



Contemporaneity of Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

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Amitav Ghosh as a Post-Modernist in *the Shadow Lines*

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1. Introduction

Both modern and postmodern literature represents a break from 19th century realism. But basically Post modernism is a reaction against modernism. It gives voice to insecurities, disorientation and fragmentation. In character development, both modern and postmodern literature explore subjectivism, turning from external reality to examine inner states of consciousness, in many cases drawing on modernist examples in the "stream of consciousness" styles of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, or explorative poems like *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. Post modernism is a reaction against the modernist and the 'Anti-modernist' tendencies which have psychological and intellectual impact. In America and France post-modern literature emerged as a genre. Post-modernist writers break away from all the rules and seek alternative principles of composition conforming to their content of existentialist thought. Postmodern in Indian English literature explores fragmentariness in narrative - and character -construction in a different way from its British or American counterpart. In post modernism, there is a preoccupation with insecurities in the existence of humanity. The picture of life delineated by them accommodates meaninglessness, purposelessness and absurdity of human existence through the employment of devices such as Contradiction, Permutation, Discontinuity, Randomness, Excess, Short Circuit and so on. Post-modernist literature manifests chaotic condition of the world. Post modernism of Indian English literature is, however, different from that of England or Europe which rejects western values and beliefs as only a small part of the human experience and rejects such ideas, beliefs, culture and norms of the western. A Sahitya Academy Award winner, *The Shadow Lines*, is an interweaving of personal lives and public events. Ghosh tells us that as he was upset by the riots that followed Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, he transformed his turmoil in the form of the novel. The memories of the 1964 Calcutta, Dhaka and other riots actually were revived and he was impelled to write the novel. This novel is a continuous narrative which reproduces the pattern of violence. Ghosh gives a lot of emphasis to details and has an acute ear for speech and dialogue, but the profounder fact is that he is looking and probing deeper into something that resembles the work of a historian. His novel is rooted in reality, yet it looks beyond. Though the novel is based on historical reality, it can be termed as a complete piece of fiction. The reader sees in Tridib, an impulsive character and he is the organizing principle in the novel. It is through his creative imagination that he conducts his life. He is guided by none but himself, and guides that narrator, being his mentor. To complement him, Ghosh created the character, May. The other characters like Ila, the Shaheb and Nick Price are presented as striking contrasts to Tridib. Characters like Tha'mma and Robi are sometimes alike him but differ in their ideologies of nationalism. Amitav Ghosh narrates the story through a nameless narrator. Though nameless, he is not faceless. His name is "I". As the novel develops, the character grows with the novel and he becomes a full-fledged character, worth reckoning. The narrator lives in the 'story' of Tridib. Ghosh treats his characters with respect and concern. Though there is criticism that he creates women characters with conflicted selves, he denies it. He says that 'his men characters are as much conflicted as his women characters.' Ghosh focuses on his main characters like Tridib, the narrator and May and less important characters are presented in a fairly summarized form. *The Shadow Lines* is a novel of ideas. The post-modernist sometimes tries to find inward meaning and chronicles his self in his writings. The conventional narrative method of linearity and chronological sequence is subverted by the narrative voice, which as an implied author is separate and distinct from the real author. The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* makes detailed reference to the houses, lanes and cities, locations that resonate with personal and cultural significance. The author's love for travel aids him in this process. Ghosh's experiences in Egypt helps him to realistically and convincingly picturise Antar in *The Calcutta Chromosome* and Tridib in *The Shadow Lines*.

2. Different styles

The novelist has used the different styles, both traditional and innovative, to look at it afresh from an entirely new perspective. "The arranging of episodes and of digressions, the art of foiling; the use of symbols, metaphors and tropes as structural elements- all this indicates a conscious purpose that yields an extraordinary symmetry of form"(1) depicts Ghosh as a post modern novelist. The novel is in non-linear narrative mode and it moves back and forth and doesn't bother about the conventional notions of time and space. Post modernists use this technique and one can experience this in Ghosh's novel "The Shadow Lines".

3. Novel of memory

The novel transcribes speech, meticulously holding, as far as possible, the dynamics of a typical speech situation. Through telling, remembering and listening, the characters reconstruct the past. The dialogue between the sixteen year old Ila and her cousin illustrates this well,

I tried to tell her...

I began to tell her....

I had been talking for a while when I noticed that she wasn't listening to me...(SL 20)

Stories, obviously, can only be told,

Ila, who could tell us stories about smart girls and rich boys.....(76)

Many years later... found myself telling her the story Ila had told me (77)

..... angry with myself for having told her the story(77)

What about the story you were telling me.....(82)

And, since they are never written down, stories rely on the dynamics of memory. As a novel of memory, *The Shadow Lines* prefers memory's truth to recorded history to explore alternative means of documenting events. The word 'remembering' and 'memory' punctuate the narration of almost every story establishing the loose time scheme of remembered histories.

The novel not only recreates the Calcutta of the 1950s and 1960's through the memory of the growing boy but also the Dhaka of the 1920's through the grandmother's. Other characters supplement knowledge of the events in the other parts of the world in a similar fashion- Tribid, Mayadebi, Robi, May. Unlike the protagonist who resurrects his boyhood Calcutta entirely through fragments of memory, his and those of others, Ila displays an amnesia to the past,

I could tell she didn't remember....(19)

....she did have a faint recollection but she could not exactly say he remembered(19)

I asked her if she had any memory of the stratagems----(19)

But how could you forget (19)

..... how do you remember (20)

Ghosh exploits personal reminiscence to replicate the workings of memory in 'remembered' histories. Memory of public events in private memory, which colours and distorts them in accordance with personal biases and priorities, is used by Ghosh to call attention to the selective amnesia of recorded history of Indian nationalism to all that ran counter to this narrative. Thamma's story about her classmate, who was a member of one of the terrorist groups operating in Bengal, centers two such narratives which were either totally erased or ignored to mere footnotes in the heroic epic of Indian nationalist history. The novel uses Tridib to contextualize the youthful idealism to acknowledge the contributions of militant nationalism in mobilizing resistance against British domination even though idealism proves to be misguided in hindsight.

4. Post modernism

The Indian writer in English is biased because of the responsibility, in particular, of narrating the nation, in all its 'postcolonial contexts' and Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, following Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children*, has often been cited as a pattern of this tradition. As a post-modern writer, he believes that the family can be a metaphor for the nation and in his own words: Two of my novels (*The Shadow Lines*, and my most recent *The Glass Palace*) are centred on families. I know that for myself this is a way of displacing the 'nation'...In other words, I'd like to suggest that writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities). I think there is a long tradition of this, going back at least to Proust- and it's something that Jameson, Anderson (and even Bhabha) never seem to take into account.(Brinda Bose, 29). Taking the last two quoted statements from Ghosh together, it is possible to suggest that, one, Ghosh is a quintessential postmodern writer who invites the reader to actively participate in the unfolding of a text and two, that it is in keeping with Ghosh's expectations of his readers that he chooses to 'displace' the nation with the unit of the family. The novel is post-modernist in two senses- the author questions the existing paradigms without blindly agreeing to the so-called universal truth. The myth that violence gets driven to the borders once new nations are carved out of a single state is questioned in the novel. Two, the subjective nature of post-modernism is depicted. Though Tridib's death is experienced in a disjointed manner by the different characters, its fuller implications are understood when the different characters bring their partial perspectives on this very painful and poignant incident. R.K.Dhawan describes the book as a novel that resists classification: It is basically a memory novel that weaves

together past and present, childhood and adulthood, India and Bangladesh and Britain, Hindu and Muslim. It is a social document and a political novel, a Bildungsroman and a postmodernist work of fiction (Dhawan:23)

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that this novel marks a notable shift to a more realistic examination of the protagonist's search through his memories, ultimately provoking a recognition in him and in the reader that he too was fleeing and pursuing something: namely, the connection between past and present in his own identity.

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