

Tracing Multiculturalism in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

Multiculturalism represents a society in which several cultures co-exist. It is the composition of different cultures from various ethnicity, race, religion etc. It influences every ethnicity to adapt together irrespective of their cultural differences. The present paper investigates the amalgamation of various cultures, ethnicity, and generations collaborating and creating a distinct culture of their own. *The shadow lines* create a platform for the intermixing of cultures and ethnicity across borders. Amitav Ghosh illustrates the possibility of a multicultural oriented society where every individual has a recognized identity. The borders remain as a subsidiary concern of a particular person. In the novel, Tridib is portrayed as a philosophical person who is fascinated by the love of a person across borders. Ila also represents a cross-cultural relationship with Nick Price irrespective of their ethnicity which justifies the multiculturalism in the novel. This paper further explores the different ethnic or national cultures across borders in the postcolonial era. The existence of different cultural identity in the contemporary period produced a space of their self. A cosmopolitan perspective can be studied into the characters of *The Shadow Lines* reflecting the unprejudiced contemplation of homogenous society.

Keywords: Multicultural, Identity, Culture, Ethnicity, Postcolonial, Cosmopolitan.

INTRODUCTION

Bhikhu Parekh states that, "It is neither a political doctrine nor a philosophical issue but actually a perspective on as way of viewing human life. Increasing cultural diversity focuses on the promotion of rights for different religion and cultural groups. The rights for cultural groups form basis for multiculturalism" (Parekh 59). Multicultural can be defined as the non-political state of mind where one secures and approves the differences of culture and ethnicity without questioning each other but rather creating a diverse environment. Multiculturalism creates a society, state, a nation, a country, a region which is composed of people who belong to different cultural background. Oxford Learners Dictionary defines multiculturalism as "the practice of giving importance to all cultures in a society and it includes people of several, different races, religions, languages and traditions." (Oxford Dictionary) Merriam Webster Dictionary define multicultural as "an adjective of, relating to, or adopted to diverse cultures and

multiculturalism is noun form of it.” (Webster Dictionary) Terence Turner coins that, “Multiculturalism is one manifestation of the postmodernist reaction to the de-legitimization of the state and the erosion of the hegemony of the dominant culture in advanced capitalist countries” (Turner 416).

“It happened everywhere, wherever you wish it. It was an old story... told when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries...it was the story of a hero called Tristan...a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman across-the seas”.(186)

- Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* published in 1988 manifests us to the possibilities of creating a multicultural world. It demonstrates how diasporic displacement becomes a source of enlightenment towards the path of a cosmopolitan culture. The unnamed narrator captures the different versions of cultural identity through the main characters in the novel - his grandmother-Tha'mma, his cousin, Ila and his uncles Tridib and Robi. Growing up in a bourgeois family in Calcutta, the narrator possesses the acceptability of a metropolitan and bi-lingual culture. His interaction with his cousin and uncles who resides across the sea, his stay in London for research work made his attitude and approach to issues of nation and culture more cosmopolitan. One of the most powerful influences in his life as a child is his grandmother, a fiercely independent modern woman. Tha'mma is an embodiment of the cultural identity. Although, Tha'mma has a relocated identity but still she has adapted with the present culture. In a way, she is confused with her identity because her birth identity is dissimilar from her present identity.

The Shadow Lines unleashes us to the amalgamation of various cultures. It is a novel where both west and east meet and gradually the continuation of the family ties remains the same. Here, we have ultra modern attitude with Indian manners, Bengali culture in three forms - one takes place in Dhaka, another in Calcutta and abroad. Ketaki Datta states that “Amitav Ghosh makes the East and the West meet on a pedestal of friendship especially through the characters like Tridib, May, the writer himself, Ila Datta-Chaudhuri, Nick Price and Mrs. Price. Here, a sensitive and much hypes issue “Partition of Bengal” is the crux round which friendship, chasm of relationships and communal tension are built up. Truth ‘hidden’ and ‘discovered’ later – all come into the open” (Datta 63). Against the backdrop of post partition and violent scenarios of hindu-muslim riots, Ghosh seems to express his own views through Tridib. Tridib considers himself to be a person who believes in no boundaries or borders. He considers the world as a home to various cultural diversities. It

is a home to both men and women living together irrespective of their culture, ethnicity, race and religion.

“Tridib’s father was a diplomat, an officer in the Foreign Service. He and Mayadebi were always away, abroad or in Delhi; after interval of two or three years they would sometimes spend a couple of months in Calcutta, but that was all. Of Tridib’s two brothers, Jatin-kaku, the elder who was two years elder than Tridib, was an economist with the U.N. He was always too somewhere in Africa or South-East Asia, with his wife and his daughter Ila, who was my age” (Ghosh 6). Therefore, we can say that the sensibility and understanding of cultural diversities develop from the globetrotting background of his family.

Tridib at a very young age developed the understanding of multicultural society. He has links to the west through his grandfather, “Tridib had been to London, with his parents, many years ago, when he was a boy...there was a family called Price, who lived in West Hampstead, but they weren’t relatives - they were very, very old friends of Tridib’s family, because Mrs. price’s father, Lionel Tresawsen had lived in India when the British were here, and he and Tridib’s grandfather, who was a very important man, a judge in the Calcutta High Court, had been friends”(Ghosh 12). Tridib continued to be part of the family by falling in love with May price as she uttered, “All I remember ... is him saying – you’re my love, my own true love, my love-across-the-seas” (Ghosh 175). Tridib propagates the missile of cultural diversity as he falls in love with a woman, who resides across the sea. Suvir Kaul also observes that, “In *The Shadow Lines*, the questing romance of Tridib-Tristan finds in May its object across the seas, but it also finds in her a figure for the deluded idealism, the cultural dislocation or in comprehension, that sets the stage for personal or public tragedy” (Kaul 276). Tridib can further be compared to Manto’s “Toba Tek Singh” as both their views regarding nation coincides with each other. The reflection of Toba Tek Singh is partially re-captured into Tridib as he is “...a man without a country...” (Ghosh 186) who is against the borders and fences of the other side. Tridib imagines himself to be a person who is fascinated by the love and affection of a woman, residing in different country. He believes that one needs no permanent place to reside as the borders are illusionary lines which demarcates one’s culture to the other.

Ila Datta Chaudhuri represents multi-cultured identity. Her father Jatin Datta Chaudhuri works as an Economist with United Nations, for which he is transferred from one country to the other. Nivedita Majumdar aptly describes her as, “a globetrotting, cosmopolitan activist for politically correct causes” (Majumder 248). Ila moves with her parents all across the globe and later stays for a long duration in

London, where major part of her childhood years are spent. She also joins college in London for her higher education. Ila acquires a fragmented identity that is some part Indian and some part British. Her dual identity makes her abnormal in Indian as well as British cultural milieu. Rajeshwari Sunder Ranjan points that, “Ila is the post-colonial cosmopolitan of twentieth-century...For Ila too there is no natural ‘home’; she must find or create her own place in the world... lives in London because she wanted to be free , a freedom that is really rootlessness” (Ranjan 289). It is examined that Ila suffers from the crisis of identity. She has a shifting identity as she travels from one place to the other. It is Ila’s foreignness that attracts the narrator towards her since his very childhood. Ila’s identity is stuck in –between as she belongs to neither of the places. Her diverse culture makes her different from others.

Ila and Nick both represent different cultures and it’s the marriage which bonds them together. There is a continuous tension between the relationship follows but Ila continues loving her husband. Nick has a spirit of having varieties in his plate and therefore Ila continues to suffer from the seeds of the relationship. Shweta Saxena states that, “Ila’s illusion of a happy married life with Nick soon receives a jolt when she gets to know that Nick invites a Martinique woman in their flat in her absence ...” (Saxena 130). Nick admits that, “he’d met her in a pub or something and he’s been seeing her for a year ...He’s got an Indonesian woman in line too somewhere” and the reason for doing so is that, “he just likes a bit of a variety; it’s his way of travelling” (Ghosh 188). Nick’s exposure to love beyond cultural differences makes him an imperial master as he objectifies women as a product from third world countries. His acceptability towards multicultural society is no less than a colonial master. His loose character implies domination and childlike nature towards relationships.

In the novel, Ila and Tridib illustrate different conceptions regarding culture. Tridib spreads the idea of multi cultured society as he himself falls in love with a woman, who resides across the sea. “It was a German Story...it was a story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas....” (Ghosh 186). Lydia Yaitsky examines that “At the heart of the novel is the mysterious Tridib, Ghosh’s twentieth century re-invention of the Arthurian Knight Tristan, who has influenced the life and vision of the narrator and has taught him to see the world multi-dimensionally through the lens of imagination” (Yaitsky 163).

Tridib-May courtship is compared to the love story of Tristan and Isolde who fell in the romantic spell of each other. This romantic encounter of Tridib and May shows the acceptability or acceptance of love and likeness to a different culture, ethnicity, race and religion. It shows the devotion of love towards a woman of an alien country. Tridib is a philosophical person who believes that imagination can take you to various places. He believes that one can travel beyond through his readings and knowledge about the particular place. There is no limited boundary or sea to a person and therefore the mind of a person should not be kept intact. Tridib is a different person who plays a vital role in the narrator's life. The narrator is the heir of Tridib's thoughts and imagination. Tridib is the mentor of the narrator. Tridib has given him eyes and mind to imagine place. He has infused the availability to accept the multi-ethnicity of the world. Rituparna Roy justifies that, "Tridib is the narrator – protagonist's idol, the person with whom he completely identified himself and with whose life he is preoccupied to the point of obsession. Indeed, the narrator's intensely imaginative inner life is for him, Tridib's lasting legacy." As he says in the novel, 'Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with...' (Roy 116).

The second part of the novel, 'Coming Home' represents the love-hatred relation between different ethnicities. On one side, it is the cordial relation of Ukil babu and Khalil's family and on the other hand the death of Tridib by the angry mob. It is mentioned in the novel that, "Khalil and his family look after Ukil-babu" (Ghosh 209). Jethamoshai, "the old man was so orthodox that he wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of his food" (Ghosh 210). The old man has transformed himself into an unconventional person with time. Jethamoshai believes that there is no nation as India-Shindia because once a person starts moving from one place to another, the journey continues. In my opinion, Jethamoshai approves the vibrancy of heterogeneous society and prefers to stay back in his own birth place.

The Shadow Lines gives us an expression of multicultural imagination. Ghosh portrays multicultural society through his central characters. He has given an apt and realistic picture of combination of various cultures in India. The novel presents people's love for several cultures at the same time. Tridib remains the leading light of multiculturalism. His imagination and love across the sea made him a citizen of global village. Tridib attachments to his roots kept his imagination alive through the narrator's vision. The multiculturalism that has developed in the novel is that of salad bowl where one can identify one's

individual identity. It is a novel where family bonding and friendship create an ambiance of multiculturalism. The Datta-Chaudhuri-The Prices family plays a crucial role in the novel. The marriage that took place between Nick and Ila Datta Chaudhuri in the family proved it to be an example of multi diversity in the novel. *The Shadow Lines* sets to uncover a plenty of cultures or mingling of cultures reflecting the unprejudiced contemplation of homogenous society. Ghosh encourages us to develop a cosmopolitan culture in the society. Amitav Ghosh reveals a multicultural society through family generations. *The Shadow Lines* sketches different figures of human of various cultures and ethnicity creating a space of their own. As Brinda Bose observes, “In Ghosh's fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by time and space - history and geography and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past. As the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* embarks upon a journey of discovery of roots and reasons, the more of the one he unearths leaves him with less of the other.” (Bose 19)

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