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## Subversion of History: An Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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### Abstract

The mythical form of history is of primary concern to Ghosh. He fictionalizes the real fact of history to make readers aware of the injustices done to human beings since times immemorial. He impressively knits the truth by creating captivating characters, beautiful settings and skilled plots.

Ghosh, through his writing awakens our conscience towards the injustices and violence done on human beings in the history, compelling us to question the reason behind these kinds of inhuman acts. He teaches us ethics and expects us to raise questions about history as well as on contemporary events instead of accepting whatever is laid before us. Our awakened conscience will lead us to take steps so as to *stop* further repetition of injustices done on human beings. The present paper studies the subversion of the history through the narrative of *The Shadow Line*.

Key words: history, subversion, fiction, injustice

History, like the drama and the novel, grew out of mythology, a primitive form of apprehension and expression in which- as in fairy tales listened to by children or in dreams dreamt by sophisticated adults- the line between fact and fiction is left undrawn. (Toynbee 44)

Historical fiction digs deep into the past making a story woven with fantasy and imagination. The novelist tries to create a real setting of past in which the fictional characters play their role as assigned to them. The use of history in literature is not a recent phenomenon; it dates back to 800 BC when Homer wrote *Illiad*, in which he gave an account of the Trojan War. The way of representing history differs with every writer and so does their purpose of using it in their fictional world. Amitav Ghosh, an eminent post-colonial write, explores the events and incidents of history in fiction in a significant manner so as to create awareness in people by awaking their conscience and inquiring history as well as truth.

Ghosh . . .recreates the past by creating subjective / individual history in his fiction. Post- colonial writers would say, fictionalizing of history is total subversion since as they contend, truth is not to be found in recorded statements but statements in the making, because anything which is codified becomes institutionalized. (Pandit 140)

Through his writing, Ghosh draws our attention towards the injustices done in history and the violence inflicted by the people and Government on human beings. Therefore, he compels us to question the reason behind these kinds of inhuman acts. He teaches us ethics and urges not to accept whatever is laid before us, but rather to raise questions about the history as well as on contemporary events.

Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (TSL), deals with one of the frequent themes of post-independence India, the theme of Partition. He dealt with the theme with a new perspective - how it still affects the older as well as the younger generation. Ghosh in his novel presents the parallel happenings in the history of the nation and the life of the individual. The novel explores the issues of belonging and displacement, of memories and reality, and of religion and nationality.

The novel *The Shadow Lines* is set in the Calcutta of 1960's and moves with a poise through Calcutta, Dhaka and London. The major characters that provide the basic frame work for the novel to move forward are the narrator; his mentor Tridib and the narrator's grandmother, Thamma. The novel's time period is from 1939 to 1979, in which 1964 is being depicted as a very important year for the characters. The past is remembered in the present through memory, and many of the characters live more in the past than in the present.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh merges the events recorded in history with the private lives of the individuals in such a way that they lose their importance as external and superior to the worldly happenings in their lives. National history in its records ignores the existence of individual pasts.

In the year 1964, the narrator while coming back from school witnessed the frenzied mob hitting stones, and was stunned by the violence and fear that engulfed the whole of Calcutta due to riots. The narrator who lived with the dreadful memory of incident even after seventeen years has passed, was shocked to acknowledge that his friends don't even know anything about the event, though they talk about the Pakistan War of 1965 and the China War of 1962. The narrator who has been the victim of riots was not able to convince his friends that the dreadful riots had happened. His friend's explanation is same as that of the historians, "All riots are terrible, Malik said. But it must have been a local thing. Terrible or not, it's hardly comparable to war." (TSL 221)

The irony is that the experiences felt by an individual of dreadful riots are not remembered or recorded in history books, though the riots provoke atrocities not less than war

There are no reliable estimates of how many people were killed in the riots of 1964. The number could stretch from several hundreds to several thousand, at any rate not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962. (TSL 229)

The fact that the past which the narrator has internalized within himself for years is without any historical importance but it unnerves the narrator. He utters, "I was determined now that I would not let my past vanish without trace; I was determined to persuade them of its importance." (TSL 221)

The narrator's friend argues that there might be some reference of the riots in books or something else and if there is no reference of the riots encountered by you then surely you might be imagining the thing by yourself. The narrator then searches immense volumes on national freedom movement, wars, political analysis etc, but nothing can be found about his distinctly remembered riots. He is unnerved and shocked by the possibility that he might be living under the memory of an imaginary event.

Though after a lot of searching the narrator finds the mention of riots in the newspapers in a very casual manner, whereas news related to cricket matches, or splits in political parties recur in regular basis appearing in sensational headlines. Soon after a week of the riots, they are simply referred to as stray incidents and disappear from newspapers declaring that normalcy was restored; and the incident forgotten forever. Ghosh highlights the riots within India that are foremost in forming the psyche of the subcontinent.

He attempts to reveal the manner in which these riots are quite deliberately wiped out of National memory, because they serve to undermine and disrupt the dominant historiography's neat narrative of battles with foreign enemies located outside national borders, and fought with the methodology and rationality of organized warfare. (Chandra 67)

Ghosh, in the novel refers to displacement of human beings, their psyche, as well as their identities in communal violence and riots. The narrator discovers that how ordinary human beings are killed or uprooted in the name of 'freedom' and 'progress', and reminiscences the death of his uncle Tridib in the riots.

History creates a reality which is different from the reality experienced by the individuals in their day to day lives. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh deals with the issue of freedom, where every individual aspires a different notion of it, which clashes with that of the other. All the forms of freedom are created by History – be it freedom from traditional norms and culture to which character Ila desires or national freedom to

which the narrator's grandmother aspires and considers to be the ultimate form of freedom,. Tha'mma, narrator's grandmother who is an embodiment of the national and cultural identity is obsessed with the idea of national freedom. She believed in the anti-imperialist movement and longed to participate actively in it. She recounts an experience to the narrator, "I would have killed him [English magistrate]. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free." (TSL 39)

Tha'mma's clear conviction about nationality, religion and belonging start getting disturbed when she returns to her birthplace in Dhaka (Bangladesh), after partition. Firmly ingrained with the idea of national freedom and boundaries, Thamma is shocked to know that she would not be able to see any dividing distinction between India and East Pakistan from the plane because in the modern world borders are crossed within airport when disembarkation forms are filled with information about nationality, date of birth, birth place etc. She asks in surprise:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, 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 will 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? (TSL 151)

Tha'mma is highly disappointed because the reality she witnesses, does not fit into the framework of history known to her. To her history has more truth than her own life experiences. Tha'mma finally loses her grasp on reality when Tridib is killed in post-colonial Dhaka by a violent Muslim mob resulting from riots of 1964 like any other Hindu-Muslim riots. Tha'mma lives in notions of nationality and freedom, which is ideological, constructs, created by the canonical and is politically motivated, thus submerging the individual perceptions of reality as less important or invalid.

Ila prefers to live her life in England as she aspires freedom from national and cultural bondage of India. The reality witnessed by Ila is altogether different from her concept of freedom from cultural bondage and is shaped by the history. Out of the reach of the conservative, restrictive, patriarchal society of Calcutta, she leads an independent life in London and makes her own rules; she is inextricably trapped between the two cultures in rejecting one and being rejected by the other in return, which only serve to perpetuate her marginalization:

Through the fantasies of being accepted and popular in the Western milieu that Ila constructs for the narrator as a child and an adult, the novel focuses on her anxieties about being rejected by the Western culture that strives to embrace while at the same time consciously repudiating her Indian background. (Chandra 75)

It is history of the nation which defines, creates and eliminates boundaries. Through the novel, Ghosh makes us aware of the fact that geographical boundaries at times lead to cultural differences which successively generate antagonism among people. It is evident in the novel that the loss of a saint's relic in Kashmir triggers off riots in East Pakistan which result in Tridib's death. If history is responsible for creating and naming nations, it has also conditioned them into viewing each other differently and with the feeling of animosity. Ghosh reveals the truth to us as history conditions people into believing only the reality of its own making. "Every form of reality which is personal and not a part of written History is written off as fictive and imaginative" (Pandit 136). Though an individual like the narrator is expected to believe that he is living in a 'free' country, among 'free' people, yet he is not able to free himself from the frightening memory of Tridib's death.

Ghosh in his writing blurs both 'history' and 'fiction' into a story (narrative) does not claim to present the truth. His intention is to recreate and redefine history, liberating it from the confines of institutionalized records.

The narrative of Ghosh is presented as a version of truth, because in the form of fiction is itself subversive in nature, since it gives a new vision to the existing past and historicizes it. (Pandit, 2001: 139)

Ghosh's novels invariably focus on the themes of history and their connections across geographical places: his imagination supported with archival research and narrative inventiveness that have been seldom explored before. His engagement with some of the serious issues involving ex-colonies in Asia and Africa is reflected in his novels. His novels are concerned with the impact of colonial encounters on political, social and cultural lives of the now independent countries like- India, Bangladesh, Burma and Egypt. In his writings he explores and

dissolves the boundaries of genres, destroying the existing divisions of discourse into anthropology, history, fiction and autobiography.

He is a writer of the shifting ongoing migrations and transnational culturalflows in different countries over different continents, a writer who questions the validities of boundaries and borders imposed by some powerful race/ countries/ or communities over others. (Gupta, 2002: 242)

After analysing Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, we can say that he fictionalizes the real fact of history to make us aware of the injustices done to human beings. The reader never gets tired of reading his book since he incorporates several devices. He shifts the main plot and sub plot before getting too tedious, telling several tales within a tale, giving such a beautiful and alluring description of geography, characters and situations that one may participate and get involved. Such is the greatness behind his art of storytelling that he writes not only for the purpose of entertainment but also to make us aware of the truth that lies beneath the apparent history.

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