

Post-Colonial Self-Articulations in Shadow Lines of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

*The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as process. The novel has become the leading hero in the literary development of our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it.¹ Bakhtin was writing in a European context, but could have been addressing with even sharper relevance that of new literatures in English. Bakhtin identified the novel as the "open - ended" literary form of the modern age, reflecting and bringing together many languages ("heteroglossia"). These languages are not simply linguistic, but socio-ideological" idioms and forms, voices from different strata of cultural experience. Amitav Ghosh's work introduces a number of "languages," including those of the Indian folk-tale, the Mahabharata, journalism, and the memory patterns of the extended family, radically de-constructing traditional novel forms. In a genre associated in Europe with "realism," Ghosh explores Vedic concepts of Maya (illusion) and transcendence to question the possibility of Western realism. In the opening section of *The Circle of Reason*, the village capitalist, Bhudeb Roy, organizes a festival to Saraswati which Ghosh identifies rather loosely as "the Hindu Goddess of Learning."² He has a six-foot image built, with spinning electric lights behind the eyes and a silver-foil halo. During the ceremony the rationalist Balaram leaps onto the Platform with defiling sandals and tears off the dyed cotton hair, revealing the clay underneath. "This is not Saraswati, Learning," he cries to the electrified crowd, "it is Vanity." At a deep level, the image of Saraswati is "Vanity," for in the Vedic tradition she is a feminine principle and aspect of nature, and only becomes "knowledge" in flowing through the enlightened devotee—Bhudeb Roy is certainly not enlightened. But Balaram is equally benighted—he "exposes" the image not because this misrepresents the tradition, but because it does not represent his concept of Westernized rationalism.*

Key words: *Westernized Rationalism, Vedic Tradition, Folk Tale, Paradigm, and Scarified.*

Introduction

Towards the end of the book there is another festival, the reenactment of Chitrangada's appearance to Arjuna. In the story, taken from the Mahabharata via Tagore, the warrior

princess Chitrangada is granted the gift of physical beauty for a year in order to attract Arjuna. She becomes his lover, but Arjuna, not knowing the transformation, is drawn by hearsay to Chitrangada's other self. After the year, Arjuna

sees her without her beauty, and understands the illusion of the physical. (382) The two episodes are alike and yet opposites. In the first, a religious image is unmasked, showing the crude substance beneath; in the second, physical reality is dissipated to reveal the spiritual.

In both, the real significance of the ritual has been missed. In the first, traditional belief has been prostituted as a means of publicity by the grossly materialistic Bhudeb Roy; in the second, the original legend has been sentimentalized by Tagore and is being played on a gramophone record, in a language the participants cannot understand, in an alien country. Chitrangada is being played by a prostitute, Kulfi. This does and does not invalidate the myths. Misused and misunderstood, the two episodes do have a meaning—the first in the cycle of conflict within which Alu begins his quest for a higher meaning; the second, in the movement that redeems Kulfi (who is given a full ritual burial), and turns Alu back to India. Only through illusion can truth be found.

The concern with the cyclical process of the activity of life underpins the whole book. Reality is Maya, illusion, but only through Maya can reality be understood. The three sections of the novel follow the three Vedic Gunas—Sattva, Rajas and Tamas,—the three aspects of nature ('prakriti') without which no action is possible, taking the development from rising awareness of "Reason," through "Passion," to "Death" or entropy. The process also brings together the divergent stylistic levels of the book—that of an exuberant folk-tale, of the emergence of a human community, and the dialectic between Indian and European consciousness in an alien predicament.

The opening sections focus on a village near the future India-Pakistan bonier, where Balaram embodies the impact of nineteenth-century scientific reason on India. For Balaram, the modern age began with Pasteur's development of disinfectant and inoculation, and Madame Curie's experiments with radiation to control cancer cells. With these scientific discoveries Balaram

believes superstition and ignorance were done away, and the scientific basis of life established. Armed with this knowledge he wages a heroic war against the corrupt commercialism of his arch-enemy, Bhudeb Roy. Yet the inadequacy of this view is hilariously underlined by Balaram's attempt to answer all problems, including war, with buckets of carbolic acid.

Indeed Balaram's concepts of the "new science" were already out of date, Curie and Pasteur being both creators of a new consciousness and the inheritors of the old. Again Ghosh complicates the issue. For Balaram's reliance on a nineteenth-century pseudo-science, Phrenology, in fact approximates to the Indian "superstition" of popular religion and astrology that he opposes. His search for a new Western vision of reality, reflected in the chapter titled "a Pasteurised universe," brings to mind the Vedic legend of the creation of the world, in which the milk ocean of creation was churned by the gods and demons using a snake to separate the poison from the "amrit" (ambrosia). Shiva drank the poison, purifying (pasteurising) the universe. However the outcome was that only the gods drank the "Amrit": Ghosh suggests Balaram also has a one-sided strategy.

Into the story comes Alu, his name, literally "potato." Alu gains his name because his head, of such interest to Balaram, is lumpy like a spud. But Alu, who emerges as the real hero of the book, is also basic, unlovely but ever-renewed, a child of the folk, a creature of the earth. While Balaram pursues his intellectual war against Bhudeb Roy in a landscape scarified by the internecine India-Pakistan conflict, Alu becomes a master-weaver. Weaving is a central image of the book, bringing together its many paradoxes and opposites. A craft, using the cotton indigenous to India from prehistoric times, it is a paradigm Indian culture. Yet as a mechanical process, it embodies the commercial exploitation that undermines all human societies. "When the history of the world broke, cotton and cloth were behind it; mechanical man in pursuit of his own

destruction . . . millions of African and half of America were enslaved by cotton." (57)

When a misdirected flare ignites Balaram's defensive arsenal, Alu escapes with a sewing machine and Balaram's *Life of Pasteur*. Pursued south to Kerala by the police detective Jyoti Das, who becomes a figure of death as the book progresses, Alu crosses the Indian ocean to the imaginary Gulf State of Al-Ghazira with a boatload of Indian women, destined for the town's brothels by Zindi. Sexual, predatory and physically dominating, Zindi is an ambivalent figure of womanhood whose machinations continue whatever quest idealism may pursue. Al-Ghazira is an oil state, a chaotic meeting of the traditional folk, the old tyranny of the Emirs, and the Western pressures of colonial administration and post-colonial exploitation.

A huge economic centre has risen in the desert as a monument to a progress no one wants: when it collapses, Alu is buried in the dead-centre, the rubble arrested by a fallen beam inches from his nose. When he emerges after days of meditation, it is with the inspiration that money, not germs, are destroying civilization. The vision is as flawed as that of Balaram, and when the revolutionary society led by Abu Fahl is crushed by the state, it is with Zindi, Kulfi (an inmate of Zindi's brothel) and an orphan child called Boss that Alu escapes. Following in reverse the routes by which European culture travelled to India, they, reach Tunisia, chosen by Ghosh as an instance of a political integration of European and African cultures. Here the trio meet up with an expatriate Indian doctor, Dr. Verma.

The "circle" is closing. For if Balaram came to his vision of reason through biology, attacking deviant microbes with his panacea of carbolic acid, Dr. Verma comes to a Hindu reverence of life also from a basic in microbiology. Dr. Verma even has a *Life of Pasteur*. In it she points out to Alu that the germ both brings death and makes the possibility of life. "It says without the germ 'life would be impossible because death would be incomplete.'" (356) It is Dr. Verma who organ-

izes a dramatic reenactment of the play by Tagore, already mentioned, where the princess Chitrangada, returned to her plain appearance, is seen in her essence by Arjuna. Dr. Verma has to take what Indian actors she can find, today as noted above, when the scene is enacted, within the costumes Kulfi the prostitute takes the part of Chitrangada, while the warrior Arjuna is played by the police-agent Jyoti Das. Kulfi expresses a moment of intense sexual desire and crashes to the ground, clutching her heart, dead.

"Heavenly. Her fathers have gathered her to their heavenly abode" intones Dr. Verma, dressed as Madana, the God of Love. (400) The cycle of death and regeneration is almost complete. After Alu has gone to great lengths to give Kulfi a proper Indian burial, he is told by Dr. Verma that this will give him a reason for going home, and the book ends with Alu, Boss and Zindi, turning back towards India, while the death-bearing Jyoti Das looks towards Europe.

The *Circle of Reason* is an extraordinarily accomplished first novel. It combines wit, intelligence and creative innovation to explore new possibilities for the novel form in the Indian context. Yet it is not wholly successful. The different narrative strategies pull apart, and the substructure, of knowledge working its way through the stages of the three Gunas, does not sufficiently unite the divergent sections. More over the work suffers from being too complex for its imaginative integrity: at times one becomes aware of Ghosh's manipulation.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh finds a sharper unifying focus. The novel brings together the forms of the autobiographical novel and the family chronicle, to subvert both. "I am born" begins Dickens, *David Copperfield*. "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born," begins *The Shadow Lines*. Ghosh's novel introduces a family "tree," but it is not the legally-defined family of European society, of Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* or Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*—rather, it is the Asian extended family of loyalties, affections and associations. This becomes so complex that

even the narrator confesses confusion and the novel is to some extent about the meaning of family relationships in a disintegrating world. "Shadow Lines" of the title refers both to lines of separation, and the invisible links which bind.

There are several lines of family introduced—that of the narrator, based in Calcutta; that of his grandmother's sister, associated with Dhaka, and two further lines bringing into the story Robi and Ila. But the blood relationships merge with those forged by intimacy, as with the British family, linked through domicile in India, of Lionel Tresawson. The narrator's closest links are with Mayadebi, his grandmother's sister, and with her son Tridib, the enigmatic older friend through which the CT narrator experiences much of his life.

For if Circle of Reason is about "Knowledge," Shadow Lines is about "Knowing." The novel moves through an intricate weaving backwards and forwards in time. Narrative sequence is constantly frustrated by the intrusion of memory—memory working not, as in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, as a stream-of-consciousness, so much as remembered family histories, restructured in a search for meaning. Memories sharpen into focus, then blur: "Although I cannot remember when it happened any more than I can remember when I first learnt to tell the time or tie my shoelaces."³ "I don't know, I can't tell: that world is closed to me, shut off by too many years spent away." (13) Can we ever be sure? One of the most vivid episodes in the novel, a sexual encounter in a bombed theatre, is related by Tridib to May and so taken at third hand by the narrator. But even Tridib cannot be certain of how far his memory has been accurate: "he didn't know whether it had really happened or he had imagined it." Yet this does not invalidate memory. "Reality" for its own sake does not have any specific truth." Ila who claims to be "objective" remembers the cities she has visited by the airport lavatories. (26) Tridib gives meaning to his experience through his imagination, but not wilfully. He

teaches the narrator to "use [his] imagination with precision." (29)

Not that the ostensibly "practical" Ila is free from illusion. One of the recurrent motifs in the book is the mental creation of a house from another, secret, place—a vivid expression of the relationship between real and imagined "homes." Arriving in the Tresawson's house in London, the narrator knows the position of every room. This is because when a child he had been taken to hide in a cellar below Ila's family home in Dhaka, where they had "played houses." Ila had traced out for him an imaginary house, which we discover is identical in form to the London house where Ila had spent her childhood. In the cellar, as they play at having a family, it becomes clear their doll-child represents the earlier Ila. Yet the doll is blue-eyed and flaxen-haired, befriended and protected by the son of the house, Nick Price. In reality Ila was dark, and Nick deserted her: Ila's underground imagination evades reality rather than clarifying it.

The novel gains stature by placing the individual themes starkly in a contemporary context. The shadow lines divide and link peoples and nations. The novel takes place largely on the newly-created Indo-Pakistan border which divides the family and its past. What is this border? Flying over it, the grandmother expects to see some sign. The father laughs—no, it will not be a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other. But the grandmother's question is a serious one. If there are no physical signs, where is the difference? Why cannot people as in the past travel from Dhaka to Calcutta without anyone stopping them? What are the 'shadow lines'? (154-55)

Their dual meaning emerges in the final sections of the book when the grandmothers discover a relative, turning senile, left behind in a hostile Dhaka. They go to rescue him—with Robi, May and Tridib. He is trying to escape from the mob when May and Tridib run to his rescue—May is protected by being English, but

Tridib, throwing himself to his own death, drawn by the 'shadow line' of imaginative sympathy. Why he should do it is the mystery left by the book. As May says, "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." (252)

The profoundly personal ending of the book is different indeed in tone to that of Ghosh's first novel. But both end with a ritual, a religious intimation of the cycle and continuation of life. Ghosh's work to-date extends the scope of the novel, not only within its own narrative, but moving outward and beyond the strategies of words, to an exploration of the past and the future of the culture he has inherited.

The novel begins in 1939 with the outbreak of Second World-War when Tridib, narrator's cousin went to England. The narrator remembers his grandmother and her younger sister Mayadebi. Mayadebi's husband was a diplomat, an officer in the Foreign Service. They used to be out of India for most of their time. They had four sons namely Jatin, Kaku, Tridib and Robi. Jatin was two years older than Tridib. Jatin became an economist with the U.N. and he was out of India with his wife and daughter Ila. Robi was very close to his mother and he used to accompany them wherever they went. Tridib was the time in Calcutta. He was twenty one years elder to the narrator. It was in his company that the narrator learnt about the real world. Tridib was working on a Ph.D. in Archeology. Tridib spent a number of years in his ancestral house with his aging grandmother.

The narrator's grandmother was a teacher and she lived near the house of her sister. Tridib used to pass narrator used go get worried over Tridib's company and his visits of 'paan-wallas'. But Tridib was not a regular visitor to the street-corners. He used to tell the narrator about the world he had seen. He was always the centre of attraction for the boys. Tridib was a good story-teller. He used to tell about strange people and lands. He used to speak on all

subjects in the evenings and his listeners waited for him eagerly. Tridib had a "thin, waspish face, his tousled hair and his bright black eyes glinting behind his gold-rimmed glasses. "Tridib preferred neutral places like coffee houses, bars, street-corner addas. He was very shrewd and worldly-wise in his dealings. He used to guide students in their studies. He also instructed them how to be successful in interviews. There was a 'casual self-mockery' in his behavior. He was unpredictable. For his admirers, he was a mysterious figure.

The narrator was a boy when he saw Tridib in Calcutta. Once Tridib stopped visiting his haunts and the narrator, then nine years old stayed at his house. During this stay, Tridib told the narrator about his experiences and the story of his journey to England in installments. After some days, Tridib was again found at his old 'adda'. He told his listeners about his girl friend May Price. Tridib's grandfather was a judge in the Calcutta High Court and May Price's grandfather lived in India during the British rule. They became friends. Later Lionel Tresawsen, the grandmother of May Price went back to London. In 1939, Tridib went to England with his father. Then May Price was a little girl. They stayed with the English friends. Tridib's father was operated upon in London. Later May Price visited Calcutta and met the narrator. Then after seventeen years the narrator again met her when he went to England on a year's research grant. He was working for his Ph.D. thesis on the textile trade between India and England in the nineteenth century.

In London the narrator met May Price when she was playing in an orchestra in a theatre. After the show May Price took the narrator to her place. May Price told the narrator about her friendship with Tridib. In 1957, Tridib was twenty seven and May nineteen years of age. He had begun long correspondence. Tridib went to London in 1939 and left London in 1940. Since then they wrote to each other. Since then Tridib lived in Calcutta. The narrator grew as a boy in Tridib's company. He liked Tridib who was

rather the alter-ego of the narrator. He became the narrator's mentor.

The narrator was sixteen when he was to go to Delhi for college education. His niece Ila came from Indonesia for her holidays. Along with Ila, the narrator visited the lake where they used to sit on a bench with arms on each others' waists. They shared moments passed together with Tridib in Calcutta.

When Ila's parents were in Colombo, Ila had a number of experiences there. One day, early in the morning Ila was reading a book in her lawn. Suddenly there was a splash under her chair near the pond. She saw a shadow rippling, crawling into the pool. It was a big snake. Ila cried and found it difficult to slip away. At last the snake moved aside and Ila was safe. One day the narrator, Ila and Robi visited a pub. The narrator wanted to tell Ila about Tridib and his world of imagination. Ila came to Calcutta with her parents. They met each other and the rest of the younger ones enjoyed each other's company.

One day the narrator, Ila, Tridib, Nityananda and Ila's mother were together in a car. It was the time of festivals and it was very difficult to go beyond Dakshineswar temple. Gradually the car moved along the Grand Trunk Road. After sometime, the car entered a big house. Ila took the narrator to one side of her house to show him the elegant view around. She led the narrator to an underground cellar which was unknown to others. There was a huge, very big dining table in the dark room which the narrator's grand father had bought in 1890. After three years of this incident, the narrator took May Price to this dark cellar to show her the underground room and the huge dining table.

In London, the narrator met Ila and Robi at the Indian Students' Hostel in Bloomsbury where he was staying. They took the narrator with them and went to meet Nick. Nick was waiting for them on the platform. He was wearing a blue suit, a striped institutional tie and a dark overcoat. He greeted everyone. They reached the house on Lymington Road. The narrator was

excited on visiting this house. Mrs. Price welcomed the guests from India. The narrator liked the house and the hostess alike. Back in India Tridib had shown the narrator a picture of this house, and one particular room. He saw a number of old photographs in this house. Here the reader gets a long description of photographs and people in full seven pages, from page number 60 to 67. Even the minute and insignificant detail about the colour, pose, angle of people in the photographs have been provided.

By now Ila and the narrator had become intimate and they played a number of games in a dark room. The narrative at this juncture shows the psycho-sexual growth of Ila and the narrator. Then the narrator tells the reader about the last days of his grandmother. He also narrates about one evening party which he attended along with Ila and Robi in Calcutta. He told his ailing grandmother about Ila and her frank views. After a few months, the narrator's grandmother died. He was informed later.

The narrator spent his first autumn in London and he was feeling very lonely. One day Mrs. Price invited Ila, the narrator at a family dinner. Nick and May were also there. Ila came late. She was smiling, dressed in Knee-length boots and a shirt. She informed the gathering that she had got a job. The narrator enjoyed the dinner and the company. There was a blizzard blowing outside and the narrator had to stay there with Ila.

The second part of the novel entitled 'Coming Home' begins with the narrator narrates about his childhood days spent with his grand mothers and mother. It narrates the incidents that happened in 1962. the narrator tells about his grandmother and grandfather. His grandfather was an engineer with the Railways in Burma. Their ancestral house was in Dhaka but after partition in 1947, they migrated to Calcutta. His grandmother was still attached to her house in Dhaka. The narrator's father was serving in Calcutta.

Tridib and May Price were good friends. Tridib used to write letters to May. In one letter, Tridib wrote to May about a sexual encounter of a stranger which he saw. He narrated it in detail and May felt restless after reading it. She thought it must have been imaginary incident. It was a pornographic letter which had also annoyed her.

One evening in March 1963, the narrator's father returned home in a happy mood. His mother asked him but he simply smiled. He asked them to wait till dinner. His father had got a promotion in his profession. He had been made counsellor in the deputy high commission in Dhaka. This news made his grandmother sad. She locked herself in her room. One day his grandmother received a letter from her sister Mayadebi with an invitation to Dhaka. Mayadebi was in Delhi and she telephoned his grandmother. Their uncle still lived in their house. It would be a return to their roots. The grandmother got the air-ticket for Dhaka on the third of January, 1964. She was excited, now for the first time. Tridib also got ready to go to Dhaka with grandmother and May.

Ila had got married in London to Nick Price. Nick had decided that it would be fun to have a Hindu marriage ceremony. Preparations were already underway in Calcutta. Ila's parents were in Calcutta to look after the arrangements. After this ceremony, Ila and Nick had planned to go to Africa for their honeymoon. The narrator joined the dinner party of Ila's marriage in London. He got drunk and May Price took him to her apartment. He made an unsuccessful attempt to seduce her but a sound scolding sent him to bed like an obedient boy.

May Price came to Calcutta and the narrator wanted to show her the city and the places of interest. When she saw Tridib in the crowd, she ran towards him and embraced him. She was given the narrator's guest room to stay which looked out over the garden. The narrator along with May Price and Tridib visited the Victoria Memorial and other places. May was impressed

with the elegance of these places. They saw a dog lying on the road, almost half-dead. May wanted to help the animal but it was too late. She was wounded by the dog and ultimately the dog was given mercy-death.

Ila and Nick Price had just returned from their honeymoon. Ila rang the narrator and it was a pleasant surprise for him. Then the narrator was in London and Ila took him to her place where Mrs. Price, the mother of Nick, opened the door. Ila led him to the cellar which they had visited. It was a visit to the cellar like that in Raibazar. The narrator was reminded of Tridib and other persons in his life. The underground room in the old house was the favourite place of children in Calcutta, in Raibazar.

On 2 January, 1964, the narrator along with other family members left for Dhaka to visit their ancestral house. They came to know that their old house was owned by a mechanic Saifuddin who had set up a workshop. Mayadebi was more excited on this visit. May also learnt that their old uncle still lived with the motor mechanic in Dhaka because he had refused to leave the house in 1947. Till then, he had been like a family member in Saifuddin's house. The news of communal clashes in Calcutta and Dhaka spread, and the stay of Mayadebi and others seemed to be unsafe in Dhaka. So they decided to visit the house at the earliest. They drove in a car through the deserted streets of Dhaka. Robi, Tridib, May Price, the narrator, Mayadebi and her sister were in the car. While moving through different localities, both the elderly sisters were reminded of their childhood days and past years.

When visitors entered their old house, they were shocked to see the house turned into a garage-cum-workshop. There were motorcycles all around for repairs. On seeing the guests, the mechanic Saifuddin came out to welcome them. They enquired about the old man 'Ukil-babu' who was bed-ridden. Mayadebi went to him and called him 'Jetha Moshai'. She told him that they had come to take him back to Calcutta. But

the old man did not pay attention to her words. He didn't refuse to recognize them. He had lost his sanity and appeared to have been arrested in a time sequence. He refused to leave the place because he had forgotten about his past. Now his present was the only reality for him. The driver came running to inform them that there had been trouble in Dhaka, and they should leave the place at once. Mayadebi, her sister and other leave the place with a heavy heart. On seeing this, the old man got up and was put in a rickshaw that followed the car. On the way, the streets were deserted. Just then, they saw a crowd on the road waiting for the victims. The crowd stopped the rickshaw and pulled down the old man. On seeing this May Price got down to save the old man and Tridib was after May. He ran after May, shouting at her to stop. On seeing a white-skinned European, the fanatic crowd did not touch her but Tridib, a wheat-complexioned man from Calcutta got into their circle. Soon he turned into a corpse. The narrator, Ila, Mayadebi, couldn't help. The driver took them to a safe corner. It was after many years that the narrator came to know about the real picture of riots through newspapers. May met the narrator after many years in Delhi and she gave him an account of what happened with Tridib who ran after her. She felt guilty to be the cause of Tridib's death. It was only for her sake that Tridib got into trouble. She concluded by saying that Tridib's death was not an accident but a sacrifice. Now the narrator and May were in each other's arms. The narrator was happy because "for the glimpse she had given me of a final redemptive mystery". This mystery was the mystery of a real sacrifice like that of Tridib's death.

The narrator talks of how one's imagination can be used as a kind of extension to real concrete experience of life and also replicate experiences which are not available first hand. Through this method the hurdles created by the limitations of the senses can be overcome and one can have free access to several experiences

beyond the reach of time and space as Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee points out :

"Tridib had told him of the desire that can carry one beyond 'the limits of one's mind to other times and places, and to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. Distance in *The Shadow Lines* is thus perceived as a challenge to be overcome through the use of imagination and desire until space gets dissolved. One of the many intricate patterns that weave the novel together is the coalescing of time and space in a seamless continuity."¹

Reality is multi-faceted and a combination of reality through senses and appropriate and focused use of imagination would provide an enhanced and enriched experience rather than a raw, incoherent one without the aid of imagination.

"The spatial imagination and the passion for entering other lives that the narrator imbibes from Tridib, enables him to be mimetically situated in a specific cultural milieu. Yet by the end of the novel certain major shifts have taken place that destabilize the simple equation between events and their written report, undercutting the basis of formal realism in which the credibility of the representation is predicated upon a firm knowledge of what has happened. An indeterminacy about this knowledge invalidates realism as a narrative mode in *The Shadow Lines*."²

The shadow lines is not simply about the validity and reliability of political division but how certain events and forces can unite people towards and collective consciousness which would be fragmentary and often contradictory during times of normalcy. This idea is interrogated by the narrator while expostulating the idea of his grand mother that eternal threat can become a means of internal unification.

"The *Shadow Lines* obviously questions the idea of nationhood that is consolidated

through the baptism of wars or coercive state apparatus. The grandmother valorizes apocalypses that make ‘people forget that they are born this or that, Muslim or Hindu...they become a family born of the same of pool of blood.’³

Conclusion

The novel is not only about the problem of nationhood based on political divisions but also the untouched silences in the lives of people who bore the brunt of the suffering of partition without either their choice or volition as Suvir Kaul aptly points out;

“The Shadow Lines is an archaeology of silences, a slow brushing away of other cobwebs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma. As the narrator discovers, this is no easy project, for the silences the uncovers are not contingent or accidental, but are constitutive of the nature of Indian modernity, indeed of the identity of the post-colonial sub continental nation – states of India and Pakistan.”⁴

An interesting but ignored fact about partition is that the public mind is more focused on partition of the western side of India forgetting the east Pakistan till 1972 which was given the name of Bangladesh after the 1972 war between India and Pakistan. This indifference towards the eastern partition finds a competent voice in the writing of Ghosh.

“Partition is the watershed between the colonial and the post-colonial, and the riots and programs that marked its passage taught people at terrible fear. At the origin of India and Pakistan lies the national trauma of partition, a trauma that freezes fear into silence, and for which *The Shadow Lines* seeks to find a language, a process of mourning, and perhaps a memorial.”⁵

The Colonial experience as articulated is still to be understood at the deeper, fundamental level as it not only broke open the self isolated security of India but also exposed unwillingly to the world out side its border and one has to come to proper terms in harmonizing the past and the present as Mita Bose comments;

“The burden of India’s colonial past appears to weigh heavily on a migrant postcolonial generation, and Ghosh seems to be constantly in search of that elusive epiphanic moment in which individuals may come to terms with their histories, thereby releasing themselves from the metaphoric and metaphysical – burden of their condition. A ‘glimpse’ of final redemptive mystery is all that Ghosh can, in all honesty, give us: but it is perhaps the most precious footnote that fiction can offer our fractured, fractious history.... Those dilemmas of diaspora that are engendered in the margins of history are foregrounded in Ghosh to attain preeminence in fiction.”⁶

The real nature and attempt of the writer is given a clear understanding in the comment of Neelam Srivastava who talks of new forms of hybrid culture emerging from colonial experience.

“Ghosh, in his writing, is at pains to foreground the cultural syncretism of the Indian subcontinent in strategic opposition to the historicism of nationalistic discourse. Ghosh’s quest for an alternative history and anthropology has led him to emphasize the importance of the narrative.”⁷

The artistic achievement of Ghosh and his capacity to blend both political history with the demands of art and verisimilitude is appropriately remarked by Mita Bose.

“Ghosh’s aesthetics is a fictional embracing of historical/ political subtexts, and an intellectual exploration of both the major as well as the marginalized, contexts of modern history : nationalism/internationalism,

migrancy, memory/nostalgia, violence, communalism. He is constantly looking for ways in which he can render history into fiction.”⁸

The spirit of exploration and new ways of perceiving reality and understanding the way of

the contemporary life is structured can be the basic reason and thrust for the writer.

“Amitav Ghosh’s novels claim a unique position in the post colonial literature that explores and celebrates the hybridity of post colonial nationality and migration.”⁹

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