

PUBLIC HISTORY VERSUS PERSONAL HISTORY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's novels are characterized by a fusion of history and imagination. Each of his novels presents intermingling of fictional lives with grand historical events. The objective behind putting the fictional alongside the real is to offer a view of the past from the perspective of ordinary individuals. The monologic narration of history is replaced with a narrative that projects multiple readings and interpretations of the past. The main narrative in his novels links multiple narratives which are, often, directly reported by individual characters. A plethora of stories recounted in mode of oral storytelling is a significant feature of Ghosh's narrative technique. Personal histories and perceptions are thus allowed to exist independently without attempting authorial intervention. Ghosh's writing constantly endeavours to explore personal histories of ordinary people that have been silenced or appropriated by grand narratives of history.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Fragmentary Memories, Personal Memories and Grand Narratives

Introduction:

Amitav Ghosh's novels excavate suppressed/silenced individual histories and amalgamate them with the grand narratives of history to give a round picture of human history. Ghosh takes recourse to narrative devices like personal/collective memories, oral storytelling and deconstructive strategies. The writers' mistrust for borders of every kind gets revealed in his novels that are characterized by crossing borders between different times and places, and also between different literary genres. An exploration of narrative strategies and style adopted by Ghosh for his novels reveals the writer's ability to communicate weighty issues and ideas through deceptively simple narrative structures.

A Case Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*:

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* employs a first person narrative frame work to present multiple stories.

The writer's departure from magic realist technique he had employed in his debut novel *The Circle of Reason*, and the skillful representation of a stark reality of the post-colonial Indian subcontinent through "tightly plotted structure and greater realization of individual characters" in this second novel signalled the arrival of Ghosh as an original voice in Indian English Fiction. The story of the novel unfolds through the unnamed narrator's consciousness wherein memories of past get artistically woven to project a personal history of his extended family that intersects with some major events of public history. The intermingling of private and public history, of fiction and reality through a collage of memories of different characters that get filtered through the narrator's act of remembrance makes the novel a complex work of art.

In his essay "The Ghost of Mrs. Gandhi" Ghosh has made it clear that *The Shadow Lines* is his creative response to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, and that the novel is "about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them." In the novel the unnamed narrator's memories are activated by the death of his dear uncle, Tridip in the 1964 Hindu-Muslim riots. The incident occupies a central place and the narrative hovers around the incident moving back and forth without disclosing the central event till the last part of the novel. Through fragmentary memories of the narrator, the novel first develops the major characters and, in the process, also unfolds the personal history of the narrator's family. The criss-crossing of the personal history with public events like the Second World War, the Partition, the Indo-China war, the communal riots of 1964 and the Bangladesh War of Independence enable the novel to document the impact of historical events on ordinary people.

Personal memory is the main narrative device employed by Ghosh in this novel. Commenting on the role of memory in the novel, Manjula Saxena rightly observes:

Just as the table is made of wood and nails and adhesives, similarly, Ghosh's novel is...made up of the narrator's memories relating to Tridip, his

relatives and acquaintances. There are memories of various characters, like the narrator's grandmother's, of Mayadebi's, the narrator's cousin Ila's and of May's – the acquaintance of both Tridip and the narrator, and so on.

The memories of different characters are framed within the memory of the narrator who recalls what he had heard, since childhood, about and from Tridip, Tha'mma, Ila, May and others. With the memory technique, the novel narrates episodes ranging from 1939 to early 1980s. The opening lines of the novel describe an incident that occurred much before the narrator's birth – "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridip" (SL, 3). The second section of the novel also opens with description of an event by mentioning the exact year of its occurrence— "In 1962, the year I turned ten, my grandmother retired, upon reaching the age of sixty" (SL, 127). By mentioning the exact years of the events in the opening lines of both the sections, Ghosh gives the novel a form of historical document. However, the novel forsakes the structure of traditional historiography as the personal history that it constructs is sourced by multiple individual memories which get loosely connected with one another taking the narrative backward and forward in time. The description of the eight year old Tridip's trip to London with his parents in 1939 gets cut off when the narrator's meditations on how Tridip looked then takes him to another memory related to Tridip's youthful days in 1950s. The story of the London trip is narrated much later and that too in fragments. Such looping, non-linear mode of narration is natural for a 'memory novel'. Incidents belonging to different times and places coalesce as the narrator's memory subsumes the memories of other characters and make them a part of his own consciousness. Ghosh has also used a memory-within-memory kind of framework which projects different memories fusing into each other to reveal a reality in its wholeness. For instance, the narrator remembers his visit to Elizabeth Price's house in late 1970's along with Ila. Both go into the underground cellar in the house and as the narrator sitting on a camp bed looks around the cellar, he is invaded by earlier memories:

Those empty corners filled up ...with the ghosts who had been handed down to me by time: the ghost of the nine-year- old Tridip, sitting on a camp bed, just as I was...the ghost of Snipe in that far corner...the ghost of eight-year-old Ila, sitting with me under that vast table in Raibajar. They were all around me...not ghosts at all: the

ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance—for that is all that a ghost is, a presence displayed in time. (SL, 200)

The scene fuses three memories: the young narrator and Ila sitting together in the cellar of Price's family house in London in the late 1970's; the child narrator and Ila playing houses in the underground room at Rajbar in early 1960's; and nine-year-old Tridip listening, in the London cellar, to the story of Tristan and his love for a woman across the seas which is narrated by Snipe in early 1940's. In the memory of 1960's Ila is crying after recounting to the child narrator an imaginary story about her doll, Magda's experience of racism in a London school. In the memory of late 1970's Ila is crying over the more real experience of the infidelity of her English husband. The memory of 1960's along with that of 1970's exposes Ila's inability to learn from her past experiences. The racism in the so called cosmopolitan city of London is also exposed. The memory about Tridip relating the story of Tristan which he had heard in 1940's and which he narrated to Ila and the narrator (who were only nine year old then) reveals a western world devoid of national or cultural boundaries. The fusion of three memories provides deep insights on the nature of inter-cultural relationships in the old and the modern world.

The first person narrative in the novel is used from a dual viewpoint - that of the child and the adult narrator. The dual narrative voice - now that of the child narrator, now that of the adult narrator - criss-crosses in the novel. One of the best illustrations of this is the narrator's remembrance of the incident when his grandmother was about to visit Dhaka to meet her old uncle. Tha'mma looked very nervous when the narrator's father talked about her scheduled air journey, the forms she would have to fill in at the airport. At that time the child narrator felt that Tha'mma's nervousness sprung from the fear of air journey she was undertaking for the first time. Remembering the incident in adulthood the narrator comments:

It was not till many years later that I realized it had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form...and at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. (SL, 168)

Thus, the adult narrator explores his childhood experiences from newer perspectives to reach at a mature understanding of the complexity of life in the post-independent India. Throughout the novel

we get to see the growth of narrator not only in terms of age but also maturity, and that establishes the novel as a Bindungsroman.

The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* moves through multitude stories and narrators. The autonomy of the multiple narrators and their narrations is maintained despite the use of first person narrative. In John Mee's words:

The political space of Ghosh's novel is one where different stories fight to make themselves heard.... In these and other respects *The Shadow Lines* is very much a dialogic novel. The narrator's voice is always being usurped by others who act as the narrators within the different time frames and his own point of view is constantly being interrogate (even by himself)

The central incident of Tridip's death is unfolded through four accounts narrated by different narrators. The first narrative account is the true report of the newspapers and official histories that narrate the circumstances of the riots but remain silent about the details of ordinary people like Tridip who lost their lives in that incident and the impact it had on the acquaintances of the dead people. The narrator has to rely on the accounts of people who were witness to that incident. First, it is narrator's father who immediately after few days of the incident informs the child narrator that Tridip was killed in an accident. The fact of Tridip's death attains a mysterious note when the narrator's mother while talking about Tha'mma's odd behavior during India's participation in Bangladesh war of Independence comments:

"She's never been the same you know, since they killed Tridip over there." (SL, 262) However, it is not till the narrator grows up that he gets to know more about Tridip's death first from Robi and then from May. Robi's story comes in a form of nightmare that regularly troubles him which he narrates to Ila and the narrator in London. For Robi the incident is a reminder of the tragedy of Indian freedom that has not created not a whole but a fragmented national self. May's version is more personal as she tries to come to terms with her personal loss as well as her sense of guilt. Thus, in constructing a personal history which also reflects the tragedy of modern Indian nation, the novel seeks the aid of memories, orally translated stories and journalistic reports.

Reference:

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