



Search For Diasporic Identity In Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines

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Abstract

Diaspora refers to the displacement or scattering of people from their original geographical homeland or region to some other land or region. It is often used to describe communities or groups of people or individual who have been forced to leave their ancestral lands and relocate to other regions of the world. Diaspora refers to the sense of displacement, nostalgia and alienation. In postcolonial literature, the concept of diaspora plays a vital role in exploring the themes of identity, displacement, hybridity and cultural resilience. Postcolonial writers have drawn the issue of diaspora in their works as central theme to explore the impact of colonialism on individual, community and culture. Amitav Ghosh is one of the prominent postcolonial writers, who is captivated with diasporic issues such as displacement, alienation, exile, immigration. Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* is one such work which aims to depict the struggles of diasporic individuals and their battle to create and maintain a concrete identity. This research paper is an attempt to discuss identity crisis of diasporic characters and their search for identity in the novel *The Shadow lines*.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Displacement, Memory.

Introduction

The concept of identity in the diaspora literature has a plethora of cognitive provisions such as rootlessness, isolation, alienation, nostalgia, generational vacuum, and an identity voyage. The authors of diaspora aim to create a bond between motherland and immigrants by predicting the current cultural tensions among these regions. For the newly arrived refugees, the desire for the formation and establishment of a new identity is crucial to maintain the balance between the past and the present. According to the theory developed by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, nation could be deemed as a man-made and cultural establishment which is segregated into nations and divided by imaginary lines-

..it is an imagined political community... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. This makes it possible for emotional affinities to transcend some disruptive dissonances, thereby making space for a sense of nationness and nationalism. (6).

Objectives

- i) To study diaspora in postcolonial context.
- ii) To study search for diasporic identity in the select novel.

Methodology

The proposed research paper is undertaken with the help of analytical and interpretative methodology and from postcolonial approach with close reading of the select texts. To carry out this project help has been taken from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary source is the select text of the novelist and secondary sources involve essays, articles, books of critical interpretation related to the research and e-resources accessed through database such as JSTOR, shodhganga-inflibnet, research gate, academia.edu etc.

Analysis and Findings

The notion of 'Diaspora' emerged in 1990 and it is as old as postcolonial theory. Different ethnic groups in postcolonial literature have ethnic, cultural and historical specificities based on their respective original cultural heritage; thus, the condition of the dislocated and dispossessed is especially poignant and complicated they are unable to find a 'home; of their own. In postcolonial context, diaspora refers to the displacement of a community or individual from its original homeland as a result of historical processes such as colonization, enslavement, or economic migration. This concept encompasses the experiences of dispersion, cultural negotiation, and identity formation among individuals and communities residing outside their homeland. Postcolonial diaspora explores the themes of belonging, alienation and cultural hybridity, highlighting how people manage and find their identities in new and unfamiliar environments. It also reflects on the complexities of memory, nostalgia, and the preservation of cultural heritage amidst the pressure of assimilation and integration into host societies. Diaspora in postcolonial literature serves as a prism through which writers critique colonial legacies, examine power relation and advocates for social justice putting light on the enduring impacts of colonialism on global migration and cultural diversity.

The diasporic issues have drawn the recognition of post-colonial writers from the decolonized lands. Amitav Ghosh, also a prominent writer on that issue, is captivated with subjects like exile, immigration, cultural displacement etc. The novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) written by Amitav Ghosh is one such work which aims to depict the struggles of diasporic individuals and their battle to create and maintain a concrete identity. His novel is called a memory novel that presents certain images of significant historical events. The novel is based primarily on the premise of a postcolonial country like

India's 'quest for identity'. It also showcases the political consciousness possessed by Indian people who are trapped by the continuous divide of the nation and are also significantly affected by the same. The book is divided into two parts: "Going Away" and "Coming Home", but does not consist of chapters or sections. "Coming Home" starts as the protagonist tells the story of several members of his family and their arrival in the Calcutta region. In the novel *Tridib*, grandmother and narrator share an inbred "Indianness" or nationalism, regardless of their age gaps, theological differences or viewpoints and the distancing in their places that contribute to the traditional ancestral land being shared. This novel offers readers a picture of the disturbances in Calcutta at the time of the partition between India and Pakistan. The harsh political developments influenced *Tridib* and his friends tremendously, showing *Tridib* the true meaning of 'distance'. He discovers that distance does not simply mean the space between two or more entities, but it rather means the reciprocal conflict in that space regardless of how far apart it exists. It is noted that there was a mutual discord because of the interaction of people of separate faiths, including Hindu and Muslim religions. The dilemma of the separation of the self by group creativity has been noticed, "*Tridib* saw in his imagination ...a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror" (*The Shadow Lines* 29).

Ghosh reflects in the novel, the two major characters *Tha'mma* and *Ila* and exposed how these two are transformed and are being tormented by their diasporic condition. Homi Bhabha observes that colonialism endangers "the unhomeliness that is the condition of extra territorial and cross-cultural initiation..." (*Location of Culture* 940). This unhomeliness is the hurtful fact that worries both *Tha'mma* and *Ila*, since none of the two has actual home other than the constructed one for the former and the neglected one for the later.

Narrator's grandmother *Tha'mma* was born in Indian sub-continent *Dhaka* before partition and has lost her home while she, with her husband went to his working place *Myanmar*. She used to pass her childhood in a joint family where everyone lives and eats together. As *Jethamoshai* says, "Once you start moving you never stop." (*The Shadow Lines* 215), and it is seen happened to her. She rushed back to unpartitioned *Calcutta* after her husband died. But her sense of home becomes problematic once the partition of *India* takes place. Her birth place *Dhaka* now becomes a foreign land for her where she needs a passport to come. *Tridib's* comment on her at *Dhaka* airport is ground-breaking as he says "But you are a foreigner now, you are as foreign here as *May*, much more than *May*, for look at her, she does not even need a visa to come here." (*The Shadow Lines* 195). In the essay "Postcolonial Angst in *Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines*", *Shawkat Hussain* remarks, "perhaps the greatest irony of independence of *India* for characters like *Tha'mma* is that while it gave them freedom and a new nation-state, the Partition took away their 'homes' and the dialects that gave them their special identity." (127). Ghosh beautifully expresses the worries and anxiety of immigration suffered by others *Hindus* who left the *East Bengal* through the Character of *Tha'mma*. All they also left their dialect of *Dhaka* there as they moved to *Calcutta*. When *Tha'mma's* younger sister *Maya* visit her at *Calcutta*, she rushed to embrace *Maya*, "laughing, talking quickly in that language that none of us could understand properly, their old *Dhaka* dialect" (*The Shadow Lines* 40).

The diasporic displacement and dislocation frees Ila from any essential idea of home. The comment made by Bill Ashcroft et al in *The Empire Writes Back* is note worthy here-“Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces.” (217-218). Ila never regrets the absence of the idea of home, nor cares to find any alternative in her life. When playing with the narrator she says, “we can choose to build a house wherever we like.” (*The Shadow Lines* 70). Both Tha'mma and Ila are obsessed with the idea of freedom. But, for, Tha'mma, freedom means liberation of her nation from the British colonizer and as a result of which, a secret terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantor were formed to assassinate British officials and policemen. Frantz Fanon, who wants to prove in his *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonized people are doomed to be mere reflection and manifestation of his master, or he must fight against his master through vigorous struggle and Tha'mma is realised to accept the latter way.

Ila's idea of freedom is radically different. Her reply to the protest from Roby on dancing at the Grand Hotel is relevant here. In outrage she says, “Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free.” (*The Shadow Lines* 88). By 'free' she means to say free from the Indian culture as well as from its orthodox people who always restricts women. Though the idea or concept of freedom is different for both Tha'mma and Ila, it is constructed by the place where they live or do not live, the time they go through or do not mind to go. “The development of diasporic cultures necessarily questions essentialist models, interrogating the ideology of unfitted, natural, cultural norm.” (Ashcroft et al. 70).

Memory plays a vital role in *The Shadow lines* where almost all the characters are seen living in some stories. It is evident when Tridip says to the narrator, “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 live in stories, because stories are all there are to live in, it was just aquestion of which one you chose....” (*The Shadow Lines* 182). Tha'mma also constructed stories and her idea of names and idea of Dhaka is also a construct that is preserved in her memory. Images like Cham-Cham, fish, Dhakai saree etc. come to her mind when she thinks about Dhaka. Her first question when she comes to Dhaka is “where's Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka”(193) makes the narrator understandable that “her Dhaka had long since vanished into the past.” (193). The novel shows that the dislocated past and misleading memory of Tha'mma result the death of three people.

Lines are regarded as institutions which differentiate people from each other in terms of political, cultural and religious identity. These “identity markers” function in an open manner that is close to the boundaries on a map. The characters in the novel Ghosh experience these lines as actual and real lines dividing people in reality. The partitioning mechanism has been found to have devastating consequences on the grandmother of the narrator who struggles from a contrasting personality and changed nationalism. On the way to Dhaka his grandmother wonders if the boundary between the two countries India and Bangladesh can be recognised in some way. In the words of the grandmother, “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” (*The Shadow Lines* 167). In the book

Location and Culture (1994), Homi Bhabha comments on the interference of race, class, and gender and its effect on the placement of a particular culture which further moulds the identities of individuals or communities-

The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2).

Conclusion

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* presents diasporic displacement as source of enlightenment towards the path of multiracial culture. The novel highlights multivalent diaspora and dislocation creating multidimensional consequences. The characters and plot of the novel revolve around the issue of diaspora and its effects. The novel focuses on how the characters Tha'mma and Ila are deceived and affected by diaspora and displacement. Ghosh, in the novel also explores the complexities of modern life, including migration and cross-cultural interactions. He has highlighted "both ends of diasporic situation: blind nationalism in Tha'mma and Ila's cold-eyed detachment from the need for a root." (Kulsum and Kaiser 75).

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