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A Critical Appreciation of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Amitav Ghosh is a major contemporary Indian English novelist and winner of many prestigious prizes and his works have been analyzed as illustrations of postmodern and postcolonial writing. Amitav Ghosh beautifully shares his real life experience and knowledge of history and interconnects with the contemporary world. His works includes *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2005), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and some other non-fictions. Commenting on the position of Amitav Ghosh in the Indian English Fiction, Anup Benivwal writes “witnessed an effervescence of a new generation of creative talents – Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Alan Sealy, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Taroor ... who virtually revolutionized and re plotted the literary and cultural map of India. (1)

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956. His father was a service man in Indian Army. Initially, he joined Doon school, Dehra Dun for early education. He also studied at Delhi University and went to St. Edmund Hall, Oxford pursue postgraduate work and in 1979 obtained a diploma in social anthropology. Later he completed his PhD on the same genre. Yesapogu rightly observes:

In the contemporary Indian Literary scenario Amitav Ghosh is the only writer who reflects the truth of Indian reality. He bears numerous responsibilities in the world of literature. He executes with admirable aplomb as an anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer, teacher and slips into global responsibility for establishing peace as an ambassador. He has excelled the global literary standards set by the post colonial and post modern writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Sashi Tharoor, Arundhati Roy etc. He has become the colossal central socio literary figure with a substantial body of work drawing the global attention. He has become the only negotiator to mediate the core social and cultural problems of India and other colonized nations. All his major works have enjoyed immense academic attention across the globe and it has invited and produced a great amount of literary criticism.(1)



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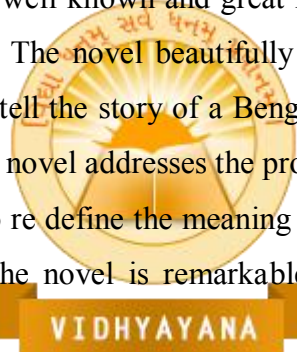
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Amitav Ghosh has received numerous awards for his works. Some of these awards are Prix Medicis Etranger for 'The Circle of Reason' (1986), the Sahitya Akademi Award for 'The Shadow Lines' (1988), the Arthur C. Clarke Prize for science fiction for 'The Calcutta Chromosome (a thread like structure in a cell nucleus carrying genes)' (1996), the Pushcart Prize for his essay, "The March of the Novel through History: My Father's Bookcase" and the Grand Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt International e-Book Awards for 'The Glass Palace'. Ghosh is regarded as the renowned novelist and famous anthropologist. During his life time he visited many countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Egypt and America. Amitav Ghosh is remarkable for his great contribution in the field of postmodern Indian English fiction. His writing reflects his vast knowledge and his deep experience of existing human and social problems.

The Shadow Lines: A Critical Appreciation:

The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh is a well known and great novel. It was published in 1988 and won the Prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. The novel beautifully captures the perceptual views of time and events that brings people together. It tell the story of a Bengali family in which the novelist explores multiple dimensions of interpretation. The novel addresses the problems and issue of three generations in a family. Through this novel, Ghosh tries to re define the meaning of political freedom in the contemporary society and the power of nationalism. The novel is remarkable in its complexity of theme, language, narration and symbolism.



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The title of the novel is symbolic and suggestive and indicates the central theme of the novel. It goes beyond its literary meaning and becomes a philosophical statement that evokes inner human tendency and struggle for existence. 'The Shadow Lines' is an illusion of human mental and spiritual condition. The lines that are beyond the definition reflect the situation of divided psyche. Shadows are generally deceived and represent both the sides real and illusion. It suggests that the world around is complex phenomenon and misleading. In a way, a shadow is like a "fair weather friend" in that it appears to us only when the sun is directly overhead. While every human being casts a unique shadow, a common theme can be seen in them all, namely that they are just as much a part of us as they are detached from us. This is another realm in which Ghosh metaphorically uses the elements of shadow lines to tell his story. The human understanding has its own limitation and the faithful representation of reality will remain like a shadow. In way, the title leads you beyond the geographical and cultural boundaries of time and space. As Meenakshi Mukherjee writes: "Time in this novel can be illusory and concrete at the same time and likewise space can be fluid



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even when held solidly within the concrete scaffolding of a house or confirmed within the firm outlines etched national boundaries on a map.” (5)

In the very beginning of the novel four major characters Tridib, the grandmother, Ila and the narrator are introduced. Interesting, the narrator is unidentified who describes the story. In all the characters, Tridib is describe as the unconventional male and recognized as positive personality. He is a true friend of the narrator who guides him in all the perspective. He has immense knowledge and romantic heart also. He is such unlucky fellow who losses his life due to riots. On the death of Tridib, Tha'mma recollects the folliing lines from Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall*:

He moves in darkness as it seems to me

Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

He will not go behind his father's saying,

And he likes having thought of it so well.”



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Another, main character Tha'mma is a narrator's grandmother who plays an active during the struggle of India's Independence against the British Empire. She represents modern middle class woman who is a nationalist. As Anjali describes her:

Tha'mma's search for the pre-partition Dhaka of her childhood and youth is projected as nostalgia for home. Tha'mma's attempt to identify herself as a native Dhakaian from the older parts of the city, who is contemptuous of the alien inhabitants of the new residential localities, records her amnesia in relation to her new Indian identity when confronted with more compelling claims of an older solidarity.(110)

Unlike, the grandmother, Ila has different pont of view of freedom. She has English mindset and life style. After the marriage with Nick, she finds her life in restriction. The narrator could not digest Ila's nature and way of thinking. He says “Ila lived so intensely in the present... whereas with her, when she spoke of her last lover's legs, the words had nothing to do with an excitement stored in her senses, but were just a string of words that she would remember while they sounded funny and then forget as completely as she had the lover and his legs. (30)”



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The narrator is a strong portrayal in the novel *The Shadow Lines*. The story of the novel is the story of narrator's family of three generations which takes place at Dhaka, Calcutta and London. It covers many significant events of the time like partition of India, the Second World War and regional revolutionary movements. The narrator's identity is intensely not revealed by the author to generalize the character in a broader way. The narrator tries to re-discover the meaning of nationalism. Throughout the novel the narrator recovers different events from the past and comments on the current reality. He himself describes his own attitude and says "I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates. That it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war of friendship." (219)

The novel portrays a landscape of symbolism and realism that spans both time and space and moves at the certain levels of reality. The physical border and imaginary border illustrates human psychology in a symbolic way. The novel captures the image of India during the time of partition. The western influence on the life style of India and people's mentality is skillfully presented by the author. In the novel, Amitav Ghosh artistically reveals his concerns about the time and space. The characters are struggling to connect with the present situation and find difficulty to remain at the same. The outer world is depicted with the inner world of conflict and complexity.

The craftsmanship is another typical characteristic of Amitav Ghosh as a novelist. *The Shadow Lines* is the appropriate example in which Ghosh shows his talent of crafting a novel. In the narrative method, he follows Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. The narration in *The Shadow Lines* moves between time present and time past in the memory of unnamed narrator. The narrative becomes unique with the merging events of history and allegorical representation of India by the recollection and experience of the narrator. In the first person narration it follows the stream of consciousness technique which can be referred as memory novel. Ghosh himself tells about his art of narration.

...*The Shadow Lines* and Proust certainly had a great impact on that book.... Proust's influence on *The Shadow Lines* is clearly evident I think, even in the structure of its sentences. Similarly, it was in deference to Proust that the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* was left unnamed. But Proust's influence is evident also in the ways in which time and space are



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collapsed in the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*. I remember that at the time my ambition was to do with space what Proust had done with time: that is, to make completely different instances of a continuum immanent in each other. (Hawley 8-9)

In a way *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh remarkable in its theme, structure, language and narrative style. It represents the postcolonial and postmodern tendency of Indian society. The novel attempts to decolonize the notion of nationalism and geographical boundaries. The novel holds a unique position in the post colonial Indian English literature and addresses certain issues pertaining to race, identity, and gender, cultural and psychological division of the society and reveals the politics of nationalism and globalization.



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