

Alienation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* : A Thematic Study

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Abstract. Amitav Ghosh is one of the most prominent novelists of the present age. He handles the problem of alienation brilliantly in his novels. His characters are often seen struggling with identity crisis, alienation and quest for freedom. Some of the characters of his novels are menial, mean and abject human individuals whose undeserved sufferings are beyond our common sense. They are fated to face isolation and alienation due to so many factors. The consideration of boundaries, class, colour and religions have kept people into fetters, but humanity is in a state of consistent endeavour to seek a space beyond the exposed boundaries. Amitav Ghosh has used historical memories to construct concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world. After going through the novels of Amitav Ghosh, we have come out with the view that human society all over the world has unifying emotions and feelings, but the distraction of castes, colour and creed has been constantly at war with one another. The idea of quest and alienation is all pervasive in the novels of Amitav Ghosh as it examines and investigates the meaning of freedom for human being in the modern world.

Keywords : Alienation; contrasting culture; quest for freedom; existential question.

Amitav Ghosh, a master in using different techniques in his novels, tries to examine the effect of alienation in the behaviour of his characters. The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* is an effort to make people free from all baneful customs and beliefs which have divided the human race in narrow cells. Amitav Ghosh's creative art has its roots in the experience of the people. Ranging across three generations and moving between two contrasting cultures, the narrative provides penetrating study of freedom, an important and pervading force. The major characters of his novels, reflects ideas in their own individualistic manner.

The Shadow Lines is after result of the experience faced by Ghosh during the riots in 1984. T.S Eliot had nervous breakdown because of the personal problems due to world war and his fragmentary masterpiece, *The Waste Land* (1922) seeks a means to embody the poet's desire to create peace in this tormented and devastated world. In the same way *The Shadow Lines* is a non-sequential hesitant journey back and forth to centre of the trauma. The murder of his uncle is as remarkable for its psychological sophistication as for the resulting novel's complex theme. *The Shadow Lines* reveals that cultural divide; communal struggle and misunderstanding lead to a state of crisis in India. The author shows that the 'Shadow Line' between people and nations is a mere illusion. It is a tale of a family, which used to live in Dhaka before partition in 1947, but is shifted to Kolkata. The novel is divided into two parts- 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home'. In the second section

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of the novel, 'Coming Home' Ghosh returns to the Indian sub-continent, to Kolkata and Dhaka. In this section, the narrator as chronicler tries to understand the various nuances and meaning of political freedom.

Tha'mma glorifies political freedom. It is in search of an exclusive personal, social and moral freedom. May Price and Tridib also strive for a quest that seems elusive. The narrative structure of the novel is complex and at the same time fragmentary. The images of journey are the central theme of the novel. The movement is from present to past and again from past to present which enables the novel to achieve the symbolic narrative texture. The story depicts refugees from East Bengal to cross path with the prices from London in a period of time which spans three generations. History including the two world wars, Indian Independence and the Hazaratbal, incident in Srinagar, 1964 riots in Bangladesh emerged in the stories as the driving forces of the novel. Ghosh shows the impact of politics on the lives of ordinary people and human relationship. Historical events have provided Ghosh with raw material against which he studies the historical truth, the meaning of nationalism and political freedom in the modern world.

The two families, Indian and European with their distinctive features mirror out a criss- cross network of the encounter on colonial maps. Mr. Tresawsen who goes through Asia before setting in Calcutta while child narrator's cousin, Tridib securing a central role, goes to London for his post-graduate studies and is here during war. Ila, the narrator's pretty cousin moves to London to become the emancipated woman. She always dreams of being married with Nick Price but sadly discovers how wrong the choice proves to be. In the parallel way, Nick's elder sister accepts Tridib's invitation to India as she was in affair with him but this fails to concretize as Tridib met a tragic death and sacrifices his life to save the incautious English woman. Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother is a model of the female emancipation starkly opposed to Ila. She is independent from the western cannon. She appears to be a stern widow, defending the traditional morals.

In the second section, the narrator as chronicler tries to understand the various meaning of political freedom, nationalism and partition. Different viewpoints of the partition, nationalism and political freedom emerge in the section through the characters. On a canvas where political freedom corresponds with the social order and society, its wider perspective affects man's urge for freedom against the conventions in which they are destined to survive. Tridib's insistence upon imaginative freedom is, according to Ghosh, the only way to preserve intellectual integrity. Besides political freedom other concepts of freedom are also prevalent in the novel. The grandmother feels that Ila's yearning for freedom is merely to lead a life without any constraints at morality. Ila has spent all her life in different countries of the world, but is unsure of what she is striving for. As a child Ila yearns to identify with other girls and boys in the international school where she studies. Sadly for her she is lonely, a victim of racism. She also faces the emotional

trauma at being rejected by those around her. As a mature young woman, she tries to establish herself in the west and adjust to her lifestyle. She loves Nick Price with a consummate passion. She soon hears of Nick's infidelity. She feels rejected. Through Ila, the author poses an existential question. Individuals who become more independent and also more isolated and lonely are lacking cultural mooring. Ghosh establishes that it is necessary to preserve and increase traditional freedom as well as gain a new kind of freedom which enables the individual to realize their maximum potential. Because from the tradition the quest of freedom is only illusion containing within itself the seed of the ruin and destruction at humanity, generating discomfort, insecurity and nothingness. The narrator's voice becomes a befitting summary at Ila's elusive quest for the freedom. Ila represents the vast majority of the Indian youth. To Ila, freedom means liberty from the restrictive customs that delimits the individual activities in India.

From the analysis and evaluation of the various facets of the idea of the freedom projected in the novel *The Shadow Lines*, we can draw an inference that Ghosh conceives the image of freedom in a wider canvas. The political identity, the social identity and the psychic identity of any individual are not separable. It is only with the realization of the space of individual's desire, expectations and responsibilities that the idea of political freedom and social freedom can be realized. Ghosh lends meaning to social and political chaos reflected in the individual's search for a meaningful existence. The novel depicts the violence and crude barbarity through the recounting of riot memories. It seems to convey the message that man is running after self-esteem, his search for an authentic selfhood through freedom to act the way he likes, is a mirage. G.R. Taneja in his essay points out:

The Shadow Lines takes in the war devastated
London civil strife in post partition East Bengal
and the riot hit Calcutta and embodies a major
critique at the psychological make-up at
contemporary man that thrives on violence.

(Taneja, 309)

The story centres around Tridib, the narrator's uncle. He fondly reminisces :

Tridib..., who had given me worlds to travel in
and eyes to see them with. (*The Shadow Lines*, 22)

At the very start of the novel we have the narrator, a young boy gazing with respect and admiration as Tridib makes up a story for his group of friends of his adda at Gole Park with a view to impressing them about his English connections. Staying in a close relationship brings the narrator and his uncle Tridib together, although much to the dislike of Tha'mma, who is stern middle-class matriarch.

Tridib saw May Price as a little baby. When he went to England with his parents in 1939, the friendship between the families began when Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawsen and Tridib's grandfather, Mr. Justice Chandra Shekhara Dutta Chaudhary, met in Calcutta. By the time Tridib meets May in India in 1962, their friendship through correspondence since 1959 has ripened into love. Tridib realizes May concretely and warmly in his imagination with all the attendant excitement stored in his senses. He can visualize her shape and appearance precisely even without meeting her. Their love has intrinsic reality; it crosses all borderlines and shadow lines.

The relationship between May and Tridib, too, unfolds from the child's point of view, he instinctively knows that there is something between them which he could never understand or share. Understanding comes seventeen years later, when bits of information fall into place to create a pattern of meaning. It is May – Tridib relationship which is central to the thematic concerns of the novel. The narrator's close interaction with May who accompanied Tha'mma, Maya Devi and Tridib to bring his grandmother's uncle Jethamoshai from Dhaka to Calcutta and was witness to the killing of Tridib is the most moving part of the novel. The heart of *The Shadow Lines* is the death of Tridib. The narrator loved and admired Tridib as a hero. So, he finds it difficult to accept the facts of Tridib's death.

The Shadow Lines attempts to demonstrate the mingling of people across international borders. The pairing of the characters in the novel are such : Tridib and May Price, details of the death of Tridib are conveyed by May to the narrator years later at a dinner in London. May narrates the story to express her feeling of guilt, that she was responsible for Tridib's untimely death. On learning the truth, both May and the narrator realize they cannot rationalise the motives of Tridib's rescue.

The Shadow Lines can, therefore be described as the narrator's jig-jag journey sometimes backwards in time in quest of a fuller meaning in life. It is an attempt to construct a pattern of experiences. Everyone in the novel, infact, hovers over *The Shadow Lines* between imagination and reality. But what matters most in *The Shadow Lines* is the truthful portrayal of alienation of characters from society, situations and to some extent from their own selves. Tridib, the hero has to pass through various ups and downs of life which ultimately made him a fragmented and alienated character.

These days the modern human faces the existential problem. One fails to perceive the very purpose behind life and the relevance of one's existence in a hostile world. He is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny and that there are forces threatening to wither his life and all its joys and hopes. The potential meaninglessness of human existence has corroded human life from various quarter. Victor Anand remarks about modern man :

Modern Indians live on an adhoc basis in a no
man's land of value. (Anand, 311)

Ours is an age of great spiritual stress and strain. There is no value to sustain. The modern man suffers from inner problem a conviction of isolation, meaninglessness in his way of existence. The existential problem is so pervasive that it threatens to corrode every sphere of life.

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