

## Reflections of the Past in Amitav Ghosh's Novels -*The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper takes into discussion the diasporic phenomena, namely, rootlessness, nostalgia, memory and alienation in two of Amitav Ghosh's novels namely *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*. It infers that the characters get respite from memory banks. Ghosh uses the flashback technique in order to intensify the characters' quest for identity. Diasporic literature traverses barricades in order to clinch a new selfhood. The very thought and longing for belongingness form the core to search for the original root. It refers to the rootedness namely one's home-place. One is not able to detach from the human bondage, sentiments, and love. Another element which is associated with this attachment to home-place is 'Memory'. An immigrant never forgets one's home-place. The thread which links the past and the present is the recollection. Thus, nostalgia and memory are equally interlinked to search for one's root or belongingness. This fixation to one's home-place is the belongingness which is portrayed through the lens of recollection and flash back technique. Past always acts as a mirror in which the present has its reflections. In the *Shadow Lines* the glorious memories of Calcutta and Dhaka are beautifully pictured by the characters longing for their homelands. The partition of Bengal and the resultant trauma are widely depicted. The old family house stands as a wholesome framework of attachment of deeprootedness. It remains a home for the grandmother, even after partition and she always longs to see it again. In the *Glass Palace*, home thoughts are not something to be merely remembered as an abstract construct but represented as a cultural tool of negotiation for new cultural encounters. Thus, a new space is created through home thoughts which helps in the construction of a new identity. The past is remembered not as a dead, remote period, but as flowing on, into the present.

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### Introduction

The diasporic literature of the twenty-first century has been enriched by the issues of transnationalism, hybridity and identity crisis and they serve as vital issues in today's era of globalization. The diasporic phenomenon that are interlinked are: the concept of home, rootlessness, nostalgia, memory and alienation. These diasporic elements form recurrent themes in writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. Diasporic literature traverses barricades in order to clinch a new selfhood. It defines and sometimes redefines variegated contacts of time and space. According to Gurbhagat Singh, Expatriate writing, in its theory and practice, is the work of exile who has experienced unsettlement at the existential, political and metaphysical levels. With this experience, he/she unsettled the philosophical and aesthetic systems. The phenomenon of exile has emerged in our times due to uneven development within capitalism and due to the movement forced by colonial powers. (21)

The very thought and longing for belongingness form the core to search for the original root. It refers to the rootedness namely one's home-place. One is not able to detach from the human bondage, sentiments, and love. The notion of home is

not restricted to a bounded space or territory. This home-place is the 'root' from where people get dispersed and to which they long to return 'Home' holds the total meaning of belonging or attachment.

Another element which is associated with this attachment to home-place is 'Memory'. An immigrant never forgets one's home-place. The thread which links the past and the present is the recollection. This reduces the distance between the alien country and homeland. Through flash-back technique, the past incidents of the native land are reflected. Such fragmented bits are recaptured through memory which also acts as a lens to view the past.

Nostalgia entwines the notion of Home and Memory. The term 'nostalgia' is derived from the Greek 'nostos' – return home and 'algos' – pain and it refers to the homesickness and a yearning for home. It ties the immigrants with their home-place. Through nostalgia one is able to construct a 'imagined world' a new cultural third space where the cultural distinctness is blurred.

The immigrants feel isolated and alienated because of the absence of their own native culture. Thus, a state of mental imbalance is created. The main reasons of alienation are lack of adaptability, lack of acculturation, inability to feel oneness with the alien environment etc. The main ingredients associated with one's home-place may be language, culture, food, religion, dress, rituals, etc. These attachments always form part and parcel of a human being. One's home is conceptualized as a genealogical tree rooted in native soil from where people derive their identity. Mobilization and settlement in an alien land cannot keep an individual away from his/her attachment to home-place. As this home-place occupies a vital and dominant place in one's livelihood, great writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai have taken this complex issue of 'belongingness' and search for identity in their writings.

Thus, nostalgia and memory are equally interlinked to search for one's root or belongingness. This fixation to one's home-place is the belongingness which is portrayed through the lens of recollection and flash back technique. Past always acts as a mirror in which the present has its reflections. Because of globalization, the diasporic phenomenon such as mongrelization of culture, food, creolization of language are incorporated with fluidity and uncertain identity and belongingness. These components are negotiated and they form a platform in diasporic writings of the twenty-first century. Even though, an immigrant attempts to build a new home of emotional attachment, his/her recollection of the past events can never erase their original home thoughts which are always marked with sentiments, intimacy and love.

Amitav Ghosh has been aware of the impact of politics, historically generated on the lives of common people. He posits the view that human relationship is the quintessence of all living. Hence, all the entire bulk of his fiction stands deep-rooted in its stress on human relationship. Amitav Ghosh is known for his mastery over the historical past, from where he excavates events that turn out to be the raw ingredients for his fiction. Also, his sense of history delivers a different message. It is to a greater degree posing his patriotic fervour and subjective understanding of the Indian mind. Amitav Ghosh expresses his concern in a psycho-social perspective, that is, he deliberates his issues as standing in steadfast relationship of the man, his inner-man and his community. As John C. Hawley writes: ". . . but first and foremost, and

overriding all the main ideas that inform his work are the stories, the Dickensian proliferation of characters whose lives engage us and who take us to some richly imagined places and times" (1). Before attempting to record the nostalgic moments generated out of the home thoughts from abroad, the following quotation might very well foreground the situation.

'Yes. But it's hard, Dolly – it's hard to think of leaving: Burma has given me everything I have. The boys have grown up here: they've never known any home. When I first came to Mandalay the nakhoda of my boat said: This is a golden land – no one ever starves here. That proved true for me, and despite everything that's happened recently. I don't think I could ever love another place in the same way. (GP 309-10).

In the novel, *The Glass Palace*, Dolly is able to change herself according to the situations. She accepts and accommodates successfully in her new place and calls it her own home-place. She asserts, "This is my home" (119). Ghosh's novels suggest the need for co-existence and strong humanitarian ties across cultures, overlooking personal, regional and political considerations. He tries to imaginatively reconstruct the past throughout his novels with the central concern of devising the invisible threads that link humanity. The characters in Ghosh's novels are conditioned by events which embark on a back and forth journey towards the search of identity. There is a continual narration of events woven in a very delicate manner. Thus there is a flow of history from past to present which creates a fluid pattern of time. There is then the dilemma of the expatriate artist who is precariously fixed on the borderline between the past and the present.

In *The Shadow Lines* the glorious memories of Calcutta and Dhaka are beautifully pictured by the characters longing for their homelands. The partition of Bengal and the resultant trauma are widely depicted. This separation has created vast dislocation of people in Pakistan and India. This dislocation of people as refugees is one of the major concerns of the novel. Even though they are separated by partition by lines, these lines remain only as shadow lines erased by past memory, longing and nostalgia.

Memory and past home thoughts act as a recurring background throughout the novel. In this novel one could see two kinds of dislocations namely forced migration and professional migration. The first one was due to the partition of Bengal and the latter happened due to the high skilled work force of India. Ghosh beautifully highlights how these 'shadows' of imaginary and remembered spaces haunt all the characters in the novel as they narrate their collective histories to each other. The shadow lines point at the grey realms of imagination and memory.

According to Urabashi Barat, the story of *The Shadow Lines* is of course one that quite obviously conforms to the bildungsroman pattern of beginning in the childhood of the narrator – protagonist and ending in his attaining adulthood and maturity. Each stage of his development is clearly demarcated through the change of location demanded of the bildungsroman. (21)

*The Shadow Lines* also beautifully pictures how the narrator stands out as an adult who is deep rooted in his childhood experiences. The way he faces his present has its reflections from his past. His experiences and his reactions stem out of his childhood past. Tridib narrates about his childhood experiences at London and it automatically makes one imagine his own memories. Because of the deep-rooted attachment and longing, one could see the depth of his past always peeping in the present. The central motif that intertwines in *The Shadow Lines* is memory. This is because of one's longing and nostalgic attachment to the past. Memory of every individual is measured against the intensity of how much one shares his past experiences with other persons. The memories of Tridib far exceed those of Ila in the novel in quality and intensity.

The old family house stands as a wholesome framework of attachment of deep rootedness. It remains a home for the grandmother, even after partition and she always longs to see it again. Her visit to her ancestral house in Dhaka symbolizes her longing and her past memorable experiences in that house.

The novel captures the trauma of emotional ruptures in a beautiful manner. The past is reconstructed through houses, photographs, maps, road names and newspapers. There are two encounters which the narrator recalls. The first one when he accompanied Thamma, Mayadebi and Tridib to bring the narrator's grandmother's uncle, Jethamoshai from Dhaka to Calcutta was a witness to Tridib's killing which was an episode of communal violence. Secondly, he recalls when the narrator visited London where he met May. There is a jumbled way of recollections of events right from 1939-40, 1960-63, and 1978-79. These blurred temporal and spatial fragments manipulate in a coherent stretch so as to stage the post-colonial situations and cultural dislocations.

The immigrants, as they experience the new cultural paradigm, begin to have a sense of rootlessness. They begin to evolve a new nostalgic pattern in which, one could sense a deep longing for their homeland. Ghosh has presented in his fiction many an instance of these home thoughts from abroad. While drawing instances of this nostalgic intricacy, he attempts to establish the point that these remembrances of the past do give them a reprieve from the present miseries. Home thoughts are generated only in those immigrants who refuse to acculturate themselves in the existing cultural space.

In *The Glass Palace*, home thoughts are not something to be merely remembered as an abstract construct but represented as a cultural tool of negotiation for new cultural encounters. Hence, home thoughts generate as a dynamic arrangement which comes among people, and even cultures, so that a meaning is forged. Thus, a new space is created through home thoughts which helps in the construction of a new identity. Ghosh seeks an understanding of the past to have a bearing upon the present. The past is remembered not as a dead, remote period, but as flowing on, into the present, postcolonial situations of multi-ethnic, pluralist societies, of boundaries and mutations of nations imposed by the colonial rulers and complex cultural diversities of a persistent political struggle for democratic and egalitarian system.

*The Glass Palace* (2000) is a tale of three generations of a family, and as according to Jagroop S. Biring,

*The Glass Palace* is a probing critique of the civilizational imperialism of the British rulers, which colonized the native mind by reframing the existing structures of human knowledge into East. West binaries of orientalism . . . The supremacy and superiority of the colonizer get so much ingrained in the native psyche that he becomes thoroughly subservient to the master and the valorization of constructions like a nation and national identity. (96, 98).

Ghosh's fiction covers a politically anarchic cosmos. His fiction also tends towards autobiography, since he has been pressurized by the tyrannical claims of social and psychological data. He becomes its protagonist and he naturally begins to populate his characters into the backdrop of post-colonialism. Post-colonialism and diaspora have a unified stress on grudge and grieve owing to displacement or rather an encounter with multiculturalism. So, naturally he posits the internal griever, the self develops as against the other. As Dasan puts it, "Postcolonialism as an academic subject comes into play in the context of the colonization of the mind as a fact of the world, a fact that divides into self versus the other, the centre versus periphery, the colonizer and the colonized" (1). The characters still face the problem of finding a space ready to accommodate them. The discovery of displacement frees them to live in the world as it is on its terms.

With precisely a verbal recall of historical events, Ghosh brings into focus what he has observed in life by travelling. Hence, with an honest use of language punctuated by irony, he manipulates the evils of the past and the present successfully.

This paper takes into discussion the diasporic phenomena, namely, rootlessness, nostalgia, memory and alienation. It infers that the characters get respite from memory banks. Ghosh uses the flashback technique in order to intensify the characters' quest for identity. Also, the author has identified those particular immigrants who withdraw into themselves in isolation and derive a sense of release recollecting the past walking down the memory lane.

### About the Authors

**Dr. J. Anney Alice Sharene** was born in Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu in 1970. She was motivated by her parents from her early years to cultivate the habit of Reading books. She started writing short stories in her school days. Teaching was her passion. She started her career as a teacher. Then she worked as an Assistant Professor in a reputed Technological Institution in Tamil Nadu for fifteen years. Presently she works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English in Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Wadi al Dawaser, Saudi Arabia. She lives in Saudi Arabia with her daughter. She completed her Doctorate Degree, *Negotiating Diasporic Identity in Amitav Ghosh's Novels* in Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tamil Nadu in 2012. Her area of specialization is Diasporic Literature. She is interested in this specific area as it moves parallel with the reality of life. Also, Diasporic Literature is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. Her author for PH.D., was Amitav Ghosh who is one of the well-known faces in English literature. His writings received great critical acclaim: winning several awards and major nominations. She presented papers in many conferences.

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