



International Research Journal of Humanities, Language and Literature

Volume 5, Issue 2, February 2018 Impact Factor 5.401

ISSN: (2394-1642)

© Associated Asia Research Foundation (AARF) Publication

Website-www.aarf.asia, Email : editor@aarf.asia , editoraarf@gmail.com

A Critical Study of Cross-Cultural Transactions in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Sayar Ahmad Mir, Research Scholar, Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad

Email: Sayarmir033@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to explore cross-cultural transactions in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. An exploration of cross-cultural connections is presented involving the narrator's family in Delhi and the Price family in London. Amitav Ghosh brings two families together and reconstructs both cultures by using Tridib's memories. It explores how media and technology have impacted the cultures and demonstrates the dynamics outside national borders. It also shows how certain lines divide people, and how they have been internalized into language that prevents people from thinking beyond borders.

Keywords: Cross-culture, Borders, Memory, Categorisation.

Amitav Ghosh, born in Calcutta in 1956, is one of the most widely known Indian authors who write in English today. He studied in Dehradun, New Delhi and Oxford. Before earning his doctorate at Oxford University, Ghosh wrote his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*. The novel earned him the Prix Medicis Etranger Award. His other novels include *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The*

Hungry Tide, The Imam and The Indian and *Sea of Poppies*. Ghosh is also the winner of the Pushcart Prize, a leading award and in 2007 he was awarded the Grinzane Cavour Prize in Turin, Italy.

Cross-culturalism is a useful rubric in literary and cultural studies. It helps writers to reach beyond the confines of the nation. With the advent of science and technology, the world has become trans-nationalized so cultures are affected by the ideas that navigate across borders. A new cultural phenomenon has emerged that extends beyond national borders. The notion of cross-cultural literature includes colonial and postcolonial literature, as such literature crosses borders. Cross-culturalism includes a substantial amount of travel literature. This approach provides a valuable way of analysing domains of knowledge that are dominated by one dominant culture. In *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form*, Peter Hitchcock contends that being beyond borders indicates dynamism across and beyond (21).

There has been a massive development concerning mass media and technology that has resulted in unparalleled interactions among cultures. The development in one part of the world has impacted the local level in other parts of the world. Such interactions have given birth to dual identities. It has influenced the lifestyle and way of thinking of the people. It has a deep influence on the lifestyle and thinking of the people at a mass level. Thus, literature is no longer considered within the limits of the nation but rather outside of it.

Amitav Ghosh positions an individual's life within the sweep of humanity's destiny. The fact that Ghosh moves freely between anthropology, science, history, culture and fiction points to the fact that traditional boundaries between these disciplines have been broken down. Through Ghosh's characters, which represent different cultural backgrounds, he attempts to blur the lines that separate us and unite the various locations outside of borders. In other words, it is what Stephen Clingman calls 'navigation' that 'links the two' and which is

not possible 'without boundary' (21). This novel exposes the lines that have been internalized in language and which prevent one from seeing beyond cultural, national, or geographical boundaries. Borders hinder the progress of society and limit the radius of vision within the four walls of its boundaries. Borders are constructed through various interactions and are temporary. Ghosh said:

What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness, their constructedness – the ways in which they are 'naturalized' by modern political mythmaking. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be 'given' or taken-for-granted (...). I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded. (qtd. in Roy 113)

Through *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh questions the veracity of colonialism and nationalism that categorise human beings into 'Us' and 'They'. Such ideologies create friction among the people and do not allow them to think outside borders. It is vividly delineated through Tridib, the protagonist, of *The Shadow Lines* that memory holds different lines, some hold us apart and some connect us across geographies. But the account of the protagonist does not correspond with the documented version of the history. It gives a new account of the events that unfold through Tridib's memories. "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" (Kaul 126).

The Shadow Lines is divided into two parts: Going Away and Coming Home. It details the life of Tridib who is raised in Calcutta, educated in New Delhi and finally moves to London. He is associated with two branches of families, The Datta Chaudhury's in India and the Prince family in London. The narrator praises Tridib for his narration of events and incidents. However, Thamma, his grandmother, thinks the other way round. She believes that

Tridib is destined to waste his life in self-indulgence. But unlike Thamma, the narrator loves to listen to Tridib. From the narrator's perspective, the version of Tridib differs from the collection of historical facts and figures.

The Shadow Lines explores the cross-cultural connections between the narrator's family, the Chaudhury family in Delhi, and the Price family in London. Amitav Ghosh places two cultures together, connects two families and records the minute details through Tridib's memory. Tridib narrates:

When I was about nine Tridib once stayed away from his haunts in Gole Park for so long that the regulars began to wonder what had happened to him. I was the only one who knew, because I had stopped by his house once (as I often did in those days) on my way to my maths tutor's house, in the afternoon. This was during the time he was telling me the story of his journey to England in instalments. (11)

Amitav Ghosh explores cross-culturalism through the lives of two families—one Bengali and one English. When Tridib was to go to London with his parents, the Price family had taken his father for an operation. They were close to Tridib's family despite having different cultural backgrounds. "There was a family called Price, who lived in West Hampstead, but they weren't relatives – they were very, very old friends of Tridib's family, because Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawsen, had lived in India when the British were here, and he and Tridib's grandfather, who was a very prominent man, a judge in the Calcutta High Court, had been friends" (14). It was Lionel Tresawsen's daughter who decided to help Tridib's family by sending a telegram. She was ready to extend her help, she says, "When she'd heard that Tridib's father was ill she had written to them and sent telegrams to say that they must stay with her in London, because she'd bought a big house, and she'd been wanting to take in lodgers anyway"(14). Through the memories of the characters, Ghosh tries to explore the events unfolding in the lives of the characters. These two families are connected by their

memories beyond borders. “*The Shadow Lines* takes us into the mnemonic fund of a young narrator who as a wide-eyed adolescent worshiped Tridib, an uncle who fed him on his memories of his one visit to London during the war, and his grandmother, who shared with him her nostalgic memories of East Bengal, where she was born and spent her childhood.” (Taneja 365).

It is the friendship of two families that connects them across borders. Ila who lives in London marries English Nick Price who is the son of the Price families’ patriarch. And Tridib also has a crush on May Price but they are separated when Tridib rescues her from a violent mob in Dhaka. Tridib gets killed in the Dhaka riots along with Jethamoshai. The narrator said:

I thought he’d stop to take me back to the car. But he ran on towards the rickshaw. The mob had surrounded the rickshaw. They had pulled the old man off it. I could hear him screaming. Tridib ran into the mob, and fell upon their backs. He was trying to push his way through to the old man, I think. Then the mob dragged him in. He vanished. I could only see their backs. It took less than a moment. Then the men began to scatter. I picked myself up and began to run towards them. The men had melted away, into the gullies. When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. (276)

The Shadow Lines is set against a violent background. But it treats the world as a global village where the incidents happening in the centre have an impact on the periphery. Geographic location can help an individual establish his identity. Despite their differences, the novel seeks to unite people across cultures and to connect them as human beings regardless of their origins. Rather, it is the protagonist Tridib who opens the door of a new world to the narrator that spans national boundaries. It is a world where there is no categorisation based on culture and geography. But at the same time, he “develops an

intricate methodology to establish narrative validity and reconstruct history, only to finally undermine the West's craving for validity, chronology, and order by taking recourse in a language that undermines the concept of chronology itself.” (Bagchi 196)

The novel shows the breaking of boundaries especially when the characters in the novel marry against their cultural backgrounds. Despite belonging to different cultures and nations, Indian Ila marries English Nick. The interaction between the two families also showcases how different cultures mingle and cross. Mrs. Price is very friendly with Mayadebi’s husband and calls him Sahib. Her children Price and Nick also develop close relationships with the children of Datta Choudhury’s family.

Amitav Ghosh exposes the colonial mindset as when Ila wants to dance with the stranger, Robi says to her, “You can do what you like in England...But here there are things you can’t do, that is our culture and that is how we live” (97). Ila replies to her that this is the reason that she wants to be free in England. In a way, Ila represents English culture as she crosses cultural boundaries by marrying Nick.

Through *The Shadow Line*, Amitav Ghosh seeks to make readers understand that how men are caught in the web of cultural, national, or geographical boundaries. People are divided into 'Us' and 'Them' by these boundaries. The novel offers a solution to the constructed boundaries of cultures or nations that can unite people who belong to different cultures. It describes the cross-cultural dealings of the narrator's family, the DuttaChaudhury of Bengal in Delhi, with the Price family in London. Ghosh places two cultures together, connects them and records the minute details through Tridib’s memory.

References

Bagchi, Nivedita. "The Process of Validation in Relation to Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1993, pp. 187–202.

Clingman, Stephen. *The Grammar of Identity Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. Penguin Books, 1988.

Hitchcock, P. *The Long Space. Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form*. Stanford University Press, 2010.

Kaul, Suvir. "Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in Amitav Ghosh's '*The Shadow Lines*.'" *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 16, no. 1/2, 1994, pp. 125–145.

Roy, Rituparna. *South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh*. Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

Taneja, G. R. *World Literature Today*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1991, pp. 365–365.