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QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL, 'THE SHADOW LINES'

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ABSTRACT

The postcolonial characters in Amitav Ghosh's novel 'The Shadow Lines' are in quest of an identity of their own, procreated by themselves from the situations. The grandmother in the novel is a refugee in one sense and Ila is a rootless in this modern world, and the unnamed narrator looks into the world through the eyes of his uncle Tridib. The anti-imperialist and jingoistic grandmother's national faith is based on her sincerity and loyalty both to her nation and family. Ila's identity is based on diaspora and conceited colonialist superiority. The unnamed narrator's identity is based on the situations of history.

Key Words: Identity, anti-imperialist, loyalty, colonialist.

Introduction

The postmodern novelist Amitav Ghosh's major novels *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* move around the issues of wandering cosmopolitan in this postcolonial and postmodern world. The characters in his novels narrate their own India and moves around the world most of the time a lonely journey, having ephemeral love relationship and ends up with a crater or silence in an aloof zone. In *Post-Colonial Transformation* Bill Ashcroft says, "The spatial significance and the frequent paradox of colonial nationalism becomes obvious when we consider the amount of emotional and political energy expended, in the name of such artificial, detached and culturally erroneous boundaries. The question of how post-colonial people are to inhabit the space defined by these boundaries, how they are to retrieve the 'placeness' of such a space, lies at the heart of the political realities of the post-colonial state". *The Shadow Lines* is the narrative of colonial historical past transforming the lives of the characters by an artificial, detached and culturally erroneous boundary separating them from their birth place. East and west meets in the novel on the ground of friendship through the characters like Tridib, May Price, the writer himself, Ila Datta-Chowdhury, Nick Price and Mrs. Price. The "Partition of Bengal" is the crux of the communal tension for the displacement of the grandmother. The postcolonial perception of personal identity is shaped by appalling tragedy of partition is obvious. Bill Ashcroft is especially expressive on this issue, "The appalling tragedy of partition is only a more obvious, more brutal example of the destructiveness of imperial mapping but it is a story that has been played out time and again in the colonial world, with the establishment of boundaries that have been capricious at best, often absurd and, in many cases, catastrophic". Even after getting rid of the

colonial rule the post-coloniality has still existed in the form of secessionist attitudes, communal tension and power related complex situations. The novel exemplifies both the artificiality of national frontiers and the inter-connectedness of supposedly separate places and experiences.

The postcolonial anxiety about the quest for identity is depicted by Amitav Ghosh in his novel *The Shadow Lines* through the memory of the situations of socio-cultural conflict, war and separation, travelling and hybridity. The unnamed narrator in the novel is constantly engaged in the imaginative renewal of times, places, events and people of the past. This remembering is polarized with nostalgia, often darkened by dull shades of grief, but continuously in search of a meaning for an identity. The narrator's contact with other characters and their lives traces the political, social, intellectual and emotional parameters of English speaking, bilingual, metropolitan, middle class Indian subjectivity. Thus, identity is a product of images and desires of human subjectivity. The personal history of anti-imperialism has created a notion of identity in the novel. *The Shadow Lines* is a novel which depicts the postcolonial conflict of life for a quest for identity with a self-conscious meditation on the themes and subjects of nationality, internationality, cultural and historical self-determination and enormously conflicted transition from nationalist freedom struggle to the disillusionment and discontents of the free independent nation state of India.

Discussion

The novel *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh is the narration of the story of an unnamed boy's memory of experience of this world and people. The *ur*-hero, *ur*-narrator and *ur*-imagination Tridib gives the narrator a world to travel in and the eyes to see with long before he ever leaves Calcutta. The grown up narrator faces the real world to experience many things of the history of that century, the socio-political life and the cultural milieu. The novel focuses on freedom to create an identity from different perspectives.

The postcolonial anxiety about the quest for identity is very prominent in the novel where characters are always questing for identity through their various activities of the memory of the situations of socio-cultural conflict, war and separation, travelling and hybridity. The narrator's contact with other characters and their lives traces the political, social, intellectual and emotional parameters of English speaking, bilingual, metropolitan, middle class Indian subjectivity. The identity is a product of images and desires of human subjectivity. The personal history of anti-imperialism has created a notion of identity in the novel. The novel is an extremely self-conscious meditation on the themes of nationality, internationality, cultural and historical self-determination.

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis grounded in the premise of the unconscious is 'structured like a language', which in turn highlight important aspects of life of signs in human society. In his "Mirror Stage" (1929) article Lacan directs his attention to the imaginary, the elected domain of binary oppositions and of the ego, the ideal representation of oneself dogged by three passions: love, hate and ignorance. The 6-18 month old child sets up mechanisms of identification with objects outside like material things, other people, or the image in the mirror. These mechanisms are ambivalent affects: first jubilation at the recognition of one's own image soon marred by a sense of anguish when the child realizes that the changing reflection is a fake. The function of the image is that it is the first mediator and the perpetual other. Sooner or later, a name has to replace the image in the mirror.

As mirror deals with illusory space, the reflection of the imagined is creating some illusory meaninglessness in the novel *The Shadow Lines*. The projecting space of mirrors has literal and metaphorical significance in the novel. The unnamed protagonist always looks through the mirror image of his *ur*-hero, *ur*-narrator and *ur*-imagination Tridib. His world is throughout the novel looked through the eyes of Tridib. He remembers the first going of Tridib to London and gives the detail of meeting Tridib first, "I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridib first talked to me about that journey. I remember trying very hard to imagine him back to my age, to reduce his height to mine, and to think away the spectacles that were so much a part of him that I really believed he had been born with them. It wasn't easy, for to me he looked old, impossibly old,...I had decided that he had looked like me". But his grandmother contradicted him and said,

"No, he looked *completely* different---not at all like you". The mirror image of the narrator turns to be a different person which is not the identity of the narrator.

The details of the story of Tridib's stay with the Prices at Lymington Road during the Second World War are engraved in the mind of the little unnamed narrator protagonist that after thirty years he could vividly re-live his uncle Tridib's experiences, "Slowly, as I looked around me, these scattered objects seemed to lose their definition... Those empty corners filled up with remembered forms, with the ghosts who had been handed down to me by time: the ghost of the nine-year-old Tridib, sitting on a camp bed, just as I was, his small face intent, listening to the bombs;". The unnamed narrator again says, "And still, I knew that the sights Tridib saw in his imagination were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I 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 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". The mirror image and desire can carry one beyond the limits of one's mind. But the unnamed narrator understands that he is not the same person like Tridib, "...I was not sure whether I would ever experience desire of that kind" but a kind of desire he possesses to look through the eyes of Tridib to know about the world and people makes him to understand many things which he has not witnessed before.

The unnamed narrator's idea that he is similar to Ila is an illusion when he understands that, "...that she and I were alike that I could have been her twin—it was that very Ila who baffled me again with the mystery of difference". The difference between him and Ila is a reality. The memory of the mirror image is a kind of bafflement. The unnamed narrator was introduced with Nick Price by Ila whom she desires. The narration goes, "After that day Nick Price, whom I had never seen, and would, as far as I knew, never see, became a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass; growing with me, but always bigger and better, and in some way more desirable---I did not know what, except that it was so in Ila's eyes and therefore true". The unnamed narrator looks at Nick through the eyes of Ila which is illusory, as May said him that Nick was at all different from all of them. The mirror images of Tridib, Ila and Nick were only to make the unnamed narrator understand and to realize about the differences that all of them possess. Thus, identity is a product of images and desires of human subjectivity.

When Tha'mma and Mayadebi met once in Calcutta, the unnamed narrator describes, "After I had touched Mayadebi's feet I looked up and saw they were holding hands over my head, like schoolgirls, smiling with their lips pressed together, full of merriment, in exactly the same way, as though there was a mirror between them". The identical posture between the two sisters which can be compared to a mirror image was a temporary phenomenon and makes the narrator to realize the totally different nature of the women. "But of course, Robi remarked, drawing patterns on the table with his beer, the fact was that they hadn't looked at all like each other; they were completely different". It is the reality that two women cannot be identical in their nature and personality. The realization is the recognition of the other in the society they live.

In a globalized world, solidarity exists beyond territorial and nation-state boundaries. Even in transnational forms of identity, territorial identities remain important. The novel *The Shadow Lines* gives an account of the national adventure of anti-imperialism. The personal history of anti-imperialism has created a notion of identity in the novel. History teaches Tha'mma and her uncle to be loyal to the territorial forms of identity. Separation from own birthplace is an anguish in where Tha'mma 'unbelonging' to the old place of her birth is a product of her circumstances. She is perplexed at the history that had led 'her place of birth to be so messily at odds with her nationality', that has made her a foreigner in her home town, Dhaka. She was surprised when she comes to know that she has to fill up a form to go to Dhaka and retorts, "There weren't any forms or anything and anyway travelling was so easy then. I could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted". The narrator as a little boy delighted to tease his grandmother who did not know the difference between coming and going who had been a schoolmistress for twenty-seven years. In his later life the narrator realizes that it was not his grandmother's fault at all, "it lay in language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to". Tha'mma's journey was a search for precisely that

fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. The anguish and agony of the past makes aware the old woman about her new identity.

Tha'mma, the grandmother of the narrator is an unabashed nationalist and she gives way her most loved gold chain with ruby studded in it for the movement against those people who were responsible for killing her nephew Tridib in that old country of her, now beyond the border. Tha'mma spent her childhood in Dhaka, a part of undivided India. "It's this war with Pakistan....She's never been the same you know, since they killed Tridib over there". Tha'mma became a nationalist and wanted to help fight against the country which was once her motherland. The personal history of anti-imperialism has created a notion of identity in the novel. The story of Tha'mma continues till Dhaka was the part of Pakistan.

The national identity for the old man, Jethamoshai of old Tha'mma living in the old house in Dhaka was not restricted by a border line between countries. Both of them were loyal to the territorial boundaries according to their own way. When his brother's daughters went to Dhaka to fetch him to Calcutta, India he made a straight reply, 'Once you start moving you never stop. I don't believe in this India-Shindia. ..but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here".

The nationalist identities of both Jethamoshai and Tha'mma are created beyond the borders. The old man tried to live to the last breath of his life in a country where nationality does not give him security. Again, Tha'mma lives and tries to be happy living in a country where she was not born. The shadow of the border lines has an effect on both of them. Tha'mma accepts the truth of her identity by trying to forget the past. She hates nostalgia. Narration goes by the narrator, "she has spent years telling me that nostalgia is a weakness, a waste of time, that it is everyone's duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future".

Hybridity is a concept popularized by postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha. It is the creation of new cultural forms and identities as a result of colonial encounter. Hybridity in postcolonial societies can be in the form of the retrieval or revival of a pre-colonial past or to adapt contemporary artistic and social productions to present-day conditions of globalization, multiculturalism. Ila and the grandmother are 'unrooted' characters. They are two typical twentieth century diaspora. Ila is a postcolonial cosmopolitan and the grandmother though she refuses the term is a refugee. Ila decided to live in London as she wanted a free life to live. But it was freedom that could be bought for the price of an air ticket. The bedridden Tha'mma warns the unnamed narrator to keep himself away from that spoilt Ila. Tha'mma wanted to know why Ila preferred to live in London because in London she shared houses with some other people, but in India she could have lived a very affluent life. The incident described by the narrator to his grandmother about Ila is the ultimate truth of her searching for an identity. She wanted to live in such a society where she can behave according to her own way. In a Calcutta hotel she was stopped by her uncle Robi from dancing with some unknown visitors of the hotel in the name of culture which made her angry and she shouted, "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? 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". But this is an illusory freedom. "It's not freedom she wants, said my grandmother. She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases. ...But that is not what it means to be free". The place for an identity created by Ila herself in London was not an identity with a voice within. The narrator was surprised and says, "I thought of how much they all wanted to be free; how they went mad wanting their freedom; ... whether I was alone in knowing that I could not live without the clamour of the voices within me". Ila, the grand-daughter of Mayadevi was longing for a kind of cultural freedom which she was unable to enjoy in India. Her identity is formed from her freedom as a woman brought up in western culture.

But the travelling nature of the unnamed narrator has not changed his likeness for his own culture, which again we find in Robi too, though he was born and brought up in foreign countries. The identity quest of Ila and the narrator and Robi is based on the hybridity that the modern people have to undergo.

Sooner or later, a name has to replace the image in the mirror. The projecting space of mirrors has literal and metaphorical significance in the novel. The mirror image of the narrator turns to be a different person which is not the identity of the narrator. The realization is the recognition of the other in the society.

The personal history of anti-imperialism has created a notion of identity in the novel. Identity is formed from freedom. Identity is a product of images and desires of human subjectivity.

Conclusion

The unnamed narrator, Tha'mma, Jethamoshai and Ila are creating a space of their own for an identity in the novel *The shadow Lines*. The identical elements found through the mirror images and later realization of the difference is playing a very vital role in understanding human psychology. National identity based on the loyalty to the respective countries to be found in the characters like Tha'mma and her old uncle Jethamoshai while Tha'mma was not happy with new Dhaka and Jethamoshai is happy to live in the place where he was born. Ila's identity is based on the acquired freedom to live away from her people to do whatever she pleases. This is an illusory freedom without an inner voice from heart. Jethamoshai, Robi and unnamed narrator are creating their own identity within the sphere of their own world of spaces and concept. The characters in the postcolonial novel *The Shadow Lines* quest for an identity of their own based on the illusory mirror image, national identity and cultural hybridity.

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