

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 4 April 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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New Historicism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Amitav Ghosh

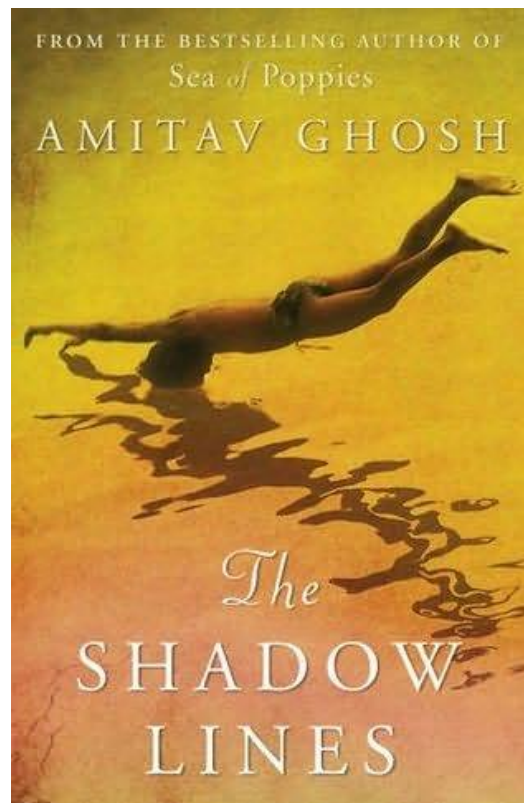
History in Creative Literature – Writings of Amitav Ghosh

Focusing upon **New Historicism** as an element of text and history in literary writings, I wish to elaborate on the historicist approach to literature as used by the contemporary Indian English

writer, Amitav Ghosh, who has won many accolades for his fiction which is intertwined with history. What better reference can one give than his second novel *The Shadow Lines*.

Amitav Ghosh's success as a historical novelist owes much to the distinctiveness of his well researched narrative. It brings a bygone era and vanished experiences to life through vividly realized detail. Ghosh's fiction is characterized by strong themes that may be sometimes identified as historical novels. His themes involve emigration, exile, cultural displacement and uprooting. He illuminates the basic ironies, deep seated ambiguities and existential dilemmas of human condition. The narrator is very much like the chronicler Pimen in Pushkin's drama *Boris Godonow*. But unlike Pushkin's Pimen Amitav Ghosh is not a passive witness to all that happens in his presence, and absence. He is the very soul of the happenings, he connects the various clauses of life lived in Calcutta, London, Dhaka and elsewhere.

The Shadow Lines



Ghosh's second novel, *The Shadow Lines*, was published in 1988, four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi's assassination. The novel probes the various facets of violence and the extent to which its fiery arms reach under the guise of fighting for freedom.

Ghosh's treatment of violence in Calcutta and in Dhaka in this novel is valid even today. Answers still evade the questions which he poses about freedom, about the very real yet non-existing lines which divide nations, people, and families.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator recalls with Proustian precision, the people and events that dominated his childhood in Calcutta in the '60s, and later in London. The mystery at the tale's heart concerns his Uncle Tridib's fate in the city of Dhaka during the Khulna (East Pakistan) riots in 1964 which resulted in the outbreak of communal riots on 10 January in Kolkata (West Bengal). But, the effect of that crucial time does not unfold until nearly twenty years later.

Such delayed understanding is the fuel that powers Ghosh's quiet, forceful writing, in which detail and memory are shown to shape our lives as effectively as events of global importance. Examining connectedness and separation, the author uses the fate of nations to offer observations about a profound human condition.

Restless Narrative Motions

Amitav Ghosh's historical world is one of restless narrative motions. His central figures are travellers and diasporic exiles. He treats national borders and conceptual boundaries as permeable fictions to be constantly transgressed. Through the multiple criss-crossing, discrete binaries of order and category give way to a realm of mirror images and hybrid realities. Reason becomes passion; going away is also coming home and the differences between us and them, now and then, here and there are disrupted by the itinerant maps of a roaming imagination.

The New Historicist Approach

New historicist approach concerns itself not only with the big and paramount national matters like partition and communal frenzy but also with political matters and international events of the past. The inscrutable and transcendental issues like the indivisible sanity, religion and alienation, themes of detachment and isolation become part of it. The search for freedom, passion for social justice and deep concern for the individual liberty in an increasingly collectivized society are very well represented in such works.

The Element and Function of Nostalgia

The novel also highlights nostalgia, which is an intrinsic part of history. The characters suffer a sense of loss and isolation. They are always hankering after the past, for those days and for those places that are no longer traceable. For example, reminiscences of her childhood in Dhaka keep haunting Tha'mma, who has been living in Calcutta for about two decades. For her, Calcutta can never be Dhaka which used to be *her* home.

The Strategy: Fictional Language and Fictional Episodes as History

Amitav Ghosh's novels have historical events written in the fictional language and fictional matter treated as history thus giving the effect of presence and absence of history at the same time.

The public chronicles of nations are interrogated by highlighting on the one hand the reality of the fiction people create around their lives and on the other hand by recording the veritable graphic details of individual memories that do not necessarily tally with the received version of history. For instance, the narrator himself is a witness to the riots in Calcutta in 1964, but when he tries to prove it to his colleagues using the traditional medium of recording history – i.e., the newspaper – he initially meets with disappointment. There is no visible record of the narrator's mnemonic history.

Personality of the Creative Writer as Historian

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's personality merges with that of the historian on one hand and on the other hand after a passage of time, he is no more physically present in them. For him the past exists only in memory and has no visible traces left in the present to go by. The only resources, which the narrator-historian possesses to graft history, are memories, photographs, and Tridib's stories which are difficult to dismiss because they are factually correct yet set in a medium of fiction.

The events are reconstructed, often as accurately and as carefully as any historian, putting real people in imaginary situations, and fancy conditions in documentary narratives, augmenting the significance of historical events by plausible and internally consistent depictions and at the same time they seem to register only the fictive aspect of the stories and, consequently, dismiss the history which is connected with them.

An Evaluation of a Segment of Historical Reality

Thus a historicist approach to text is nothing but an evaluation of a segment of historical reality as projected by the novelist whose techniques of writing fiction enable him or her to describe his or her world-vision.

In all his writing, Amitav Ghosh's engagement with history is not the same kind as that of a regular historian, but this does not, in any way, lessen its significance as historical fiction. The fictional framework renders history more readable and lively and he is able to involve the reader more than what actual history does. Ghosh's fiction reveals that the novelist's involvement with history is his prime obsession. Indeed, he interjects a new dimension into his encounter with history. His fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. Ghosh is thus a novelist who virtually bends his novels to the needs of history; they largely derive their purpose and shape from it.

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