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Imagery in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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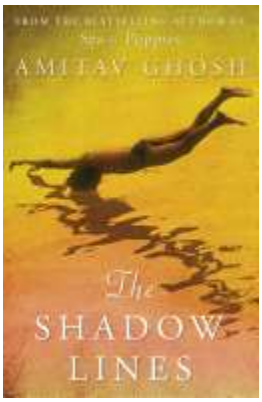
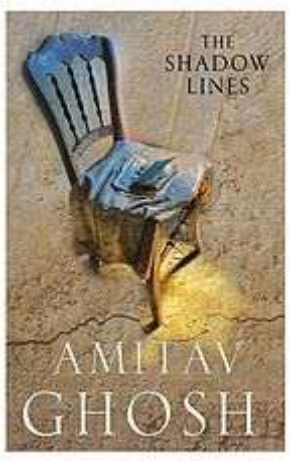


Abstract

Amitav Ghosh occupies a rather curious place in the landscape of contemporary English language authors from the Indian subcontinent. A noted novelist, an essayist and a nonfiction writer, Amitav Ghosh's standing in the realms of literature is truly unparalleled. His stories move

restlessly across countries, continents and even oceans. His narratives always reflect the wisdom of an Oxford scholar. His views and opinions are meticulously researched and learned. In every book, an epic scale of scholarship is directly discernible. His second novel 'The Shadow Lines' resists classification. Everyone in this novel, in fact, hovers over the shadow lines between imagination and reality. Imagery helps to create a specific atmosphere/mood/tone, in accordance to the authors' choice. Imagery is a huge source from which readers can infer the authors' intentions and opinions. Oftentimes, imagery characterizes the work itself. Those characters are realistic portrayals from life itself. In this paper we will examine how the live imageries give expression to the theme of illusion and reality through different characters.

The Shadow Lines



Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines,* focuses on the trauma of individual lives caught in a changing world where new nations are formed and old identities have to be arbitrarily replaced by new notions of national identity, causing cultural and physical displacements from old contexts into new ones. In the contemporary era, the problem gets aggravated as further displacements take place with travel and immigration, bringing about their own kinds of alienation and heartbreak.

Riot and Killing in Dhaka

The protagonist of the novel, Tridib and his English girl friend visited Dhaka. Tridib is killed by a mob during a Muslim riot there. It is this traumatic experience which severely affects the lives of almost all the major characters in the novel. Ghosh employs certain key images to highlight his major concerns in the context of this core experience of the novel. Maps, mirrors, spectacles, stairs and photographs, etc. recur in the novel emphasizing notions of nation, identity, and illusion, and for highlighting such ideas as the search for reality and the role of memory in confronting the present.

Maps, Mirrors and Boundaries

In her essay, "Maps and Mirrors," Meenakshi Mukherjee states: 'If maps are an attempt to chart the earth's surface precisely, mirrors deal with illusory space.' She further states that there is a resultant 'shifting reaches of meaning' in the idea of 'the simultaneity of precision and illusion.'[1] Another way of interpreting the drawing of maps is to see them as an artificial and arbitrary postcolonial exercise to impose divisions between people – through travel and memory of previous times; and looking into mirrors can be understood as an attempt by individuals to confront their real identities.

Maps and boundaries are mentioned in the novel frequently. The Bartholomew Atlas belonging to the child Tridib in London finds its way to Delhi, itself crossing the boundaries it describes. Further, this is how the narrator challenges the notion of nationalism set up by maps:

> [...] There had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intention, had thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lives [...] they were not to be blamed for believing that there was something admirable in moving violence to the borders [...] they had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lives [...] when they discovered that they had created not a separate, but a yet-undiscovered irony – the irony that killed Tridib: the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year old history of that map, when

the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines (233).

Religious Protest

In 1964 the stealing of the relic of Prophet Mohammad's hair in Srinagar led to riots in the distant Khulna in East Pakistan. In order to investigate this phenomenon, the narrator draws a circle on a map of Asia, with Khulna at the centre and Srinagar on the circumference. He finds it to be 'an amazing circle' (231), touching among other places, areas in Sri Lanka, Thailand and China. The narrator discovers, for instance, that Chiang Mai in Thailand is much closer to Calcutta than Delhi is: that Chengdu in China is closer to Calcutta than Srinagar is. And yet, nothing happened in the foreign areas adjacent to Indian cities, because of the negative developments in the latter. But, maps are not made keeping sentiments and geographical proximities in mind!

Mirror Theme

Tridib highlights the significance of the mirror theme in the novel. Thus, he tells the narrator that if one strives and is also lucky, one can travel 'to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror' (29). Thinking of herself as a baby in a gas mask during the War, May tries to see her old contrasting self: 'May was looking into the mirror, laughing silently' (166). Later, May tries to hide her true response to Tridib's death from the narrator: 'She turned away so that I couldn't see her eyes, even in the mirror' (204). Going back in time to newspaper descriptions of the events of 1964, the narrator tells us: 'I began my strangest journey; a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distance, a land of *looking-glass* events' (224).

Photographs and Memory

Photographs, in which the past survives as a visual, living presence, keeping alive memory, recur in the novel. Tridib's world, certainly, comes alive for the narrator through the former's collection of photographs. A key example is an old photograph wherein Tresawsen,

Dan, Mike and Franscesca walk down happily, and a week later, they are killed in a bomb attack or die subsequently. Though photographs can and do record some rare moments for posterity, they may not convey the emotions and inner lives of people:

> Nobody knows, nobody can ever know, not even in memory, because there are moments in time that are not knowable: nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin (68).

Staircases Leading on to Memory

Staircases in the novel, like maps, mirrors and photographs, also signify division or contradiction. In this case, not only literally between the architectural levels; they can also be viewed metaphorically – that is, as the indicators of different levels of reality. Take for instance, when Ila draws a map of a house and its stairs, which is a flat representation, the literal mind of the narrator cannot accept it: 'there can't be a staircase because it's flat, and staircases go up, they aren't flat' (70). When the narrator visits the Prices, May opens a door 'tucked behind the staircase' (116) and a hidden world of books is discovered; in the room behind, the narrator's sexuality is awakened at the sight of a half-naked Ila. In the latter case, the staircase divides the public and the private spatially. In Dhaka, in the old house, 'the stairs are slippery with dirt' (172), reminding us that time has brought decay for many. Children run up and down these stairs but the upstairs is, primarily, for the very old.

In a letter, Tridib describes a scene in a bombed cinema hall, wherein a boy climbs the stairs to an undamaged gallery-signifying the still undamaged aspects of lives, and the world after the war. Here, a man and a women enter and make love on the aisle, not knowing that a boy is observing them. The staircase divides the world of the gallery i.e. the observer from the world of the performers signifying active and passive principles in the unfolding of human lives.

Spectacles and Cigarettes

The images of spectacles and cigarettes in the novel are linked with some thoughtful pursuit. Probably, Ghosh is influenced by Conrad here. In Conrad's novel, *Lord Jim*, Marlow is visualized sitting in the dark, telling his story to a group of listeners and occasionally lighting a cigarette to dispel the darkness. In Ghosh's novel, however, the lighting of a cigarette and the emitting cigarette smoke are linked to moments of deep concentration. For instance, the narrator fondly recalls Tridib lighting a cigarette and then getting deeply absorbed in his reading: 'I had found him, as always, lying on a mat in his room at the top of the house, reading, with cigarette smouldering in the ashtray beside him' (10). Again, the narrator asks Ila if she remembers Tridib sitting in his room, 'Cigarette smoke spiraling out of his fingers' and Tridib telling them about 'the behavioral differences between the Elapidae and Viperidae families of snakes, or the design of the temples at Konarak, or the origins of the catamaran' (19). However, in the scene pertaining to the stolen view of the sexual act in the cinema hall, a woman just attracts the attention of a man by lighting a cigarette. Tridib's gleaming spectacles are frequently mentioned in the novel and are a part of his introspective, probing personality, as are cigarettes and cigarette smoke.

Digestion was a Mess

An unusual feature of Tridib's personality is his Gastric: 'the truth was that his digestion was a mess [...] every once in awhile a rumble in his bowels would catch him unawares on the streets and he would have to run to the nearest clean lavatory. This condition was known to us as Tridib's Gastric'. Gastric can be obliquely related to Tridib's startling, innovative ideas.

Ila's Doll

Similarly, there is an image, which is related to Ila, exclusively; Magda is Ila's doll and her 'make-believe' baby. She is Ila's other and her alter-ego. She has blonde hair and blue eyes, suggesting Ila's desire to be an English girl. Surprisingly, though Magda is English in appearance, she is treated as a subaltern Asian and she is beaten by Denise, her classmate. Eventually, she is rescued by Nick Price. But, after recounting the incident to the narrator, Ila

bursts into tears. Subsequently, the narrator learns from May Price the cause of Ila's anguish: 'that wasn't quite what happened [...] Nick didn't stop to help Ila. He ran all the way back [...] Nick didn't want to be seen with Ila. Ila didn't have any friends in school you see'. (76)

Magda acts as a metaphor for Ila's various experiences. Through the aforesaid story, Ila tries to project her own crisis of identity as a despised Asian, on to Madga. It will be correct to say that Ila rewrites her own story when she makes Madga undergo experiences similar to hers, but with a different ending.

That she is being neglected by others and feels alienated becomes further evident when she draws an imaginary room in an imaginary house for her doll in the sand. The imaginary lines, of course, remind us of the imaginary lines of maps, but, essentially, they are drawn by Ila to create a world for herself – a world where she is secure. However, it is a make-believe world – and with a doll as a relative, it simply highlights her isolation, her alienation from others in the actual world.

Mistaken Identity: Giant Lizard Taken for a Crocodile

Another episode worth mentioning in the context of imagery is the one narrated by Ila, which describes their home in Colombo. A *thala-goya*, a type of large lizard, is mistaken by servants for a crocodile. Ila's mother, a westernised lady, nicknamed Queen Victoria, is not frightened by it and adopts it and keeps it in her back garden. The lizard evokes different reactions from the characters, revealing their cultural biases: the servant, Ram Dayal, says, 'why did I come to Lanka [...] I knew Ravana would come to get me' (24). 'Queen Victoria,' on the other hand, says:' & the heck of a huge great lizard [...] wandering about in my garden like a governor at a gymkhana' (25). However, she summons up her courage to prove her class: 'being as she was, the daughter of a man who had left his village in Barisal in rags and gone on to earn a knighthood in the Old Indian Civil Service, she retained her composure' (25). Later the lizard is kept in the garden – and is treated as a pet, indicating the cross–cultural leaning of the family.

The Serpent

This pet saves Ila's life. In this particular episode, a snake slithers near Ila, ready to strike her. The lizard notices the snake and reacts with a sudden movement. The snake is momentarily distracted. Ila manages to upset her chair and move out of danger; the snake strikes the fallen chair. The lizard then chases the snake away. The snake here represents a destructive principle, the lizard – a salvation principle. To elaborate, if we take the lizard as a cross-cultural symbol, it is implied that Ila's travels and cross-cultural encounters have a liberating, salvation aspect; the snake on the other hand, can be here taken to represent a cloying, destructive and narrow spirit of tradition.

There are three images that occur successively in the novel and have individual as well as composite implications. These are the cotton man, the Victoria memorial and the wounded dog encountered by May, Tridib and the narrator.

Injured Dog

During her sojourn in Calcutta, May happens to go round the city in the company of the narrator and encounters a 'cotton man,' twanging on his harp. May takes him to be a musician. He represents to her an old, indigenous aspect of Indian culture, untouched by western colonization. Subsequently, May visits the Victoria memorial. She reacts sharply to the statute of Queen Victoria and turns her eyes away from the statue and the building. She says: 'Let's go, please, I can't bear it [...] it shouldn't be here [...]. It's an act of violence. It's obscene' (176). Here, May reacts against the colonial experience of India – the statue of Queen Victoria presents a different, rather an ugly facet of Indian history, as against the one represented by the cotton man; the statue, obviously, is to be taken as a symbol of oppression and subjugation.

Later May agrees to see it the way Tridib sees it: 'This will do for our ruin' (170). By linking herself and Tridib to the Memorial, which she has initially described as a symbol of violence, May is ironically suggesting the violent end of Tridib, when indeed their relationship will exist only in memory – as a 'ruin'.

Soon after this, May forces him to stop the car so that she could put an end to the agony of a seriously injured dog by slitting its jugular vein with a penknife. May and Tridib participate in a violent, though well-meaning act, which foreshadows the death of Tridib in an act of bloody violence. Towards the end of the novel, the rickshaw carrying the old man is visualized as becoming a vast monster: It symbolizes the mob violence growing out of proportion, and overtaking the rickshaw puller and its rider, and any alien person who comes in its vicinity.

Visual Imagery for Dramatic Effects and Character Illumination

The Shadow Lines is a novel where the visual imagery is used not for producing any dramatic effects, but as metaphoric symbols for projecting the essential concern of the novelist: which is, to give expression to the theme of illusion and reality. The images function almost like the characters in the novel – bearing their own contradictions and complexities; they carry out the novelist's purpose effectively.

Conclusion

Amid my inquisitive search about Amitav Ghosh's writings, *The Shadow Lines* caught my attention emphasizing that boundary lines of nations are only shadow lines. Imagery makes scenes come alive; but fiction is created by interweaving narration and scenes that evoke specific imagery. The narration ties together the scenes with information that interprets the events; or, it can function as transitions between scenes. Therefore, the efforts here are made to outline the imagery he used in this novel. However, its few hallmark are cited deviating detailed and elaborative matters.

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