

## **Portrayal of Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines***

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### **Abstract**

In this paper an attempt is made to explore the inquisitive concern for identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. People from the ancient times displace themselves from place to place, in order to fulfill their primary need for the survival. At the same time, they never forget their original identity. Displacement in its various forms widens the social network and imaginative world of the displaced. Displacement is of different types, some displace themselves voluntarily and some are forced to leave their motherland. There have been different reasons for the displacement of Asian people. In the novel *The Shadow Lines* one way another almost all the characters are displaced for several reasons.

In postcolonial fiction, the theme of 'displacement' charts out the damage or loss that the colonizers have done to the colonized. This damage is both in the physical and the psychological form. The biggest harm is noticeable in the form of economic breakdown,

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In modern literatures across the world, specifically in writings of the postwar period, displacement has been treated as an upshot of warfare, imperialism and colonization on the literal level, and as severance from the native culture or tradition and resultant breakage or crisis of identity on the metaphorical level. In the words of Ghanashyam, "The Shadow Lines is primarily a novel of lines, borders, freedom and nationalism. The novel is a painful saga of partition, and a reminiscence of the problems and plights of people stranded in riots and wars. Through the novel, Ghost exposed the impact of the shadow lines, the lines that demarcate people and nations on a psychological level." (47)

The postcolonial writers have given profound psychological insights in the pain and predicament of the colonized. Displacement in any form shatters the whole being of a person.

In *The Shadow Lines* Amitav Ghosh vividly expresses the features of diasporic condition. It takes its origin from movement of the displacement. The narrator's family is the Hindus who fled from their home in Dhaka to Calcutta after the formation of East Pakistan. There, during the Second World War, when Europe itself lies in the ruins, they befriend in English family, the Prices. The two families are woven together by a complex series of cultural crossings. Beginning in the colonial

times and ending a little later after the creation of Bangladesh. The setting of these events is equally extensive and includes three countries - India, England, and Bangladesh which make the novel truly international.

*The Shadow Lines* begins with an Indian passage to England and the westerners travel to India to serve an ancient and self-contained culture. In the first part of the novel ‘Going Away’ the author examines the movement of the characters away from a point of fixity. The irony of the novel is that the characters come and go in so many directions that the narrator is obliged to know what is home, and wonders if there is such a thing as a discrete homeland separable from one’s experience elsewhere. At the very beginning, Mayadebi is going away from India to England with her family. Here the concept of displacement is introduced.

She was born and brought up in Dhaka. She received education in Dhaka. After her marriage to Sahib, she left her native place and accompanies her husband to the different parts of the world. Her husband Sahib was a diplomat, an officer in the Foreign Services. So it was the consequence of his job which led him to displace himself with his whole family. He and Mayadebi were always away, abroad or in India. His post in the British Empire made him to displace his family to different places. The impact of displacement on the displaced is evident even in the introduction of the novel.

The change in the attitude of Mayadebi is evident from her appearance in the society, as she has been outside the country for a long time. The culture, in which she has been placed, has marked a great change in her attitude. Her appearance to her relatives is like of Queen Victoria. During her college days she was a shy type, she never used to mingle with her classmates. Now the adopted country has made her to face even the unknown audience. On the other hand, Sahib’s appearance has totally changed by the culture in he has been placed by the consequences of his job. He is always away from the home town either abroad or in some other part of the country. His day to day living in different environments with the people of England and the officials of higher rank has changed him entirely. It is evident through his dressing as well his speech which he has learned in the displaced state. He has shifted his whole family in this direction. The elder son of Mayadebi takes up a job with UN as an Economist and he too has been always away somewhere in Africa or South-East Asia with his wife and the only daughter Ila. Tridib is the second son of Mayadebi and the third son is Robi. Tridib is in India. Robi is his parents. Thus, the whole family is displaced by the situation which beyond their control. The materialistic world changes the whole family. In the case of the first son Jatin, because of his busy schedule he unable to control his daughter, as the narrator is controlled by his grandmother. This makes her flexible and she marries of her own choice.

Grandmother Tham’ma’s birth place is Dhaka. She has been brought up in Dhaka and married to a railway employee. She resides with her husband in Burma, where her husband works. Her husband is transferred to different places, during his service. After her husband’s death she moves to Calcutta and finds a job in a school. India becomes her invented country only because of the partition, a historical accident which has dislocated her geographically, emotionally and spiritually. She takes care of her only son. She rejects the help of her relatives. She wants that all the family members should be busy with their work. As the narrator says, “all worked hard at whatever

we did: my grandmother at her schoolmistressing; I at my homework; my mother at her housekeeping; my father at his job as a junior executive in a company” (4).

Tridib was born in 1932. First, he had been to England with his parents in 1939, during his father’s medical treatment. Tridib accepted every place as home, even on that fateful trip to Dhaka. He did Ph.D in Archeology. His research was related to the study of the Sena dynasty of Bengal. Tridib in his book-lined room feeds the imagination of the narrator, with stories of the years he spent in London during his displacement, with the Price family. Tridib’s displacement from India to England from one real space to another perhaps is a quest for freedom. He displaces himself for the sake of cultural, emotional and intellectual freedom. He mentally displaced, because of his passion for May Price and the things which are there in England. He fills the imagination of the narrator with the stories related to England and the people who are related to May Price. He becomes a walking tour guide for particular streets and houses in London, even before visiting them. The passions are created by Tridib in the narrator about the place, to which the narrator is displaced in his later life. He enjoys the years he spends in the place which he has seen in the imagination. “The Narrator’s acquaintance with the unknown or half known relatives is developed in the same manner as Tridib or Ila help him to know far off countries on the map through their diverse experience.” (177)

The narrator of the novel is unknown to the reader. He is born and brought up in Calcutta. His grandmother is always against his connection with Tridib, because she considers Tridib as a wasteril. She never approves of him. On the other hand, the narrator is fascinated with Tridib’s acquaintance. Psychologically he is displaced in his childhood by Tridib. He speaks always about the places which Tridib has shown him through the Atlas. But he proves to be the model for the narrator. The narrator always takes an advantage of Tridib’s experience about the whole world. He moves from India to England, from one real space to another and it perhaps is a quest for freedom. He is physically displaced for the first time when he is sent to Delhi for the purpose of education. He wants to be free from the bondage of culture. He has spent most of his life in displacement. He goes to Delhi then to London and to various places and consequently discovers the meaninglessness of the life. His passion for Ila forces him to love the things which she likes, every time he tries to defend Ila from his grandmother. It is in England that the narrator realizes the truth, when he emerges from the shadows of Ila and Tridib. He returns to his birthplace because he is aware of what Ila has lost and learns what his real home is. Brinda Veerappa says, “Home is not the geographical entity, but an emotional, moral and intellectual entity, which can be identified in the shadows of one’s own inner being.” (172)

Ila as a girl is displaced from the soil of her origin. Her acquaintance with the new culture makes her feel that the culture of her motherland is bondage, and she wants to adapt herself to the foreign culture. Ila has traveled the world over since childhood days but has been unable to understand the world. Ila’s journey is through real geographical space, but none of them is her own. They are only transit points and they never belong to her. The pathos of a child’s search for a space of her won is brought out by Amitav Ghosh through Ila. She wants freedom from her middle-class orthodoxy. She is fascinated by the romance of freedom that life in London offers. “Ila’s quest for a

space of her own can be seen from the time she is a young girl: schools are that mattered to the young Ila – probably because they are close to real space in her every shifting childhood” (164). To be free from the bondage she adapts herself in the foreign land. She is the citizen of the world, placed in the centre of the great prolixity and heterogeneity of cultural production. It is indeed difficult for her to imagine like her narrator cousin, the wonders that the untraveled lands can hold for her. She is a product of such an education that she rejects her roots, her relatives, her cars and servants in India and seeks an identity for herself all alone in an alien land because she wants to be free. She goes to England believing that she could physically live there and adopt western ways and style. But soon she realizes that she is not really free even in England. She has been subjected to racism as a child in London; Nick Price also avoids her because he does not want to be seen with an Indian. In her later life after her marriage to Nick Price, with whom she has been in love, she discovers that Nick has been and is going to be unfaithful to her. Ila’s preference for Nick and her later disappointment exposes her wobbly transplantation in the western culture. In the words of Ghanashyam, “Ila feels free in the West but in fact she binds herself in her love and marriage with Nick Price. Freedom comes not in nations or notions but from within ourselves.” (48).

Nick Price has displaced himself from London to Kuwait for the material world. He has been working there in the company and later on thrown out of the company on the charges of embezzling money. From there, he returns to his native land. His father Lionel Treswawern was stationed in India and he had developed friend ship with Tridib’s grandfather who was a judge in the Calcutta high court. The job which Lionel Treswawern had, made him displace form England to India, to fulfill the demands of his family, as he came out of his native place leaving his every concern, he was fascinated with the Indian culture.

Amitav Ghosh describes the displacement of his characters across continents and how interpersonal bonds across cultural boundaries cannot be sustained. All the characters of this novel have been displaced from their homes by the circumstances which were beyond their control. He portrays the conditions of the displaced in the other land through his characters.

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