

**Depicting Culture and Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines***

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**Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh is a prominent writer of present times, who deals in his writing with the effects of colonialism and problematizes the dominant discourse of history. He quietly contests the construction of various borders that separate nations from nations, culture from culture and people from people, etc. The politicians and revisionists' approach to history, destabilization of borders, voices of frontier, suppressed by dominant ideology point to the uniquely Ghosh's way of quest for identity. Identity cannot be merely wished away for we are inevitably influenced by our political, social and cultural activity. Social location of an individual plays an important part in the formation of his identity. Any identity gets categorized on the basis of class, gender and race. Thus, an individual has many identities like cultural, political and social. The tendency of Amitav Ghosh is towards syncretism and breaking barriers. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh tries to capture the subalterns' voices. He depicts marginalized women and writes about the colonial and nationalist history. All the texts of Ghosh are a combination of history, anthropology, autobiography, travelogue, fiction and non-fiction. In this novel, the novelist focuses on culture, identity crises and historical elements like Swadeshi movement, partition of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh, Communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Kolkata. I would explore crises of identity, and conflict in culture in *The Shadow Lines*.

**Keywords-** *Identity, Culture, Anthropology, travelogue, Syncretism*

Amitav Ghosh's second novel *The Shadow Lines* is a historical narrative which deals mainly with the geographical boundaries and national borders that separate people. The novel also records to violence that followed the riots of Dhaka and Kolkata in 1964. The title *The Shadow Lines* has many connotations; it does not only refer to borders between countries but also states and region. Ghosh chose his title to suggest that the borders which separate people are demarcated by politicians for their personal benefits and fame. When Tha'mma travels to Kolkata with her family in the plane, she

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naively asks, “Whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane” (The Shadow Lines, p. 167).

Tha'mma does not imagine any line in between the borders; she is actually looking for visible indication of demarcation. She says:

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. (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 167).

The issue of culture and identity which have always occupied human imagination in various ramifications remains a hugely disputed academic topic. The older assumptions of identity as something fixed and definite is somewhat obsolete in our times, for identity is now looked upon as fluid and ever-inchoate. The importance of culture and identity as a theoretical concept can be seen from the way it has come to be studied in various academic fields, like sociology and politico-cultural studies. This can also be gathered from how culture and identity figure as major tropes in contemporary literary discourses. In her Introduction to *Identity and Difference*, Kathryn Woodward says:

This book is about identity because identity matters, both in terms of social and political concerns within the contemporary world and within academic discourses where identity has been seen as conceptually important in offering explanations of social and cultural changes. (*Identity and Differences* edited by Kathryn Woodward p.1).

The term identity has a long history in Western and Eastern philosophical traditions, right from the ancient Greeks to contemporary analytical philosophy. With the rise of race, gender and class as the holy trinity of literary criticism and cultural studies, the issue of identity has become central in academic discourses. In the ordinary primary sense of the term, ‘identity’ refers to the name or any such recognition tag by which a person is known to others. This name embodies the identity of that man. But apart from offering certain personal information like family line the name cannot capture the identity of a person. In another words, identity is a subject position with which the person concerned actively engages. The religious identity of an individual person is determined by his religious practice which is distinct from the others. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1932- ) offers

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critical insight into the formation of cultural identity. Like other postmodern theorists, Hall argues that:

Identities are never complete, finished product; rather they are constantly in the process of construction and reconstruction. In other words Hall considers identity as becoming. (*Cultural Identity Essays* by Stuart Hall pp.1)

Tha'mma reveals the uselessness of the borders when she asks her son that how she can know if she is entering a new nation. It becomes difficult for her to comprehend the idea that the border is not on the frontier, but rather inside the airport. She cannot believe that there are no external marks to identify the borders between Dhaka and Kolkata. She is also disturbed because she has to go through many procedures to pass between these two countries. Ila had experience about the atmosphere of many places and many cultures in world on account of transfer of her father from one country to another.

The important characters of the novel include Tha'mma, unnamed narrator, Mayadebi, Jatin, Tridib, Robi, Ila, May Price, Nick Price, and Jethamosai. The novel is located in Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan, created from the partition of Pakistan), London and Kolkata (India), describing the story of three generations

In this novel Ghosh explores the meaning of contemporary India, historically variable and the feeling of cross cultural friendship. In this novel Ghosh weaves spatial dimension and temporal into a separate texture on which the unknown narrator builds his identity. The anonymous narrator is one of the protagonist-characters. "The narrator" or "I", the central figure in whole novel and the central voice powerfully controls the meaning and understanding of the novel.

The novel is divided into two parts: "Going Away" and "Coming Home". The storyline juxtaposes the lives of two families, one from India and another from England.

The point of Tha'mma's uncle Jethamoshai is clearly revealed when Tha'mma persuades him to return to Kolkata to accompany his extended family. He tells her:

I don't believe in this India-Shindia . . . Suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here. (*The Shadow Lines* p. 237).

The futility of the border lines is evident in Jethamoshai's speech as he believes in the rootedness of identities and nations. The narrator realizes the futility of the constant line drawing by the politicians which does not separate anything or anyone but only provokes acts of violence on both sides of the

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border. He expresses his notion about the uselessness of these border lines which separate countries on the geographical maps, when he says:

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of them lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates . . . the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines- so 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. (*The Shadow Lines*. p. 257).

These borders will never be separated by people who share the same history and culture. As Ghosh highlights the shadowiness of boundaries and borders, he also emphasizes the uselessness of maps. When the narrator returns from London, fifteen years after Tridib's death, he finds an old Atlas of Tridib. While *The Shadow Lines* describes the borders which divide people who share the same cultural background, narrator looks back into his childhood and interweaves his personal experiences with the major historical events of colonial and postcolonial India. The initial part of the story is set in the colonial India, when the Second World War began. The narrator was not born at that time. The novel opens with this statement of narrator, "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son Tridib". (*The Shadow Lines*. p. 3).

The narrative begins in 1939, when The Second World War started and it ends in 1964 when violence erupted in Pakistan and India. In 1939 Tridib was only of eight years and he was murdered in 1964 by a Street mob in Dhaka where he had gone to bring grand of his uncle. The narrator was born in 1952 and remains a character in whole novel without any a name because *The shadow Lines* written in autobiographical elements namely writer's/narrator's his own experience and impression about the other characters of novel. As observed by writer of events and characters, he reveals himself also. He tells the readers that why and where other characters are wrong. Some points are given by narrator about Ila, "She was in a thin blouse now; I could see the outline of her breasts and even the shadow of the mole above her nipple". (*The Shadow Lines*. p. 122).

Ila's sad experience is attributed because she had lived in many alien countries. Ila thinks about India that it does not hold any fascination, it is a backward country and full of superstitions, restrictions, and conservative outlook. Ila tells narrator, ' I want to be free of greater events. Indian

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present culture has lost the sanctity and has become shallow.’ In this perspective one incident done in night club, when Robi, Ila and Narrator go there, Ila starts flirting with two businessmen. Robi loses control over him and pushes one of them, and the party stops and the trio move out. Ila is humiliated and annoyed she speaks her opinion:

Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London?

Do you see? It’s only because I want being free.

Free of what? I said.

Free of you! She shouted back. Free of your

Bloody culture and free of all of you.

(*The Shadow Lines* p. 98).

The above passage clearly portrays the present culture of country; our present generation wants to be free-- free from relationship, free from everything and free from commitments.

The novel reaches its climax when Tridib is murdered in a street riot near his mother’s home in Dhaka. In 1979, the narrator recollects the memories of a Muslim-Hindu riot that took place in Kolkata in 1964. The beginning section of the novel ‘Going Away’ begins when a native is going away to the land of the colonizer, and ‘Coming Home’ begins when a native is coming back home from colonizer.

This novel tells the story of three generations introducing characters throbbing with life from different nations, religions and cultures. The narration is non-linear as there are diversions and digressions. There are untimely deaths, about which he elicits reports from different narrators. The first time when he heard the extremely painful news it was from his father. He could recognize the true intensity of the event only after fifteen years, from two narrators, one the brother of Tridib, Robi, and the other Tridib’s lover May Price. The terrible scene of Tridib’s death left a lasting imprint on mind of Robi. May Price was not successful in her attempt to save Jethamoshai from the rioters. All her efforts proved useless and the place was strewn with the dead bodies of Tridib, Jethamoshai and Khalil. May Price, while narrating the way in which Tridib was killed by the rioters, gradually begins to believe her guilt:

Do you think I killed him? She said.

I stayed silent; I did not want to answer her.

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I used to think so too, she said. I thought I had killed him. . . . I know now I didn't kill him, I couldn't have, if I had wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice, though real sacrifice is a mystery. (*The Shadow Lines* pp. 277).

The narrator does not collect information from just one source, but from many sources, namely narrative voices of those who are interrelated either through friendship or family. But he couldn't reach at the final conclusion about the mystery related to the death of Tridib.

In this novel recreated in effect by the grandmother's response to narrator about communal experience of Ila in London as:

Ila has no right to live there. She does not belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country... years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood . . . it was their religion. That is what it takes to make a country. ( *The Shadow Lines*. p. 85)

In this novel, sadness of inaction, failure of materialism, disappointment, constant search for identity and truth of unrequited love, etc. are depicted.

*The Shadow Lines* depicts urban middle class life like the education and professional jobs are important. The novel is in two parts 'Going Away' and 'Coming home' in this part home is central symbol as a place where one is born and brought up and deeply attached to home. We can say that Tha'mma is the central character of novel. It may be said that the novel is mainly the story of Tha'mma, so Tridib called her a modern middle-class woman. Like a modern middle-class woman, she wants to lead a trouble-free life; she believes in country's unity and she was a great patriot. She spends her maximum life in Kolkata, but she was witness of most horrible scenes like her visit of Dhaka to bring back her uncle. Tha'mma's married life proved to be short-lived, as she bore a child in 1925 and she became a widow in only 32 years old. She starts her new life in Kolkata after becoming widow as a school teacher in 1936 to fend for herself. She had more problems in her son's education because she declined the help offer of Mayadebi.

*The Shadow Lines* succeeds in depicting political perception of sociological communal violence, identical crisis which awaken the reader individual into rethinking about political solution. About Amitav Ghosh's art of novel writing introduced through *The Shadow Lines*, Novy Kapadia comments:

Amitav Ghosh shows how different culture and communities are becoming antagonist to point of no return. This is revealed as major issue of contemporary

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India. The author realizes that with the dominant tradition slowly regarding itself as only legitimate source of India's complex culture, communal antagonism will grow. (*Contrasting Strands of Political Nuances in The Shadow Lines*. p. 129)

*The Shadow Lines* deals with history, culturally significant element of Dhaka, Kolkata and London and connecting events of the past with present using memory lines. Ghosh writes:

You know, if you look at the picture at home, all that picture of dead people in Assam, the north east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura- people shot by terrorists and Separatists and army and police, you will find somewhere believed it all, that single word: everyone is doing it to be free. (*The Shadow Lines*. p. 271)

This is the most important idea of *The Shadow Lines*: communal violence interlinked with religious freedom and political issues. The major thematic concerns of novel are freedom, partition of nation and violence which is interlinked basically with the life of middle class family and variety of culture and nationality.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the development and growth of Tha'mma character encapsulate the futility and meaninglessness of political freedom which was otherwise supposed to usher in an era of peace and prosperity for all. (*Theme of Partition and Freedom: The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*. p. 138)

*The Shadow Lines* mainly represents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with the national identity. Conceivably the most important of these occurs when the narrator discovers the relation between deaths of Tridib and riots. The national identity means not only that it is imaginary. Theorists of subjectivity have argued that all identity is imaginary. The novel encompasses subjective and personal identities as well as collective social and political.

Sexual identity is referenced by the narrator's desire for his cousin Ila, who is so like the narrator that (he) could have been her twin. (*The Idea of India*. P. 38-39)

From the perspective of deconstruction, the novel undertakes such rhetoric: first, at the beginning of the novel, cultural associations show a curious reversal that accompanied the idea of blood relationship:

The truth is that I did not want to think of her as a relative ...I could not bring myself to believe that their worth in my eyes could be reduced to something so arbitrary and unimportant as a blood relationship. (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.6).

Tha'mma was accompanied by her younger sister, Mayadebi, Tridib, his younger brother Robi and Mrs. Price's daughter. Tridib and May are in a romantic relationship, in spite of not being of

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the same age. When communal riots end, they are in Dhaka. The riots of 1963-64 broke out, and in an effort to rescue May from the frenzied mob, Tridib lost his life. When Tridib died, the narrator was only 11 years old and was not able to understand the real meaning of death. Narrator goes to London after fifteen years of Tridib's death, to meet Robi and May Price who were with Tridib on that tragic day. The narrator after returning from London goes to old newspapers of 1963-64 to know about the riots and incidents related to Tridib's death. May Price's apartment is described as follows:

I had hoped to spend my last days in London visiting by my old haunt- West End Lane, Lymington Road, Stockwell, and the Emborkment Before returning to India. . . it was she who ended the desultory conversation about my thesis that had sustained us through the dinner, and said; why haven't you ever asked me how Tridib died? This is the first thing you should have asked. (*The Shadow Lines*. p. 272-75).

The novel reaches its climax when the narrator returns from London after knowing the real truth about Tridib's death. Tridib went to Teen Murti Library in New Delhi to collect newspapers related to the death of Tridib. According to Meenakshi Mukharjee:

Maps on this novel are not confined to atlas and every representation of space in the novel- rooms, hoses, neighborhood, city, country, and border-assumes a semiotic signification over and above the literal context. Thus houses have synecdochal relationships with countries in the novel. (*Maps and Mirrors: Coordinates of Meaning in The Shadow Lines*. P. 140).

The conversation between the narrator and May brings back Tridib's memories with minimal hidden truth relationship. Ila, the narrator and Robi were of about same age; they played and stayed together in childhood. Their friendship lasted till their adolescence. Tridib was killed in front of May price's eyes while trying to rescue her. The narrator writes about May:

Do you know, I said. That's exactly how you used to look when I first met you. Do you remember? I was looking up at you then, just as I am now . . . I call still see what May did next as though it were a film running through my head in slow motion. (*The Shadow Lines*. p. 180-81)

May tells the narrator that whether she was in love with him or not was a dilemma, but it was certain that Tridib loved her because when he was at his last moment of life he said to her, "You are my love, my own, true love, my love across-the-seas; what do I have to do to keep you with me? But it's just a whisper." (*The Shadow Lines*. p. 193 ).

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May was a girl of extraordinary sensitivity. Her presence of mind was well developed regarding right and wrong. In a simple explanation about Tridib's death, Tridib acts on May's standards, her rule of what is right and what is not. May forces Tridib to stop his car and save a dying dog on the road side.

Postcolonial term is applied to cultures affected by the imperial process. It started just after colonialism but not necessarily after decolonization. Post colonialism is a complex cultural process which represents particular period of history as shown by ideas, belief or spirit of the time. It is a discourse that offers different perspectives on colonialism. The Postcolonial identity of marginal groups, their oppression and exploitation and loss of culture and language are predominant issues related to post colonialism. Amitav Ghosh writes as follows:

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

This highlights one of the most important characteristic features of his writing. Amitav Ghosh also deals in *The Shadow Lines* issues of identity vs nationhood. He dismantles of history on the front of nationality, language and culture. The novel's representation of the past merges fluidly with the present. The novel deals with historical elements namely World War, the freedom movement, and the partition of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh.

Tha'mma got overpowered by her thoughts and works. She takes up a mission in her old age that is to bring her uncle Jethamosai in Kolkata from Dhaka. At first Jethamosai fails to recognize Tha'mma but when Tridib reminds him, he recognizes Tha'mma. Jethamosai, Tridib and Khalil, the rickshaw-puller, get killed in the communal riots when they are trying to come to India from Dhaka. This tragic incident affects Tha'mma's psyche. She talking about co-existence among people of different countries and donates her golden chain to the fund for war.

Tha'mma wanted to become a revolutionary and she cooks food and washes her clothes because they were fighting to country's enemy. When the narrator asks her if she would kill the English magistrate, Tha'mma replies, "I would have been frightened. . . But I would have prayed for strength, and good willing, yes, I would have killed him, I was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free" (*The Shadow Lines*. p. 43).

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The relationship between the narrator and Ila was only one sided: Ila was not interested in the narrator but he wants Ila. Its main cause may be middle-class family background of narrator because Ila belongs to wealthy family background. The other significant reason may be child-psychology that the narrator wants to know about death of Tridib. Tridib and the narrator were very close as Tridib was his friend, guide and philosopher. Tridib's influence on the narrator brings him to know about the death of Tridib, "I felt nothing – shock, no grief. I did not understand that I would never see him again; my mind was not large enough to accommodate so complete on absence" (*The Shadow Lines*. p.263).

Such type of feeling is also experienced by many children. Here ironical fate work is a matter of love, pain comes from inner mind because love to death person (Tridib). Real love is a different emotion that centers on a single individual. Such type individual could be brother, friend or any one. It is a wrong idea that love exists only for the opposite sex or the suitable partner.

Love has been misunderstood and has a wide scope. Another perspective of love is that it demands suspension of logic. Logic and love are mutual enemies; love also goes against the other rationalities- justice and equality. Here it may be appropriate to say that the narrator fails to get back in the same measure which he offers others. May Price explain the meaning of Tridib's life?

I was jealous, achingly jealous, as only a child can be, because it had always been my unique privilege to understand Tridib, and that at the Victoria Memorial I know I had lost that privilege; somehow may had stolen it from me (*Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study*. p. 32).

Tridib's relation was strained with Tha'mma, because Tha'mma had never changed her rule. The narrator explains about the connection between human tendency and love to "enumerate and quantify (*The Shadow Lines* p. 95).

Here *The Shadow Lines* expresses the complexity of love that love can never be "purchased" with gift: it just happens. This novel suggests multiple ideas, and deals with trans-border situations. The title of novel suggests that all lines are shadow lines, not real, so only divide people without uniting them.

Our present generation lives for their own self--that seems to be their motto, so naturally these crazy generations never taste of the nectar of true love, which demands surrender without any conditions. Probably the disturbing and separating feature in *The Shadow Lines* is the tension between Hindu and Muslim communities as a result of communal hatred and partition.

## Conclusion

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Amitav Ghosh has established himself as one of the prominent writers of Indian English novel. His works have earned him critical acclaim in Indian subcontinent, America, Europe and some more countries. Amitav Ghosh's major novels have been translated and rewarded-literary prizes. His Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel, *The Shadow Lines* is led to critical debate in India. Two parts of this book namely Going Away and Coming Home are very significant embodying coming and going, arriving and leaving, meeting and parting. Going Away starts with the marriage of Ila and going to honeymoon. Coming Home starts with the retirement and farewell of Tha'mma. The generalization of violence and riots enables Amitav Ghosh to deliberately avoid harsh historical and political realities. Amitav Ghosh seeks to elaborate on the larger politics of post colonialism in affirming the identity of ordinary people and their cultural rootedness.

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