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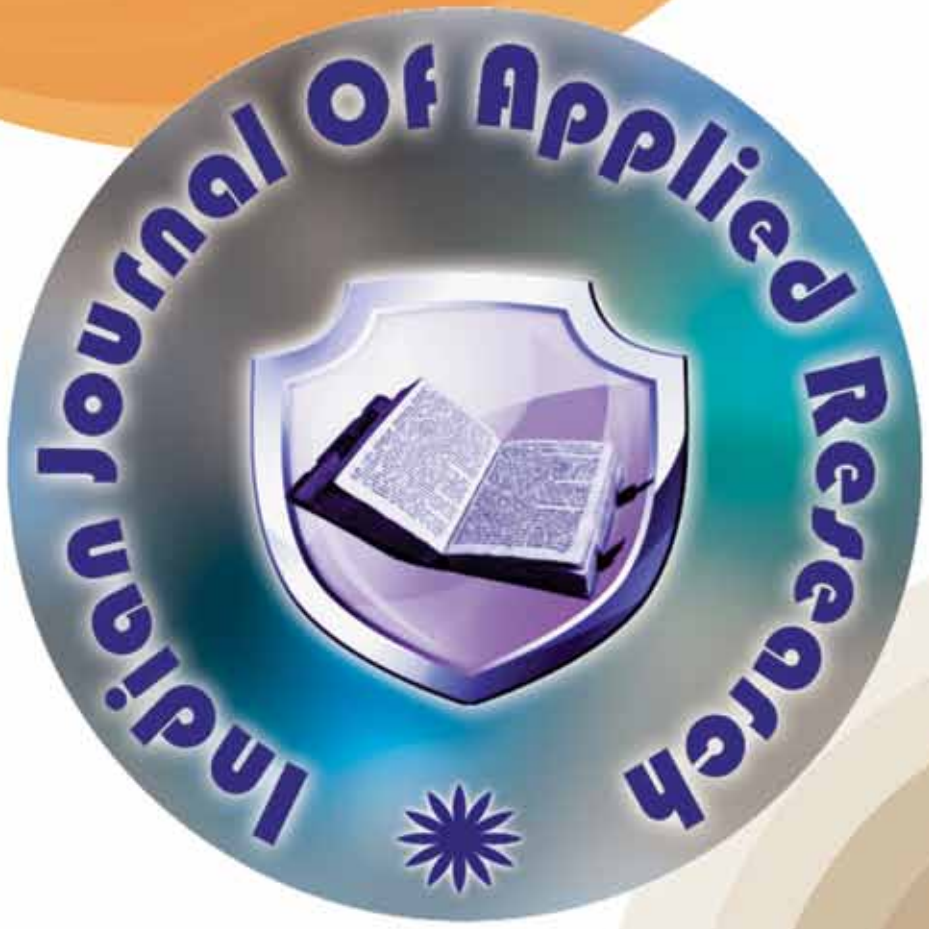

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Research Paper English

Amitav Ghosh: Transfiguration of Memory and Imagination in the Shadow Lines

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ABSTRACT

This article will expose the layers in the writing by probing it from a narrative point of view to expose how memories appear in strata, and how different voices are juxtaposed. As memory provides the narrative trigger in this novel, I analyse Ghosh's mnemonic enterprise as part of his narrative management .It will also analyze other forms of textual stratification by showing the connection between space and individual memory and collective history, the novel depicts how nationalism invades private lives and how political histories shape personal memories.

Keywords : Memories, mnemonic, imagination, nostalgic, nationalism, political histories

Amitav Ghosh stands out among his peers for the admirable directness and lucidity of his prose as well as for his brilliant perception of the complexities of human relations in the multicultural world. As an ingenious crafter of fiction he has made his mark and earned substantial critical acclaim.

The Shadow Lines explores the author's major concern about wider, cross-border humanity with striking insights into the issues of ethnic nationalism and communalism; it also reveals new levels of his technical prowess. Ghosh has departed from Rushdie's mode of "imaginative serio-comic storytelling" evident in his apprentice novel. What he now offers is a supple and sophisticated mnemonic narrative. He wraps together slices of history by mnemonic triggers or "wistful evocations of memory" to reflect on communal carnage and sectarian tension in the Indian subcontinent. He chooses to tell a story that pervades through the seams of reality and fictions of time and space, of memories and beliefs.

Ghosh's work is known to be imbued with intricate detail of the time and situation, which he writes about and his words are filled with a wealth of meaning. Amitav Ghosh's memory novel in The Shadow Lines, Space as a place of contact as well as conflict is an important dimension in the fictional realms of Ghosh. In fact, space, imagined or remembered, seems to have a profound influence on the novelist and his protagonists in many of his major works. The Circle of Reason (1986) spreads over India, the Gulf region, Algeria; The Shadow Lines (1988) over India, Bangladesh and the UK; The Calcutta Chromosome (1996) over India and the US; The Glass Palace (2000) over Burma, India and Malaya; and The Hungry Tide (2004) over the Sundarbans, the islets of the Ganges delta that lie south of Calcutta and just east of the West Bengal/Bangladesh frontier. Ghosh reinvent himself with his every novel, but The Shadow Lines undoubtedly remains one of his best.

The novel takes place largely on the newly-created Indo-Pakistan border. It spans three generations of the narrator's family, spreading over East Bengal, Calcutta and London. Opening in Calcutta in the 1960s, the novel portrays two families one English, one Bengali known to each other from the time of the Raj, as their lives intertwine in tragic and comic ways. The narrator travels between Calcutta and London in 1981 to tell the story which contains multiple stories. Stories-within-stories are united by the thread of memory as the novelist treats memory as a driving force of the narrative. The narrator, Indian-born and English-educated, traces events back and forth in time, from the outbreak of World War II to the late twentieth century, through years of Bengali partition and violence, observing the ways in which political events invade private lives. The fragmentary narrative unfolds the narrators experience in the form of memories which move backwards and forwards.

Tha'mma, narrator's grandmother is the most realised character in the novel, giving distinct ideas of the realism and the enthusiasm with which the people worked towards nations building just after independence. The vainness of creating nation states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided. Ghosh deliver the most powerful message of the novel through his character. It is imagination alone which can portray a lucid and an enduring picture of reality. Hence, the narrator gives more emphasis to the creative aspect of imagination in uncoiling memories even though both imagination and memory are an irresolvable mystery to him just as the murder of Tridib.

The story starts about thirteen years before the birth of the narrator and ends on the night preceding his departure from London back to Delhi. He spent less than a year in London, researching for his doctorate work, but it is London he knew very well even before he put his first step on it's pavement. A young narrator's uncle Tridib, who fed him on his memories of his one visit to London during the war; and his grandmother who shared his nostalgic memories of East Bengal where she was born and spent his childhood. And then there is Ila (his cousin, for whom he nurtures a secret passion), who travels all over the world with her diplomat glob-trotting parents and occasionally comes home to tell a wonderstruck boy accounts of her peregrinations abroad. Their memories "form a part of my secret map of the world, a map of which only I know the keys and coordinates, but which was not for that reason any more imaginary that the code of a safe to a banker." From the three whose memories form his own consciousness, he learns to see in different ways. Ila sees much but experiences little. With her superficial response to life, she only remembers how one airport differed from the other by its less or more conveniently located ladies'. Tridib teaches him to see with precision because he teaches the boy to see with imagination ("we could not see without inventing what we saw").

Tridib evoked the young boy "the worlds to travel in and . . . eyes to see them with."In short, its Tridib's gift of imagination that kindles in the narrator a desire to travel around the globe. Both have a penchant to study maps to develop and discover

their distinct sense of travelling to the places without any kind of mental and physical boarders or barriers.

Instead of ever making an effort to understand him, Ila despises the narrator for having a dreamy view of distant places; for she could never believe in space as a human construction but looks upon it as a given reality. She dismisses the narrator's practice of imaginary space construction as a mere indulgence in fancy:

It's you who were peculiar, sitting in that poky little flat in Calcutta, dreaming about faraway places. I probably did you no end of good; at least you learnt that hose cities you saw on maps were real places, not like those fairylands Tridib made up for you. (The Shadow Lines 23-24)

The narrator realises that Ila is trapped in a static zone even though she has travelled to different regions of the world. The problem is that Ila perceives the present without ever seeking its affinity with the past, especially when memory is not crucial to her conception of space and place. She is unable to see the past through memory or imagination whereas once the narrator has seen the past through Tridib's eyes, the past "seemed concurrent with its present"

The narrator has a twin motive in narrating from the sources of memory: first, to communicate the lurking political turmoil beneath the tender veneer of his childhood years in post-partition India; and secondly, to save his memories from slipping into the realm of forgetting In 1979 the narrator recollects the events of 1964 involving his friend because he is determined not to let "the past vanish without trace; I was determined to persuade them of its importance" The narrator uses memory not merely to comprehend the individual and collective cultural past that has been confounding him for fifteen long years, but also to figure out "what" and "how" to remember.

Tha'mma, narrator's grandmother establishes him the oneness of memory, according to her neither space nor time can divide it. After her retirement in 1962 as a headmistress from a public school where she has worked for twenty-seven years, the grandmother begins to feel nostalgic about her house in Dhaka. She has reached a stage in her life where she cannot suppress old memories of her ancestral home any longer. She sadly recollects how her ancestral house was divided with a wall between two brothers, her father and her uncle Jethamoshai. The reader thus first encounters the partition of domestic space, a partition that is repeated on the national space with the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The grandmother reminisces:

They had all longed for the house to be divided when the quarrels were at their worst, but once it had actually happened and each family had moved into their own part of it, instead of the peace they had so much looked forward to, they found that a strange, eerie silence had descended on the house. (The Shadow Lines 121).

The novel deals with the effects of fear on the memory and ones engagement with the world. The memory play central role in all character in the novel. The memories of the1964 riot traumatise the narrator, and he successfully blocks them until a chance remark that he overheats during the 1984 riots prompts a personal crisis and a detailed unpacking of the earlier trauma. As he recounts the events, he recalls snippets of conversation with relatives and friends that suggest that they, too, had been redefined by their memories of their experience. May Price recollect the events transpired after seventeen years .May Price looks back, still wandering if she had visited India in fact she was in love with Tridib.She visited India because she was in fact in love with Tridib and she still cannot answer her question . "I don't know how whether everything else that happens was my fault: whether I'd have behaved otherwise if I would really loved him (172)." she placates herself after she relives her secret memory to the narrator.

By showing the connection between space and individual memory and collective history, the novel depicts how nationalism invades private lives and how political histories shape personal memories.

The Shadow Lines spans three generations of the narrator's family spread over East Bengal and Calcutta; the English family-friends, the Prices, whose histories include the two Wars and the contemporary London. And the web of life in The Shadow Lines, which encompasses many countries, many religions, is a collage of memories, the narrator's own, and others', dusty photo-graphs, yellowing newspaper clippings, but nurtured above all by imagination. While nations, religions, war, violence and partition divide people, memory does not. Imagination creates a world that cannot be divided, any more than nations break and float away when geographical boundaries are arbitrarily recreated. Life in The Shadow Lines loses its chronological logic. Past invades the present and enriches and transforms it, and in the process, strengthens the narrator's ability to encounter and even reshape his own future when it invades his present later. The very structure of the novel--coil within coil opening up vistas of new worlds, new experiences--reflects this giddying whirl of life, memory and imagination.

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