

HISTORICAL MAPPING OF DISLOCATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE NOVEL THE SHADOW LINES

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Abstract

Indian Diaspora Writings have successfully brought fourth the problems of age, gender, race, identity crisis etc. It has transcended all the boundaries and explored the themes of displacement and rootlessness .History, geography and culture is re-visited. This has made Indian Writing a hybrid form of writing and more augmented.

This paper will focus on the novel The Shadow Lines. This novel has taken the narrative beyond the national frontiers and makes it an important socio political postmodernist work of fiction which explores the role of imagination and evokes reality. The quest for identity unfolds itself against the mood and background of a new internationalism. It is a 'memory novel' which weaves past, present, childhood, adulthood, India, Bangladesh, Britain, Hindu and Muslim. It has thus become a social document and a political novel.

***Key Words:*Diaspora Writing, rootlessness, displacement, memory novel, social document, political novel.**

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Indian Diaspora Writing has stimulated itself in the present scenario. It seems as if the change atmosphere has catapulted their writings to a different level altogether. Various forms of diaspora art may be attributed to it- dance, paintings, music, films etc. but it is writing which helps in binding this literature firmly. This form of art has very successfully problematized the issues of gender, race, and identity crisis and so on. An unconscious longing for their homeland always tends a fascination to their work. Various writers from various countries have adjusted their writings according to their scenario, abilities, aspirations and talent. Varying from different kinds of exile whether fleeing their countries due to oppressive regime or being alienated in their own country, they all have explored literature to the fullest whether in the form of geographical dislocation or socio cultural displacement a new dimension has been added to their writings. Indian English writings have transcended all the boundaries and have become a part of mainstream English Literature world over. Writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Tharoor , Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh gave an equal concern to global concern which lends an essence of displacement and rootlessness to their literature and writings. The themes of Diaspora Writers explore the theme of displacement and self-fashioning. There is a global readership and an enduring appeal to their work. They may be nostalgic for their homeland but sometimes takes liking for the West too. The physical transformation shows the conviction with which they accept adopted Western culture.

There is a continuous movement of history, geography and culture in their works. This fiction has evolved over a period of time. This literature emits both a feeling of locatedness and dislocatedness . There is a feeling of warmth, security and chaotic upheaval at the same time in their works. This multi layeredness encapsulates geographical space, psychological space and cultural space.

There is a hybridity of Indian English. It has been able to win over wide audiences, the richness and complexities of Indian culture in an ever more globalized world. This Indian English writing is an honest demonstration of native geniuses. It has turned out to be a new form of Indian culture and voice in which India converses regularly. Indian Writing is much more augmented. The complex world of psyche is caught in historical and cultural labyrinth of the sub-continent, the encounter between the west rationality and Indian myth, hollowness of national identity and national boundaries. There is a constant struggle to give a concrete shape to its destiny. This post colonial literature celebrates what Salman Rushdie calls "a historical

weightlessness."There is an interesting amalgamation of past with present and the future dislocating time. The history is re visited, re explored and the residual effects of politics are re exposed. This eventually has led to the feelings of identity crisis and cultural de generation. These themes became the focus points of the writings of many writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai etc. This form of expatriate writing presents the psychodrama of human relations which makes them transcend the barriers of genre, narratives, time, history and location.

Rushdie celebrates "the plurality, the excess of culture, the rootlessness which means that if one does not belong to one place, then one belongs to many." There is magical realism in the marginalized consciousness which heightens the sense of reality. The emotional entanglements form the core of their work.

This paper aims to focus upon one of such eminent Diaspora writer Amitav Ghosh's award winning novel 'The Shadow Lines.' The craftsmanship of Ghosh's work has been the way he weaves the wool and the wrap from distinct though inter related strands of travel writings cultural criticism and cognitive mappings. The whole exercise of trying to explore these three trajectories has been to support the hypothesis. The study has grown out of as well as interrogates Ghosh from hitherto unsearched areas.

The Shadow Lines (1988) was a book not about any one event but about the meaning of such events and their effects on individuals who lived through them. The author with his skilled craftsmanship takes the narrative beyond the national frontiers and opens out to encompass cosmopolitan experiences. The quest for identity unfolds itself the mood and background of a new internationalism. This opens the way for new experiences which are seen and understood through the narrator's consciousness. The name of the narrator is not revealed which suggests a contemporary consciousness- an all-encompassing identity. This forms the intricate part of narrative design.

The novel is primarily 'a memory novel' which weaves the past and the present, childhood and adulthood, crosses frontiers from India to Bangladesh, Britain, Hindu and Muslim. It is a socio political postmodernist work of fiction which explores the role of imagination and evokes reality.

Amitav Ghosh has very astutely woven the personal lives of the characters who populate his novel with public events and also display poignant human emotions through an intricate web of memories, relationships and images. These also constitute for the pillars on which his narratives are based. The Shadow Lines is very aptly justified as a novel about growing up and understanding.

The opening of the novel is with the description of the protagonist's eccentric, external but always brilliant cousin Tridib who is an alter ego to narrator and exercises tremendous influence over him since his childhood. The narrator sees the world through his eyes. He tries to imagine Tridib as a child.

‘I remember trying very hard to imagine him back to my age, to reduce his height to mine and to take away the spectacles that were so much a part of him that I really believed he had been born with them.... in the end, since I had nothing to go on, I had decided that he had looked like me.’ (3)

Tridib was a story teller who spent much of his time in gossip with young never- do-wells at street corners and tea stalls. ‘He was a familiar figure within the floating, talkative population of students and would be footballers and bank clerks and small time politics and all the rest who gravitated towards that conversation loving stretch of road between Garighat and Gole Park’(8).Tridib’s niece Ila would sometimes come to Calcutta and the narrator as a child would wait for her arrival. She appeared to the narrator ‘an exotic butterfly with easy intimacy with places which are magical names in the boys’ atlas’ (20). He’s hooked by her exotic appeal, her foreignness, western ways and easy infirmity. When narrator goes to London to observe her life from close quarters, is shattered to see Ila living in a world of self deception and shallowness. She’s out of line with both the worlds and ends up belonging to neither. She loses her identity in an attempt to ape the borrowed one.

Another character very skillfully traced by the novelist is narrator’s grandmother Tha’mma. Her development and growth makes her a multifaceted character. There are many layers to her character which unfolds with the time. She in fact, is the pillar of the novel. Tha’mma induces discipline in the family. Before her death, she writes a letter to the Principal of her grandson’s college about his visits to whores in Delhi ‘never understand as how she learnt of the women I had visited nor do I know how she saw that I was in love with Ila for so long before I dared to admit it to myself.’(93)

During her days of childhood and growth, she had her sympathies with freedom fighters and wanted to do something for them in a small way.

‘She put her hands on my shoulders and holding me in front of her, looking directly at me, her eyes steady, forthright, unwavering. I would have prayed for strength and God willing, yet I would have killed him. It was our freedom: I would have done anything to be free’ (39).

In contrast to Tha’mma’s nationalist militant fervor and hysteria, there is quite strength and sanity of the narrator’s uncle Robi. He’s upright, principled and moral man who is not swayed by socio political pressures. He has been sketched in few episodes very poignantly and distinctively by Ghosh. Through Robi and the narrator, the novelist attempts the construction of shadow lines of the borders as signifiers of freedom and nationhood. The issue of identity in terms of larger cultural and historical collectivities is finely articulated. There is a fine use of ‘*Stream of Consciousness*.’ Memories of the past are in concurrent with the present and the geographical distances are transcended through it. The events are deliberately gathered and released when the actual occasion arises. They are then transformed by the literary artists like Ghosh into the materials of the narratives. Grandmother’s visit to Dhaka to her ancestral home

is the most shattering climax. She ends up questioning some of the fundamentals of nationalism.

‘But there aren’t any trenches or anything. How are people to know? I mean where’s the difference then? And if there is no difference both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before when we used to catch a train to Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day, without stopping us whatever it for all then- the partition and the killing and everything. Is there isn’t anything in between?’(151)

The heart of the novel is the death of Tridib. Narrator only understands it towards the end. It is a struggle with silence as he has no words to communicate as what happened ‘It lies outside the reach of intelligence beyond words- that is why this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me because it is not a presence at all, it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words’(228). A little later he writes ‘I do not have the words to give it meaning. I do not have the words and I do not have the strength to listen’ (228). He loved Tridib as a hero so his death becomes little difficult for him to accept. ‘So complete is this silence that it actually took me fifteen years to discover that there was a connection between my nightmare bus ride back from school and the events that befell Tridib and others in Dhaka’(218).

What makes this novel very contemporary and relevant is that the lessons of history have never been learnt. The deplorable violence unleashed upon Sikhs in Delhi from October 31st, 1984 to Nov 04th, 1984 shows history repeating itself.

The absence of pessimism, despair and ambiguity makes *The Shadow Lines* a very commencing and effective piece of art. The author boldly tackles both national and international political themes

He shows how different cultures and communities are becoming antagonist to each other in Contemporary India. Therefore, the use of political allegory is used very effectively to stress the need for a type of civilization where the communal holocaust can be avoided. Above all the use of imagination and memory technique makes ‘The Shadow Lines’ a compact novel. Reference to houses, photographs, maps, road names etc are very artistically used. It gets related to a search; a quest for identity and meaning for personal significances in a living world. The discrete and distant identities provide a strong foothold to the understanding of the history. Every character seems to have an intimate relation with history whether it is Tridib pursuing Ph.D in Archaeology or Tha’mma living through partition, Ghosh’s mappings seeks to expand cognitively and culturally where the places and routes form the basic building blocks of the cognitive map.

Amitav Ghosh combines the innovations of postmodern fiction with an insight to produce powerful and provocative investigations of the post colonial world. Each novel of his is a “mapping test” which explores the cultural and societal effects of our changing sense of time and place. He teaches his readers how to travel and re- discovers them again. The outspace is

being inscaped i.e. not only the exterior territories are mapped but also the inner recesses of the mind.

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