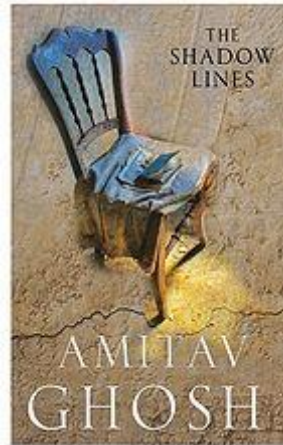


Postmodernism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

Indian writing in English has stamped its greatness by mixing up tradition and modernity in the production of art. The interest in literature lit the burning thirst of the writers which turned their energy and technique to innovate new forms and styles of writing. Earlier novels projected India's heritage, tradition, cultural past and moral values. But a remarkable change can be noticed in the novels published after the First World War, which is called, modernism.

Amitav Ghosh is one among the postmodernists. He is immensely influenced by the political and cultural milieu of post independent India. Being a social anthropologist and having the opportunity of visiting alien lands, he comments on the present scenario the world is passing through in his novels. As per postmodernists, national boundaries are a hindrance to human communication. They believe that Nationalism causes wars. So, post-modernists speak in favour of globalization. Amitav Ghosh's novels centre on multiracial and multiethnic issues; as a

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wandering cosmopolitan he roves around and weaves them with his narrative beauty. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh makes the East and West meet on a pedestal of friendship, especially through the characters like Tridib, May, Nice Prince etc. He stresses more on the globalization rather than nationalization. This paper attempts to expose the postmodern elements in *The Shadow Lines*.

Amitav Ghosh – *The Shadow Lines*

The list of finest contemporary Indian-English writers remains incomplete without the name of Amitav Ghosh. Amitav Ghosh has undoubtedly earned his position in the canon of Indian English fiction. A noted novelist, an essayist and a nonfiction writer, Amitav Ghosh's standing in the realms of literature is truly unparalleled. Ghosh's second novel, *The Shadow Lines* is more somber, less fanciful in its politics, and quite stunning in the power with which its formal experiments in sequence and location resonate thematically.

The Shadow Lines traces nearly a half-century of interlocking relations among three generations of two families, one Indian and one British, giving perhaps the definitive fictional demonstration of Benedict Anderson's dictum that nation are "imagined communities". 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. *The Shadow Lines* interweaves fact, fiction and reminiscence.

Exploring Issues of Nationhood and Diaspora

In his novels Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of nationhood and diasporas, ideas that involve relationships between individuals belonging to the same or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders. *The Shadow Lines* probably represents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity and it is simultaneously about each character's personal identity. Both in Political Science and Geography there is a specific definition of a country or a state. However the word 'Country' bears a specific meaning to a man. A man's entire entity of present, past as well as future is associated with his own country or native land or homeland. In general, the part of land where one is born becomes one's homeland, native land or motherland. Within the parliamentary system it is a rule that a country will keep up the rights of people of that country but when the state is unable to bear the responsibility of a man, his whole entity is at stake. On the background of that crisis Amitav Ghosh writes an invaluable novel *The Shadow Lines*.

A Narrative of Events

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a narrative of events which are related to each other. Most of the narrative in the physical world is set in Calcutta, Delhi and London and at often times, uses as backgrounds, various historical events that defined the Indian Subcontinent like the Swadeshi Movement, the Partition of India and the communal riots of 1963-64 in Calcutta and Dhaka and also to some extent the Second World War.

The novel at its very outset has a multicultural and multi-spatial appeal. This appeal, accompanied with the narration of linked and non-linked events in various places and non-places gives the novel a paradigm shift to a point, where various so-called "postmodern" and "post structural" elements can be argued. Also, leaving the plot and the setting of the novel aside, it is

the narrative, by its intricate, constantly crisscrossing web of memories, which presents the novel with innate cultural and sub-cultural elements that in turn provides the novel with a latent “non-absolute” space. And it is this “non-absolute” space that needs to be cultivated in order to understand the aspect of “postmodernism” in the novel.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a style and concept in the arts characterized by distrust of theories and ideologies and by the drawing of attention to conventions. It was developed by academics in the 1950s-1960s in a reaction against scientific efforts to explain reality objectively. It was a fashionable and dominant mode of analysis in many academic circles in the last decades of the twentieth century. Postmodernist thought influenced many disciplines, including religion, literary criticism, sociology, ethics and morality, linguistics, architecture, history, politics, international relations, anthropology, visual arts, and music.

Fredric Jameson described postmodernism as “the spatialization of culture under the pressure of organized Capitalism”. Space, definitely plays a fundamental role in the novel. At the very outset, the setting of the novel in different physical spaces attributes to the conditions of constructs and these constructs thereby gives the novel a “postmodern” dimension. This postmodern dimension is further extended, when placing the novel in a globalised cultural space of the present day. However, the validity of this argument is sustained only when post-modernism is viewed as a manufactured product of globalization and the constructs as nothing more than imaginary cultural sub-spaces which dominate the narrative of the novel. These constructs, however, presented the novel a certain aesthetic dimension, as Foucault expounded ecstatically on what he called the “Aesthetics of Existence”, and it is these aesthetics of the novel

which shifts the emphasis of such constructs from “collective political action” to “self gratification”. It is the self-gratification of such spaces and sub-spaces, which cluster and form links with each other but never shows any signs of collective unity or political unison that provides the novel its postmodern image.

Coming to Frederic Jameson’s remark of postmodernism being “the spatialization of culture under the pressure of organized Capitalism”, if we view *The Shadow Lines* as a post-modern text, we do find this spatialization in both the plot and the narrative. Analyzing the main characters – the narrator, his uncle Tridib, his cousin Ila and also, May – all fall into different spatial constructs. Not only the main characters, even the narrator’s grandmother and all the other characters comply with the requirements of the constructs and fit in them. Therefore, propounding on the nature of these constructs, as historically all the constructs in the novel are a result of either British colonialism or globalization and both are nothing but various mechanisms of global capitalism, the very basic postmodern characteristic of the novel is just spaces in between spaces. There can be no voice of unified reasoning found anywhere in the novel. And this of course is a very much post-modern phenomenon as one of the fundamentals of postmodernism, according to French postmodernist, Lyotard, i.e., the propounding of facts based on reason with historical significance. Thus these constructs essentially self-gratify themselves.

Class Politics

The postmodern analysis of *The Shadow Lines*, however, remains incomplete without looking at the class-politics of the novel. A very distinct class-line can be found in the novel in the characterization of its characters and in the events and non-events and in the narrative.

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Coming to the characters first, most of the characterizations that take place all bear the same class hologram – either bureaucracy or socially upwardly mobile. This however has the exception of the narrator’s childhood narrative, in the character of his grandmother. Still, a certain class phenomenon can be attributed to the grandmother too, as the characterization makes her just a product of and onlooker to class-politics.

The characterization of Tridib too has its own class-politics. Tridib from the very beginning has been portrayed as an image, an image of longing for the narrator, someone that he always wants to be but cant as he lacks in faculty. This image has vivid class-politics. Tridib’s whole character is based on the simple aim of alienating him and making a “magic image” out of the image. Such alienation which has been tried hard to be portrayed as intellectual alienation but which actually altogether attributed a class-alienation to the image. Also when the narrative steps into the realms of multiculturalism, through Ila first and then later through May and the Prices, the class-politics reserve a concrete foothold in the novel.

Non-absolute Space

The non-absolute space that has been developed in *The Shadow Lines* is constituted of various spaces and sub-spaces, events and non-events. One of the main significance of these spaces, sub-spaces, events and non-events is that they are localized, time bound and issue based. For example, the relationship of the narrator with Ila is at its very heart, developed on a cultural and social construct and that construct is very much localized and time bound, not merely physically but also in the spaces and sub-spaces of the novel. And this phenomenon agrees fully with Foucault’s idea of “micro-politics” which concerns itself with localized, time bound and issue-bound spaces and atomized politics. Also, the rhetoric of empowering without organizing

politically which dominates the whole narrative of the novel adds up to the structural spaces of *The Shadow Lines*, thereby giving it a post structural dimension.

Co-existence Impossible

The Shadow Lines makes impossible coexistences and disrupted metaphysical boundaries into real struggles both for its narrator and its readers. In the first section of the novel, Ghosh examined the process of ‘going away’, of the dispersal of his characters across continents and how inter-personal bonds across cultural boundaries can / cannot be sustained. In the section ‘Coming Home’ he examined against the backdrop of political events spanning about two decades, the post-colonial cultural displacement and the loss of the cultural commonality of the subcontinent. Points of fixity which were earlier determined by one’s birth or one’s home or even one’s country have now become shadow lines. The novel is full of symbolic references of Houses old and new, maps and mirrors, borders and boundaries, all these symbols in one way or the other deal with the theme of man’s search for identity, his search for roots. This is not a story of the grandmother or Jethamoshai, but it is a story of every man torn between the past and the present. The novel ends but does not conclude. It raises serious questions about our roots, our identities and at the same time questions Why War? Why riots? Why Partition? Why borders? Why Shadow Lines?

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