

Internal Quest For Security : A Study of Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines

Dr. Ritu Sharma [1]

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Indian writing in English has achieved a significant place in world literature. Among the literary stars Indian talent is not only shining equal with British and American writers but also shining more eloquently and in a dignified way. It is evident in recent survey that nearly all prestigious prizes and awards are won by Indian writers. Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arun Joshi, Vikram Seth, Khushwant Singh, Amitav Ghosh, Nayantara Sehgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry etc are in the long list of award winners. Among all these intellectuals Amitav Ghosh is one who has dealt with Indian theme in a totally different and new way. An Indian writer having Indian sensibility is not only in the race, but also at the high place of world genius.

Ghosh, an imaginative and sensitive anthropologist, deals with human affairs not only in his life but his interest is reflected through his writing. This India born author has worldwide reputation for his highly acclaimed works. Ghosh has not only written novels, essays biographies but various research papers also. Ghosh's major novels include *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1990), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995),

The Glass Palace (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2005). Ghosh has not only achieved name and fame but many prestigious awards are in his hand for his intellectual labour.

The Shadow Lines (1989) by Amitav Ghosh is a remarkable work by all standards as it has crossed all the boundaries and narrow categorizations of an Indian novel. The novel shows an intense and anguished meditation by author on the formation and division of modern states in South Asia. The novel has nostalgic elements and a bit autobiographical. Like Dickens, Ghosh also begins the novel with 'I'.

The novel shows chronicles related to author's life, his surroundings, his relatives and his imaginary world, which has a great relevance with reality. The novel brings home the incidents related to Dhaka and London. The author takes us with his creative power first in his childhood and then his experiences as an adult. The book generally deals with the chronicles of one series of events lived differently by various people related to author.

The novel is divided into two parts "Going Away" and "Coming Home". Here these two phases are directly or indirectly related to 'home'. Home is a place where a person is born, brought up and learns to live life with proper love and affection of family members. But sometimes a person has to

leave his home because of certain assignments but still he/she has some fascination for home in his mind. In this novel "Ghosh's characters go as far as Delhi or London on work or travel and come home to Calcutta or Dhaka only to learn that peace is elusive as ever".¹

The story deals with author's cousin uncle Tridib who never lives the story except through the memories of others. He is a link that has capacity to connect all the characters, he is just like a shadow line that never materializes or comes in to existence. The narrator begins the novel giving details of his relationship with Tridib. He says, "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with" (TSL:20).²

The story moves on and keeps on traveling back and forth in time as well as space. The train of author's thought moves backward and forward and shifts many places from Calcutta's Gole Park to Ballygunge and then London's Brick Land of the war or Lymington Road of today and then in Bangladesh. The whole novel describes the imagination of one person or the other. "Everyone in the novel, in fact hovers over the

shadow lines between imagination and reality; everyone has his or her stories and memories that are based partly on imagination, partly on reality and when they are retold they are relived as well."³

The Shadow Lines is basically a world of memories and reminiscences of narrator. What ever he has experienced and felt during his childhood, his relation with his uncle cum friend Tridib, his Grandmother's home sickness, her 'home coming' attitude and at last Tridib's death, all the mysteries are unfolded coil after coil just like an onion though, linked together but having inborn separation. The narrative becomes strong with the various threads knitted together. During his childhood narrator is highly attached to his uncle and develops his life following the way his uncle has shown him. The story of the novel deals with narrator's grandmother, born and brought up in Dhaka and now living in Calcutta. As before independence and partition these two places were the part of same territory and there was not any restriction to move from one place to other but now the shadow lines, which are just a mirage, have covered the whole area. In general view everybody thinks that there must be a long distance, trenches or soldiers or any other indication, which suggest the partition. When grandmother after partition visits her home town to bring her uncle Jethamalani back with her "to her dismay, much like her grandson's she learns that the

^[1]Associate Professor, Dept of English, Dyal Singh College Karnal (Haryana), Email: ritu_cs@rediffmail.com

mental equivalent of the division was not physically visible on the frontiers and the natural question would be, what was it all then- partition and all the killing and everything if there isn't something in between." (TSL: 151)

The illusions regarding partition becomes reality even no one considers it true. The boundaries though drawn physically but has long lasting influence on the mind of people. It is rightly said that people don't bother about the tragedies of others life. "Because as long as one learns about death and destruction in newspapers and other media, one is not touched by them. But when someone in the family is caught in the carnage, then one realizes what it is."⁴

Grandmother's uncle who stayed at Dhaka after partition is not willing to come back when grandmother along with Tridib, Mayadebi, May Price and Robi visit their paternal house to meet uncle, who is now looked after by Khalil a cycle rickshaw driver, has turned old and bed ridden. When is asked to go to India he answered: "I don't believe in India shindia..... but suppose when there they decide to draw another line somewhere, what will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere, as for me, I was born here, and I will die here." (TSL: 215)

The old man has shown his love and affection for the hometown. Grandmother too is attached and having nostalgia about her home and place. In a book review Girish Karnad makes the following observation on the episode of grandmother's visit to her native town: "The grandmother's visit to the ancestral home..... is surely one of the most memorable scenes in Indian fiction. Past and future meet

across religious, political and cultural barriers in a confusion of emotions, ideas, intentions and acts leading to a shattering climax."⁵

The novel as a memory and reminiscence is told with the experience of Robi (Tridib's brother) and May Price (Tridib's beloved). Both of them along with grandmother, her sister and Tridib moved from their ancestral home to airport in 1964 in their car. Khalil rickshaw puller was carrying uncle in his rickshaw when all were crossing the market area chased by many people who tried to attack and break the windscreen of the car. People also surrounded the rickshaw and just for

the safety of old man May Price supposing herself safe as an English woman tried to save uncle. Tridib too tried to save them but the violent crowd left nothing but the dead bodies of uncle, Tridib and Khalil on the road. In a moment all things vanished leaving its undeletable marks on the consciousness of eye-witnesses as well as on the psychology of all family members.

The author had visited all the places with Tridib's eyes and imagination but during 1964's riots narrator lost his uncle. After his death he was told not to explore the reason of his death but, after 15 years when Ghosh himself visits London and finds the things as it is, related to the picture set in his mind and again lost in the memories of his mentor. Here he meets May Price and gets the real cause of Tridib's death. The loss of his uncle seems to be unbearable and uncompressible.

They all, alongwith many others, lost their lives. The question arises "But for what? People kill for freedom. But do they achieve it? It seems to be a mirage as the shadow lines that divide one people from another keep ever changing".⁶

The story begins with the year 1939, the time of World War II and presents the chronology of partition Bengal, Calcutta, Dhaka riots and communal frenzy. The futility of drawing boundaries across nations results into nothing but, despair in the form of death, violence and separation. The title itself suggests barriers and partition and futility of lines as mere shadow that tear, separate and embitter human beings and human feelings.

Thus we see here in the novel that everybody hovers over the imaginary shadow lines and has his own memories and imagination, it be Ila's imagination or of Tridib. All characters alongwith narrator participate and provide unity to the narrative. They want to cross boundary of fiction and want that everything becomes part of an imaginatively perceived experience of reality. "The Shadow Lines between people and between the countries they inhabit and call their own, too, merge and become one."⁷

In nutshell, the novel can be described as the narrator's journey backward in time, in search of the basic meaning of life. Through a child's narrative Ghosh has tried to make the reader having the same perception as felt by the narrator himself.

I. REFERENCES

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