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COMPLEXITIES OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S  
*THE SHADOW LINES*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to find out the complexities in the relations in the modern world due to changes in the political lines and human emotions. Amitav Ghosh depicts beautifully in this novel about the changes that come in the life of his characters. He uses his skill of recounting the history through flashback technique. He appoints the narrator to tell the story whose identity is deliberately hidden till the end of the novel. Although his identity is hidden but we realize that Amitav Ghosh himself is telling the story in disguise of narrator. He sometimes peeps into the past and sometimes lives in present. The narrator's movement is simultaneous in past and present. He tells the story of past on behalf of his mentor uncle Tridib. He is confused and unable to describe the relationships between him, Tridib, Ila and his grandmother. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is magnificent novel that weaves fact and fiction in a complex and absorbing way that covers almost half a century of Indian history. He discards the ambiguity of boundaries and borders that divide countries and his people. In his views these lines uproot the people from their home, relations and have to face the pain of exile. *The Shadow Lines* is the story of three generations spread in three countries as a result of historical changes. These changes bring the confusion and trauma in the lives of his characters.

**Key words:** Confusion, uprooting, relationships, nationality.

Amitav Ghosh is a true anthropologist and a brilliant story teller. His novels bring him praise and recognition from his readers, as he unravels one truth after another in his novels with a twist of fiction without any alteration in the historical truth. He uses new technique to tell a story by the use of memory, as we can read in *The Hungry Tide* where Nirmal uses his narrative to tell the story and history of Sundarbans to Kanai or in *The Shadow Lines* where the unknown narrator combines the histories with the help of his memory. He narrates each story carefully, holds the attention of the reader and steadily moves to the end. His anthropological

research and the outstanding knowledge about the history, culture, food habits, clothes etc. impress the readers.

The narrator tells the story in layers; his story lingers between past and the present. He looks into past with the eyes of Tridib, his grandmother and Ila. We come to know about the private and public life of the characters in the novel, with the help of the recollections of memory of the narrator. In *The Shadow Lines* the action takes place in three countries – India, Bangladesh and England. The novel is divided into two parts: "Going Away" and

"Coming Home". The narrator lingers between past and present and from the present to past. We can interpret "Going Away" as "Going away from self" and "Coming Home" can be interpreted as "Coming back into the self". Narrator expressed "Coming and Going" as a part of family's secret lore.

As P.D. Dube quotes-

One is constantly plagued by doubts in the novel as to whether the characters are going to Calcutta or coming to Calcutta or coming to London or going back to London. The two parts of the novel indicate this enigma of 'non-belonging'. When the dwelling place is uncertain, borders also compound the problem"<sup>1</sup>

Joshi observes, that the novel is arranged in such a way that important incidents come after a "Prelude as if to provide a catalyst for the narrator's memories"<sup>2</sup>

Ghosh employs the narrator to narrate the story who frequently travels between Calcutta and London in 1981. The story contains many layers of multiple stories-stories of Tha'mma and her sister Mayadebi, Tridib and Robi, Tridib and May, Ila and Nick Price whom she marries.

The novel begins in a small flat of urban middle class family of the narrator. Like any other middle class family, narrator's family considers education and professional job as most important thing. Urban middle class people are addicted to work because for them profession and education is necessary to earn them 'bread and butter'. They become obedient, hard worker and stay at the side of the boss, as going against him will cause them trouble that would affect their livelihood. But this class of society affects badly when any misfortune strikes them. Life become unbearable for them, it loses all its meaning and comes to a standstill.

The two parts "Going Away" and "Coming Home" symbolizes a place where one is born and brought up, feels deeply attached to it when a person stays away from home, for a long time, then this attachment grows more. He either goes away from his home or comes home. We find that Tha'mma in *The Shadaw Lines* goes away from home

in Calcutta or Dhaka or come home to Calcutta or Dhaka.

Tha'mma is the central character of the novel. We can call her modern middle class woman and like all middle class women she wants to lead a simple tension free life, but her life changes when her husband dies due to sickness. Being a stubborn and self-respected person, she refused any help from her rich sister Mayadebi and takes a job as a school teacher in Calcutta. She spends her most of the life in sub urban area of Calcutta. She witnessed a most horrible scene when she was her way to take her aged uncle back to Calcutta, where a mad mob killed her uncle, her nephew Tridib and a poor rickshaw puller Khalil. Thamma told the narrator about Dhaka and her family.

After her grandfather's death, quarrel begins between her father and Jethamoshai and house was partitioned. Tha'mma grew up and started going to college with Mayadebi where she came to know about the freedom fighters like Khudiram Bose and Bagha Jatin in Bengal who were trying their best to free India from the clutches of the British imperial regime. In that age she also fell in romance with the idea to become a revolutionary.

She wanted to contribute her best in the freedom struggle by helping revolutionaries, cooking food, washing clothes or delivering messages etc. But her all romantic revolutionary dreams came to an end when she was married and went off to Burma. But her happy married life also proved to be short lived; she became widow at the age of thirty two. Being self-respected person she never took any help from her relatives or her rich sister. She was self made person, fighting hard for her livelihood and bringing up her son (narrator's father). She lived in one room flat in Bhowanipore. She always dreams of "the old house, her parents, Jethamoshai, her childhood" (154). She wanted to go back to her house in Dhaka but circumstances never let her to go back. She had many problems to face like educating her son.

Ghosh describes Tha'mma's character, as a typical middle class woman, suffering and facing every hindrance bravely. She is the bravest character in the novel. With all her peculiarities, she

is very sincere, hard working and time-conscious lady for whom wasting time is unbearable offence. Her typical middle class thinking is revealed when she refuses any help from Mayadebi. As the narrator thinks –

----- the fears she had accumulated in the long years after my grandfather's premature death, when she had had to take her schoolteaching job in order to educate my father. I could guess at a little of what it had cost her then to refuse her rich sister's help and of the wealth of pride it had earned her, and I knew intuitively that all that had kept her from agreeing at once was her fear of accepting anything from anyone that she could not return in exact measure. (41)

She is the true picture of many unnamed and unrecognized women who are responsible for the sustenance of family in India. She is very strict in nature towards her son and daughter-in-law but she loves and is concerned about the narrator (her grandson) and never let him to spoil his character. She rebukes him to worship Ila when he visits her on hearing the news of her illness. The narrator was stunned when he comes to know that just before her death, she writes a letter to the principal of the college about her grandson's unethical conduct of visiting cheap women in Delhi. Somehow the narrator was able to dodge the principal, blaming that the sickness might have affected his grandmother's sense. The narrator was shocked-

"I have never understood how she learnt of the women I had visited couple of times, with my friends; nor do I know how she saw that I was in love with Ila so long before I dared to admit it to myself" (115)

The narrator's childhood memories are the major themes of *The Shadow Lines* that lingers between past and present. He was greatly influenced by his uncle Tridib. He looks the world through his eyes. He was his role model and mentor as he tries to be like Tridib. The narrator's identity takes shape with the memories of Tridib. The reader constructs his image and physical traits by the events and memories narrated by him.

The character of Tha'mma is simple but in some places she is complex in nature. She cuts off herself from the outer world after her retirement; only narrator was allowed to see her. She is very concerned and conscious in spending her time till her retirement, but after that she becomes nervous when her time started 'stinking'. She started thinking about the childhood, young age and the memories she spent in her big house in Dhaka. She came to know about her uncle, Jethamoshai, who is still alive. She takes it as her mission to take the old man home. She was unaware about the changing political values, partition and the riots that are taking place in Bangladesh.

She was worried when she was told that the border isn't on the frontier.

It's right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things" (186)

She felt more nervous to know that she is much more a foreigner in her birth place than May, as she does not need visa to come Dhaka. She visits Dhaka in her memories. Ghosh is successful in painting the human psychology in every character that is the base of every fiction.

The narrator's childhood is filled with complexes when his relatives come with different stories from different places and he is unable to establish any blood relation with them. He says –

"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. (3)

That is why he fails to establish any relation with Ila. He felt inferiority complex when he compares himself with Nick. Ila says-

"He is very big. Much bigger than you: much stronger, too. He's twelve, three years older than us" (61)

He feels envious when he encounters Nick for the first time in London. His feeling towards Ila is one sided. He loves Ila, but she is unaware of his feeling. She is attracted towards Nick since her childhood. She thinks Nick as her hero who will save her from

all harm. She tells the narrator a story where he saves her from a girl who humiliates her on racial ground. The narrator reveals the truth of this story by May-

And I know that Nick didn't stop to help Ila. He ran all the way back.....

Nick didn't want to be seen with Ila. Ila didn't have any friends in school.(93)

Narrator was very close to Tridib as he was his philosopher, guide and friend. His personality influenced the narrator very much. Yet he was not shocked after hearing Tridib's death –

"I felt nothing no shock, no grief. I did not understand that I would never see him again: my mind was not large enough to accommodate so complete an absence" (293)

The narrator's childhood innocence was unable to relate and understand the word 'death' to 'Tradib' as he is always in his memories and memories never dies. For him the word 'dead' is associated with films and comic books.

Love is the irony of fate. Love gives pain and isolation. Love is a feeling without definition that centers on a single individual. The single individual might be our family member or even our friend. It is not true to say that love exists only between mating partner or the opposite sex. Love exists there, where logic is abandoned. Love cannot exist with logic, as they are natural enemies. Love is the game of irrationality, uncertainty, excitement and confusion. Sometimes lover wants to live with his beloved and sometimes he wants to die for her. Control over his emotion got disturbed. From this point we can say that the narrator is in love with his grandmother, Tridib and Ila, but he never dare to express his feelings. It is not true to say that the narrator's love for Ila is a platonic love. He also wanted to have physical relation with her. Many times Ila created such circumstances unknowingly that the narrator wants her. Most of the time, he controls himself, as he does not want to lose her friendship. Tha'mma calls her whore who wants to live her life without any values and openness like foreigner. In her views good girls do not behave like

Ila. Defending Ila against any allegation infuriates his grandmother. He was blind in one sided love with Ila.

In love the reciprocity of love is must, but our narrator is an unfortunate fellow. He fails to get back the love in the same measure that he shows to others. Tridib was his hero, but May exists between him and Tridib. His grandmother's strict nature and her rules strained their relationship. His secret love towards Ila and visiting prostitutes made his grandmother angry –

'I jerked my head out of her hands. She met my gaze and smiled. I could not believe that this withered, wasted, powerless woman was the same person that I had so much loved and feared' (112)

He loved Ila since his childhood but there is no reciprocity, as she was not aware of his feeling. It is due to their social difference. Ila belongs to elite community, where as the narrator belongs to a middle class family. In London he wanted to spend most of the time with her, see her and even wanted to express his feeling, but all in vain. Complexity of love is explained in *The Shadow Lines*. Love is the feeling that comes from the bottom of the heart. It can't be won by gifts. Love purchased by gifts and luxuries is short lived. Sacrifice is the outcome of Love. The narrator tries his best to draw Ila's attention but he knew that he will get her cool reaction. Even her cold and inhospitable tone didn't irritate him. His dreams shattered when she married Nick. She is an opportunist. She always tries to take advantage of his love and care. Nick is also an opportunist. He is without job and money. He married Ila only for money, as she is the only child of a rich family. It was very surprising that Ila belongs to an aristocrat family still she marries an unemployed and wastrel person who does not love her. Although he is conscious about his race, still he is with her for money. He deceives Ila by having physical relation with many other women.

Amitav Ghosh conveys the idea of being uprooting herself / himself to the other country from the point of view of Tha'mma. Living in another country only for studies or making livelihood is not

an offence but living in other country only for freedom is a great offence according to Tha'mma.

Ila does not have any fascination for India. She looks India as a backward country having conservative outlook and full of superstitions. She wants to lead a life of freedom and without a value. She has no faith in relations, sense of responsibility and sense of dignity. She is ashamed for being an Indian. Every Indians feels proud when anyone asks his/her nationality in a foreign country. Being an Indian is like a blessing of god and every Indian wants to take rebirth on this pious land, but Ila is different. To discard her nationality, she lives in London sharing a flat with a bearded Irish Computer Scientist, a girl from Leicester and a young Ghanian. In her illusion she regards herself as one of them but she was regarded by them as a decorative piece and a guest in the flat. She thinks that living abroad alone with strangers will make her superior to the narrator and other Indians. She is a coward, though she pretends to be a bold girl. She flees away from her family in order to be free. She has only bookish knowledge and her practical knowledge is nil. She trusts on Nick who is vulpine and impudent in nature. She believes in western culture which is hollow and pit of dirt. The incident in the night club illustrates her nature clearly, when she started flirting with two businessmen in front of her uncle Robi and the narrator and when Robi tried to stop her she is very annoyed and humiliated.

Ila believes in internationalism, views liberty differently. She escapes to England in order to be free. Ila is the representative of those young Indian folk who are contemptuous of what is going on in their country who instead to set things right, close their eyes and escape from it. They think lives constrictive in their own country. They live under the illusion that west provides them haven of freedom. Soon Ila also realizes, but dare not to admit that she is really not free even in England. Her life is also constrictive due to racial prejudice and she is unable to enjoy the same freedom as any native would enjoy. The Prices and her close friends might have accepted her whole heartedly but her bitter experience as a school girl due to racial prejudice speaks about the society at large. Even Nick Price, whom she loved, was ashamed once of

being seen with an Indian by his friends. After marriage she has to face bitter truth of his unfaithfulness.

As Murari Prasad observes, "Ila's preference for Nick Price and her later disappointment expose her wobbly transplantation in the western culture. Her dislocation stems from her penchant for illusions interface."<sup>3</sup>

Our new generation is like Ila, who wanted to be free from any commitments, free from relations, free from duties towards their parents and even towards their country. They wanted to enjoy their life at any cost. They think physical enjoyment as a true love, but they are far away from the nectar of true love that does not demand the boundary of bodies. This love is spiritual that makes a man, a perfect human being and the earth, the better place to live in. This is a gentle shower of bliss that soothes the suffering of human being.

*The Shadow Lines* is the true evidence of dirty politics. Riot and tensions between Hindu and Muslim have been sowing the seeds of communal hatred, partition, destruction of private and public property, murder and violence. Mere being a spectator is no problem but when we caught in such a circumstances we understand the real problem. Effect of riots panic, fear, rumour and hatred deteriorate the situation. The children response to these riots quickly although they are unable to understand the reason but effect is long lasting.

Ghosh's novel shows the impact of politics on the lives of common people and their relationships. Ghosh is a historian and historical events provide raw material to study the historical truths e.g the meaning of nationalism and politics in the modern world. He uses references to house, photographs, maps, road names and advertisements.

The story begins in Colonial India in the year 1939 when the narrator was not born. This year is significant for the outbreak of Second World War and its destructive effect. After twenty one year the story of Tridib and May and Mayadebi's visit to London, is told by Tridib to the narrator. The romantic relationship that took between Tridib and May through correspondence is significant. The



mysterious intimacy between the Price family and Mayadebi's family is explored beautifully by Ghosh. The central theme of *The Shadow Lines*, is the search for the realities of nationality, cultural segregation and the racial discrimination.

As mentioned earlier *The Shadow Lines* is the collection of memories where the past overshadows the present. Every character's identity is marred by the past so they are unable to detach themselves from the past. This novel presents time as limitless and boundless. Mary Mount quotes about Ghosh, "He is the most original of the lot, no body links time and space like him. He'll stand the test of time"<sup>4</sup>

*The Shadow Lines* is the outcome of complexity, love, guilt, betrayal and mystery of relationship of the modern people. The narrator is the mirror image of Tridib who tells the stories on behalf of Tridib. The narrator sucked into history and public events as a result either he is totally obliterated like Tridib or left scarred. Ghosh worked hard on this novel. He used his personal experiences to write this novel.

The multilayered infrastructure of *The Shadow Lines* is broad enough to make it like a microcosm of the world. The events and characters spread over India (Undivided and divided), England and Bangladesh. In the novel time extends from the early thirties to the middle sixties with an illuminating extension up to the late seventies a momentous period of events involving characters belonging to different age group, different countries and social status. The novel focuses on a limited large family, then divided and then brief re-union ending with a tragical death of Tridib, Jethamoshai and Khalil. It is interesting to note that the unusual structure of Tridib dying too early and the narrator born too late suggests that the author's main emphasis is on ideas and concepts. Tridib is the synonym of eternity and indivisibility of time while the unnamed narrator is interpreted as a symbol of space that fills the whole world including all the objects from outside to very deep. The multilayered perspective of the unknown narrator has a close resemblance to the cosmopolitan author who travels from place to place and time to time. T.S

Eliot expresses beautifully the continuum of time in his Four Quartets

Time present and time past

Are both present in time future?

And time future contained in time past.<sup>5</sup>

It is not possible to forecast the future or recall the past of an unknown person. But Ghosh made backward travel in time, possible through uncoiling the memory and imagination.

The Shadow Lines are deceptive lines that separate the countries as well as human being from one another. The lines create distaste and estrangement between the most intimate relationship, as in the case of Ila and the narrator and also take close two strangers across the sea like Tridib and May. Time, space, freedom and even human emotions are dynamic and are as fictitious as it is real.

Ghosh violates time and space, trying to show the incoherence of truth which can only be grasped in the process of narrativizing. He is successful in showing how each character lives in the story of his/her making. The two section of the novel is relevant to the reality of relationships. The first section "Going Away" ends with the indifference and estrangement of Ila towards the narrator. The narrator feels that Ila possessed his life and her going away meant death to him. The second section, "Coming Home" ends with regaining self-possession of the narrator, removing hangover of Ila, union with May and accepting Tridib's death. The incidents take place in India as well as abroad yet they create a structured plot.

To conclude *The Shadow Lines* is a partition novel. The story is beautifully woven around the lives of Tha'mma, Tridib, May and Ila with the memory lingering from past into present and back into past. Every character's action leaves lasting effect on the other characters and helps the novel progress to the rigid barrier of time, action and place. The novel forces the reader to think and understand the delicate issues like religious cults, partition and inter-personal relation.

Tridib is role model and mentor of the narrator. Tridib's niece Ila who had been brought up

in an aristocrat family, loves her freedom and looks down the Indian culture and boundation in every relation. May Price, a foreigner have more respect and love for India than Ila who is Indian by birth. The most impressive character is narrator's grandmother who weaves around the concept of memory and socio-political situation. After retiring as headmistress she begins her journey on the memories of her house in Dhaka. The memory forms the basis of the entire novel which never permits the author to lose touch of the ghost of by gone times. In *The Shadow Lines* the inter-personal relationship is based on imagination and on reality and are relived when they are retold.

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