



LITERATURE IN LIFE: DECODING THE MUFFLED VOICES

Editors
Dr. R. Mercy Latha
Dr. Anita Albert



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Pacific Books International

19. "The Haint" and "The House": A Freudian Analysis of the Supernatural and the Uncanny in Toni Morrison's <i>Beloved</i> —Dr. Amar Chakraborty	196
20. Boza's Melodic Journey: Exploring Istanbul in Orhan Pamuk's <i>A Strangeness in My Mind</i> —Ms. R. Vadivukarasi & Dr. C. Geetha	212
21. Feminism: A Summary —S. Gayathri	221
22. Culture and Identity in Amitav Ghosh's <i>The Shadow Lines</i> —A. Velumani	229

Chapter 22



Culture and Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

A. Velumani

Asst. Professor of English
Nallamuthu Gounder Mahalingam College, Pollachi

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh the living writer of this century is an Indian writer in English. He is greatly influenced by the stories of partition, independence and the Second World War and these stories and anecdotes of such epochal related by his parents, family members and neighbors made an indelible impression on his mind. History is his prime obsession and his fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. During his formative years, Ghosh learnt through silences and conversations about the subterfuges and silences of his father's generations. It is therefore this aspect of historical reality which has fascinated Amitav Ghosh. He has used these memories to construct

the concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world, which is, the dominant theme of most of his well-known novel, *The Shadow Lines*. It also delineates the theme of partition and the use of imagination; through the technique of imagination the novelist depicts the plight and sufferings of the characters during partition.

Keywords: Partition, Historical consciousness, Political, Obsession.

The freedom movement which started from 1857 to 1947, and the partition which took place on 14 August 1947, of India, is the two major historical events that influenced deeply the writings of Indian – English writers in twentieth century. The present study aims at understanding the partition in the novel *The Shadow Line* written by Amitav Ghosh, the former dealing on the partition of subcontinent into India and East – Pakistan, and the latter on the partition of subcontinent into India and East – Pakistan, the present Bangladesh.

On the midnight of 14 August 1947, India became Independent. But the very moment of Independence brought with it, happiness and sorrow, life and death, integration and disintegration, settlement and unsettlement. It is evident we got the Independence at the cost of partition. The partition was such an event as it spelled disaster for millions of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims who were living like brothers and sisters.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is an Indo-Anglican fiction which depicts the division of Bengal and the sufferings of its people, caused by the partition. It's a narrative constructed on the historical, social, psychological consequence of displacement. The novel concentrates on the sufferings of the people during the partition. The action is mainly portrait through the characters, Thamma, the grandmother. It raises very few

important questions about the border and their demarcation, nationalism, and freedom. It tries to prove time and space as mere Shadows. It tells how the terror and destruction created by riots affect the characters.

The novel is about two families the Dutta Choudharis of Bengal, living in Calcutta, and the other the Prices, living in London. Chandrashekhar Dutta Choudhari was a judge at the Calcutta high court. And during the British rule Lionel Tresawsen was in Calcutta as an officer. Chandrashekhar Dutta Choudhari and Lionel Tresawsen gradually became good friends which lasted long. The novel lines up characters from different nationalities, religion and cultures in the world. It includes three generations Thamma, the grandmother, Jethamoshai, the grandmother's relative Mayadebi, Thamma's only sister, and Himangshushekhar Dutta Choudhari, Maya's husband popularly known as Shaheb, are the representative of the first generation; the father – son of Thamma, the grandmother of the narrator, the mother of the narrator and Jatin, the elder brother of Tridib, Mayadebi's son, who is an economist with the UN, are the representatives of the second generation; and Tridib, Ila, Jatin's daughter, Nick Price, grandson of Mrs. Price and Ila's husband, May Price daughter of Mrs. Price, studying at royal college of music and the narrator belong to the third generation.

Amitav Ghosh has also used various ideas about Partition in his novels. In *The Shadow Lines* effect of Partition is deeply felt by the Narrator and his grandmother Thamma. Thamma laments on the effect of Partition and its political freedom. Thamma expresses her idea on political freedom and the other cause of Independence and Partition in the novel *The Shadow Lines*. In *The Shadow Lines* the development and growth of Thamma's character encapsulates the futility and meaninglessness of political freedom which was otherwise supposed to usher in an era of peace and prosperity for

all. During the days of her childhood and youth, she had her sympathies with all those who were fighting for the cause of freedom. In fact, she too wanted to earn small portion of the glory enjoyed by some of her classmate 'terrorists' by running secret errands for them or even cooking for them and washing their clothes. The aim was to be associated with such a group of persons, actively involved in fighting for a 'pious cause.'

Thamma's formative years have taught her the need, necessity and desirability of political freedom which is a sort of pre-requisite for economic, social, cultural and intellectual freedom and development. Amitav Ghosh shows that in a changing world, different strands of nationalism and ideology will exist and even compete. The force of nationalism in the quest for freedom or ideology is often a source of violence. Thamma's disillusionment increases when she has to mention her birthplace on the passport - form during her visit to Dhaka. Home ought to be the place where one was born and brought up, sealed by an emotional bond, where one can claim one's right without a *thought and without any hesitation. Leaving Dhaka during the Partition had obviously* meant severing old roots and groping for a new kind of stability and identity. Therefore, years later, on her visit to Dhaka, she is distressed to write 'Dhaka' as her place of birth: "She liked things to be neat and in place - and at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be messily at odds with her nationality" (152).

Tridib's death bewilders Thamma further. She finds her idealism fast turning into helplessness as the anarchic tendencies within and without her gather force. Thamma lies in bed, weak and helpless. Even as she realizes that war, partition and violence are meaningless if they create no visible borders between two countries; she never accepts and understands Ila's desperate urge to settle in England. The likes of Tridib have to die so

that a comprehensive view of real freedom may find favour and flourish with the help of personal relationships.

In fact, *The Shadow Lines* questions prevailing precepts and ethics which man inherits blindly. The value of political zeal and social freedom is no longer stable, exclusive, permanent and immutable as Thamma and Ila had believed. Tridib, however, the novel emphasizes the relevance and significance of human relationships. This alone can lead to an attainment of genuine freedom. Man is free to decide on a course of action which is found to affect a whole group of people, a nation, and mankind. Every individual shares the responsibility of establishing a code of values which would ensure peace and solitary for mankind. It has to be remembered that freedom is not just the absence of external presence of external pressure; it is also, the presence of something else. The struggle for freedom is not without its darker side. If social and moral freedom is unlimited, it may unleash the numerous problems of excess and the lack of restraint.

The Shadow Lines gives a new twist to an old theme of partition. The 'lines' symbolically represent all such lines that divide nations and peoples in the name of nationalism, religion, language and caste. It is new in *The Shadow Lines* is that the novelist denies the very existence of these lines and hence calls them 'shadow' or illusionary. This makes the novel debatable as to whether it is about 'the meaning of political freedom in the modern world' or an escape from reality.

To sum up, the main focus of the novel is on the meaning and nuances of political freedom in contemporary life. The novel highlights the politics, national and international. Ghosh emphasizes the impact of politics on the lives of common people and human relationships. He also highlights communal riots, which broke out of the partition rumour. The national and international politics, which is the main characteristic

of the Indian English novels of 1980s, is the most significant theme of *The Shadow Lines*.

Amitav Ghosh successfully presents his views on partition, communal riots, and war. The novel makes the readers think how relevant is the study of partition today as well. Ghosh points out that the communal riots that broke out during or after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, or in 1964 or 1979, or at any other time follow the same pattern of suspicion, distrust, rumour, loots, rapes, and killings. The novel doesn't arouse merely feelings about killings but it makes one think how meaningless all these riots are.

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