Conflict between tradition and modernity in Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow lines'

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Abstract:

The novel presents a variety of characters, each has his own journey. Since the novel puts forth the time of partition (Indo- Bangladesh) and time after it, characters can be seen with traits which are both traditional and modern. It is due to their upbringing and values that their mind has certain inclinations. Because of her traditional values Thamma shows repulsion towards Ila and Tridib. The later ones on the other hand has their own personal set of beliefs to live their lives. Such disparity in thoughts gives a hint of clashes between them in many parts of the novel. However, even the traditional characters carry a spirit of freedom and modernity within them. Also modern characters have an urge to cling to their roots too.

Keywords: Values, inclinations, set of beliefs, clashes, spirit of freedom.

Amitav Ghosh is a world renowned Indian author in whose writings we can see an amalgamation of cultures. Amitav Ghosh's novels brought a newness in novel writing which is unique to observe. In all his novels, a thorough research on the sociological and historical aspects can be observed. His characters has the brilliance of his research. Born in 1956 in Calcutta, he had his school education at the famous residential Doon School in Dehradun. Despite being belonging to the middle class , his experiences and influence set him apart from the typical middle class value system. His grandfather's Kolkata home was stuffed with books which groomed him as a thinker and writer.

He is a traveler which is also inflicted into his novels. He has explored Egypt, Myanmar and Cambodia and poured his experiences into his books. A winner of Sahitya Academy award for his novel The Shadow Lines. His early experiences in childhood that took him all over South East Asia were also responsible in giving him a broader perspective on issues than one fixed in New Delhi.His broad perspective as a writer also originated from his early childhood experiences which he gathered in South Asia. He remains stable in his narratives and graceful while criticizing various issues of the world and society.

His father, Lt- Col. Shailendra Chandra Ghosh was an avid story teller who introduced him to the stories of the exotic lands which further enhanced the horizon of his imagination. His literary creations are with his family and life experiences.. Ghosh is now distinguished professor of Comparative Literature at Queens College, City University of New York. Earlier he has taught anthropology and comparative literature in various universities in America.He lives in New York with his family.

Ghosh is a cosmopolitan writer. His way of writing is philosophical. He himself being an enthusiast traveller, the characters of his stories can be seen doing many journeys and travels. Ghosh's novels bravely deals with the themes of political struggle and communal violence. He also skillfully presents the epic themes of history, memory, travel, diasporas, pain of separation, love and loss. The experiences gathered while travelling across the borders are molded into words and presented as books. According to Ghosh, journeys enabled him in getting the complex issues of this life and world which he reflected in his novels. Cross cultural

perspectives of violence, poisonous political atmosphere, quest of the philosophical truth, plight of the migrants, rationalism, multiculturalism, identity crisis, freedom from boundaries, humanitarian attitude and scientific quest are at the core of his novels.

'The Circle of reason' was his first novel written in 1986.Further he wrote 'The Shadow Lines' (1988) for which he received Sahitya Academy award in 1989. His other notable works are 'In An Antique land'(1993), 'The Calcutta chromosome' (1996), 'The Glass Palace' (2000), 'The Hungary Tide' (2004). He also has been the winner of prestigious Prix Medicis Estrangere Award, Arthur C Clarke prize and the Padam Shri Award on 26 Jan.2007.

His writings are unique and contributed a lot to Indian writing in English.The Shadow Lines is one of such writings,a highly innovative novel. The novel, according to A. K. Ramanujan "weaves together personal lives and public events"(qtd.in Trivedi). This novel has various themes such as nationalism,freedom,violence,memoryand conflict between illusion and reality, conflict between tradition and reality.

Complex cultural overlapping has been presented by him as a theme as there is discussion of migrations, border crossings and inter-cultural flows in his novels. This mingling of cultures can be seen as given a new momentum and dimension in ghosh's novel, 'The Shadow Lines'.The issues of ethnicity, nationalism and communalism are well explored in the story. Material of the novel is extracted frm the partition memories of Ghosh's psyche. The painful breakage of friendly ties has been given an illustration which is tough to read and realize.His writing technique makes his literary stuff both interesting and hard to leave in between, which makes this novel highly recommended in the genre diaspora literature.

The novel opens up about the issues of the riots, non adjustment of cultures in new lands, migrating people, political changes, religiously backed clashes, identity crisis, separation and a lost sense of belongingness and many more. Historical events like the Swadeshi movement, Partition of India and Communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta all also play a significant role in the background of the story.Riots are shown as one of the most dehumanizing event in the novel as the central character of the story dies in the novel saving lives of the others.

In the novel 'The Shadow Lines' the story is narrated by an unnamed narrator.Tridib, narrator's uncle, is one of the central characters. The characters' life events and political developments of the time remain side by side in the story. Other than Tridib, Thamma who is narrator's grandmother, is also a central figure of the story. Narrator's childhood was highly influenced and to an extent regulated by Thamma and her viewpoints. However deep down in his heart narrator has a great fondling for Tridib. Various issues highlighted by the novel are showcased through the lives and life events of the characters. Bengal partition,pain of separation, loss of home, memories, communal harmony and nationalism are some of those issues.

The eight-year-old narrator in the beginning of the novel gives account of how his grandmother values time and how she hates time spoilers. Two families whose account has been given to the readers are of Thamma's family and her sister Mayadebi's family. Thamma who becomes a widow at a young age somehow takes care of her family.Mayadebi's husband is a high-ranking official in foreign services.The children of the family are Jatin, an economist with UN, Robi, a civil servant and Tridib, who is just doing some research and good for nothing according to Thamma . Tridib educates the narrator about the history and shares a closeness with him . Thamma dislikes the bonding of narrator with Tridib. Thamma does everything in her power to keep the two away from each other but it was hard for the narrator to resist the magnetism of Tridib.

Novel gives glimpses of the changes coming in the social behaviours and norms of the country. The cross-cultural relationship between Tridib and May Price, the narrator, Nick and Ila has been given ample space in the story. The narrator expresses his feelings for Ila but is rejected by her. Further, Nick and Ila marries in the novel. People with traditional mentality like

Thamma, are portrayed for whom it becomes difficult to cope up with the new way of living and new societal norms. The colonized people's mind is still colonized . The political change after independence was not easily digested by many communal groups of the country and these changes were opposed via communal riots and tensions. These riots have affected the lives of those who has nothing against communal harmony and who were miles away from such communal hatred.

Story of three generations has been presented in the novel. The characters of the novel oscillates between 'the need for independence', and 'the adjustment with colonial culture'. Traditional upbringing and thought process doesn't let them accept the modernity with openness and their personal urges do not let them settle with the traditional ways of living. But still characters are seen developing relationships with individuals of different nationalities and communities. Hence Amitav Ghosh successfully showcasing his central theme that borders are just shadow lines between individuals erected by selfish people for their petty benefits.

Ila, the niece of Tridib, who swings between the inclination towards the foreign culture and her roots which were Indian. She had to long for modernity as well as had to stick with traditions. Modernity was something which she could not completely absorb and traditionality was something which was not making her acceptable among her people as her relatives didn't approve of her and her ways. However, she is shown yearning for the approval of her identity by her family and relatives. She visits Calcutta in her holidays. Even her foreign friends were not accepting her as one of themselves. She was never made a part of pictures by her blonde friends. She was always out of those pictures where she used to go out with her friends."She herself was always unaccountably absent in the pictures" (Ghosh 25).

Most of the characters were used to such change or crisis of identity. Characters of the story are entrapped in this mental tug of war where they can't leave the traditionalism at one point and also couldn't embrace modernity. Tha'mma, who remains traditional in her views regarding nationalism, could not sync in with modern political machinery where patriotism is replaced by petty selfish benefits. She exclaims in wonder about the India-Bangladesh borders' normalcy- "What was it all for then- partition and all the killing and everything – if there is not something in between?"(151). She finds 'no trenches, no soldiers pointing guns at each other…' (TSL: 151). Such innocent belief in borders is reflective of her nation's definition as traditional. She has only known this traditional view of country love where you need to give life for your country. That's why modern political system thriving for selfish means in the name of nation love is beyond her understanding. Therefore, Tha'mma could never understand the things which were denied to her , "…the unity of nationhood and territory, … the self respect and national power… like all the modern middle classes the world over…"(TSL:78) Amitav Ghosh's novels present history blended with the imagination. The present novel is an example of that.

The unnamed narrator himself is captured in the web of cultural identity alongwith other characters of the novel. Growing up in a traditional family in Calcutta, the narrator possesses the acceptability of both traditions and a deep desire to experience the modernity. His interaction with his abroad based cousin and uncles, his London stay for research work made his attitude and approach towards 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 modern woman. Tha'mma was revolutionary as compared to the women of her age but she carries all the traditional notions of life style too.

The Shadow Lines unleashes us to the amalgamation of various cultures. It is a novel where both west and east meet. Here, we have ultra modern attitude with Indian manners, Bengali culture in three forms - one takes place in Dhaka, another in Calcutta and abroad. Ketaki Datta states that "Amitav Ghosh makes the East and the West meet on a pedestal of friendship especially through the characters like Tridib, May, the writer himself, Ila Datta-Chaudhuri, Nick Price and Mrs. Price."

Women in Amitav Ghosh's novels neither fight against men nor live as dominated in the male ruled society. But they do speak for their rights as human beings in the society with the help of education, employment and their rebellious attitude towards life. His women characters are special as they do not fall under the category of 'stereotypes'. Their struggle for various causes has turned them into revolutionaries.They are the flag bearers of a cultural construction.

Tha'mma is the protagonist in Amitav Ghosh's novel The Shadow Lines. She was narrator's grandma. Born in a joint family in Jindabahar in Dhaka, she grew up under the shade of the Indian National Movement.At that time, fight against the British was being led by Mahatma Gandhi in a peaceful way and the militant nationalists were also trying to play their part in their own way. Tha'mma was quick tempered with a deep sense of freedom. She is proud, stubborn and strong-willed. Her ways of carrying oneself and her modesty had traditional beliefs."In her fierce moral standards, Spartan outlook of life, intolerance of any nonsense real and imagined, she is as real as any patriarch or matriarch worth the name" (Dewani 15).

As a college student, Tha'mma wanted to work for the terrorists – to run errands for them, to cook their food, to wash their clothes and to provide them any kind of help.She further says that she would have warned the revolutionary student of her class about the raid of Britishers.When the astonished narrator asks her whether she would have killed the English magistrate, she replies, "Yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom. I would have done anything to be free" (SL 39). Though she does not become a revolutionary in the literary sense, she had a deep desire to help those who were fighting for India's Independence. Tha'mma acted as the guardian angel of her family. She was the motivating engine for her family. She takes up the teaching job in one of the local schools and continues to serve there for twenty-seven years and retires as a Principal in the year 1962. It was with this job that she brings her son up and takes pride in her refusal of help from anybody especially from her rich sister, Maya Devi.

She had certain set moral values for her family which was traditionally inbuilt in her. Compromises with self-respect was unacceptable for her. She is a conservative and reactionary person. Those are considered degraded according to her who doesn't follow old accepted principals of life. Her roots are irrigated by old customary beliefs. In this sense she is traditional. "Tha'mma's character is a tribute to so many unrecognized women in this country who are holding the world of their children and near and dear ones together by their toil and labour" (Tiwari, 34).

She gives importance to education in life and also wants to come out of the traditional role of women who stays within the four walls of house as she earns for her family and she wanted to be a revolutionary herself but still she is rooted with traditional values. She has the essential kindness of women in herself. Her modern thoughts has not made her hard core individualist who thinks about her and her happiness only. Being a mother and grandmother herself, she is ready to forgive one of her old acquaintance. When her relative shows her the post-card, she has received from Jethamoshai, her uncle, she becomes so emotional that tears starts rolling down her cheeks. As a traditional women she doesn't belief in forgetting the old ties in order to move on in life. Her modern views has certain limit which doesn't allow her to be selfish and little hearted. She comes to know from the card that Mrinmoyee, one of Jethamoshai's sons is living in Calcutta with his family. She decides to contact him, forgetting her differences with that family. Such spirit of letting go can mostly be shown by traditional people.

She loves Dhaka and cherishes memory of her paternal home all her life. When she goes to Dhaka to fetch her uncle Jethamoshai, she becomes excited to see her birth place."This couldn't be it, she cried. It can't be our Lane, for where's Kana babu's sweet shop? That shop over there is selling hammers and hardware: where's the sweet shop gone?" (SL 206) She still identifies herself with the country she belongs to. Tha'mma remains a fine revolutionary in the novel. She says "I would have done anything to be free" (SL 39). Though she is an old woman without strength, she fights for her country. Her blind love for her country makes her a revolutionary in the novel. "Tha'mma is another pillar of this novel …

Ghosh depicts all the peculiarities of a suffering, braving middle class Indian. For all her extremes, she is a real life heroine." (Tiwari33)

Tha'mma is a strict disciplinarian who was very peculiar about the right use of time and it invited her rage if anyone wasted it. This was one of the reason behind her disliking towards Tridib. Traditional people considered time as a valuable asset. It was believed time needs to be respected under all circumstances even at the cost of bodily discomforts, time should be saved. While modern characters like Tridib, Ila put their individual status before any traditional beliefs and wanted to live their life to fullest. Hence, it was a clash among their personalities which were supported by traditional and modern beliefs.

The second person who was disliked by Tha'mma was Ila, the daughter of her sister Maya Devi. For her, Ila could not be included in the definitions of modesty. As per Bengali middle class standards, her way of living and her clothes were inappropriate. 'Her hair cut short like a bristle on the tooth brush, wearing tight trousers like a Free School Street whore', she comments for Ila. Her concept of freedom is quite different from that of Ila.This variation in the concept of freedom, again presents a clash between traditionality and modernity in the novel.

Ila, as a woman of modern civilization, she wants to be free of commitments, of relationships, of duties and of everything. 'My life, My rules' should be the best explanation of how she sees her life. She is stubborn and lives on her terms. Little she cares for what people think, as making herself happy is her topmost priority. Ila is an idol of a modern, beautiful, attractive girl. She wears the western dresses and resembles a foreigner in her looks. She gives least or no importance to the Indian traditions. This thinking of her makes her disassociated from her people both in thought and culture.

Ila's upbringing and education in England has a major role in distancing her from her roots. Her father was with a University in the Northern England. Her mother was called Queen Victoria, who loved to dominate over household servants just like white memsahibs. She was "The daughter of a man who had left his village in Barisal in rags and gone on to earn a Knighthood in the old Indian civil service" (TSL 25). The white memsahibs of the colonial India were well known for their life of idleness, dislike, their insensitivity and their rudeness towards Indians. All these stuff have moulded Ila's mentality and made her dislike traditional views.

Life in Calcutta could not develop any interest for Ila. She visits a night club with Robi and the narrator just to lift her mood and feel better. Opposite to the traditional beliefs of how a woman should behave in public, Ila shows her consent of dancing even with a stranger. She puts herself and her desires before any tradition or culture. She takes pride in being modern like this. She is totally indifferent towards the judgement of Robi regarding this. When her uncle does not allows her to dance with a stranger, she cries out, "Do you see why I have chosen to live in London? … it's only because I want to be free … free of your bloody culture" (SL 88). Traditional value system is just like shackles for her where she wants to break them and be free.

Ila works in an organization called Save the Children Fund and is fighting for Indian Immigrants in London.Her way of showing kindness is different from the traditional ones. In London, her life style is prudent where she shares a tiny home with five other students. Despite having servants at her own home she cooks and cleans.

May is another revolutionary character in the novel. She has her own ideas of freedom and modernity. She is bold and practical in her statements. She is aware of her duties as well as her faults. She is straight forward in expressing her emotions. As a British woman, all her definitions of carrying herself are different from the traditional characters of the novel. Her way of showing kindness is a bit different from the traditional way of showing kindness. She cannot see anybody writhing in pain. For example, while going on a drive with Tridib, she sees that a dog is writhing in pain. She asks Tridib to stop the car and asks him to relieve the dog of its pain. When Tridib says that they will not be able to do anything, she scolds him. "Can't you help a bit? She said. All you're good for is words. Can't you ever do anything?" (SL

173) She takes out her pen-knife and stabbed the dog. So the dog gets free from its pain. Although this is also a fact about May that she actively remains engaged in relief works. Her concepts of helping others is different from that of traditional ways of helping people.

May is highly disturbed after Tridib's death. She believes that she is responsible for the death of Tridib. She asks the narrator, "Do you think I killed him?" (SL 251).She does all kind self torturing things like sleeping on floor and fasting to have some relief from her guilt, She drowns herself in relief works, raises fund and contributes in social welfare. Just like any traditional person who is conscience driven, she suffers the blame of Tridib's death on her life. If she were modern this incident would not have affected her in this way. Her sensitivity was not overtaken by her individualism inspired by modernity.After, all these self purifying activites she could make peace with the fact that Tridib sacrificed his life and it was his own decision as she says, "He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery" (SL 251-252).

"May embodies the qualities of a savior, nurturer and a protector – she is politically active in a positive way… one of the few characters who takes responsibility for her action" (Multani 165).

Tridib was a popular guy in the locality of narrator , so it was not like Tridib was imposing his influence on the narrator. It was natural effect ofTridib's personality's magnetism which was hard to ignore. Areas of Gariahat and Gole Park in Calcutta used to remain under the influence of Tridib may it be pan shop owners, sweet shop owners, or random boys on the street. The place was like favourite hangout zone or we may call it 'adda' in Hindi. The narrator used to enjoy the protective shield of Tridib. He used to remain elated in the fact that Tridib would treat him as equal and would also share secrets with him. The narrator has a pure child-like love for Tridib. As a child he was proud of the immense knowledge of Tridib at almost every topic. The narrator being nourished under the traditional guidance of his grandmother always keeps this desire of be like Tridib. This gives an innocent account of a clash of traditionality with modernity.

The expanse of Tridib's character is such that it is difficult to limit him in any definition or explanation. He is sincere and capricious both at the same time. He has a great influence on the narrator and Thamma knows this. She always tries to keep the narrator away from him as he does not fit into her definition of sincerity and how a person should be in society. Tridib was an archeologist and had a scientific temperament.He does not believe in fairy tales. His life was not governed by old traditional ways of living which was one of the reason behind Thamma disliking him. He also falls in love with May, who is practical minded person. He believes in her judgements. He sees her decision of giving relief to a suffering dog by stabbing it as a practical one. He never lived his life as per rules of the society. He did whatever was dear to him, that's why he was not liked by the traditional old people like Thamma in the novel.He dies in the end in riots in order to save Jethomosai, which shows his traditional belief of sacrifice and regarding other's life before his own. Thus, it can be stated that Tridib had traditional beliefs too which weighed heavy as compared to the concept of individualism and putting oneself first, which are a byproduct of modernity.

In this way novel presents a range of characters, some of them had a traditional bent of mind while others had a modern perspective of looking at the things. But actually they had a blend of both the qualities. Thamma being a conventional lady had modern views regarding education and women's role in nation building. Other characters like Ila, May, Tridib and the narrator carries traditional human values with them in their course of life. However, the way they represent their values is non-traditional and it also affects their relationship with the other characters. The dislike received by Tridib and Ila by Thamma is such an example. In the novel, at some places there is a clash between traditionalism and modernity while in others places there is a balanced togetherness of both the concepts.

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