

Recurring Past and History in shaping One's Identity: Re-Reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Anannya Gain

Assistant Professor in English
Haringhata Mahavidyalaya
Nadia, West Bengal.

Abstract

History is irreversible and has an immense impact on the formation of someone's identity. But the term identity has multiple dimensions. This paper attempts to find out the ways how a person's unfathomable vistas of identity is unjustifiably affected and sometimes regulated unapologetically by history. Amitav Ghosh is an author who amalgamates and portrays these two strains very beautifully. Historical background, its aftermath are always a concern in the developments of the different characters of his novel. *The Shadow Lines* also focuses on some of the vital issues of human development collectively and subjectively. Among the various interpretations of nation, colonialism, postcolonialism human identity is getting muddled. The past keeps glaring and laughing at the incongruous fight between history and identity. With a thorough reading of the persons or characters in this novel it will a constant search whether this effect of past on personality is justifiable or not.

Keywords: History, identity, nation, freedom, memory.

“History is who we are and why we are the way we are” says the two times Pulitzer prize winner historian, David C. McCullough. But whether history can be or should be that much influential in shaping one's identity is the basic question of this paper because the mind of one person is not that much palpable or distinct as the historical facts. Postcolonialism, nationality, boundary, freedom, violence, diaspora, refugee- these are the primordial terms that reflect in our mind while reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. The reader becomes conscious about the central characters and their struggle to cope up with the conditions that they are into. Each and every central character of the novel goes through a kind of dilemma. They want something; they have lost something and in-between they are always sacrificing some portions of their real self every single moment. Their quest for identity continues throughout the novel and it's doubtful whether any person who is acquainted with some traumatic incidents of history can ever recover

from it. So, this paper is an attempt to discover and discuss how someone's true personality gets shrouded by historical veil in regard to this well-acclaimed novel of Amitav Ghosh.

In the book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* Ania Loomba says, "Colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history" (Loomba, 7). The novel demonstrates that formation of borders, independence, separation are irrefutable history but it vividly contours and restricts the emotional and intellectual development of an individual. One can never truly wash away the facts which are irreversible.

In the book named *Handbook of Self and Identity* defines identity like this- Identities are the combination of the basic nature and characteristic and also the social roles that one performs. Identities can be formed by the past- what used to be true of one, the present- what is true of one at that present moment, or the future- the person one aspires to become. But knowing oneself is not so easy as this concept presupposes. In this novel the grandmother questions who is she but she cannot get a clear idea as her intellect is full of ramifications and mixture of the past state and consciousness of the present situation. Due to the diasporic events in her she also feels a connection with the collected consciousness of the refugee from East Pakistan. She has to find and fight her convictions and other social narratives. The narrator on whose account the novel is based wants to reflect Tridib, another character of the novel and this wish makes the novel all the more complicated. The whole range of characters in this novel shows a strong connection with the past and the shadow of that past never leaves them completely and from there the main conflict of this novel arises.

A.N. Kaul in his essay 'A Reading of The Shadow Lines' has described this situation very accurately when he says that "this non-existent divisions or shadow lines is repeatedly invoked and applied to a wide domain of inner and outer realities without which human beings could hardly live through a single day of their lives" (Ghosh, 299). The novel has multiple structural and thematic layers, dimensions and intricacies. A.N. Kaul in the same essay has reminded this term 'complex fate', coined by Henry James. The word complexity is actually a part of every bilingual author and its essence moves from the creator to its creation. The novel abandons proper chronological sequence as the characters live in some memory and so are very unwilling and resistant to move out of that shell. The chapters, "going away" and "coming back" are representing the constant struggle of an individual finding meaning of life being encompassed by the facts and notions of past, present and obviously history. The author of this novel, Amitav Ghosh very intricately questions the validity of the national/ international borders in whose illusion, mirage and apparition humanity is entrapped.

According to Manjula Saxena in the essay “*The Shadow Lines As A Memory Novel*”, “*The Shadow Lines* is interplay of imagination and memory recalling certain incidents and imagination weaving memories” (Chowdhary, 33). The very beginning of the novel, if analyzed properly shows us very prominently how the narrator is bringing up or linking incidents which are actually before his birth: “In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father’s aunt, Mayadevi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib” and with this he starts remembering his idol Tridib. Then he goes on narrating about the age when Tridib went to London, his grandmother’s disapproval of Tridib, his visit with May. The anonymous narrator’s memory covers up incidents from 1939 to 1964 but they don’t appear in the traditional chronological order, flows like the stream of consciousness. The narrator’s social consciousness grows by his travelling the world which is vouchsafed by his idol as he says, “Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them” (Ghosh, 20). It becomes difficult for him to overcome the traumatic experience of permanent separation or in other words emotionally detached from the memory of Tridib. May Price, the beloved of Tridib is also clueless and fixed to that one overpowering incident. So almost all the main characters in the novel are swinging and dwindling between the present and the past. The irresistible past just constantly tries to intrude in making the present consciousness and also lays promises to resonate in the future existence of the characters.

The article “Nation As Identity in *The Shadow Lines*” by Alka Kumar has justly pointed out that many of the chief characters in the novel like the narrator and his grandmother, are meshed and rigidly immovable beyond some specific historical moments. The shadow lines of the novel are actually the imaginary lines that one creates in his or her mind about borders and distinctive national identities. A person can only be called free if he or she belongs to a free nation. Rather than becoming a free spirited entity the words “freedom” and “independence” symbolizes for them the concrete lines which will remind them forever about freedom. That’s why the grandmother in this novel feels devastated when she sees no such palpable lines. She exclaims, “But if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where’s the difference then?” (Ghosh,151). The hypocrisy of these predatory notions are such glorious and through various conspicuous and smart narratives their psychology is shaped in such a way where people don’t hesitate to even murder anyone if it’s the question of achieving so-called free state or “nation”. But does the blood sucking war worth while playing with the emotional and psychological identity of a person?

The victims of Bengal’s partition from the then East Pakistan; now Bangladesh turns out to be prey of one of the most traumatic history of not only Bengal but the entire world though somewhat unaccented. This was not only a physical partition of the soil. It started to bleed the entire nation, mostly the psychology of the refugees who were uprooted but that memory, like

the ghost of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* never wants to leave. Maya Angelou once said, "The more you know of your history the more liberated you are". But this philosophy fails ironically in this novel. The disturbing history is just making their identity and existence all the more volatile and confused. In this novel the grandmother's ancestral home is in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Though she has migrated and lives in India for most of her life she feels a very strong connection with her past. She goes back to bring back or rather united with her previous country. But it remains an illusion. She wanted to re-construct the past but evidently it will bring the most disastrous fate in the novel. Because the nation she belonged to and she loved has changed drastically, but in her memory she still relives those past; just as Sigmund Freud has stated, "My love is something valuable to me which I ought not to throw away without reflection". (Nicholi, 175)

Thus these concepts of national identity are actually playing with the emotions of people. This ominous longing for the past has also taken life from the next generation who are not the direct sufferer. Because of the great patriotic stance from the part of the grandmother Tridib has to sacrifice his life. These remains irremovable shadow lines which dominates a person's perceptions, thoughts and ideology. Seema Bhaduri in her essay "Of Shadows Lines and Freedom" states: "Lives of the characters in this novel are determined largely, by their idea of freedom and this idea is shaped by the history of the times..." (Chowdhary, 146). In the essay "The Narrator and the Chronicling of Self in *The Shadow Lines*" it is stated that the autonomous existence of the narrator's self is questionable as the narrator remains nameless throughout the novel on which the entire novel churns up. The readers get acquainted with all the characters and incidents through the narrator's consciousness but the narrator is a product of bi-culture-colonial India and England during the outset of World War II. The narrator tries to decipher the meaning of these shadow lines of nation, differences colonization, freedom and this quest almost becomes a process of discovery of his own identity. All the narrator could understand is the futility of this freedom which just gives people an illusory feeling of being free: 'draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage. The whole thing is a mirage' (Ghosh, 247).

There is a parallel story of dislocation; of supplanting someone from his/her homeland. They are victims of the political ideological freedom. But they are not truly free of the horrible experiences of struggles for freedom. Though Amitav Ghosh touches a glimpse of world history in this text author also focuses on the micro-history of the Indian subcontinent. Their freedom only gave them a different land. It was a new and strange struggle to mould one with totally new social perspectives, beliefs, rituals, culture, imbibe its nuances and idiosyncrasies. In "*The Shadow Lines Between Freedom and Violence*" Alpana Neogy, "Most Indians and foreigners would consider these happenings as 'an enigmatic disease, a plague peculiar to the subcontinent'. But at the bottom all the uprisings revolve around a single issue: 'identity'" (Chowdhary, 71).

So, the grandmother in this novel questions herself her own identity. She was born in Dhaka which was no longer her home. So she asks who she is and why she is an Indian as she born in Dhaka. As a result gradually she comes to realize that “her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” (Ghosh 152). Her home remains only as a fresh memory, a non-existent at the recent time. India was gaining the much highlighted freedom from its colonial control and people took it for granted that it will ensure them individual identity and freedom. All of them are thought to be independent but very ironically their truest self is buried under the impact of history and identity gets crippled.

The refugees from the traumatic and most troublesome period of Indian Sub-continent were the ones who have locked their thoughts in those exhilarating moments when they were announced to be free. But they could not understand what it will cost them. They are now homeless people who cannot immerse in another community so easily. In the essay “Tha'mma My Grandmother: Imaging the Elderly in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*” it is stated that, “Tha'mma is a woman like countless others who experienced displacement and dispossession... but now she is sixty years old, she has ceased to be a person, she is a non-entity.” (Chowdhary, 107). She could not form her own entity; neither could reverse back to her jovial and glorious past, nor could be content with her present condition. So, the shadow lines are not boundaries or boundaries of maps rather it's the shadow on the topography of one's consciousness; unknowingly acknowledging the concept of freedom; wanting but unable to be adapted with the aftermath of this freedom; the resistance to be shaped by history.

Taking into view the other characters of the novel and their perspective on freedom is also something to ponder upon. Ila's idea of cosmopolitanism is shaken as she is also perturbed and dwindling between two main stream perceptions: one is her restrictive Indian background and another her easily adaptable unrestricted and licentious London society. According to her idealism London is a civic polite nation where it embraces everyone regardless of their ethnicity and culture but she forgets that the origin of that nation is completely and blindly based on race and colour. For her misconception she has to pay the most costly price that is the disloyalty of Nick; her unimaginable differentiation asserts itself.

May Price can be called relatively free compared to other personalities in the novel as she accepted and described Tridib's death with a empathy but not with glorification – he “gave himself up, it was a sacrifice” (Ghosh, 251-252) and obviously grandmother's illusory notion of freedom and his immediate action to rescue the old man acted as incentive for Tridib's death. So, May is only major character in the novel who is free from any preconceived and infectious notion of nationalism. She was not filled with emotional satisfaction while going to rescue the old man. She only felt it as the need of the hour but again as tragically it is related to the overpowering sense of nationhood as she just becomes a mere observer to the death of her

beloved. May has got a little maturity to evade political indoctrination but the horrible past continues engulfing her present existence.

Throughout the novel a scattered sense of loss is prevalent. The narrator's romantic fascination for the beautiful Ira remains unreciprocated. The narrator's idol Tridib has been able to acquire his love but only for a limited period. It abruptly stops with the sudden demise of Tridib. May considers herself partially responsible for this catastrophic fate as she also becomes a mere helpless spectator when Tridib was paying the price in this destructive maze of 'nationalism'. Freedom of a nation always has a tendency to make us believe that a utopian reality is the ultimate goal whereas the personal experiences still can be bitter, full of unwanted surprises. So those people who gets actually indoctrinated by the claims of history they face incommunicability with the surrounding, also with oneself.

By the words of Ian Almond in the essay "Postcolonial Melancholy: An Examination of Sadness in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*" states that Tridib's "suicidal plunge into the Muslim mob" is actually a step of "self-annihilation of a character who chooses to die rather than persist in a world of broken illusions" (Choudhury, 59). So inside the clamour of glorification of nationalism, pride of history, religious divisions, wounded memories, broken images, grey shadows he chooses to be calm and quiet. It reminds the words of the Greek genius, Michaelangelo-

"Precious is sleep, better to be of

Stone

While the oppression and the

shame still last;

not seeing not hearing, I am

blest;

so do not wake me, hush! Keep

your voice down."

References:

1. Loomba Ania, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. Routledge, 2005.
2. Leary Mark R., June Price Tangney, *Handbook of Self and Identity*, The Guilford Press, New York, 2012.
3. Ghosh Amitav, *The Shadow Lines*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995.
4. Chowdhary Arvind, *Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines Critical Essays*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors LTD, New Delhi, 2016.
5. Choudhury Bibhash, *Amitav Ghosh Critical Essays*, PHI Private Limited, New Delhi, 2009.
6. Linscott Robert N., *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo*, Princeton University Press, 1980.
7. Morrison Toni, *Beloved*, Vintage Classics, 2004.
8. Nicholi Armand, *The Question of God: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex and The Meaning of Life*, Free Press, New York, 2003