

MEMORY AND VIOLENCE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

Subhendu Dutta
Research Scholar
Department of English
North Eastern Hill University, Tura Campus.

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a wonderful book that serves as one of the best examples of post colonial literature. It narrates the journey of two families- the Datta Chaudharis and the Price family from London. It focuses on a world that gets ruptured by the horrors and trauma of partition. The presence of a nameless narrator is one more important feature that makes the narrative of this novel interesting. The nameless narrator connects the various threads of this memory novel which progresses through a series of recollections of many people like the vibrant Thamma, a retired school teacher who wants to unite her family at any cost and Tridib who sacrifices his life to save one of his relatives. Thus the novel is also a gallery of characters who get displaced and long to return to their roots. While going through the pages, we as readers will also encounter historical events like the Second World War and the communal riots in Dhaka and Calcutta.

Keywords: Journey, Trauma, partition, memory, roots.

Post-colonial literature is a brilliant medium through which one gets an access to a disturbed past that one can hardly cherish or treasure. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is one such book that narrates a life as recorded by a nameless narrator who chronicles the journey of two families- the Datta Chaudharis and the Price family from London. The narrator's family consists of his nameless grandmother and her younger sister, Mayadebi. Both the sisters were from Dhaka where they lived in a joint family under the strict patriarchal supervision of their father and Jethamoshai. The elder sister got married and later became a widow. She worked as school teacher. Her son, the father of the narrator was a junior engineer. Mayadebi who got married to Himangshushekhari Datta-Chaudhuri had three sons- Jatin, Tribib whom the narrator deeply admires and Robi.

The memory novel that progresses through a series of recollections is presented in two parts, "Going Away" and "Coming Home". The narrator's strict grandmom who disliked chessboards and cards plays a pivotal role in the story. She disliked Tridib who according to

her was a “loafer and a wastrel” (TSL 4) and wastes his dad’s money. The narrator recalls the occasional visits of his uncle, Tribib whom he would see standing “at the street corners around Gole Park” (TSL 7) where the narrator lived. The narrator further adds that Tridib had visited London in 1939 where he met May Price whom the narrator meets for the second time during his visit to London.

This short meeting between the narrator and May Price enables the readers to know a lot about the friendship between Tridib and May Price that happened through letters and cards: “He had always sent Mrs Price cards at Christmas...But that year he had sent two cards...Smiling at the memory, she told me how his card had reached her just when she was trying to get over an adolescent crush on a school boy trombonist, who had no time for her at all” (TSL 19). The most interesting thing that needs to be noted is the shift in time and place, a feature that shows that the events are not happening right now but have been ‘retrieved from the past’ (George) using one’s memory and this gets repeated a number of times throughout the narration.

Ila, the daughter of the narrator’s uncle Jatin is a worldly woman who is independent and inclined to foreign culture. The narrator recollects how Ila used to visit them during puja. Ila had studied in different schools. As a child she was fond of keeping albums with photographs of her friends. Ila used to show them to the narrator. Once, during Durga puja holidays, Ila took the narrator to her old family house in Raibazar. There they played a game called ‘Houses’. She played the same game with Nick in a cellar in London: “Come on, she said; she was already on her knees crawling through the dust. Come on, I’ll show you. Its the game I play with Nick” (TSL 54).

A little later, we as readers realize that the character of Nick has always been a source of worry for the narrator. Nick, according to Ila was better, sweeter and taller than him:

After that day Nick Price, whom I had never seen, and would, as far as I knew, never see, became a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass; growing with, but always bigger and better, and in some way more desirable- I did know what, except that it was so in Ila’s eyes and therefore true...(TSL 55).

The presence of Nick Price was a barrier for the narrator who loved Ila. It was a one-sided love to which Ila had never responded. Ila’s attraction for Nick was strong and it showed her preference for a foreign culture and life style. Ila’s behaviour, as the narrator recollects, spoke volumes about her nature and the kind of life she wanted to lead: “ Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London? It’s only because I want to be free...Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you” (TSL 98). A character like Ila who faithfully represents “ the life of the senses” (Chowdhary 4) loves freedom, independence and selects Nick and later gets betrayed by him. The narrator comes to know about it from Ila herself.

From the narrator's recollections, we realise that Ila's case is unique as she has to bear a lot in life: Besides being cheated by her love, she has also been forced to leave her roots and embrace alien environments:

Ila has never seen stability in her life, she was always moving from one country to another and from one school to another. These countries are quite different from one another. But the people who inhabit them are the same everywhere. The segregation and humiliation she encounters on her being a brown-skinned, dark-haired Indian is the same everywhere (Chikhalikar 2) (<http://leej.in/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Chikhalikar.pdf>)

The narrator's grandmother plays a significant role in the novel. Through her whom he calls Tha'mma and who represents the first generation, Ghosh has managed to portray a broken soul who longs to go back to her roots. As a character, she is strict and lives according to rules. She even manages to impose them on others like the narrator and his mom:

As for herself, she had been careful to rid our little flat of everything that might encourage us to let our time stink. No chessboard nor any pack of cards ever came through our door; there was a battered ludo set somewhere but I was allowed to play with it when I was ill. She didn't even approve of my mother listening to the afternoon radio play more than once a week (TSL 4).

This bit of information which the narrator gives by using his 'autobiographical' (Schwab 58) memories creates an image of a person who is traditional and stoic: "In 1962, the year I turned ten, my grandmother retired, upon reaching the age of sixty. She had taught in a girls' high school since 1936...For the last six years before she retired, my grandmother had been its headmistress" (TSL 127). Kushwant Singh, too, was fond of his grandmother. But the character drawn by him is quite different from the one portrayed by Ghosh. Kushwant's grandmom, as evident from his autobiographical accounts was a private person lost in her own rustic world. She hardly interfered with the world of the writer and his parents who took him away from her.

Thus, the narrator's Tha'mma is someone who is educated and different from women who love working 'in the kitchen' (Rosello 243) and doing household chores. However, after she got retired, as recalled by the narrator, she started behaving in a different way. She became highly critical of people with whom she lived under the same roof: "One afternoon, a few days later, I came home from school and found that both she and my mother had locked themselves into their rooms. That night I overheard my mother complaining tearfully to my father that she'd been nagged all day long- about her cooking, her clothes, the way she kept the house. My grandmother had never paid any attention to these matters before" (TSL 131). Retirement was perhaps the only reason that had changed her.

The year 1962 was an eventful year for the narrator. His father got promoted to the position of a Manager and then all of them shifted to a new house on Southern Avenue. This new place and its surroundings brought about noticeable changes in Tha'mma who had

slowly withdrawn into a shell of her own: “My grandmother’s enveloping, placental presence was slowly withdrawing from the rest of the house and concentrating itself within the four walls of her room” (TSL 133). From a very active woman who would often visit her school where she used to work, she had transformed into someone attached to an armchair kept beside a window.

She became thoughtful and nostalgic about her good old days about which she tells her grandson, the narrator. The memories of grandmom which are sweet as well as bitter takes the narrator and the reader to Dhaka, the place where her sister Maya and she grew up. Tha’mma’s “earliest memory” tells us about her ancestral home which was a “a very odd house. It had evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided step pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family...” (TSL 133). It was a crowded house where a big joint family lived together and shared a common kitchen.

The family consisted of her grandparents, parents, her sister Mayadebi, her “Jethamoshai” and his family which had three cousins. Thamma’s earliest memories of her grandad gives us a picture of a man who was thin and stern and feared by all. His death was a hard blow that broke the family into pieces. After his demise, Jethamoshai tried his level best to keep the family united, but he miserably failed because the members never took him seriously. He also had a very bad temper which made him extremely unpopular amongst the women of the house. It resulted in quarrels which got worse with the passage of time. There was no trust and soon the house got divided into two parts by a wooden partition wall. It also led to the partition of their “father’s old nameplate. It was divided down the middle by a thin white line...” (TSL 136). The members stopped talking and there was nothing but silence and frustration among the members.

The narrator’s grandmom got married to an engineer in Burma while her sister, Mayadebi married Shaheb who belonged to the Datta-Chaudhuri family. His father was born in Mandalay in 1925. Unfortunately, the narrator’s grandad died of pneumonia in 1935 and after that his grandmom who was Mayadebi’s elder sister had to work to run the family. She had bachelor’s degree in history awarded to her by the Dhaka university and so was able to join a school in Calcutta. There she worked for twenty seven years.

The partition that happened in 1947 was one of the major historical events which changed her life forever. Thamma, as evident from her words, could never forget the “traumatic experience of the partition of the country into India and Pakistan” (Anuj 247). She felt sad as she badly missed “the upside-down house” in Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan.

Later, when she came to know that her Jethamoshai was still alive and living in their ancestral house, she could not control her tears. She felt nostalgic as she remembered her old house which was now a haven for Muslim refugees from India. She felt emotional and wished to bring him back. The narrator who was just a child then could recall the moist eyes

of his Thamma. The character of Thamma is quite interesting: “Starkly opposed to Ila, providing an alternative model of female emancipation independent from the western canon, she appears to be a stern widow, a sort of family dictator, resolute in defending the family morals that she had taught in her long career as a teacher first and as a school director later, until almost the end of the novel when her long suppressed wish to re-unite her family, divided by past quarrels and present geographical boundaries demonstrates her hitherto unsuspected emotional vulnerability” (Piciucco 405).

The letter that reached the narrator’s grandmom on 2nd January 1964 gave a kind of relief to her. From that letter, she came to know that her sister and her husband who were in Dhaka had managed to get some information about Jethamoshai from someone called Saiffuddin. Jethamoshai or Shri Ghostobihari Bose was known there as “Ukil-babu” (TSL 210). He was bedridden and was looked after by a family who shared the ancestral house with him. So Thamma took the decision to go to Dhaka to bring him back. Thamma got accompanied by Tridib and Robi to Dhaka. May Price who had come to Calcutta and stayed with the narrator’s family too joined them in that trip. The narrator and his parents were left behind as they “watched the plane until it disappeared over the horizon” (TSL 213).

This trip to Dhaka was quite eventful. The narrator who was not there was told about it by Robi. When they reached Dhaka they met Mayadebi and her husband. Thamma felt strange as she saw unfamiliar sights. For her, Dhaka was that same old place where she used to live with her family. She thought that since there were no trenches or anything like that:

...both sides will be the same; it’ll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then- partition and all the killing and everything- if there isn’t something in between?(TSL 167).

But Thamma was disappointed. For her Dhaka meant her old house or Kanababu’s sweet shop or the old jackfruit tree and she eagerly waited to see them. Unfortunately there was communal tension in Dhaka at that time. In spite of that, they were able to reach their old house. Their perilous expedition through the streets of Dhaka was filled with sights that shocked Thamma: “It’s all wonderful, she said. But where’s Dhaka? Then gradually, soon after they had crossed a bridge, the sights changed; the streets grew narrower and more crowded, the houses older, more dilapidated. My grandmother was alert now, sitting on the edge of her seat, looking, sniffing the air”(TSL 227).

At last their car reached that old house where Jethamoshai lived. Many things had changed and one could easily see the the visible effect of partition. Their old house was now a refugee camp. Their old garden was now buzzing not with bees but with sounds caused by men who worked “on a motorcycle’s mudguard” (TSL 229). Their garden had disappeared and in its place one could see a workshop whose floor was covered with pools of black oil. The arrival of Saifudin, a mechanic who was in his mid-forties gave them some relief. He

told them about Khalil and his family who looked after Jethamoshai. The meeting took place in a room. The old man was seated on a four-poster bed. Initially he failed to recognize any of them. However, when he realised who they were and for what they have come, he refused to go:

...I dont believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here (TSL 237).

Later, they played a trick to take him out of that house. They told him that he is going to the court and so he agreed: "When they reached the yard Tridib helped Khalil lift the old man into the rickshaw"(TSL 239) which followed the car that moved along the empty road. There was communal tension and the car was attacked by some of the rioters. The driver was attacked and after that the mob surrounded the rickshaw and charged at Khalil and Jethamoshai. May Price saw it and ran out of the car to help them. When Tridib saw May in danger, he too rushed out of the car and like a tiger fell upon those blood-thirsty rioters. But it was of no use as they were more in numbers as compared to Tridib. He endlessly struggled and while doing so was fatally wounded by that insane mob.

Partition had drawn a dark line between Hindus and Muslims. It was not so simple because that line was like an unbreakable wall between two communities. It brought about drastic changes in the "social and economic life" (Abrams and Harpham 306) of the commoners. Innocent people lost their lives. Women as young as ten were raped or burnt alive. The trauma of partition has haunted us and will continue to do so in the future. The British colonial rule gave freedom to the subcontinent and this political freedom was not a bloodless victory as it resulted in partion not of a country but of hearts. Partition changed history, made people from both sides mad for revenge. Women were dragged out of their hiding places and then mercilessly raped. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) abounds in such horrific descriptions:

They move forward from all points. They swarm into our bedrooms, search the servants' quarters, climb to the roofs, break locks and enter our godowns and the small store rooms near the bathrooms. They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet-that want to move backward- are forced forward instead...(183).

Men too were killed and Tridib was one of such victims. The death of Tridib was sudden and shocking and it is one of the most heart touching incidents told by the narrator, an incident about which he was told by Robi who had witnessed it:

Then the mob dragged him in. He vanished... I picked myself up and began to run towards them. The men had melted away, into the gullies. When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat, from ear to ear (TSL 276).

Tridib was one of those characters who had influenced the narrator a lot. The narrator could easily recollect the stories that were told by him when he was alive. Tridib was not a desirable friend according to Thamma as he could never adjust with his dad. His refusal to marry as the narrator recollects was one more reason that convinced Thamma that Tridib could never become a responsible man. As far as the narrator was concerned, he liked Tridib who stands as one of the central characters in the novel. The narrative ends at that point where we find May and the narrator close together in her house. May tells him about her feelings of guilt as she considered herself responsible for Tridib's violent death: "Do you think I killed him? She said. I stayed silent; I did not want to answer her(TSL 277).

The Shadow Lines (1988) is one of the most impactful novels of Amitav Ghosh. In it we come across a gallery of characters and their recollections that build up its complex but interesting narrative. It is a "historical novel" (Mee 327) that gives us an engaging glimpse of the trauma of partition. It also gives us a graphic description of mob fury that devours not one but three lovable characters. It is indeed the "most impressive" (Mee 325) novels of the writer who is seen as one of the godfathers of post-modern era.

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