

A Parallel Study on Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Chetan Bhagat's *The Three Mistakes of My Life*

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Abstract

An attempt is made in this article to compare the two eminent contemporary novelists, Amitav Ghosh and Chetan Bhagat, who have taken India to the global scene through their narrative skills. The study is made to read their perceptions of reality, myth, history, politics, characters and some selected themes. The riots that broke the peace of the nation India at the time of partition of British India are taken for narration. How the riots were dealt with by Ghosh and Bhagat in their respective novels is the major focus of this study.



Chetan Bhagat

Importance of Parallel Study

Parallel study paves the way to examine the similarities and the dissimilarities of a work of art by two different authors of the same country. M.M. Enani defines “Parallel Study” in the book *Theories of Comparative Literature*: “Any study of parallelism claims that there are affinities between the literatures of different peoples whose social evolution

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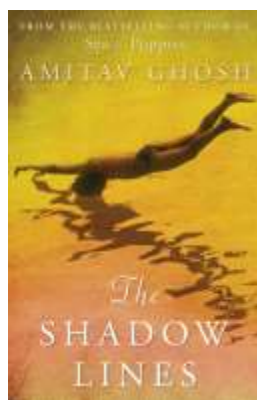
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is similar, regardless of whether or not there is any mutual influence or direct relation between them” (42). The two works of art may contain the same theme but the narration or the tone of characterization may differ.

Amtav Ghosh and Chetan Bhagat

The two authors taken for the parallel study are Indian English Writers Amitav Ghosh, a novelist, columnist, environmentalist, essayist and a travelogue writer and Chetan Bhagat whose works have become immensely popular in recent years. Chetan’s six novels have won critical praise and prestigious literary awards. His novel *The Five Point Someone* has also been adapted into a film and has brought more fame and glory to the writer. *The Three Mistakes of My Life* is his fifth novel that was written in 2008 and has found a place in bestselling lists across the world.

Amitav Ghosh, in an interview says, “I also liked Chetan Bhagat's first book -- I think he has a lot of talent and I hope that the urge to write bestsellers doesn't interfere with it” (n.p). Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* is a novel written in the year 1990. There are many similarities between these two writers. Both contribute a lot to Indian Writing in English literature and both write about the Indians and for the Indians. Their novels are written out of their own experiences and there is a blend of historical incidents that happened in our country.



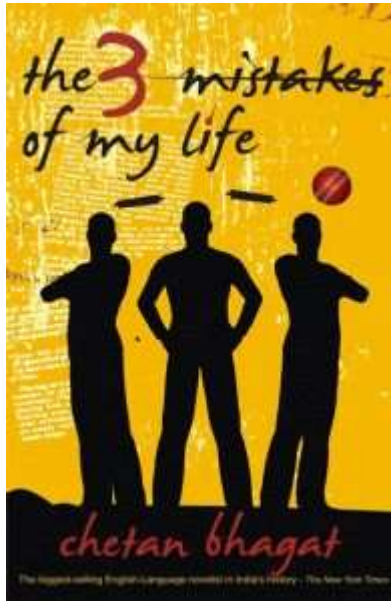
The novels taken for comparison are Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and Chetan’s *The Three Mistakes of My Life*. Both the novels give importance to friendship and deal

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with the religious riot that took place in our country at various situations. These two novels are real stories of mission, obsession and sacrifice.



A Nameless Narrator – A Memory Novel

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is narrated by a nameless narrator and is also a memory novel. He focuses on the political events and the religious riot which took place during the war of 1962 and 1964. The story is about the families of Mr. Justice Chandrashekhara Datta Chaudhary and Lionel Tresawson. Though they belong to different religions and regions, they are tied with the band of friendship. Tridib is the friend of the narrator, and also his philosopher and guide. Thamma the grandmother of the narrator is a widowed school teacher who hates the moderns and the youngsters and she considers Tridib as a “loafer and a wastrel lives off his father's money” (TSL 04).

Social Problems and Politicization of Religion

Social problems like Hindu-Muslim riot or political issues like the politicization of religion are the burning themes discussed in both the novels. These problems are seen through the eyes of Govind, Ishan and Omi in the novel *The Three Mistakes of My Life* and through the eyes of Tridib, the narrator and Thamma in the novel *The Shadow Lines*.

The Three Mistakes of My Life

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Chetan's *The Three Mistakes of My Life* is also based on the real events of the sectarian riot that took place in Gujarat in 2002. It is set on the backdrop of communal disharmony of Gujarat. It tells the story of three friends, namely, Ishan, Omi and Govind, who grew up in the same boarding school and are drawn into a romantic triangle. Their destinies are predetermined and yet the three of them are unable to get past the traps of love and betrayal of life. They yearn and dream for a future to be one but they become the figures of revulsion in later years. This not only sets the perspective for the intimate and ultimately tragic relationship they build with each other, but also provide an interpretation of the human society.

This novel is also about the three friends and their part in rescuing the life of an innocent Muslim boy Ali. Ishan, one among the three friends, aims to become a cricketer. Like Thamma in the novel *The Shadow Lines* considering Tridib as a loafer, here Ishan is considered as a loafer by his father. His dad sarcastically comments "cut a cake today to celebrate one year of your uselessness" (TML 03). Ishan's father paints him as a loafer to his neighbors. He says "He and his loafer friends hanging around the house all day along" (5).

Youth in the Sight of Elders, But There is Redemption

Here both the novelists point the mistaken sense of the elders about the youngsters. Tridib is doing Ph.D. in Archeology and is considered as a loafer. Ishan's interest in cricket makes him a loafer in the eyes of his father. Later he drifts into the life of an ordinary cricket coach. He sees a great potential in the Muslim boy Ali and he decides to support him because as a lover of cricket he did not like Ali's talent to go waste. He did not like a repetition of misfortune. So he is magnanimous in helping the boy. Somewhere in his psyche, the boy becomes a prop, a substitute for his lost self and he again hopes to re-live his own unfulfilled child hood dream.

Through Ishan, Chetan allows the readers to understand the struggle and obstacle faced by a sports person and enables the reader to see the real person behind the mask of superstar.

Love of One's Own City

Govind in *The Three Mistakes of My Life* is very much attached to his own city Ahmedabad. He says, "Ahmedabad is my city. It is strange, but if you have had happy times in a city for a long time, you consider it the best city in the world. I feel the same about Ahmedabad" (TML 06). Like Govind, Tridib is very much attached to his native city. Though his parents live in abroad, he lives in his grandmother's house in Calcutta. He roams around the Gol Park with his wandering friends.

Obsession with Western Culture

The lasses of this generation want to be free from the tangles of their parents and are obsessed with western culture. This kind of attachment degrades their temperament among the elders who are rooted in old values. In *The Shadow Lines*, Thamma condemns Ila who wants to be free in her own way. She is obsessed with foreign culture and wishes to dance with the strangers in the pub. She says in anguish, "I've chosen to live in London . . . because I want to be free of your bloody culture and free of all of you" (TSL 98). Ghosh shows the decline of our culture among the youngsters living abroad.

Craze for Modernism

Like Ila, there is a character in Chethan's *The Three Mistakes of My Life* that is Vidya. She aspires to be a PR and wants to be free and live her life king-size. Her room itself portrays her passion for western culture. "Her [Vidya] room was filled with postures of west life, Backstreet boy." (TML 49). She takes everything light and easy in life. She says "life's best gifts are free" (TML 182).

No Love for Own City

Both Ila and Vidya have no attachment towards their native town. Vidya says “I want to get out of Ahmedabad” (TML 47). She is crazy about the foreign land. When Govind brings sand from the Australian beach, she gleefully says, “Wow an Australian beach in my hands” (TML 182). These two Ila and Vidya are of modern and are free of commitments of relationship, of duties and everything. Their motto is to live for one’s own self. They do not bother about anything or care for others. They both have a growing interest in metropolitan culture in which there is no place for emotions and feelings.

Harm Caused by Communal Prejudice

Both Ghosh and Chetan have brought out the harm caused by the communal prejudice in their novels. Valuable lives are lost due to prejudice. Novy Kapadia in his article “Imagination and Politics in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*” rightly points out “Amitav Ghosh’s greatest triumph is that the depiction of communal strife in Calcutta and erstwhile East Pakistan, and its continuation in contemporary India, is very controlled and taut” (208).

Communal Riots

In *The Shadow Lines*, the religious riot was caused due to the theft of the relic. The disappearance of the sacred relic known as the Mui-i-Mubarak - sacred hair of the Prophet Mohammed from the Hazratbal Mosque led to the communal riot which began in Kashmir and spread to Pakistan, Bangladesh and Calcutta.

In the novel *The Three Mistakes of My Life* the author brings out the communal riot that happened in Gujarat when the Sabarmati train was attacked. People are marginalized on the basis of ability, economic status and of religion.

Omi’s roots are in Hindu culture, it is infused in his blood yet, later he is considered an atheist and rebel. Here the religious politician Bitto Mama is responsible for the tragedy. He is a very staunch believer and supporter of his religion and regards

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others who practice other religions as his foe. He incites violence against the Muslims whoever he sees them in the street. He teaches the devotees of his religion to “keep bearing pain...Our scriptures tell not to harm others. They teach us patience” (TML 42). But he is the first person who does not follow the words.

In Support of Equality

Ghosh conveys equality through the words of Thamma in the novel *The Shadow Lines* “Once that happens people forget that they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don’t you see?”(TSL 77-78).

The sacrifice of Omi is the climax of the novel *The Three Mistakes of My Life* and the sacrifice of Tridib in rescuing Jethamoshai in the riot is the climax of the novel *The Shadow Lines*. Both Omi and Tridib understand the value of human life and the harm caused by religious disharmony. Amidst the world of violence, through these two peaceful figures the authors remind the need for us to lead a harmonious life. Ghosh and Chetan pay their tributes and condolences to the martyrs who lost their lives in the riots.

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