

MERGING OF NATIONAL HISTORY AND INDIVIDUAL HISTORY IN THE NOVEL

'THE SHADOW LINES'

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines' published in 1988, is supposed to be a remarkable novel based on the history of post-colonial India. The novel can be read at two levels: one – personal level and the other, a wider, national, social level. At the personal level, it is the story of the inner psychic experiences and conflicts of a child, who grows into a young man. At the second level; a wider socio-political and national level, the novel deals with the history of post-independent India of the Eastern region. The novel still extends to some other regions, outside India. It thus, deals with the question of Indo-British relations, the coming together of two cultures and races- the White and the Brown. Thus, the history of individuals and families are intertwined with the history of nations. Thus, until now we have seen one of the interesting aspects of this novel as how individual episodes attain a major significance, as they are part of epoch-making history. Family history, hence, becomes national history in 'The Shadow Lines'.

KEYWORDS: History, Individual History, Family History and National History

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines' published in 1988, is supposed to be a remarkable novel based on the history of post-colonial India. In the novel 'The Shadow Lines' employing the first person narration, the young Indian narrator tells the story of his childhood and growth to maturity. The novel reveals the inter-relationship between two families: one Indian and the other British. The novel can be read at two levels: one – personal level and the other, a wider, national, social level. At the personal level, it is the story of the inner psychic experiences and conflicts of a child, who grows into a young man. It reveals his memories and experiences as a child, an adolescent and an adult, his emotions and relationships. It brings out the various impacts these two families had on him, his psychic growth in relation to these characters.

At the second level, a wider socio-political and national level, the novel deals with more serious issues like the political conditions of Eastern India since the time of Independence and Partition and its impact on common man, the wars with Pakistan and China, the relationship between India and Bangladesh etc. It ultimately deals with the history of post-independent India of the Eastern region. The novel still extends to some other regions. It again deals with the question of Indo-British relations, the coming together of two cultures and races- the White and the Brown. It also discusses the impact of World War on London life. Thus, the history of individuals and families are intertwined with the history of nations.

The novelist employs time shift i.e. the back and forth movement of time, digressions, inside stories etc; which gives an unusual technique to the novel. He uses the conversational tone of story-telling. The novel is divided into two parts, symbolic of the themes the novel deals with. The first part 'Going Away' deals with the protagonist's visit to London, his curiosity as a child aroused to go around the world, influenced by his relatives. The second part 'Coming

Home' deals with the protagonist's returning home after his studies abroad. They both deal with the particular experiences of the major characters, of both the families, in the novel.

A critic, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan clears her views about the characters as:

“... The English and Indian characters [are] viewed as subjects of history. The Tresawsons and Prices have active roles to play in the events of history; they make political commitments and they enact their liberal principles through participation in social movements....” (p. 298)

Individual History

The term 'individual history' means the story of a person, which has already taken place in the past. In the novel 'The Shadow Lines', we come across several characters and through some events, we come to know about their past. Example: the narrator introduces us to his family. He then recalls some events that took place in the past in relation to his family. Similarly, like the narrator, Tridib, grandmother, Robi, Ila, May etc. also tell us about their past, about some important and interesting events that have taken place in their earlier days, example.: Grandmother recalls her College days, May recollects Tridib's death, which took place during the Dhaka riots etc.

The narrator introduces us, also to the British family, Mrs. Price's family, about their past through some important events. Thus, Amitav Ghosh not only gives us detail information about the narrator's past and present, but also about the narrator's grandmother's past and present. This is how, he gives minute details of every major characters of this novel, thus making the readers attract towards his story.

As A. N. Kaul, a critic, opines about the novel as:

“It begins with the real world as constituted in and through history, politics and society as well as in and through the perceptions and values of the men and women living in it.” (p. 308-309)

National History

The term 'national history' means the past of a nation or of a country. In the novel, 'The Shadow Lines', one comes across some of the historical events of some nations; eg.: Amitav Ghosh, in this novel, tells us something about the Second world War, the partition of India and Pakistan, the formation of a new nation like Bangladesh etc. Also, he tells us about some small historical events, which took place in cities like the 1964 Dhaka riots, Calcutta riots, riots in Kashmir and Khulna, extremist activities taking place in Bengal during the early decades of the 19th C. etc. hence, Amitav Ghosh, through the narrator of his novel, narrates the histories of nations like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Germany and cities like Calcutta, Kashmir, London etc. thus, we come to know the detail history of a part of the world, through this novel. Suvir Kaul, another critic states:

“[The narrator's] remembering is often tinted with the sepia tones of nostalgia, often darkened by the dull shades of grief but... that will allow the narrator's autobiography (and equally, the national biography that is interwoven with it in the novel) to cohere, to make sense.” (p.269)

Further, he states:

“The Shadow Lines becomes not simply a male bildungsroman, an authorized autobiography ... but also a dialogic, more open-ended... biography of a nation.” (p.286)

Amitav Ghosh has very effectively merged both the histories i.e., linked the national history with the individual history in the novel. For instance, once the adult narrator remembers two family photographs, which he had seen, when he

was a child, and the story related to it, which Tridib had narrated to him. The photographs include people from both the families but carry a tragic story, behind it. Alan, Mike, Francesca, all those, who were in the photographs, were killed in a bomb attack. This took place during the Second World War. Thus, photographs are remnants of a beautiful human relationship that ended in a tragedy brought forth by the Second World War

Similarly, later on in the novel, we again get glimpses of the troublesome days of the Second World War from Tridib's stories, recollected by the narrator. During those days, in London, gas masks from the gas bombs dropped by the Germans, protected babies. Therefore, May, as a baby, was put on one, which makes Tridib frightened.

Later on, in one of the episodes, Tridib narrates the story of a very special day, his ninth birthday, which was celebrated in London, during the Second World War. Tridib wants to go out but Mayadebi gets angry and stops him thinking that he may be caught in the trap because, rumours were spread that tins of toffees were believed to have been dropped by enemy airplanes. Mrs. Price, wants to make dinner and some presents:

“They knew it was going to be a bad night as soon as they heard the first planes ... the planes flew over the houses ... the gun in the cricket field ... opened up, and at once the pictures on the walls and the cups on the table began to rattle ... they sat ... wondering how long the raid would last. There was a very loud explosion somewhere nearby; it shook the floor of the cellar” (p.185)

Sometimes, not even the narrator, but also the grandmother recollects some events of her past, the memoirs of her college days. There was a boy in her class, who was arrested in the classroom by the police for terrorist activities. He was shy, insignificant looking boy:

“With a ... little beard ... always sat as far back as possible in the lecture room ... since ... nobody took much notice of him.” (p. 36-37)

He was tried and later deported to Andaman Islands. She used to dream of the boy. She fantasizes getting involved with the terrorist activities helping them. She feels she would have warned the boy and saved him. This was her dream as a young person. She was also fascinated by the stories about the terrorist: about the heroism of Khudiram Bose and the sad death of Bagha Jatin, who were betrayed by treacherous villagers:

“She had wanted to do something for the terrorists, work for them ... cook their food, wash their clothes” (p.39)

She thinks she would have killed the English Magistrate, as she says:

“I would have been frightened ... but I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free.”(p. 39)

Thus, through this event, we find an individual character like grandmother responding to the historical events.

Similarly, in the second part of the novel, 'Coming Home', we are introduced to grandmother's ancestral house. Here, the family history of the grandmother merges into that of a nation. The episode of grandmother's ancestral house becomes the episode of partition in India, a painful, memorable event. She further says:

“But now... it's all gone. They're all dead and I have nowhere ... to escape to.” (p.126)

We come to know more about grandmother, when Tridib talks of her as:

“She was only a modern middle-class woman All she wanted was a middle- class life in which, like the middle classes the world over; she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted – a modern middle class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it.” (p.78)

The politicians had played a game for their own vested interests by partitioning the country. They could never imagine the damage, they had caused; they could never realize that they had killed the happiness of thousands of middle-class, who had a right to enjoy a peaceful life, right to enjoy their nostalgia in old age. People like grandmother lost their history, culture, ancestry and childhood in their partition. Naturally, a woman like the grandmother could never forgive Indian history for this.

The narrator also gives a detailed report of the Calcutta riots in 1964, in which he himself was caught. In the year 1964, on the day the cricket match was been played between India and England, in Madras; the child narrator was caught in a riot. He, as usual started to school, waiting for the school bus. The bus arrived, including few boys in it, and by seeing the water bag, they said that the water of the city is poisoned; ‘they’ have poisoned it. The school; bus was to be caught by riots; they narrowly escape, there is stone throwing at the bus. This episode shows that a communal frenzy can also destroy young, innocent minds. As a critic of ‘The Shadow Lines’, Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her essay, says:

“During the 1964 Hindu-Muslim riots – subsequently forgotten by history – the schoolboys in Calcutta had ‘the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear between oneself and one’s image in the mirror.’” (p.266)

In fact, the narrator gives a detailed historical survey of the background of the loss of relic, which is not communal at all, in the beginning. On 27th December 1963, the sacred relic of Prophet Mohammed’s hair disappeared from a famous mosque in Kashmir. It became a big issue for his believers:

“As the news spread, life came to a standstill in the valley of Kashmir ... there were huge demonstrations in Srinagar, in which Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus alike took part ... there was not one single recorded incident of animosity between Kashmir, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs.” (p.225)

The demonstrations carried black flags instead of green flags. This happened on 29th December and Karachi observed 31st December as a ‘Black Day’. In Khulna, a small town in the distant east wing in protest against the theft was burnt down and a few people were killed. The author mixes history with personal episode, so effectively that his characters react and respond to the historical events.

Actually, the narrator, as a student of Delhi University found out from casual conversation that the riot which he himself had witnessed as a child in 1964, was the same that killed Tridib, but in a different country, Dhaka. Thus, through the news of the cricket match played on 10th January, he comes to know that on the same day, the riots in Dhaka took place. The newspaper of 7th January reads:

“Fourteen die in frenzy off Khulna ... over the next few days the riots spread outwards from Khulna into the neighbouring towns and districts and towards Dhaka. Soon Hindu refugees began to pour over the border into India in trains and on foot At some places on the border the trains were stopped by mobs The towns and cities of East Pakistan were now in the gap of a ‘frenzy’ of looting, killing and burning ... In Calcutta, rumours were in the air- especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with refugees still pouring in,

rumours began to gather at the stations ... and on 10th January, the day the cricket Test began in Madras, Calcutta erupted. Maps were rampaging through the city, Killing Muslims, and burning and looting their shops and houses ... The police opened fire on mobs in several places and ... curfew was imposed.” (p. 228-229)

The communal riot of Dhaka killed Tridib. This part of the story is narrated to the narrator by May, much later. The car in which Robi, May and the two sisters were travelling was attacked by ‘a’ mob but was saved by the rickshaw guards. The mob then attacked the rickshaw. The grandmother then ordered the car to proceed, but May insisted on going back to the rickshaw. She got out of the car and ran towards the rickshaw. Tridib and Jethamosai were killed by the mob. It is described by the author through May as:

“When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They’d cut Khalil’s stomach open. The old man’s head had been hacked off. And they’d cut Tridib’s throat, from ear to ear”. (p.251)

Since this episode, grandmother hates Pakistan. For her, Muslims were the only people, who killed Tridib. She looks at Pakistan as ‘a foreign country’ and Muslims as ‘the murderers’. Her every memory is full of hatred. Tridib’s death is not only an individual loss to the family. Therefore, grandmother will no more call Dhaka as ‘her’ home. So many Tridibs get killed in such riots and communal violence and for what purpose? The histories of nation and communal riots are made and highlighted by the murders of innocent, well-meaning individuals like Tridib. Thus, the individual’s life merges with the history of nations very clearly and skillfully in ‘The Shadow Lines’.

As the well-known critic, Meenakshi Mukherjee points out:

“The public chronicles of nations are interrogated in this novel by highlighting on the one hand, the reality of the fictions people create around their lives ... and on the other by recording the verifiable and graphic details of the individual memories that do not necessarily tally with the received version of history.” (p.255)

Thus, until now we have seen one of the interesting aspects of this novel as how individual episodes attain a major significance, as they are part of epoch-making history. Family history, hence, becomes national history in *The Shadow Lines*.

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