

# Active and Passive Oppositions in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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## Abstract

This paper throws light on Amitav Ghosh's concern on exposing the idea of the nation as an illusion, issues of communalism by revolving around active and passive opposition in the light of author's perception of culture, history and family. Memory and curiosity, role of imagination in evoking contemporaneity, awareness of growing internationalism is evaluated. It also focuses on the need for co-existence and strong humanitarian ties across cultures by overlooking political, historical, cultural and personal considerations.

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Indian English writers have received fabulous royalties and international recognitions in the contemporary literary scenario and Amitav Ghosh is such a writer who holds important place in Indian fiction in English. He weaves together public and private life events with the structured web of history and mythology and balances complex set of issues with rare deftness by establishing himself as a significant new voice among Indian authors. *The Shadow Lines* unfurls itself by using the technique of stream of consciousness brilliantly and has succeeded in exploring regional and political issues and throws the notions of secularism, nationalism and freedom.

*The Shadow Lines* covers a large span of time by telling the story of three generations of the narrator's family by focusing much on the need for co-existence by overlooking personal and political considerations. Active and passive can be used as the convenient designations for the opposed attitudes. Male characters exemplify passive attitudes and are evaluated on the basis of historical differences between the three generations of families. Complex interconnections of resemblances, affiliations, dependence and independence are reflected in this work. Dutta-Chaudhuri family, division of two sisters of this family, quarrel within the joint family living in Dhaka become a grimly absurd parable of the partition by such 'shadow line'.

Amitav Ghosh gives new twist by revealing the cultural divide, communal struggle and misunderstanding by covering three countries such as India, East Pakistan and England. The theme of imagination and reality pervades the book that defies familiar perceptions of time and space.

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Political insights became the intrinsic part of the story and grandmother's insights are sharp and realistic. "All she wanted was a middle class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted-a modern middle class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it." (78)

*The Shadow Lines* has an extraordinary depiction of the reversal of usual gender attribution of the qualities 'active-passive' by explicating contrast between cultural rootedness of passive male characters. One hand romantic love, active and passive opposition in sexuality, adolescent infatuation to adult passion and unfulfilled love are some of the subjects dealt in the novel. Aloofness from human conflict and passions, Naxalite movement in Calcutta in the sixties were active and male character like Tridib are passive. This work is also in search of individuals perfectibility and also takes plunge into the discourse of silence. It can be called as the novel of accommodation beginning with the real world or world realities' later recognizing as mere shadows which accrues and accumulates within.

Shadow line between people and nation is a mere illusion. It recognizes and acknowledges the violence in our lives. Robi philosophizes to Ila and the narrator, "You know. If you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspapers at home now, all those pictures of dead people- in Assam, the north-east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura-people shot by terrorist and separatists and the army and police, you will find somewhere behind it all; that single word : "everyone's doing it to be free".(246).

Ghosh's construction of the 'division of experience' is complex and subtle but by using these narrative technique the mind of character is unobtrusively disclosed by the author. Division of experiences lies in the differences drawn between the English and Indian characters where Robi and Ila are represented as passive figures buffeted by history. "... Ila, put an arm around his shoulders and another around mine, and held us together. We stood a long time like that, on the steps of that derelict church in Clapham, three children of a free state, together clinging..." (272). Realities of the world becomes increasingly immaterial and become mere shadows in the hands of Amitav Ghosh.

Ghosh proposes the theme of complex cultural imbrication, transnational cultural processes including the nuanced critique of discrete cultures and gained new dimension to *The Shadow Lines*. He leads the readers through the deepening of narrator experiences and the multiple switches in the narrative sequence constitutes a counterpoint to grand narratives of the place.

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