

Diasporic Consciousness in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

Diasporic consciousness is reflected in all the major novels of South Asian countries which are based on the theme of partition. Most of the South Asian novels are set in the post-colonial era. These novels depict the sad and tragic tale of woes and suffering from the different angles. There is diasporic consciousness in Amitav Ghosh's novel **The Shadow Lines**. The novel examines the Indian colonial and postcolonial experiences by unravelling the concepts of Identity, belonging and nationalism. It tells the story of two families, on the Datta Chaudhary family of Dhaka and other the Price family of London. Amitav Ghosh employs the unnamed narrative who narrates the story of different characters from different perspectives. The diasporic consciousness of the people who suffered during partition and communal riots is presented by Ghosh in realistic manner. The novel represents a shocking but a realistic picture of communal riots in Calcutta in 1964. The novel begins with the colonial time and depicts events in the post-colonial times. The novel also shows the movement towards new values and an eraser for geographical boundaries.

Keywords: Diaspora, Consciousness, Sad, Suffering, Post-colonial, Realistic

The diasporic consciousness is defined and reflected in South Asian fiction. It is reflected in all the major novels of South Asian subcontinent which are based on the theme of partition. Diasporic consciousness is reflected in the novels like **Train to Pakistan, Tamas, The Dark Dancer, A Bend in the Ganges, Azadi, Ice Candy Man, Midnight's Children, The Shadow Lines, and Sunlight on a Broken Column.**

All these novels depict the same sad and tragic tale of woe and strife from different angles. Most of the popular South Asian novels are set in postcolonial times. South Asian countries were under the Colonial rule of the English. After long struggle for independence most of the South Asian countries got independence but independence came along with partition of a country.

Diaspora literally means the dispersion of Jews to areas outside Palestine since the 6th century B.C. It also connotes a dispersion, scattering or decentralization of national or religious groups living outside their homeland but maintaining their cultural identity. The novel **The Shadow Lines** deals with the theme of diasporic consciousness. The Parsi community dispersed from their country. They were forced to migrate to the South Asian countries. They left their home and country with heavy hearts.

There is diasporic consciousness in Amitabh Ghosh's novel **The Shadow Lines**. The novel examines the Indian colonial and postcolonial experiences by unravelling the concepts of identity, belonging and nationalism. The novel examines the construction of relationships in the postcolonial era, focusing on the familial and national connections and interactions between the Prices, the narrator's family, Tridib's family and Ila's family. Lint Brad observes how these characters are influenced by or mirror colonialist tendencies and relationships. (Lint,2015).

The novel tells the story of two families, one the Dutta Chaudhary family of Dhaka and the other Price family of London. During India's partition, Dhaka went to East Pakistan. Dutta Chaudhary family came to Calcutta. The grandmother, her sister Mayadevi and narrator's mother and father came to live but one member of the family Jethamoshai refuses to come to India and stays at Dhaka. The grand mother and her sister Mayadevi often think of their old ancestral home at Dhaka, their school days, streets, playgrounds at Dhaka, shops where they used to go for shopping. Both the sisters cannot forget about their past days. We find

diasporic consciousness in the characters like grandmother, her sister and old Jethamoshai, their uncle. When they plan a visit to Dhaka on 3rd January 1964, both the sisters are excited. They are happy to see the places and shops they used to visit on their way to Dhaka by a car. They tell about their past days to the other passengers. The old man Jethamoshai refuses to come to India. He does not recognise the geographical boundaries which come into being after the partition. He considers these geographical boundaries as the shadow lines. He does not want to cut away from his roots. He has forgotten about his past and now his present is only reality for him. The old man says that he does not know any Indian Shindian. He is born at Dhaka and wants to die there. Thus, the elderly people fail to reconcile the bitter reality of partition. They want to remain stuck with their roots.

The Shadow Lines is based on the theme of partition of India in 1947, the themes of loss and sadness. Almond Ian's article argues that *"no character is left satisfied at the end despite persistently struggling after the things they want, which highlights the themes of loss and sadness that pervade the work."* (Almond, 2004).

The novel opens with the year 1939, when Tridib, the narrator's uncle leaves for London. Tridib recreates World War II London for his wide-eyed cousin:

"Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with."(TSL, pp37).

Tridib was an idealist and he dreamt of a better place, *"a place without borders and countries."*(TSL,46). He didn't believe in borders and maps and in fact nationalism. He really wanted a world without borders. Tridib had told the narrator of the desire that can, *"carry one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places and, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror."* (TSL 48).

In 1947, the Dutta Chaudhary family was forced to migrate to Calcutta from Dhaka due to the communal riots which spread at Dhaka, Calcutta, and other cities. The Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs were killed in lakhs. The unnamed narrator learns about these communal riots when he visits to library and reads the newspapers. In 1964 when communal riots spread at Calcutta and Dhaka between the Muslims and Hindus Maya Devi, her sister and others are forced to leave Dhaka at once. On the way infuriated crowd awaited them. The narrator reminds himself how Tridib was killed by an infuriated mob at

Dhaka. Tridib had gone there along with the grand mother and her sister Maya Devi to bring back old Jethamoshai to India. In an effort to rescue May Price he was killed. The narrator learns that lakhs of people were killed during partition and in the riots of 1964.

Amitabh Ghosh employs an unnamed narrator. He narrates the story of different characters and episodes from different perspectives. Amitabh Ghosh has employed unnamed narrator like Geoffrey Chaucer who gives detailed description of the events, persons and places. The unnamed lets the readers enter the fictional world of Ghosh. The narrator begins the narrative from the memories of Tridib and his trip to London in 1939. The narrator is also a character in the novel. The events narrated by the narrator are depicted in fractured chronology. The novel begins with 1939, then the story of partition of 1947 is told. Tridib's grandmother, narrator's grandmother came to live at Calcutta leaving their ancestral home at Dhaka. Then the narrator visits a library and knows what happened in 1964. He reads the old editions of newspapers in 1978. The narrator came to know the reason of communal riots which spread at Dhaka, Calcutta, Srinagar and Madras. He remembers that it was during this riot he had visited Dhaka on 3rd January 1964 with his grandmother Maya Devi, May Price and Tridib.

In this visit Tridib was killed by a furious fanatic mob in the road of Dhaka. The role of the narrator becomes all the more important in his role of a catalytic agent. In fact, the narrative of **The Shadow Lines** moves among continuously shifting temporal and spatial planes, so that the narrative time coincides with the consciousness of the narrator, whether he be listening to someone else's stories, or recalling his own memories, and not with his fixed temporal mode.

The novel **The Shadow Lines** also shows Ghosh's diasporic imagination at play. The elderly characters, the grandmother, her sister Mayadevi, and their old uncle Jethamoshai experience diaspora. They fail to reconcile themselves with the bitter reality of partition.

The geographical boundaries for them are just the shadow lines. Old Jethamoshai refuses to leave his ancestral home at Dhaka when partition came in 1947. He is so deeply attached with his roots at Dhaka that communal riots fail to threaten him. His present is everything for him. Old Jethamoshai reminds us the character Bishan Singh a Sikh insane person in Saadat Hasan Manto's story Toba Tek Singh who refuses to go to India and frequently asked where Toba Tek Singh is? He finally dies at Wagah border in no man's land which

shows that he neither accepts India nor Pakistan as his home. Thus, we find diasporic consciousness in **The Shadow Lines** in the experiences of elderly characters.

Murali Prasad rightly stated that, "*Evoking the postcolonial trauma is the aftermath of India's separation from Pakistan. Gosh visualizes to the recuperative exercise of transitional imagination to overcome communication strain. Gosh as a postcolonial author cleverly exploits the postcolonial narrator's actions and behaviour in this novel.*"

(Prasad,2008) Amitav Ghosh's **The Shadow Lines** seems to move effortlessly across national boundaries as Shobha Tiwari puts it "*a culture rooted in a single place but a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generations in time.*" (Tiwari,2000)

Writers writing on the partition of India have adopted the stance of a disinterested onlooker while depicting the upheaval of partition. Maybe it is Sidhwa, Attai Husain, Sahni, everyone feels disturbed by these communal holocaust and brutality. Their novels show that in this sad state of affairs both the parties are losers. There are no winners.

Amitabh Ghosh expresses his concern and sorrow in the novel **The Shadow Lines**. The novel represents a realistic but the shocking picture of communal riots in Calcutta in 1964. The novel begins with the colonial times and depicts events in postcolonial times. The diasporic consciousness of the people who suffered during partition and communal riots is presented by Ghosh in realistic manner. **The Shadow Lines** shows horrible vision of partition. Ghosh gives a lyrical expression of his diasporic imagination.

The environment of diaspora has a bearing on the novel. The novelist depicts the gruesome experiences of characters in Bengal and abroad. In the novel one also gets the experiences of multiculturalism. The novel also shows a movement towards new values and an urge for the eraser of geographical boundaries. Ghosh's imagination is necessarily diasporic and postcolonial. **The Shadow Lines** also reverses the process of finding a place for oneself in the world. It is a novel about the compensations and the escape routes which that world, such as it is, still makes available to a certain privileged class of sensitive and talented persons. The novel has placed Amitav Ghosh among the modern leading Indian novelists.

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