

Memory of Incidents and Places as a Narrative Technique in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

Indian fiction in English has come to be recognized as one of the literatures of India. Initial attempts in English were done in the latter half of the nineteenth century; but those attempts made before 1920 were tentative because the novelists, in spite of their command over the language, were not sure of their approach to the problems of the time. In the last hundred years Indian English fiction has flourished and has come to be recognized as an important source of information on Indian people and their culture. At the same time, it has come to be seen as an expression of Indian sensibility. It is true that the novel is a Western form of literature; but now it is no stranger to us. This article is on Amitav Ghosh's exquisite talent in portraying Indian sensibility through memory as technique in his novel *The Shadow Lines*.

Keywords: Memory, Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Indian sensibility, Narration.

The Shadow Lines of Amitav Ghosh is a complex novel interweaving memory and contemporary life, more memory than contemporary life. It converges on the traumatic life of a family in Calcutta and Dhaka in 1964 when a member of the family, Tridib, was killed in a communal riot. Ghosh employs the technique of a narrator, an educated young man who travels between Calcutta and London in 1981, to tell the story which contains multiple stories of his grandmother and her sister, of his uncles- Tridib and Robi, of his cousin Ila who married an Englishman and of May Price, a family friend in London.

The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* is in two parts- Going Away and Coming Home. The words 'Going' and 'Coming' are used in relation to 'home', a place of one's birth and upbringing, a place to which a person is deeply attached, especially if one lives in another place. Ghosh character go as far as Delhi or London on work or travel and come home to Calcutta or Dhaka only to learn that peace is as elusive as ever. One disturbing feature of life in Calcutta or Dhaka and such cities is the increasing tension between Hindu and Muslim

communities and the eruption of violence which takes its toll of innocent lives and destruction of public as well as private property.

The narrative structure of *The Shadow Lines* is fragmentary. There are sixteen sections in the first part and fifteen sections in the second part, but the sections do not add up to an organic whole with a proper beginning, middle and end. The story or the chief narrative line evolves sporadically and is constantly interrupted and diverted by other narratives. The only fixed centre is that of a chief narrative voice through whom the narrative are filtered. Ghosh's narrator shuttles not only from Calcutta to London to collect materials for his Ph. D thesis, but across the loom of time from 1981 to the 1960s onto the 1940s and earlier. Especially his mind is drawn on the troubled time of the 1960s when Tridib, his uncle, was killed in a Hindu-Muslim riot in Dhaka. At the time of this tragedy took place, the narrator, a twelve year old boy, had been told that Tridib had died in an accident. It is only in 1981 that he learns from Robi, another uncle, and also from May Price, an English family friend, who were eyewitnesses to the tragedy, how Tridib had been killed. The oblique manner of the revelation of Tridib's death is more effective than a direct presentation. It is a timeless moment in the tortured consciousness of the family. The narrator whose name is not given in the novel is the bearer of this troubled memory.

The narrator's grandmother is the central character in the novel. In fact, *The Shadow Lines* is very much about her story. The narrator remembers how Tridib had called her a modern middle-class woman. She has loved a quiet life for a whole lifetime in Calcutta, but when she goes to Dhaka (her native city) on a visit, she is the unwitting witness to the most horrendous act in her life when a rioting mob kills her old uncle and her young nephew. She is left totally disoriented as she cannot comprehend the meaning of what happens. She is the dangling woman suspended by the quirk of history. Ghosh presents the grandmother's early life as a story told by her to the narrator. Born in 1902 in Dhaka, she grew up as a member of a big joint family, with everyone living and eating together. But when her grandfather died, the ancestral house had to be partitioned because of the strife that broke out between her father and terrorist movement amongst nationalists in Bengal:

About secret terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantar and all their offshoots, their clandestine network, and home-made bombs with which they tried to assassinate British official and policemen; and a little about the assets, deportations and executions with which the British had retaliated. (p- 41)

In her own class there was a shy young man who was a member of a terrorist organization. One day as the lecture was going on the police entered the class and arrested the young man as they had learnt that he planned to kill an English magistrate in Khulna district. He was tied and later deported to the cellular jail in the Andaman Islands. In her youthful enthusiasm she had dreamt of terrorists like Kudhram Bose and Bagha Jatin who had been betrayed by treacherous villagers who in turn had been brought with English money. She had wanted to work for the terrorists, to turn the errands for them, to cook their food, to wash their clothes and to render some help. After all the terrorists were working for freedom. When the

narrator asks whether she would have killed the English magistrate, she replies: “I would have been frightened, she said. But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free”. (43). But her romantic notions of terrorism and freedom end like a bubble with her marriage. Her short married life, mostly lived in Burma, was punctuated by the birth of a son in 1925 and the unfortunate death of her husband in 1935 when she was just thirty two.

A new phase of life began in 1936 when she took up a job of a school teacher in Calcutta. Ghosh omits this part of the grandmother’s life except dropping hints from which the reader may construct the story. Starting life in Calcutta in a one room tenement in Bhovanipure, she would dream of “the old house, her parents, Jethamoshai (her uncle), her childhood”(138) in Dhaka, but she could never go there. The big political events, the partition in 1947 and Dhaka becoming the capital of East Pakistan divided her from her native city. But these public events did not have a direct impact on her very much as the demands of her personal life. As a school teacher she educated her son on her own, declining the help of her rich sister. The son’s employment in a private company, his marriage, the birth of a grandson in 1952, her own retirement in 1962 as the headmistress of the school she had joined in 1936 are abbreviated and revealed in an oblique manner. The focus of the novel is on the grandmother’s retirement in 1962 to her death in 1965. She had grown up with the school where she was a teacher and became the headmistress in the last six years of her service. But her school disappeared from her life after retirement, and around at the same time her son was promoted as the General Manager of his firm. The family moved to a large new house on the southern avenue, opposite the lake. She was given the best room in the house, but she dreamt of her old house in Dhaka where she was born and had grown up to adulthood.

The grandmother’s sister, Mayadebi, is the fortunate girl in the family. Born in 1910, she grew up into a beauty and married Datta Chaudhuri, the son of the wealthy judge, who became a diplomat in Indian Foreign Service. She lived mostly abroad, moving from one country to another, wherever her husband had his posting. Mayadebi had three sons. The eldest was Jatin, born in 1929, who had a job as the economist with the UN, working most of the time in Africa or South Africa. He lived with his wife and his daughter, Ila, who was the age of the narrator. Tridib was the second son, born in 1931, who lived in the 1960s in the family’s last ancestral house in Ballygunge place in Calcutta with his aging grandmother. He was supposed to be working for his almost the age of the narrator. By 1981 Robi is in the IAS and stops in London to be with the narrator and Ila for a few days. On leave from his job, he is on his way to Harvard where he has a fellowship to study administration and public affairs for six months.

The heart of *The Shadow Lines* is the death of Tridib and it is only towards the end of the novel the narrator approaches this experience. It is a struggle with silence as he has no words to communicate what happened: “it lies outside the reach of my intelligence; beyond words... It is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words” (240). A little later he writes: “I can only describe at second hand the manner of Tridib’s death: I do not have the words to give it meaning, I do not have the words, and I do not have the strength to listen” (251).

The narrator loved and admired Tridib as a hero. So he finds it difficult to admit the fact of Tridib's death. "so complete is this silence", the narrator declares, "that it actually took me fifteen years to discover that there was no connection between my nightmare bus ride back from school, and the events that befell Tridib and the others in Dhaka" (241). The narrator's struggle with the presentation of Tridib's death makes it all the more agonizing.

The trouble started when the scared relic known as the Mu-i-Mubarak believed to be a hair of the prophet Mohammed himself- disappeared from its place on 27 December 1963 in the Hazratbal mosque near Srinagar, two hundred and sixty three years after it had been installed. "Over the next few days life in the valley seemed to close in upon itself in a spontaneous show of collective grief. There were innumerable black flag demonstrations, every shop and building flew a black flag, and every person on the streets wore a black armband" (248). But surprisingly there was not a single incident of Hindu- Muslim animosity in the valley. Fortunately the Mu-i- Mubarak was recovered on 4 February 1964 by the officials of the central bureau of intelligence, and Kashmir heaved a sigh of relief. The narrator is concerned with the impact of this event on life in Calcutta and Dhaka.

The narrator remembers how on a certain morning in early January 1964 the school bus, which would normally be over crowded, came with only a dozen boys. No sooner had he got in than the other boys told him that 'they' had poisoned the water in the Tala Tank, which catered to the entire city of Calcutta. Everyone knew who 'they' were. At school, the classes were cancelled half-way through. On their way home the boys saw that the streets "were easily empty now except for squads of patrolling policeman" (223). At a particular point an unruly mob had thrown stones on their bus and chased it from its normal route. The boys began to sob as they could not go home. "It would be enough to say we were afraid: we were stupefied with fear" (204).

The fear grips the thousand million people who inhabit the Indian sub-continent and sets them apart from the rest of the world. The narrator comments upon the quality of this fear in the following manner:

It is a fear that comes from the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the space that surrounds one, the street that one inhabits as a desert in a flash flood... it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror (225).

It was the time when the narrator suffered the worst of fears in Calcutta that his grandmother had gone on a visit to her sister, Mayadebi, who was in Dhaka. Her husband had his posting in East Pakistan. When the idea was rooted that she should visit Dhaka, she had wondered whether the border between India and East Pakistan was marked by trenches or something. When she flew into Dhaka on 3 January 1964, accompanied by Tridib and May Price, who had come on a visit to India, and met her sister, the grandmother's question was: "where's Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka" (216), for the dream image of her native city had vanished long ago.

One important reason for the grandmother to go to Dhaka was her desire to see her old house and bring her uncle, Jethamoshi, to India. No sooner had she spent a few days in her sister's house than the grandmother accompanied by Mayadebi, Tridib, May Price, and Robi set out in the Mercedes car with the driver and a security guard of the High commission. The car had to stop at a particular point in the by-lanes of Dhaka, and they had to walk to the old house. They discovered to their dismay an automobile workshop in what was a garden in their house. Their house was crumbling and a large number of families were living there. This uncle Jethamoshi, now called Ukilbabu, was decrepit and bedridden, and looked after by Khalid, a cycle-rickshaw driver, and his family. The old man failed to recognize them, and spoke ill of his relatives when they were mentioned. The old man would have gone on with his talk but the car driver intervenes to say that they must leave immediately as "there's going to be trouble outside" (212). So the grandmother, Mayadebi and other depart, arranging with Khalil that he should bring their uncle to their house in his cycle- rickshaw telling him that he is taking him out. It is then that the trouble starts, the grandmother's visit to the most memorable scenes in Indian fiction.

The climax occurs as the grandmother and her sister are returning in their Mercedes from their ancestral home and there is following them in the rickshaw. When they come to the bazaar area, they find that the shops are closed and the streets are deserted, but for stray people. It was as if they were waiting for the car. In no time a lot of men surrounded the car, break the windscreen and the driver suffers a cut across his face. The car lurches and comes to a halt with its front wheel in a gutter. Then the security guard jumps out and fires a shot from his revolver and the crowd begins to withdraw from the car. At the same time the silence is broken by a creek, and the attention of the crowd turns to the sound of a rickshaw- Khalil's rickshaw with their uncle in it, and the people surround the rickshaw. Though the sisters could have driven away, May Price and Tridib leave the car to save the old man and they get lost in the whirligig of the world. The mischief takes less than a moment and the crowd begins to melt away. The dead bodies of Khalil, the old man and Tridib lie on the road. The horror of the act is branded with fire on the memory of May Price and Robi who see the whole thing.

Ghosh dramatizes the violence that is at the heart of *The Shadow Lines*. Characters in the novel Robi, May Price and the narrator "tremble like a leaf to recollect the scene of Tridib's death, fifteen years later, thousands of miles away, at the other end of the continent"(292).

The Shadow Lines is a psychological progress integral to our consciousness. Memory is both rational and emotive pertaining to the cognitive and the effective parts of personality, literary artists, poets and novelists alike have acknowledged the presence of emotive elements in memory. Ghosh, the novelist makes the narrator of his novel recall his own experiences with a fondness- an emotive element. An example is the narrator's following recollection of an incident pertaining to Tridib:

When I was about nine, Tridib once strayed away from his haunts for so long that regulars began to wonder what had happened to him. Then one evening I heard that he had surfaced at Gole Park. I found him and heard him say, "I have been to London I have English relatives through marriage". It was then that I cried, "Tridib you made a mistake.

You were in your room smoking”. There was a howl of laughter and a chorus of exclamations: “You fraud you liar you haven’t been anywhere” another sharper voice broke in and said the fact is that he is a nut he has never been anywhere outside Calcutta (13).

The narrator was furious with himself for having exposed Tridib to their ridicule. Shouting, He told them the truth as he knew it: that Tridib had been to London with his parents many years ago when he was a boy. In recalling his attempt to undo the damage to Tridib’s reputation the narrator feels relieved and happy. Now, happiness undoubtedly is a state of emotion.

Memory of experiences unlike that of facts is either happy or sad but never indifferent. Memory is both rational and emotive. It is an apt instrument and sustains for the creation of a work of literary art. Socrates long ago mentioned some important features of memory. Memory like all knowledge begins in perception or experience. Experiences leave some kind of a trace, which goes into the formation of memory. *The Shadow Lines* is an organized structure of memories. Ghosh’s novel is apparently at least made up of the narrator’s memories relating to Tridib, his relatives and acquaintances. There are memories of various characters like the narrator’s grandmother’s, Mayadebi’s, cousin Ila’s and of May’s, the acquaintance of both Tridib and the narrator and so on. Then there are memories of the normal or stylized behavior of these characters. Referring to the grandmother, the narrator says “For her likes and dislikes were unimportant or she would pretend to dismiss him with a toss of her head” (6). Then in this fond of memory there are memories of places. The author recalls the grandmother’s observation namely “Tridib living in that crumbing house or the stall at the corner of his lane where Nandu Chaubey sat or the place at the far end of its rope, battering the tree it was tied to” (7) - all these instances are the memories of the places.

Further there are memories of recognition “we recalled we taught ourselves to distinguish the shapes of their aircrafts from ours” (242) and of the characters reaction like trigonometry in the content of the grandmother’s observation that her uncle did not let any Muslim come within ten feet of his shadow in his younger days or he waggled his head at May and smiled back. In other words innumerable memories of different kinds have gone into the making of the work. Moreover all memories are traceable to perceptions in fictional world.

There are individual differences in memory. This is especially significant in the context of the works of literary art of which *The Shadow Lines* is a brilliant example. Memories are hard in some and softer in other. ‘Hard’ is less sensitive and the ‘Softer’ is the more sensitive respectively of an individual which result in shallow or deep memories, respectively Ghosh or his narrator has a ‘softer’ memory. And so he remembers so much in such minute and vivid details. Remembering May Price exactly as he had looked seventeen years ago, the narrator says:

Her hair was still cut as exactly as I remembered it from the time she had stayed with us in Calcutta: falling thick and straight to her shoulder mantling her head and the sides of her face; but where I remembered it as dark and glossy, it was streaked with strands of gray which shimmered when they caught the light” (15).

When he recalls hearing, even in the drunken state, “the sound of feet pounding heavily after him” (155) or the vital fret mentioned in the letter that was written by Mayadebi to the narrator’s grandmother- “Mayadebi wrote that she had not been able to visit their old house yet” (209) could not remember that his grandmother grasped with disappointment and nostalgia on seeing the courtyard of her ancestral house. “A workshop inside our courtyard! What’s become of the old jackfruit tree?” (209).

Such memories are necessarily, invariably accompanied by the artist’s awareness and understanding as to how he is going to use them effectively in the creation of a work of art which happens in *The Shadow Lines*. Possessed of a highly refined sensitivity, Ghosh’s main fictional characters retain, may be unconsciously, their experiences and relate them to the experiences of the other characters in the novel, indirectly or directly or remotely. Ghosh, the literary artist has woven them all into the organic unity, befitting a successful novel. He has done it through narrative devices with the help of which the raw materials, i.e. memories have got organized and become a major component of the novel.

In our psychological life forgetting occurs and may occur at different times for different reasons. One is biological reasons which affect everyone- the mental faculties become weak in old age and one starts forgetting. The other reason for forgetting is that one tends to forget that which does not like. Generally the pleasant and the useful are remembered and the unpleasant is forgotten. This characteristic of memory, that is selective, is also quite evident in *The Shadow Lines*: when the narrator tells Ila how he longed to visit Cairo to see the worlds pointed arch in the mosque to Ibn Tulan, and touch the stores of the great pyramid of Cheops she clichéd her fingers, gave herself a satisfied nod, and said about inadvertently; “oh yes, Cairo. The ladies are way away on the other side of the department lounge (22). Here the narrator remembers and recalls Cairo for its beauty and interesting historical architecture. In contrast Ila remembers ‘The Ladies’ and only the ladies a utility. The rest of Cairo has been either forgotten or does not get registered on her mind. Ila’s memory is clearly selective in *The Shadow Lines*.

Memory is imaginative and imagination can fabricate memories. This is how memory and imagination function in unison in Ghosh’s works. *The Shadow Lines* is the interplay of imagination and memory, recalling certain incidents and imagination weaving memories. Tridib’s gastric mentioned in the story is a recollection of a fact but it also includes the narrator imagining it as a special organ particular to Tridib. It is a clear case of memory and imagination interweaving effectively to create artistic element in the work.

The famous aesthetician S. K. Langer observes ‘aesthetic memory’ is the ‘virtual memory’ or the ‘semblance of memory’. Distinction between actual and virtual memory can be likened to the one that German philosopher Kant draws between noumena and phenomena. Noumenon, according to Kant is the thing-in-itself and phenomenon, is the thing-as-it appears to us. In every perception, time and casual relations are imposed on the thing-in-itself by the mind, thus converting it into phenomenon similarly aesthetic memory is actual memory as it has been actual upon by creative imagination of the artist’s when he uses it. This modification of memory is necessary.

Narrative is a major organizing device. It is important to literature as representation is to painting and sculpture. Narration which is integral to a novel or a story and in fact to most of the literary arts, necessarily organizes the diverse elements of the work, so that memory or imagination even as the material cause of the literary work become different from the original memory. The narrative is the impressionistic rendering of the perspective of a middle class youth's world of these changing times. It evolves in the stream of consciousness tradition, through sketchy, disjointed outlines of memories and associated fancies as they pool into the narrator's mind and consciousness by way of reminiscence, fusing gradually into a coherent pattern of stories mutually interrelated yet disparate, interesting only laterally, spatialised in their simultaneity the profile of a multilateral world. In the fragmentary pieces- the random diversion of the narrator's memory is captured in the socio-cultural ambience of Calcutta and partly of London.

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