

The *concept* of Time and Space in *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh

Harshita Chhikara¹

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is a renowned name in Indians writing in English today. His *The Shadow Lines* (SahityaAkademi Award) has time and space as its two indispensable components. The following paper probes the nature of these components, how they have been set up in the novel and the purpose behind.

Introduction

As a young boy, Amitav Ghosh's narrator travels across time through the tales of those around him, traversing the unreliable planes of memory, unmindful of physical, political and chronological borders. But as he grows older, he is haunted by a seemingly random act of violence. Bits and pieces of stories, both half-remembered and imagined, come together in his mind until he arrives at an intricate, interconnected picture of the world where borders and boundaries mean nothing, mere shadow lines that we draw dividing people and nations.

Out of a complex web of memories, relationships and images, Amitav Ghosh builds an intensely vivid, funny and moving story. Exposing the idea of the nation state as an illusion, an arbitrary dissection of people, Ghosh depicts the absurd manner in which your home can suddenly become your enemy.

¹HarshitaChhikara(Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, MDU, Rohtak, Haryana.
Ph. No. 9467405198 Email – harshita.hc18@gmail.com)

Analysis

The Shadow Lines is set in a subjective consciousness, Ghosh aptly strikes a balance between time experienced subjectively and the mechanical or scientific time. This is a correct sort of combination which allows Ghosh to locate his novel in a historical and geographical reality. It is a well known fact that the story is a mere sequence of events in time (Abrams, 182). Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* sticks to the story. The narrative of the novel spans from 1939 to 1979, or even beyond. The novel begins with –

In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib (TSL, 3).

The narrative finishes when May has a sapience into her tragic situation, in the form of epiphany-

I thought I'd killed him. I used to think: perhaps he wouldn't have got out of that car if I hadn't made him, if I'd understood what I was doing... For years I was arrogant enough to think I owed him his life. But I know now I didn't kill him; I couldn't have, if I'd wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery [...](TSL,277).

The narrator goes through back and forth mental odyssey in time, and rapidly reaches the other end of the time-span of the novel. The frequenting of time-shifting technique which Ghosh undertakes in the novel seems to be arbitrary and abstract on the surface level but in fact is very functional tool which

allows him to establish the relationship among the widely segregated events. For example, we may mention two different but closely connected incidents in the novel, namely the story told by Ila to the narrator of her doll Magda going to school and later being cheated by her lover. In the light of the incidents happening actually, the made-up story sounds essentially true- Magda's story is what has really happened to Ila; her experience of going to school abroad and her relationship with Nick. These made-up stories are slant hints about what is really going on in her life.

It would not be wrong to say that-

In *The Shadow Lines*, memory manifests itself, essentially, in the form of a memoir or reminiscence- based on the narrator's own recollection of events, and his reporting of the other character's memories, though there are few representations of the narrator's or the other character's stream-of-consciousness as well in the novel. (Chowdhary, 89)

For instance, the narrator already knowing the location of the places in London, which he has never visited before, only through what Tridib told him through his stories. The narrator tried to explain this to Ila, but to no use.

I tried to tell her, but neither then nor later, though we talked about it often, did I ever succeed in explaining to her that I could not forget because Tridib had given me world to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with: she who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in

Tridib's room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta. ...I could see that those names, which were to me a set of magical talisman because Tridib has pointed them out to me on his tattered old Batholomew's Atlas... (TSL, 22)

The narrator thoroughly believed in what Tridib told him. Ila could not understand his point because she could never have that imagination that the narrator developed in himself through whatever Tridib told him.

I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more or less true, only very far apart. It was not her fault that she could not understand, for as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all. (TSL, 23)

The form and the course of action of the narrative of *The Shadow Lines* is chiefly set by the reminiscence of an unpleasant experience of the post-partition era.

In terms of time, it is less than a moment, but it has been dealt with in quite a few pages, and there are scores of pages devoted to its victim Tridib, and the time in which he lived. As against this, the narrative relating to the grandmother's married life of twelve years is foreshortened to just one page. (Chowdhary, 92)

Ghosh intentionally keeps certain incidents subordinate than others, which adds to and help to intensify the narrative of the novel.

The watchful heedfulness of Ghosh for the chronological exactness is apparent in substantiating the comparative ages of his characters, in giving needful information about sequential generations in both, i.e. one British and the other Indian and in some instances even telling the days and years of their birth, marriage and death. For example,

It was the day before Shoshti, a perfect Puja day, with the clear October sunlight lying golden in the galis; the air cool, free at last of the damp summer heat. (TSL, 37)

Or

Tridib once told me all about it (the table). My grandfather bought it on his first visit to London, he said, some time in the 1890s. (TSL, 53)

Or

In 1962, the year I turned ten, my grandmother retired, upon reaching the age of sixty. She had taught in a girls' high school since 1936. (TSL, 127)

In *The Shadow Lines*, time is not merely the clock-time, succession change or flux, but it is also what the characters talk about. In the beginning of the novel the narrator's grandmother talks about time, being critical of Tridib, -

My grandmother didn't approve of Tridib. He's a loafer and a wastrel, I would sometimes hear her saying to my parents; he doesn't do any proper work, lives off his father's money. ...Tridib wastes his time. (TSL, 4)

But on the other hand the narrator cherishes the time spent with Tridib-

...I loved to listen to Tridib: he never seemed to use his time, but his time didn't stink. (TSL, 4)

There are no isolate or rational places in *The Shadow Lines*. Ghosh gives a definite character even to coffeehouses, bars and roadside addas. These places have their own utility. Tridib in the novel frequently uses the stretch between Garihath and Gole Park to distract himself.

But even at those times, when he was the centre of everybody's attention, there was always something a little detached about his manner. He did not seem to want to make friends with the people he was talking to, and that perhaps was why he was happiest in neutral, impersonal places-coffeehouses, bars, street-corner addas-the sort of place where people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other any further. That was also why he chose to come all the way from Ballygunge to Gole Park for his addas-simply because it was far enough for him to be sure that he wouldn't meet any of his neighbours there. (TSL, 10)

The places which are being used in the novel are very suggestive and reveal the personality and the thought procedure of the characters. For instance,

She (May) was not frowning when she played in that concert in the Festival Hall: it was evident that her mastery of her instrument was so complete now that she had to give little thought to the music. (TSL, 16)

Gosh not only just engages himself with the physical spaces but also with the mental

spaces, which in true sense of the word reveal the actuality of the so called actual world. Ghosh does not merely spatter in mental spaces, but also relates places with all sorts of action. In *The Shadow Lines*,

the novelist dwells upon the opposition between East and West, Europe and the Orient and the need to crossover these shadow lines. Although Ghosh's characters globe trot from one part of the world to another jumping not just political and physical boundaries but also psychological divides, the novel is divided by him into two parts, 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home' overlooking the identities of nations. But AmitavGhosh's characters move in so many directions that ultimately the identity of a distinct and discrete homeland becomes blurred and the world where no boundaries of race or caste are acknowledged, becomes one big home and the real home lies in one's memory and consciousness away from all lines. (*The Blurring Borders: Post-colonial Travel in The Shadow Lines*, 68)

Conclusion

Change and growth are two vital components through which the protagonist undergoes in the course of action of the novel. Amitav Ghosh uses the Wordsworthian philosophy of 'defamiliarising the familiar'. The narrator is not aware about the truths of the life of the pivotal character Tridib in the novel, with the course of action further he becomes aware of the meaning of human existence and human consciousness. Ghosh, in *The Shadow Lines*, challenges traditional concepts of time and space, and through his narrator understands the meaning of distance and division or boundaries, and

these concepts simultaneously gets questioned through the journey of the narrator in the form of flashbacks.

Works Cited

1. Bose, Brinda. *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives*. Penecraft International, 2003, pp.57-86.
2. Chowdhary, Arvind. "Time and Space in *The Shadow Lines*." *Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines: Critical Essays*, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2002, pp. 1-24, 84-101.
3. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. Penguin India, 2003.
4. Khair, Tabish. *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*. Permanent Black, 2005.
5. Wordsworth, William. "Preface and Appendix to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800, 1802)." *WORDSWORTH'S Literary Criticism*, edited by W. J. B. Owen, The Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1974, pp. 68-95.