

East West Encounter in *Shadow Lines* of Amitav Ghosh¹Dr. R. BakyarajAssociate Professor, Dept. of English,
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Abstract:

The novel is no more the work of imagination but it is a reflection of reality as well: its essence its necessary quality, lies in the expression of the connection between the real and the imagination. Amitav Ghosh shadow lines resist classification. It is basically a memory novel that weaves together past and present, childhood and adulthood. India and Bangladesh and Britain, Hindu and Muslim story happening, through the coil within the 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 buildings roman, tracing 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 significance landmark was Salman Rushdie's midnight 's children: it is as postmodernist a work of fiction as Farrukh Dhondy's Bombay Duck.

Key words: Imagination, Coil of memories, Unfurl, Maturity, Establish, fiction

Narration: Several more labels can be affixed to the shadow lines, each as valid as the others, after all as Henry James noted in the Art of the novel, the novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary form. But one of the most rewarding ways of reading the novel is, I believe to see it as belonging to that long tradition of fiction that includes Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy on the one hand and travels with my aunt and harown and the sea of stories on the other. Fiction, that is, that examines its symbiotic relationship with fact and explores the role of the imagination in creating and evoking reality, which, "in the artist's sense .

This theme is established in the shadow lines through the use of the geographical metaphor and the journey motif implicit in its 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. This is of course a traditional method for the novel that sets out to discover the relationship between imagination and reality; indeed, even Edwar said wises it when he observes of the novel, stories are at the heart of what explores and novelists say about strange regions of the world'. It is through its imagination, perception and rendering of human experience in everyday life, through what Proust calls the 'gross dimensions of social phenomena, that the novel is able to 'evoke the essentially non-finite quality of existence' . Ghosh's approach has fact a clots affinity with Graham Greenes in Travels with my

Aunt and The captain and the Enemy, which are likewise concerned with this relationship and which are similarly based on the metaphor of the journey.

Appropriately, The Shadow lines begins with a statement about a journey, one that Mayadebi , the narrator's great-aunt , her husband and Tridib, her son, undertook in 1939, from India to England : a journey which will be undertaken again and again, and by other characters in the novel, too, both physically and in the imagination, sometimes , however from England to India as well. Tribid's father is a diplomat, living abroad or in Delhi and only occasionally visiting Calcutta: but Tridib himself prefers to stay on in their family house in upper middle class neighbor hood of Calcutta with his elderly grandmother. When he has rejected his parents peripatetic life style is not known, but the narrator's grandmother puts it down to incompatibility with his father. The fiercely bourgeois old lady disapproves not of her nephew's estrangement from his father but of what she considers his flippancy in letting so trivial a matter stand in the way of his material prospects. In her eyes Tridib is an untrustworthy and dangerous nonconformist, though outwardly he may seem the quintessential middle-class Bengali, living staidly in Calcutta and looking after his grand mother, and engaged in research for his doctoral degree. The apparently everyday quality of his life, paradoxically, only emphasizes in uniqueness, and he is a source of perennial fascination for the boy who as a young adult is the narrator of the story of the novel.

Tridib, too, is a story-teller, ' happiest in neutral, impersonal places coffee houses, bars street-corner addas the sort of places where people come, talk and go wasy without expecting to know each other any further; for it is detachment and objectivity that allow the imagination to soar. He spends much of his time in gossip with young ne'er-do-wells at street corners and tea-stalls, much to the distaste of the grandmother, who has Grand-grind-like belief about time: ' For her time was a like a tooth brush: it went mouldy if it was not ; and stank. Tridib, however never seemed to use his time, but his did not stink; For he is caught up with the non-essential, the non-material, the imaginary and the imaginative; the world of story, the world of the creative imagination. He himself, like his tales, constantly skirts the border between truth and falsehood, reality and the imagination, so that it difficult to say whether it is fact or fiction that prevails with him.

Sometimes his imagination creates a story that is truer than reality; once he speaks gravely of visiting his English relatives by marriage in London, describing them in graphic and truthful detail the only caveat being that they are not his relatives at all, nor he has been to London to meet them. The boy blurts out what he believes is the reality, and Tridib's exciting story falls apart, so that the truth of his account of the price family is dismissed: the irony being, of course, that they do literally become his relatives by marriage in course of time.

Tridib's niece Ila sometimes comes to Calcutta, and the boy tries to remind of her of their shared experiences of her uncle's stories. She is surprised by the vividness of his memories, for she cannot understand how, sitting in a little room in Calcutta, 'Tridib had give me worlds to travel

in and eyes to see them with; Ila has travelled all over the world with her parents, but too great and exposure to reality has erased the magic from her eyes, so that all those places on the map which are to him, ‘ a set of magical talisman’s are for here merely familiar, commonplace, dull, significant only by virtue of the position of the ladies toilets in the airport lounges which become for her the signs of stability, the only fixed points in the shifting lands capes of her childhood; ‘ She is therefore irritated by the narrator’s enthusiasm for the London underground; ‘ To her the underground was merely a means of shifting venue; and he comment: “ I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart. It was not her fault that she could not understand, for as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all”.

Ila believes that her emphasis on reality has had a salutary effect on the narrator; ‘ at least you learnt that those cities you saw on maps were real places, not like rgiaaw fairylands Tridib made up for you; But Tridib, the archaeologist who makes the past come alive for the present, has never believed in fairytales: what he had taught the boy was ‘ to use my imagination with precision’. For instance, when Ila’s mother described an encounter with a snake in Colombo, the boy tries to earn his mentor’s approval by asking what kind of snake it was. Tridib, however, is disappointed. The snake has little to do with real life, and what kind it is merely factual information: what is interesting rather, is to imagine life under a sloping roof, so unlike the flat ones of Calcutta. This is what reality is , something that must be seen and known through the imagination, which works out of “ real desire”, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried on beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other place where there was no border between oneself and one’s in the mirror! The mirror image repeated later in the novel too, is especially significant for it is the traditional symbol of art. Art is expected to represent or reflect reality and the novel is a mirror walking along a highway, in Stendhal’s picturesque phrase; but how far a mirror-image is “real” and how far a distortion of “reality” is to be questioned.

Indeed, even the apparently unimaginative Ila cannot do without imagination. As a child her only souvenirs of the far way the places she has lived in are the yearbooks of her schools “the places themselves went past her in an illusory whirl of movement with photographs of her fellow-students about whom she weaves many stories”. So the most beautiful and talented among them are her special friends, and yet she herself is never photographed with them; and when she finds that her cousin has discovered a photograph of a boy she has claimed to be her boyfriend with his arms around other girls, while Ila herself stands a little apart from everybody else, the page with the incriminating photograph is torn from the book. The boy realizes then that the exotic and unapproachable Ila is like him after all, creating her own reality, her own space, out of her imagination.

Similarly when Ila teaches her cousin to play houses with her in the dark basement of the family house in the village, she talks about Nice price, with whom she has evidently play this game before and whom she describes as coming to her rescue when is attacked by a group of racist children in London. It is only later that the adult narrator learns what the reality was like: that Nick was ashamed of her and had certainly not gone to her aid at all. Ila is obviously in love with Nick and she inveigles him into marrying her, with her father's money as bait; but she soon discovers that Nick does not care for her and is openly unfaithful. The only way in which she can cope with the situation is by pretending to herself and to her cousin that the reality is actually imaginary and the imaginary world of well-being she creates is the reality.

Everyone in the novel, in fact, hovers of the shadow lines between imagination and reality; everyone has his or her stories and memories that are based partly on imagination, partly on reality, and when they are retold they are relived as well. They interlink and participate in each other, so that in the end the boundary between fact and fiction, imagination and reality, disappears and everything becomes part of imaginatively perceived experience of real life. The shadow lines between people and between countries they inhabit and call their own, too, merge and become one.

Imagination is not just a part of reality, it can and does create its own reality. Rumor can start a riot; so that the story of the loss of the prophet's hair in faraway Srinagar can kill Indian Hindus in Dhaka and make vast crowds of people believe that their water supply has been poisoned and break up a friendship in Calcutta. For it is imagination that links a people together, not the fact of geographical contiguity. The Bengali feels closer what is happening on the Indian sub continent than to events in Chiang Mai in Thailand or Chengdu in China, which are closer to Calcutta than Delhi or Srinagar; while places in Europe as far away from each other as Khulna and Srinagar in South Asia remain uninvolved with each other, for there is no imaginative connection between them. Indeed the physical fact of geographical boundaries between nations is of no real importance: the border drawn between the two Bengals has in fact pulled them even closer together, 'so close that I, in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free our looking-glass border'.

Facts can in fact distort reality much more than imagination can. Thus the intensely felt horrors and the betrayals of the riots in Bengal following the theft of the prophet's hair hardly find a mention in the newspapers outside Bengal, and when the narrator recalls the event his friends suggest that he might have imagined it all. He is naturally 'unnerved by the possibility that he had lived for all those years with a memory of an imagined event', until he remembers that the riot had coincided with a test match in Madras. Searching through the papers of that day he finally discovers a brief mention about them except that the report is about Khulna, not about Calcutta or Dhaka. The riots in these two cities of Bengal have 'dropped of silence; because neither the newspaper nor the reader was at the time or later imaginatively involved with what

had happened then. To bring the back to light now required the narrator to make the “strangest journey” of all: ‘ a voyage into a land outside space, an expense without distances; a land of looking-glass events’. This idea of reality is suited to a mass society whose eyes and ears are daily assailed with innumerable aspects of the world so that the imagination is clogged, instead of being inspired. The idea of society and social structures is beginning to disappear under an increasing flood of social facts, always being revised, which are represented as instances”. Reality is as subjective as the imagination; Facts are not, and so cannot be as true as imaginatively comprehend experience.

Conclusion: The grandmother is so angry about her grandson’s defense of Ila that she believes he shares the young woman’s view of freedom and that, accordingly, he must visit prostitutes in Delhi, where is studying; she even writes to the dean of his college complaining about his character and demanding his expulsion. The narrator easily denies the charges; but the fact remains that her imagination has not run too far away from reality. As she sinks into dementia following her imaginary world and rejects in the ‘ real’ one.

The grandmother’s memories of the Dhaka of her childhood are so sharp, vivid and concrete that her grandson can easily visualize it for himself, in another kind of imaginative reconstruction of reality. When she gets an opportunity to go there again as an old woman, she is at first a little reluctant, For reality often destroys memories and dreams. But she convinces herself that she has a mission ahead to rescue her old uncle living along in their old family house, although he and her father had long been estranged. She is full of excitement when her plans are finalized, but not because as she thinks, of the prospect of her first flight, but because, she hoped to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. She cannot believe that there are no lines or marks to separate the two countries; Obviously, then, partition has failed, if things are as they used to be before with no definite boundaries; it has merely made her, and thousands like her, aliens in their own home.

Dhaka itself no longer seems the same Dhaka, but it is only when she and Maya debi see their old house that reality overtakes memory and imagination. The house is changed beyond recognition, but the uncle has not: he clings to the only reality he knows, the old family feud, and refuses to go with them.

The old uncle’s end is the end also for Tridib, who had accompanied the two elderly ladies to their ancestral home to rescues their recalcitrant relative. On their way back, the riots break out and their car is attacked by a frenzied mob. They would have got away had it not been for may, the girl she is in love with, the kind considerate girl whose honesty is assailed so scornfully as barren by her brother Nick and who is distressed by what the Victoria memorial symbolizes, the harsh reality of power games. On the Indian streets she had once killed a dying dog, run over by Tridib’s car, with her pen knife; now in Dhaka she re-enacts what she had done with Tridib as her victim. For she sees coming behind them the old uncle in a rickshaw pulled by his trusted Khalil; and when ‘ the mob goes after them instead’, may jumps out of the car, against

everybody's advice, to help them, and Tridib runs after her to help her, as he had always done. She herself is untouched for she is 'an English memsahib', but the old man, the rickshaw puller and Tridib are slaughtered. May realizes now that her earlier kindness had been insensitive, and that it was because of her that Tridib died. Clearly, then, kindness is not enough if it is not accompanied by understanding which is the gift of imagination. For years May has blamed herself for his death. Ultimately, then, it is imagination which triumphs for it gives her and the narrator and the reader a 'glimpse' of 'a final redemptive mystery' that must remain distanced from reality.

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