

IDEALISM VERSUS REALITY IN *THE SHADOW LINES*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present the characters of *The Shadow Lines* caught up in ironical situations originating from their own idealistic approach towards life which they possess. The major characters of this celebrated novel are disillusioned when their idealism comes to terms with the reality of their experience. Life does not turn out to be what they think and feel. It is something else-a world contrary to their imagination. Their concept of life proves to be just an illusion. All their idealism ends in disillusionment and reality poses before them a chaotic world full of violence, hatred and bloodshed.

Key-words: idealism, reality, disillusionment, chaotic, violence, hatred

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The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh (1988) has earned its writer world-wide acclamation and the most coveted Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puraskar. The greatness of this work can be imagined by the fact that it immediately attracted the attention of the readers and the critics across the globe. His characters seem to be belonging to real world. He writes fiction but his art of characterization is convincing. The psychological representation of the different traits of his characters makes them look close to reality. This is because Ghosh is primarily interested in human beings, their predicaments and their attitude towards the situations which they face in life. In the book, *"Contemporary Indian Writers in English"*, in an interview with John C. Hawley, Amitav Ghosh himself admits, *"My fundamental interest lies in the people-in individuals and their predicaments."*(1) Again in another interview, defending his choice of fiction over history he says *"It's (fiction) about finding human predicament. It's about finding what happens to individuals, characters"*. (2) These two self-revealing statements make it crystal clear that Ghosh is basically interested in human beings and in depicting how different individuals take up joys, sorrows, dilemmas, longings, dreams, success, failures and all other passions that life brings to them.

The Shadow Lines is a complex novel which offers a web of historical and imaginary events. Employing the narrator technique Ghosh narrates a story interweaving multiple stories into its texture. These stories are of Karthamma-narrator's grandmother and her sister Mayadebi; of the uncles of the narrator- Tridib and Robi and their niece Ila. The story revolves round Tridib whose family has a close relation with a family in England- namely the Price family. Their role is also equally important. We are told that Tridib was born in 1932 and went to England in 1939 along with his parents where his father underwent medical treatment. There they stayed with Mrs Price and it was her daughter May Price who had been in touch with Tridib through correspondence and in the end Tridib sacrificed his life in an attempt to save May during her visit to Dhaka.

A close study of this novel reveals that the major theme of this great work is to emphasize the extremely devastating nature of violence generated by riots and war on the people who become the victims of such horrendous events. While talking of this novel in his book, *"The Imam and The Indian"*, he himself says, *"The Shadow Lines"-a book that led me backward in time to earlier memories of riots once witnessed in the childhood. It becomes a book not about any one event but about the meaning of any such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them."*(3) After reading the novel there remains no doubt that the main thrust of the writer is to present the horrific effects of war and

riots on the lives of those who undergo such events .But Ghosh is such a great artist that he has raised in this novel multiple social and national issues that are of great importance . There can be perceived a web of different themes that are woven skillfully by the writer. The writer has woven together personal lives and public events. The characters hold their distinct ideologies which prove to be illusionary as the story moves on. Their idealism appears worthless when reality turns out to be different from the views.

Karthamma is a strict disciplinarian who considers self-respect the highest virtue an individual can have. She becomes widow at an early age but never demands or accepts any help from her rich and influential sister Mayadebi. She brings up her son and educates him with dignity and dedication. She does not allow her family members to waste their time as time which is wasted, "*begins to stink*" (p.4). She doesn't like Tridib. In her eyes he is just a good-for-nothing fellow who, "*doesn't do any proper work, lives off his father's money*" (p.4). That's why she does not want him to stay in her house. She always asks her grandson (the narrator) not to have any intimacy with him. She thinks that it would create bad effect on the narrator. According to her Tridib is a total failure in life, "*a lightweight and frivolous character*" (p.7). But the narrator is spellbound by the personality of this character because, "*Tridib had given me (the narrator) worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them*" (p,26). Again the narrator remarks, "*the one thing that he (Tridib) wants to teach me (the narrator); he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision*" (p.26). As the story develops it is Tridib only who becomes a symbol of humanity which is of paramount importance for the writer. The narrator reveals the layers of the consciousness of different characters especially Karthamma, Ila, her parents and May Price. All seem to be caught up in some sort of shadow lines-be it prejudices dogma or a feeling of narrow nationalism. But Tridib's imagination holds no such shadow lines that divide humanity. He lays down his life voluntarily for the sake of May Price and Jethamoshai-the last surviving member of Karthamma's family (her uncle) at Dhaka where they are attacked by a rioting mob. His throat is cut from ear to ear. The novel ends with his death which becomes symbolic of humanity. His sacrifice turns him into a figure larger than life itself and Karthamma's scornful views about his personality prove futile and baseless. The following statement of the narrator exhibits deep insightful views of Tridib:

"... sights Tridib saw in his imagination were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I (the narrator) would ever see. He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a moment of torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other

times and other places, and even if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror".(p.32)

The greatest mirage of this world for Karthamma is the political division of nations. In fact the whole world is disillusioned about such divisions. Amitav Ghosh raises this point very effectively through the character of Karthamma who is just unable to understand the concept of creating borders between nations. Ghosh calls these borders the shadow lines. The shadow lines are the barriers (be the political, cultural, linguistic, social, spatial or even temporal) which divide human beings. This novel is a powerful comment on such barriers. They should be crossed in order to create a peaceful world full of love and happiness. This view of the writer has been brought out through the character of Tridib who teaches the young hero (the narrator) that these barriers are the enemies of mankind and must be challenged and removed from the scene of the world. What hold our attention most is the way in which Tridib emphasizes the use of imagination to expand the horizons of one's sense of meaning and erase the narrow borders of lines and partitions. He keeps showing the narrator different maps of different countries and asking him, *"to use my (the narrator) imagination with precision"* (p.26).

Karthamma eagerly wants to bring back her uncle from Dhaka as it would not be safe for him to stay there during communal riots. Finding herself totally incapable of comprehending the political border between nations the first thing that she asks her sister Mayadebi when they meet at the airport is, *"where is Dhaka? I can't see it"* (p.213). She thinks that the political borders would be concrete and distinctly defined. But she is completely baffled where these borders are exactly to be seen. Ghosh also shows his contempt for narrow nationalism through Karthamma. At one point she tells the narrator, *"They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood...War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country"* (p.86). The only hope in such a dreadful scenario is people like Tridib and May who are symbols of humanity. Their remaining in touch with each other while sitting across seas is symbolic of a humane attitude towards life. Their love strengthens the concept of universal love among human beings. May works for certain agencies like Amnesty and Oxfam that help the victims of natural or man-made calamities who don't belong to her country. They are the people of South Africa and Central America. Tridib's volunteer sacrifice for humanity certainly crosses all shadow lines of narrow nationalism which is a danger for today's world. Those who are in favor of the borders between nations are disillusioned and away from reality.

Ila -Tridib's niece has a very superficial view of life. She lives only in the present. She is the daughter of a very well-to-do and influential family. But she is not at all prudential

and her ideology does not take her anywhere. Of all she is the most disillusioned character in the novel. The narrator has a deep regard for Tridib's views about the role imagination plays in visiting far-off places unknown hitherto to oneself. He holds the belief, "*...that one could not see without inventing what we saw*" (p.34). But Ila cannot imagine or foresee anything as she says, "*Why? Why should we not try, why not take the world as it is?*"(p.35). She lacks worldly wisdom. Her short-sightedness brings misery in life. She marries Nick Price who has never cared for her. At school Ila used to face racial discrimination at the hands of the English students and it was the same Nick Price who never helped her or showed any concern for her. May tells the narrator, "*...I think Nick didn't want to be seen with Ila...after she began going to school Nick used to come home much earlier than he used to*" (P.83). Despite all this, Ila falls in love with Nick Price as she is attracted to his looks. She ultimately marries him but soon after their marriage she comes to know that Nick has had relations with other girls. He is a total misfit for her and keeps on having extra-marital relations with other women without caring for her feelings. What is left for Ila is endless anguish and painful tears. Ila wants to enjoy freedom in life. At one place in the novel, just after Robi has asked her to behave in a cultured way while in India, she tells the narrator, "*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 your bloody culture and free of all of you*" (p.98). She feels as if she has sufficient knowledge of the ways of the world. But the reality proves to be quite otherwise. She fails to understand even people with whom she has had long and close association. She cannot make out that the real freedom is to free oneself of all pre-notions about life; that life is not just to be seen and lived but it is also to be felt with experience and understood with wisdom.

Ila also becomes symbolic of the students of the Asian countries who go abroad for studies and other purposes in the hope of enjoying freedom and prosperity but after reaching there, feel disillusioned as the reality turns out to be different from their dreams. They feel baffled and completely disoriented. Karthamma also tells the narrator that, "*She's (Ila) gone there (England) because she is greedy; she's gone for money*" (p.87) and also that, "*She (Ila) wants freedom to be left alone to do what she pleases; that's all*" (p.98). Ila becomes a victim of racial discrimination in England. The English students even beat her. She is brought home by the police on such occasions. In India she enjoys the status of a princess and remains surrounded by many servants who would do every little job she wants. She lives in a very big palace-like house in India. But in London she shares a tiny room with five other students and has to do all her work on her own. She tries to hide her painful tears resulting from her troublesome married life from the narrator but in vain.

Ultimately she tells him in detail how her husband Nick has been deceiving her before and after their marriage. The worst thing is that Nick does not show even the slightest signs while Ila keeps working in an office. All her dreams and ideas prove to be just a mirage. She enjoys neither freedom nor prosperity.

The Shadow Lines also exposes narrow-mindedness of people in general though only fragmentary. It is revealed by Karthamma that in the past Jethamoshai (her uncle), " *was so orthodox that he wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of his food?*" (p.231). But after the partition he has to live with a Muslim family and eat food cooked by a Muslim lady. What and where is the utility of such narrow-mindedness? Narrow idealism always leads to disillusionment. Ghosh has also tried to show that greed is a negative quality and it takes man away from reality-reality of real happiness that has origin in shedding all narrow-minded dogmas. Happiness is to be found in contentment that is realized after providing happiness to others. When the narrator meets May for the first time in London he finds her playing oboe in a concert in the festival hall. Later she tells him that she loves working for humanity. The narrator remarks, "*It was evident that she found a great deal of satisfaction in her work*" (p.18). Karthamma wants to save her uncle Jethamoshai and it is only for his sake that she goes to Dhaka but she finds that he has never liked her or her family as he is not willing to give away their share of parental property. She tells him that they have come to save him. But his greed has made him insane. He cannot even recognize them. Greed is another narrow barrier that divides human beings and darkens the prospects of a happy and meaningful life. The greedy are ultimately disillusioned.

The Shadow Lines is a great novel that has many relevant themes. One of them is to show how individuals wreck their own happiness by clinging to their dogmatic idealism. Change is required at every stage in life as the world in which we live goes on changing. One cannot stay aloof and be a spectator only. Life is to be lived with enthusiasm shedding all sort of narrow beliefs that create discriminations and walls among human beings. All such walls are hazardous for human happiness. In order to enjoy a peaceful and joyful life one has to cross all these narrow borders. The only remedy left for the entire world today is love. Only love can bring human beings close to peace and joy. In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh has questioned the meaning of narrow nationalism and political division of nations in the modern world. The idea of the nation state is an illusion. It is an arbitrary dissection of people.

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