loves him and regards herself responsible for this mishap.

The story is unfolded on the backdrop of the riots in Bangladesh in 1964 and the political scenario of India during the period. The narrator potently vents his perplexity as a child during those fights, his estrangement from his Muslim friend Montu, and the passing of Tridib, to connote the actual ecosphere of innocent people who *breathe* history. Though not recorded or reported, these events are as real as the documented ones. As Samik Dasgupta, in his doctoral thesis on Ghosh's novels, rightly points out, Amitav's narrative:

... challenges the very discourse of power that legitimizes the idea of a stable, single and 'pure' national identity by writing off the presence of the 'other' from the conceptual frame of nationhood, and in the process captures the experience of nationhood in its heterogeneous complexity. (4)

This discourse on nationalism finds its expression in the personal stories of Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother. Tha'mma is a staunch ally of orthodox nationalism. She believes that a nation comes into existence through bloodshed in war. When her plane ticket to Dhaka was confirmed:

... she wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. When my father laughed and said, why, did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas, she was not so much offended as puzzled. (110)

Upon this explanation, she retorted, saying:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then - Partition and all the killing and everything - if there isn't something in between? (Ibid)

For her, a state is demarcated by its "boundaries that serve to exclude 'Others' while bestowing unity and brotherhood on all those included within it" (Chandra 69). In the course of the narrative, however, Tha'mma's perception of nation as a symbol of concrete entity is challenged as she herself undergoes a traumatic individual experience. She has to give away with her innate faith in the nationalism in search of her roots in Dhaka, now a part of Bangladesh, "alien country". Further, the novel takes a poignant turn when Tha'mma's reclaiming of her bondage with her birthplace is shadowed by the untimely death of Tridib. He is killed during the communal riots in Dhaka. This severe shock is followed by another revelation that "across the border there existed another reality" (219). To subscribe to Dasgupta's observation, "*The Shadow Lines* portrays nationalism as something inherently limited as opposed to the post-national ideal of inclusiveness. But at the same time, it suggests that the superficial embracing of a foreign culture cannot be an alternative of nationalism." (7)

Through Ila, the narrator's cousin, Ghosh brings to the forefront the other side of nationalism. Ila is the product of the post-independence world of *diaspora*. Though an Indian, she has never spent much time in this country. No wonder, she is not ready to accept India as her home. She is not willing to identify herself with Indian culture. She believes that true freedom consists in evading the barriers of nation. As a gesture to disown her roots, she chooses Nick, son of a British citizen, as her life partner. Unfortunately, her decision goes wrong as Nick denies her the space that she deserves as an English person. As a result, she suffers from isolation and neglect. Ultimately, Ila realises that it is futile to think of freedom as 'salvation' from the synthetic restrictions. Despite her repeated efforts to be adopted by the residents of an alien land, Ila fails to be one of 'them.' She overlooks the reality that most of the European nation-states are primarily based on the foundation of shared race, religion, or language. To quote Meenakshi Malhotra, "This eliding of history finally renders her unfree; if anything, ironically, it leads her deeper into bondage" (166).

The Shadow Lines is undoubtedly "a postcolonial text which suggests that neither Tha'mma's exclusionary ideals, nor Ila's facile internationalism can meet the challenge of sectarianism in the modern society. It is only a cosmopolitan worldview that can resolve such conflicts by embracing the

differences”(Dasgupta 64).Tridib and May represent this cosmopolitanism.Both rise above the margins of ethnicity and citizenship to find their own forms of actuality.

Unlike Thamma, Tridib promotes an idea of reality founded on individual comprehension of personal memory.He calls for an inventive recreation of the past on the basis of these reminiscences and insights. To him, a place does not merely exist, “it has to be invented in one’s imagination” (21). The relationship between May and Tridib transcends national and cultural boundaries. In turn,it symbolises the entire spectrum of cosmopolitanism. Significantly, the pluralistic culture that Tridib stands for throughout the novel, does not emerge from a shallow interface between people on both ends of the borders. It is, in fact, an imaginative process of synchronising oneself with the weirdness of the ever-changing world, which has no place for “an actual experience of belonging”. *The Shadow Lines*, thus, asserts the notion of a homogeneous culture. The novel shows how the murder of an innocent individual like Tridib is erased from all official records through mindful silence.

To quote Dasgupta, “*The Shadow Lines* suggests that national boundaries cannot write off one’s past, and the inherent differences of the society, as they claim to do. On the contrary, the nationalist imagination transforms these differences into self-other binarism which continue to exist even after the partition of the nation-states, creating “shadow lines” that separate the communities by their shared sense of antagonism and hostility towards each other” (19). Ghosh suggests that nation-states which are instituted on separatist identity cannot substantiate the self-other bifurcation. Such kind of nationalism inevitably leads to violence and hostility without making any sane effort to solve these distinctions.

In conclusion, *The Shadow Lines* rejects the separatist, ill-disposed and self-defeating rationale of fanatic nationalism. As a postcolonial author, Amitav Ghosh “believes in the heterogeneity of culture, and considers partition to be a symbolic reminder of the failure of national wish to live with difference” (Dasgupta 221).He vehemently rejects the notion of nationalist borders, and advocates the concept of the pre-national space that resists geo-political separations of the post-colonial world. To me, the novel signals the sinister impact of history on the lives of common people.What I take away from this narrative is the miserable maxim:

History has power to heal; but more than that, it has power to hurt.

References:

- [1]. Chandra, Vinita. “Suppressed Memory and Forgetting: History and Nationalism in *The Shadow Lines*.” Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives. Ed. Brinda Bose. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003. 67-78.
- [2]. Dasgupta, Samik. Synopsis of the thesis titled “Across *The Shadow Lines*: Interrogating History in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh. West Bengal: Vidyasagar University, 2016.
- [3]. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers and Permanent Black, 2003.
- [4]. Malhotra, Meenakshi. “Gender, Nation, History: Some Observations on Teaching *The Shadow Lines*” in Brinda Bose (ed.) Amitav Ghosh. Delhi: Pencrafts International, 2003, 173 – 194.
- [5]. Prasad, G.J.V. “Re-Writing the World: The Circle of Reason as the Beginning of the Quest.” Ed. Brinda Bose. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003. 56-66.



- Dr Satyajit Patil(M A, PhD, NET, SET)is presently working in Pemraj Sarda College, Ahmednagar (Maharashtra) as Associate Professor of English.
- Dr Satyajit has 21 years of teaching experience at Under Graduate and Post Graduate Levels.
- He is the Research Supervisor of Savitribai Phule Pune University.