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A NOTION OF MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINE*

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Abstract

Postcolonial Indian writers chronicle the trans-cultural changes and adjustments brought by migration. Amitav Ghosh declares that ongoing human history is the subject of his writing, and the immigrant writer is a part expressing the lives in progress. The postcolonial migrant literature foregrounds and celebrates a historical weightlessness and cultural conflicts. The experience of cultural transplantation lends new perspectives and creative potentialities for diaspora writers and they have fashioned astounding artistic patterns. Located in the metropolitan West, Ghosh recreates the contemporary social milieu and cultural crisis in his native land and attempts to redefine it in the emerging post-colonial context. He mixes the past, the present and the future and the imperial and the colonial cultures in his fiction, dislocating time and subverting the imperial purpose in the process. has won many accolades for his fiction that is keenly intertwined with history. His fiction is characterized by strong themes that may be sometimes identified as historical novels. His themes involve emigration, exile, cultural displacement and uprooting. second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) which was published four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This sad event constitutes a logical background in the novel, and it makes readers probe various hammering facets of violence. Also, his treatment of violence in Calcutta and Dhaka in this novel is valid and relevant record even today. The novel focuses on the narrator's family in Calcutta and Dhaka and their connection with an English family in London.

Keywords

Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Migration, Displacement, Postcolonialism.

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Amitav Ghosh, one of the most celebrated authors in Indian English, has won many accolades for his fiction that is keenly intertwined with history. His fiction is characterized by strong themes that may be sometimes identified as historical novels. His themes involve emigration, exile, cultural displacement and uprooting. He illuminates the basic ironies, deep seated ambiguities and existential dilemmas of human condition. Migration as “the physical movement of people within and between social systems” (Johnson 177) makes its strong presence in Ghosh’s texts through numerous migrant characters. Interestingly, migration of these characters takes place under the aegis of events in history. Also, having read his novels, it is not surprising to learn that Ghosh himself was first a student of history in college (Hawley 68). His characters, both historical and unhistorical, experience a movement from their place of birth to a foreign or alien land.

Amitav Ghosh addresses the impact of migration as it befalls on his migrants. In the new land migrants driven out of their country by force are puzzled of their position while undergoing a confused state of mind. They experience a sense of rootlessness that could only be made stable with a possible return back home. This further leads to a feeling of alienation as the migrants are in constant search of their identity: “The sense of exile results in a deep feeling of loss, ache, separation, yearning for recuperation and restoration” (Shukla & Shukla 7). What they are and where they belong are questions that irritate their minds. They are not able to let go of their old identity nor are they content with their new distinctiveness. What emerges is a sense of belonging that creeps into their minds creating further complications. They are clueless if they should either submerge themselves into the new place and its people or cling on hopelessly to their own nationality. While hankering for the land of their birth they are also placed in a fixed position troubled by the new identity they are absorbed into.

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The better reference in this context is his celebrated second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) which was published four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This sad event constitutes a logical background in the novel, and it makes readers probe various hammering facets of violence. Also, his treatment of violence in Calcutta and Dhaka in this novel is valid and relevant record even today. The novel focuses on the narrator's family in Calcutta and Dhaka and their connection with an English family in London. A boy conjures up a picture of London so vivid in his imagination that he recognizes it when he visits years later and learns that real places can be invented inside one's head. From Dhaka to London, this novel contains a wealth of colourful characters in the fantastic backdrop of historical narratives. The plot of this novel, as a matter of fact, tends to engage readers and "deeply resonate for many Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis" (Hawley).

The novel also highlights nostalgia, which is, in real sense, an intrinsic part of history. The characters suffer a sense of loss and isolation. They are always hankering after the past, for those days and for those places that are no longer traceable. For example, reminiscences of her childhood in Dhaka keep haunting Tha'mma, who has been living in Calcutta for about two decades. For her, Calcutta can never be Dhaka which used to be her home. It is a story of a middle class Indian family settled in Calcutta. The boy narrator presents the views of the members of his immediate and extended family, thus, giving each a well defined character. Ila decides to live in a foreign land only with the hope that she will be accepted and absorbed into the life pattern of that land. She is so charmed by British ideologies and values that she aspires for an attachment and anxiously craves for a union with the colonisers. What matters to her is the union with the English people even if she has to cut ties with all her Indian people and family members. The freedom that she sees in the British way of life appeals to her while she rejects her own Indian culture that she perceives as hypocritical and deceitful. She is very clear about her alliance with the English people that makes her scream out loud before her uncle Robi and the narrator the reason for having chosen to live in London. For her London symbolises freedom, emancipation and a free spirit. She says:

"Do you see why I've chosen to live in London? Do you? It's only because I want to be free ... Free of you! She shouted back. Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you" (*The Shadow Lines* 88-9).

Amitav Ghosh eloquently sketches the migrants "desperate urge to migrate to foreign lands, where their dream to be accepted only leads to futility." This is exactly what Ila goes through but a situation that she brushes aside and ignores. First of all she is attracted to all that is alien. Her wish to become one with the English people will never materialise. Even as a young girl in school her acceptance by the British family, the Prices, fails to give her the recognition that she has been earnestly waiting and expecting for. "Ila didn't have any friends in school. . . . Nick Price was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian" (*The Shadow Lines* 76). He prefers to run away than rescue her while she is being bullied by her class mates in school. In spite of this rejection Ila is still very much attracted by the place and people that she continues to pursue her desire desperately seeking acceptance until she gets herself deeply entangled in an illusionary relationship with Nick.

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Her marriage to Nick is the second example of her futile attraction for the alien. For it is a marriage of convenience where the jobless Nick gets support from Ila's father and Ila migrates to London. Consequently it leads to futility. "He wanted to make a point; to let me (Ila) know that I shouldn't take anything for granted just because we're living in a flat my father's bought for me. And because I have a job and he doesn't" (*The Shadow Lines* 188). Nick exerts his control by having affairs with other women. Ila "dialled the number . . . a female voice answered - breathless, as though they'd had a playful tussle" (*The Shadow Lines* 187).

The consequence of such a futile migration that Ila has been fighting for has instead only displaced and distanced her from her country, her people and her identity. Behind such a migration is Ila's belief that by uprooting herself from her native country she will be absorbed into the English land. Unfortunately her migration only takes away her sense of belonging. She becomes an outsider in the land of her birth and the land of her adoption as well. Painfully Ila finds herself at crossroads where she leads a life of mental trauma and hurt and never return home to comfort and happiness.

Migration particularly in the case of forced migrations, leads to displacement, because the migrants experience on the one hand reluctance to return to one's country and on the other hand a yearning to return to one's native country. The sense of displacement that they experience is expressed in two ways – through memories of home, and a yearning to visit their home. Memories of their home are treasured in their hearts and minds. These are memories that unfold in the form of an attachment that people have towards their once cherished but now estranged land.

Amitav Ghosh presents a dual conflict of migration due to Partition that creates a sense of displacement, dilemma and perplexity in the hearts of individuals, as seen in *The Shadow Lines*. Originally from Dhaka, Thamma journeys from her native land to Kolkata in search of a job for subsistence and to educate her son as she now has to fend for her family after the death of her husband. Once there "she had no time to go back to Dhaka in the next few years. And then in 1947, came Partition, and Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan. There was no question of going back after that" (*The Shadow Lines* 125). But Thamma clings on to her life in Dhaka and remembers places like Shadow-Bazar, the Royal Stationery and the jewellery shop with great clarity. Thamma is unable to split her bonds with the past. She may be carrying an exterior of toughness and self-reliance, yet she goes through nostalgia and pain in her heart. She longs for a return to the land of her birth. When she returns to Dhaka temporarily Thamma experiences a sense of alienation. The conflict arises the moment Thamma steps into Dhaka. The Dhaka she witnesses now is absolutely different from the Dhaka of her birth. She is unable to recognise places and is shocked that the place that she has always considered home is no longer identifiable: "Yes, I really am a foreigner here But whatever you may say, this isn't Dhaka. . . . this is for foreigners; where's Dhaka?" (*The Shadow Lines* 195).

Dhaka is no longer familiar to her and nor does she become familiar to her uncle. "She's a foreigner Ukil-babu. She's come from Calcutta with your relatives" (*The Shadow Lines* 213). The present speaks of the harsh and cruel reality of an estrangement and a drift that has dislodged her from her native soil when the shadow lines were drawn as indicating the maps of nations of India and Bangladesh. These were lines invisible to the naked eyes yet they perfectly create a divide

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among fellow human beings. Here voluntary migration is a sincere choice made by the migrants with hopes of improving their lots through better job opportunities, better living conditions, higher education prospect, a fascination towards a different and new way of life and also an absolute urge to associate themselves with the land of adoption.

The theme of migration and displacement is incomplete without a discussion on Ghosh's reflection of diaspora. Diaspora is any dispersion of people from their homeland that is usually permanent in nature. Ghosh's earlier explorations of nationhood and diaspora of relationships between individuals and communities that transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders are extended in his novels (Anshuman A. Mondal 15).

Thamma has been permanently displaced from Dhaka and is re-rooted in India. She has a constant and strong yearning to return to her country. Kolkata is never her home. She rather feels alienated and distanced in her adopted country. Thamma may have crossed borders in search of means of subsistence to support herself and her family yet this shift leaves her heart and mind empty of any attachment towards the strange land. Far away from home, family, friends and country she lives in perpetual craving for her native land.

Migration and displacement play a very significant role in the works of Amitav Ghosh. With migration and displacement as a subject Ghosh has very consciously unraveled the historical situations and conditions responsible for the movement of people from their place of origin to a foreign land. Ghosh's novels display in abundance these displaced people's distress and agony. They have no choice over their condition but are pushed out of their country into a new, foreign and unknown land. He traces his characters' plight as they are received into a new environment amidst unfamiliar people.

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