



Colonialism and its Legacy: A study of *The shadow lines* by Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of colonialism and its legacy in *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh. He is one of the prominent voices of Indian Writing in English. He does not believe in National borders and geographical boundaries that divide and separate the countries and its people under the pretext of religion and community. The identity crisis of marginal groups, their exploitation and oppression, displacement, nostalgia and loss of language and culture are the predominant issues related to colonialism in *The Shadow Lines*. Colonialism led us to partition, terror, violence, fear, hatred, devastation and pathos. The colonial encounter has been a seminal event in the history of both the west and the non western world, shaping culture, literature, politics and history. The colonial ambivalence is comprised of materialism and spirituality that are otherwise considered as the economical and the cultural identity.

Keywords: colonialism (terror, havoc and pathos), post colonialism, multiculturalism

Introduction

We all know that India has been colonized for a long period by the Britishers. After a mass struggle India got freedom, colonizers went away but marks of woe and suffering of colonialism remained forever in the minds of the Indians. We got freedom on physical level but mentally we are still colonized by the western culture and traditions as we are following their ways of living because we feel that they are superior to us in so many ways. We forgot our own culture and became the victim of their ideology. They are still dominating the very minds of the Indians, though with the passage of time things have changed but still the impact and legacy of colonialism is walking with us like a shadow. The colonial ambivalence is comprised of materialism and spirituality that are otherwise considered as the economical and the cultural identity.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the foremost and prominent voices of Indian Writing in English, who discussed history of colonialism as well as its impact on the colonized country. His fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. He has used memories to construct the concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world, which is the dominant theme of *The Shadow Lines*, by interweaving memory, history and contemporary life.

The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh is undoubtedly a benchmark in Indian writing in English. Primarily the novel questions the efficiency of the borders. The families of Dutta Choudhry and Princes in London defy the borders between them. They have good relations despite the racial and cultural differences. They show us that humanity is same everywhere.

The Shadow Lines is a novel about colonialism, partition, violence, identity crisis, nationalism geographical borders etc.. There are so many things to discuss about but primarily my concern is to discuss colonialism and its impact and legacy in the novel. Colonialism is the policy of a polity seeking to extend or retain its authority over other

people or territories, generally with the aim of developing or exploiting them to the benefit of the colonizing country and of helping the colonies modernize in terms defined by the colonizers, especially in economics, religion and health. As I have mentioned earlier that India remained a colony of Britishers for a long time, they not only colonized the Indians geographically but rather they ruled over the psychology of the Indians. They came to India for trade with but with their wicked plans they became the masters of the Indians. They followed “divide and rule” policy, and made us their slave. They not only robbed our country’s treasures but also robbed our culture. India struggled for a long time to rid of the clutches of this monster named colonialism. History shows that so many protests took place; many freedom fighters lost their lives for the sake of Freedom. We all are aware of some famous names of freedom fighters like, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Chandrasekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh etc., who compelled the Britishers to leave our nation. Though they were forced to leave the country but their diplomatic strategies gave way to the Partition of Indian. They created rift in the minds of the people on the basis of their religion and communal issues. Finally the country was divided into two parts: India and Pakistan. After the partition we all witnessed violence, devastation, terror on large scale.

Before this major partition we had one more partition that took place in 1905. Lord Curzon, one of the viceroys of India, tried to split Bengal into two halves on the plea of better administration. He tried to take the advantage of religious gulf between two major communities. But his efforts ended in failure in 1911 when the Bengalis irrespective of their religions got together and a bloody revolt proved that Bengalis were more prone to nationalist sentiments than to religious passions. Though later Bengal was parted in 1947 and in 1971 it became the independent state of Bangladesh. The story of the novel revolves around this partition and its consequences. The undivided India had long been living in peace and harmony, though the people

followed different religions but they stayed in mutual cooperation. It was towards the beginning of the 20th century that the seeds of dissension were sown by some people in connivance with and on provocation of the ruling masters and the matters came to such a pass where the partition was the only choice. M.A.Jinna's obstinate stand for a different nation for the Muslim population was not only myopic but hazardous. Even after partition, the people lived peacefully except those who were led by the rumors of their brothers being attacked and killed in the other parts. The most to suffer were typical plodding countrymen who did not even know who M.A.Jinna or Jawahar Lal Nehru was or what was India being portioned for.

As I have mentioned earlier partition gave way to terror, havoc and pathos. It was responsible for hatred and anger; this hatred turned into violence and took the form of riots, riots led the people towards fear and devastation which finally ended with pathos and suffering of common man. This novel is the best example of such suffering. Here we find narrow nationalism or expatriation which is the outcome of such partitions. Due to partition the people were forced to leave their homes and lands. Same thing happened with Tha'mma and Maya Devi. They left their native place, Dhaka and moved to Calcutta. The very place of birth becomes alien to them. But Tha'mma's old uncle refused to move saying that:

“Once you start moving you never stop that is what I told my sons when they took the trains. I don't believe in India shindia. It is all very well. You are going away now but suppose when you get there, they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here and I will die here.”

For his safety he gives shelter to a Muslim rickshaw puller named Khalil and lives with his family. Tha'mma wants to bring him to India for his safety. In 1964, she decides to visit her birth place and bring him back. May Price Tridib and other family members also join her for her journey but it proved to be the worst decision of her life. In Dhaka, situation was not favorable and they met a drastic tragedy. When they were about to leave the place, they were attacked by riotous crowd. Tridib, Khalil and the old uncle were brutally killed by the mob, this tragic incident gave them a sudden blow; it was like a never healing wound for them. Amitav Ghosh clearly mentioned that usually people forget such riots and violence quite easily because they have other interesting things to talk about, but if we feel this pain we find it is eternal.

After discussing the impact of partition which was the very result of colonialism let us discuss the legacy of Colonialism. The legacy of colonialism can be clearly seen in Indian society as we are still following them in so many ways. Multiculturalism can be the best example to prove it. The time period, after the death of colonialism was the transitional period of cultures. After the dark clouds of colonialism, a bright rainbow of cultures comes up in the postcolonial sky. It is a multi-colour culture having the colour of both-the colonizer and the colonized.

Multiculturalism is the cultural diversity of communities and the policies that promote this diversity. “The legacy of postcolonial angst today appears to have settled into a potentially numbing acceptance of bi- or multi-cultural euphoria.”(Bose, Brinda, 15) Amitav Ghosh can be called a master writer of multiculturalism as almost all of his novels give a picture of mixed peoples, cultures and traditions.

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* opens up space for a multicultural world. The unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* comes in contact with different, often contradictory versions of cultural identity through the main characters in the novel-his grandmother, Tha'mma, his cousin, Ila and his uncles Tridib and Robi. Growing up in an upwardly mobile middle class professional family in Calcutta, the narrator acquires the sensibility of a metropolitan, bi-lingual, English speaking, postcolonial subject; his interaction with his cousin and uncles whose fathers are globe-trotting diplomats, and his own stint in London for research work makes his attitude and approach issues of nation and culture more cosmopolitan. One of the most powerful influences in his life as a child is his grandmother, a fiercely independent, staunch nationalist woman. Tha'mma is an embodiment of the cultural identity constructed by the dominant state ideology, which in turn is propped up by the accepted national historiography. Her austerity and rigid work ethic form an essential part of her idea of the modernity and progress of the country.

The Shadow Lines sets to uncover a plenty of culture or mingling of cultures. Here, we have Western attitude with Indian manners, Bengali culture in two forms- one takes place in Dhaka and another in Calcutta. The anglicized gaze of the educated Indians like Ila, Tridib and the narrator points to the fact that independent India is culturally colonized still. Postcolonial trend finds a clear expression in Tridib's and Ila's longing for the West. Even the young boys from Calcutta streets flock to Tridib to know more about the West. On one such occasion, he tells the boys at the street corner that he had been to London to meet his English relatives by marriage. As the boys were listening to him spellbound, the narrator shouts that Tridib was in Calcutta itself and that day he had met him the other day in his room. Similarly, Ila tells the narrator about her sexual exploitation in London to impress upon him that the West offers her a lot of freedom. Later she laughs and tells him that she is as chaste as any other Indian girl of her age. Now it is foolish on her part to copy the western manners and mannerisms and wear foreign dresses and dance to the sound of pop music, in the fond hope that it will guarantee her social recognition and acceptability in the English society. The colonized people try to associate with the erstwhile colonizer to boost their own ego and try to embrace their world, which seems to them not only glamorous but places them above the common natives. Basically, it is a desire to run away from a society, which is striving to define its own identity. The writer shows the futility of such efforts when Ila marries Nick Price, not for love for him but for the license it will give her to live in London. Ila is a perfect example of those colonized people who adopt the colonizer culture just to prove themselves

superior or better than their own countrymen. Ila, the daughter of Tridib's elder brother, travels all over the world with her diplomat globe-trotting parents and occasionally comes home to tell the wonderstruck boy the account of her peregrinations abroad. While the narrator's experience is travelling in the mind through imagination, Ila's experience of travelling is based on the actual travelling in person through reality. The narrator acknowledges that he has created his own secret map of the world. The narrator says that their memories form "a part of my secret map of the world, a map of which only I know the keys and co-ordinates, but which was not for that reason any more imaginary than the code of a safe banker." (196)

Ila follows the western culture blindly and regards Indian culture nothing but a bondage. Her wedding-lock with Nick is just to certify herself an English girl. Their union is stillborn, though she refuses to admit it even to herself. She neither belongs to India nor to London. She hangs between two identities. She can't accept India as her native place because she is an ultra-modern girl. She wants complete freedom in her life which is not possible in India. She thinks that India is comparatively inferior to other countries in the manner of culture and lifestyle. She is not ready to accept her own native land; moreover she is not accepted by her desired land.

The native's desire to own the colonizer's world is often accompanied by disowning the colonized world. To disown India, Ila shocks her people, particularly the grandmother by her western dresses and subsequently, she shocks Robi and the narrator by her uninhibited behavior in a hotel in Calcutta, where she wanted to dance with a stranger. Indian culture comes with flying colour through the idea of Robi who was not ready to allow Ila to behave in a Western manner:

"You shouldn't have done what you did. You ought to know that; girls don't behave like that here. (Ghosh, Amitav, 88) To answer Ila's Western arrogance, he reminds her that she stands in India where girls have certain boundaries which should not be crossed in anyway. You can do what you like in England, he said. But here there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture; that's how we live."(88)

In this one to one conversation between Robi and Ila, Ila represents the English culture. She behaves as an English girl who is not ready to act under the command of others. On Robi's restriction, she cries out:

"Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free."(88)

The narrator's visit to England shows that the two cultures cannot really meet. Probably multicultural and cross-border friendships are desirable, but we find that Ila's international contacts with the friends from her international school, particularly, with the adulterous Nick, cause humiliation and pain only. Similarly, Tridib's desire to love and marry May Price leads him to his untimely death. The fact is that the two cultures cannot meet, they remain apart. This post-colonial

desire to assess one's own culture by the standards of the Western culture is evident in the young narrator's effort to size himself up in relation to Nick Price in the 'mirror'.

The *Shadow Lines* shows two types of characters. One is that of higher social elites like Mayadebi and the Shaheb, and second is that of characters like Ila who still live in close contact with the West. They do not have roots in the home country and want to be a part of the colonizer's world. Such characters have no desire even to think of the colonized world, they are happy imitating the West. Ila's mother, for instance, sits like Queen Victoria. The grandmother, on the other hand shows the other side of post-colonial understanding. She is enlightened and self-sufficient and ardently proud of being an Indian. She wants India to forge her own identity. Though she admires the nationalism and patriotism of the English, she feels it is time for Indians to act and achieve their own identity and not waste time in copying the West.

As the only young Indian woman in the novel, Ila bears the burden of representing a post-colonial female perspective. Although she leads an independent life in London, out of reach of the conservative, restrictive, patriarchal society of Calcutta, and makes her own rules, she is inextricably trapped between the two cultures in rejecting one and being rejected by the other in turn. Her marriage to Nick Price, rather than finally incorporating her into the dominant Western culture, only serves to perpetuate her marginalization. When the narrator, commenting on Nick's sleeping with other women after his marriage to Ila, tells her that her sins have finally come home to roost, she replies,

"I never did any of those things: I'm about as chaste, in my own way, as any woman you'll even meet.".(190) Ila is the only cosmopolitan woman in the novel, and her cosmopolitanism is constructed as suspect because of its not being rooted in any one culture. Unlike the inherent Indianness of Robi, or the Englishness of Nick, both of them share Ila's globe-trotting background. Ila, then reveals herself as having shaped her values on the conservative Indian norm even though she outwardly struggled against them. She maintained her 'chastity' in spite of trying to be free of (the) "'bloody (Indian) culture'" and rebelling against the suppression of female sexuality by Indian hegemonic patriarchy. Ila gives in to pressure brought to bear upon her as an Indian woman in bearing the weight of sexual definition through the insistence on chastity, one that the narrator and Robi, who visit prostitutes in their college days, do not have to negotiate. The last time we see Ila in the novel, she too, like Tha'mma is screaming in a high pitched voice that everything is fine with her marriage and banging the phone down on the narrator.

Just as Ila is imprisoned rather than liberated by her attempt to inhabit two opposing cultures simultaneously, May is the victim of her unflinching humanitarianism in its confrontation with socio-political manifestation beyond her comprehension. Talking to the narrator about the events of the day Tridib was killed, May recounts how she jumped out of the safety of the car and into the midst of the mob in an attempt to save Jethamoshai and the Muslim rickshaw driver who had been looking after him for years. She recalls:

“Your grandmother screamed at me. She said I didn’t know what I was doing, and I’d get everyone killed. I didn’t listen: I was a heroine. I wasn’t going to listen to a stupid, cowardly old woman. But she knew what was going to happen. Everyone there did, except me.” (250)

Thus, In *The Shadow Lines* Amitav Ghosh gives an apt and realistic picture of combination of various cultures in India. The novel presents people’s love for several cultures at the same time. As Brinda Bose observes:“In Ghosh's fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by time and space - history and geography and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past. As the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* embarks upon a journey of discovery of roots and reasons, the more of the one he unearths "leaves him with less of the other.”(Bose, Brinda,19).

References

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