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Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines: A Critical Study*

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D. (English)



Amitav Ghosh

Courtesy: <http://www.amitavghosh.com/pictures.html>

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines:*
A Critical Study

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh has won many accolades for his fiction that is keenly intertwined with history. His 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. He, in one of the interviews, has observed, "Nobody has the choice of stepping away from history" and "For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life-history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality".

Amitav Ghosh's success as historical novelist owes much to the distinctiveness of his well-researched narratives. He remarkably manifests a bygone era and vanished experiences to life through vividly realized detail. The better reference in this context is his celebrated second novel, "The Shadow Lines" (1988) which was published four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This constitutes a logical background in the novel, and it makes readers probe various hammering facets of violence. Also, his treatment of violence in Calcutta and Dhaka in this novel is valid even today.

The novel is largely set against the backdrop of major historical events such as the Swadeshi movement, the Second World War, the partition of India, the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta, the Maoist Movement, the India-China War, the India-Pakistan War and the fall of Dhaka from East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. It is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator which has its roots in broader national and international experience. In the novel the past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcations. . The text harps on the concerns of our period, the search for identity, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture. It magnificently interweaves fact, fiction and

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

reminiscence. It is a continuous narrative which replicates the pattern of violence not only of 1964 but also of 21st century. The fragmentary narratives unfold the narrator's experiences in the form of memories which move backwards and forwards.

While focusing upon the text of *The Shadow Lines* the paper aims at examining and elaborating Ghosh's historical touches and their implications. The paper also investigates his narrative techniques employed in the novel.

Intertwined with History

Amitav Ghosh, one of the most celebrated authors in Indian English, has won many accolades for his fiction that is keenly intertwined with history. His 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. He, in one of the interviews, has clarified, "Nobody has the choice of stepping away from history" and "For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life-history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality". Also, having read his novels, it is not surprising to learn that Ghosh himself was first a student of history in college (Hawley, p.68).

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 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

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

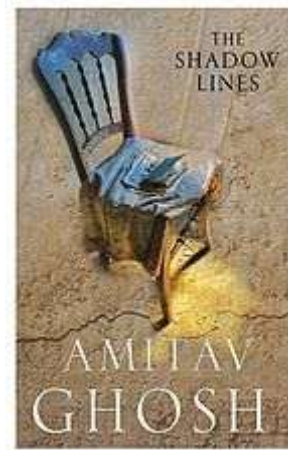
12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

traditional medium of recording history – i.e., the newspaper – he initially meets disappointment. There is no visible record of the narrator’s mnemonic history.

Introduction



Amitav Ghosh’s success as historical novelist owes much to the distinctiveness of his well-researched narratives. He faithfully manifests a bygone era and vanished experiences to life through vividly realised detail. His 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. He chooses to tell a story that pervades through the seams of reality and fiction, of time and space, of memories and beliefs.

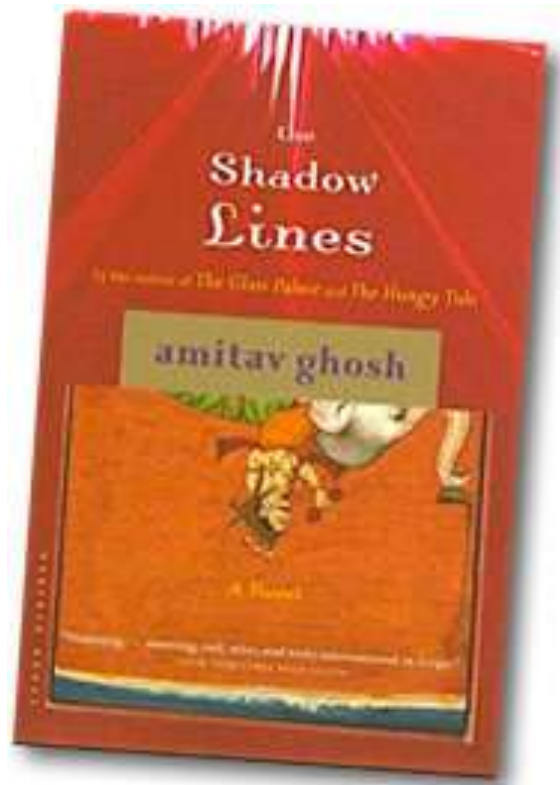
The Shadow Lines

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study



The better reference in this context is his celebrated second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) which was published four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This sad event constitutes a logical background in the novel, and it makes readers probe various hammering facets of violence. Also, his treatment of violence in Calcutta and Dhaka in this novel is valid and relevant record even today. The novel focuses on the narrator's family in Calcutta and Dhaka and their connection with an English family in London. A boy conjures up a picture of London so vivid in his imagination that he recognizes it when he visits years later and learns that real places can be invented inside one's head. From Dhaka to London, this novel contains a wealth of colourful characters in the fantastic backdrop of historical narratives.

The novel is set against the background of major historical events such as the Swadeshi Movement, the Second World War, the partition of India, the communal riots

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta, the Maoist Movement, the India-China War, the India-Pakistan War and the fall of Dhaka from East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The events revolve around Mayadebi's family, their friendship and sojourn with their English friends the Prices and Thamma, the narrator's grandmother's links with her ancestral city, Dhaka. It is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator which has its roots in broader national and international experience. In the novel the past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcations. .

The text deals with the concerns of our period, the search for identity, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture. It magnificently interweaves fact, fiction and reminiscence. It is a continuous narrative which replicates the pattern of violence not only of 1964 but also of 21st century that is plaguing and torturing us in different emerging forms. The fragmentary narratives unfold the narrator's experiences in the kind of memories which move backwards and forwards, and this special technique adds multi-dimensional perceptions to the thematic understanding and the conveying of messages of the novel.

The text, in addition, dwells on the effects of fear on memory and one's engagement with the world. The memories of the 1964 riot, for example, traumatise the narrator, and he successfully blocks them until a chance remark that he overhears during the 1984 riots prompts a personal crisis and a detailed unpacking of the earlier trauma (John C. Hawley, p.65). As the narrator recounts the depressing events, he recalls snippets of conversations with relatives and friends that trigger to suggest that they, too, had been redefined by their experiences that day.

The plot of this novel, as a matter of fact, tends to engage readers and "deeply resonate for many Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis" (Hawley).

Historical Touches and Their Narratives

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

While tracing historical aspects and their fascinating narratives interlinked with broader perspectives in the novel it is herewith befitting to discuss the following endorsing points:

1. 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 Shadow Lines is a story told by a nameless narrator in recollection. It is a non-linear tale told as if putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in the memory of the narrator. This style of writing is both unique and captivating; unfolding ideas together as time and space coalesce and help the narrator understand his past better. Revolving around the theme of nationalism in an increasingly globalized world, Ghosh questions the real meaning of political freedom and the borders which virtually seem to both establish and separate. The novel traverses through almost seventy years through the memories of people, which the narrator recollects and narrates, giving their viewpoints along with his own. Though the novel is based largely in Calcutta, Dhaka and London, it seems to echo the sentiments of whole South-east Asia, with lucid overtones of Independence and the pangs of Partition.

2. Impacts of High Nostalgia

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

The novel also highlights nostalgia, which is, in real sense, 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. It is a story of a middle class Indian family settled in Calcutta. The boy narrator presents the views of the members of his immediate and extended family, thus, giving each a well defined character.

However, Tha'mma, narrator's grandmother is the most realised character in the novel, providing a distinct idea of the idealism and the enthusiasm with which the people worked towards nation building just after independence. It is chiefly through the considerable depiction of her character that Ghosh delivers the most powerful message of the novel; the vainness of creating nation states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided. All the characters are well rounded.

In Tridib, the narrator's uncle, Ghosh draws one of the most unique characters of our times. Narrator's fascination with him is understandable as Tridib travels the world through his imagination. Ghosh subtly tries to undo the myth that boundaries restrict as there are no barriers in imagination. Though Ghosh is a little mean to narrator's cousin and childhood love, Ila, but her thus portrayal is crucial to showcase the confusions which the people who live away from their native place, harbour and the prejudices they face in general.

3. Narrator in Capacity of Mature 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

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

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 cinematic fiction. The events are reconstructed, often as accurately and as tactfully 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.

The narrator is like his uncle, in the long run – very much alive to the place in which he is residing, and alert to the potential emergence of other places in his seat of imagination. Even more than his uncle, though, he is sensitive to the history of places.

4. Recollection of Past Events

The differences of time and place blur as the process of recollection transforms the past events into a throbbing sense of what has been lost. The historical events carried by the novel includes the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the Partition of India in 1947, and the spontaneous communal combustion in the form of riots in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and India following the '64 Hazratbal incident in Srinagar.

The novel is not a bare and bland recapitulation of those tense historical moments; it captures the trauma of emotional rupture and estrangement as also the damaging potential of the siege within people sundered by bigoted politics.

The materiality of Ghosh's novel as a re-appropriated history is felt throughout the narrative and the historical moments narrated become a compelling tale. The

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

reconstruction of the past through houses, photographs, maps, road names, newspapers, advertisements and other concretisations allows us to collate the text with concurrent contexts and validate the author's perception of the time and milieu covered by the novel. The principal episodes viewed in a simultaneous focus seem to be part of a historical continuum and the narrator's insight into the characters falling into insane frenzy or wallowing in stolid indifference to trans-cultural currents can be palpably located.

5. Concerns about Cross Border Humanity

A close analysis of Ghosh's works also reveals his grounded philosophy that nations are both real and imaginary, and material and immaterial. It is for this reason that he suggests that borders that separate them are 'shadow lines'. The novel illustrates this very philosophy by teasing the nationalist literal mindedness of the narrator's grandmother who wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane (Anshuman A. Mondal, p.88).

While *The Shadow Lines* explores the author's major concerns about wider, cross-border humanity with striking insights into the issues of ethnic nationalism and communalism, it also uncovers new levels of his technical prowess. Ghosh has departed from Rushdie's mode of "imaginative serio-comic storytelling" (Hawley, p.3) or "the disjointed magic realism" (Mukherjee) 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" (Mukherjee, "Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma") to reflect on communal carnage and sectarian tension in the Indian subcontinent. The novel derives its material from Ghosh's experience of the fracture following the Partition and the resultant rupture in the affiliative bonds of the communities across the border. What makes his experience worthy of investigation is the technique by which his experience is distilled into a fascinating narrative.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

6. Geographical Fluidity and Cultural Dislocations

Ghosh's earlier explorations of nationhood and diaspora of relationships between individuals and communities that transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders are extended in his novels (Anshuman A. Mondal, p.15). He engages with the limits of essentialist nationalism and barriers to empathy across geographical borders. The novel eventuates into a search for the strategies for survival in a violent, hate-filled world of narrow divisions and finds in love an effective antidote to the miasma of ethnic tension.

Thus the novel prompts to address the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a salutary insight into history. The cross-border movement of aliens and immigrants under the increasingly globalised scenario endorses, or rather validates, the novel's larger project of cultural accommodation, of making sense of ontological confusion in intricate spatiality and seeking adjustment to the emerging demands of multicultural world.

As Brinda Bose rightly notes, "It is no doubt fitting that in the age of an extravagantly embracing of globalization, we may claim to have closed the gap between the *other* and straddling it; certainly, the legacy of postcolonial angst today appears to have settled into a potentially numbing acceptance of bi- or multi-cultural euphoria. In such a circumstance, the diasporic imagination of Amitav Ghosh – that wrestles with an understanding of bi-culturalism as it 'yokes by violence together' discrete and distant identities – is essential to our understanding of our history even as it is being created" (Bose, pp.15-16).

In my view, Ghosh appeals to creative multicultural impulses whereby we can engage the other in the mutual transformation of dialogue without giving up the distinctiveness of our traditions. He makes a plea for cross-border ties and inter-

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

civilisational alliance which amounts to making an attempt at matching, to quote Edward Said, “the new economic and socio-political dislocations and configurations of our time with the startling realities of human interdependence on a world scale” (Said, *Culture and Materialism* 401). Such re-appropriations of history or “desirable constructions of the past” also do away with the partitioning of the past to open out common doors from the corridors between cultures through “creative improvisations” (Prasad, p.58).

7. Demarcations as Arbitrary and Invented Divisions

As the title of the novel symbolically suggests, all lines are shadow lines; they are not real. Ghosh questions the very basis of modern nation states. It does not matter how many states exist in a continent or sub-continent. It does not change the well-being of its people. When nature draws lines in form of mountains, oceans, rivers, it is real. But man-made borders are shallow and unjustifiable (Shubha Tiwari, p.36).

Commonly the most important idea drawn from *The Shadow Lines* is the shallowness of international borders, lines of control, frontiers and boundaries. Jethamoshai speaks well when Tha'mma and others persuade him to go to India, “Once you start moving you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don’t believe in this India- when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here” (p.212).

Ultimately through the description of the pain of partition, riots and communal hatred (that is important dimension of *The Shadow Lines*) Ghosh drives home the idea of unreal borders. There is no substance in such strict borders. (Shubha Tiwari, p.5).

Ghosh’s preoccupation with shadow lines or demarcations as “arbitrary and invented divisions between people and nations” has also been closely questioned by A.N. Kaul. In his opinion, *The Shadow Lines* “ends up attributing value and a higher reality to

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

a sort of amorphous romantic subjectivity” (Kaul, p. 299). Kaul argues that unlike Henry James and E.M. Forster, who recognise the barriers to cultural crossings due to a variety of political and cultural complexities, Ghosh privileges the world of private refuge over historical and political realities and thus regards these troublesome realities or historical formations as immaterial; at any rate, he blithely disregards them.

As Kaul points out, the novel insists on a sentimental resolution and as such it lacks an authentic resonance. He also reads some signifying and profound statements about life in the novel as “postmodern banalities” or mere “conundrums.” Kaul perhaps sidesteps the implications of Tridib’s advice to the narrator that he uses his “imagination with precision” (24). Tridib’s insistence on the material moorings of imagination – its temporal and spatial co-ordinates – is plainly missing from Kaul’s explication of “imagination” as romantic retreat from historical realities in *The Shadow Lines*.

8. A World Torn Asunder by History

The Shadow Lines is a kaleidoscopic world of different cultures, tours and travels. It also portrays a world torn asunder by history. Through an intricate web of memories, relationships and images Amitav Ghosh builds a vivid and moving story. It is unlike the novel of previous era, firstly because it is not linear in narration. The interaction of Indians with English people, their journey to and fro, their issues of political freedom and the forces of nationalism that this throws up has been very vividly described. The first impression one gets in reading this novel is that the people described belong to so many different nationalities, cultures and backgrounds. The very opening of the novel describes the writer’s aunt Mayadebi going to England with her husband and son. This was in 1939 and since then the interaction with them and separation from them has been projected through memories. Through the cinematic attention-grabbing technique of flashback, the action moves to and fro from London to Calcutta and to Khulna and Dhaka. With the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

world moving at break-neck speed, it is no longer possible for any writer to write the novel in Jane Austen fashion from the centre of her place.

9. Segment of Historical Reality

Although, chronologically, the story begins with a passage of time in colonial India when the narrator was not even born, it embraces a good deal of postcolonial moments, and all the episodes are held in simultaneous focus to illuminate the narrative resolution. The year 1939 is historically significant for the outbreak of the Second World War and the phenomenal upheavals on the Indian subcontinent coming in its wake. Mayadebi's visit to London around this time, her intimate contact with the Price family and the Tridib-May component of the story are recounted by Tridib twenty-one years later to the narrator, an eight-year-old inquisitive child. May was a little baby when Tridib saw her in London.

A romantic relationship between them has developed through correspondence, transcending the shadow lines of nationality and cultural boundaries. Amitav Ghosh examines the mysterious pull between Tridib and May and the abiding bond between the two families defying distance and physical frontiers even as the countries they belong to are pitted against each other. The narrator's voice, thus, appears to be the author's voice and signals in frankly asserting tone that the issues of boundaries and national culture are illusory and flimsy. There cannot be any divisions of universal humanity. The concept of time in the story can be taken as a metaphor for the national borders. It seems to suggest that as there is no division or wall between past and present, the separating lines between nations also cannot stand.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study

Conclusion

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 in *The Shadow Lines* 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. His 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. the novel narrates the events taking place in 1939-40, 1960-63 and 1978-79 in a jumbled way but the adult narrator focalises on these recollections in the 1980s and manipulates these blurred temporal and spatial fragments into a coherent stretch to stage postcolonial situations as well as cultural dislocations and anxieties, and presents the issue of fractured nationalities in close and telling encounters for good measure.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 8 August 2012

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Ph.D.

Historical Factors and Their Narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:
A Critical Study