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The Representation of Space in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Abstract:

*Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956, and studied at Dehra Dun, New Delhi, Alexandria and Oxford. He is one of India's best-known writers in Indian English Fiction. He has written many well-known fictions and non-fictions and received many prestigious awards for his writings. Amitav Ghosh's writing deals with the variety of dimensions for his fictional narratives such as history and memory, political struggle and communal violence, agonies of dislocation made by the Partition, etc. Here, in this paper, I have taken up Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) for its formal experimentations with the challenge to be overcome by the projection of imagination and utter desire until the space gets dissolved. The focus of the paper is to show how the major characters deal with the blurred and complex space in a seamless continuity in this novel.*

Keywords: History, memory, communal violence, dislocation, partition, space.

Commenting on 'space' in his essays "*Of Other Spaces*", Michel Foucault writes:

The Space in which we live, which draws out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and knaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relation that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not super imposable on one another (p. 23).

It is this idea of 'space' that Amitav Ghosh explores in *The Shadow Lines*. The novel reflects the agonies of displacement, the sense of alienation in an adopted land and the

constant dream of a return to one's land. But how far is this dream realized? Does one find the space one desires for? Here the intention is to show that space is a pure abstraction built by psychic, cultural and political constructs. The concept of space is itself very a contested issue and it has no concrete demarcations and can be designated only by shadow lines.

The title of the first section of the novel "Going Away" suggests moving away from a space. At the very outset we come across Mayadebi's going away from India to England with her family. At once, the idea of space is introduced –geographical as well as emotional. The second section, on the other hand, is titled "Coming Home". As the title itself suggests the concrete sense of 'home', a belongingness with the land. But where is that 'home'? The novelist tries to find answers to such questions through the experiences of different characters in the novel.

Tha'mma's memories of Dhaka, her homeland before the Partition, are passed on as colourful stories to the narrator. The best part of her life is spent in Dhaka, an emotionally happy and fulfilling space –a space that is real. And even after spending decades in Calcutta, the memories of her old home haunts her. They provide her a sense of belonging. She feels the need to go back to her childhood space, ostensibly to bring her old uncle back with her. In truth, there is a deep desire to go back to that space which once was real and now remains in memory. But in Dhaka when she looks for her determined space(the so called real space), she finds it no longer there. She could not help but exclaiming when she visited her old house which occupied by Shaheb in Dhaka and she says:

...Where's Dhaka?...[Tha'mma] gave...a long wonderful look and said: Yes, I really am a foreigner here –as foreign as May in India or Tagore in Argentina. Then she caught another glimpse of the house and shook her head and said: ...this isn't Dhaka (*The Shadow Lines* p.195).

Her home has been occupied by Muslim migrants from across the border. Tha'mma instantly realizes that in real life, there are no determined spaces. There are objectives for a person being in a particular space. To Tha'mma and Mayadebi, the house holds an idyllic vision of their childhood. But to the mechanic Saifuddin, the place has to be put to practical use, "the old portico had sprouted a tin shed" (p.208) which served as an automobile workshop. Thus the potential of an environment can only be manifested by the users.

All along, Tha'mma feels no rancor about the Partition, about the Muslim refugees occupying her ancestral home and about her lost dream. But Tridib's death changes her attitude. She develops a hatred for Pakistan. She talks of fighting for freedom. Now India becomes her real space. Tha'mma effectively dramatizes the trauma of Partition, the lack of emotional, political and literal space to those who are uprooted by this separation through borders.

Ila journeys through real geographical spaces, but none of them is her own. They are all spaces which she never belongs to. When Robi drags her out of the dance-floor where she has started dancing with the stranger and saying:

There are certain things you can't do here; that's our culture (p.88), she yells:

Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free: Free of you! Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you (pp. 88-89).

But Ila fails to find a sense of belongingness anywhere. She fantasizes an existence where she is the cynosure of all eyes around her. She rejects everything Indian and tries to seek an identity for herself in an alien land. In an attempt to reject her roots and identify herself with the West, she marries Nick but finds him cheating her for the sake of variety. As Lenfest rightly observes the movement of Ila in an alien land and how she caught herself into the web of vagueness of real space:

She only uses her imagination to conform to the ideals of the Western World, which ultimately creates a false pretence for her entire life as an Indian, a life from which she can never run, yet continually tries to hide (pp. 112).

Rootless and lost at the end, she clings to the arms of the narrators and Robi, members of her family. Her attempt to adopt an alien culture proves futile. At the end, she feels the need to go back. But the question remains –where?

Tridib who believed that everyone live in stories, choose to live the story of Tristan, "...a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman –across – the –seas..."(Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, pp.186). Tridib's imagination and cross-cultural identifications enable him to think beyond frontier limits. He desires for a space –a space

without history, a space free of ravages of collective memory and limits of practical reason. It is this unrealizable desire that leads to his tragic end. As Suvir Kaul puts it:

Such desire can of course only exist prior to historical or geographical calculation, and is manifestly unrealizable. In its function as critique and as utopian hope, however, it is quite as real as the shadow lines that mock the limits of our political consciousness and imagination (pp. 285).

The narrator moves from India to England –from one real place to another, perhaps in a quest for space –cultural, emotional and intellectual. As a child, his perception of space is always in the literal sense; the emotional space is beyond his comprehension. He confuses emotional and cultural space with the geographical space. He measures space with concrete distances. He sees the world through the eyes of Tridib and Ila. He lives in the space created by them and his imagination. But as a mature young man, he feels the need to be free. The search for his own space begins, only to find that real space is always reduced to shadow lines, because it never approximates the imagined space he builds up. He realizes that space is not a geographical entity, but an emotional, moral and intellectual entity which can be identified in the shadows of one's own inner being. In a similar vein, Lenfest points out:

...With May's voice and then her capacity to recollect for him what Tridib's 'eyes' have seen, the narrator is finally able to experience a reality free of the shadow lines (pp. 117).

Thus Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* tries to show that there is no solid space, either geographically or culturally. Spaces exist only as abstractions blurring into one another: alien space into native space; cultural space into geographical space. 'Space' in this novel, perhaps like all things a rare and beautiful, seems difficult to attain. The space in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* projects the dimensions of an individual's desire in which the actual and the imagined co-exist harmoniously. In this novel, the narrator continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by both time and space –history and geography and attempts to redefine the meta-journey towards the blurred space. As Brinda Bose puts it:

...this novel undertakes follows the narrator –as he weaves and winds his way through succession of once-imaginary homelands –into that [...] space where boundaries are blurred and cultures collide, creating at once a disabling confusion and an enabling complexity (p. 19).

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