

Element of Memory in The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

It is a historical novel with flesh-back mode narration. It covers the time span of 1964 to 1984. Here we found the elements of biography with reference to author upset by the riots that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination and that his novel came out of the turmoil of that moment. The incident revived his memories of 1964 riots in Calcutta, Dhaka and elsewhere. It is principally organized through the weaving together of 'personal lives and public events.' The finished form ultimately excavates personal and social history against the racial riots in some parts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and mainly Calcutta in India.

Keywords: Historical Novel, Flash-back Mode, Personal History and Nation's History.

Amitav Ghosh has interwoven several literary aspects in this present novel in which I would like to focus on 'Memory' and how it has been mingled with Personal History and Nation's History. Before to classify this novel as a memory novel or not, we will have to answer two questions. First, what is memory? What are its distinctive features? And second, are these features present in The Shadow Lines? One allied question that must be answered would be, that even if a few distinctive features of memory are present in the novel, have they been retained in their original form or have they been changed or modified? And, finally, if they have been modified, what all has taken place during the process of modification? To put it very simply, in what form or dimensions, does memory figure in The Shadow Lines? To answer this, we will very briefly look at what memory has done to the work in question. Is it actively making the novel or is the novel just a collection of memories?

Let us get back to the first question: What is memory? We all understand it rightly to be a psychological process as much integral to our consciousness as thinking is. We are rational because we think, and also because we memorize. We use these faculties consciously when we learn our lessons for taking examinations, or subconsciously when different experiences leave their impressions on our minds, without our becoming aware of this. So, both thinking and memory are the very essence of our rationality; they contribute equally to our learning. But, then, they are not identical. Memory is rational and emotive- pertaining to the cognitive and the affective parts of personality. Thinking, on the other hand, even as understanding and not as mere awareness is purely rational- completely devoid of feelings, emotions and sentiments, which are the components of our affective life. Memory, therefore, is perhaps more gratifying than the purely objective, disinterested kind of thinking. Literary artists, poets and novelists alike have acknowledged the presence of emotive element in memory. Ghosh, the novelist makes the narrator or his novel recall his own experiences with a fondness- another emotive element.

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. The point to be noted here is that 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; thinking, on the other hand, is definitely non-emotive as when I think about an abstract concept like Space or my solving a mathematical problem. I do these activities by exercising my mind or rationality alone; but, memory, I may repeat, is both rational and emotive. That is why, it is an apt instrument and sustainer of the creation of a work of literary art.

Socrates long ago mentioned some important features of memory, which we need to discuss in the context of *The Shadow Lines*. Here is what Socrates said to Theaetetus about memory:

Imagine, then, for the sake of argument, that our minds contain a block of wax, which in this or that individual may be larger or smaller, and composed of wax that is comparatively pure or muddy, and harder in some, softer in others and sometimes just the right consistency. Let us call it the gift of the Muses' mother, Memory, and say that whenever we wish to remember something we see or hear or conceive in our own minds, we hold this wax under perceptions or ideas and imprint them on it as we might stamp the impression of a seal-ring. Whatever is so imprinted we remember and know so long as the image remains; whatever is rubbed out or has not succeeded in leaving an impression we have forgotten or do not know?

Here, Socrates tries to explain the memory, like all knowledge begins in perception or experience. Before sense-perception, or as the philosopher would insist, before the determinate kind of perception begins, mind is a 'blank slate' or *Tabula Rasa* as Hume calls it; it does not have the traces of memory on it. Experiences leave some kind of trace, which goes into the formation of the fund of memory. Now, I ask, is not *The Shadow Lines* also an organized structure of memories? Just as the table is made of wood and nails and adhesives, similarly, 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 grandmothers of Mayadebi's, the narrator's cousin Ila's and Mary'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.

The next important idea implicit in the statement of Socrates is that 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. We may recapitulate what Socrates tells Theaetetus, our minds contain a block of wax, which in this or that individual may be pure or muddy and hard in some, softer in others. Here, the hard is the less sensitive and softer is the more sensitive receptivity of an individual which results in shallow or deep memories, respectively. I am sure, that like all artists, Ghosh/his narrator is also blessed with a softer memory. Otherwise, how could he remember so much in such minute and vivid detail? Remembering May Price exactly as she had looked seventeen years ago, the narrator says:

Her hair was still cut exactly as I remembered it from the time she had stayed with us in Calcutta: falling thick and straight to her shoulders, mantling her head and the sides of her face; but where I remembered it as dark and glossy, it was streaked now with strands of gray which shimmered when they caught the light. When he recalls hearing, even in the drunken state, 'the sound of feet pounding heavily after him', or the vital fact mentioned in the letter that was written by Maya Debi to the narrator's grandmother-

‘Maya Debi wrote that she had not been able to visit their old house yet. Without a softer, that is, more alert sensitivity, how could the narrator remember that his grandmother gasped 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?’

There is no doubt that the more sensitive people have a ‘softer’ more impressionable memory, but not all such people are artistic in temperament. Equally true is the fact that all artists literary or performing have a ‘softer’ memory as the material cause for their experiences for longer periods, to be used purposively later- in fact, more purposively than a layman does. Impelled by their inherent tendency to use up every possible memory for the creation of some or the other work of art, artists receive almost every impression more fully and this they can do only with the softer memory material. This softer memory material does not allow, in their case, events to just happen and pass them by. Rather, in their case, impressions of all events are deliberately gathered up and then remain dormant in their memory till such time as the retainer finds the occasions for their actual use. Then they are recollected and transformed, at least, by literary artists like Ghosh into the materials of narratives.

As per the psychological study, in our life forgetting occurs and may occur at different times for different reasons. One is the biological reason, which affects 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 one does not like. Generally the pleasant and the useful are remembered and the unpleasant is forgotten.

Coming now to the third question, this is: In what form is memory present in the novel? Let us, for a moment, suppose that the majority of incidents, narrated in the novel, never actually occurred. Historical events like the two riots and biographical facts of the author’s own life can, of course, not be denied. But supposing that the author has only imagined the rest of the events, can the work be still called a memory novel? Here we will have to take note of a fact. Very often it is maintained plays no part? Further, is it proper to hold that memory and imagination are so exclusive of each other that they can never interact, not even in a narrative? The answer is a firm ‘no’. In fact, the two not only coexist but also, more often than not, work together in unison. The point is that memory is imaginative and imagination can fabricate memories. This is exactly how memory and imagination function in unison in Ghosh’s work. The Shadow Lines, to be sure, is interplay of imagination and memory- memory recalling certain incidents and imagination weaving memories. Tridib’s Gastric mentioned in The Shadow Lines is a recollection of a fact but it also includes the narrator imagining it as a special organ- peculiar to Tridib. It is a clear case of memory and imagination interweaving effectively to create an artistic element in the work.

Creative or aesthetic memory is a device as integral to artistic creation as actual memory is to learning. The famous aesthetician S.K. Langer calls it the ‘virtual memory’ or the ‘semblance’ of memory. Distinction between actual and virtual memory can be likened to the one that the German philosopher Kant draws between Noumenon and phenomena- so basic to his theory of knowledge. Noumenon, according to Kant, is the thing-in-itself and phenomenon, is the thing as it appears to us. Space and time as well as causal relation are, for Kant, mental categories, which we necessarily impose onto the object of perception. That these categories are mental, Kant argues by saying that being infinite, they cannot be parts of the finite outer world. However, the final purpose of the novel is to create an image of personal and social history, which is a non- memory goal. Yet to achieve this objective Ghosh has made maximum and effective use of memory in almost all its dimensions and forms. Even if the novel were

constituted of imaginary incidents, cast in the mnemonic mode of virtual memory it would still be considered as a memory novel.

References:

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