

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

HISTORICAL INTROSPECTION OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *SHADOW LINES*

BHAVNA MANN

Research Scholar, I.P.University, Sector-16, Dwarka, Delhi



BHAVNA MANN

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh is prominent Indian writer who has worked both on fiction and non-fiction. His works include novels such as *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Ghosh's second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is beautifully written. It reminds of Rushdie in terms of its formal experimentations with geography and chronology. However, unlike Rushdie, it is written in an understated, condensed prose that comes close to poetry. The themes of this novel revolve around arbitrariness of partition and the invention of the past. It moves between India and the UK, Calcutta and London, the Second World War and present.

Key words: Partition, Nationalism, Public history, Private, History, Nostalgia

INTRODUCTION

Exploring history in context of literature is an interesting psycho social exercise. History is not only about 'great' events and personalities but entails a lot more of a web. History sometimes tends to take elite routes. The powerful sections of the society may tend to dominate the way history gets represented, circulated and accentuated. However, Ghosh in his works highlights the voices that may be unheard of. Voices of the marginalized sections of the society particularly find their expressions in his work. For instance, his novel *Shadow Lines*, entails the tale of Thamma about partition seen from her perspective. Similarly, in *Hungry Tides*, Kusum also a victim of partition, has her own tale of saving lives of other people. Individual lives, the challenges they faced in their own seemingly meaningless contexts, their heroic struggles, often tend to be ignored or forgotten as trivia.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF *SHADOW LINES*

Ghosh reinvents history in his own unique style. He beautifully juxtaposes personal and mass history with different layers of analysis. Major events in history can create extremely significant or catastrophic consequences in private individual

lives. However most historians lack in the time or efforts to bring these voices into mainstream historical pool of knowledge. For instance, in *Shadow Lines*, Tridib is a victim of riots. Death in a family is a huge catastrophic event. Such a big event in an individual or his/her family's life is represented in newspaper in a single impersonal line of '29 killed in riot'... History is impersonal as it is vast and may ignore the individual but such expressions are found in Ghosh's work. Ghosh on the contrary has given time and space to such individual characters in his novels. He aims at a cathartic vent for these characters through his work. Ordinary, mundane, everyday people, their lives, challenges and concerns help us analyse big events through their eyes.

Set against the outbreak of World War II (1939) and the post partition communal riots of 1964 in some part of India and Bangladesh (East Pakistan) in the foreground, the fictional narrative in *Shadow Lines* is interwoven with history and validated by actual experiences in the lives of major characters. It is this intersection of the public and private domain, which enables the narrator to adopt an interrogative mode and speculate about the

premises on which historical events can be known and accessed.

The rapidly shifting narrative brings out the image of a young boy in a well defined economic and social setting that can be identified with the Bengali Bhadrak, bound in a web of family ties and relationships. The young narrator is firmly located in the matrix of extended family relationships spanning three generations. While Ila, Tridib and the grandmother in particular leave an indelible impact on him, his open parents appear peripheral to his journey of discovery and self knowledge. For the most they seem to provide him with a secure middle class background and the opportunity for further studies in London. The grandmother wields the maximum influence on the narrator through her stories of life in Dhaka, and the freedom struggle in Bengal. Her responses to notions of freedom and nationalism raise questions about the desirability and meaninglessness of nationalism. Her personal desire to have been a part of the resistance and terrorist movement in Bengal shows her views on colonial power and the understanding of the nation in terms of the bloodshed:

They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi they become a family born of the same people of blood. (Cited in Bannerji 42).

His critically acclaimed skills of imagination and analysis of private, individual lives are beautifully woven around actual historical events. *The Shadow Lines* presents historical dates going back to 1939. The dates are significant not for an examination of historical events but for the reconstruction of events of public history and shaping discourses on the narrator. The recovery of history is made partially through personal memory, a memory buried in the space between public domain and private understanding. This history includes immediate personal experiences as may be found in the following example. When the narrator visits Prices in England, he demonstrates his familiarity with the people and the material objects because he has imaginatively encountered them all through Tridib's

stories. Another example is the photograph of Dan Mike and Franceska which encapsulates a moment in time. It validates the existence of history that is reconstituted through the narrator's memory and retrieved through this text. History is thus documented and foregrounded through personal perceptions and memories. Tridib, Ila and the narrator, all pursue disciplines like archaeology and history. So these characters are supposed to have a historical sense. But the elucidation of the text takes place largely through the perception and conferral of the meaning largely by the narrator himself (Bannerji 44)

According to famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud every author's work carries an imprint of his/her unconscious. Interestingly in Ghosh's work there is a recurring concept of nostalgia. Almost all the individual characters have experiences of alien lands and a sense of cutoff from their own soil. There is a strong urge to connect back to their original roots. It can be psychologically a very distressing feeling of not belonging anywhere which Ghosh explores in his novels.

Ghosh himself seems to be a 'wanderer' in his individual life. He was born in Calcutta, settled in New York and received D.Phil. from Egypt. He continues to travel back and forth to India. His works at a subtle level may be an expression of his unconscious self of having a connect and disconnect from his own native soil. He probably has a 'exploring' identity which also reverberates through his characters. For instance, the grandmother or Thamma, is haunted by the reminiscences of her childhood memories in Dhaka even as she is living in Calcutta for the last nearly two decades. Ghosh reconstructs events as accurately and carefully as any historian putting real people in imaginary situations, and fancy conditions in documentary narratives, thereby augmenting the significance of historical events by plausible and internally consistent depictions

For historians women are no separate entities in their records. Ghosh, however gives his female characters full creative freedom for their narrations and catharsis. History should be best studied and analyzed in a gender sensitive perspective. Bearings of historical happenings have

different psycho social effect on the minds of men and women. The central character in the novel is Tha'mma, the grandmother. In fact the novel is her story. Tridib calls her a modern middle-class woman. She wants to lead a trouble free life like all women. As a great patriot, she believes in the unity of the country but turns out to be a kind of rebel because the fate denies to her the kind of life she wants to live. A major part of her life is spent in Calcutta but is witness to a most horrible scene when she visits Dhaka to bring back her uncle. Her aged uncle and her nephew met a tragic end. Tha'mma narrates her story (121-26) to the narrator. Born in Dhaka, she was a part of

...a big joint family then, with everyone living and eating together: her grandparents, her parents, she and Mayadebi, her Jethamoshai –her father's elder brother–and his family, which included three cousins of roughly her own age.... In his presence everyone, including her father and Jethamoshai, spoke in whispers, with their heads down and their eyes fixed firmly on the floor. But when he left the house for the district courts, where he practiced as an advocate, the house would erupt with the noisy games of the five cousins. Every evening the five children would be led by their mothers into his study, where they would each have to recite their alphabets –Bengali first and then English –with their hands held out, palm downwards, and he would rap them on the knuckles with the handle of his umbrella every time they made a mistake. If they cried they were rapped on their shins. (Ghosh 121)

After the death of her grandfather, the ancestral home had to be partitioned. She came to know about the terrorist movements in Bengal which was the nationalist movement to gain freedom from the British occupation: "about secret terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantar and all their off-shoots, their clandestine networks, and the home-made bombs with which they tried to assassinate British officials and policemen; and a little about the

arrests, deportations and executions with which the British had retaliated" (Ghosh 37).

At the time she was studying B.A (History) in Dhaka and developed interest in personalities like Khudiram Bose and BaghaJatin. She had even imagined herself as a revolutionary. A shy young man who studied in her class was even arrested for planning to kill an English magistrate. He was deported to the Andamans cellular jail.

She'd been expecting a huge man with burning eyes and a lion's mane of a beard, and there he was, all the while, at the back of her class, sitting shyly by himself. She could so easily have talked to him. He would have been handsome too, she had decided later, if only he would shave that beard of his. Lying in her bed, she would think to herself – if only she had known, if only she had been working with him, she would have warned him somehow, she would have saved him, she would have gone to Khulna with him too, and stood at his side, with a pistol in her hands, waiting for that English magistrate.... (Ghosh 39)

The central concern in the novel is the meaning of what happens. People and events encountered in childhood are brought into focus, when the adult narrator views from a perspective of cumulative knowledge. The novel also highlights the debate on partition. According to Khushwant Singh (1998), "It's the best work on partition. It operates at many levels –memories, boundaries et al that one is totally soaked in his narrative." The novel discusses the nation of nationalism in-depth. It may be noticed that the grandmother's idea of nationalism is quite different from its dictionary meaning. The novel undercuts nationalism by questioning the official version of history on which the idea of a nation is constructed. The novel, however, does not offer solutions to the problems of nationalism raised in it. According to Hutchinson and Brass:

Nationalism was, first of all, a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty. The people must be liberated – that is, free from any external constraints; they must determine their own destiny and be

masters in their own house; they must control their own sources; they must obey only their inner voice. But that entailed fraternity. The people must be united; they must dissolve all internal differences; they must be gathered together in a single historic territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture.

This is quite true of the writers, especially of fiction. Ghosh alternates between past and present to place the self in "history" that unfolds the full meaning of present while giving an insight into future. The story in the novel is told in the first person. The Calcutta locale and the environs of the upper middle class family are portrayed with authenticity and vividness, while the protagonist remains a vague, undefined, passive, and unobtrusive person throughout the story. The story moves back and forth in an extremely unusual but effective association of incident.

CONCLUSION

To conclude historical analysis is enmeshed in a complex web of factors pertaining to individual and societal, cultural and social. History has its own distinct bearings at an individual and mass level. It may also happen that the history of the 'elites' may be more heard of and that of the marginalized be a little or more ignored. A gender based perspective to a deeper study of history is also important as the subjective realities of men and women differ significantly. Ghosh's novel provides brilliant scope of analysis on these interwoven threads.

Works Cited

- Bannerjee, Premindha. *The Narrator and the Chronicling of the Self in The Shadow Lines*. In Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines: Critical Essays*. Edited by Arvind Chowdhary Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: The Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Hutchinson, John and Paul R. Brass. "Elite Competition and Nation-Formation," *Nationalism*, ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1994. 4.
- Singh, Kushwant. "Traveller in the Tortured Orient." *The Hindustan Times*, 16May, 1998.