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Migratory Modes in *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the use migratory modes in *The Shadow Lines*. Migration has been remained a greater force of living life from the time unknown. People migrate for the livelihood and its effects have been portrayed very effectively by Amitav Ghosh. He uses migration to highlight the sad plight of human beings. Now a days migration has taken different dimension. It takes place by choice or by force. Both these forms of migration find place in the novel. By using it as a major mode of narration, Amitav Ghosh amalgamates various themes in this novel.

Key Words: Migration, narration, memory, diaspora, identity

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*¹, recipient of Sahitya Akademy award, is narrated by a nameless protagonist. The narrative begins in 1939 with the outbreak of Second World War and ends after the riots in East Pakistan and the eruption of violence in India and Pakistan in 1964 when Tridib, the narrator's father's cousin, gets murdered by a mob in Khulna near his mother's family home in Dhaka.

The Shadow Lines does not follow a chronological narrative because the experiences narrated in the novel are not just limited to the narrator-hero. Hence the narrator has to recreate the past of his family by weaving memory with imagination. The focus of the narrative is a mystery of Tridib's death which the narrator pursues with a dogged sense of commitment. Later the details of Tridib's death are given to the narrator by Tridib's girl friend, May Price who had actually

witnessed the scene of terrifying violence in Dhaka.

Right from the beginning of the novel, the subjectivity of the narrator gets overlapped with the subjectivity of Tridib. This indicates an intersubjective migration and experiences of Tridib become the experiences of the narrator. Tridib is also the narrator's mentor and guiding spirit. At many points in the narrative the viewpoint of the narrator gets telescoped into that of Tridib. Thus, there is also a crossing of boundaries between the selves by mingling voices and viewpoints of the narrator and Tridib. The narrator internalizes the physical experience of Tridib of visiting London. He tries to relive them imaginatively. His boyhood is filled with the experiences and memories of Tridib and he starts looking at the world through the eyes of Tridib. Later when the narrator visits London, his experience is nothing

more than revision of the memories of Tridib. Thus, Amitav Ghosh smudges the boundaries between nations by erasing the boundaries between two individuals and by effecting a mode of migration through imagination and memories.

The Shadow Lines also cuts across the time barriers to indicate another kind of migration. It begins in the colonial times with the spotlight of two families – the Datta Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Price family of London. The relationship between these two families spans over three generations. However, this relationship traced in this novel is not in a proper sequence. It is recreated as pieces of experiences from different consciousness. In the process, the narrative moves like a memory web and transcends the conventional distinction between past and present. Along with the crossing over of the time line, the narrative crosses over geographical lines too. A study of the relationship between two families involves several passages between India and England. Towards the end of the novel, the narrative crosses the newly created frontier between India and East Pakistan. Further, the novel also takes the readers to other countries and continents as and when the characters move to these locations. Two of the Datta Chaudhuris get posted in other countries to the Indian Diplomatic Service and U.N. postings. Their experiences also influence the consciousness of the narrator and they indicate another form of border crossing.

The title of the novel itself indicates a form of crossing or erasing all kinds of

boundaries. It implies that there are no separate or cultural realities and that all demarcations are shadow lines, arbitrary and invented divisions

Amitav Ghosh's notion of migration as reflected in *The Shadow Lines* also has an ideological significance. The novel juxtaposes migration with the forces which divide people and land. By doing so, Ghosh indicates that divisions can lead to terrible consequences. Ghosh also seems to imply in the novel that crossing the lines of nations, cultures and religions can lead to better understanding between people.

The Shadow Lines also marks a movement across various disciplines. Under the basic structure of a novel, it moves into the realms of history, politics and culture. It tries to look into silences and gaps of history of partition. These gaps and silences are filled with personal memories and the novelist tries to generate a historiographic interest in the novel by placing documented history as against the history of personal memory.

Amitav Ghosh also interrogates the traditional concept of time and place in *The Shadow Lines*. Characters like Tridib and the narrator are capable of moving across space even without a physical displacement whereas someone like Ila experiences physical displacement without belonging to any place. The narrator observes his ability to migrate: "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with." (p.20) The narrator keeps on sketching an imaginative map of the world in his mind whereas Ila drifts around the world without perceiving the places. She,

writes the narrator, “Who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib’s room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta.” (p.20)

The Shadow Lines is deeply rooted in the dynamics of space and time as any migration narrative would be. John c. Hawley explains this significance effectively:

Ghosh is fascinated by the interaction of Space and Time, and his narrator is fascinated throughout the novel with the impact that a particular place – an alleyway, a darkened living room – can have on one particular individual, while others pass it by unscathed. Ila would appear to be in the latter category, whereas the narrator is very much susceptible to the connotations of place.²

This complex interaction of space and time in the mind of migratory subject is brought out effectively when the narrator visits later in London. For the narrator, scenes of London look unreal or as seen in a film. For him, the real place is only a concretization of the imaginary landscape which he had already perceived with the help of Tridib. He tries to convey this to Ila : “I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it had to be invented in one’s imagination ... So that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all.” (p.21). However this type of understanding of time and space is beyond the comprehension of Ila She possesses a poor sense of history. The

narrator says that for Ila, “the current was the real: it was as though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates.” (p.30) The narrator noticed how Ila has no connection with her past and hence he is unsure about where she is heading to. The narrator also remembers Tridib and his notion that one has to invent places constantly for oneself to have a sense of agency and identity. He recalls what Tridib had said in the context of Ila’s indifference to time and place:

Tridib ... had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly. And then, because she shrugged dismissively and said: why? Why should we try, why not just take the world as it is? I told her how he had said that we had to try because the alternative wasn’t blankness – it only meant that if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions. (p.31)

The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* is very much like his uncle – he is alive to the dynamics of space and time. He is also aware of his capability of creating places in his imagination. Further, he is also sensitive to the history of a place. The narrator also appreciates Tridib’s ability in imagining places in time and space. According to him, this imaginary trip to a place is often better than the flat reality of an actual journey. Grandmother also endorses to this argument. When she makes a visit back to

Dhaka, she refuses to believe that she is actually there.

Grandmother's memories and feelings resist the notion of borders. She fails to understand how boundaries can be created between people and places. She thinks that there would be geographical markers between two nations and when she cannot find them on her way to Dhaka. She asks:

how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then - partition and all the killing and everything - if there isn't something in between? (p.151)

Grandmother's innocent doubt is backed up with a strong feeling to go beyond the artificial boundaries. She uses emotions as a vehicle to migrate.

Tridib's brother Robi also expresses his sentiments against the forces that divide people and nation. In a fit of anger, he bursts out, "Why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage ; the whole thing is a mirage".(p.247)

The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* also gets engaged in the graphic representation of places. He draws a circle on a map with Khulna at its centre and Srinagar at its circumference. By doing so, once again he

realizes that boundaries between nations are futile. He notes :

. . . Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar, and yet did the people of Khulna care at all about the fate of the mosque in Vietnam and South China(a mere stone's throw away)? I doubted it : (p.232)

Amitav Ghosh also equates journey to an invention. At one point in the narrative Ila accuses the narrator of knowing nothing about England. Though he admits that she is correct, he adds, ironically, "I knew nothing at all about England except as an invention." (p.105)

Amitav Ghosh leads his readers to the awareness that in an underprivileged nation imagination becomes a replacement for journey and migration. Through the character of Tridib, the narrator implies that imagination and story-telling can have a same effect of physical movement. Ghosh writes:

Tridib laughs and shakes me by the neck and tells me . . . Everyone lives in a story, he says, my grandmother, my father, his father, Lenin, Einstein, and lots of other names I hadn't heard of; they all lived in stories, because stories are all there to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose. (p.182)

It is noticeable that Amitav Ghosh titles the parts of this novel as "Going Away" and "Coming Home." With these titles Ghosh implies that life is eternally spent in movement and crossing the borders. They

also indicate uncertainty of locations and boundaries.

Amitav Ghosh also uses migration to question conventional meaning of nationalism. He implies that nation's boundaries cannot be drawn with the help of race or religion. The narrator studies Ila and understands that she believes in her freedom in a nationless state. He also studies his grandmother who believes in a free nation.

Amitav Ghosh also uses migration as a technique to move into different cultural spaces. He makes his characters to move across cultural boundaries to show that cultural lines are porous. Robert Dixon observes how Ghosh's characters question the rigid notions of culture through their journey:

The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across borders – the 'shadow lines' drawn around modern nation states.³

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh indicates that cultural spaces, unlike geographical spaces, are vast and borderless with their own hybrid languages and practices that can move beyond national or religious boundaries.

Diasporic experience is a result of migration. *The Shadow Lines* captures effectively the experiences of the diaspora of East Pakistan. It also traces the diasporic experiences of English family. Robert Dixon explores the complex geographical and cultural crossings found in *The Shadow Lines*:

The narrator's family are Hindus who fled from their home in Dhaka to Calcutta after the formation of East Pakistan. There, during the Second World War, when Europe itself lies in ruins, they befriend an English family, the Prices, and the two families are woven together by a complex series of cultural crossings. Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawson, lived in India before Independence, and is a type of the travelling Englishman, having left his home in Cornwall to travel widely in the Empire: in Malaysia, Ceylon and finally Calcutta.⁴

Amitav Ghosh also questions the validity of the classical geographical distinctions. He also interrogates the binary opposition between Europe and the Orient by making his characters travel and migrate.

Amitav Ghosh also uses migratory sensibility to critique militant nationalism in *The Shadow Lines*. He indicates through the transnational experiences of Tridib and the narrator that it is to hold on to narrow sense of nationalism. Ghosh also indicates how nationalism based on religious differences can nourish hatred and violence. The narrator's grandmother, for instance, subscribes to the fundamental notion of nationalism. She thinks that it is necessary to fight for the freedom of a country. She praises the feeling of nationhood of the English as they have fought bravely and have given their blood to make their nation strong. However, the narrator doesn't seem to agree with this notion of political identity of a nation. He seems to condemn the use of violence in the name of political freedom.

He also understands that the sources of nationalism are often the sources of violence. This leads Amitav Ghosh to interrogate the very existence of nationalism.

The grandmother's uncle who lives in Dhaka refuses to move from his place. The grandmother tries to persuade the old man to move India. However, the old man refuses and argues that once a person starts moving then, one can never stop. He indicates his strong disbelief in the boundaries – political or geographical boundaries. He gains mobility, ironically, not by moving but by resisting to accept boundaries between places. He sums up his notion of borderless life, "I don't believe in this India – Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then?" (p. 215)

Amitav Ghosh refuses to acknowledge separate national and cultural identities in *The Shadow Lines*. He makes his characters move physically and imaginatively across cultural and national borders in this novel. A.N. Kaul explains the significance of all modes of migration in *The Shadow Lines* and their relation with man – made boundaries. Kaul explains Ghosh's attitude in clear terms:

For him all such demarcations are shadow lines, arbitrary and invented divisions. These can lead to terrible consequences (as in Dhaka in the last section of the novel) or, more frequently, to those many Indian-English, East-West conflicts and

dilemmas which bedevil life and especially interpersonal relations in the other novels mentioned above but which simply have no place in *The Shadow Lines*. In this novel there is no sense of negotiating – much less of having to cross – barriers: no 'bridge' parties because there is no gulf to bridge in the first place.⁵

The minor characters in *The Shadow Lines* undergo the experiences of migration. Ila's life itself is marked with multiple migrations. Nick Price who marries her, leaves his job in Kuwait. His case indicates another kind of migration. May Price, Tridib's beloved, has lived in India. The grandmother of the narrator is forced to leave her birthplace in Dhaka. Thus, the novel is marked with different patterns of migration. Some of these are forced migration while others are migration by choice.

The theme of migration imparts *The Shadow Lines* a look of travel writing. As in the case of conventional travel writing, the novel carries references to many places such as Calcutta, Colombo, Cairo and Madrid. The child narrator's imagination is captured by the names of these places. Finally when he takes up an actual journey, the childhood fancy is replaced with real adult experience. The traveler's perspective runs along the narrative also gives the novel the touch of travel writing. Initially this perspective is maintained by Tridib. Later the narrator's perspective takes over the same function.

Like in a travel record, Amitav Ghosh gives detailed account of places. The narrator gives abundant details about places.

Meenakshi Mukherjee describes the technique that the narrator uses in *The Shadow Lines* – the technique of creating blank space in the midst of geographical descriptions:

We know not only the names of places the narrator describes, but often their exact addresses also (the Prices lives in 44 Lymington Road in West Hampstead; the old house in Dhaka was 1/31 Jindabaha Lane) and the brand names of objects are meticulously mentioned (Rennie's digestive tablets, Lyon's assorted toffees; the watch is Omega, Cars are Studebakers, Mercedes or Citroens; Nick's shirt is from Turnbull and Asser, his jacket from Armani). But amidst this welter of minutiae there is one blank space deliberately left so.⁶

Theme of migration is closely linked with journey motif. *The Shadow Lines* is a peculiar novel in which characters are on the move, travelling from one place of the country to another or all over the world. These journeys give them experiences and they also bear tremendous significance of present realities. Indira Bhatt explains how journeys are effected in *The Shadow Lines* through movement and memory:

The journey motif is clearly established through the title of the two parts "Going Away" and "Coming Home". They allude to first moving outward and then returning to the interior understanding and knowledge of the living forces of life. The past and the present are intricately woven with memory linking the events – not

so much the exact happenings, as memory is bound to focus on certain aspects accurately and on certain in a blurred manner.⁷

Amitav Ghosh questions the fixity of geographical identity by deteriorating characters in *The Shadow Lines*. Characters are seen preparing for their journeys in this novel. These preparations create an ambience for 'going'. The novel also presents characters preparing for the arrival of their family members. In this sense the novel is also about 'coming' or immigration. Amitav Ghosh explores this complex web of "Going Away" and "Coming Home" through the point of view of narrator:

You see, in our family, we don't know whether we're coming or going – it's all my grandmother's fault. But of course, the fault wasn't hers at all: it lay in language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or going at all a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. (P.153)

Not only the characters keep going and coming back but also the narrative that goes into the past and comes back to create credibility in its voice. This migration of narrative across time and place is a technique by which Amitav Ghosh disturbs the centrality of temporal and spatial realities. Amitav Ghosh uses various modes

of migrations in *The Shadow Lines*. His characters move in and out of countries. His narrator moves between the past and present. Thus migration is both a physical journey across space and the narrative

movement across time in *The Shadow Lines*. Both these forms of migration enable the characters to debunk the rigid ideas of national boundaries, nationalism and cultural boundaries.

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