



The Shadow Lines – The Mirror of Multi-Cultures

Dr.M.Nageswara Rao , Lecturer in English, Sri Y.N.College (A), Narsapur- 534275,
West Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh, India.

T. Abraham Lecturers in English, Sri Y.N.College (A), Narsapur- 534275, West
Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh is a well-known diasporic Indian novelist. His famous novel, The Shadow Lines is the mirror of multi-cultures. He attempts to create an image of global inclusiveness in which various cultures intermingle with one another to create a single unified global picture. The women characters in the novel – Tha'mma, Ila and May – from different cultures and generations, provide an apt study of this dilemma. Each has an incomplete understanding of the true nature of freedom. It is the narrator's point of view that is paramount. He interacts with each one of them and one gets to know of one's limited vision and one's idiosyncrasies and foibles by watching them through his eyes. In the process, the theme of freedom is explored, developed and assessed.

Key words: global picture. , Shadow Lines, location, ideology

Narration

Amitav Ghosh is a well-known diasporic Indian novelist. His famous novel, *The Shadow Lines* is the mirror of multi-cultures. He attempts to create an image of global inclusiveness in which various cultures intermingle with one another to create a single unified global picture. Ghosh becomes the citizen of the World as he is a globetrotter. It is helpful to look at the issue from a cultural perspective, for the novel clearly shows that cultural formations are the sites within which one's nationality or individual identity may be constructed. Surely, the narrator, Tridib and the grandmother – despite their differences in age, location, ideology and varying perspectives on reality, share an innate Indianness, even a conceptual formulation of nationalism, which Ila, the Indian located in the west cannot envisage, and so cannot be a part of. Here what Benedict Anderson has to say about the nation is quite illuminating. "It (the nation) is an imagined political community [...]. It is imagined because the members of even

the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 15).

Is she the same westernised Ila, who had been outraged when Robi did not let her dance with a lecherous stranger, saying, "you can do what you like in England but here there are certain things you cannot do. That is our culture, that's how we live" (97), and she had rushed out in anger, shouting. "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free" (98).

The women characters in the novel – Tha'mma, Ila and May – from different cultures and generations, provide an apt study of this dilemma. Each has an incomplete understanding of the true nature of freedom. It is the narrator's point of view that is paramount. He interacts with each one of them and one gets to know of one's limited vision and one's idiosyncrasies and foibles by watching them through his



eyes. In the process, the theme of freedom is explored, developed and assessed.

Ila is unwilling to accept India as her home, as she has never really lived there and cannot identify herself with its culture. She also knows that her adopted country is not keen to accept her. She is an alien, an outsider and the desire for acceptance produces tension in her. Eventually, in her effort to establish her roots in the west, she marries Nick, an Englishman. He is disloyal to her soon after, yet much against her wish, she decides to shrug off his waywardness and stay in England and continue to be his wife. Ila's disillusionment brings into focus the strengths and limitations of the two cultures. Ila finds Indian culture too restrictive and too conservative. But in India, generally speaking, institutions like marriage are considered stable. Ila rejects everything Indian, but eventually she finds herself 'clinging to her uncle Robi and the narrator – the members of her family from India who have shared a common loss, the death of Tridib'.

Tridib, too, had dreamt of "a better place, a place without borders and countries" (205). He was happiest in neutral, impersonal places – coffee houses, street corners – as though he did not seem to want to get too close to the people he associated with. A few weeks before his most tragic death at the hands of a mob in 'Dhaka, May sees an injured dog by the roadside and threatens to jump out of the moving car to come to its aid. "Let it be, May, Tridib pleaded. There's nothing we can do". But May is shocked at his passivity. "Can't you help a bit? She said. All you're good for is words. Can't you ever do anything?" (191). He assists in putting to death an already dying dog, to relieve it of its pain.

And it was unfortunate that not being rooted in Indian culture, she could not understand the concept of a veranda – a place which connected one to the outside world. As against hers, Tridib's concept of space was vast and comprehensive. He once told the narrator that one could never know anything except through "a pure, painful and primitive desire", which meant that one strove "beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror" (32). It was a kind of transcendental space, which partook of all times and all places – to which one could orient oneself, provided one desired keenly.

The figure of the grandmother, for instance, draws on a strong cultural tradition of reverence for elders. The aged also play an inspirational or redemptive role by rescuing the young protagonist from indecision or desperation, as one sees in the bonding relationship between Tha'mma and the narrator of *The Shadow Lines*. Jethamoshai declares that he does not believe in 'India Shindia', the truth of the matter is that his disbelieving will not make it disappear. The partition of the subcontinent was a reality, and not a piece of fiction. Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines*, focuses on the trauma of individual lives caught in a changing world where new nations are formed and old identities have to arbitrarily replace by new notions of national identity, causing cultural and physical displacements from old contexts into new ones. The protagonist of the novel, Tridib and his English girlfriend visit Dhaka. Tridib is killed by a mob during a muslim riot there. It is this traumatic experience which severely affects the



lives of almost all the major characters in the novel.

In his article, "Are there good and bad nationalisms" David Brown has pointed out the illiberal atavistic cast of ethno – cultural nationalism, and the progressive nature of 'civic' nationalism. Now, in *The Home and The World* (1915), Tagore anticipates and projects the 'good' and 'bad' nationalism into Nikhil and Sandip. Couching his criticism in the figure of the extremist Sandip, Tagore contrasts him with Nikhil the liberal humanist and 'civic' nationalist. Both Tagore and Ghosh eschew cultural nationalism, the former from a realisation of its divisive potential in multi – cultural, multi-religious social context, the latter from the perspective of globality.

Ila's situation is the result of a failed cosmopolitanism. She does not fit in either the restrictive upper class Bengali society, or in the easy and casual promiscuity of her society in London, though she is viewed by her group exotically as "our own upper-class Asian Marxist" (107). None of her aspirations, namely, her fond hope of winning Nick's loyalty to herself and her attempted identification with European culture, get realised. Her supposed superior and privileged position as the inheritor of a tradition of radical struggle from Tresawson and his friends, and her confident assumption of being a dominant actor, in the future, on the world's political scene, are undercut by the narrator. Ila's own experience of racism belies her statements about her 'free' state. And when she condemns Tha'mma as a fascist, Ila, it is implied, views Europe as a group of free states, upholding an ideal 'civic' nationalism – a society where anyone can "integrate into

the common culture, regardless of race or colour" (Kymlicka 542). When Ila and the narrator play 'Houses' under the table in the old family house at Raibazar, Ila cannot fathom the need for a veranda. The narrator, for his own part cannot imagine a house without a veranda – "otherwise how will we know what's going on outside?" (77). Meenakshi Mukherjee refers to Ila's inability to understand the need for verandas and terraces in her essay "Maps and Mirrors" in *The Shadow Lines*. Professor Mukherjee interprets this as "underlining the essential difference between the cousins". She says:

Terraces and verandas are traditionally female spaces in our culture and Ila's inability to comprehend their importance may at a realistic level be attributed to her upbringing in other countries while at a metaphoric level it highlights her total self-absorption (Mukherjee 262).

Ghosh considers the world as 'a global village' of men and women where they should be trying to reach towards one another, irrespective of their culture and race. Indian culture is not in any way less idealistic than the English. Ghosh unintentionally proves it. It will be a sad mistake to assume that the western culture can displace thousands of years of our Indian civilisation, as it gets embodied, say, in a moment of greatness that Tridib clinched – Ghosh presents a limited vision in terms of higher middle-class people, who work in foreign missions and agencies and have contacts abroad. Some of these characters may seem to feel concerned for Indians – for instance, when Mayadebi's husband talks to the narrator's mother about the shortage of kerosene and the high price of fish in Calcutta, but then, it is only a part of his polite posturing. It creates the



impression as if he is really interested in people's welfare. The novel is more a study of cross – cultural relationship between India and England than anything else. It seems to conform to 'humanity is one' as his protagonist Tridib, an Indian, falls in love with May; and Ila – again an Indian, marries Nick Price, an Englishman. The unnamed narrator, of course, is friendly with May.

Thus Ghosh brings out multi-cultures in this novel, *The Shadow Lines* as he has great experience of travelling over different countries in the World as a student, scholar and an author.

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