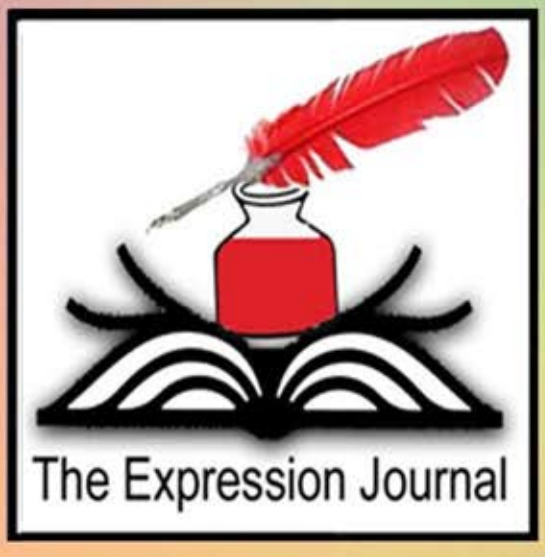
ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

Vol. 11 Issue 6 December 2025

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal
(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)
www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

DIVIDED HISTORIES AND FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES: EXPLORING THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM AND PARTITION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES* AND *THE GLASS PALACE*

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Abstract

This postcolonial seminal work examines the complex legacies of colonialism and partition in Amitav Ghosh's novels *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*, focusing on fragmented histories, identity formation, and cultural memory. Through a close reading of these historical fictional works, it reveals how Ghosh portrays the dislocations and disjunctures caused by colonialism and partition, shaping individual and collective identities in South Asian literature. This article explores the role of memory, history, and storytelling in reconstructing fragmented histories and identities, arguing that Ghosh's novels offer profound meditations on the enduring impact of colonialism and partition. Imperialism and nationalism are the root causes of human displacement; a theme explored in both the works. Ghosh describes memory as personal recall rather than events occurring in a precisely chronological order. Subjects like as geographical entities, displacement, and the impermanence of space and time are explored in his works. His characters' identities are fluid and transcend national and ideological boundaries. Ghosh, believes that cultural memory, hereditary trauma, and imaginative narratives may transform one's identity.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, Colonialism, Partition, Identity, Memory, History, Fragmentation, Dislocation, South Asian Literature, Historical Fiction, Amitav Ghosh.

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Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's novels, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *The Glass Palace* (2000), offer powerful and poignant explorations of the complex and deeply intertwined legacies of colonialism and partition. Through his masterful storytelling, Ghosh reveals how these historical events have left an indelible mark on the lives of individuals and communities, shaping their understanding of identity, belonging, and nationhood. As Ghosh astutely observes in *The Shadow Lines*, "the past is never really past, it's always present in some way" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 123), suggesting that historical events continue to reverberate through time, influencing our perceptions and experiences in profound ways.This sentiment echoes Benedict Anderson's seminal idea that "nations are imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6), highlighting the ways in which historical events, collective memories, and cultural narratives converge to shape our understanding of identity and belonging. Ghosh's novels beautifully illustrate this concept, demonstrating how the legacies of colonialism and partition have created complex, fragmented, and often contested identities. By exploring the intricate web of relationships between history, memory, and identity, Ghosh's works offer a nuanced understanding of how individuals and communities navigate the complexities of their past, present, and future.

The Shadow Lines: Partition's Dislocations

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh masterfully recreates the tumultuous landscape of the Bengal Partition, deftly weaving together personal narratives, historical events, and cultural traditions. As Urvashi Butalia notes, "partition was a moment of profound

dislocation, a moment when the very fabric of society was torn apart" (Butalia, 1998, p. 12). Ghosh's novel poignantly captures this sense of displacement and disorientation, laying bare the human cost of political upheaval with unflinching candour. Through the eyes of his characters, we witness the anguish of families torn apart, the desperation of those seeking refuge, and the quiet resilience of individuals struggling to rebuild their lives amidst the ruins of a shattered world. Gyanendra Pandey's observation that "partition was a moment of radical disjuncture" (Pandey, 2001, p. 15) is particularly relevant here, as Ghosh's characters grapple with the existential challenge of reconciling their identities with the newly drawn borders, forced to confront the brutal realities of a world where the familiar has been rendered strange and the sense of belonging has been irrevocably lost.

In the first portion of the novel, Ghosh explores the phenomenon of 'Going Away,' focussing on the dispersion of his characters across continents and the sustainability of interpersonal connections across cultural barriers. In the section titled 'Coming Home', he enumerates the political events over approximately two decades, the post-colonial cultural dislocation, and the erosion of the cultural unity of the subcontinent, which were previously defined by one's birth or domicile; even national identity has now become a nebulous concept. In 1947, the partition occurred, and Dhaka was designated as the capital of East Pakistan. The partition abruptly altered the significance of home that Thamma had connected with Dhaka. She was no longer returning to Dhaka as a native, but rather as a foreigner. Thamma possesses a profound pride in her heritage and her lost family in Dhaka, as well as in her sister residing abroad and her spouse Sahib. She possesses a remarkable attachment to the family jewellery, yet she is willing to relinquish it if necessary to generate funds during periods of civil unrest. Thamma endures the intolerable weight of memory. She holds within her the treasury of her childhood residence, countless interactions, encounters, and both tangible and intangible possessions; however, she shares her laments with no one, merely gazing silently at the lake. Her hometown, Dhaka, has undergone such profound and radical transformations over the years that she can no longer find any correspondence between her memories of the place and the reality it presents.

Subsequent to her retirement, the grandmother encounters a friend from her Dhaka days, who informs her that the ninety-year-old Jethamoshai continues to reside in their former home in Dhaka, now inhabited by Muslim immigrants from India, and that he is being cared for by one such family. The grandma is resolute in her intention to return Jethamoshai to Calcutta. She poses an innocuous inquiry to the narrator's father on the visibility of the boundaries between India and East Pakistan from the aircraft. The narrator's father chuckles and enquires why she perceives the border as a long black line, with green on one side and crimson on the other, like to a school atlas.Thamma states:

> But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And 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, what was it all for the partition and all the killings and everything – if there isn't something inbetween." (TSL 151)

The grandmother's inquiry reflects the author's insight on the futility of political borders and the ineffectiveness of socio-political activities, culminating in the loss of innocent lives. The grandmother perceives no discernible resemblance between the Dhaka she left years ago and the city she now encounters as a stranger.The question that shereiterates throughout her visit is “Where’s Dhaka? Then Tridib Teasesher”: “But you are a foreigner now, you’re as foreign here as May-muchmore than May look at her, she doesn’t even need a visa to come here.At that, my grandmother gave May a long wondering look and said: yes,I really am a foreigner here as foreign as May in India or Tagore inArgentina. Then she caught another glimpse of the house and shook herhead and said: But whatever you may say this isn’t Dhaka. (TSL 195)It is only upon seeing their former residence that reality confronts them directly. The home has transformed; upon the sisters' arrival, they are disheartened to find it in a state of disrepair, with what was once their garden now occupied by an automotive factory and other people living there.Khalil, a rickshaw driver, and his family are caring for their elderly, decrepit uncle. The treasured beautiful picture of the home that Thamma had for years dissipates.

***The Glass Palace*: Colonialism's Echoes**

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh expands his canvas, tracing the intricate web of colonial relationships across Burma, India, and Malaya. As Edward Said notes, "colonialism is a matter of power, not merely of cultural exchange" (Said, 1978, p. 14). Ghosh's novel probes the complex dynamics of power, identity, and culture that emerged under colonial rule, revealing the ways in which colonialism insidiously shaped individual and collective identities. Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56) is particularly relevant here, as Ghosh's characters navigate the complex intersections of culture, identity, and power.

The Glass Palace is a novel about memory and moving. It combines history, fiction, and travel writing into a single story. In this case, the personal and the political fit together perfectly. Ghosh himself says, “It’s coming together of the many themes of my earlier novels.Writing this novel was like fighting a war” (62).The book is divided into seven parts, just like the beautiful rainbow. These parts show different sides of the personalities of people from different countries, such as King Thebaw and his Queen, Rajkumar and Dolly, Beni Prasad Dey and Uma, Saya John, Arjun, Dinu, and many more colonised victims. As the book starts, the sound of a 'English gun' can be heard in the distance outside of Mandalay's royal palace, which is called the 'Glass Palace'. Eleven-year-old Bengali orphan Kaala Rajkumar is working at Ma Cho's tea shop. The royal prisoners, Burmese King Thebaw and his pregnant wife Queen Supayalat, are sent into exile in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra. The palace is on the verge of loss after King Thebaw issues his "Royal Proclamation." The war started when the Burmese army gave up to the British on November 14, 1885. The King was then captured and sent into exile. The Burmese King, who used to work as a coloniser, is upset about losing his country and being locked up in Outram House in Ratnagiri. At the end, King Thebaw dies of a heart attack while living in exile. Over time, the history of the last Burmese King is lost and forgotten.Ira Pandey says, “What makes the tragedy of human lifebearable is a graceful acceptance of the inevitability of pain and suffering” (Outlook, 6).

The author provides a lot of information in the central part of the novel by Ghosh. He plays the part of the British Indian Army in Malaysia during the Second World War, when they fought the Japanese. This is taken care of by Arjun Roy, Uma Dey's nephew, his batsman Kishan, and Hardayal Singh in the 1/1 Jat Light Infantry. Some students and leaders of the Congress party ask Arjun, "From whom are you defending us? From ourselves? It's your masters from whom thecountry needs to be defended" (TGP, 288).In fact, these and other comments show that the writer is critical of being a colonised subject. Arjun Roy was proud of the Empire too, just like Beni Prasad Dey. He was happy to have joined the regiment that had won medals like the Victoria Cross from the Somme and two Military Crosses for putting down the Arab revolt in Mesopotamia.He writes to Manju, "What makes me prouder still is the thoughtthat Hardy and I are going to be the first Indian officers in the 1/1 Jats: it seems like such a hugeresponsibility- as though we are representing whole of the country" (262).He thinks of himself as the first modern Indian who doesn't let the past hold them back and lives with Westerners.

Memory, History, and Identity

Both novels underscore the significance of memory and storytelling in reconstructing fragmented histories and identities. As Marianne Hirsch notes, "postmemory is a powerful form of memory that shapes our understanding of the past" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 103). Ghosh's characters are often caught between competing narratives – personal, familial, national, and imperial – which they must navigate to make sense of their experiences. By foregrounding the role of memory and storytelling, Ghosh emphasizes the provisional nature of history and identity, highlighting the ways in which they are constantly negotiated and reinterpreted.

The Politics of Memory

Ghosh's novels also highlight the politics of memory, demonstrating how historical events are selectively remembered, distorted, or suppressed to serve the interests of those in power. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 1988, p. 271), highlighting the ways in which marginalized voices are silenced or erased from historical records. Ghosh's works challenge this erasure, amplifying the voices of those who have been silenced or forgotten.

Conclusion

Through *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh offers profound meditations on the enduring legacies of colonialism and partition. As Partha Chatterjee notes, "the nation is a contested terrain, a site of struggle and negotiation" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 15). Ghosh's novels remind us that these historical events continue to shape our world, influencing our understanding of identity, culture, and power. By exploring the complex interplay between history, memory, and identity, Ghosh's works encourage us to engage with the past in all its complexity, acknowledging the ongoing relevance of these events in our contemporary world.

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