

Vol. XCIII, no.1
Jan-Mar 2018

The Vedic Path

Quarterly Journal of Vedic, Indological & Scientific Research

Peer-reviewed, UGC Approved Research Journal

(Sr no. 324, Journal no.49342)

ISSN 0970-1443

Registration no. 29063/76

indexed at

www.worldcat.org

Guide to Indian Periodical Literature

**Originally published as *The Vedic Magazine*
form 1906 to 1935
and thereafter as *The Vedic Path***

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Quarterly Journal of
Gurukula Kangri Vishwavidyalaya,
Haridwar, Uttarakhand, India

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**From Border to Trans-border Situations:
Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines***

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Abstract

Though the novel is written in the first person, we never come to know the name of the person even after the novel is read completely. There seems to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the novelist that the reader should not try to find out the name of the story teller. For Amitav Ghosh the story teller is not only an individual but also the supreme consciousness that pervades the life of every individual. The article analyzes the aspect of this supreme consciousness or the individual consciousness which becomes a battlefield in which there is no victory or defeat.

Key words : Borders, Nation State, Unity, Consciousness.

The very beginning of *The Shadow Lines* is significant to understand the novel: "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib" (Ghosh 3). It is quite appropriate to say that the novel begins as a recollection of events that have taken place not in the life of the narrator but in someone else's. It is also important to note that there is a very rich narrative texture. The story is told in layers, mixture of private and public events working towards unity. It is, however, very difficult to define the theme, perhaps at

the same time very easy to do so, for, it is a novel of “search” – search for self knowledge and self-identity.

The narrator describes the events that he had heard from Tridib- his cousin now deceased- when he is eight and undertakes a journey. It is therefore quite appropriate to call Tridib the mentor and alter ego of the narrator. When the narrator begins to identify himself with Tridib, the narrator’s grandmother chides him, for, she does not approve of Tridib. For the grandmother

Tridib is a “loafer and wastrel”(3) who wastes his time:

In my grandmother’s usage there was nothing very much worse that could be said of any one. For her time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn’t used. I asked her once what happened to wasted time. She tossed her small silvery head, screwed up her long nose and said: It begins to stink. As for herself, she had been careful to rid our little flat of everything that might encourage us to let our time stink. No chess-board or any pack of cards ever came through our door; there was a battered Ludo set somewhere but I was only allowed to play with it when I was ill. She didn’t even approve of my mother listening to the afternoon radio play more than once a week. In our flat all of us worked hard at whatever we did: my grandmother at her school mistressing; I at my homework; my mother at housekeeping, my father at his job as a junior executive in a company which dealt in vulcanized rubber.

Our time wasn’t given the slightest opportunity to grow mouldy. That was why I loved to listen to Tridib : he never seemed to use his time, but his time didn’t stink.

(4)

In *The Shadow Lines* the action takes place in different continents –Europe, Asia, and Africa – and in different

countries –India, Bangladesh, and England. The novel is divided into two parts: “Going Away” and “Coming Home.” There is a shift of time from the past to the present and from the present to the past. “Going Away” can be interpreted as “going away from the self” and “Coming Home” can be interpreted as “coming back into the self”; So, there is the concept called “coming and going” (not belonging) which is expressed as part of family’s secret lore:

You see, in our family we don’t know whether we are coming or going – it’s all my grandmother’s fault. But of course, the fault wasn’t hers at all: it lay in language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all ; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. (153)

As P.D. Dube observes, “...one is constantly plagued by doubts in the novel as to whether the characters are going to Calcutta or coming to Calcutta or coming to London or going back to London. The two parts of the novel indicate this enigma of ‘non-belonging.’ When the dwelling place is uncertain, borders also compound the problem” (93). Joshi also says that the novel is arranged in such a way that important situations/incidents come after a “prelude as if to provide a catalyst for the narrator’s memories”(112).

The shadow Lines tells the story of the narrator’s family of three generations which are spread over London, Dhaka, and Calcutta, and draws characters from different nationalities, cultures, and religions in the world. The first generation is represented by the grandmother Tha’mma, Jethamoshai, Mayadebi, and Saheb. The father, the mother, and Jatin represent the second generation. May, Nick, Ila, and the unidentified narrator represent the third generation.

Ghosh employs an educated young man who frequently travels between Calcutta and London in 1981 to narrate the story. As mentioned earlier, the story contains many layers—multiple stories to be precise: stories of his grandmother and her sister, of his uncles Tridib and Robi, of his cousin Ila, who married an Englishman, and of May Price, a family friend in London.

The novel depicts urban middle class life. For urban middle class, education and professional jobs are important. These people are addicted to work because education and profession only see to it that they earn their daily morsel. The work environment so moulds them that they cultivate the virtues of hard work, obedience, saying yes to all the dictates of the boss; and thus they zealously fall in line with the norms of society. But this class of society gets seriously disturbed when misfortunes strike them. For them, life ceases to exist when struck by the sudden eruption of violence like a volcano in public sphere. In these cases life for them loses all its meaning and comes to a standstill. The two parts – “Going Away” (Ghosh 3-112) and “Coming Home” (115-252) – are used to refer to going and coming with home as the central symbol, a place where one is born and brought up and is deeply attached to.

This attachment is more so if one is away from home for a long time for different reasons. The feeling of “citizen of the world” may be ideal, but it is not within the reach of all people. They either go away from their home or come home. We find that characters in *The Shadow Lines* go away from homes in Calcutta or Dhaka or come home to Calcutta or Dhaka. But what transpires to them at the end is that peace is as elusive as ever, wherever they are – either at home or abroad.

Tha'mma may be said to be the central character of the novel. It may even be said that the novel, in fact, is her story.

Tridib calls her a modern middle-class woman. Like all middle-class women, Tha'mma wants to lead a trouble-free life; she is a great patriot and believes in the unity of the country. But she becomes a sort of a rebel when the life that she wants to live is denied to her by the cruel fate of time. She spends most part of life in Calcutta, but she becomes a witness to a most horrible scene when she visits Dhaka to bring back her uncle. In that visit her aged uncle and also her nephew meet tragic death. She becomes a sort of dangling woman suspended by the history. The story Tha'mma is told to the narrator by herself (121-26). She was born in Dhaka, and grew up as a member of

...a big joint family then, with everyone living and eating together: her grandparents, her parents, she and Mayadebi, her Jethamoshai –herfather's elder brother– and his family, which included three cousins of roughly her own age, as well as a couple of spinster aunts. She remembered her grandfather, although she had only been six when he died: a thin, stern looking man with a frown etched permanently into his forehead. In his presence everyone, including her father and Jethamoshai, spoke in whispers, with their heads down and their eyes fixed firmly on the floor. But when he left the house for the district courts, where he practiced as an advocate, the house would erupt with the noisy games of the five cousins. Every evening the five children would be led by their mothers into his study, where they would each have to recite their alphabets – Bengali first and then English –with their hands held out, palm downwards, and he would rap them on the knuckles with the handle of his umbrella every time they made a mistake. If they cried they were rapped on their shins. (Ghosh 121)

But as it almost always happens, the ancestral house had to be partitioned, after the death of her grandfather. She came to know about the terrorist movements in Bengal which was in fact the nationalist movement to free India from the clutches of the British imperial regime: “about secret terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantar and all their off-shoots, their clandestine networks, and the home-made bombs with which they tried to assassinate British officials and policemen; and a little about the arrests, deportations and executions with which the British had retaliated” (37)

She was studying B.A. in History in Dhaka. She had a great liking for revolutionaries like Kudhram Bose and Bagha Jatin, and in her young romantic imagination had even wanted to become a revolutionary. A shy young man of her class was arrested on the charges of conspiring to kill an English magistrate. He was tried and deported to the cellular jail in the Andamans :

She'd been expecting a huge man with burning eyes and a lion's mane of a beard, and there he was, all the while, at the back of her class, sitting shyly by himself. She could so easily have talked to him. He would have been handsome too, she had decided later, if only he would shave that beard of his. Lying in her bed, she would think to herself – if only she had known, if only she had been working with him, she would have warned him somehow, she would have saved him, she would have gone to Khulna with him too, and stood at his side, with a pistol in her hands, waiting for that English magistrate.... (39)

She wanted to work for the revolutionaries, to run errands for them, cook their food, and wash their clothes because they were fighting the enemy of the country. When the narrator asks her whether she would have killed the

English magistrate, she replies, “I would have been frightened.... But I would have prayed for strength, and god willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free” (39).

But all her romantic sojourn with revolution came to an end when she was married off and went to Burma. Her married life also proved to be short-lived, as she bore a child in 1925 and became a widow in 1935 when she was just 32. She had to start a new phase of life in Calcutta as a school teacher in 1936 to fend for herself.

There is not much depiction of her life from here onwards, and the reader is expected to construct the story from the links dropped by the author now and then. She had to live in a one-room tenement in Bhowanipore. She would dream of “the old house, her parents, Jethamoshai [her uncle], her childhood” (125) in Dhaka, but she could never go there. The saga of partition and the attendant problems of refugees had no direct impact on her life as she had left Dhaka long back. She had more pressing problems in getting her son educated, declining the help offered by her sister. The next happenings of her life –her son getting employment in a private company, his marriage, the birth of a grandson in 1952, her own retirement in 1962 as the headmistress of the school she had joined – are all revealed in an indirect way.

Thus Ghosh portrays Tha'mma as a typical middle-class Indian, suffering and braving odds that confront her. She can be considered the real heroine of the novel with all her peculiarities. She is a sincere, hard working, and time-conscious lady for whom wasting one's time is an inexcusable crime. She tells the narrator, her grandson, that if one wastes time, it starts stinking. The typical middle-class Indian mindset is revealed when she refuses help from her sister. As the narrator senses:

... the fears she had accumulated in the long years after my grandfather's premature death, when she had had to take her school teaching job in order to educate my father : I could guess at a little of what it had cost her then to refuse her rich sister's help and of the wealth of pride it had earned her, and I knew intuitively that all that had kept her from agreeing at once was her fear of accepting anything from anyone that she could not return in exact measure.(33)

This mindset is in contrast with both upper and lower class of society as the former is used to receiving favours, where as the latter cannot deny on account of its helplessness. We can also sense a kind of a feminist in Tha'mma. For her, all men are like Tridib: "... at heart she believed that all men would be like him if it were not for their mothers and wives" (6).As a teacher, she was sincere and innovative. She was always working to develop new techniques and methods for the benefit of her students. As the narrator says:

When she was headmistress my grandmother had decided once that every girl who opted for Home Science ought to be taught how to cook at least one dish that was a specialty of some part of the country other than her own. It would be a good way, she thought, of teaching them about the diversity and vastness of the country. (116)

Tha'mma's character can be said to be a tribute to many unrecognized women who are responsible for the growth and sustenance of "family" in our country. Though she loves and shows concern for the narrator, she can never reconcile herself to the breach in his character. When he visits her on hearing news of her ill health, she accuses him of his worshipping of Ila and visiting cheap women in Delhi. The narrator is shocked at what he considers her cruelty. Adding to this, just before her death, she writes a letter to the principal

of the college where her grandson (the narrator) is studying to oust him from the college, citing his unethical conduct. Of course, the narrator is able to “convince” the principal of his conduct blaming the sickness that might have affected Tha'mma's reasoning faculty. The narrator thinks, “I have never understood how she learnt of the women I had visited a couple of times, with my friends; nor do I know how she saw that I was in love with Ila so long before I dared to admit it to myself” (93).

Though Tha'mma's is very strict as far as spending time is concerned till her retirement, after that with “stinking time,” she gets deviated from her path. She gets overpowered by her thoughts about family, her uncle in Bangladesh, and others. This new change in her life costs her dearly, for this “change” claims a precious, young life. Tha'mma takes up a “mission” in her old age. This is to find and bring back her uncle Jethemoshai in Bangladesh. She says, “It doesn't matter we recognize each other or not. We're the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone, and now at last, after all these years, perhaps will be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred” (129). She is at loss to understand the evil in humans. It is well said that old bitterness cannot be put to an end, try how well one might be. But Tha'mma only succeeds to meet Jethamoshai, now a man without any memory. At first he fails to recognize her, but when Tridib reminds him of his connection with them, he suddenly recognizes: “The old man's face lit up. They died! he said, his voice quivering in triumph. They had two daughters: one with a face like a vulture, and another one who was as poisonous as a cobra but all pretty and goody-goody to look at”(214).The irony is this old man is spitting venom against the same people who have come to rescue him from the wretched life he has been leading. In this attempt, they are also going to lose a very precious life! Tha'mma's visit to Dhaka

can be said to be her hamartia and she has to pay for that. It is her new passion for relatives that brings doom on them. Tridib, Jethamoshai, and Khalil, the rickshaw-puller get killed in the communal frenzy when they try to return to India from Dhaka after convincing Jethamoshai to accompany them. This tragic incident has its own bearing on the psyche of Tha'mma, for her perception of human relations changes drastically indeed. This lady, who has been talking about peaceful co-existence among people of different countries hitherto, begins talking about a kind of pre-emptive strike to keep Indians safe. She donates her gold chain to the fund for war. When the narrator questions her about her decision of donating the chain, she emotionally says, "We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out" (237).

Childhood is one of the major themes of *The Shadow Lines*. Tridib, the narrator's older cousin, exerts a great influence on the narrator. The narrator looks at the world with Tridib's eyes, which have a kind of detached sensibility. For the narrator, Tridib is a perfect role model as he tries to identify himself with Tridib. The narrator says, "I was nervous now: I could see that he was waiting to hear what I'd have to say, and I didn't want to disappoint him" (28). The narrator's identity takes shape in and through his responses to the characters he engages with and the responses he elicits. He remains unnamed and the reader constructs his image and physical traits by events narrated.

Great fiction bases itself on human psychology. This is quite natural. So, it also appears some times that these novelists might have smuggled psychological precepts from texts of psychology. In psychoanalytical literature, castration fear in male children is a major theme. This is exploited by Tridib when he tells a story to the narrator and Robi: "He (Tridib) had smiled and gone on to tell us in ghastly detail about the circumcision rites of one of the desert tribes. And

then, spectacles glinting, he had said: So before you leave you'd better decide whether you would care to have all that done to your little wee-wees, just in case you're captured" (19). There is also what is known as coming together of complexes in childhood and growing. The narrator's relatives come from different places and with different stories to tell. The complex has such a great impact on the narrator that he cannot think of these people as his blood relations; he says, "...I could not bring myself to believe that their worth in my eyes could be reduced to something so arbitrary and unimportant as a blood relationship" (3). This can be the reason why the narrator fails to establish any relationship with Ila. He is noticed only when Ila's relationship with Nick gets spoiled. The narrator falls a prey to inferiority complex when he compares himself with Nick. Ila says, "He is very big. Much bigger than you: much stronger too. He's twelve, three years older than us" (49). Life changes for the narrator with this encounter:

...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. (50)

The narrator's relationship with Ila is only one sided. He wants Ila, but Ila is not interested. Maybe the narrator's middle-class family background is the reason. Another significant peep into child-psychology is exemplified by the narrator's coming to know about Tradib's death. Tradib was very close to the narrator, as his friend, philosopher, and guide. His influence on the narrator is immense. Yet when he comes to know about his death, "I felt nothing –no shock, no grief. I did not understand that I would never see him again; my mind was not large enough to accommodate so complete

an absence” (239). This feeling is also experienced by many children. So, when a person dies, they innocently ask questions like “Why are you crying?” or “Why is grandpa lying like that?” The elders cannot answer such questions because they do not know what to say.

Irony of fate works in matters of love. Pain comes mainly because of love. Love eludes definition. Love is a kind of emotion that centres on a single individual. This individual could be mother, father, sister, brother, or any one. So, it is a wrong notion that love exists only for a suitable mating partner or the opposite sex. Love has a very wide scope and is very much misunderstood. Another aspect is that love demands suspension of logic. Love and logic are natural enemies and so are love and other rationalities – equality, justice, etc. So, when one is irrational, the mindset will be uncertain, excited, and confused. When an individual thinks only of himself/herself, discarding others, control over emotional life gets disturbed. By looking at love from this angle, one can say that the narrator is in love with Tridib, Tha'mma, and more so with Ila, his eccentric cousin.

It may be appropriate to say here that the narrator fails to get back the love in the same measure he shows to others. He gets what is known as reciprocity. Tridib reciprocates his hero-worship to an extent; May drains the very meaning of his life: “I was jealous, achingly jealous, as only a child can be, because it had always been my unique privilege to understand Tridib, and that day at the Victoria Memorial I knew I had lost that privilege; somehow May had stolen it from me” (170). With Tha'mma also his relationship gets strained. This is because Tha'mma never changes her rules or code of conduct. He tries to shake off the chains of his body: “I jerked my head out of her hands. She met my gaze and smiled. I could not believe that this withered, wasted, powerless woman was the same person that I had so much

loved and feared” (91). This is how the relationship breaks. With Ila, there seems to be no way for any reciprocity since she was not at all concerned about the narrator. In London, he spends much time trying to talk to her, see her, and hear her speak but in vain. The narrator explains the connection between love and human tendency to “enumerate and quantify” (95). The novel here expresses the complexity of love. Love cannot be “purchased” with gifts; it just happens. So, applying the ordinary ruler of wealth and power to normalize it is a mistake. By applying “the metaphors of normality,” (96) we expect justice in love. But it does not turn out that way. The narrator tries his best to get Ila’s attention and reciprocation. But, what he gets is:

She would open the door and say –Nice to see you, come in, but I hope you’re not expecting any dinner – and I would tell her, smiling brightly – I’ve walked eight miles, it took me exactly two hours and ten minutes – and she would arch her eyebrows in surprise and say: Why? Is it some kind of health kick? (96)

Ila does not reciprocate for the one who loves her so passionately. She loves Nick, who is not sincere in his love. This is the baffling aspect of love.

The Shadow Lines suggests multiples ideas related to trans-border situations impregnated with the civilization-growth and international borders. The title suggests that all lines are shadow lines; they are not real. The very notion of modern nation states has been questioned. According to the author, these lines only succeed in dividing people, not uniting them. The very concept of nationhood is a mirage since it is not logically based. The lines drawn by nature in the form of mountains, oceans, and rivers are real. But lines drawn by humans in the form of borders are shallow and hence unjustifiable.

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