

Diasporic Interfaces in *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*

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The most recent Gyanpeeth awardee Amitav Ghosh is placed among the most eminent Indian English writers of undisputable repute and undeniable substantial content in their works. In his wide range of fictional and non-fictional works, Ghosh has dealt with themes of history, anthropology, family, nation, encounters between nature and man, climatic changes and challenges, and also postcolonial themes of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, identity and diaspora. This paper is oriented towards exploring and elaborating, discussing and developing diasporic interventions in the two great novels of Amitav Ghosh – *the Shadow Lines* and *the Hungry Tide*. The Sahitya Academy winner *the Shadow Lines* presents the two-directional diasporic flow – from and towards the third world. The narrative of the novel is woven around the events, stories and episodes that connect the two families – the Dutta-Chawdharies of Calcutta, India and the Prices in London. The unnamed narrator and his uncle Tridib bring before us the idea of a cosmopolitan world where all borders are nothing but only shadow lines - indistinct, inappropriate and unimportant. In the characters of Tha'mma and Ila, we face two different female viewpoints of diaspora and internationalism. On the other side, *the Hungry Tide* brings before us the machinery of neo-colonialism. This novel presents the experiments of colonial rule and capitalism conducted in a non-European location as European man's struggle for perfection. Woven across the tiny islands known as Sundarbans, in the Bay of Bengal, the novel is a story about refugees and settlers. We see humanism and environmentalism confronting each other.

Key Words: Diaspora, The Shadow Lines, The Hungry tide

Originally, the term 'diaspora' was used for the dispersal of the Jews from their homeland. "Now, it is being used in a more generalised sense to refer to the migration of a population or a section of it, along with their ways of life to the place of destination abroad" (Patil 66).

Widely read and threadbarely discussed novel *the Shadow Lines* proclaims its ideology in its very title. Ghosh through this novel puts before us that borders between nations, states, religions and cultures are arbitrary. They are sham and

unreal and exist only in the minds of people. Having no concrete identity, these gaps and borders disappear as shadow lines as soon as we try to map and investigate them. The novel provides ample scope and terrain for critics interested in postcolonial subjects of migration, diaspora and transnationalism. In his essay 'A Reading of *Shadow Lines*', Prof. A. N. Kaul observes, "Crossing of frontiers – especially those of nationality, culture and language – has increased the world over, including India. Of this

tendency, *the Shadow Lines* is an extreme example.” (02)

The novel portrays the experiences of two spatially far and culturally alien families and their diaspora – one Indian and other British. Mr. Leonel Tresawsen visits India and stays in Calcutta for his business expedition and expansion during the colonial period. He befriends here Justice Romesh Chandra Dutta- Chaudhary as they both share interest in spiritual discussions. They are the first generation diaspora in the novel. This legacy of friendliness and comfort with each other continues through coming generations of the two families in the novel. Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother is one major character in the novel. She was born in Dhaka, which was a part of India before independence and subsequent partition, spends some years of her married life in Burma as her husband is posted there and Indo-Pak partition forces her to migrate and settle in Calcutta after the death of her husband. She participated in the Indian freedom struggle when she was a university student and staunchly believes in nation and nationalistic feelings. As a strong, independent and self willed lady, she lives life on her terms and ideals and retires as a school principal in Calcutta. The memories of her childhood spent in her Dhaka home are very much alive in her and she fondly narrates them to the narrator. Her diaspora turns problematic when she presents contradictory views about memory and past. The narrator tells us that she dislikes nostalgia and preaches to him that nostalgia is a weakness and waste of time and that it is everyone's duty to forget the past and move ahead and work on building the future (SL 208). But it is she only who declares “The past is

what we talk about” (127). This self contradiction is the by-product of her diaspora and feeling of rootlessness. Her craving for home and self identity makes her overtly self conscious. She visits Dhaka once again to bring her uncle Jethamoshai back to India and it is more due to her longing for and attachment with her homeland Dhaka than to her love and concern for old uncle. How a remembered home is significant for diaspora? Femke Stock writes about it, “Memories of home are no factual reproductions of a fixed past. Rather they are fluid reconstructions set against the backdrop of the remembering subject's current positioning and conceptualizations of home” (Page 24). The diasporic relations with homeland are never simple. The complexity is hidden in the layeredness of ‘homing desire’ and they lived experience of a locality. The actual place of lived experience and a metaphorical place of personal attachment and identification are clearly distinct from each other. The complexity is further enhanced by differences of experiences between the first generation migrants whose diasporic experience is marked by nostalgia and longing and later generations for whom it is celebratory and redemptive and their memories of the homeland are more fragmented. Through the character of Tha'mma, Ghosh also voices his notions about nations and borders. He dictates that we live in a transnational world where borders are melting and theory of nation-states is losing its validity and charm. Tha'mma believes that nation is built by war and bloodshed, by the toils of our previous generations. While travelling by air from Calcutta, India to Dhaka, Bangladesh, she is horrified at finding no rigid lines to signal the partition and blurts out,

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? ... 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... (167).

And her son answers, "This is the modern world. The border isn't on the frontier"(167).

In Jethamoshai, the grandmother's elderly uncle, we get a picture of our older generation who is deeply rooted in home in culture. Even partition and communal hatred against him does not cause the old man to leave his ancestral house in Dhaka and move to India. Jethamoshai unconsciously reminds me of Ernest Hemmingway's old man at the bridge who is the last to leave his village San Carlos which is being air raided during the Spanish civil war. It is notable here that migration affects not only those who migrates but also those who stay and are rooted with homeland. The predicament of Indian parents is known to everyone now whose children have migrated to the first world resulting in the parents living off their old age alone and uncared.

Ila, narrator's cousin whom he also loves secretly presents another picture of Indian diaspora. Her father is the economist with the U.N. and she has travelled across the globe with her diplomat family. Her Western manners, exotic dresses, and English way of speaking add to her beauty and charm and the narrator is drawn towards her from a very early age. She is in reality an anglophile who respects and

imbibes Western culture on the cost of disowning her own. To the narrator and the world, she presents herself as being loved and revered by her schoolmates in London, having many boyfriends and enjoying her days in London but reality is somewhat different. She is scorned and bullied by her schoolmates. Nick Price whom she pretends to be her boyfriend to the narrator does not want to be seen with her by their schoolmates and takes a different route to home even when Ila and Nick are family friends and live in the same house in London. Ila presents before us the cruel picture of migration – the racism and discrimination against the migrants from the third world. While playing Houses with the narrator in their childhood, Ila makes stories, creates roles and urges the narrator to pretend. The Magda story is the sub-conscious reconstruction of her own experience of racial antagonism at London. Ila's diasporic identity is unreal and problematic for she is rooted nowhere. She is inextricably trapped between the two cultures in rejecting one and being rejected by the other in turn. She also presents that colonised psychology where the colonised disregards his own culture to be embraced into the coloniser's. In the pub, when being stopped by Robi from dancing with a stranger, Ila retorts that she wants to be free of Indian culture. She is fascinated by West and believes that West gives her unbounded freedom and joy. She marries Nick Price believing this but Nick's adulterous behaviour yields into an unhappy marriage making Ila's world only a sham.

Bhabha in his work *the Location of Culture* observes that colonialism engenders "the unhomeliness that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-

cultural initiation...” (940). This unhomeliness becomes a grim fact of Ila’s life as what she occupies in the end is ‘the neglected space’, both physically and symbolically. Ila somehow fits into Stuart Hall’s idea of cultural identity and representation. Even at her Stockholm apartment which she shares with four other people working with them for a social cause against Nazism, she is least valued. Ghosh notes that she is only a ‘deck’, a decoration for the others.

The narrator and his beloved uncle, Tridib presents before us a cosmopolitan vision, a world without borders, a global village where everyone is trying to reach towards another. Tridib possesses a distinct faculty of memory and precise imagination and the narrator also inherits these qualities from him and ably invents places and experiences for himself. Memory and imagination play a pivotal role in the novel and the narrative move up and down, far and near through the memory lane of the narrator. The narrator or the protagonist of the novel is unnamed, as if in line with its transcultural theme. It portrays the journey of the narrator for self discovery through indivisible and inseparable space and time and on the parallel also depicts the journey of nations seeking for identity. The diasporic experiences of three persons have a perennial effect on the narrator’s life and ideology – Tha’mma, Ila and Tridib. He intently listens to their stories and experience of other places – grandmother’s stories of Dhaka home, Ila’s travels worldwide and Tridib’s experiences in London. He does also recreate memories and experiences. Owing to this, when he actually visits London while doing research, it does not seem to be his first visit. He is enthralled by places,

and to Nick and Ila’s shock and amazement, leads them to Mrs. Price’s house, 44, Lymington road. For the narrator and Tridib, memory and imagination are ways to transcend borders and bringing the world into unison. Curiosity and wonder are the drives to recreate memories.

In *the Hungry Tide*, we get a peep into the pathetic conditions of displaced people with their unending struggle for home and their rights. The narrative is set in the Sundarbans, known as ‘bhatir desh’, the tide country where the tides reach more than two hundred miles inland, and everyday thousands of acres of mangrove forest disappear only to re-emerge hours later. For hundreds of years, its only the truly dispossessed and the hopeless dreamers of world who have braved the man-eaters and crocodiles who rule there. Not only this, the opportunist and self-centred policies of government make their life even more bitter and painful. In the novel, we see that the dichotomy between man and nature is reversed. Nature does not hold the position of ‘subaltern’; its humans who are underprivileged and inferior with the status of ‘other’. Ghosh tells us in the novel blending profusely history with his fictional characters that it was Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scotchman who bought ten thousand acres of the tide country from the British government during the colonial regime to found a new country based on the principles of equality welcoming everyone who wanted to settle there disregarding all sorts of differences of caste, creed and money. But the utopian project could never be completed.

Diaspora is rooted deep in the novel. The parents of Piya's father were Bengalis who had settled in Burma and they came to

India as refugees. Piya, who is of Indian descent, has settled in America but after Fokir's death she wants to settle in Lusibari. Daniel migrated from Scotland to establish a commune in Lusibari. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, Nirmal and Nilima had come to settle in the Sunderbans whereas Kusum had come from Bihar after her husband's death in an accident. People migrated to Lusibari mainly in four periods:

Some of its people were descended from the first settlers, who had arrived in the 1920s. Others had come in successive waves, some after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and some after the Bangladesh war of 1971. Many had come even more recently, when other nearby islands was forcibly depopulated in order to make room for wide life conservation projects. (HT 59)

This cross-culturality illustrates Bhabha's observation that all forms of cultures are continually in the process of hybridity" (Bhabha 211). Ghosh's diasporic consciousness moves between cultures and creates the concept of a third space due to his disenchantment with both globalism sans culture and nationalism showing cultural exchanges within a nation only. He tries to understand the past in the light of the present or vice versa: "In Ghosh's fiction the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by both time and space—history and geography—and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past" (B. Bose 19).

Amitav Ghosh portrays the sufferings of the displaced people during the 1950s, 60s,

and 70s. When the Bengali Hindus entered West Bengal with the hope of better life, the hope proved utopic as they were sent to various inhospitable and infertile areas outside West Bengal with the assurance that they would be relocated in West Bengal. The then Government of West Bengal was of the opinion that the displaced people who constitute one third of the population of the state were a burden so to be sent to neighbouring states. It was in this context that Dhakaranya, deep in the forest of Madhya Pradesh was conceived as a long lasting solution to the problem of rehabilitation of Bengali refugees. But here the poor migrants felt alienated as it was a semi-arid and rocky place, an area culturally, physically and emotionally removed from their known world. The main party of the opposition Communist Party of India (CPI) continually provided voice to these refugees from Bangladesh and promised to house them in West Bengal, suggesting that it might be in even the Sundarbans. In 1977, when they came to power in Calcutta, those displaced sold their belongings and land and decided to move back to West Bengal, but the Government forcibly sent them back. This massive inflow of refugees was met with severe and violent resistance at many places. Finally there were thirty thousands of refugees who slip through the police cordons and sailed to Morichjhapi, to the promised land in the Sundarbans and settled there. "The Government saw these people as squatters and land grabbers...and decided that: they would not be allowed to remain" (HT190). What's been said about the danger to the environment was just as sham, in order to evict these people who have nowhere to go. The government stopped the supply of

food to them, when they ran out of food. They started eating grass. A lot of people died due to hunger. Then the police destroyed their tube wells from where the displaced took water. They suffered with different kinds of diseases. At last, the Government sent cannons of police, in order to stop their connection with the outer world. Then finally the police burnt their huts and shot the people with rubber bullets, women were used and thrown into the sea. The sea claimed all of them but the official report said that only fifteen people died. Amitav Ghosh by the magic of his narration attracts the attention of his

readers. The character of Nirmal is portrayed in such a way that readers feel proud of him. The way in which he sacrifices his own life for the sake of the displaced is admirably told. Sukunta Das says thus, Normal's transformation is effected by his embracing the life of a fighter in the cause of the dispossessed, displaced. It is only through the eyes of the disadvantaged people- political, cultural, economic or linguistic or whatever- that the major characters undergo psychic transformation, resulting in realization of their selves. (111).

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