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## DEPICTION OF CULTURE AND HISTORY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

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**Abstract:** The aim of the present research paper is to study the history of nation that is cited in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. His works reveal his great ability for rewriting history. The preservation of tradition while breaking away from it is the principle involved in combining myth and history in the recent Indian fiction in English. The underlying principle is that a renewal of literary history demands the removal of the prejudices of 'historical objectivism' on one hand and the 'aesthetic of production and representation' on the other in an aesthetic of 'reception and influence'. The literary study is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and frees itself from the material of words and brings its own being into a contemporary existence. It increases the horizon of expectations from time to time. Its unique historicity depends on whether this horizon of expectations can be objectified. The horizon of expectations is determined by its artistic character and by the kind of degree of influence on the presupposed audience.

**Keywords:** Culture, History, partition, relationships, bildungsroman, journey-motif, Going-away, Coming-back.

"The English word 'history' is derived from the Greek word *historia* meaning enquiry, research, exploration or information. In a broad sense history is a systematic account of the origin and development of humankind, a record of the unique events and movements in its life. It is an attempt to recapture however imperfectly, that which is, in a sense, lost forever". While the above definition reiterates history as a retrieval of the past, historians like R. W. Emerson and Thomas Carlyle define history as a subject that traces the essence of the past innumerable biographies of great men; thereby implying a focus of history on the life and actions of only historically great men of the past. The new texts of Amitav Ghosh absorb the reader presenting various vitally important areas of reality. The euphoria of independence

having come to an end, people started viewing things in a different way. The end of the colonial rule led to the realization on the mass of the people that they are yet to get a 'second freedom'. The forces of social justice are gathering momentum on the Indian soil.

Re-writing of the texts is not new to Indian writing. Indian attitude is very much open-minded. It is not enmeshed in an enclosed circle, nor is it blindly committed to any dogmatic principle. Many currents merge in the main stream of Indian culture, so is the case with Indian aesthetics and readership. One of the post modern novelists Amitav Ghosh come in for much appreciation in spite of his chosen irreverence to the existence of political authority and many a national personality.

The recent Indian writers in English are shaped by the process of modernization. They make a bold attempt at Indianizing the English syntax, word order, lexis, idioms, pronunciation, intonation and stress patterns. This process of Indianization has been going on for the last four decades in an unimpeded manner and reflects a change in mental attitude. The words and expressions in Indian English fiction by and large possess recognized national character than the imported significances, references, traditions and ways of thinking and feeling.

*The Shadow Lines* [1988] by Amitav Ghosh is a masterpiece in contemporary Indo-English Literature. Its portrayal of interpersonal relationships often viewed as a kind of metaphor, an objective correlative, for the political truths embodied in the title of the novel. The maps and the mirrors that Meenakshi Mukherjee has noted –

**'identical realities across territorial borders which were originally meant to mark out differences, or across communities that are imagined to be different, reiterate the theme of the novel as spelt out in the title'.**

For one thing, maps and mirrors are also traditional images for self-discovery and the quest for identity intrinsic to the bildungsroman as much as they form one of the oldest themes of the novel form itself. The story of *The Shadow Lines* conforms to the bildungsroman pattern of beginning in the childhood of the narrator-protagonist and ending in his attaining adulthood and maturity. Each stage of his development is clearly demarcated through the change of location demanded of the bildungsroman.

*The Shadow Lines* is once upon a time type of story narrated autobiographically yet with a multiple perspective, using memory as a means of recapturing fragments of the past. Though it begins at the beginning in the London of the 1939 war period and ends in the same London in 1979, it takes us back and forth in time and space, going away and returning home both geographically and intellectually. All the characters are often on the move, travelling all over the world, but they acquire real understanding and knowledge with their own experiences, their acquired experiences through imagination and then reliving the past linking it with the present realities. The journey-motif is clearly established through the title of the two parts 'Going Away' and 'Returning Home'.

The novel appears to be more about historical events and violent happenings, partition and border-lines, dividing the nations, in fact it is also more about the people who act out their life against these problems, acquire a clear understanding, and accept the realities of lines, but find in their personal lives, lines are blurred and shadows must be discarded. Unlike Khushwant Singh's *Train To Pakistan*, *The Shadow Lines* examines the impact of borders on the personal lives, long after Partition and establishes Ghosh as a major voice after Rushdie.

*The Shadow Lines* suggests, then, that there are two major issues in individual development, marked by 'going away' and 'coming here'. In this sense, the novel is full of journeys. In the words of Suvir Kaul –

**'In *The Shadow Lines*, it is of course the male narrator's growing imagination, empathy and intellectuality which allow for the exploration and understanding of complex themes. As his horizons expand and become international in scope, his questions, memories and experiences provide the structure of the narrative. But even as his consciousness mediates and frames other voices, stories and experiences, we become aware that some of these voices counterpoint his narrative, and even interrogate his telling of the story – in the many stories of this novel – overlapping at points, mismatched and contentious at others – *The Shadow Lines* becomes not simply a male bildungsroman, an authorized autobiography, with its obvious agenda and priorities, but also a dialogic, more open-ended telling of the difficulties, interdependencies and inequalities that compose any biography of a nation.'**

The journey is central to the shadow lines. Indeed, it begins and ends with journeys, with one to England away from India and with one to India from England respectively. The last one may be the narrator's but the first – foreshadowed, as it turns out by another one by an Englishman voyaging to India, a journey that, moreover, links three families, one British, two Indian, inextricably together – is undertaken not by the narrator himself, but by his great-aunt and her family before he was born. This was a passage to England that would forever change the course of the narrator's life, for it was Tridib who had gone with his parents to London, and this journey introduced Tridib not only to the infant May, but to an England ravaged by war and to experiences, his own as well as those of others, which opened up his imagination and his vision and helped him in turn to enlarge the emotional and intellectual world of the narrator, so that when the latter, too, 'goes away' to London he is in a sense also 'coming home'.

It is significant therefore that the protagonist remains unnamed, but much care is devoted to establish his social and family context. Indeed, from one point of view the absence of a name might even indicate that *The Shadow Lines* is not a bildungsroman at all, for at the core of the bildungsroman lies the individual search for identity and selfhood through the power of the name. In *The Shadow Lines*, what the narrator learns about his family and social identity goes beyond the limitations of the accepted boundaries, but in finally identifying himself with the dead Tridib he establishes the continuance of these bonds with his own selfhood. His selfhood is a kind of secondhand selfhood, for it is based on Tridib's experiences and imagination as much as his own.

*The Shadow Lines*, thus, leaves lasting impression on the reader, with its structural intricacies and brilliance and thematic profundity. The main events of the novel take place in England, India and Pakistan during the turbulent times of war, communal riots and resulting ethos of uncertainty and incomprehensible fear. Throughout the novel, the reader experiences a nagging threat of the forces of friction and destruction. The artificiality created and politically maneuvered barriers between nation and nation, people and people, need to be transcended beyond the confines of time and space. Tridib's life and death bring out the tragic irony of the inescapable duality of the human mind. His spirit of Liberation is both a triumph and a defeat, of his creative imagination and selfless love.

They held each-other's hands with tender loving care in perfect communication. This is the strength of true love. It can transcend the violations and oppressions of human history. The monument is a remainder of the colonial Rule / Oppression of the past. However, it does not dissuade these two 'stranger-across-the-sea' from loving each other. Their love is suggestive of the possible triumph of the present union over the past evil. If man can forget and forgive the past evils and transcend the artificial barriers, allow his mind to be free from the presuppositions of the past, he may be able to achieve an ideal world. Finally, it is nature and circumstances of Tridib's death that suggest a possible meaning to this seemingly meaningless life. Against all the nihilistic forces, he stands up as a positive force of hope and faith in the strength of true love. During the Sixty four communal riots in India and Pakistan, Tridib visited Dhaka with May and his aunt. While trying to save the lives of his granduncle and a poor rickshaw-driver, he lost his life at the hands of a few fanatics. When the frenzied mob attacked the old man and rickshaw-driver, May, Tridib and the others saw this from a moving car. May first jumped out of the car and rushed towards the victims. Tridib instantly followed her and soon overtook her. He plunged into the crowd and vanished. Later, May found three dead bodies, Tridib's being one. For years, May carried the guilt of Tridib's killing, till a deeper and more humble realization dawned upon her. She said:

**'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 to. He gave himself up: it was a sacrifice. I can't understand it. I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery.'**

May's disowning the responsibility of Tridib's death is a tribute to the latter's dignified self-sacrifice. The ultimate mystery of such a sacrifice will always elude definition – who can fathom the depth of a martyr's mind? May's confession only suggests that Tridib did not die for any petty, selfish desire, but rather he gave himself up for his belief and conviction. However, the irony behind his tragic death cannot be negated. When the world is surrounded by anarchic forces and the ordinary reality is only arbitrary and contingent, can one say with certainty that his sacrifice was meaningful? However, one pays the highest tribute to his courage of conviction.



On the whole, the character of Tridib projects a true spirit of individual freedom. It is a human privilege and responsibility to keep his spirit of liberation eternally alive. In this increasingly hostile world of wars, violence, hatred, frictions, divisions, where 'there are only states and citizens, there are no people at all'.

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