Narrative Technique in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines

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Amitav Ghosh follows the magic realism technique employed by such Latin American writers as Gabriel Carcia Marquez in his narrative technique. It is remarkable how in ***The Shadow Lines*** *Ghosh presents the multi-layered experience of varied people in diverse chronotopes which ultimately appear to converge into a single text. These contexts are distinguished from one another by illusory 'shadow lines' of borders, calendars and individual perceptions. As Marquez does in the* ***Chronicle of a Death Foretold****, Ghosh uses memory and imagination as the narrative devices to interrogate space time, persona, and overcome the isolability of persons as well as distance between spaces and times which appear both fluid and concrete.* ***The Shadow Lines*** *is about blurred lines across time-space consciousness. In the novel the signs denoting borders in the map and periods/dates on the calendar lose their force as concrete reality. Events take place in different parts of the globe at varying points of history between 1939 and 1964, even beyond.*

Introduction :

Ghosh's narrative technique is quite the opposite of the conventional, linear chronological narrative. The storyline juxtaposes the lives of two different yet intertwined families, one Indian, one English and uses this structure to question the boundaries between peoples and the geographical settings they inhabit. The story, which shifts from Calcutta to London to Dhaka, is told through the point of view of a contemporary Indian male, although the real luminaries of the plot are the young man's grandmother, Tha'mma, and his cousin, Tridib. The anonymous narrator recounts in flashback the people and places Tridib had described to him twenty years before, and the heady life of modern London that signified the centre of the universe.

The novel is of course the male narrator's growing imagination, empathy and intellectuality which allow for the exploration and understanding of complex themes. As his horizons expand and become international in scope, his questions, memories and experiences provide the structure of the narrative. But even as his consciousness mediates and frames other voices, stories and experiences, one becomes aware that some of these voices counterpoint his narrative, and even interrogate his telling of the story. The narrative of this novel, not unlike the process of subcontinental independence, engenders and empowers political subjects unequally, and indeed represents them asymmetrically. However, in the many stories of this novel-overlapping at points, mismatched and contentious at others-"*The Shadow Lines* becomes not simply a male bildungsroman, an authorized autobiography, with its obvious agendas and priorities, but also a dialogic, more open-ended telling of the difficult interdependencies and inequalities that compose any biography of a nation."[1]

The Shadow Lines refers to the blurred lines between nations, and families as well as within one's own self-identity. Ghosh depicts the characters of the novel as caught between two worlds, and the struggle to come to terms with both their present lives as well as their past, forms the inner course of the narrative. May Price, for instance, is an upper-class Anglo by birth yet also a woman keenly attuned to the conditions under which most of the world's population exists-she sleeps on a thin mattress on a floor and fasts one day a week because "it occurred to me a few

years ago that it might not be an entirely bad idea to go without something every once in a while." Another example is the narrator's cousin Ila, whose upbringing abroad as the daughter of a diplomat has given her a cultural identity crisis as an adult. Ghosh's tale dramatizes the inner conflicts of the juxtaposition of dissimilar yet related cultures as well as the outward conflicts between friends and families that have been inflicted by geopolitical discord.

According to Bragg Lois *The Shadow Lines* is "basically a memory novel"[2] that weaves together past and present, childhood and adulthood, India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Britain through the "coil within coil of memories (that) unfurl within it; it establishes its socio-historical situation through its careful observation of concrete social reality and as such can be regarded both as a social document and a political novel; it is also in many ways a bildungsroman, training the growth and development of the narrator from childhood to maturity. It is part of the Indian experiment with the non-fiction novel whose first significant landmark was Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children.

The theme is established through the use of the geographical metaphor and the journey motif implicit in its title-derived, significantly, from Conrad-and in the titles of its two parts-'Going Away' and 'Coming Home'. This metaphor pervades the book and enables it to extend and to expand spatially and temporally (a journey, after all, takes place sequentially and in time). Appropriately, *The Shadow Lines* begins with a statement about a journey-one that Maydebi, the narrator's great-aunt, her husband and her son Tridib, undertook in 1939 from India to England : a journey which will be undertaken again and again by other characters in the novel, too, both physically and in the imagination sometimes, from India to England. Tridib's father and brother Jatin are both diplomats, living abroad and only occasionally visiting Calcutta, while Tridib chooses to stay there in his ancestral home at Ballygunge Place with his aging grandmother. In Tha' mma' eyes, therefore, Tridib becomes "a loafer and a wastrel," although he may appear to be quintessential staid, middle-class Bengali looking after his grandmother and doing research for his Ph.D. in Archaeology. It is Tridib who, through his story telling gives the narrator "worlds to travel and ... eyes to see them with." This magic is, however, missing in Ila who has travelled all over the world and who can only remember the Ladies Room in the various airports of the world, "the only fixed points in the shifting landscapes of her childhood." To her the London Underground is merely a place for commuting. She is irritated by the narrator's fascination for the place because "she could not understand, for as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had moved in many places, she had never travelled at all."

In this novel the shaping force of memory is "enormously productive and enabling, but also traumatic and disabling; it liberates, and stunts, both the individual imagination and social possibilities; it confirms identities and enforces divides."[3] Memory is, above all, a restless, energetic, troubling power; the price, and the limitation, of freedom; the abettor, and the interrogator, of the form and existence of the modern nation-state.

The present novel does not narrate events sequentially, nor is the experience of its narrator hero limited to the events of his own life, for beneath the surface of everyday happenings he lives a 'truer' life in his memory and imagination mentioned. It should be mentioned here that the first of what is called the two end-points of the narrative takes place thirteen years before the hero's birth and the details of the second are communicated to him only years later by May Price. Tridib's girlfriend, who had actually witnessed that scene of 'terrifying violence' in a 'new' nation. But Tridib is the hero's mentor and guiding spirit, almost an alter ego, and not only is his boyhood filled with Tridib's London memories, but his own later visit to London is a reliving of the scenes and events of Tridib's experiences there. Thus the two instances of the destructive force of nationalism mark not the actual time span of the novel but its hero's growth from childhood to maturity.

Private and public narratives interpenetrate in the novel, history surging around ordinary also lives to determine their colour and shape and both are perceived through the image of reflection

in mirrors. The euphoria of nationalism that the Chinese War had generated in India in 1962 is seen as the mirror image of the exhilaration that the beginning of the Second World War had produced in England. Through a relayed recollection we know that it was the same in Germany 'though of course in a much more grotesque way. It was odd coming back here-like stepping through a looking glass'. Identical realities across territorial borders which were originally meant to mark out differences, or across communities that are imagined to be different, reiterate the theme of the novel as spelt out in its title.

The apparently simple narrative of *The Shadow Lines* is in fact "a complex jigsaw puzzle of varied time and place segments including some magic pieces that mirror others."[4] The last fragment in this puzzle does not fall into place until the end when Robi has unraveled the mystery of Tridib's death. His nightmarish tale concludes with a meditation on the illusory quest for freedom on which both state violence and terrorist activity are directed. As a civil servant he has to exhort his subordinates to kill "for our unity and freedom' and when on returning home he receives a note from the terrorists that he has to be killed for their freedom it is like reading my own speech transcribed on a mirror."[5]

On the other hand, Tridib makes the past come alive for the narrator as he teaches the boy "to use my imagination with precision". Everyone in the novel hovers over the shadow lines between imagination and reality; everyone has his or her own stories and memories that are partly based on imagination, partly on reality, and when they are retold, they are relived as well like Tha-'mma's stories of her childhood and youth in her ancestral home in Dhaka and Tridib's recounting of his visit as an eight-year-old to wartime London which tells the narrator "in instalments." When, therefore, Ila shouts at the narrator that she has chosen to live in London because she wants to be free of her past, of her people of the inhibitions they impose on her (like Robi objecting to her drinking binge in the nightclub of Calcutta's Grand Hotel and her subsequent desire to dance with a businessman), the narrator shouts back at her. "You can never be free of me .... If I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me, You cannot be free of me because I am within you."

Perhaps the character which most clearly illustrates this is the narrator's grandmother, The 'mma, who says that Ila's claim to be free outside India is false; freedom cannot be bought "for the price of an air ticket." Her memories of the Dhaka of her childhood are so sharp, vivid and concrete that the narrator can easily visualise it for himself, in another kind of imaginative reconstruction of reality. But she goes to Dhaka to bring back her Jethamoshai, Dhaka no longer seems the same Dhaka to her ("But where's Dhaka ?" she keeps asking when being driven through the city). It is only when she and Mayadebi see their old, crumbling house that reality overtakes memory and imagination. The old uncle's end is the end also for Tridib, who had accompanied the two old ladies to Dhaka. Both of them are killed by a frenzied communal mob.

Ghosh's experience as a social anthropologist shows his handling of the characters and the context in which they exist. He reveals a sense of history and a firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical material that underlies his narrative. It is his remarkable technique that brings alive to us the war-devastated London, communal strife in post-partition East Bengal and the riot-hit Calcutta and embodies a major critique of the multi-layered psychological make-up of the contemporary man that thrives on violence.

In *The Shadow Lines* one major source of difficulty is one's inevitable and irresistible, identification of the narrator as the authorial voice. The readers are strongly pressurized by the narrative tone and stance- at once judicious, reflective, intelligent and sensitive-to accept the narrator's account and his interpretation of men, women and events as the definitive versions of reality. This is a novel that comes to us entirely filtered through a singular consciousness-however resonant it may be of an entire civilizational ethos. There is no suggestion of irony, resistant points of view, or other checks to reach of this central vision. Sometimes Ghosh locates the narrator's and Tridib's attitudes and perceptions within childhood or adolescence. But he seems to also, precisely privilege his period as a more 'authentic' source of vision. This does not limit their validity.