

# Re-Imagining the Spatial and Temporal: A Detailed Study of the Narrative Structure of *The Shadow Lines*

Nandini

Assistant Professor, Panjab University Constituent College, Balachaur, 25.04.2023

## Abstract:

In *The Shadow Lines* (1988) Amitav Ghosh, by employing the technique of a non-linear memory narrative, challenges and questions the dehumanised constructs of society and critically examines the concept of borders and nation. This research paper provides a detailed study of the innovative and fluid narrative created by Amitav Ghosh in which he re-imagines the spatial and temporal boundaries with the help of memory montages. In this novel the narrator traverses physically and psychologically over a span of forty years and analyzes the heterotopic spaces and pathological effect of violence, partition and war on the marginal groups which suffer from oppression, displacement, exploitation and loss of language and culture.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, blurred lines, memory narrative, post-modern, stream of consciousness

## Introduction:

“... one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust ... a longing for everything that was not in oneself ... that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places ... where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror.” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 1988)

*The Shadow Lines* (1988) by Amitav Ghosh foregrounds the violence of partition and civil strife and further tries to question the disparity between the pathological effect these events have on individual lives on one hand and their total absence of history on the other. Ghosh in his *The Shadow Lines* employs a very unusual technique of narration to highlight these themes. The art of narration of this “memory narrative” can be analysed in the light of the given quotation from *The Shadow Lines*. The expression “beyond the limits of one's mind” and “no border” evidently capture the gist of the shadow lines as “memory narrative” which spans over 40 years and is written as the memory dictates. There is a constant fluctuation between three time zones as the incidents are narrated through remembrance. The incidents of the novel are narrated by an anonymous narrator and within this narrative structure we also find the narration of incidents by some other characters of the novel. The growing imagination, empathy and intellectuality of the male narrator allow for the exploration and understanding of complex themes. The structure of the narrative is provided through the questions, memories and experiences that result from the expansion of horizons of the narrator, becoming international in scope. The two main aspects of the narrative technique are: a) remembrance through the memory of the narrator, b) fascination and pre-occupation with story telling.

“Do you remember?”- this question almost becomes a haunting refrain in the novel. It shapes the narrator's search for connections, a longing for the discovery of lost information or repressed experiences, for the details of great trauma or

happiness that have retired into the archives of memory. As the narrator retrieves this information he travels psychologically through flashbacks and oscillates between time zones. This psychological travelling between various time zones distorts the chronology. Due to this non-sequentiality and imaginative travelling the novel appears to be a stream of consciousness novel which constantly stirs the imagination of the reader thus making the reading process active and pleasurable. The narrator's memory and imagination play a great role in providing pace to the novel thus making it dynamic. Though there is no proper chronological sequence in the novel but the events are reported with utmost exactness and precision. The quality of presenting things with exactness and precision was what he inherited from Tridib, his uncle who was like a role model for the narrator and whom the narrator admired to the extent that he remembered each and every story narrated by Tridib even years after his death. To quote the narrator,

“the one thing he wanted to teach me... was to use my imagination with precision.”

( Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* 1988)

This exactness and precision in narration can be analysed in the light of predominant characteristics of the narrative structure; the temporal and spatial markers presented by the author historian.

### **Obsession with years and dates:**

In the *Shadow Lines* the obsession of the narrator with dates and events is quite evident. The parts *Going Away* and *Coming Home* start with “In 1939...” and “In 1962” respectively, the details of Tridib and his family leaving London in 1940 are also aptly presented, the year 1959 is presented as the year when Tridib and May price started their correspondence through letters. The author historian presents the readers with an arithmetic of years and dates in relation to the occurrence of major events. This arithmetic of dates help the readers to solve the jigsaw puzzle of this non-linear narrative and put the novel into a coherent manner of comprehension. The three time periods: 1939-40, 1960-64, 1978-79, presented by the narrator are also symbolic of tremendous political changes the place of Thamma and Mayadebi has undergone. though these changes are not expressed in denotative language but there are many connotations in the text that bring to fore the transition of Bengal from being a part of India to being made East Pakistan and then to Bangladesh.

### **References to age :**

The author whose proto type is the narrator also makes references to age time and again and uses this as an important time marker. various events in the novel are presented to the readers by giving references to age of various characters in the novel, and from these references the readers get to know about the particular time period about which the narrator relates a story or reports the incident. The narrator reports the incident when tridib and his family visit London as ,

“Mayadebi was twenty nine when they left and Tridib was eight.”

(Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* 1988)

The narrator recalls the correspondence of Tridib and May Price through letters and writes,

“ when he was twenty seven and she was nineteen, They had begun a long correspondence. Tridib had written first she told me.” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* 1988)

By analysing these references to age the readers can relate to the time period being reported.

### **Relative time difference of events:**

In this novel the narrator often presents events in relation to one another by using relative time difference. One event is presented in terms of, or in relation to the other. Though the events are not reported in a

harmonious manner by presenting exact dates but this relativity of time difference helps the readers to sort the time frames for themselves and makes oscillation between time periods fluid and smooth. For instance, the narrator tells about his visit to London in relation to 1968 as,

“When I went to London, a decade later, often when Ila suggested going out somewhere... I would cry: Yes let's go, let's go on the underground.” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* 1988)

This presentation of events in an unusual manner throws light on the creativity of the author and the power of narrator's memory with the help of which he narrates the events with exact precision.

### **Technique of exclusion and inclusion of events**

The author, relying on his memory chooses to comment upon certain events repetitively and chooses to leave certain years deliberately. The author historian, whose proto-type is the narrator has a selective memory, and that is why there is partial selection of events. Due to this process of inclusion and exclusion, the narrative bears resemblance to the genre of historical fiction as history always seems to be partial and prejudiced, and this element provides this novel a universal appeal. According to the critics, over these forty years there are only thirty days singled out for commentary and only five main events which are referred to, particularly. The main events which are referred to, again and again are: Visit to the Raibazar House, Arrival of May Price in December 1963, Reporting of Tridib's death by Robi and then by May Price, and visit to Dhaka in January 1964, and the death of Tridib. The death of Tridib in 1964 is narrated by the use of flashback in 1978. Due to this lack of linearity and absence of structure, the novel appears to be a post-modern novel.

### **Pre-occupation with the binaries**

Another major thing to be noticed in the art of narration in *The Shadow Lines* is the author's pre-occupation with pairs. The author makes use of binaries “to draw parallels between contemporaneity and antiquity”, in order to present similarities and dissimilarities.

This pairing can be evidently seen in the division of the novel in two parts: Going Away and Coming Home. Pairing is also evident within two time zones as two time zones are juxtaposed frequently. For instance, 1939; the period of Tridib's visit to London is always juxtaposed with 1978, the period of narrator's visit to London. The narrator recalls the address of May Price's house, 44 Lymington Road from West Hampstead, as explained to him by Tridib. In 1978, the narrator still has Batholomew's Atlas, “a set of magical talismans” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* 1988) which was given to him by Tridib somewhere in 1960s, which provided a room for the narrator's to become fertile and travel psychologically.

The characters are also paired in terms of similarities and dissimilarities, to compare and contrast their personalities. Some of these pairs are: the sisters; Mayadebi and Tha'mma, Tridib and the narrator, Robi and May Price as they report Tridib's death, Ila and Nick, and Ila and the narrator. The pair that gathers the utmost attention of the readers is that of the Narrator and Tridib. Though the narrator and Tridib had an age gap of twenty-one years, the narrator was all praises for Tridib, who was almost like a role model for the narrator. This admiration of the narrator for Tridib is the reason why the narrator remembered each and every detail once told

to the narrator by Tridib with exact precision and accuracy. Another reason for his pre-occupation with Tridib was that “Tridib had given him[me] worlds to travel and he had given him[me] eyes to see the world with” and “for having seen through Tridib's eyes...past seemed concurrent with its present.” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 1988)

“In imagination there is a stark contrast between Ila and the narrator. as the narrator could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in imagination; that her practical bustling London was no less invented than mine. Neither more nor less true, only very far apart.” ( Ghosh,*The Shadow Lines*, 1988) The contrast is also presented in terms of economic status of the sisters Tha'mma and Mayadebi, and also, the narrator and Ila. The narrator as the one "who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta is contrasted to the "shifting landscapes" of Ila's childhood. Ila and Nick are presented as the examples of world weariness in the novel.

In terms of narration there is a set of two pairs: a) the narrator and Tridib , and b) Robi and May Price. The first pair is dominant in the relating of stories, as the stories are narrated first by Tridib to the narrator and then by the narrator to others. The second pair of Robi and May Price plays a crucial role in the reporting of Tridib's killing. Robi narrates the death of Tridib as a nightmare, whereas, May Price gives a more factual and precise description of Tridib's death. From this pairing in terms of narration we can conclude that the author employs dual narration.

### **Conclusion:**

From a deep analysis of the novel and the techniques used in narration, it can be concluded that the narrator always seems to be in a reverie and his imagination and memory allows him to sway smoothly within various time zones as he dreams, recollects and invents. As this is a novel of travelling : physically and for the most part psychologically , the linearity of the structure is distorted which makes this novel a bit obscure in terms of structure and for that matter it bears a close resemblance with the stream of consciousness novel and can be called a Post-modern novel.

### **References:**

1. Ghosh, Amitav: *The Shadow Lines*. Oxford University Press. 1988. pp.10-245
2. Kaul, Suvir. “Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*”. *Oxford Literary Review*.(1994) 16. pp.125-145.
3. Mukherjee, Meenakshi, “*Maps and Mirrors: Coordinates of Meaning in The Shadow Lines. In Amitav Ghosh. The Shadow Lines*” Delhi: Oxford University Press.1995. pp. 255-267
4. Sunder Rajan,Rajeswari: *The Division of Experience in The Shadow Lines* Delhi: Oxford University Press.1995. pp. 255-267
5. Amitav Ghosh BBC Podcast on *The Shadow Lines* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnDbgOt40ME>